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Competing Notions of Regionalism in South Korean Politics

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Abstract

In the past decade, ASEAN has been the primary driver of East Asian regionalism, and Korea has been an active supporter of ASEAN plus Three. Korea has explored the idea of an East Asian Community, and has been relatively open to notions of Asia-Pacific regionalism. The ROK has involved itself comparatively heavily in regional projects as both an initiator and a participant, but its notion of 'region' has oscillated between more and less inclusive forms of regionalism. This article examines how competing conceptions of region have influenced Korea's pursuit of regional initiatives. By revisiting historical understandings of Korea's regional identity, we explore the normative bases and material interests which motivate Korean regional initiatives, and assess the impact of its proposals.

Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) has emerged as an active proponent of regionalism in the past decade. Its inclusion in ASEAN-centric forums, especially ASEAN plus Three (APT), underlines its status as a core East Asian state. For instance the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), which was launched as the effects of the Asian Financial Crisis were still keenly felt in the ROK, signalled a new phase of regional integration and cooperation (Choo, 2009). Such initiatives are notable insofar as Southeast Asian states have adopted the leading role. South Korea has participated in

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community-building projects such as the East Asian Summit, and ‘has its own conception of the emerging region formation’ (Selden, 2010). The ROK identifies as a core Asian state, but its security and economic interests extend to the broader Pacific region. Its longstanding security alliance with the US entails some extra-regional contributions to US-led campaigns such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the ROK has global trade and financial relations which demand an active presence in international economic forums such as the G20 grouping. Given its identity, policy stance, and interests, two sets of issues arise in analysing Korea’s approaches to regionalism.

The first concerns the debates which have shaped the formation of South Korean initiatives, and the notion of ‘region’ that most strongly prevails in policymaking circles. Which broad governing norms and material interests inform ‘big’ Korean visions for the region, and on which intellectual basis has the ROK formulated ‘small’ visions, in the form of specific proposals, initiatives, and mechanisms for regional integration? Is the ROK more responsive to relatively exclusive notions of ‘Asianism’, or does Korea define its interests and identity more with the wider, looser definition of region inherent in ‘Pacifism’ (He, 2004; Wesley, 2009)? Furthermore, to what degree have the ideas and proposals of Korean policymakers reflected popular notions of ‘region’, and the proposals formulated by civil society? Intuitively, there will be at least some congruence between the notions of region which epistemic communities of policymakers share, and the notions which prevail among the broader populace.

A second set of issues surrounds the degree to which South Korea has succeeded in ‘selling’ its visions to other states. Have Korean proposals been accepted or rejected? A key point of conjecture in regional visions relates to the notion of ‘community’ and the degree to which it is institutionalized. Again, two contrasting visions present themselves: a formal pooling of national sovereignty, as has evolved in the European Union, or a weaker and more informal version of regional solidarity proposed by ASEAN, which ‘remains wedded to state sovereignty as an initial preference [and] which results in a high degree of autonomy for national governments in determining domestic policy’ (Khong and Nesadurai, 2008: 33). Furthermore, which state/s does the ROK envisage leading the development of a regional community?

Thinking about regionalism

Regions are a heavily contested concept. According to Hettne, ‘definitions of a “region” vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation’ (2005: 544). Rather than seemingly objective criteria such as geography and culture, ‘it is how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of “regionness” that is critical’ (Hettne, 2005: 544). Some states exclude others from a regional organization: ‘A region or an area covered by a regional framework is not determined a priori. It is a social construct . . . Because a region is not a given, membership of a regional framework becomes a problem’ (Hamanaka, 2009: 24).

A region may be simultaneously defined both by the states that fall within it and also by states external to it. According to Said (1978), the 'Orient' ('East') is basically a Western construction. For instance, it was Western politicians and scholars who coined the term 'the East', and who referred to the lands which adjoin Europe as the Near East, the Middle East, and the Far East. It was also the West that coined the term 'Asia', and divided it into South Asia, West Asia, and East Asia (and subsequently into Northeast and Southeast Asia).

