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South Korea's Middle-Power Engagement Initiatives: Perspectives from Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

South Korea has emerged as an important actor in the evolving Asian and global governance structure. Its influence has grown in various capacities that spans over areas such as trade, investment, aid, tourism and the cultural Korean Wave. Today, most analysts acknowledge South Korea's status as a middle power—both in terms of its material capabilities as well as its foreign policy behaviour. This paper focuses on Southeast Asian perspectives of South Korea's rise, specifically views from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. It examines these countries' views of South Korea's rise and its efforts in promoting itself as a middle power. The paper concludes that Southeast Asia generally views South Korea as an emerging middle power, and its role in Southeast Asia is largely confined to the economic and cultural sectors. Although South Korea is perceptibly absent from Southeast Asia's geostrategic calculus, its perceived neutrality (despite being a U.S. ally) is seen to work to its advantage in its pursuit of middle power status.

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“The Park Geun-hye government, as a responsible middle power in the international community, wishes to give back the help we received in the past. As a trustworthy friend, it wishes to make meaningful contributions to maintain the peace and stability of the international community.”

Yun Byung-se, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, August 2013¹

“Through various initiatives, such as its programs in green growth and development cooperation, South Korea has demonstrated the influence middle powers may have on global governance.”

Kim Sung-han, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea, February 2013²

“The contours of Asia after it rises are going to depend on forward-looking strategic choices by China, the United States, and Japan, but also key middle powers such as South Korea, Australia, and Indonesia.”

Chung Min Lee, Dean of the Graduate School of International Studies, Yonsei University, December 2011³

“Korea is well positioned to talk about the problems of the global economy and present solutions to them. That is because we are a middle power nation that has successfully risen from being one of the poorest countries in the world.” [Translated]

Lee Myung-bak, former President of the Republic of Korea, February 2010⁴

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Republic of Korea, “Remarks by H.E. Yun Byung-se Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 10th Annual Iftar Dinner August 1, 2013,” August 2, 2013, http://www.mofa.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=14137&seqno=312638&c=&t=&pagenum=1&tableName=TYPE_ENGLISH&pc=&dc=&wc=&lu=&vu=&iu=&du=.

² Kim Sung-han, “Global Governance and Middle Powers: South Korea’s Role in the G20,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/south-korea/global-governance-middle-powers-south-koreas-role-g20/p30062>.

³ Chung Min Lee, “The Perils of a Monotone Asia,” *PacNet* 69, December 15, 2011, <http://csis.org/files/publication/pac1169.pdf>.

⁴ “Radio and Internet address to the nation by President Lee Myung-bak [translated transcript],” *Korea.net*, February 8, 2010, <http://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=91043>.

South Korea's Middle-Power Engagement Initiatives: Perspectives from Southeast Asia

1. Introduction⁵

Geographically sandwiched between China and Japan, and not quite matching up to them in terms of economic and geostrategic influence, the Republic of Korea or South Korea (henceforth Korea) has traditionally been overlooked in the debate on major power relations in Asia. In recent years, however, Korea has emerged as an important player in the evolving Asian architecture and international order. Its economy is one of the most advanced in the world, and its influence has grown in various capacities that spans over areas such as trade, investment, aid, tourism and the cultural Korean Wave. Regarding Asian security, Korea plays a pivotal role in the management and resolution of the security challenge posed by North Korea. Korea's alliance with the United States serves as an important source of peace and stability in Asia. Today, many analysts readily acknowledge Korea's status as a middle power, putting it in the same category of countries with Canada and Australia.⁶

Broadly, there are three ways of defining a middle power—according to capabilities, function or behaviour. Middle power diplomacy generally involves adopting an internationalist perspective, actively participating in multilateral forums, leading in a specific niche area and acting as a bridge among nations.⁷ Since the late 1990s, the Seoul government has started labelling Korea as a middle power, promoting the country's image as a key Asian and global actor. This self-identity was most pronounced during President Lee Myung-bak's administration (2008-2013), during which Seoul launched the "Global Korea" vision to enhance Korea's role in the international community. Steps to realise the vision included the disbursement of Official Development Assistance (ODA), strengthening economic ties with other countries, as well as playing an active role in multilateral organisations. The hosting of the G20 Summit in 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012 were celebrated as diplomatic achievements in Korea's quest to be a responsible and significant member of the international community. The Seoul leadership recognises the importance and timeliness of crafting a grand strategy, built on the premise of its middle power status, to achieve its national interests.

The role of Korea in Asian and global affairs will continue to grow, with the greatest impact likely being felt in Asia due to geographical proximity and foreign policy focus. During visits to several Asia Pacific countries in March 2009, President Lee introduced the New Asia Initiative, a policy promoting strong

⁵ The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Korea Foundation for this study. They would also like to express their appreciation to the roundtable participants who contributed their valuable insights and thoughts on this study. Finally, they would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁶ Tobias Harris, "The Emergence of Middle Power Asia," *East Asia Forum*, May 7, 2009, www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/05/07/the-emergence-of-middle-power-asia/.

⁷ See, for example, Mark Beeson, "Can Australia Save the World? The Limits and Possibilities of Middle Power Diplomacy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 5 (2011): 563–577; *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, eds. Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim R. Nossal (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1993); and, Matthew Sussex, "The Impotence of Being Earnest? Avoiding the Pitfalls of 'Creative Middle Power Diplomacy,'" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 5 (2011): 545–562.

Korean engagement with all Asian countries, including with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This was a new direction for Korea as its diplomatic attention had traditionally been focused solely on “the big four”⁸—the United States, Russia, China and Japan. Korea’s presidential office noted then that “Korea’s bid to diversify its diplomatic focus [...] is inevitable due to the growing influence and importance of Asia.”⁹ With its growing international standing and material power, Korea now has the ability to broaden its diplomatic agenda. In particular, it has promoted its model of economic success and democratic development as something which developing Southeast Asian countries can adopt. It has also sought to be a regional leader in green growth. Additionally, it is starting to expand its network of Free Trade Agreements (FTA) and engage more with Asian, including Southeast Asian institutions. Such efforts have made Korea’s presence in Asia more visible and portrayed it as a responsible and committed stakeholder of Asia.

While there has been much written on Korea’s role as a middle power, Korea-Southeast Asian relations, as well as Southeast Asian perspectives of the cultural Korean Wave, less has been said about Southeast Asian views specifically of Korea as a middle power, especially beyond the cultural sphere. This paper assesses Korea’s efforts in promoting itself as a middle power in Southeast Asia, focusing on the perspectives from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam of Korea’s rise. Out of all the Southeast Asian countries, these five countries have the highest bilateral trade volumes with Korea. Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam also receive relatively more Korean foreign direct investment (FDI) among the Southeast Asian countries. In terms of defence ties, Korea was the third largest supplier of conventional arms to Indonesia from 2007 to 2011,¹⁰ and is also selling arms to the Philippines. In this regard, it would be useful for Korea to be aware of how it is viewed in these five states.

The paper will attempt to answer the research questions: (i) Do these Southeast Asian countries regard Korea as a middle power, and (ii) What are Southeast Asian perspectives of Korea’s engagement with Southeast Asia? The paper will first review middle power concepts and examine Korea’s middle power diplomacy, specifically with regards to its initiatives in Southeast Asia. It presupposes that Korea, as a middle power coming into its own, can and should play a key role in Asian and international economic and diplomatic affairs. The paper will then discuss the perspectives from each of the five Southeast Asian countries, following which the views will be assessed within the middle power framework. The paper concludes that Southeast Asia generally views Korea as an emerging middle power, and its role is largely confined to the economic and cultural sectors. Southeast Asia is unlikely to envision a role for Korea in the management of its geostrategic challenges, although Korea’s perceived neutrality is seen to work to its advantage in its pursuit of middle power status in Southeast Asia.

⁸ Byun Duk-kun, “Seoul, Jakarta agree to fight recession, boost economic ties,” *Yonhap*, March 6, 2009, Factiva.

⁹ Byun, “Seoul declares ambitious diplomatic initiative for Asia,” *Yonhap*, March 8, 2009, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2009/03/07/16/0301000000AEN20090307003200315F.HTML>.

¹⁰ Siemon T. Wezeman, “The maritime dimension of arms transfers to South East Asia, 2007-2011,” in *SIPRI Yearbook 2011: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, ed. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 281.

