Growing Activism as Cooperation Facilitator: China-Japan-Korea Trilateralism and Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy

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South Korea's increasing status in regional and global affairs has started to draw substantial attention. This study focuses on the China-Japan-Korea triangle and argues that Korea's exercise of middle power diplomacy is vital to robust trilateralism. Since the late 1990s, Korea has proactively mobilized its diplomatic resources to enhance the institutionalization of China-Japan-Korea trilateralism. Its diplomatic activism fits into the existing theoretical assumptions that middle powers are likely to act as cooperation facilitators and bridge builders. To be specific, Korea's middle-power diplomacy within the triangle works in two ways: making intellectual contributions and bridging between China and Japan. First, Korea has acted as the main idea proposer, agenda-setter and vision designer throughout the evolution of trilateralism, including the first trilateral breakfast summit in 1999, the first independent Trilateral Summit in 2008, and the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) in 2011. Second, Korea's presence in the triangle has provided bridging between China and Japan. Korea's chairmanship and diplomatic efforts toward resuming the Sixth Trilateral Summit in November 2015 have created a new diplomatic pattern in Northeast Asia whereby cooperative trilateralism incorporates bilateral disputes into a minilateral setting. However, Korea is, after all, a middle power in this triangle with no intention to challenge China or Japan. For this reason, Korea has exerted its middle-power bridging cautiously through a "wait-and-see" approach.

Key Words: China-Japan-Korea triangle, summit diplomacy, middle power, trilateralism, Korea

Trilateral cooperation among China, Japan and Korea took root in 1999 under the auspices of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit. In order to strengthen coordination on financial policies, leaders of the three countries convened a trilateral breakfast meeting, which marked the starting point of the institutional-

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ization of trilateralism. In 2008, the Trilateral Summit was further developed into an independent and regularized mechanism apart from the APT. In 2011, the institution building of the trilateral relationship took another step forward by establishing an intergovernmental Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), located in Seoul, for providing administrative services and think tank-style advice to the three governments. Since its inception, approximately 20 ministerial meetings and more than 100 specific intergovernmental projects have been initiated under the umbrella of the Trilateral Summit. Nonetheless, the construction of the China-Japan-Korea triangle remains far from a counterweight to that of the U.S.-Japan-Korea. The China-Japan-Korea triangle is based on cooperative relations; that is to say, resolutions or even dialogues on disputed issues, such as the territorial or historical issues or the North Korean nuclear issue, are not strictly on the agenda as part of trilateral cooperation. For the foreseeable future, the key focus of the China-Japan-Korea triangle will likely be limited in functional areas and is unlikely to reach strategic levels.

As Northeast Asia has not developed mature institutions, regional cooperation is predominantly characterized by an intergovernmental approach that focuses on the three major states of China, Japan and Korea (Yoshimatsu 2008, 64). Each country has its own incentives and visions for trilateral cooperation. China has shown great enthusiasm in developing trilateral cooperation. China sees the potential output of the trilateral framework as both strategic and pragmatic.¹ It could be a venue to exercise leadership and a strategic tool to confront U.S. alliance systems. China also has high expectations for functional cooperation and has committed substantial resources to the trilateral FTA in both the early preparation stage and during ongoing negotiations (Jo 2012). However, China's diplomatic ambiguity in distinguishing trilateralism from bilateralism seems to be problematic. In 2005 and 2012, China refused to hold the Trilateral Summit due to fluctuations in Sino-Japanese relations. This implies that China merely sees trilateralism as an extension of bilateral relations, not an independent multilateral arrangement. In contrast, Japan in many respects has weaker incentives to promote trilateral cooperation. Japan has often approached regional multilateralism from a position of inclusiveness, one that encompasses the broader Asia-Pacific and draws in U.S. participation (Yeo 2012). In comparison, Korea acts as an enthusiastic supporter of both functional cooperation and institutionalization efforts. In all three critical junctures of trilateral cooperation history in 1999, 2008 and 2011, Korea behaved as a critical idea-proposer and vision-designer by

