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Rising South Korea: A Minor Player or a Regional Power?

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Abstract

South Korea's rising status in regional and global affairs has received much attention in recent years. But in academic, media and policy debates South Korea is usually regarded as a mere middle power that, due to its geopolitical situation, has only limited leeway in its foreign policy. Accordingly, it must constantly maneuver between its larger neighbors: China, Japan and Russia. However, this perspective neglects the fact that the same geopolitical constraint also applies to other states in the region. No country can easily project its power over others. We use the concept of "regional power" as a template to discuss South Korea's rising stature in regional and global politics. We argue that Seoul seems quite capable of keeping up with other assumed regional powers. Hence, we not only provide a novel account of South Korea's foreign policy options but also go beyond current approaches by asking about the (undetermined) possibilities for Seoul's regional relations.

Keywords: South Korea, security and foreign policy, middle power, regional power, regional order, East Asia

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1 Introduction

Major international events held recently in the Republic of Korea (hereafter ROK or South Korea) point to Seoul's ambitions to gain recognition in relation to issues and topics of global concern.¹ In March 2012 South Korean president Lee Myung-bak hosted the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, with over 50 world leaders in attendance. Two years earlier South Korea became the first non-G8 country to host the G20 leaders' summit, which US president Obama once described as the world's premium global economic forum. In December 2011 South Korea held the Fourth High Level Forum (HLF) on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, thereby revealing its ambition to contribute not only to issues of global security and economy but also to questions of international development cooperation and aid assistance.

1 This paper grew out of the research project "South Korea as an Emerging Power in International Politics," which was funded by the Korea Foundation.

South Korea is currently participating in active peacekeeping and military operations in international hot spots including Afghanistan, Lebanon, South Sudan, the coast of Somalia and the Kashmir region. In this way, the country is helping to establish and maintain regional security and stability. Beyond its activities in the field of international security, South Korea is eager to secure opportunities for enhanced economic growth, not least to boost its international standing. For instance, South Korea has concluded a range of free trade agreements (FTAs), among them agreements with the world's three largest economic zones: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union and the United States. Other FTA partners include Chile, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and India (Flamm and Köllner 2012). As a result, approximately 60 percent of the world is now part of South Korean "economic territory" in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). In this sense, South Korea can be described as a "truly" global economic actor.

While the above-mentioned observations draw a picture of an eager South Korea aspiring to succeed in regional and global affairs, they contrast with the widespread portrayal of the country's foreign and security policy, according to which the country is predominantly focused on North Korea and constrained by geopolitical conditions in Northeast Asia, the sphere of influence of four nuclear states as well as of emerging and established economic powers. Hence, Seoul's geopolitical situation has often been described, in reference to a traditional Korean proverb, as that of a shrimp located between whales and in imminent danger of getting hurt when the big whales around it begin to fight (Kang 2011: 2). Behind this metaphor stands the common assumption that South Korea – surrounded by the great powers China, Japan, Russia and the United States – has only limited leeway within its foreign policy and must maneuver constantly between the more powerful regional actors (De Ceuster 2005).

But does this widespread presumption of what Thomas Kalinowski and Hyekyung Cho (2012: 244) call "fundamental obstacles" correspond with South Korea's actual status in regional and global affairs? We argue that the mere density of populous and militarily and/or economically powerful states in Northeast Asia is a fact all regional neighbors have to cope with. None of China, Japan, Russia or the United States can easily project their power over the others or, to put it more bluntly, "do what they want to." The particular geopolitical setting in Northeast Asia – almost exclusively believed to limit only South Korea's foreign policy options – also holds true for Seoul's putatively more powerful neighbors. For example, to many policy makers, scholars and journalists China, due to its mere size, is a great power. Beijing is often said to possess the most significant influence over North Korea because Pyongyang is seen to depend on Chinese support for its survival. However, it is important to note that the Chinese government was not able to prevent North Korea from conducting missile and nuclear tests in, for instance, 2006 and 2009 – although it strongly opposed these actions and threatened to take punitive measures. Thus, despite being a small and impoverished country, North Korea did not change its decision-making behavior when confronted by a far superior power (not to mention, among others, the United States, Russia, Japan and

South Korea). Japan, which is referred to as a middle or even regional power, is another case in point. As a result of decades-long economic stagflation, demographic challenges, more assertive neighbors and a self-imposed “peace constitution,” Japan’s foreign policy options in Northeast Asia are similarly limited. Therefore, the question of restricted decision-making in foreign policy as well as the constrained projection of a country’s own power capabilities – also as a result of the above-mentioned geopolitical conditions – does not apply just to South Korea but is rather a (neglected) reality that all actors in the region face.