2. Middle Power Concepts and Korea

This section will first discuss the importance of middle powers in the international system, followed by an outline of the origins of the middle power concept. Subsequently, it will highlight the on-going debates about middle powers and middle power diplomacy. In this regard, it will look at how middle powers are defined—according to their material capabilities, function and foreign policy behaviour—and the expectations of their behaviour in the international system. Within the context of this study, Korea's identity as a middle power and its foreign policy behaviour in Southeast Asia will also be examined.

Why are middle powers important in international politics? Carsten Holbraad, author of the seminal *Middle Powers in International Politics*, notes that focusing exclusively on great power relations run the risk of “taking a too Olympian view of international politics,” while focusing on small states is inadequate as they “tend to be objects rather than subjects, in the sense that their international behaviour is highly conditioned by the policies and relations of stronger powers.”¹¹ On the contrary, focusing on middle powers may provide “the best vantage ground for tackling some of the features of international life,” as that category in the hierarchy sees the meeting of “old and weary nations, exhausted from centuries of power politics at the highest level but rich in experience,” with “young and energetic countries, conscious of their potential and full of ambition.”¹² Middle powers are also perceived to have an interest in the maintenance of international peace and stability, and to this end they “emphasise coalition building and cooperation building,”¹³ usually via multilateral channels. The importance of middle powers in maintaining international peace and stability arises “because, unlike great powers, they were not suspected of harbouring intentions of domination and because they had resources sufficient to enable them to be functionally effective.”¹⁴ Likewise, former Korean Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Kim Sung-han writes that “[i]nternational relations of the 21st century [...] are too complex to rely solely on major powers,” and as such “a stable and prosperous global system” can only materialise when middle powers like Korea “play a more proactive role in filling in the lacunae of ‘great power politics.’”¹⁵ Middle powers are thus expected to take on an active role to preserve stability in the international system.

Scholars trace the origins of the middle power concept to varying periods since the emergence of the Westphalian state system. Holbraad observes that the term “middle power” has been used in German political writings in the early 19th century to refer to states which both occupied “an intermediate place

¹¹ Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 3.

¹² Holbraad, “The Role of Middle Powers,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 6, no. 1 (1971): 78, doi: 10.1177/001083677100600108.

¹³ Andrew F. Cooper, “Niche Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview,” in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper (London: MacMillan Press, 1997), 9.

¹⁴ Robert W. Cox, “Middlepowermanship, Japan, and future world order,” *International Journal* 44, no. 4 (1989): 823, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40202638>.

¹⁵ Kim, “Global Korea: Broadening Korea's Diplomatic Horizons,” Centre for Strategic and International Studies, July 27, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/global-korea-broadening-koreas-diplomatic-horizons>.

in the power hierarchy of states and, either a central situation in geography or a medial position in some antagonism.”¹⁶ Hasan Basri Yalçın, citing an article by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2006, notes an even earlier usage of the term “middle power.” This occurred during the 15th century, when the Mayor of Milan categorised states into three groups—“grandissime (empires) which may be called great powers or superpowers, mezano (middle powers), and piccioli (small powers).”¹⁷ According to this classification, middle powers are the states which “have sufficient strength and authority to stand on their own without the need of help from others (Rudd, 2006).”¹⁸ Based on these early definitions, middle powers can be understood to occupy the middle spectrum in the ranking of states, not possessing superior military or economic capabilities but at least with the ability to independently secure their national interests. Andrew F. Cooper identifies three waves of middle powers post-World War II. The first wave, comprising several countries belonging to the non-aligned movement, including India, Brazil and Indonesia, saw their influence decrease by the 1970s. The second wave, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, consisted of countries from the South, such as Nigeria, Mexico and Algeria. This group of middle powers has also seen their influence in international affairs decline. Subsequent middle powers which have emerged since the 1990s, including Korea, have displayed in their foreign policy behaviour “creativity and skill [to utilise] their greater freedom of action for diplomatic activity.”¹⁹ In a study distinguishing between traditional and emerging middle powers, Eduard Jordaan observes that traditional middle powers are those which emerged during the Cold War and are “ambivalent” to regional integration and cooperation, while emerging middle powers came to prominence after the Cold War and are “eager (often assuming leadership role)” to regional collaboration.²⁰ Based on its policy behaviour, Korea arguably belongs to the latter group.

In 2009, Joseph S. Nye wrote in a commentary that “[q]uietly, South Korea has moved away from being defined by its problematic North Korean neighbour, and is becoming an important middle-ranking power in global affairs.”²¹ He cited Korea’s hosting of the G-20 Summit in 2010, its conclusion of an FTA with the European Union, and the appointment of Korean Ban Ki-moon to the United Nations Secretary-General position as examples of Korea’s increasing prominence on the international stage. Nye was just one of the many scholars that noted Korea’s rise to middle power status. In the literature, Korea’s commitment to cooperation and multilateral institutions in Asia, as well as its expanding network, are acknowledged as evidence that Seoul is moving closer to the “Global Korea” vision.²² Korean policymakers have also identified the country as a middle power.

¹⁶ Holbraad, “The Role of Middle Powers,” op. cit., 78-79.

¹⁷ Hasan Basri Yalçın, “The Concept of ‘Middle Power’ and the Recent Turkish Foreign Policy Activism,” *Afro Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 197, http://www.afroeurasianstudies.net/dosyalar/site_resim/veri/4842000.pdf, citing Kevin Rudd, *Leading not Following: The Renewal of Australian Middle Power Diplomacy*, 2006.

¹⁸ Yalçın, “The Concept of ‘Middle Power’,” op cit.

¹⁹ Cooper, “Niche Diplomacy,” op. cit., 14-16.

²⁰ Eduard Jordaan, “The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers,” *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 30, no. 1 (2003): 168, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>.

²¹ Joseph S. Nye, “South Korea’s Growing Soft Power,” Project Syndicate, November 10, 2009, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/print/south-korea-s-growing-soft-power>.

²² See, for example, Dlynn Armstrong-Williams, “South Korea as a Middle Power: The Growing Globalization of South Korean Foreign Policy in the 1990s,” in *Transforming East Asian Domestic and International Politics*, ed.

Dlynn Armstrong-Williams notes that Korea first started to see itself as a middle power in 1998, when Foreign Minister Hong Soon-young said in a speech that “Korea in the 21st century must stand as an Asian power and a middle power [...] It must have a clear sense of what it can and cannot do as a middle power situated between the world’s most powerful nations.”²³ Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Kim has also on several occasions referred to Korea as a middle power—classifying it with countries such as Australia, Indonesia and Turkey.²⁴ He defines middle powers as “medium-size states with the capability and willingness to employ proactive diplomacy with global visions.”²⁵ Discourse aside, an assessment of Korea’s material capabilities and policy conduct suggests that it is behaving in accordance with the status of a middle power.

In the literature on middle powers, scholars have attempted to define “middle power” according to three classifications: by capabilities, function and foreign policy behaviour. First, Korea’s material capabilities do seem befitting of its “middleness” in the global positioning of states. Jonathan H. Ping offers a succinct yet comprehensive matrix of classifying great, middle and small powers according to nine indicators: (i) population, (ii) geographic area, (iii) military expenditure, (iv) gross domestic product (GDP), (v) GDP real growth, (vi) value of exports, (vii) gross national income per capita, (viii) trade as a percentage of GDP and (ix) life expectancy at birth.²⁶ In most of the indicators, Korea places in the upper-middle tier of international rankings. Since the early-2000s, Korea’s economy has been ranked between 12th and 16th globally. In 2009, Korea became the first Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) aid recipient to become a donor state—a testament to its successful economic growth. As of July 2013, Korea’s 49 million-strong population makes it the 25th largest country in the world. Its military expenditure of US\$31,484 million in 2012 ranked it 12th in the world in terms of military spending.²⁷ Based on these indicators, Korea can be considered a middle power.

