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**KOREA EUROPE REVIEW**

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Understanding South Korea-Middle East Relations under the Moon Jae-in Administration

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**Abstract**

*The Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) has been trying to diversify its foreign relations by engaging with different actors across different regions, including the Middle East. Although most Asian powers seemingly prioritize their foreign relations by focusing on their immediate neighbourhood in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, the Middle East has occupied a rather substantial place for a number of reasons. South Korea, starting in the early 1990s, has developed a vision for a more multidimensional and multilateral foreign policy. Spanning successive governments South Korea has deepened its relations with Middle Eastern states, particularly so with the energy providers, despite varying policy perspectives on the Middle East. This article examines the period starting in early 2008 with the Lee Myung-bak presidency up until the end of the Moon Jae-in administration in March 2022. It focuses on Middle East policies to map the changes and continuities in South Korea's foreign policy. The Lee government is often considered to represent a turning point in Korean foreign policy toward a more global vision. Starting with a historical contextualization, the core analytic focus is on the Moon administration's Middle Eastern policy. The analysis seeks to define the respective administrations' agenda priorities towards the Middle East and to offer a comparative evaluation in terms of the governments' political stance and foreign policy nexus.*

**Introduction**

South Korea is one of the Asian countries that sought to widen its foreign policy perspective since the end of the bipolar world order. The structural changes that, since the early 1990s, transformed the bipolar nature of the international system into a multipolar one had considerable impact on the South Korean foreign policy agenda. Successive South Korean governments put forward different foreign policy initiatives since the end of Cold War. Through these initiatives, a number of regions with particular issues and interests were prioritized. The Middle East is among those regions even though we should bear in mind that 'Middle East' is itself a controversial frame and as such closer to a political-cultural definition of a combination of states and communities rather than a clear-cut physical geography.<sup>1</sup> As South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs states: "South Korea has diplomatic relations with 18 Middle Eastern countries, where there are seventeen Embassies and two Consulate Generals. Countries with which Korea has diplomatic ties include: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Bahrain, the UAE, Algeria, Oman, Jordan, Iran, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, Tunisia and Yemen".<sup>2</sup>

1. Since the aim of the paper is not to discuss the emergence, adequacy and acceptance of Middle East as a regional denomination, I proceed in this article from the official South Korean way of defining the Middle East and the scope of countries comprised by it.

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (ROK). Middle East: The ROK-Middle East Relations. [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpage/m\\_4911/contents.do](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpage/m_4911/contents.do)

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3. Frank Gaenssmantel, "Interpreting change: International challenges and variations in foreign policy beliefs as explanations for shifts in China's policy towards the European Union." *International Relations* 29.3 (2015): 396. See also Mark Bevir and Oliver Daddow, "Interpreting foreign policy: National, comparative and regional studies." *International Relations* 29.3 (2015): 275.

4. Alon Levkowitz, "The Republic of Korea and the Middle East: Economics, Diplomacy, and Security," *Korea Economic Institute* 5.6 (2010): 1-9.; Alon Levkowitz, "Korea and the Middle East turmoil: a reassessment of South Korea-Middle East relations," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 24.2 (2012): 225-238; Alon Levkowitz, "South Korea's Middle East Policy," Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University, 2013.

5. Hee Lee Soo, "The Silk Road and Korea-Middle East Cultural Connections: Guest Editor's Introduction," *Acta Koreana* 21.1 (2018): 1-14.

This clarification is helpful both in terms of defining the scope of the paper and for understanding the South Korean perspective on what the Middle East does consist of. The paper, however, is not structured along a bilateral relations analysis. Rather, it aims to uncover the dynamics of establishing and deepening relations with the region as driven by the agenda setting of different South Korean governments. First, I provide a brief review of South Korea-Middle East relations highlighting core issues, key countries and problems. Second, the political history of different initiatives of South Korea is examined by focusing on the transformative impact of these processes on the South Korean perception of the Middle East and its implications. In this part, Lee Myung-bak's pivotal opening out strategy 'Global Korea' and the so-called 'Resource Diplomacy' as a crucial part of the former is given particular emphasis. Resource Diplomacy was the first declaration of a systematic framework to define the Middle East relations of South Korea and, in this sense, represents a vital turning point in South Korean foreign policy towards the Middle East. Together with the Global Korea vision of President Lee it constituted a significant part of the wider foreign policy perspective of his administration. The main part of the paper focusses on the Middle East policies of the Moon Jae-in administration. It examines them along the respective issue areas of South Korea-Middle East relations. By probing the Moon administration's Middle East agenda, this paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by asking whether the Moon Jae-in government modified and/or added any new dimensions to the South Korea-Middle East relations or simply followed a similar pattern as the previous governments. Therefore, it aims to map the interests and cooperation fields, the challenges and the opportunities for both South Korea and Middle Eastern countries. To do this, the article develops an interpretive perspective by combining external and internal factors that have shaped the Middle East policies of South Korea, again with a specific focus on the Moon Jae-in administration. This seems called for because the interpretive approach is integrative since, as Frank Gaenssmantel points out, it "accommodates two different accounts of change."<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the main external factor that has shaped the South Korean foreign policy agenda toward the Middle East is the end of Cold War and the bipolar world order resulting in Korea's ambition for a more global vision. The main internal factor can be seen in South Korea's rapidly growing economy and the increasing demand for energy sources.

