

# Notes on Strategy

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## Strategic Concerns of a New Global Power: South Korea

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In June 2021, under the global spotlight, South Korea made its grand entrance onto the center stage of world politics. Fresh off the heels of expanding its bilateral alliance into new territory with the U.S., South Korea was invited to the G-7 Summit held in Cornwall, U.K. South Korea, once one of the poorest countries in the world, is primed to play a key role in rebuilding international order in a post-COVID society. Moreover, South Korea has emerged as an essential provider of international public goods, assuming the responsibilities of a COVID vaccine producer and supplier. This is possible because the country is recognized as one possessing the core technology needed to solve global challenges; it is also the only democratic state that has quarantined without a full-blown lockdown. Simply put, South Korea is rising to the occasion and stepping up to lead the world. Of the so-called "30-50 Club" (countries with a GDP per capita of over 30,000 USD and a population of over 50 million people), South Korea is the only member that has experienced colonization before World War II broke out and imperialism ruled the day. Most G-7 countries have run empires. In this sense, South Korea's path feels and looks different. As a new emerging global power with unique experiences, it has gone through dramatic changes. South Korea's success in industrialization and democratization were heralded as one of the greatest rags-to-riches stories of the

20th century. Its new responsibilities towards the global community will reaffirm South Korea's own success story. It is here where Korean diplomacy adds the final touches.

At this juncture, South Korea needs to assess some weighty considerations. To begin with, how will it lead world development? South Korea has triumphed in the “catch-up development” model. Yet by the same token, South Korea has remained a passive agent in charting its own path, blindly accepting the standards set forth by major powers. Since the 18th century, economic advancement has been tied to industrialization driven by fossil fuel. The pyramid-esque flying-geese model has been the global operating framework for political and economic structures in a capitalist system. The time has come for a new paradigm for development to arise from this existing structure, largely due to the unsustainability of fossil fuel-based industrialization. Accordingly, growth opportunities and engines of a new global capitalist order must be explored, including sectors of semiconductors, green growth, bio industries, batteries and hydrogen cars. As a new major power, South Korea is well-positioned to thrive in the new paradigm for development.

Perhaps the most critical strategy for South Korea lies in its ability to effectively communicate its intentions to the rest of the world — namely, by diplomacy. Like the film “No Country for Old Men”, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2008, there may be “no country for other countries”. The title itself conveys pity and misery, yet at the same time indicates a steadfastness. Countries are not

designed to make altruistic choices in the precarious world of global politics. There is a tacit understanding that each country serves its own national interests. In this sense, the principle of ‘returning one’s favor’(報恩) in the realm of international politics is nothing but a myth — magnanimity does not exist. Yet the theory has been perpetuated because specific actions have been deliberately presented as such.

Nevertheless and somewhat surprisingly, in diplomacy, values can matter. Countries often betray certain values and norms in their diplomatic rhetoric. These values and norms are embedded in goals and agreements. People can get confused from time to time when they examine values vis-à-vis norms and interests or observe how they are calibrated. Most countries veil their interests behind outwardly expressed values which may seem compelling, perhaps even universal. Yet they are intended to be this way. The hypocrisy allows bold ideas of self-survival to endure and direct clashes to be managed. The key is to pursue one’s own interests behind the shroud of a diplomatic process by expressing certain values and norms. Therefore, diplomacy is sometimes described as a technique of strategic hypocrisy.

Within the bounds of international order, ideational elements are made up of values embodied in agreements. Shared principles prevent upheaval, tumult, and global disorder. In this context, the core essence of international relations is characterized as ‘ordered anarchy’. Naturally, countries expect values and norms to be aligned with their own interests when they participate in international agreements. Consequently, there will sometimes be a mismatch between

the pursuit of “clumsy” interests and the espousal of “elegant” values. Diplomacy is described as saying “the nastiest things” in “the nicest way.”

For instance, take a look at the communiqué of the Carbis Bay G-7 summit. Aspirations such as “open society”, “democracy”, “multilateralism”, and “preparation for future pandemics and building cooperative relationships” are championed in the document. South Korean diplomacy should learn how to execute these targets, devising strategies and practicing effective diplomacy rooted in values, with a dignified and sophisticated approach to elevate the country’s position.

Exhibiting values through diplomacy is not a one-shot deal. Diplomacy is the projection and expression of a culture and its people. The government is tasked with integrating and modulating these values and interests, while its people deliberate over diplomacy and collective values from a global citizen’s perspective. A nation’s sense of pride is deeply connected to this self-reflection. Therefore, people need to discard their archaic worldviews and move away from toxic ideologies, such as West-centric civilization theories or the argument of ‘exit from Asia to Europe’ (脫亞入歐). The West is no longer an aspirational group for South Korea and many others. The words we used to describe foreign affairs belie a century-old dichotomous worldview between the so-called civilized and uncivilized races — one that has no room in the global discourse today.

To be sure, value-centric diplomacy should not compromise a country's interests. Yet it is vital that the values articulated and enacted are flexible. If you lose diplomatic flexibility and fix your gaze on values alone, diplomacy becomes no different from an ethics class. If value-centric national pride eclipses the government's competence in external relations, values and interests become intertwined — when in reality they should have a healthy distance from each other. Ethics and morality do not function identically in the spheres of domestic and international politics, at least for now.

Indeed, there is “no country for other countries”. Yet considering the complex relationship between values and interests, “action for others” may occasionally work. When designing a specific foreign strategy around a given value, highlighting the mutual benefits for both counterparts would be conducive to fruitful and constructive outcomes. Diplomacy can be described as the process of persuading another country through these tactics, or perhaps even characterized as the “identification of common interests.” Unadulterated altruism does not exist here, only the distribution of shared interests. At the end of the day, diplomatic finesse is about convincing your counterpart by establishing shared interests while advocating universal values. In order to master this technique, it is necessary to remain diplomatically flexible. This will be South Korea's strategic political challenge to overcome as a new global power.