Second, middle powers typically assume a functional role in international politics, meaning that they are particularly important actors in certain areas of global concern. Niche diplomacy is important for middle powers because “unlike major powers, [they] do not possess the ability to operate in an influential fashion right across the policy spectrum. An element of selection is involved in which this

Robert W. Compton, Jr. (England: Ashgate, 2002), 101-114; Young Jong Choi, “South Korea’s Regional Strategy and Middle Power Activism,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2009): 47-67, http://www.inss.re.kr/app/board/view.act?metaCode=en_m_pub&boardId=e40e0b367566ae12d911dd89&pkey=3; Sook-Jong Lee, “South Korea as New Middle Power Seeking Complex Diplomacy,” *EAI Asia Security Initiative Working Paper* 25 (2012), http://eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng_report/2012091211454078.pdf; Jeffrey Robertson, “South Korea as a Middle Power: Capacity, Behavior, and Now Opportunity,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 151-174, http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_03_01.jsp?page=1&num=53&mode=view&field=&text=&order=&dir=&bid=DA-TA03&ses=&category=11; and, Yul Sohn, “‘Middle Powers’ Like South Korea Can’t Do Without Soft Power and Network Power,” *Global Asia* 7, no. 3 (2012), http://www.globalasia.org/V7N3_Fall_2012/Yul_Sohn.html.

²³ Armstrong-Williams, “South Korea as a Middle Power,” op. cit., 104.

²⁴ Kim, “Global Korea,” op. cit.; and, Kim, “Global Governance and Middle Powers,” op. cit.

²⁵ Kim, “Global Governance and Middle Powers,” op. cit.

²⁶ Jonathan H. Ping, *Middle Power Statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific* (England: Ashgate, 2005), 215.

²⁷ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2012,” accessed September 20, 2013, <http://portal.sipri.org/publications/pages/expenditures/download-database>.

set of countries must choose between a variety of functions.”²⁸ This ensures that middle powers are influential in particular areas of global affairs, despite their limited resources. Under President Lee’s administration, Seoul has promoted green growth and developmental assistance as areas in which Korea could play a leadership, or at least major role. Korea has embarked on cooperative green growth projects with Southeast Asia. In July 2008, Korea committed US\$100 million via the East Asia Climate Partnership to support ASEAN member states in dealing with climate change. ASEAN and Korea have also signed a Forest Cooperation Agreement in 2011 and subsequently in September 2012 inaugurated the Asian Forest Cooperation Organisation (AFoCO). Through the organisation, Korea provides funding to and shares its technical expertise with ASEAN states to address sustainable forest management and climate change in Southeast Asia.

Other than green growth, Seoul has also positioned its rapid economic and political progress as a model for developing countries. Providing assistance to emerging economies is a tenet of President Lee’s “Global Korea” vision, establishing Korea’s bridging role between developed and developing countries. Korea’s swift rise from a poverty-stricken nation in the aftermath of the Korean War to an economically prosperous, politically stable country today has often been highlighted in the country’s official discourse. Korea has also established a “global development partnership”²⁹ encompassing both state and non-state actors at the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held at Busan in 2011. Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Kim Sung-han’s statement that “the ROK has emerged as an agenda-setter in the field of international development cooperation”³⁰ reflects Seoul’s ambition to be a leader in helping developing countries. One of the ways Korea assists developing countries is through its ODA, which is managed via three platforms: Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF), and international organisations. A large portion of Korea’s ODA is distributed to Asian countries. From 1987 to 2006, ASEAN received US\$1.13 billion from Seoul, making it the largest destination of Korea’s ODA in cumulative terms.³¹ Korea has also pledged to double its ODA to ASEAN by 2015.³² Development projects in ASEAN are supported by the Korea-ASEAN Special Cooperation Fund and the Future Oriented Cooperation Project Fund. Within ASEAN, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia receive the lion’s share of Korea’s ODA. Korea also offers technical assistance to other countries, for example sharing its experiences and technology to help Vietnam establish an e-government framework.³³ In fact, Vietnam is the first country to import Korea’s development model.³⁴ Through such initiatives, Korea’s role has grown more significant in ASEAN, and consequently Southeast Asia. In exporting both its

²⁸ Cooper, “Niche Diplomacy,” op. cit., 6.

²⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation,” last modified December 1, 2011, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/49650173.pdf>.

³⁰ Kim, “Global Korea,” op. cit.

³¹ Yul Kwon, “Korean Assistance to Southeast Asia,” in *Korea’s Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, ed. David I. Steinberg (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), 163.

³² Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), “ASEAN-Republic of Korea Dialogue Relations,” December 19, 2012, <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/rok/item/asean-republic-of-korea-dialogue-relations>.

³³ Thanh Hai, “S. Korea assists Danang in e-government development,” *Talk Vietnam*, November 14, 2012, <http://talkvietnam.com/2012/11/s-korea-assists-danang-in-e-government-development/>.

³⁴ Byun, “Vietnam named first importer of Korean development model,” *Yonhap News Agency*, March 17, 2009, Factiva.

green growth strategies and its development model, Korea ensures that it occupies a niche role on the international stage. Its aid-turned-donor experience also enables it to play a bridging role between developing and developed countries. In this way, even if it is not considered a traditional great power in terms of its economic or military might, Korea's importance in global affairs cannot be ignored. This is even more so in Asia, which comprises several emerging economies and where Seoul focuses the bulk of its foreign policy objectives.

Third, middle power foreign policy behaviour is typically understood to involve adopting an internationalist perspective, actively promoting and participating in multilateralism, as well as being a bridge among nations—all part of efforts to maintain global peace and stability. The preference for internationalism and multilateralism by middle powers arises “from the inability of these states to unilaterally and single-handedly shape global outcomes in any direct manner.”³⁵ In this regard, institutions and the norms they advocate offer a platform for middle powers to ensure that their interests are not overshadowed by the agenda of the major powers. Multilateral institutions also offer middle powers the chance to form “like-minded” coalitions which have collective and stronger voices at the international level.

Korea has displayed middle power behavioural characteristics in its foreign relations, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Bilaterally, Korea remains committed to its security alliance with the United States, which serves as an important source of peace and stability in Asia. Even as Korea pursues a multilateral orientation, observers agree that the United States will continue to occupy a critical role in Seoul's foreign policy. Economically, Korea has also expanded its presence in Southeast Asia through its bilateral FTA network. Seoul has signed an FTA with Singapore, is negotiating economic agreements with Vietnam and Indonesia, and is additionally considering one with Malaysia. These agreements give it a stake in the stability of the Southeast Asian market. Security-wise, Korea's ties with Indonesia and the Philippines seem the strongest compared with other Southeast Asian countries; these bilateral defence ties are limited mostly to capacity building and arms procurement from Korea.

Complementing these bilateral relationships is a commitment to Asian institution- and community-building efforts. Seoul's contributions to various forums such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), East Asia Summit (EAS), Six-Party Talks (SPT), Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM), and the Northeast Asia Trilateral Summit are all salient features of Seoul's key role in Asia's economic, political and security affairs. Korea's embrace of multilateralism allows it to utilise network diplomacy to improve its international standing. In these networks, Korea, like other middle powers, strives to take on a neutral role, in the sense that such states “do not challenge or threaten the global *status quo*—that is, the economic and military-political ‘balance’ of power.”³⁶ This makes it “sufficiently removed from great-power interests and alignments to act as articulators of sectional interests and/or

³⁵ Jordaan, “The concept of a middle power in international relations,” op. cit., 169.

³⁶ Jordaan, “The concept of a middle power in international relations,” op. cit., 167.

bridges between those interests.”³⁷ Korea’s perceived neutrality helps in building up its network power as it can actively participate in Asian initiatives without drawing suspicion to its motives. In this regard, Korea has expanded its role in Asian multilateral institutions. Given the scope of this paper, this section will focus specifically on Korea’s engagement with Southeast Asian community-building efforts, primarily through ASEAN, although it is acknowledged that Korea’s wider regional and global initiatives also contribute to its middle power status.