### **Brief Review of the Scope of South Korea-Middle East Relations Research**

The literature on the South Korea-Middle East relations, at the first glance, seems to be dominated by a focus on the energy dependency of South Korea and the economic relations branching out from this issue. However, research is actually more diverse and can be grouped in three main categories. The first comprises research that takes South Korea and Middle East as its main research units. In this approach, the Middle East region is taken as a whole region and a single unit. One of the first scholars who contributed to that specific group of literature is Alon Levkowitz. In his research, he focused on South Korea and Middle East relations from a historical perspective and also organized existing relations under a number of fields such as security, diplomacy, economy, trade, and so forth.<sup>4</sup> The cultural sphere is also included as an object of inquiry within the literature. One such study, for example, explores the deep historical connection between Korea and the Middle East through Silk Road cultural interactions.<sup>5</sup> One of the most recent books has provided a significant contribution to the literature. This book by Hae Won Jeong, a professor specializing in Asia-Middle East relations at Abu

6. The 'Middle power' concept is one of the most defining concepts of South Korean foreign policy agenda and attitude. One of the first comprehensive works on the middle powers is Holbraad's book (1984). Regarding South Korea's middle power status please see Robertson (2007), Rozman (2007), Saxer (2013), and John (2014).

7. Hae Won Jeong, *South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy in the Middle East: Development, Political and Diplomatic Trajectories* (London: Routledge, 2022) (1st ed.) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003092100>

8. Joachim Kolb, "Small is Beautiful: South Korean-Gulf Relations as an Example of Strategic Engagement by Players in Different Arenas," in *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century: The Local to Global Transformation*, ed. Tim Niblock and Monica Malik (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013): 289-319.

9. Jeongmin Seo, "Diversifying Korea-Gulf Relations: From Construction to Halal Industries," *The Journal of Middle East and Central Asian Studies*, No. 1, (2017): 1-23.

10. Mohammed Turki Al-Sudairi, "South Korea-GCC Economic Relations: An Overview," *Gulf Research Center* (2012)

11. Harald Olsen, "South Korea's Pivot toward Iran: Resource Diplomacy and ROK-Iran Sanctions," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 25.1 (2013): 73-85.

12. Hae Won Jeong, "Beyond resource diplomacy and economic statecraft: UAE-ROK relations in the 21st century," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 226.

13. Alon Levkowitz, "Israel-South Korea relations: the first six decades," *Israel Affairs* 28, no. 1 (2022): 1.

14. See, for example, Irina Lyan and Alon Levkowitz, "From holy land to 'Hallyu Land': The symbolic journey following the Korean wave in Israel," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3.1 (2015): 7-21.

15. Nissim Otmazgin and Irina Lyan, "Hallyu across the desert: K-pop fandom in Israel and Palestine," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 3.1 (2014): 32-55.

16. Mohamed Elaskary, "The Korean Wave in the Middle East: Past and Present," *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity* 4.4 (2018): 1-16.

17. Aron Shai, "North Korea and Israel: A Missed Opportunity?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 10.1 (2016): 59-73.

Dhabi University, provides an in-depth discussion of theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of middle powers<sup>6</sup> with regard to South Korea's bilateral relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> In this group, there are also some studies compartmentalizing the Middle East region and focusing on specific parts of the region. One notable example is an article analysing the trajectories of South Korea's involvement in the Gulf.<sup>8</sup> Another paper focused on the relations between Gulf countries and South Korea from various areas with particular emphasis on the expansion by South Korean companies of their Halal industries.<sup>9</sup> Since the economic field is of prime importance in the Gulf region, a report for the Gulf Research Center specifically studied the economic relations between the Gulf countries and South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

The second category consists of the works that approach South Korea and Middle East relations based on a bilateral relations methodology. The interesting point in these works is that there is still an emphasis on the economy and resource trade. However, these works are not free of political issues. For example, in an article on resource diplomacy Harald Olsen tried to make sense of the rationale behind South Korea's reluctance to join sanctions on Iran.<sup>11</sup> Another notable bilateral relations article deals with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and South Korea. This article sheds light on the diplomatic history of South Korea-UAE bilateral relations. It examines the historical trajectory of South Korea's emergence as a middle-power state in the Middle East and discusses "the ramifications for the nexus between domestic politics and foreign policy."<sup>12</sup>

Israel has gained some prominence among the Middle East states that were analysed within the context of relations with South Korea. Most recently, Levkowitz examined the relations between South Korea and Israel starting from the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1962 up until the year 2020. By analysing the internal and external factors influencing their foreign and security policies Levkowitz aimed to offer an explanation for "mutual misunderstandings and the attendant problems, notably the failure to sign a free trade agreement till 2020."<sup>13</sup> Among the issues most often investigated in terms of bilateral relations, there is perhaps one above all others that has attracted scholarly interest. That issue is the *Hallyu*, also known as the whole of Korean wave of culture, pop music, and K-dramas. One example among the works analysing the impact of the Korean wave on the Middle East are studies on the acceptance of Korean culture in Israel. This type of study is also significant in terms of the fact that it moves away from high politics of both South Korea and Middle East and concentrates on the cultural sphere.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, it has diversified in terms of methodology,<sup>15</sup> and most recently seems to have taken a comparative turn, for example undertaking comparisons of Turkish and Korean drama throughout the Middle East.<sup>16</sup>