Once this situation is accepted, the issue of what kind of regional standing or status seems to be possible for South Korea can be viewed – as this paper does – from a novel perspective. Therefore, the main question of the paper is whether South Korea is, as is often stated, only a “shrimp amongst whales” or instead a considerable (albeit neglected) regional power. In answering this question we hope to contribute to the analysis of South Korean foreign policy by using the concept of regional powers as a template to discuss the country’s regional ambitions. This analytical approach, which is outlined in more detail in the following section, is particularly suited to addressing our questions as it provides a comprehensive framework with which to examine the power hierarchies of states at the *regional* level. While many studies on South Korea’s foreign policy take it for granted that the structure of the international/regional system quasi-automatically determines Seoul’s foreign policy behavior (e.g. Gerschewski and Hilpert 2009; Kang 2011), which is usually associated with the concept of a middle power, we go one step back by, to put it simply, emphasizing more agency and less structure. In this vein, we not only provide a novel account of South Korea’s foreign policy options in the region but also go beyond current approaches by asking about the (undetermined) possibilities for Seoul’s regional relations.

At the same time, we also intend to close a gap in the research on the concept of regional power. South Korea is an interesting case because it seems to be an anomaly in terms of the positioning of states at both the global and regional level. For instance, one criterion for being a regional power is the material resources of a country, such as the size of its economy, military or population. In these realms, as will be shown later, South Korea is quite capable of keeping up with other assumed regional powers, yet it is widely perceived to be only a minor player in regional and global politics. We argue that the case of South Korea warrants an investigation from the perspective of the regional powers concept. In this sense we also contribute to the research on regional powers. We ultimately ask how viable this concept is in view of the article’s findings. The methodological approach used to evaluate South Korea’s position is based on analytical frameworks and typologies compiled from the literature on regional powers. This approach is introduced in the next section, along with the different conceptualizations of regional power and our selection of methodological instruments. We subsequently analyze the indicators of South Korea’s putative status as a regional power. The concluding section evaluates the findings and identifies further research questions in reference to the regional power concept.

2 Definitions and Understandings of Regional Powers

The literature concerning the concept of regional powers provides a comprehensive collection of diverse definitions and notions that overlap and intersect in terms of their meaning: regional great power, major regional power, great power, major power, secondary regional power and middle power, to list only some.² Only the notion of the superpower seems not to be contested; otherwise there exists a rich pool of diverse analytical concepts.

Among many policy makers, researchers and journalists, the usual candidates for regional power status include Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa. Further aspirants are Iran, Mexico, Nigeria and Japan (cf. Rubin 2006; Huntington 1999: 36; Buzan and Waever 2003: 34; Nolte 2006: 3). This list of potential regional powers can be extended quite arbitrarily,³ something that indicates the difficulty of grasping the term conceptually and highlights the multitude of definitions. Often the conceptualization of the term lacks clear distinctive characteristics in relation to other similar classifications, so that several terms are applied to one and the same country.

While, for instance, Jonathan H. Ping (2005) classifies India as a middle power, Samuel Huntington (1999: 36) elevates it to the category of a major regional power, a type which is in certain ways dominant within a region but not able to project its interests as globally as the only superpower, the United States. In contrast, the US government sees the South Asian country as a potential great/world power, citing its democratic development and its political and economic freedom (White House 2002: 26). Japan may function as another example of the alternating usage of the term “regional power.” In the eyes of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003: 35) Japan represents a great power because of its hesitancy to claim superpower status and its unbalanced power resources; however, Andrew F. Cooper et al. (1993: 19) consider it a middle power as it demonstrates the tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, to seek compromise in international disputes, and to practice good international citizenship. As indicated earlier, some authors, such as Ping (2005), do not even consider Japan a middle power. Another example of the mixing of the terms “regional power” and “middle power” is provided by Daniel Flesmes (2007a, 2007b). While Flesmes on the one hand treats India, Brazil, and South Africa as so-called emerging middle powers (Flesmes 2007a), he later treats the same states (*ibid.*: 7) – and, elsewhere, South Africa (2007b) – as regional powers, thereby handling both classifications as interchangeable.

With respect to the question of what qualifies a state to be considered a regional (great) power, Oyvind Osterud (1992) formulates four conditions. According to these criteria, a state which is geographically part of a delineated region, is able to stand up against other states in the region, is highly influential in regional affairs, and, unlike a middle power, might also be

2 This part of the paper is based on a section from an earlier GIGA Working Paper (see Shim 2009). Detlef Nolte (2010) considers additional definitions such as second-tier states, intermediate states and middle-tier states.