Korea’s dialogue ties with ASEAN originated in the late-1980s, and it achieved full Dialogue Partner status in 1991. ASEAN-Korea dialogues have so far focused on cooperation in trade and investment, energy and environment conservation, and Korea’s support for the ASEAN Community vision. The importance of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula are also discussed. In 2004, Korea acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and six years later both sides adopted the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-Korea Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. Most recently in September 2012, Korea took its relations with ASEAN a step further by opening a diplomatic mission to ASEAN, following in the footsteps of the United States, Japan and China. Korea’s relations with ASEAN are also institutionalised in forums such as the APT, ARF, ADMM-Plus and EAS. Not only is Korea an active participant in these forums, it has also assumed a leadership role in regionalisation attempts. Former Korean President Kim Dae-jung proposed in 1998 the establishment of the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG). This initiative grew out of the experience of the 1997 financial crisis, when “East Asia was unable to mount an effective collective response [...] because there was not yet an organisation for regional economic cooperation,”³⁸ and led to the inaugural EAS in 2005. Korea has also pledged to contribute to Southeast Asian capacity building in areas including counter-terrorism, energy security, infrastructure development and climate change. Economically, Korea is a significant actor in the emerging financial architecture of East Asia. During the global financial crisis of 2007–2009, Korea played a role in launching the CMIM and contributing US\$19.2 billion to the US\$120 billion currency swap fund. Korea’s participation in multilateralism to resolve Asia’s problems, as well as its provision of concrete contributions to Southeast Asia, clearly boosts its middle power status. Additionally, related to Korea’s involvement in the G-20 is the much-cited idea of an Asian “caucus,” comprising the Asian countries of the G-20, whose ostensible role would be to represent the collective concerns of all Asians to the global community. Were such a development to emerge, it is not inconceivable that Korea, unburdened by the sort of historical baggage China and Japan have in East Asia, could end up playing a major role.

In the three dimensions discussed above, it is clear that Korea has assumed a middle power identity and accordingly adopted a foreign policy that helps it to sustain its role in Asian and international affairs. Specifically, Korea has promoted green growth and its development model as its niche areas, actively participated in multilateral institutions while at the same time strengthening its bilateral relationships, and sought to propose solutions to resolve global problems. Perhaps nowhere can the

³⁷ Brian Hocking, “Finding Your Niche: Australia and the Trials of Middle-Powerdom,” in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, op. cit., 134.

³⁸ Kim Dae-jung, “Regionalism in the Age of Asia,” *Global Asia* 1, no. 1 (September 2006): 11, http://globalasia.org/pdf/issue1/10Kim_GA11.pdf.

impact of Korea's middle power diplomacy be more strongly seen than in Asia—and in particular Southeast Asia, as Korea has in recent years stepped up cooperation with ASEAN and its member countries. What is less clear are the responses of Southeast Asian states to Korea's assumption of the middle power role. The next section will focus on Southeast Asian perspectives of South Korea's rise. This is important as the views of Southeast Asian countries will affirm if, for all its efforts, Korea is indeed recognised as a middle power by Southeast Asia.

3. Southeast Asian Perspectives of Korea's Rise and Engagement Initiatives

As a whole, ties between Korea and Southeast Asia in the immediate post-World War II period were not very strong. The Philippines and Thailand had dispatched troops to support South Korea during the Korean War, but overall, engagement between Korea and Southeast Asia was not at a high level. Being new nation-states, the priorities of Korea and most of Southeast Asia were on nation building and internal stability. Pavin Chachavalpongpun observes that due to the slow development of bilateral ties, Korea-Southeast Asian relations during that period “were often perceived as less significant and remained the weakest, relative to those between Japan or China and Southeast Asia.”³⁹ Korea's engagement with the Southeast Asia expanded following the 1961 coup by General Park Chung-hee—but rather than having any real economic or security interests in Southeast Asia, Korea's deeper engagement was driven by “an attempt to increase its worldwide legitimacy in contrast to the influence of [North Korea].”⁴⁰ As its economy grew in the mid-1980s, Korea was able to invest in Southeast Asian countries, boosting economic relations. Once China and Korea normalised relations in 1992, however, China began to vie for and replace Southeast Asian markets as the preferred choice for Korea's trade and investment.⁴¹ Following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, China emerged as one of the leading economic partners for Korea.⁴²

Today, Korea is viewed by Southeast Asian countries as a significant trading partner. ASEAN-Korea bilateral trade has been consistently growing and totalled US\$125 billion in 2011. Korea remains the fifth largest trading partner of ASEAN, while ASEAN is the second largest trading partner of Korea. Meanwhile, the ASEAN-Korean FTA (AKFTA) entered into force in 2009. In 2010 and 2011, ASEAN was Korea's second largest investment destination. Korea's green growth vision and its sharing of its development model are also relevant to Southeast Asia, which comprises several developing countries. In the cultural sphere, the Korean Wave, or *hallyu*, has had a significant impact on Southeast Asia. Korean popular culture has expanded Korea's soft power influence and enhanced its image in Southeast Asia. While ubiquitous throughout Southeast Asia, however, *hallyu* does not seem to have a direct effect on the Southeast Asian countries at the foreign policy level. Thus, while this paper acknowledges the significance of Korea's cultural power, the following sub-sections on the

³⁹ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “A Fading Wave, Sinking Tide? A Southeast Asian Perspective on the Korean Wave,” in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, op. cit., 246.

⁴⁰ David I. Steinberg, “Tenuous Beginnings, Vigorous Developments,” in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, op. cit., 5.

⁴¹ Jong-Kil Kim, “Korea's Economic Relations with Southeast Asia,” in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, op. cit., 106.

⁴² ASEAN-Korea Centre, “2012 ASEAN & Korea in Figures,” November 2012, <http://www.aseankorea.org/program/board/list.jsp?menuID=002003003&boardTypeID=88>, 47.

perspectives of individual Southeast Asian countries will not dwell heavily on the spread of the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia. Instead, the focus will be on Korea-Southeast Asian collaboration in the economic, political, security and development sectors.

The following sub-sections will examine the perspectives of Korea's middle power role from five Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Out of all the Southeast Asian countries, these five countries are of particular importance to Korea as they have the highest bilateral trade volumes with Korea. Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam also receive relatively more Korean FDI among the Southeast Asian countries. In terms of defence ties, Korea was the third largest supplier of conventional arms to Indonesia from 2007 to 2011,⁴³ and is also selling arms to the Philippines. It would thus be useful to look at how these countries view Korea's engagement initiatives in Southeast Asia. The following research relies on the use of primary data such as speeches and statements from leaders and policymakers, relevant secondary literature, as well as interviews conducted in June 2013 with 19 respondents comprising Track 2 officials, academics, current/former policymakers and experts on Korea from the five selected countries.

Each sub-section will first provide an overview of the Southeast Asian country's relations and impressions of Korea. They will then highlight perceptions of Korea within the economic, political, development, security and cultural sectors. Last but not least, the sub-sections will discuss their views of relations with Korea vis-à-vis China and Japan, and their perspectives of Korea's role in Southeast Asia and the wider Asian region.

3.1 Indonesia

A poll conducted for the BBC World Service in 2013 found that Indonesia was the second most positive country about Seoul's influence, after Korea itself.⁴⁴ Fifty-eight per cent of Indonesians viewed Korea's influence positively while 17 per cent viewed it negatively. Indonesian respondents for this paper similarly held positive impressions of Korea, with one calling Korea "the new rising star," given the Korean Wave and increasing number of Korean consumer products in Indonesia. Overall, bilateral ties between Korea and Indonesia are most visible in the economic, defence and development sectors.

⁴³ Wezeman, "The maritime dimension of arms transfers to South East Asia," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2011: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, op cit.

⁴⁴ Conducted by GlobeScan and the Washington-based Program on International Policy Attitudes, the 2013 Country Ratings Poll asked 26,299 people around the world to evaluate the influence of 16 countries and the European Union from December 2012 and April 2013; Globescan, "Views of China and India Slide While UK's Ratings Climb: Global Poll," May 22, 2013, http://www.globescan.com/images/images/pressreleases/bbc2013_country_ratings/2013_country_rating_poll_bbc_globescan.pdf, 33.

In 2012, Korea became Indonesia's fourth largest trading partner, with US\$27 billion in bilateral trade.⁴⁵ Both sides have pledged to increase their annual trade volume to US\$50 billion by 2015 and US\$100 billion by 2020,⁴⁶ and are currently in negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). In terms of FDI, Korea's investment of US\$1.94 billion in Indonesia in 2012 made it the third largest foreign investor in Indonesia, behind Singapore and Japan.⁴⁷ Along with Vietnam and the Philippines, Indonesia is among the top receivers of Korea's ODA. Accordingly, Indonesian respondents noted that Jakarta regards Seoul as an important partner in trade and investment.

In December 2006, Korea and Indonesia signed a strategic partnership declaration, strengthening cooperation in areas such as trade, environment and energy.⁴⁸ Jakarta has also invited Korea to participate in Indonesia's development, such as seeking Korean investment for infrastructure building under the "Master Plan for the Acceleration and Expansion of the Economic Development of Indonesia."⁴⁹ According to an article in *The Jakarta Post* in March 2012, Indonesia views Korea "as an important partner due to its significant capital and high technology."⁵⁰ It is thus not surprising that respondents expressed hope for more technology transfers from Korea, particularly within the defence and infrastructure sectors.