North Korea has undeniably been a significant unit of inquiry regarding South Korea's Middle East perspective. Some studies have directly focused on North Korea while also including South Korea in the bilateral relations analysis. One example is a detailed assessment of North Korea-Israel relations, for example also discussing the North Korean pilots' involvement as a support to Egyptian forces in the Arab-Israeli war in 1973.<sup>17</sup> Another notable study in this regard examines Iran's friendly relations with both Koreas, a fact that gains Iran a somewhat unique status in international affairs.<sup>18</sup>

The third category of inquiry takes the leaders/presidents of South Korea as units of analysis and looks into the relations from a governmental perspective. Among them, two important papers have focused on the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations respectively.<sup>19</sup> This category, however, features



18. Shirzad Azad, "Iran and the Two Koreas: A Peculiar Pattern of Foreign Policy," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* (2012): 163-192.

19. Shirzad Azad, "In Quest of a Second Boom: South Korea's Middle East Policy under Park Geun-hye," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 11, no. 1-2 (2018): 257-278; Shirzad Azad, "Dějã vu diplomacy: South Korea's Middle East policy under Lee Myung-bak," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2013): 552-566.

20. For more detailed information on the diplomatic recognition competition please see Gills (2005).

21. Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2018: 53-82.

22. Ming Lee, "Seoul's Searching For "Nord-politik": Evolution and Perspective," *Asian Perspective* 13.2 (1989): 156-157.

a relatively more limited research output as compared to other two categories.

Existing research tells us a lot about the relations of South Korea with and perspectives of it towards the Middle East. One of the inferences that can be gained from a literature review is that there is still a lot of space and plenty of opportunity for academic research. It is perhaps unsurprising that most of the foreign policy literature on South Korea prioritize North Korea relations and the wider network of relations with the regional powers. In this sense, the Middle East is still underrepresented in terms of academic research. Secondly, existing research clearly documents that some countries within the Middle East have come into prominence. These countries are mainly the Gulf countries and Iran and researchers have paid most attention to them. Thirdly, the governmental (presidential terms) approach is relatively new and there are only quite a few analyses in this field of inquiry. It is from this vantage point that this article aims to contribute to understanding of the Moon Jae-in administration's Middle East policies. Finally, beside energy trade and economic relations, investigations of cultural issues are on the rise. Hallyu, mostly discussed within the Southeast Asia context, has also began to be an attraction point in the Middle East and draw academic interest. There are indications that this trend will continue in the future and cultural analysis may gain utmost important in the coming period.

### **A Basic Look to the Foreign Policy Initiatives of South Korea**

South Korea is one of the few examples in the modern international system that is a half of a once unified political unit: the Kingdom of Korea. After the Japanese Empire had to withdraw from the colonized countries, the future of the peninsula was decided between the United States of America (the USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR). South Korea and North Korea were declared two independent states in 1948 and the Korean Peninsula remains divided to this day. It can be said without hesitation that this division on the peninsula is the first and foremost priority defining the foreign policy agendas of both Korean states. Since the two (one nation)-states had consistently looked to boost recognition in the international arena, the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries took on a competitive form, particularly so during the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> The Middle East region also became an attractive focus region for both Koreas and both sought to establish diplomatic relations. However, this increasing interest that South Korea took in the region didn't necessarily entail the development of a defined and structured foreign policy vision or framework at the time. Rather, the emphasis was mostly on inter-Korean relations and the economic recovery and development of South Korea. Yet, after the end of Cold War, when South Korea was no longer considered to be a poor and war-devastated country, this began to be reflected in its foreign policy perspective. Inter-Korean relations were still a priority, but there was a political will to shed and leave behind the restrictions of the Korean peninsula security-focused dilemma. Coinciding with the end of Cold War, there was also a crucial transformation in South Korean domestic political life: the transition from authoritarian rule to democratic government. As Scott A. Snyder put it, as the output of economic development of South Korea gained international recognition, South Korea managed to navigate a successful transition from authoritarianism to democracy.<sup>21</sup> During the transition period, Roh Tae-woo, the successor of Chun Doo-hwan, initiated a dialogue-based rapprochement not only with North Korea but also with other socialist states.<sup>22</sup> After President Roh, Kim Young-sam came into power; however, he did not have much room for manoeuvre at the international level due to

23. Chong-Jin Oh and Joosong Lee, "South Korea's Geopolitical Code and Inter-Korean Relations: "Northeast Asia+ Community of Responsibility". *Doğu Asya Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3/5 (Şubat 2020): 5.

24. Samuel S. Kim, "Korea and globalization (Segyehwa): A framework for analysis." *Korea's globalization* (2000):2.

25. The Nobel Peace Prize, Kim Dae-jung: Facts, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2000/dae-jung/facts/>.

26. Seong-Ho Sheen, "Strategic thought toward Asia in the Roh Moo-Hyun era," in *South Korean Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, In-Taek Hyun, and Shin-wha Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 102.

27. Ibid.

28. Sung-jin Choi, "Balancer of Northeast Asia," *The Korea Times*, December 16, 2005, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/04/673\\_238929.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/04/673_238929.html)

29. Hae Won Jeong, "Beyond resource diplomacy and economic statecraft: UAE-ROK relations in the 21st century," *Asian Journal of Middle East-ern and Islamic Studies* 13.2 (2019): 231.