One consequence of the creation of a collective Asian identity is the misplaced assumption of cultural similarity among Asian states. Korea – both prior to the division of the peninsula in 1945 and thereafter – has struggled to define its regional identity. Relations between the ROK and neighboring states such as Japan and China have been particularly fraught, making problematic any assumptions of cultural similarity or alignment of interests and perspective. Whenever international and regional orders have been in flux over the millennia, Korea has undergone similar struggles with its identity (Shin, 2005: 618). Korean conceptions of 'region' fall into three main categories, the Asia-Pacific, East Asia, and Northeast Asia, each of which projects a specific vision. The coexistence of these three categories has made problematic a coherent vision of region among Korean policymakers and scholars (K. Kim, 2010).

The first, and broadest, notion of region is that of the Asia-Pacific. In the early phases of the Cold War, the Republic of Korea was physically and ideologically isolated from its neighbors. Since a *geographical* definition of region – a group of contiguous states – was problematic, Korean leaders emphasized *ideological* commonality (anti-communism) in envisioning a region. The 'Asia-Pacific' thus connotes a sphere of cooperation between advanced Western states in the Pacific on the one hand and Asian states on the other (Lee *et al.*, 2009: 82; Ryohei, 2007: 228). Conservative governments in particular have not viewed Pacific regionalism as being in any way incompatible with the maintenance of close security relations with the United States. This pan-Pacific notion of regionalism was intended to *supplement*, not supplant bilateralism, as has been exemplified by the campaign of the Lee Myung-bak government (2008–) to 'expand and revitalize the pan-Pacific cooperation under the leadership of the United States' (S. Kim, 2009: 3).

This inclusive notion of region ('Pacifism') may be contrasted to 'Asianism', which is narrower and more exclusionary (J. Kim, 2010; Wesley, 2009: 56–9). Asianism, or pan-Asianism (He, 2004: 107–11), 'promote[s] solidarity and cooperation within "Asia", usually against the political, economic and cultural influence of "the West"' (Ryohei, 2007: 226). Therefore, this restrictive notion of regional identity preceded its broader counterpart in that the former highlighted the distinctive identity shared by Asians to cope with the influx of Western ideas and institutions. 'Asians only' regionalism surfaced in South Korean politics in the 1990s, but its origin can be traced to the turn of the nineteenth century when Westerners began to make headways into Korea and Asia more broadly. The term Asia or East Asia, nonetheless, had negative connotations because of its links to Japan's Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, but

an Asian regional consciousness has strengthened since the 1990s for three reasons: the shared experience of rapid economic development; the notion, propounded mainly by progressive intellectuals, that East Asian solidarity can resolve problems such as the division of the Korean Peninsula; and the need for a 'community' which can promote regional cooperation amid a rapidly changing international order (Lee *et al.*, 2009: 134–42). Proponents of an Asianist variant of regionalism, including former prime minister Cho Soon (2003), are more likely to predict that China can integrate peacefully into the region and in ways that are conducive to Korean interests. Consequently, progressive Korean governments have de-emphasized the imperative to collaborate closely with the US and other Pacific states.

The third form of regionalism to which Korea has been a party as either an initiator or a supporter is at the sub-regional level. The ROK has cooperated with its Northeast Asian neighbors, especially Japan and China, to promote coordination on issues of common concern. What began with the Northern Diplomacy under Roh Tae-woo (Choo, 2009: 95–6) has gradually evolved into a form of trilateralism (Kim and Park, 2005), and this narrower vision of regionalism was evident during the Roh Moo-hyun government. In addition to proposing that the ROK act as a 'balancer' in Northeast Asia and a economic 'hub' for the sub-region, cooperation via the APT mechanism accelerated under Roh. The Northeast Asia sub-region has also played host to a range of initiatives by non-state actors. For instance, history researchers from China, Korea, and Japan have collaborated on bilateral and trilateral bases to arrive at common understandings of regional history (He and Hundt, 2011), while transnational links between civil society actors in sectors such as the environment are also substantial.

In exploring how Koreans have defined their region and their place in it, we seek to ascertain how the Asianist and Pacificist logics have influenced Korean regional initiatives. The article argues that Korean notions of regional identity have oscillated between these two poles, depending on which sets of ideas have enjoyed the greatest degree of salience at a particular point in time. We illustrate these oscillations by analysing the evolution of Korean initiatives in economic, security, and diplomatic regionalism, including projects of community building. The article proceeds chronologically, and analyses initiatives that Korea has proposed, and also Korean perspectives on major initiatives proposed by other states, since the onset of the Cold War. We conclude by assessing the degree to which Korea's preferred vision of the region has been realized, as well as factors which determine the success or failure of specific proposals.