3 For instance, Robert Pastor (1999: 25) includes Argentina, Iraq, Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan in addition to the above-mentioned countries.

a great power on the world scale, can be regarded as a regional great power (ibid.: 12). But, in reference to the latter condition, Flemes (2007a: 10) asserts “that the author [Osterud] is mixing the characteristics of regional powers and great powers and making the distinction between regional powers and middle powers more difficult.” The distinction of a middle power from a regional power seems to be particularly unclear. Whereas Eduard Jordaan (2003) divides middle powers into traditional and emerging middle powers, Flemes (2007b) equates the latter term with the notion of regional powers. Martin Wight (1978) differentiates between the concepts of middle and regional power on the basis of geographical boundaries and determines a local/regional and a global level. While states, according to Wight (ibid.: 63), can be regional powers within their geographical proximity, they are regarded as middle powers in terms of the global level. What Wight has introduced here is a conceptual difference between a middle power and a regional power, as the former term seems to refer to a state in the global hierarchy while the latter concept relates to a regional, more geographically limited context. However, Andrew Hurrell (2000: 1) objects that the hitherto existing approaches and attempts to develop a theory of intermediate powers have led to a “dead-end.” He adds for consideration a constructivist position on this topic, which, in his view, omits the putatively objective geopolitical and geoeconomic criteria and focuses more on the socially constitutive character of such a hierarchical status.

Bearing the diverse understandings in mind, a crucial question to ask is then how a state can be identified as a regional power. To distinguish between overlapping meanings and definitions, several scholars have attempted to define the term (e.g. Hurrell 2000; Nolte 2010; Ping 2005; Godehardt and Nabers 2011; Husar and Maihold 2009; Flemes et al. 2012; Osterud 1992; Wight 1978; Jordaan 2003; Cooper et al. 1993; Cooper 1997). Many of these authors have developed analytical frameworks that provide various indicators for determining and assessing potential regional powers. After reviewing the literature on regional powers, we have identified the following criteria as the most relevant:

- 1) *Delimitation* refers to the territorial, economic, cultural, or political context in which the potential regional power is embedded.
- 2) *Pretension* concerns the question of whether leadership claims are voiced by the actor, and if so, what these claims are.
- 3) *Endowment* refers to how the actor is equipped in predominantly material terms, for instance, military, economic, and natural resources and demographically or geographically.
- 4) *Influence* refers to the level of leverage or impact an actor has on important issues of regional/global concern.
- 5) *Recognition* concerns the intersubjective character of interstate relations and asks how others view the actor’s role as a regional power, or if it is even acknowledged.

On the basis of these characteristics, the next section discusses South Korea’s possible role as a regional power. The question of delimitation can be answered relatively easily as the South

Korean government sees itself (and is seen) as part of a region that is widely known as (North) East Asia, with the major states of influence being the United States, China, Japan and Russia (see for example NSS 2009: 20; MND 2010).

3 South Korea – A Regional Power?

The discussion about South Korea's emerging role in regional and global affairs has gained much momentum in recent years (Hwang 2004; Kalinowski and Cho 2012; Kang 2010; Kim 2009; Park 2011; Robertson 2007; Rozman 2006; Shim 2009; Snyder 2010; Zhu 2007). While this discussion was initially mainly restricted to policy-making and academic circles, international media outlets have increasingly come to participate in the debate, as articles published in the *Financial Times* (Oliver and Pilling 2010), the *New York Times* (Bowring 2009), the *Wall Street Journal* (Davis 2009), *Newsweek* (Lee 2010a), and *Time* (Schuman 2010) show.

The academic literature demonstrates a high level of agreement with regard to South Korea's position in the international and regional systems. The country is usually regarded as a middle power, meaning that it is unlikely to lead or incapable of leading and more likely to be led (see for instance Rozman 2007; Hilpert 2007; Robertson 2007; Kim and Lim 2007; Moon 2007). Hanns Günther Hilpert (2007: 15) provides a good example of this by stating that “[i]n the concert of powers in East Asia, South Korea will always play a minor role in relation to the more populous countries China, Japan, the USA and Russia.”⁴ Jeffery Robertson (2007: 164) argues in a more nuanced manner. While he concedes that it is hard to imagine South Korea being anything but a middle power, he also states that it “has outgrown the middle-power category.”

However, other scholars show that it is quite possible to think of South Korea as a considerable regional power. They discuss, for instance, the country's rise as a regional power (e.g. Hwang 2004; Zhu 2005), its strengthened regional leadership capabilities (e.g. Park 2011) or its emergence as a major military power in East Asia (e.g. Dinerman 2010, Larkin 2001).