30. Quoted from Jeong (2019: 231) based on the source which is H. Park, 'Iraq as a successful precedent for summit diplomacy...now is the time to prioritize resource diplomacy', *Seoul Economic Daily*, March 17, 2018, <http://www.sedaily.com/NewsView/1RX0LD21PY>.

31. Joongi Kim, "The Formulation of Korea's Resource Policy: Resource Diplomacy, Public-Private Consortium and International Agreements," *Asian Journal of WTO & International Health Law and Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (March 2014): 299.

32. The international economic difficulties, caused by 2007 economic crisis, had been also pushing for such a vision while the resource diplomacy was criticized and even became a subject of investigation in later days. See "[Special investigation part I] Resource diplomacy: \$4 billion in losses, and no one responsible" by Im In-tack, Kim Jeong-pil, Ryu Yi-geun and Choi Hyun-june, *Hankyoreh*, January 25, 2015, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/675100.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/675100.html).

33. Kang, Choi, Bong Youngshik, Kim Hankwon, Kim Jiyeon, and Lee Jaehyon, "Evaluating President Park Geun-Hye's Foreign Policy in Its 1st Year," *Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, (2014): 2 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08146>.

domestic issues such as corruption allegations in addition to the 1997 economic crisis' impact on the South Korean economy.<sup>23</sup> However, it is still important to emphasize the *Segyehwa* policy (Globalization) of Kim Young-sam which constituted vital step as "*Segyehwa* has been touted as no longer a matter of choice but one of necessity- globalize or perish!"<sup>24</sup> Following the transition to democracy, the now famous *Sunshine Policy* was put forward by Kim Dae-jung and he would eventually be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular".<sup>25</sup> Although this initiative clearly seemed to focus on the inter-Korean relations, it also helped South Korea to shape its country profile in a desire for a peaceful reconciliation of the peninsula and, therefore, also raise its prestige in the international arena. In line with his predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun, who served as the ninth president of South Korea from 2003 to 2008, pursued a similar pattern in foreign policy sphere. There were two important initiatives by Roh that need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the National Security Council office published a national security guideline titled "Peace, Prosperity and National Security: Security Policy Initiative of the Participatory Government," in March 2004, a year after Roh took office.<sup>26</sup> This document was vital because "it was the first ever official document on South Korea's national security strategy by the presidential office".<sup>27</sup> Secondly, President Roh proposed that South Korea would "play the role of a balancer" for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.<sup>28</sup> However, this well-structured foreign policy vision continued to prioritize East Asian geopolitical concerns and was falling short of offering a comprehensive view for other regions in terms of South Korean foreign policy objectives. With hindsight, there is little doubt however that it was the previous administration of Lee Myung-bak that was the pioneering force, at least at the discourse level. His "Global Korea" perspective turned out to be not only a successful foreign policy slogan during his own political term but later developed into a kind of tag for South Korea's international relations. The reflection of the Global Korea vision on the Middle East was brought about by the "Resource Diplomacy" of President Lee. However, it is argued that "the building blocks of horizontal resource diplomacy can be traced back to the legacy of Roh Moo-hyun's presidency".<sup>29</sup> It is said that the "resource diplomacy took off with Roh's visit to 17 countries which resulted in securing \$8.8 billion worth of hydrocarbon resources and minerals".<sup>30</sup> Although there were certain attempts of the various South Korean governments that put emphasis on the issue of resource dependency, it was one of the landmark achievements of the Lee administration to conceptualize it. As Kim points out; "The current administration's aggressive 'resource diplomacy' has been frequently led by the president himself and senior government officials and involves entities assuming a proactive role."<sup>31</sup> Here it should be emphasized that President Lee constructed his resource-energy dominated-policy based on previous governments' experiences but also added his vision by dedicating himself to the matter personally.<sup>32</sup>

The conservative government of Lee was succeeded by another conservative president and a famous figure in South Korea political life, Park Geun-hye, since she was also daughter of the Park Chung-hee who was seen as the father of the economic development of the country. After Park Geun-hye took office, the administration defined its foreign policy in three forms: "1) 'Trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula' (hereafter, trust-building process); 2) the 'Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI),' and; 3) 'middle power diplomacy.'"<sup>33</sup> It was quite clear that the emphasis of the Park administration

34. Shirzad Azad, "In Quest of a Second Boom: South Korea's Middle East Policy under Park Geun-hye," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 11.1-2 (2018): 260.

35. Azad, "In Quest of," 260-261.

36. Azad, "In Quest of," 264.

37. Jeffrey Robertson, "Foreign policy in South Korea's presidential election," *Asialink*, February 23, 2022, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/foreign-policy-in-south-koreas-presidential-election>. For a more detailed explanation of continuity in South Korean foreign policy please see Robertson (2017), "Continuity in South Korean Foreign Policy", KEI Academic Paper Series.

38. Choe Wongi, "'New Southern Policy': Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy," *Asie. Visions*, No. 118, p.5, Ifri, January 2021.

39. Mee-yoo Kwon, "New Northern Policy shows some results, but lacks deeper philosophy," *The Korea Times*, August 22, 2021, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/08/120\\_314235.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/08/120_314235.html).

40. Lee Jaehyon, "Korea's new southern policy: Motivations of 'Peace Cooperation' and implications for the Korean Peninsula." *The Asian Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief* (2019): 1.