¹ Interview with Ambassador Shin Bong-kil, former Secretary-general of the TCS (November 19, 2015).

making a substantial intellectual contribution. The hosting of the TCS in Seoul rather than Tokyo or Beijing further demonstrates that Korea possesses the capacity to act as a cooperation facilitator and broker that can accommodate both the interests of China and Japan. Even when Korea-Japan relations deteriorated in 2013-2015, Korea did not oppose holding the Trilateral Summit. Compared to China, Korea adopted a dichotomous approach that distinguished Japan-Korea bilateral disputes from cooperative trilateralism.

Gilbert Rozman (2004) noted that Korea's bridging role between China and Japan is one of the key factors for regionalism in Northeast Asia. He argued that, "if both (China and Japan's) national identities and national interests are driving tensions [...] Seoul may set its sights on quietly advancing trust while biding its time before pursuing a more proactive role as facilitator for powers already inclined to a multilateral security system" (Rozman 2007, 198). History shows that the Korean Peninsula, whether divided or not, has always been regarded as a "shrimp" amongst the great powers in Northeast Asia. Although the contemporary international politics of the Korean Peninsula has not completely abandoned this geopolitical perspective, this paper argues that Korea's increasing facilitation of cooperation in the China-Japan-Korea triangle has revealed a more independent bridging behavior since the late 1990s. In this context, this research addresses two analytical and descriptive research questions. First, why does Korea take consistently proactive stances in the construction of China-Japan-Korea trilateralism? Second, in the face of the two great regional powers of China and Japan, what roles has Korea played? How does its middle-power diplomacy work within the triangle? The central argument of this paper is that despite Sino-Japanese relations remaining the most decisive factor determining the fate of China-Japan-Korea trilateralism, Korea's middle-power role is indispensable for advancing the stability and efficiency of the triangular relationship. In recent years, Korea has shown intellectual leadership in putting forward a wide variety of cooperative proposals and visions, but also has contributed in bridging between China and Japan as a broker.

This paper is composed of four parts. The first part explores a theoretical framework explaining Korea's middle-power bridging role and intellectual leadership in the context of minilateralism. The second part presents historical and political-economic perspectives to explain Korea's rising enthusiasm for development of the China-Japan-Korea triangle. Historically, Korea has a miserable memory of being a victim of Sino-Japanese conflicts, laying the psychological foundation for Korea's willingness to support regional integration. Furthermore, since Korea's economy is highly dependent on trade with China and Japan, Korea has set up a clear strategy of involvement in two parallel trilateral groupings: the

China-Japan-Korea triangle for functional gains and the U.S.-Japan-Korea triangle for national security concerns. The third part finds that ever since the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, China-Japan-Korea trilateralism has been listed as an important diplomatic agenda for each Korean administration. Korea has persistently made intellectual contributions by presenting new ideas and cooperative proposals. Lastly, this study looks at Korea's middle-power diplomacy since 2012, when the trilateral relationship fell to its lowest point in recent years. This study puts forward the concept of "conditional bridging," referring to Korea's fulfillment of its chairmanship of the Sixth Trilateral Summit, thereby nudging forward Sino-Japanese relations while adopting highly cautious "wait-and-see" stances on the selections of timing and diplomatic climate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: KOREA AS A MIDDLE POWER IN THE NORTHEAST ASIAN TRIANGLE

The nascent China-Japan-Korea triangle seemingly adds to a growing list of examples of minilateralism in East Asia. Minilateralism has become a widely discussed phenomenon in international politics. Due to the aspect of a relatively small membership of cooperative partners, minilateralism is widely regarded as being more efficient, given that complications and transaction costs are expected to be proportional to the number of actors involved in any multilateral arrangement (Kahler 1992; Snidal 1995; Keohane and Ostrom 1995). In East Asia, these minilaterals have mainly taken the form of trilateral groupings, including the U.S.-Japan-India Strategic Dialogue, the U.S.-Japan-Australia Security Dialogue (TSD) (Satake 2011; Searle and Kamae 2004; Tow, Thomson and Yamamoto 2007) and the U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) (Cossa 1999; Cha 1999; Schoff 2005a; 2005b).