In defence, Indonesia is a major Southeast Asian purchaser of Korean military equipment, including KAI KT-1 basic training aircrafts, T-50 Golden Eagle supersonic jets and submarines. Additionally, Indonesia and Korea are jointly working on a project to develop a new jet, KF-X.⁵¹ The importance of Indonesia-Korean defence relations are reflected in the responses of the Indonesian interviewees, as they cite Korea's assistance to Indonesia's defence capability and industry as one of Seoul's key contributions to the archipelago. One respondent, however, highlighted concerns that Korea might withdraw from its commitments to assist in Indonesia's defence capacity building to build its domestic defence industry. Defence cooperation between the two countries is not just limited to such arms sales and development projects; Korea and Indonesia are also participants in multilateral exercises such as RIMPAC and Cobra Gold, and are involved in ASEAN-centric security forums such as the ADMM-Plus and ARF. One interviewee observed that Indonesia and Korea are actively involved in

⁴⁵ "40 years of friendship: S. Korea, Indonesia embark on stronger strategic partnership," *The Jakarta Post*, March 8, 2013, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/03/08/40-years-friendship-s-korea-indonesia-embark-stronger-strategic-partnership.html>.

⁴⁶ Bagus B. T. Saragih, "Yudhoyono predicts a bright future for relations with Korea," *The Jakarta Post*, March 30, 2012, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/03/30/yudhoyono-predicts-a-bright-future-relations-with-korea.html>.

⁴⁷ "40 years of friendship," *The Jakarta Post*, op. cit.; and, "Indonesia is top SEA destination for foreign investment," *Channel News Asia*, February 22, 2013, Factiva.

⁴⁸ Steinberg, "Tenuous Beginnings," in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, op. cit., 16.

⁴⁹ "Indonesia-South Korea's relationship built on trust," *Antara News*, March 29, 2012, <http://www.antaraneews.com/en/news/80980/indonesia-south-koreas-relationship-built-on-trust>.

⁵⁰ Saragih, "Yudhoyono predicts a bright future," op. cit.

⁵¹ Lee Tae-hoon, "Korea eyes tenfold growth in defense exports," *The Korea Times*, January 16, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/01/205_102994.html.

many of the same forums, providing a platform for deeper bilateral cooperation on common interests within the institutions.

Interestingly, defence was one area in which respondents felt that Korean contributions could make an impact vis-à-vis China and Japan's relations with Indonesia. It was noted that the economic contributions of China and Japan to Indonesia exceeded Korea's, but the latter could build a niche area of cooperation with Indonesia in which China and Japan had yet to create a substantial presence. Presumably, defence and security was seen as the natural choice as collaboration in this sector already exists between Korea and Indonesia. Additionally, Indonesian respondents hoped that Korea could maintain its neutrality and be more independent in its foreign and security policies even as its role in the U.S. rebalancing would help maintain peace and stability in Asia. One interviewee elaborated that Indonesia would like Korea to stabilise the Asian region by "promoting peaceful norms" and "helping [to] calm relations" between the United States and China.

3.2 Malaysia

Malaysia's impressions of Korea are most pronounced in the economic and development areas. These are also where the bilateral relations are the strongest. Bilateral security ties are nascent, although interviewees felt that Korea could assist in Malaysia's capacity building involving non-traditional security issues.

Since 2009, Korea has been among Malaysia's top 10 trading partners. Bilateral trade in 2011 amounted to US\$16.7 billion,⁵² a figure which President Lee and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak pledged to double within the next five years.⁵³ Seoul and Kuala Lumpur are also considering the feasibility of a bilateral FTA. Meanwhile, Korea emerged as the second largest investor in Malaysia in 2011, behind Japan, with its investments in the Southeast Asian country totalling US\$1.7 billion.⁵⁴ Another US\$1.6 billion in investments from Korea is expected by 2014.⁵⁵ For the Malaysian interview respondents, Korea's investments in Malaysia's infrastructure and construction projects stand out.

Korea's expertise in green growth and technological innovation, as well as its rapid economic progress, has also caught the attention of Malaysia. Specifically, PM Najib has expressed interest to "adopt, adapt and learn from the South Korean experience in promoting green energy,"⁵⁶ as Malaysia strives to meet its target of 40 per cent cut in its carbon dioxide emission by 2020. The governments

⁵² ASEAN-Korea Centre, "2012 ASEAN & Korea in Figures," op. cit., 61–62.

⁵³ Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, "Seminar Korea Business Summit—Investment Seminar on Business Opportunities in Malaysia," April 5, 2011, http://www.pmo.gov.my/?menu=speech&page=1908&news_id=441&speech_cat=2.

⁵⁴ Rupa Damodaran, "Highest ever FDI for Malaysia," *New Straits Times*, February 22, 2012, <http://www.nst.com.my/top-news/highest-ever-fdi-for-malaysia-1.50269>.

⁵⁵ "RM5 billion to flow in from South Korea," *New Straits Times*, April 7, 2011, Factiva.

⁵⁶ "Small nuke reactor is safe," *New Straits Times*, June 3, 2009, Factiva.

of both sides have also stated their intention to pursue a green technology partnership.⁵⁷ While respondents acknowledged Korea's comparative advantage in green growth, they also stated that Korea is just one among several partners that Malaysia is working with in this area. Malaysian leaders have additionally expressed admiration for Korea's development experience. At a Korean business summit on opportunities in Malaysia in 2011, PM Najib commented that Malaysia "can learn much from Korea's way of achieving developed nation status—it is, after all, often said that Korea did in 50 years what the West did in 200!"⁵⁸ This sentiment was also reflected in the survey responses. One interviewee noted that while Malaysia and Korea were at similar stages of socioeconomic development 50 years ago, the latter has since progressed at a far more rapid pace than Malaysia. In this regard, Malaysia could hope to emulate and learn from Korea's development model, including e-governance, democratic progress and the development of human capital.

Security-wise, bilateral ties are nascent, and President Lee and PM Najib have pledged to strengthen defence cooperation.⁵⁹ None of the Malaysian respondents expected Korea to play a major role in security challenges facing Southeast Asia, namely the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. One respondent felt that Korea has not built up sufficient goodwill and trust to undertake a mediatory role in Southeast Asia's disputes. Instead, it was opined that keeping a low profile helps Korea, as any action taken by Seoul on the South China Sea disputes may be perceived as it siding with Washington, given its mutual security alliance. One respondent argued that Korea's role in Southeast Asia is constrained by its alliance with the United States as several Southeast Asian states are cautious about U.S. presence, although another noted that the Korea-U.S. alliance helps to ensure peace and stability in Asia. A couple of respondents said that Korea could deepen cooperation in areas and assist in capacity building for non-traditional security issues, such as anti-piracy initiatives in the Straits of Malacca, nuclear proliferation and counter-terrorism.

Similar to the perspectives from the other Southeast Asian countries, Malaysian respondents felt that Korea's involvement in Southeast Asia lags behind that of Japan and China in terms of duration and quantity, although they also acknowledged that Seoul was moving fast to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia. Korea's neutral status is seen as an advantage for Seoul's engagement of Southeast Asia. Compared with Japan and China, fewer tensions exist between Korea and Southeast Asian countries. Korea is also perceived not to harbour great power ambitions, and less likely to divide Southeast Asian countries along the lines of major power rivalry. For now, however, the respondents noted that President Park Geun-hye's priorities are focused on North Korea, and engagement with Southeast Asia might come only at a later stage.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Trade, Industry & Energy, "Korea, Malaysia Pursuing Green Partnership," October 8, 2010, http://www.mke.go.kr/language/eng/policy/news_view.jsp?seq=957&tableNm=E_01_01.

⁵⁸ Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, "Seminar Korea Business Summit," op. cit.

⁵⁹ Lee Chi-dong, "S. Korea, Malaysia seek bilateral FTA, closer ties on energy, defense," *Yonhap*, December 10, 2010, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2010/12/10/58/0301000000AEN20101210006600315F.HTML>.