41. Kwon, "New Northern Policy."

42. EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, "South Korea," <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR>.

43. Ibid.

was particularly on the neighbouring region of South Korea and the relations with North Korea. The Middle East region was not at the centre of the foreign policy agenda at all. However, there were still considerable efforts of President Park to develop the relations with Middle East countries further. Her father "Park Chung-hee had pushed Korean companies and workers to go to the Middle East in the wake of the first oil shock of 1973".<sup>34</sup> This had resulted in a considerable progress for the South Korean construction companies' investment in the region usually called "the first boom". However, for a second boom, not only the construction sector but also the industrial and service sectors needed to be included.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, it can be said that President Park Geun-hye was lucky in the sense that her father's policies had a considerable standing in the eyes of the Middle Eastern countries and she was able to add some new sectors to already existing business relations. Although Park Geun-hye was impeached on 10 March, 2017 by creating one of the biggest political crises in Korean politics, her term was as important as Lee's for the fact that she was the first South Korean president to pay an official visit to Iran, on May 1-4, 2016. Before Park's trip to Iran, neither South Korean top leaders, nor a North Korean paramount leader, had been to the Persian Gulf country.<sup>36</sup>

### **Moon Jae-in Era: Any Change in Korean Foreign Policy towards Middle East?**

Moon Jae-in came to power amid one of the most turbulent times in South Korean domestic politics. The allegations against Park Geun-hye and her subsequent impeachment was a tough situation for all of society and Koreans were looking for a leader to illuminate the darkness. Coming from a progressive political tradition, Moon became the 12<sup>th</sup> president of South Korea in May 2017 after ten years of conservative-led administrations. Many issues were on the line to be dealt with. Many South Korean presidents have sought to put forward a new or relatively new signature policy in the foreign policy area and this can be considered as a kind of tradition. Moon Jae-in too followed the custom. However, the term "bumpy continuity" of Jeffrey Robertson is worth to mention here. Robertson argued that South Korea's foreign policy exhibits "what could be termed 'bumpy continuity,' which distinguishes high-profile foreign policy initiatives led by the presidential office from the low-profile initiatives led by the bureaucracy."<sup>37</sup> The New Southern Policy (NSP), the signature foreign policy initiative by President Moon Jae-in, was officially launched on the occasion of his official state visit to Jakarta, Indonesia in November 2017 and opened up a new chapter in Seoul's relations with ASEAN as well as India.<sup>38</sup> Beside the NSP, there was another policy of the Moon administration. It was the New Northern Policy (NNP) established in 2017 with an aim to strengthen economic and political cooperation with countries to the north of South Korea.<sup>39</sup> These two policies were components of a broader strategy called "Northeast Asia Plus Community for Responsibility-sharing" (NEAPC).<sup>40</sup> President Moon also launched the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation to engage more actively with countries in the region covered by the policy.<sup>41</sup> Although these two signature policies do not prioritize the Middle East region, this doesn't necessarily mean that the Moon administration has ignored the Middle East countries.

In 2019, South Korea imported about 2.9 million b/d of crude oil and condensate, making it the fifth-largest importer in the world and the Middle East accounted for 69% of South Korea's 2019 crude oil imports.<sup>42</sup> The United Arab Emirates's (UAE) share is 8% within this 69% of crude oil imports.<sup>43</sup> However,



44. Chris Stanton, "South Koreans a Surprising Choice as Nuclear Plant Suppliers," *The National (UAE)*, December 28, 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/south-koreans-a-surprising-choice-as-nuclear-plant-suppliers>.

45. "Prime Contractor", *Emirates Nuclear Energy Cooperation*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.enec.gov.ae/barakah-plant/prime-contractor/>.

46. Jon Gambrell, "South Korean president visits UAE amid deepening ties," *Taiwan News*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3390328>.

47. Ibid.

48. Daniel Bardsley, "South Korean elite forces arrive in UAE," *The National (UAE)*, January 13, 2011, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/south-korean-elite-forces-arrive-in-uae-1.375880>.

49. Chi-dong Lee, "Lee says S. Korean troops in UAE crucial for bilateral ties," *Yonhap News*, March 13, 2011, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20110313000500315>.

50. Jun-suk Yeo, "Former President Lee 'directly involved' in signing secret military pacts with UAE: lawmaker," *The Korea Herald*, January 17, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180117000844>.

51. "Ex-South Korean defense minister reveals secret Seoul defense pact with UAE," *Asia Times*, January 10, 2018, <https://asiatimes.com/2018/01/ex-south-korean-defense-minister-reveals-secret-seoul-defense-pact-uae/>.

52. Seung-Hwan Song and Myo-Ja Ser, "Ex-defense minister admits secret defense pact with UAE," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 9, 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3043102&cloc=joongangdaily%7Chome%7Cnewslst1>.