3.1 Pretension

Inherent to the term “regional power” is the connotation of leadership and a geographical reference to a specific area. Thus, the first step in analyzing South Korea's standing is to examine if there are indications of a pretension to regional leadership and which area this is related to. The latter question can be answered easily. For instance, for former presidents Kim Dae-jung (1997–2002) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) there was no doubt that South Korean foreign and security policy concentrates first and foremost on the northeastern part of Asia

4 Authors' translation. Original text: „[...] im Mächtkonzert Ostasiens wird Südkorea gegenüber den bevölkerungsstärkeren Ländern China, Japan, USA und Russland immer nur eine Nebenrolle spielen“.

(NSC, 2004; MND, 2006). The Lee Myung-bak administration also considers itself as belonging to this region (e.g. NSS 2009; MND 2010).

In terms of political claims to regional leadership, the so-called New Asia Initiative of the current government deserves particular mention (CWD 2010). Embedded in South Korea's Global Korea (NSS 2009) national security strategy, which envisions the expansion of South Korea's international role, the New Asia Initiative is an attempt by Seoul to increase its leverage in the region by acting as a bridge between developed and developing countries. The new regional policy focuses on deepening ties with states from Central Asia, South (East) Asia and Oceania in the fields of trade, energy and cultural exchange (DWP 2011). Especially South Korea's bigger neighbors China and Japan are seen as Seoul's main addressees in the competition for regional influence (Hundt 2011). For Zhiqun Zhu (2009), the goal of the New Asia policy is to establish South Korea's leading role in the region and to position it as a speaker for the Asian countries in the international community. Besides South Korea's path to democracy, the field of (national) development, within which the country succeeded within a relatively short time frame, is crucial to the country's presentation of itself as a model, a leading example for other nations to emulate. One way South Korea is enhancing its leadership profile is by increasing regional efforts and funds for its official development assistance (ODA) (Olbrich and Shim 2012). For instance, since President Lee's inauguration in 2008 ODA expenditures have jumped by 65 percent, from approximately USD 700 million to USD 1.2 billion. It is important to note that over 50 percent of Seoul's development funds are spent in Asia, thus indicating South Korea's bid for regional leadership.

In addition to attempting to become an "issue leader in development" (Kalinowski and Cho 2012), Seoul is also pursuing a so-called Low Carbon, Green Growth strategy, which was introduced in 2009 as a reaction to the global financial crisis (Shim 2010). While this strategy aims to reconcile enhanced economic growth with ecological preservation, it is also, and more importantly, another attempt to assume leadership in the international realm. As then prime minister Han Seung-soo (2009) noted during the 2009 East Asia World Economic Forum:

I believe that low carbon, green growth must be a paradigm not only for Korea, but for the international community as a whole ... the primacy of the current global economic downturn should not deter our focus from effectuating a low-carbon, green growth agenda. Rather, we must seek intensive cooperation and unprecedented commitment from all stakeholders. Korea is not only ready to do its part; it is ready to lead this process.

South Korea's pretension to play a greater role in the region and beyond can also be seen in other realms such as culture and the economy. Former president Roh's efforts to promote the country as a "cultural leader" already hinted at this direction (CWD 2003). Political approaches to establishing a form of cultural leadership in the East Asian region include the promotion of Korean movies, music and food at various diplomatic events including the

APEC summit (2005), the G20 summit (2010) and the Nuclear Security Summit (2012) in Korea (Korea IT Times 2005; Lee 2010b; Lee 2012a; Yun 2012).⁵ Alongside its efforts to position itself as a cultural power, Korea also accents its economic prowess. The economic policy of the Lee administration is designed to make South Korea a regional center of Northeast Asian trade relations. As early as the Roh government repeated claims were made that – due to the country’s special geographical location – South Korea was predestined to become the economic and free trade agreement hub of the region. This goal is now being pursued by the Lee administration, which aims to make Korea a “global trade powerhouse” (CWD 2011).

3.2 Endowment

The countries considered to be regional powers – Brazil, South Africa, India, China, Japan and Russia – all have one feature in common: their sheer size.⁶ Be it the number of inhabitants (China, India), the size of the territory (Russia, Brazil), or the strength of the economy in terms of expenditures for the military or for technological research and development activities (Japan), brute material facts appear to determine a country’s capacity to act in the international system and to reflect the position of a state in the global/regional hierarchy. Seen from this point of view, South Korea does not need to hide behind other assumed regional powers with respect to its material capabilities.

According to the CIA World Factbook database (CIA 2012), in 2011 South Korea ranked twelfth worldwide in terms of its GDP, measured by purchasing power parity and totaling USD 1.549 trillion. China came second with USD 11.290 trillion, and Japan fourth with USD 4.389 trillion. Other states that are classified as regional powers such as Indonesia (USD 1.121 trillion), Turkey (USD 1.026 trillion) or South Africa (USD 0.554 trillion) all ranked behind South Korea. With approximately 50 million inhabitants, the ROK’s GDP per capita was USD 31,700, only slightly less than Japan’s USD 34,300.