From Pacific regionalism to East Asian regionalism

After the founding of the Republic of Korea in the early phases of the Cold War, leaders of the new state wrestled with the issue of national identity. In particular, they sought to maintain close ties with the US, which pressed for a prompt rapprochement between the ROK and its erstwhile coloniser and neighbour, Japan. Reliance on the US consequently shaped Korean proposals for regional cooperation. Syngman Rhee

for instance called for the formation of a Pacific Union, a NATO-style alliance of anti-communist states in Asia and the Pacific. Rhee consulted anti-communist governments (other than Japan), and some indicated an interest in the formation of such an alliance. The matter was discussed sporadically until 1954, but Rhee lost interest in the initiative due to his preoccupation with domestic politics (Lee *et al.*, 2009: 123).

In the mid-1960s, a second Korean regional security initiative emerged. Park Chung Hee proposed the formation of the Asia Pacific Council (ASPAC), consisting of the 'free nations' of the region such as Park's close ally, the Republic of China (Taiwan). The announcement was heavily imbued with anti-communist rhetoric. Park had gained confidence from the deployment of Korean troops to Vietnam, and sought to play a 'leading role' in the Asia-Pacific as a security partner of the US. Meetings were held between 1966 and 1972, but the absence of a clear focus and purpose, coupled with differences in opinion about whether anti-communist states could achieve a rapprochement with Communist China, resulted in the organization ceasing to function (Hamanaka, 2009: 46–50; Lee *et al.*, 2009: 81–2, 124–5).

The next Korean venture in regional summitry was Chun Doo-hwan's call for a Pacific Summit, which he envisioned as a regular series of meetings between the region's powers. The summit would be open to all prospective members, promote respect for the sovereignty and independence of member states, promote regional trade, and facilitate cooperation between advanced and developing states. Chun's proposal for 'an institutional mechanism to reach agreement about areas of cooperation' was considered too vague, however, and the ROK's low diplomatic profile hindered efforts to sell the merits of the proposal to other states (Lee *et al.*, 2009: 126–8).

By the late 1980s, the Cold War divisions began to melt in East Asia. Both Pacificist and Asianist visions of regional order emerged, but competing visions came into conflict. Rather than security issues, regionalism tended to focus on economics. Japan favoured a form of trade liberalization, which would engage the United States in regional affairs. In collaboration with Australia, Japan proposed the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Australia's Bob Hawke proposed APEC during a visit to Seoul in January 1989, and Roh Tae-woo warmly received the initiative and offered his support (Hamanaka, 2009: 143–5). The ROK became a founding member of the organization, and hosted the third summit in 1991. The summit was a diplomatic coup for Roh, in that the Seoul Declaration specified that APEC members were *economic* rather than political entities. By declaring itself a group populated by economies rather than states, Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong were all able to attend APEC meetings (Lee *et al.*, 2009: 128–9). In the months leading up to the inaugural APEC leaders' summit in Seattle in late 1993, Korean Foreign Minister Han Sung-Joo stated that APEC could 'contribute decisively to the promotion and productive management of the trans-Pacific interdependence' (Han, 1993), signalling the ROK's strong support for APEC.

APEC faced an Asianist rival in the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), which Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammad envisioned as an Asian economic bloc to rival those in Europe and North America. Mahathir viewed APEC as a non-Asian construct,

and directly attacked its legitimacy by not attending the Seattle summit. According to Anthony Milner, ‘The “East Asian” vision which [Mahathir] advocated – a narrower regionalism that would be driven by Asian states – had many supporters’ (Milner *et al.*, 2010: 2), but its explicit exclusion of the US aroused unease. Under pressure to open their markets to US goods and services, both the ROK and Japan indicated interest in the EAEC. The US strongly opposed the formation of an exclusionary trade bloc, however, and Secretary of State James Baker suggested to his Korean and Japanese counterparts that they not support the initiative (Mahathir, 2006). This pressure limited the willingness of the ROK to openly support exclusionary forms of regionalism, but the foreign ministers of the proposed EAEC membership – ASEAN, China, Japan, and the ROK – met for informal lunches during the ASEAN summits of 1994 and 1995 (Hamanaka, 2009: 147–53). The result of these informal meetings was an agreement ‘to hold the [Asia–Europe Meeting, ASEM] without extending invitations to Australia and New Zealand’, and the United States. Malaysia rejected a request from Japan to invite Australia and New Zealand, on the grounds that these states ‘[did] not share our Asian values’ (cited in Komori, 2009: 167). In this sense, the ROK was identifying as an East Asian state rather than – or in addition to – an Asia–Pacific state. At least implicitly, Korea was lending legitimacy to an Asianist regional project.