53. Ibid.

54. June Park and Ali Ahmad, "Risky business: South Korea's secret military deal with UAE," *The Diplomat*, March 1, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/risky-business-south-koreas-secret-military-deal-with-uae/>.

the special place of the UAE for South Korea is not only linked with its crude oil imports but also another important agreement between two partners. A Korean consortium led by the Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) was contracted by the Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (ENEC) of Abu Dhabi government in 2009 to build the country's first nuclear power stations.<sup>44</sup> KEPCO was responsible for the design, construction and operation of the four 1,400 MW reactors at the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant. The \$20 billion contract also covered extensive training, human resource development and education programs as the UAE builds the capacity to staff a thriving nuclear energy industry.<sup>45</sup> While it was the Lee Myung-bak administration who was in power when the nuclear power plant agreement was signed in 2009, President Moon's first official visit to the Middle Eastern region was his UAE visit in March 2018. Moon explained that "the visit would boost friendship and cooperation between Korea and the UAE amidst volatile international situations."<sup>46</sup> He continued by saying that: "The Barakah nuclear power plant is not simply a mega construction project worth \$18.6 billion. The fact that the UAE put confidence in Korea, which had no experience in constructing overseas nuclear power plants, and signed a contract with us to build one in Barakah was possible only because there was deep trust between our two countries."<sup>47</sup>

Although Barakah is a valuable inheritance from the Lee administration, there remained an ambiguous issue between South Korea and the UAE, too. The discussion goes back to January 2011 when the Akh unit – meaning "brother" in Arabic – consisting of more than 100 South Korean elite special forces troops was deployed in the UAE.<sup>48</sup> This was a unique development in the history of South Korea. Although South Korea has sent many troops to foreign nations to assist United Nation's peacekeeping operations or United States-led multinational forces, for the first time this took place on a bilateral basis.<sup>49</sup> President Lee was accused of signing secret military pacts with the UAE, by the Representative Kim Jong-dae of the minor Justice Party claiming that Lee was involved in bringing about a military pact that allegedly included dispatching South Korean troops to the UAE.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, Kim Tae-young, who served as the Lee government's defence minister from September 2009 to December 2010, has meanwhile disclosed the existence of a secret military agreement between South Korea and the UAE, arguing that the military deal was signed so South Korea could win a profitable contract to build a nuclear plant in the UAE.<sup>51</sup> Another claim was that the pact included a clause that guarantees the Korean military's automatic intervention in an emergency in the UAE.<sup>52</sup> This accusation and the ambiguity of the agreement – whose details are still unknown since either side has provided no information – emerged as an issue for the Moon administration. It was also mentioned that Im Jong-seok, South Korean President Moon Jae-in's chief of staff made a visit to the UAE in December 2017 and an influential adviser to the royal family of the UAE had arrived in Seoul, too.<sup>53</sup> Another challenging characteristic of the problem is that this "military pact doesn't require approval from the South Korean National Assembly to engage in conflict, should there be a request for military assistance from the UAE, and June Park and Ali Ahmad point out that such a level of military engagement "has existed only under the U.S.-ROK alliance."<sup>54</sup> In February 2022, President Moon embarked on a three-country tour of the Middle East, making the UAE as his first stop. The visit seems important in terms of its timing since the next presidential election was scheduled for March 2022. President Moon may have been determined to draw a bright and lively foreign relations image of South Korea, especially since the Korean Pen-



55. Sukjoon Yoon, "What's Next for South Korea's 'Defense Reform 2.0' Initiative?", *The Diplomat*, September 7, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/whats-next-for-south-koreas-defense-reform-2-0-initiative/> For further discussion please see also Mats Engman (2019), "Ambition and Ambiguity: South Korea's Defense Industry Reform", <https://isdpeu.com/ambition-and-ambiguity-south-koreas-defense-industry-reform/>.

56. Jeong-ho Lee, "South Korea's Moon Sells K-Pop, Missiles on Mideast Trip," *Bloomberg*, January 17, 2022, [https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-17/south-korea-s-moon-sells-k-pop-missiles-on-mideast-trip?utm\\_content=business&cmpid=socialflow-twitter-business&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=socialflow-organic&utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-17/south-korea-s-moon-sells-k-pop-missiles-on-mideast-trip?utm_content=business&cmpid=socialflow-twitter-business&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&utm_source=twitter).

57. Ibid.

58. Steven Borowiec, "South Korea's Moon Sells K-pop, Arms on Middle East Tour," *AlJazeera*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/1/19/salesman-in-chief-south-koreas-moon-kpop-arms-in-middle>

59. Ibid.

60. Ye-eun Jie, "President Moon, First Lady Attend K-pop Concert at Dubai Expo," *The Korea Herald*, January 17, 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220117000738>.

61. President Moon had expressed his vision considering hydrogen as a transforming source of energy instead of coal and oil in his speech in January 2019. For full text of the speech please see, "Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Presentation for Hydrogen Economy Roadmap and Ulsan's Future Energy Strategy", <https://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=167364>.

62. "Moon returns home after trip to Middle East," *The Korea Herald*, January 22, 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220122000037>.

63. EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, "South Korea," <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR>.

64. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Press Conference Following Korea-Egypt Summit," January 24, 2022, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5674/view.do?seq=320708](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320708).