Unlike those "geographically dispersed" multilateral approaches, with the presence of the United States as the main driver and mediator, the China-Japan-Korea triangle follows a "geographically concentrated" pattern and features a regionalist approach. Michael Green analyzed the reasons for booming trilateralism in East Asia and argued that "trilateralism has proliferated because of deficiencies in both the region's umbrella multilateral forums and the legacy hub-and-spokes system of bilateral alliances" (2014, 761-764). In analysis of the governance structure of these trilateral groupings, he saw the United States as the central actor of these triangles and regarded trilateralism as an important supplementation to the existing hub-and-spokes system. William Tow et al. also examined the power patterns of trilateral groupings in a more theoretical way. In

the case of the U.S.-Japan-Korea triangle, he noted the great power role of the United States in aspects of taking a lead role in cooperation, and mediating and encouraging conflict avoidance between the two less powerful states (Tow, Thomson and Yamamoto 2007, 24-26). In contrast, the booming China-Japan-Korea triangle presents a challenge to existing research. This triangle lacks a dominant great power to lead this form of trilateral cooperation, as the United States has been for the operation of other triangles in the region. The fragility of Sino-Japanese relations, as well as rising competition for regional hegemony between the two, poses uncertainties and challenges to the solidarity of trilateralism. Thus, the China-Japan-Korea triangle follows the pattern of two great powers plus one relatively small power in the middle. Accordingly, this paper presents an alternative view that, in a minilateral arrangement that lacks a hegemonic state, a less powerful state could also play bridging roles or, in some circumstances, certain leadership roles in facilitating institution building. Given the unsettled bilateral discord between China and Japan, Korea's proactive role within the China-Japan-Korea triangle presents such a case.

This research links Korea's proactive bridging diplomacy within the China-Japan-Korea triangle with prevailing middle-power theories. By definition, middle powers are normally understood as "states that are neither great nor small in terms of international power, capacity and influence, and demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system" (Jordaan 2003, 165). Admittedly, within the China-Japan-Korea triangle, Korea stands as more of a "small power" than a "middle power" in terms of its material strength, given its huge gap with China and Japan in terms of economic size and political influence. However, Korea's diplomatic efforts have never fallen into a passive or subordinated "followership" role within the triangle. This research highlights a behavioral approach that emphasizes the middle powers' diplomatic intentions and capacity to act in the international political arena as a bridging and facilitating actor (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal 1993; Ping 2005). Specifically, this paper argues that Korea's role in the triangle fits into the middle-power diagram in two major aspects below. These factors help explain Korea's solid intellectual contribution and highly flexible bridging diplomacy.

First, middle powers, with relatively limited capacity, are more prone to opt for multilateral and regionalist diplomacy, while great powers generally have stronger preferences for unilateralism and bilateralism. Given middle powers' limited power and incapability to challenge existing great powers, it is not difficult to understand their strong preferences for multilateral coordination or regional cooperation, by which their voices could be better heard and respected through forming transnational groupings. In other words, middle powers tend to

make efforts in promoting cooperation with other states or non-state actors like international organizations and institutions, rather than solely relying on projecting their own national power. Accordingly, middle powers can help maintain the international order and peace by serving as mediators and bridge-builders through coalition-building, international conflict management, and resolution activities (Neack 1995). The relationship between regionalism and middle powers has been addressed in past research. For instance, several studies have focused on Australia's middle-power activism in the creation of APEC (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal 1993), and the roles of Argentina, Mexico and Canada in the regionalism process in the Americas in the 1990s (Belanger and Mace 1999). These studies argued that middle powers that sought to expand their policy influence within a regional framework were enthusiastic in advancing the institutionalization of regionalism processes.