Korean initiatives were also launched at the sub-regional level. Roh Tae-woo adopted an activist foreign policy stance, which was encapsulated in his Northern Diplomacy. In addition to establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and China, Roh’s Northeast Asian Cooperative Initiative envisioned these communist giants joining the two Koreas, the US, and Japan in a sub-regional cooperative mechanism (Lee *et al.*, 2009: 129–31). Such a mechanism informed the Geneva Accords, a set of agreements that envisioned North Korea surrendering its nuclear weapons and programs in return for the construction of new nuclear reactors, economic aid, and diplomatic recognition. The Kim Young-sam government reluctantly acquiesced to the Accords out of deference to the US, but resented being reduced to a secondary role and lacking direct interaction with the North.

East Asian vision

Kim Dae-jung was elected president as the ROK and other states experienced ‘a threat to [their] economic survival’ (Khong and Nesadurai, 2008: 58). As the Asian financial crisis spread beyond Southeast Asia to engulf other states, Japan proposed a new body – the Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) – to coordinate regional efforts to prevent financial instability and to assist in economic recovery. Several East Asian states had adopted Japan’s model of state-led economic development, and the AMF proposal was in part intended to protect the legacy of this model (Kim, 2007: 67–8). At a meeting in 1997 to discuss the AMF, the strongest support came from the ASEAN states and South Korea, whose economies were the most affected by the financial crisis. The US and the IMF opposed the formation of the new body, for fear that it would usurp the IMF’s

role in crisis management (Hamanaka, 2009: 112–14). China also opposed the AMF, on the grounds that it would enhance Japan's influence in the region.

The AMF failed to materialize, but the financial crisis provided an impetus to regional cooperation (Thomas, 2009: 2). To prevent a repetition of the crisis, East Asian states launched the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), 'a regional liquidity facility aimed at providing short-term financing to support currencies in crises' (Khong and Nesadurai, 2008: 33). Japan and Korea signed a 'swap' agreement in January 1999 valued at \$5 billion, and Japan concluded four more agreements with other East Asian states (Hamanaka, 2009: 118). In 2009, the CMI transformed from a series of bilateral agreements to a regional pool totalling \$120 billion. China and Japan each provided 32% of the funds, ASEAN members collectively supplied 20%, and South Korea was responsible for 16% (Y. Kim, 2009). The CMI is a project which the Southeast Asian states could not undertake alone: it requires the substantial financial capacities of China and Japan (Khong and Nesadurai, 2008: 33), and to a lesser extent Korea. The APT states now have, in the CMI, 'pooled resources, national commitments, policy agendas', and 'a record of concrete results including measures to protect members against future financial crises' (Emmerson, 2010: 3–4).

Despite the salience of bilateralism in Korean foreign policy, the ROK has contributed to the growth in East Asian consciousness in the past decade. In 1999, APT states accepted a proposal by Kim Dae-jung for an East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) (Kim, 2006). A group of intellectuals 'was commissioned to provide a blueprint for the development of East Asian regional cooperation'. Again at Kim's suggestion, a group of government officials, known as the East Asia Study Group (EASG), was assembled to consider the EAVG's recommendations (Kim, 2007: 71–2; Komori, 2009: 170). The EAVG and EASG laid the foundation for annual summit meetings among the ASEAN plus Three states. The EAVG and EASG reports also became the basis of the inaugural East Asian Summit in December 2005. Kim Dae-jung's vision of regionalism in part resembles that proposed by former Japanese prime minister Hatoyama Yukio in 2009, in that both leaders attempted to create a strategic space for Asian states to move away from total dependence on their alliances with the US. Kim's call for Asian regionalism garnered significant support from Asians.