3.3 The Philippines

Like Indonesia, the Philippines has relatively strong ties with Korea in the areas of economics, defence and development. Out of all the Southeast Asian states, the Philippines was the earliest to establish diplomatic ties with Korea, in 1949. More than 7,000 Philippine troops fought alongside the South Koreans in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, and reports on Philippine-Korea relations today often mention Seoul's appreciation of Manila for its contribution six decades ago.⁶⁰

In 2011, Korea was the sixth biggest trading partner of the Philippines with a bilateral trade volume of US\$10.9 billion.⁶¹ Korea is the Philippines' third largest source of investment, with the first and second sources being Japan and the Netherlands respectively.⁶² Indeed, the economic contributions of Korea to the Philippines rank as one of the key impressions that Philippine survey respondents had of bilateral relations. One respondent highlighted Korean investments in the Philippine shipping industry as a significant economic contribution of Korea.

Korea became the biggest ODA donor to the Philippines in 2011,⁶³ with Philippine Deputy Presidential Spokeswoman Abigail Valte labelling Korea a "development partner in agriculture and infrastructure".⁶⁴ Korea's contributions to the Philippines' development include an EDCF-supported irrigation project in Iloilo⁶⁵ and a donation of a US\$3 million rice processing complex.⁶⁶ Seoul and Manila have also signed agreements on collaboration in agricultural technology and energy.⁶⁷ Achieving a similar level of success as Korea in development also seems to be a goal for the Philippines. An opinion piece in the *Manila Bulletin* in August 2010 noted that "the higher importance of South Korea emanates from its being an Asian exemplar of national transformation [...] For the Philippines to achieve a similar position of respect/influence in the world community from devastation to development to modernity as South Korea has done in three generations is, indeed, a worthy target for Filipinos to aspire."⁶⁸ Interestingly, Korea's assistance towards development in the Philippines did not seem to have made much of an impression on the survey respondents. Rather, the respondents'

⁶⁰ See, for example, Kim Se-jeong, "60 years later, Korea is biggest donor to RP," *Korea Times*, January 16, 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/08/176_79714.html; Dennis Jay Santos, "Grateful South Korea makes PH biggest aid recipient," *Inquirer Global Nation*, December 3, 2011, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20110312-324991/Grateful-South-Korea-makes-PH-biggest-aid-recipient>; and, "Aquino receives Korean War hero award," *abs-cbnNEWS.com*, December 15, 2010, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/12/14/10/aquino-receives-korean-war-hero-award>.

⁶¹ ASEAN-Korea Centre, "2012 ASEAN & Korea in Figures," op. cit., 62.

⁶² ASEAN-Korea Centre, "2012 ASEAN & Korea in Figures," op. cit., 75–76.

⁶³ Santos, "Grateful South Korea makes PH biggest aid recipient," op. cit.

⁶⁴ "Aquino, Lee discuss greater cooperation," *Manila Bulletin*, 21 Nov 2011, Factiva.

⁶⁵ Riza T. Olchondra, "PH to receive largest assistance fund from S. Korea," *Inquirer Business*, April 27, 2012, <http://business.inquirer.net/55979/ph-to-receive-largest-assistance-fund-from-s-korea>.

⁶⁶ "South Korea donates Php150-M modern rice processing complex to Bohol," *Philippines News Agency*, December 10, 2012, Factiva.

⁶⁷ Presidential Communications Operations Office, "PHL, Korea sign five agreements for development assistance," November 21, 2011, <http://www.pcoo.gov.ph/archives2011/nov21.htm>.

⁶⁸ "South Korea: From war to modernization to OECD to G20 host in 60 years," *Manila Bulletin*, 29 Aug 2010, Factiva.

impressions of Korea were more focused on trade and investment, as well as socio-cultural exchanges. One interviewee expressed the view that Korean contributions to the Philippines were seen more as business-type transactions, vis-à-vis contributions from the Japan and United States which were seen as more development-type aid.

In the military sector, bilateral ties are cemented by Korean arms sales—alongside assistance from the United States, Japan and Australia—to enhance Manila’s defence capability. In January 2013, the Philippine Air Force announced its intention to purchase 12 fighter jets from Korea, two of which are expected to arrive in 2013.⁶⁹ Korea has also previously sold military trucks and machine guns to the Philippine military. One respondent highlighted that after the United States, Korea has the most number of defence agreements with the Philippines. In this regard, Korea’s assistance towards Philippine defence capacity-building efforts makes it an important defence partner. At the multilateral level, both countries are participants in RIMPAC, and are also stakeholders in the ADMM-Plus and ARF where consultations on security issues are held.

Evaluating Korea’s role in Asian security, Philippine interviewees noted that Korea’s alliance with the United States helped to ensure the latter’s presence in Asia, and added that Korea should also contribute to Asia’s stability by “supporting peaceful and constructive engagement” of the major powers. Notably, one survey respondent said that Korea did not perceive Southeast Asia as being able to make significant contributions to its immediate interests, specifically North Korea.

3.4 Singapore

Singapore’s ties with Korea are concentrated mainly in the economic sector. While respondents did not anticipate an expansion of Korea’s role and influence in Southeast Asia in the near future, they nonetheless opined that Singapore and Korea could boost relations by focusing on common interests within Asia.

As of 2012, Korea is Singapore’s seventh largest trading partner with a bilateral trade volume of US\$42.6 billion.⁷⁰ The city-state is the only Southeast Asian member country to have an FTA with Korea in effect. From 2002 to 2009, Singapore received the second largest share of Korean FDI out of all the Southeast Asian member countries.⁷¹ Accordingly, Singaporean interviewees highlighted the bilateral economic ties as the focus of the bilateral relationship. The contributions of Korean companies to Singapore’s construction and infrastructure sectors were also noted. The economic sector was identified as the area in which Korea can make the most impact, although it was also

⁶⁹ Daniel Ten Kate and Norman P. Aquino, “Philippines Nears \$443 Million Deal for South Korea Fighter Jets,” *Bloomberg*, January 30, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-01-30/philippines-nears-443-million-deal-for-south-korea-fighter-jets.html>.

⁷⁰ IE Singapore, “About South Korea,” last modified November 24, 2012, http://www.iesingapore.gov.sg/wps/portal/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3gDf4PQMFMD_1A3g2BDI0MPQx8DKNAvyHZUBABp-IR1/.

⁷¹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2010* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2010), http://www.asean.org/images/archive/documents/asean_statistical_2010.pdf, 125.

perceived that Korea does not have the resources to match up to Japan and China in terms of quantitative contributions.

Geopolitically, respondents agreed that Korea is an emerging presence in Southeast Asia, and that Singapore leaders are gradually recognising the importance of Korea. Bilateral defence ties have been established, with a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in December 2009 which “formalised existing defence interactions such as policy dialogues and exchanges of visits.”⁷² At the multilateral level, both Korea and Singapore participate in Asia Pacific drills such as RIMPAC and Cobra Gold. Both countries have also been part of the Combined Task Force-151, a multi-national task force to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia, and the International Security Assistance Force deployed in Afghanistan.

Despite Korea's emerging geopolitical presence in Southeast Asia and its close economic ties with Singapore, respondents did not expect an expansion of Korea's role and influence in the foreseeable future. This is attributed to two reasons. First, survey respondents noted that Korea's role in Southeast Asia is circumscribed by the North Korean issue. In this regard, one respondent felt that there was no continuity between President Lee's “New Asia Initiative” and President Park's foreign policy. Korea's increased engagement with Southeast Asia seems to have been short-lived, and it is yet unclear how much President Park's priorities lie in Southeast Asia as her administration has been preoccupied with the North Korean issue since taking office. As such, Singapore policymakers may find it difficult to be convinced of undertaking long-term projects with Korea. Second, Korea's role in Southeast Asia remains overshadowed by China and Japan. Although Korean pop culture may have had an impact on the socio-cultural aspects of Singapore and Southeast Asia, Korea's inability to quantitatively match China and Japan's economic relations with and development assistance to Southeast Asian countries hinders its overall standing in the Southeast Asia.

Against this context, respondents opined that Singapore and Korea could boost relations by focusing on common interests, such as ensuring a continued U.S. presence in Asia, managing the rise of China, maintaining free and open trade, and strengthening ASEAN. The last issue is particularly relevant for Singapore and Korea as both have been actively involved in regionalisation efforts and institutions such as ASEAN, aimed at tackling Asian issues.