65. Ibid.

66. Norbert Neumann, "Hanwha enters into largest K9 Howitzer deal with Egypt," *Army Technology*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.army-technology.com/features/hanwha-defense-k9-self-propelled-howitzer/>.

insula affair shows no signs for any solution in foreseeable future. The Moon administration visit to the Middle East concentrated on bolstering energy and defence cooperation. In this regard it seems important to note that the Moon administration was planning to reform the Armed Forces of the Republic of Korea (AFROK) which had been announced as the "Defense Reform 2.0" in July 2018. Moreover, as Yoon points out, "Moon had proposed an 8.2 percent increase for 2019 to meet future threats, the largest since 2008".<sup>55</sup> This is a clear sign that he put his emphasis on the defence industry. The agreement struck between South Korea and the UAE to supply Cheongung II midrange surface-to-air missiles to the UAE, was the first outcome of the visit.<sup>56</sup> Both countries also committed to expand ties between their defence industries after the contract, which would involve LIG Nex1 Co., Hanwha Systems Co. and Hanwha Defense Systems Corp.<sup>57</sup> When the outlook of the UAE visit is assessed it can be argued that although the controversial defence pact created a problem for the Moon administration at the beginning of his term, the President Moon has been competent enough to turn it into a long-term advancement of the bilateral relations with the UAE. Jagannath P. Panda argues that "Korea has used military deployment in the region to get essential advantages and secure its strategic interests which includes a focus on nuclear energy,"<sup>58</sup> others emphasized that Moon was "laying a groundwork that future presidents could build on, by signing deals that can lead to growth in South Korea's exports of high-tech products."<sup>59</sup> Another aspect of the visit was the issue of culture. President Moon Jae-in attended a concert of South Korean pop artists at Jubilee Park of the World Exposition in Dubai with first lady Kim Jung-sook.<sup>60</sup> Although it was mentioned in the literature review part that South Korean Hallyu is relatively new as compared to other neighbouring regions of South Korea, the attendance of the President to a K-pop concert in the UAE shows the importance that the administration attributes to this soft power tool.

The second leg of the tour was Saudi Arabia. President Moon met with Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and agreed to cooperate in the field of *hydrogen economy*.<sup>61</sup> The two countries also signed preliminary deals to jointly develop green hydrogen, which is produced from renewable energy sources, especially solar and wind, and jointly build a hydrogen ecosystem.<sup>62</sup> This is an important step for South Korea to diversify its energy cooperation with Saudi Arabia because Saudi Arabia provided 27% of crude oil import of South Korea in 2019,<sup>63</sup> making Saudi Arabia number one crude oil supplier of South Korea from the Middle East region.

The last part of the tour was Egypt where President Moon had a summit meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. President Moon expressed his pleasure to be the first Korean President to visit Egypt in sixteen years in addition to this being his first visit to an African nation.<sup>64</sup> Several issues were discussed, for example a free trade agreement and Moon said that the two leaders had agreed to initiate a meaningful progress for the sake of concluding Korea-Egypt trade agreements through a joint study on trade and economic partnerships.<sup>65</sup>

Sustainable development, renewable energy, eco-friendly transport, and marine and space development were also among the issues that two leaders designated for further cooperation. Moreover, like the UAE defence pact and security cooperation, South Korea and Egypt set the course for enhancing their security relation. South Korea's Hanwha Defence has signed a contract worth around \$1.7bn with Egypt to provide the K9A1 EGY variant of its self-propelled howitzer (SPH).<sup>66</sup> When considering all three visits of President Moon, it becomes clear that South

67. "South Korea signs 20-year LNG deal with Qatar," *Reuters*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/south-korea-signs-20-year-lng-deal-with-qatar-2021-07-12/>.

68. Based on the data of more than 200 countries, as of January 25, 2022, Korea, with 128 deaths per a million people, ranked the 161st and with 14,609 cases per a million people ranked 158th, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

69. Sanjay Kumar, "Humanitarian cooperation in COVID-19 attests strength of Korea's ties with Arab world countries, says Kuwaiti ambassador," *The Korea Herald*, November 15, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211115000915>.

70. Ibid.

71. Josh Smith and Hyonhee Shin, "Military aircraft with Afghan evacuees arrives in South Korea," *Reuters*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/military-aircraft-with-afghan-evacuees-arrives-south-korea-2021-08-26/>.

72. Ibid.

73. Sung-mi Ahn, "South Korea set to accept 391 Afghan evacuees Thursday," *The Korea Herald*, August 25, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210825000843>.

74. Thanapat Pekan, "Afghanistan a litmus test for this Korean dream," *Bangkok Post*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2201399/afghanistan-a-litmus-test-for-this-korean-dream>.

Korea was pursuing a twofold objective: on one hand trying to deepen the energy and economic partnership, on the other aiming to strategically position its security and defence sector as one of the areas that South Korea could develop considerable share and profits. Another example for the strengthening of relations between South Korea and the Middle East countries is a 20-year LNG deal signed with Qatar in July 2021 stipulated to start in 2025.<sup>67</sup> Through such agreements, South Korea is both securing its energy supply and maintaining bilateral trade in the long-term.

### Unexpected Challenges: The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Afghanistan Crisis in 2021

A very unexpected health crisis began at the end of 2019 which can be defined as one of the global crises of the twenty first century: the Covid-19 pandemic. Without a doubt, every country was affected by this crisis in one way or another. However, some countries' coping method has proven more successful in terms of infection and death rate,<sup>68</sup> hospitalization numbers, precautions for economic slowdown, social life and individual rights' restrictions. South Korea can be considered as one of the largely successful countries in handling the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and also managed to reflect this success to the Middle East relations. Bader M. al-Awadi, Kuwait's ambassador to South Korea, spoke at the 17<sup>th</sup> Korea-Middle East Cooperation Forum held on November 15, 2021 in Seoul stating that:

Humanitarian cooperation that took place between Korea and Arab countries in the field of limiting the spread of COVID-19, exchange of medical expertise, supply and devices, and sharing of creative ways Korea has invented to deal with pandemic, confirmed the ties and strength between Korea and its friends in the Arab world countries.<sup>69</sup>

Ma Young-sam, secretary-general of the Korea-Arab Society, in his opening remarks said that the aftermath of COVID-19 as much as the devastating crisis of climate change has shown the need for a new approach to development for the Middle East and Korea.<sup>70</sup> In this regard, it seems clear that Korea and the Middle Eastern countries are well aware of the urgency of these issues which demand comprehensive action to be taken.