A brief look at the regional trade statistics shows how deeply embedded South Korea’s economy is in regional trade relations. In December 2011 Korea celebrated the achievement of USD 1 trillion trade volume, becoming only the ninth country ever to do so. According to data from the EU Directorate General for Trade (2011), China was both the biggest export market for Korean goods in 2010, importing 25.8 percent (EUR 88 billion) of Korea’s total shipments, and the main supplier of Korean imports, with a share of 17.4 percent (EUR 54 billion). After China, with its 21.8 percent share of total Korean trade, Japan comes second on the list of Seoul’s largest trading partners with 10.7 percent (nearly EUR 70 billion in absolute numbers; EUR 49 billion in imports and EUR 21 billion in exports). China and Japan are followed by the EU-27 countries and the United States, with shares of 10.7 percent and

5 The Korean wave has proven to be particularly successful in (South) East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Thailand (Park 2006).

6 However, in fact, it is the relative (larger) size of the above-mentioned countries relative to their neighbors.

10.5 percent respectively. With regard to foreign direct investment (FDI), South Korea's outward FDI in 2011 accounted for USD 139 billion, double that of 2007, and inward FDI stocks for USD 127 billion (OECD 2012). Furthermore, in the last few years South Korea has concluded several comprehensive free trade agreements with the ASEAN, the EU, the USA and India and is negotiating more trade pacts with, for instance, China and Japan in the form of a tripartite agreement. Study groups to examine FTAs with, among others, the Gulf Cooperation Council, South Africa and MERCOSUR have also been established (Ravenhill 2009: 232; The Korea Times 2009a/b/c).

But in other fields as well, South Korea can keep up with more obvious major powers. For instance, in a report on the technological innovation capabilities in selected countries of East Asia, the European Commission (EC 2006) categorized South Korea, along with Japan, as the current "global leader" (ibid. 4) in specific high-technology industries. South Korea's total investments in research and development (R&D) are among the highest in the world. With investments of 3.74 percent of its GDP into R&D activities in 2010, South Korea outranked key science and technology players including, for instance, France (2.26 percent), Germany (2.82 percent), Japan (3.36 percent) and the United States (2.90 percent) (OECD 2012).

Furthermore, South Korea ranks among the leaders in various economic branches such as the heavy industries (ships, cars, and steel), the petrochemical and nuclear industries, and the electronics industry (consumer electronics). The country is home to several globally successful companies including Samsung, Hyundai, Posco and LG, which symbolize the country's premium-brand image (in contrast to the "Korea discount" image attached to the industrial products of the 1970s and 1980s). With regard to South Korean economic development in the future, a report by investment bank Goldman Sachs suggested that Korea will obtain the world's second-highest per capita income by 2050, trailing only the United States. The report proposed adding Korea to the list of so-called BRIC states – which includes the typical regional-power candidates Brazil, Russia, India and China – and changing the acronym to BRICK (KBS Global 2007a; 2007b).

In terms of its military expenditures, South Korea has been positioned among the upper ranks of the aforementioned aspiring regional powers. In 2010 Seoul spent 2.9 percent of its GDP, or USD 24.3 billion on its armed forces, while China spent an estimated 2.2 percent. In 2009 Brazil spent 1.6 percent, India 2.8 percent, South Africa 1.3 percent and Japan 1 percent, respectively, of their GDPs (SIPRI 2011). In its annual publication assessing the military balance of states, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) has reported that the Korean military directs 655,000 troops in peacetime, making it more than two and a half times the size of Japan's military with its 247,000 troops (IISS 2012: 259). During the last decade a strategic key objective has been to develop South Korea's armed forces into a military that is able to project its capabilities beyond the Korean peninsula. For instance, President Roh, who received much attention for his "balancer" doctrine, according to which South Korea's armed forces should safeguard regional security by acting as a military balancer in Northeast Asia,