Kim also focused on sub-regional issues, especially inter-Korean relations. The Sunshine Policy, which emphasized engagement with the North, was intended to deliver gradual and incremental reconciliation with North Korea. According to Bruce Cumings, Kim did 'more to change policy toward the North than any previous South Korea or US president' (2007: 28) by focusing on reconciliation as a preparatory step to national unification. The most tangible result of the policy was the inter-Korea summit in Pyongyang during June 2000. The engagement policy benefited from the support of the Clinton administration, but George W. Bush was far less supportive of policies that were deemed to be beneficial to the Kim Jong Il regime. The administration's stance on Pyongyang hardened following 11 September 2001, with the regime forming part of Bush's 'axis of evil'.

From East Asia to Northeast Asia

Under the progressive Kim and Roh governments, the imperative to maintain close ties with the US hampered the Sunshine Policy. Engagement became problematic without the support of the ROK's main security partner. An opportunity emerged, however, to negotiate a solution to the nuclear crisis when the Bush administration's focus turned to Iraq in late 2002. The problem of North Korea's suspected weapons capacity fell primarily to South Korea and China, both of which argued that there was no justification for the North to acquire nuclear weapons. China convened the Six Party Talks (SPT) in order to avoid conflict and renew Pyongyang's commitment to quit its nuclear programs (Selden, 2010). The SPT was ostensibly a mechanism for responding to the nuclear crisis, but the US recognized the value of a venue for sub-regional dialogue (Hill, 2010). Secretary of State, Colin Powell, for instance emphasized that the US and its allies 'speak with a common voice' (cited in Gilson, 2007: 154) on the North's nuclear program. Pyongyang detonated a nuclear device in October 2006, however, and North Korea became the first state to withdraw from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) after the test (Armstrong, 2007: 264). It subsequently dealt a blow to advocates of engagement such as Roh Moo-hyun, who was more willing to question US foreign policy than any of his predecessors. Roh went so far as to propose that South Korea act as a 'balancer' between the US and North Korea in Northeast Asia in order to facilitate peace and development, but the notion was shelved after being criticized for jeopardizing the US alliance, under-estimating the power resources which such a proposal would entail, and ignoring the realities of great power politics (Bae, 2008: 97–8; Jeong and Lee, 2010: 40). Like Kim, Roh visited Pyongyang during his presidency for a summit meeting with Kim Jong Il.

Roh's sub-regional focus on security affairs was mirrored in the economic sphere. Korean scholars and political leaders have expressed interest in intensifying sub-regional economic integration, and one conception of integration has focused on the Yellow Sea basin, encompassing northern China, the Korean peninsula, and Japan. Within such a community, Korea would be the geographical centre and a core transportation hub. The Roh government listed 'transform[ing] Korea into the business hub of Northeast Asia' as a 'core economic policy strategy' (Kang, 2003; see also Paik, 2004). Roh premised the ROK's emergence as a logistical and distribution hub on an improvement in inter-Korean relations, and on the completion of ambitious projects such as gas pipelines and railways linking South Korea with northern China and Russia. The failure to elicit lasting change in the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea), however, inhibited progress on the hub proposal. Furthermore, inept publicity hindered the proposal, which was interpreted as a campaign to make Korea the geopolitical centre of Northeast Asia.

During Roh's term in office, ASEAN continued to project itself as the centrepiece of regional cooperation and dialogue. For the ROK, regional forums became a new means of addressing the North Korean issue. Most of ASEAN's dialogue partners have acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which commits states to respect

others' territorial sovereignty and political autonomy, to desist from interference in the domestic affairs of others, and to renounce the use of force in settling disputes. Signing the TAC also qualifies ASEAN's dialogue partners for attendance of the East Asian Summit (EAS), held annually since 2005. China and India signed the TAC in 2003, and were followed by Japan, Russia, South Korea, and Pakistan (2004), and Australia and New Zealand in 2005 (Khong and Nesadurai, 2008: 37, 75–6). The ROK, Japan, and Australia stipulated that signing the treaty should not compromise their security alliances with the US (Ravenhill, 2009: 225). North Korea acceded to the treaty in 2008 (Pak, 2008), after joining the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) in 2000. The Forum is the only security body of which the North is a member, and given the stalemate in the SPT, it is one of the few venues in which the DPRK can be 'socialized' (Choi, 2009). For instance at the 2003 forum in Phnom Penh, a statement was issued which urged Pyongyang to comply with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections and not act on a threat to quit the NPT (Khong and Nesadurai, 2008: 71–2). When the ROK tried to have the issue of North Korean provocations added to the agenda of the 2008 forum, however, ASEAN refused to countenance discussion of such a divisive issue. Confronting the North so openly was not considered to be in keeping with the 'ASEAN way' (Y. Kim, 2009).