In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, there occurred a second event in the Middle East, relatively less challenging for South Korea. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan during August 2021 created a humanitarian crisis, spreading to many countries due to emergency evacuation and flight. South Korea also provided support by evacuating 391 Afghan people in the last week of August 2021.<sup>71</sup> The Afghans were flown out by at least two flights. Passengers included workers and their families from the Korean embassy, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), a hospital and Korean government-run vocational training institute, and military bases.<sup>72</sup> President Moon Jae-in emphasized the moral responsibility to evacuate Afghans who worked for South Korea.<sup>73</sup> This emphasis on moral responsibility and the government's labelling the Afghan people as "persons of special merit" rather than simply refugees seemed to have successfully softened the reactions from South Korean society as one of the most anti-immigrant societies in East Asia. A majority of South Korean citizens value ethnic homogeneity over diversity and, therefore, immigration is a controversial issue in South Korea.<sup>74</sup> The example of Yemeni asylum seekers provides a case in point.

75. Joyce Lee and Haejin Choi, "South Korea to tighten asylum laws as hundreds of Yemenis arrive," *Reuters*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-southkorea-yemen-refugees-id-CAKBN1JP0RY-OCATP>.

76. Steven Denney and Christopher Green. "Who should be admitted? Conjoint analysis of South Korean attitudes toward immigrants." *Ethnicities* 21.1 (2021): 131.

77. Thanapat Pekan, "Afghanistan a litmus test for this Korean dream,".

78. Ji-hye Shin, "Korea struggles to respond to labor shortage amid pandemic," *The Korea Herald*, March 28, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210328000132>.

After more than 552 people from Yemen arrived between January and May 2018 on Jeju island, South Korea's largest island located in the Korea Strait, more than 540,000 South Koreans signed an online petition to the presidential Blue House during a period of only two weeks, "asking the government to abolish or amend no-visa entries and the granting of refugee status to applicants."<sup>75</sup> Denney and Green also mention in their study on attitudes toward immigration in South Korea that migrants originating from Yemen face strong discrimination.<sup>76</sup> However, the perception of this recent Afghan settlement in the country represented somewhat of a surprise. According to results of a recent Realmeter poll, 70% of South Koreans were in favour of the government's plans to grant special status to its former Afghan contractors.<sup>77</sup> Another important dimension of the issue is the labour shortage that South Korea has faced for some time. To overcome this or at least to provide a contribution, a bill to revise the act on the employment of foreign workers was proposed by Rep. Lee Jong-bae of the main opposition *People Power Party* in March 2021.<sup>78</sup> When the labour shortage is linked with the decreasing birth rate in South Korea, immigration is being evaluated from a different perspective. Although the number of the Afghan people settled in South Korea is comparably small, this event may signal the starting point for South Korean politicians and society to defuse the Pandora's box that the issue of immigration has previously constituted.

### Conclusion

South Korea as one of the middle powers in East Asia began its engagement with the Middle East above all through economic relations, centering mainly on energy and construction industries. However, the fundamental international transformations set in motion by the end of Cold War and the advent of a multi-polar world order created new opportunities for South Korea. South Korea, on the other hand, started to see the positive reflections of its economic enhancement and directed this to both, its soft power (cultural impact via Hallyu) and hard power (its expertise on arms and defence industry) positioning. By actively deepening the relations with Middle Eastern countries, South Korea has been able to secure energy supplies and additionally benefit from other trade facilities. The Moon Jae-in government could build on and develop further on the legacy of previous governments among which Lee Myung-bak can be considered the most important in terms of the initiation of bilateral agreements. Among these agreements, there was also a problematic one (the UAE defence pact) that, as argued above, put the Moon administration in a tough position. However, President Moon managed to successfully tackle the issue. As the earlier Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations, Moon Jae-in also prioritized the energy supply and trade sector. However, as one component of the domestic policy agenda of President Moon, the defence reform also reflected on South Korea-Middle East relations in terms of an increase in arm deals. Another field that Moon Jae-in administration emphasized was the hydrogen economy and the diversification of energy sources with the Middle Eastern countries. Two challenges emerged during the Moon administration's rule: the prolonged Covid-19 pandemic and the Afghanistan crisis of August 2021. Both of these challenges had serious impact on the country, however to varying degrees. The evacuation of Afghan people who worked with and for South Korean authorities in Afghanistan and their settlement in South Korea has been a critical domestic issue, while the pandemic had a truly global impact. In hindsight, the Moon administration managed to deal with this issues in a very professional and largely successful manner which did not allow them



to turn into conflictual domestic political affairs. However, as the result of the presidential election held in March 2022, the conservative party won the Blue House with Yoon Suk-yeol becoming the 13<sup>th</sup> President of South Korea. Although the new President hasn't touched upon the Middle East policies yet, the region is likely to preserve its increasingly important place within the Korean foreign policy agenda.

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