3.5 Vietnam

Vietnam may be one of the latest Southeast Asian countries to establish diplomatic ties with Korea, in 1992, but bilateral relations have progressed at a rapid speed since then, particularly in the economic sector and in development cooperation. Vietnamese impressions of Korea are thus strongest in these two fields. There is also a perceived cultural similarity between Vietnam and Korea, making the Korean model of development seem useful for and adaptable to the Vietnamese context.

⁷² Chua Soon Lye, “Singapore and S. Korea sign pact to enhance defense ties,” *Cyberpioneer*, December 2, 2009, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/content/imindef/publications/cyberpioneer/news/2009/December/02dec09_news.html.

With a bilateral trade volume of US\$17.8 billion in 2011, Korea became Vietnam's fourth biggest trading partner, after China, the United States and Japan. Negotiations for a bilateral FTA are currently underway.⁷³ Korea is the third largest investor in Vietnam, after Japan and Taiwan.⁷⁴ According to statistics, Vietnam receives the most Korean FDI, in cumulative terms, out of all the ASEAN member countries.⁷⁵ It also receives the largest share of Korean ODA,⁷⁶ while Korea is the second biggest ODA donor in the Southeast Asian country, after Japan.⁷⁷ This assistance is focused on sustainable development, health care, rural development, as well as human capital and transport infrastructure.⁷⁸ Significantly, Vietnam is the first country to import Korea's development model. According to Seoul, Korea will provide consultations and technical assistance to Vietnam on issues ranging from economic policies to systems integration, under a program titled "Shaping the Future with Korea."⁷⁹ With such close cooperation in economics and development, it is no surprise that Vietnamese survey respondents stressed the significance of Korea to Vietnam as an important economic and investment partner, and also as a growth model which Vietnam could learn from. Korea's contributions to poverty reduction, education and training initiatives, as well as healthcare projects, were generally perceived to have assisted in improving the lives of Vietnamese overall.

The close bilateral relations can be better understood within the context that out of the five Southeast Asian countries surveyed in this paper, Vietnam is regarded to be the most similar to Korea in terms of culture. This is attributed to the Confucian values that both societies share,⁸⁰ as well as their experience as colonies pre-World War II.⁸¹ This cultural closeness was also highlighted by the Vietnamese interviewees. Given the cultural and societal proximity, Vietnam is likely to look to Korea's experience for useful and workable lessons that it can apply to its own development. As Tae Yang Kwak writes, "[t]here is a perception on the part of the Vietnamese that they share a cultural, institutional, or psychological connection or commonality with Koreans, while at the same time the Koreans have something different and desirable, such as material success or social liberty."⁸² In fact, one respondent termed Korea's "Miracle on the Han River" model as "an optimal way" to boost Vietnam's economic growth. Besides existing collaboration, survey respondents also felt that more

⁷³ "Vietnam, South Korea launch FTA talks," *Thanh Nien News*, August 7, 2012, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/index/pages/20120807-vietnam-south-korea-launch-fta-talks.aspx>.

⁷⁴ "Vietnam-S.Korea FTA talks forecast to go well," *Vietnam Net*, January 23, 2013, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/business/57583/vietnam-s-korea-fta-talks-forecast-to-go-well.html>.

⁷⁵ See ASEAN Statistical Yearbooks 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011 (Jakarta: The ASEAN Secretariat).

⁷⁶ "Vietnam-S.Korea FTA talks forecast to go well," *Vietnam Net*, op. cit.

⁷⁷ "Vietnam, S Korea agree to boost bilateral relations to new level," *People's Daily Online*, June 9, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90851/7404250.html>.

⁷⁸ "South Korea to double global ODA," *Viet Nam News*, June 10, 2011, <http://vietnamnews.vn/society/212170/south-korea-to-double-global-oda-.html>.

⁷⁹ Byun, "Vietnam named first importer of Korean development model," op. cit.

⁸⁰ Joong Keun Kim, "The Korean Wave," in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, op. cit., 287.

⁸¹ Tae Yang Kwak, "The Republic of Korea in Southeast Asia," in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, op. cit., 304–305.

⁸² Tae, "The Republic of Korea in Southeast Asia," op. cit., 318.

could be done to deepen Korea-Vietnam relations. This would include cooperation in information sharing and capacity building to manage challenges in all fields, technology transfer and sharing experiences on development, as well as preservation of water resources in the Mekong.

While Vietnamese interviewees noted—as with respondents from the other Southeast Asian countries—that China and Japan’s relations with Southeast Asia surpass Korea’s in terms of quantity and duration, they also highlighted that Korea possesses comparative advantages. Vietnam and Southeast Asia could, for example, benefit from Korea’s positive relations with both the United States and China. During a visit by President Lee to Vietnam in October 2009, both sides agreed to upgrade their ties to the level of a “strategic cooperative partnership,” with closer cooperation in the political, military, economic and social sectors.⁸³ A notable outcome of this enhanced relationship was the first Korea-Vietnam defence strategic dialogue held at the deputy minister level in March 2012. The inauguration of this meeting highlights how far bilateral ties have progressed, given that South Korean troops fought in the Vietnam War alongside South Vietnamese soldiers. Indeed, interviewees agreed that despite both countries fighting on opposing sides during the Vietnam War, bilateral relations have moved on and are currently extremely positive. On maritime disputes in Southeast Asia, one respondent said that the best way for Korea to contribute is to remain neutral and advocate common interests such as freedom of navigation.

Following the survey findings, the next section will discuss the implications that Southeast Asian perspectives of Korea have on its Southeast Asian engagement strategies and in its pursuit of a middle power role.

⁸³ “Vietnam, RoK strengthen and elevate cooperation,” *Vietnam News Agency Bulletin*, October 27, 2009, Factiva.

4. Discussion

Based on the above perspectives from the five countries, this section will examine if the selected Southeast Asian countries view Korea as a middle power. As mentioned earlier, middle power diplomacy generally involves adopting an internationalist perspective, actively participating in multilateral forums, acting as a bridge among countries, and leading in a specific niche area. Southeast Asian perspectives of Korea's performance in each criterion will be discussed in turn.

First, Korea's internationalist turn in its foreign policy has been received well by Southeast Asia. The expanding scope of Korea's diplomatic interests has brought it closer to Southeast Asian countries in terms of trade, investment, ODA and capacity building. In all the five Southeast Asian countries, Korea is regarded as an important trade and investment partner, and for most of the countries, Korea's investments in domestic infrastructure stand out positively. Out of the five countries surveyed, the impact of Korean ODA seems to be most deeply felt in Vietnam—not surprising given that Vietnam receives the most grants and loans from Korea. In the other Southeast Asian countries, the focus was more on Korea's contribution to capacity building, in areas such as technology transfers and non-traditional security issues, rather than specific ODA initiatives. The exact focus of each Southeast Asian country would depend on the respective country's interests. For example, Indonesia hopes for more technology transfers from Korea in the defence sector, while Malaysia is keen to learn from Korea's democratic development and green growth. Regardless of the different focus in the respective bilateral ties, the survey responses indicate that Southeast Asian countries are viewing Korea as an Asian, if not international, actor. Korea's contributions to the economy, development and capacity building of Southeast Asia are considered important by its countries. The expectation that Korea can make significant contributions beyond its backyard indicates that Korea's attempts to expand its role and influence in Southeast Asia have achieved some success.

Second, Korean engagement of Southeast Asia is perceived to remain largely focused on economics and culture, highlighting the question of whether Seoul has been able to make an impact through ASEAN-centric multilateral forums on geostrategic issues. Most of the interviewees did not envision a role for Korea in Southeast Asian strategic challenges. Instead, some felt that the best way Korea could contribute to peace and stability Asia would be by maintaining its neutrality and keeping a low profile. In this regard, Korea's mutual security alliance with the United States was seen by several respondents as a potential constraint on Korea's neutrality—and, by extension, its role in Southeast Asia. Overall, Korea remains absent from Southeast Asia's geostrategic calculus, and while it may have a role in the overall Asian architecture, it is unlikely to be involved in the management of specific challenges. As such, while Korea has deepened cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, this engagement is seen to be confined within the economic and cultural domains. It is thus debatable if Korea has made an impact in ASEAN-centric multilateral forums on strategic issues. In the context of niche diplomacy, this may not necessarily be an issue for Seoul if it chooses to focus its resources on areas other than strategic issues.