envisioned an “ocean-going force in order to contribute to peace in the world and on the Korean Peninsula” (CWD 2007). The government thus set up a multibillion dollar modernization project (Defense Reform 2020) to adjust South Korea’s military capabilities. While the project underwent several adjustments, with the so-called Defense Reform 307 in 2011 being the most recent amendment, the government is still pushing the implementation of a multi-stage procurement project for its next-generation jet fighters (F-X). The final phase, which is to involve the purchase of 60 new fighters starting in 2014, is among the world’s largest arms deals, with orders worth USD 7.26 billion (Lee 2012b). The F-X project, along with other large-scale procurement plans for the country’s navy and army (for example, KD-III destroyers, K2 Black Panther tanks, K-FX indigenous stealth fighters), represents for some observers South Korea’s emergence as a major military power in the region (e.g. Larkin 2001; Dinerman 2010). South Korea is simultaneously increasing its role in the global arms market as it is one of the largest arms importers and, due to the increasingly competitive domestic defense industry, exporters in the world (see Jackson 2011: 241). Although some observers note (Klingner 2011; Jung 2010) that the government – as a result of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents in 2010⁷ – appears to be refocusing its military alignment (back) on the Korean peninsula, other examples such as South Korea’s “global alliance” with the United States or its naval deployment off the coast of the Horn of Africa point to the country’s continued commitment to defending its interests beyond its national borders (see also Campbell et al. 2009; IISS 2012). To summarize, in terms of material capabilities such as the military, the economy, and science and technology resources, South Korea is quite capable of supporting its claim to a more considerable role in regional and even global politics.

3.3 Influence

This section reviews South Korea’s influence in regional affairs with respect to its ability to set the political agenda and shape the dynamics of Northeast Asian relations. Until today the most considerable demonstration of South Korea’s diplomatic leverage has arguably been President Kim Dae-jung’s “sunshine policy.” As this policy aimed to break down the Cold War structures on the Korean Peninsula by advocating a more cooperative mode of interaction, it succeeded in building a regional consensus to engage with North Korea. The first-ever summit between South Korean president Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in June 2000 not only marked an unprecedented rapprochement between wartime enemies but also reflected South Korea’s capacity to set Northeast Asia’s security agenda. In that year Kim Dae-jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his efforts to

7 On 26 March 2010 the South Korean corvette Cheonan sank in the Yellow Sea and 46 sailors were killed. An international investigation led by the South Korean government concluded that the ship sank as the result of a North Korean torpedo attack. On 23 November 2010 the South Korean island Yeonpyeong, which is close to the Northern Limit Line, was shelled by North Korean artillery. Four people were killed.

foster reconciliation and reunification between the two Koreas. For Koen De Ceuster (2004: 9), Kim Dae-jung's presidency represented "a turning point" in South Korea's international standing because Kim was able to gain substantial support from outside powers for his policy of rapprochement.⁸ The atmospheric change in the region at that time paved the way for a second unparalleled development, which occurred four months later. In October 2000 then US secretary of state Madeleine Albright met with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in order to, among other things, prepare a possible visit by then president Bill Clinton. With respect to Seoul's regional policy, Rozman (2007: 197–198; italics in original) notes,

In 2000, at the height of the Sunshine Policy, Seoul seemed able to punch above its weight. After successfully following the policy of *nordpolitik* to entice Moscow and then Beijing into normalized relations and then launching the Sunshine Policy by rallying support from these two capitals as well as Washington and Tokyo, this middle power was steering the region on the shoulders of giants.

South Korea also carried weight in the East Asian integration process by providing the ideational basis for the regional architecture. At the initiative of then president Kim Dae-jung, South Korea founded an advisory committee in 1999, the so-called East Asia Vision Group, consisting of delegates from several East Asian countries who formulated the vision statement for what the group called the East Asian Community (EAC). The 2010 ASEAN Plus Three summit's (ASEAN 2010) endorsement of South Korea's proposal to establish the East Asian Vision Group II not only demonstrates Seoul's continued commitment to regional integration but also the country's political relevance.

To expand its political influence on matters related to regional and global governance, the South Korean government has put great effort into a range of diplomatic activities. For instance, it has hosted a number of major international events including, as mentioned above, the G20 summit, the HLF on Aid Effectiveness and the Nuclear Security Summit. While all these events have been intended to increase South Korea's visibility on the global stage, the government has used these opportunities to widen its diplomatic leverage by advancing its own policy initiatives relating to development cooperation (Seoul Development Consensus), sustainable development (Green Growth), and the global economy (Financial Safety Nets).

South Korea's diplomatic leverage is also growing due to the expansion of its voting rights, its admission to international bodies, and the increase in the number of its citizens working in senior positions in regional and international organizations. For instance, the upgrading of South Korea's quota in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 2008 and 2010 – which was based on, among other things, material factors such as

⁸ Despite a payment of approximately USD 500 million, which was paid secretly by the South Korean firm Hyundai Asan to gain North Korea's consent to the summit, Seoul's diplomatic performance can be said to remain notable because the regional consensus to engage with North Korea remains unaffected.

the GDP, foreign currency reserves and the openness of the economy – ensures that it has a bigger role in the decision-making processes of the world's most important financial institutions and reflects the country's growing influence in regional and global affairs. Its admission in 2009 to the Donor Assistance Committee of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which provides 90 percent of global aid funding, also gives South Korea the opportunity to help shape the international development cooperation agenda.