Second, and more importantly, middle powers do not always stand in a follow-ership position in a multilateral arrangement but can also exert leadership under certain conditions. Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993) in their analysis of rising middle powers noted that the post-Cold War period had empowered small- and medium-sized countries to take advantage of greater policy flexibility to exert influence in low politics fields. In later work, Cooper (1997) also helped to shed light on this. According to the author, admittedly it was more practical for middle powers to stay humble and follow the leadership of other great powers. However, in the case of a middle power trying to show greater influence on certain issues, that state had to know its own strengths well and put them into better use. To do this, a middle power needed to wisely centralize its limited resources and capacities in appropriate policy fields after careful selection. Moreover, to become a leading actor, a middle power needed to select the right timing and environment and make sure that its fulfillment of a leadership role did not challenge the interests of any of the other great powers. This sort of "conditional leadership" played by middle powers is commonly known as "niche diplomacy" (Cooper 1997). International relations scholars divide "leadership" into three basic categories: structural leadership (the hard power of states on the international stage of world politics), entrepreneurial leadership (science and technological innovation), and finally intellectual leadership (new ideas, creativity) (Young 1991). Comparatively, middle powers are more likely to exert intellectual leadership; that is, to act as an active idea-generator during the institution-building process.

In summary, this paper finds that Korea's proactive stances on China-Japan-Korea minilateralism is in line with previous theoretical work on middle powers that hypothesizes that middle powers could serve as solid supporters and initia-

tors for transnational institution building. On one hand, the governance structure of the China-Japan-Korea triangle starkly contrasts with other U.S.-centered triangles that simply extend the hub-and-spokes system to a trilateral grouping. The China-Japan-Korea trilateral grouping seemingly creates a unique power pattern in East Asia. The Sino-Japanese relationship fails to be the most precarious factor that might cause stagnation in trilateral cooperation. Under such circumstances, Korea as a middle power offers much more than simple followership to include a substantial intellectual contribution in designing an institutional road map for trilateralism. Korea has started to reveal an increasingly pro-regionalist foreign policy since the late 1990s. As illustrated in the following sections, despite Korea's regionalist diplomacy shifting with the change of presidents, the construction of the China-Japan-Korea triangle consistently has been listed as a priority on the diplomatic agendas of every president. On the other hand, middle powers do not always intend to take leadership roles. Even if they do, middle powers need to select suitable areas and proper timing by employing sophisticated tactics. Korea, after all, has no intention to challenge or compete with China or Japan. In this sense, Korea's bridging role between China and Japan has to be flexible.

EXPLAINING KOREA'S ACTIVISM ON TRILATERALISM: HISTORICAL, FUNCTIONAL, AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

As middle-power theories posit, the formation of transnational arrangements based on regional connectedness, institutions, and organizations can help assure protection of their national interests. Specifically, a combination of historical, functional and political factors, have been at work in driving Korea towards deepening trilateralism.

Table 1. Sino-Japanese Wars and the Korean Peninsula in History

	Combatants	Roles of the Korean Peninsula	Consequences and Influence
Battle of Baekgang River (663) (白江口之戰—白村江の戦い—백강전투)	Tang & Silla VS Japan & Baekje	Split and civil war	1) Japan's defeat and learning from Tang 2) Silla's unification of the Korean Peninsula 3) Start of the regional power pattern of trilateral coexistence (Kim 2008, 95)
Mongol Invasion of Japan (1274 and 1281)	Mongols & Goryeo VS Japan	Sided with the Mongols and provided armory supplies (Agarwal 2006, 263; Robinson 2009)	Mongol's defeat and the myth of "kamikaze" (the Winds of God) in Japan
Imjin War (1592-1598) (万曆朝鮮之役—文祿・慶長の役—임진왜란)	Ming & Joseon VS Japan	Sided with Ming against Japan (Kang 2010a, 93 and 2010b, 616-617)	1) Toyotomi's death and the start of Tokugawa (Edo) period 2) Severe ruin of the Korean Peninsula (Swope 2002, 758) 3) Ming's massive loss of military forces and conquest by the Manchu (Ledyard 1988-1989, 84)
First Sino-Japanese War (1894)	Qing VS Japan	Blasting fuse for the Sino-Japanese War (Hahm 2006, 43)	Collapse of the Sino-centric tributary system and Japan's later annexation of the Korean Peninsula