Third, Seoul's efforts to utilise network diplomacy and bring countries together to work on common issues do not seem to rank high on Southeast Asian impressions of Korea. While some interviewees mentioned green growth as one area in which Korea could share its experiences with Southeast Asia, others were sceptical of such initiatives and the impact they made on Korea's standing in Southeast Asia. In fact, for all the survey respondents, Korea's impact via trade and investment, as well as culture, made more of an impression than green growth initiatives involving Korea. The perceived limited role of Korea in issues beyond economics and culture constrains its importance in Southeast Asia. It should be noted, however, that respondents acknowledged that Korea and Southeast Asian countries had common interests which they could work towards within the framework of ASEAN and other Asian institutions.

Fourth, while Korea has attempted to carve out a leading role for itself in its niche areas of green growth and development, the responses from the Southeast Asian interviewees gave the impression that not all Southeast Asian countries were concerned with the same issues. Scepticism over green growth has been mentioned in the preceding paragraph. On development, Korean initiatives resonate most with Vietnam and Malaysia. In particular, these two countries want to learn more about Korea's economic and political development. Other than green growth and development, several interviewees highlighted that Seoul's perceived neutrality could also be seen as a niche area for Korea. While the influence of China and Japan in Southeast Asia may be relatively extensive in terms of duration and impact, there are also concerns that engagement with Tokyo or Beijing could entangle Southeast Asian countries in major power dynamics. On the other hand, Korea's role as a non-revisionist, status-quo partner is perceived positively as Southeast Asian countries would be less wary of it. In this regard, Korea's neutrality is viewed by the Southeast Asian countries as a comparative advantage vis-à-vis China and Japan. Given the Southeast Asia's history of occupation by Japan, as well as the concerns over China's rise and the U.S. rebalancing, Korea's perceived neutrality could in the longer-term be an important factor in boosting Korea's strategic role in Southeast Asia, as it positions itself as a stabiliser and broker in Asian dynamics.

Based on the perspectives from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam, it can be concluded that Southeast Asia generally views Korea as an emerging middle power. Views of Korea's role in Southeast Asia are largely confined to economic and cultural issues, and Southeast Asian countries are unlikely to envision a role for Korea in the management of their geostrategic challenges. Korea is mostly seen as a neutral actor (although there were some concerns about its mutual security alliance with the United States potentially constraining its neutrality), which could work to its advantage as it attempts to fulfil its middle power function by being a bridge connecting Asian countries. An obstacle identified by the survey respondents as having the potential to limit Korea's attempts to expand its presence in Southeast Asia was the North Korean issue. Many noted that Korea's top priority remained North Korea, and while President Lee's New Asia Initiative did turn Korea's foreign policy focus towards Southeast Asia for a while, the beginning of the Park administration saw the new president focused on dealing with Pyongyang.⁸⁴ This could have

⁸⁴ Interviews for this study were conducted before President Park visited Vietnam in September 2013, her first trip to a Southeast Asian country. The leaders of both sides agreed to deepen bilateral engagement in their strategic

implications for the attitudes of Southeast Asian countries towards cooperation with Korea, especially if they do not view Korea as a committed and long-term partner owing to Seoul's preoccupation with North Korea.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the concept of middle power as it relates to Korea, and shown how Korea's attributes and foreign policy behaviour fulfils the functions of middle power diplomacy. First, Korea's material capabilities, including its economy, military expenditure and population, place it in the upper-middle tier of international rankings. Second, Korea has adopted niche diplomacy in the areas of green growth and development. Third, Korea is an active participant in multilateralism and a proponent of network diplomacy. Southeast Asia has responded positively to Korea's attempts to establish itself as a middle power and welcomed increased engagement with Seoul. However, Southeast Asian perspectives of Korea as a significant actor are confined within the domains of economy and culture. To Southeast Asian countries, the importance of Korea in Southeast Asia's geostrategic calculus is hindered by its preoccupation with North Korea and, potentially, its security alliance with the United States. However, should Korea be able to emphasise and maintain its neutrality amid major power dynamics, its importance in Southeast Asia could rise. Based on these findings and assessments, the paper will conclude with three implications for Korea's engagement of Southeast Asia.

First, Korea will need to find ways to maintain its perceived neutrality even as the Korea-U.S. security alliance remains a critical element of its national security policy. The United States may be important for Korea's security and Asian stability, but Korea should be aware that overreliance on the United States for security issues may distance it from Southeast Asian countries that are wary of getting entangled in major power conflicts. In this regard, Korea and the United States have worked towards broadening the scope of the bilateral alliance beyond military issues. During President Park's visit to Washington in May 2013, both sides agreed that "the Korea-U.S. alliance should deal not just with challenges relating to the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, but confronting the broader international community."⁸⁵ The "increasingly global partnership" will expand to include issues such as climate change, energy security and development assistance.⁸⁶ This way, Korea would be able to portray itself as an important Asian and international actor that is working towards solutions for global

cooperation partnership and pledged to sign the Vietnam-Korea FTA in 2014; See "Vietnam-RoK Joint Statement," *Vietnam+*, September 10, 2013, <http://en.vietnamplus.vn/Home/VietnamRoK-Joint-Statement/20139/38690.vnplus>.

⁸⁵ The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference," May 7, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/07/remarks-president-obama-and-president-park-south-korea-joint-press-confe>.

⁸⁶ Cheong Wa Dae, "Joint Declaration in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the Alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America," May 8, 2013, http://english.president.go.kr/pre_activity/speeches/speeches_view.php?board_no=E03&uno=7816.

challenges. The expansion of the Korea-U.S. alliance ensures that Korea can maintain its strong ties with the United States while at the same time not distance itself from non-U.S. partners.⁸⁷

Second, Korea should continue to deepen and increase engagement with Southeast Asia on the economic and cultural fronts, as well as reinforce its assistance on capacity building for Southeast Asian states. Although Korea's quantitative contributions may not match up to that of China or Japan, Korea's expertise in economic and political development, as well as its status as a non-revisionist power, have been positively received by Southeast Asian countries. This would help boost Korea's image as a significant partner of Southeast Asian countries, as well as reinforce its niche areas in the context of its middle power diplomacy.

Third, Korea should reinforce its presence in Southeast Asia by displaying its commitment to Asian institutions such as ASEAN and its related forums. Identifying common interests and working towards them would allow Southeast Asian countries to see that Korea is here to stay, even as it deals with the North Korean issue. Multilateral engagement would also enhance Korea's network diplomacy, and help to cement its role in Asia as the bridge or broker between Southeast Asian countries and the major powers. In this regard, Korea could also consider boosting its material power capabilities. As Chaesung Chun aptly states, "[i]t is good to host important meetings such as the G20 and nuclear security summits, but insufficient material power will build a barrier to South Korea's self-claimed roles of mediator or bridge-builder."⁸⁸ Soft power must be complemented by physical capabilities to be effective at the policy level. Korea could, for example, boost its capabilities and extend assistance to Southeast Asian countries in non-traditional security issues.

Through deepening engagement with Asian and ASEAN-centric multilateral institutions, reinforcing existing areas of cooperation, and emphasising its non-revisionist status, Korea would be able to highlight its value and importance to Southeast Asia. In turn, as Southeast Asian countries recognise the significant role of Korea in Asia, its middle power status would be enhanced and further established.

⁸⁷ The tension between non-alignment and alliance ties is, arguably, characteristic of Asian countries in general. Hedging strategies, involving a range of policy responses such as strengthening alliance ties, boosting engagement and/or soft balancing, are employed by Korea and Southeast Asian states to manage the uncertainty arising from the shifting power dynamics in Asia. See, for example, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, Nor Azizan Idris and Abd Rahim Md Nor, "The China Factor in the U.S. 'Reengagement' With Southeast Asia: Drivers and Limits of Converged Hedging," *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012), doi: 10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01361.x; Jennifer Lind, "Between Giants: South Korea and the U.S.-China Rivalry," *The Atlantic*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/07/between-giants-south-korea-and-the-us-china-rivalry/260060>; and, Michael R. Chambers, "The Evolving Relationship Between China and Southeast Asia," in *Legacy of Engagement in Southeast Asia*, eds. Ann Marie Murphy and Bridget Welsh (Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2008), 281-310.

⁸⁸ Chaesung Chun, "South Korea's Foreign Policy and East Asia," in *Korea and East Asia: The Stony Road to Collective Security*, eds. Rüdiger Frank and John Swenson-Wright (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), 165-166.

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