A return to Pacifism?

Lee Myung-bak reversed the engagement policy of his predecessors, and argued that Pyongyang needed to offer gratitude and a willingness to achieve reconciliation (Haggard and Noland, 2009: 99). Lee proposed a 'grand bargain', entailing the restructuring of North Korea's economy in return for the cessation of all nuclear-related programs (Tsai, 2009). In response, the North ratcheted up tensions. The Mount Kumgang tourist resort was closed in 2008 after a decade of operation, curtailing a lucrative source of income for the North. In early 2009, the North expelled all non-essential South Korean personnel from the Kaesong Industrial Zone (Foster–Carter, 2010: 92, 95). A few months later, Pyongyang declared 'all-out confrontation' and abrogated its agreements with the ROK (ICG, 2009), including its recognition of the Northern Limit Line, the sea boundary to the west of the peninsula (Snyder, 2009: 12). After the *Cheonan* incident of March 2010, the Lee government suspended most inter-Korean trade and investment links, except for Kaesong (Foster–Carter, 2010: 89, 104). Moreover, Lee has prioritized the US alliance, and has not questioned US foreign policy objectives to anywhere near the same degree as Kim or Roh.

Lee's regionalist strategy has also diverged from those of his predecessors, especially in his emphasis on improving ties with states outside of Northeast Asia. Lee's 'New Asian diplomacy' has focused on ties with ASEAN, Central and South Asia, and Australia and New Zealand (Choo, 2009: 42–5). ASEAN has become a special target for influence by the Northeast Asian 'plus three' states, which have expanded their levels of development assistance, proposed intensified economic cooperation, and strengthened cooperation about global issues (Choi, 2009). For instance, China gave \$14.8 billion in aid to ASEAN

from 2002 to 2007, and Japan provided \$20 billion in official aid and \$5 billion in 'green projects' during the same period. Korean aid disbursements were comparatively low despite Southeast Asian being collectively the ROK's third-biggest trading partner and second-largest destination of Korean investment. As part of the New Asia Initiative, Lee promised that aid to ASEAN would increase to \$400 million per year until 2015 (Ahn, 2009). A high point of Korea's relations with ASEAN came in the 'special summit' of May 2009. The summit commemorated the 20th anniversary of the ROK's formal ties to ASEAN, and Lee hosted bilateral summits with the leaders of all ASEAN states. This was a rare occurrence of ASEAN holding a formal gathering outside Southeast Asia; the only other occasions when ASEAN has played the role of guest rather than host was when similar summits were held with China and Japan. The ROK thus attained a nominal status that was broadly commensurate with its two large Northeast Asian neighbours (Choi, 2009). Bilateral relations were upgraded to a 'strategic partnership' in 2010 (Yoon, 2010).

Lee has worked closely with Australia, another self-described middle power, on projects such as the G20. Under Lee, Korea has indicated an interest in the notion of bolstering regional dialogues along the lines of an 'ASEAN+5' that includes Australia and New Zealand (Park and Lee, 2003: 285). The ROK offered support for the 'Asia-Pacific community' (APC) proposal, whereby Australia's Kevin Rudd called for a 'regional institution that spans the entire Asia-Pacific region'. The proposal for a new institution implied that extant bodies in the region, such as APEC, had failed to engage in 'the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation and action on economic, political and security issues' (Rudd cited in Milner *et al.*, 2010: 2; see also He, 2011). During Lee's visit to Australia in 2009, the two states promised to 'consult closely' (DFAT, 2009) on the initiative, and former South Korean prime minister Han Seong-soo suggested an eminent persons' group be formed to devise a 'concrete action plan for the eventual creation of an Asia Pacific community' (2009: 17). Against a backdrop of competing regional initiatives, including the possibility of the US and Russia joining the East Asian Summit, the APC failed to attract enough support to become institutionalized.