The country has also influenced the network of regional trade relations with its eagerness to negotiate bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements. The range of South Korea's concluded and planned FTAs has arguably brought a new dynamic to the region with, for instance, Japan coming under particular pressure not to fall behind in the regional competition for trade liberalization (Flamm and Köllner 2012). The negotiation of a trilateral FTA between China, Japan and South Korea as well as the Japanese government's announcement in 2011 that it would join another regional trade pact, the so-called Transpacific Partnership (TPP), are clear indications of Tokyo's attempts to catch up with the ROK in this respect (Elms 2011).

With the phenomenon of the so-called "Korean Wave," which refers to the success of South Korean popular culture, the country has considerably influenced the people, music, television and fashion of its regional neighbors and is actively working to make use of what it calls "soft power" (DWP 2011: 278). A public opinion survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that the cultural impact of South Korea in East Asia is growing (Chicago Council 2008). Other indications of South Korea's increasing cultural influence in the region are the attempts by foreign governments, for instance, those of China and Taiwan, to take (legal) measures against South Korean television productions by restricting their air time in domestic programs (Chosun Ilbo 2006; BBC News 2012).

3.4 Recognition

To be a regional power, it is not sufficient just to claim leadership; a country must also be accepted as a regional power by other countries. This reality highlights the social dimension of the concept. As Andrew Hurrell (2000: 3) states,

You can claim Great Power status but membership of the club of Great Powers is a social category that depends on recognition by others – by your peers in the club, but also by smaller and weaker states willing to accept the legitimacy and authority of those at the top of the international hierarchy.

Thus, one might say that the term "regional power" is a social construction because its meaning is based on the shared and intersubjective understanding of relevant actors. The question to ask here is therefore whether South Korea is accepted by others in its self-defined role as a bridge (between developed and developing and established and emerging countries) and as a power for regional leadership in different policy fields including development cooperation, regional integration and sustainable development.

As mentioned above, one policy field in which South Korea puts great effort into enhancing its regional and global profile is development cooperation. While the admission of South Korea to the OECD's development assistance body was certainly due to the general recognition of the achievements of the government in this field, one development-related program, the so-called New Village Movement (*saemaul undong*), seems to have received particularly high credit from several UN agencies and developing countries. Designed in the 1970s under the authoritarian rule of then president Park Chung-hee in order to develop South Korea's rural areas, *saemaul undong* is today internationally recognized as a best practice for rural development (UNECA 2008; Lankov 2010). Countries and organizations that have emulated South Korea's model of development include Cambodia, Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania, as well as UN agencies including the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Economic Commission for Africa (Claassen 2011; UNESCAP 2012; UNECA 2008).

In addition to the growing integration of East Asia along the lines of ASEAN – for example, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum, Chiang Mai Initiative – there exists another process of regional integration that has been considerably deepened and institutionalized in recent years (Rathus 2010): trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea. This trilateral cooperation has seemingly put Seoul in its long-desired position of acting as a bridge between established and emerging powers. This role has been manifested and acknowledged to a certain degree with the founding of an international organization, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), in South Korea. The location of the TCS, established as a permanent intergovernmental body, in Seoul not only gives South Korea the ability to facilitate and mediate cooperation among the three East Asian states but also reveals that it is accepted as an equal partner in regional rule-making efforts (cf. Böhmer and Köllner 2012).

Another example of the recognition of South Korean policy initiatives relates to the country's strategy of sustainable development. The range of measures and initiatives that have been undertaken since the announcement of the country's new Green Growth paradigm (for a discussion of Green Growth see Shim 2010; 2009), has prompted some to speak of Korea as a role model for other countries (e.g. UNEP 2010; Scarlatoiu 2009). For instance, in an assessment report on South Korea's "green growth" efforts, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) concluded that the country is demonstrating "leadership at the international level by boosting global efforts towards achieving a green economy" (UNEP 2010: 8).

Furthermore, South Korea is increasingly able to secure followers for its goal of leading global efforts on environment-friendly economic growth. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012, several international donor countries (Australia, Denmark, Mexico, Norway, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom) joined the government's Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) initiative and officially converted it into an international organization (Yonhap 2012). The GGGI is not only the first international organization established on the basis of the South Korean government's initiative but it also means that other states are willing to accept (and, perhaps equally im-

portantly, fund) South Korea's leadership in matters of international concern. As mentioned several times above, Seoul has hosted a number of large-scale international events. What should be added in this regard is that the very invitation to host such high-level meetings is also an expression of international recognition of its role in guiding diplomatic negotiations and mediating international consent on central questions of regional and global politics.

