



South Korea's New Asia Initiative Policy and the Middle East

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The speaker began with an introduction about South Korea's (ROK) New Asia Initiative (NAI). She said that ROK's outreach in the post-Korean War phase concerned the bigger regional players which determined its course of development. Its relationships consisted of economic ties without any significant diplomatic and strategic engagement. This gap of diplomatic endeavor was filled by the NAI. In 2009 this policy was announced during President Lee's visit to Indonesia. NAI consists of broadening and deepening ROK's engagements with Asian nations to brace for the 'era of Asia'. This initiative focuses on the following regions: South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, West Asia and Central Asia. This move included expanding beyond North East Asia when it came to foreign policy making and introduce a diverse scope of engagement.

Coming to the Middle East, ROK's engagement became diverse with time. Initially it was not a priority for ROK but soon became important due to ROK's dependence on natural resources and energy security. Presently ROK has diplomatic ties with 18 Middle Eastern nations. ROK relies on oil imports to meet about 98 percent of its fossil fuel consumption and is one of the world's top energy importers. ROK is highly dependent on the Middle East for its oil supplies and the region accounted for more than 82 percent of ROK's 2017 oil imports with Saudi Arabia (KSA) being the lead exporter followed by Kuwait. It reduced its oil imports from Iran by 10 percent in 2015.

NAI is part of ROK's quest to become a global power by becoming more active in the international arena by increasing its scope of diplomatic and political ties. ROK's diplomacy with the Middle East began in the 1960s. The Middle East has always been a huge supplier of oil to ROK. When the oil crisis in the 1970s happened in the Middle East, ROK's economy was affected. This led to ROK increasing its engagement with the Middle East by sending workers and building infrastructure.

During the Iran-Iraq War ROK was expected to send troops to handle the situation under the United Nations banner. However, ROK wanted to stay neutral and focused on supporting the civilian populations to keep its relations stable. This war also led to decline in the oil boom and affected trade between ROK and Iran/Iraq but did not cease entirely. After the war ROK got more opportunities to engage economically in Iraq but the 1990 Kuwait crisis again affected ties.

Despite market volatility ROK utilized every opportunity to solidify its relations with the Middle East. In 2013 ROK's Foreign Minister described relations with the Middle East as evolving from choice to opportunity. ROK also shifted its focus to Central Asia to diversify its sources of oil due to volatility in the Middle East. President Lee was succeeded by

President Park in 2013 who retained some of the foreign policy elements of the previous government which included the NAI. When President Lee was engaging in the region the strategies he followed was resource diplomacy and sales diplomacy. President Park introduced another facet to ROK's engagement with the region called 'creative economy'. This meant going beyond the traditional markets and adopting new upcoming technologies by making them more skill based.

For the purposes of the seminar the speaker focused on ROK's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. ROK^{2s} was the GCC's six largest trading partner. The countries she chose to talk about are the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, KSA and Oman. Apart from the GCC she also talked about Iran and Israel. ROK and the UAE entered a \$20 billion nuclear cooperation agreement for a period of 20 years in 2009 which included joint nuclear energy development. In 2017 ROK's Defence Minister claimed that a secret military pact was signed in 2009 with UAE. The present government denied any comments on this. The UAE supported ROK throughout its diplomatic stance on the Korean Peninsula. KSA's Look East diplomacy came during King Abdullah's reign. There was cooperation with ROK for joint development of nuclear energy. There is a shift to sectors of trade, health, defence from just economy in KSA-ROK relations. This shows that ROK's Middle East relations are getting diversified. Qatar had also supported ROK diplomatically. Qatar is an important source of LNG imports for ROK. Oman offers ROK natural resources and a strategic location in the Persian Gulf. Trade is most important and defining factor in their relationship and ROK is the fourth largest importer of energy resources from Oman.

The foundation of ROK and Iran relations lay back in the 1970s and they have streets named after each other's capitals in their respective capital cities. Every time sanctions on Iran were lifted ROK immediately resumed ties with Tehran. In 2016 President Park was the first ROK president to visit Iran. There has been a diversification of ties with Iran and is economically important for ROK after the nuclear deal with Iran and the US and EU. Coming to Israel, relations with ROK ensued in a rather complex form. ROK's dependence on KSA and UAE for oil muted ROK's enthusiasm to forge ties with Israel initially. After the Oslo Peace Process a new path was carved for ROK-Israel relations. The prospect of economic gain with technology transfer and Israel being a close US ally was too much for ROK to pass. ROK being a major market for US defence industries had to seek Washington's approval before buying any arms from Israel that included US-made components.

After the Arab Spring ROK companies continued to win contracts in the Middle East. Meanwhile it had also conducted FTA talks with UAE and Bahrain. Also North Korea (DPRK) has clandestine nuclear contacts with Iran and Syria in this region. After the Korean War DPRK steered clear of the Middle East since KSA and other US allies were vehemently anti-communist. However, presently DPRK maintains contact with six Middle Eastern countries from its embassy in Kuwait. However, DPRK and Syrian relationships were defined by arms transfers and political non-interference. Military export was a good way for DPRK to gain some foreign currency and missile transfers to Syria was a result of this. DPRK had assisted the Assad regime significantly. Even in Iran the *Shabab* medium range ballistic missile was based on the *Nodong/Hwasong* series of North Korean ballistic missiles. DPRK had also contributed significantly to Syria's fledgling nuclear program in the 1980s and also to its chemical weapons program. However, there is no clear proof about all this except western intelligence reports. For DPRK the Iran-Iraq War presented opportunities to

export military hardware as both needed missile capabilities for deterrence purposes. For Israel DPRK poses a security threat as cadres of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Hamas etc. have received military assistance and support from DPRK and not to mention its significant help to Iran militarily. DPRK saw its support as part of its fight against American imperialism. Israel bombed Syria's nuclear facility in 2004 killing DPRK and Syrian scientists.

In conclusion the speaker said that the NAI and ROK's relationship with the Middle East was a way to get both sides to diversify their relationship and reduce dependence on just energy trade.

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