A spate of free trade agreements (FTAs) – a 'new bilateralism' (Ravenhill, 2003) – emerged across the Asia-Pacific following the AFC. The failure of the World Trade Organization's Doha Round to produce a multilateral agreement to liberalize trade, coupled with the inability of APEC to formulate a regional trade pact, created a newfound interest in bilateral FTAs. By the late 1990s, Japan and the ROK were the only WTO members that were not party to an agreement. The ROK announced that the pursuit of FTAs would form part of its national economic strategy (Hamanaka, 2009: 154–5) as it sought to overcome the financial crisis. Korea became an active negotiator of FTAs: currently 16 FTAs are in effect and another 12 are being negotiated (*Yonhap*, 2010). An agreement that will come into effect in 2011 with the European Union represents an opportunity to secure access to what is collectively Korea's second-biggest market (Miller and Dalton, 2010). The South Korea–US (KORUS) FTA was signed in 2007, but faced lengthy delays due to disputes over access to the Korean market for US beef and

automobiles. When visiting Washington in April 2010, President Lee emphasized the strategic importance of the agreement: 'The United States should always keep in mind China, which is growing fast, militarily and economically. The ratification of the KORUS FTA has a *much more important meaning* than simple economic cooperation between two allies' (cited in Stangarone, 2010, emphasis added). In doing so, Lee reminded the US that part of the appeal of the FTA lies in its enmeshment of the interests of the alliance partners. The agreement was finalized in late 2010, soon after President Obama's visit to Seoul (*New York Times*, 2010).

Lee has pursued closer ties with states across the broader Asia-Pacific, and also has been party to an enhanced form of sub-regional cooperation. Concurrent with their coordination on the CMI, China, Korea and Japan have also engaged in a range of trilateral ventures. Regular annual summits have been initiated to discuss areas for cooperation. For instance a summit in late 2008 strived 'to frame a common policy in response to the world recession' (Selden, 2010), suggesting that the trilateral mechanism has the potential to facilitate cooperation at both the regional and global levels.

Assessing Korean ideas

Institutionalization is a conventional measure of ideas about regionalism. Since regionalism is not given exogenously but constructed socially by interaction between states, a criterion of success can be the extent to which those proposals win the 'hearts and minds' of other regional stakeholders. In order for the initiatives to be appealing, the proposals should appeal to other states.

On the one hand, Korean proposals for broad regional integration (Pacific Union, ASPAC, Pacific Summit) were not institutionalized, although ASPAC did meet for seven years from the 1960s. Roh Moo-hyun's Northeast Asian balancer and hub proposals, which were proposed *roles* for the ROK rather than initiatives for institutionalized collective action, were not well received, and were subsequently not pursued. On the other hand, the region readily accepted Kim Dae-jung's proposal to establish the East Asian Vision/Study Groups, whose membership was *ad hoc*, whose timeframe was implicitly limited, and whose remit was narrowly circumscribed. These were not proposals for institutions in the conventional sense, so we may conclude that no Korean initiative for formal institution-building has succeeded.

There is much scepticism about East Asian regionalism, with one scholar describing it as 'much ado about nothing' (Ravenhill, 2009). A Korean scholar argues that the region is becoming more economically integrated, while remaining underdeveloped in terms of formal institutions, the result of which is 'regionalization without regionalism' (Shin, 2005: 627). If even longstanding initiatives have failed to be meaningfully institutionalized, it should come as no surprise that Korean proposals have not been well entrenched. We conclude with six findings about Korean notions of regionalism.