4 Conclusion

The rise of South Korea in regional and global politics has received much attention in recent years. The starting point of this analysis was the observation that, to date, the practice of naming regional powers has been concentrated on many candidates, but not on South Korea, although, as has been demonstrated here, the country has the capacity to keep up with other aspiring regional powers in certain areas. One of our goals in this paper has been to provide insights into the analysis of South Korean foreign policy by using the regional powers concept as a template for discussing the country's regional and global political ambitions. Another contribution of the paper is the empirical testing of the concept of regional powers, which has allowed for conclusions regarding the applicability of the approach and its analytical indicators.

The findings present an ambiguous picture. Using the conceptual framework developed in the second section to examine regional powers, we have demonstrated that Seoul is eager to play a more active and self-assertive role in Northeast Asian politics (and even beyond) and is able to keep up with or even surpass relevant actors on the regional and international level in terms of certain material capabilities. Further, the analysis has demonstrated that South Korea can maneuver between its supposedly more powerful neighbors and is capable of influencing regional affairs according to its own interests. Yet because the concept of regional power also has a social dimension, which lies in achieving intersubjective understanding and acceptance from other actors, it is difficult to fully apply the term to the country under scrutiny. At this stage the lack of acknowledgment from peer nations therefore appears to be the main obstacle to considering South Korea as a regional power. One of the reasons for this lack of acknowledgement could also be the fragmentary knowledge of foreigners about South Korea's economic and diplomatic achievements. For instance, South Korean products are often mistaken for Japanese goods by Western consumers.

In addition to South Korea, there is another putatively small country that, though surrounded by superior rival neighbors, demonstrates that certain material factors alone do not always explain the position and possibilities of states in international and regional politics. Despite being a tiny Islamic monarchy and surrounded by Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, Qatar, due to its political involvement in the mass protests that have occurred in the Arab World since the "Arab Spring" (2010), has established itself as a regional power that has shaped the new political order in the Arab region (Hermann 2011; Shadid 2011).

The importance of the answer to our question lies in its geopolitical implications for the future landscape in regional affairs. One key characteristic of Northeast Asian affairs is the convergence of the ideas and interests of the (political, economic or nuclear) powers China, Japan, North Korea, Russia and the United States. Within this concert of established and emerging powers, the question of how to handle an additional powerful (and perhaps reunited) Korean player in regional politics becomes a crucial issue to be addressed in the future.

One goal of this paper has been to contribute to the research concerning the concept of regional powers by identifying further research questions. Some of these questions concern the distinctiveness of the analytical indicators and the scope of the concept, as it is exclusively centered on states as its primary objects of analysis (see for instance Alexandroff and Cooper 2010; Flemes 2010; Godehardt and Nabers 2011; Nel 2010). For instance, it is not always possible to differentiate between the indicators “influence” and “recognition” because influential policies (for example, South Korea’s model of rural development, *saemaul undong*) have to be acknowledged and accepted by other states in order to have a bearing on them. In other words, both indicators are mutually dependent.

Further, one could ask if only single states can be regional powers or if it is also possible to include other entities or actors relevant in current global affairs, since one constituent of the notion of a regional power seems to be the capacity to act in an external direction. In this vein, the research focus could be shifted to nonstate actors (such as nongovernmental organizations or multinational corporations), multilateral and bilateral intergovernmental institutions (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Union of South American Nations or the Japan–US/Korea–US alliances), or supranational organizations (such as the European Union). Another question could be whether the European Union, with its integrated Common Foreign and Security Policy or its European Defence and Security Policy, also constitutes a “regional power.” If so, questions about certain actors such as Germany, France, or the United Kingdom within this complex could follow. Are they then regional powers within a regional-powers complex?

Although some research on this question has been recently conducted, for instance, by Anne-Marie Le Gloannec (2011), it should be noted that European countries have been relatively neglected in the current debate on the naming of regional powers. However, it should also be noted that the answers to these questions depend on the use of the terms/concepts “region” and “power” in a given context. In other words, the particular notions of “region” and “power” one wishes to apply guide the answers to these questions. This points to another set of questions that most of the relevant literature has not addressed yet; namely, those questions regarding the analytical viability of the concept itself. For what the findings of this paper also show is that the term “regional power” is highly contested and thus necessitates careful and critical scrutiny. This caveat has nevertheless not prevented the term from gaining a foothold in academic, media and policy discourse.

A final question should be raised in regard to our argument as the answer aptly summarizes South Korea's position and potential in the region: Are contemporary regional politics possible without (the consent of) Seoul?

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