First, there are inherent limits to the capacity of the ROK to shape the contours of regionalism. The ROK is increasingly treated as a middle power in recent literature

as well as in policymaking circles. Middle powers, by definition, do not wield the same degree of influence as their great-power counterparts, and any expectations that Korea will devise a 'grand design' for the region are unrealistic. As a middle power, it is difficult for South Korea to lead regional initiatives, and therefore it is more likely that the ROK will be led. It is also unclear that the ROK has deeply considered the views of others when formulating regional initiatives (Choi, 2008: 182). That said, power has an inter-subjective dimension. From a social-constructivist perspective, regional power is what (other) states make of it; how other states accept Korean proposals – and *input* to ongoing processes – is perhaps more important than the absolute level of the ROK's material resources. Examples of Korean ideas being translated into action include the EAVG/SG, which provided a blueprint for the region's future and proposals for cooperation, and also inventive diplomacy in the form of the Seoul and Bogor Declarations in APEC, which helped sustain momentum for that organization. Moreover, the ROK has the capacity to endow legitimacy on Asianist and Pacificist regional projects. As Mahathir's boycott of the 1993 APEC summit illustrated, even small powers have the capacity to detract from an institution's legitimacy by opting not to participate, but – as yet – the ROK has not chosen to do so.

Second, the political persuasion of a government matters. Conservatives have tended to favour broader regionalization and have been relatively reluctant to launch major initiatives, whereas progressives have preferred narrow regionalist projects and have been more active in launching initiatives. Leaders from both sides of politics have favored a multilateral security framework for the region. Progressives, however, tend to view multilateralism as an *alternative* to the bilateral security alliance with the US, whereas conservatives tend to treat multilateralism as a *supplement* to the alliance. For instance a conservative Korean scholar (S. Kim, 2009) claims that US confidence in the regional alliance structure is a *sine qua non* for multilateral security cooperation in the region. A progressive scholar considers regional multilateral security framework as the ROK's 'exit' strategy if the US fails to respond to the ROK's 'voice'. In this view, the formation of a multilateral framework would allow the ROK to avoid 'entrapment' with the US (Lee, 2009: 2–6).

Third, it is imperative for the ROK to maintain strong relations with the US. The progressive Kim and Roh governments questioned some aspects of US foreign policy, but they subsequently reconfirmed the centrality of the alliance to Korean national security. The unique security circumstances of the ROK, especially in the form of its alliance commitments, thus act as a structural impediment to some Korean initiatives, such as the Sunshine Policy. More broadly, the US presence and its series of alliances have 'made it much more difficult for Asian states to develop broad, interlocking, institutionalized political arrangements of the kind that have characterized the European experience' (Katzenstein, 1997: 23). If the US becomes detached from East Asia, however, as it did during the Bush period, and if the ROK begins to play a more proactive role in the region, Korea could support a narrower vision of regionalism as a substitute for the bilateral alliance (for the US perspective, see Boutin, 2011).

Fourth, inter-Korean relations will continue to influence the ROK's approach to regionalism. The Kim Jong Il regime has demonstrated a capacity to cling to power and stymie social and political transformation despite the concerted efforts of leaders such as Kim Dae-jung to elicit change in the North (Buzo, 2007: 177). North Korean provocations such as sinking the *Cheonan* and shelling Yeonpyeong Island will make the ROK rely more heavily on its alliance with the US, thereby restricting the political space South Korea needs to elaborate on a pan-Asian notion of regionalism. A host of issues related to North Korea, such as its development of nuclear weapons and violation of human rights, nonetheless has the potential to trigger a more serious discussion about building a multilateral security framework in the region to deal with such issues. The Six Party Talks can serve as a litmus test in this sense.

Fifth, due to the dearth of public opinion data regarding how South Korean public has perceived Asian region and regionalism, it is difficult to gauge in what manner public perception has translated into policy practices. Circumstantial evidence suggests, however, that Korean public opinion and the tone of the press vacillated largely in time with the cues and leads provided by the government. According to a poll conducted by TNS Korea, 75% of Koreans favored Roh's proposal for the ROK to become a Northeast Asian regional balancer. And 68% of respondents replied that South Korea was capable of playing the role of a balancer in the region, whereas 11% of the respondents replied that the proposal was impractical (Kwon, 2005). A majority of the Korean public cooled on Roh's idea, however, as he started to lose political ground to the opposition party.

Sixth, the oscillations between Korea's Asianist and Pacificist visions illustrate that the ROK has yet to settle on a definition of its own identity. This in turn has limited the degree of solidarity and collective purpose that the ROK can share with other East Asian states, and may explain why some of Korea's broad regional initiatives have not attracted a high level of support. A narrower articulation of Korea's identity and regionalist projects could increase the receptivity of fellow APT states to Korean initiatives, but presumably this would require a significant renegotiation of Korea's alliance with the US.

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