First, Korea's trilateral activism took deep root as a result of its historical experiences. This miserable fate of the Korean Peninsula was due to being surrounded by great power neighbors in pre-modern history. A well-known analogy depicts the geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula as "a shrimp amongst whales" or being "sandwiched" by China and Japan (Shim 2009; Ha 2003; Bluth and Dent 2008). In a broader sense, the Sino-Japanese conflict not only refers to the battles between the two countries in the late 19th century and 1930s, but also at least three other large-scale wars during pre-modern history.² Korea's affiliation with the Sino-centric tributary system in pre-modern history and its colonization by Imperial Japanese in the early 20th century offered Koreans a unique perspective on the history of the triangle. Willingly or unwillingly, the Korean Peninsula was unavoidably dragged into war whenever the two great-power neighbors came into conflict (Table 1). In every case, the consequences of war were disastrous for the Korean Peninsula, including not only the huge number of casualties and

² The Mongol invasion is considered a Sino-Japanese conflict here, in the sense that the Mongols were the conqueror and ruler of the Chinese mainland in the 13th century. The Mongols enlisted expeditionary forces from the Chinese mainland as well.

large-scale material damage, but also the shifting power structure that the winning side of the war would institute to increase influence and tighten its control over the peninsula. Sandwiched between China and Japan, kidnapped by the stronger side, these experiences were important to understanding Korea's instinctive "victim consciousness" in regional politics.³ Koreans have a firm geopolitical perception that the safety of the Korean Peninsula lies in peace between China and Japan, and good Sino-Japanese relations would be in accordance with Korea's national interests as well. Turbulence in Sino-Japanese relations could also trigger a precarious situation, or even the advent of war on the Korean Peninsula. To avoid such a situation, Korea more recently has sought to act as a peace broker for Sino-Japanese relations rather than bandwagon with one or the other. In the early 20th century, this regional logic was seen in Ahn Jung-geun's embryonic theory of "Peace on East Asia(東洋平和論)," which envisioned a vague strategy of establishing multilateral institutions among the three countries (Hong 2014 and 2015).⁴ Nowadays, this historical and geopolitical logic is still embodied in Korea's current diplomatic strategies.

Figure 1. Intra-regional trade Ratio in the China-Japan-Korea Triangle

Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics, calculated and compiled by the author

³ Interview with senior researcher Dr. Cha Chae-bok from the Northeast Asian History Foundation (November 13, 2015).

⁴ Ahn Jung-geun, who assassinated Ito Hirobumi at Harbin in 1909, was a highly controversial figure, respected as a patriot in Korea but considered a brutal assassin in Japan.

Figure 2. Korea's Trade Relations with China and Japan

Source: *Trilateral Statistics* (TCS 2014) and *Trilateral Economic Report* (TCS 2015)

Second, Korea's activism in trilateralism is associated with its hedging strategy between the U.S.-Japan-Korea triangle for security interests and the China-Japan-Korea triangle for functional gains. Korea is participating in these two parallel triangles with varying expectations of outcomes. Korea's hosting of the third independent Trilateral Summit in May 2010 was a typical case. Shortly after the *Cheonan* incident in March, U.S.-Japan-Korea security coordination intensified. On the other hand, due to China's opposition, the parties at the Third Trilateral Summit failed to adopt any joint statement regarding the referral of the incident to the UN Security Council (*Asahi Shimbun* 2010). Despite this, a series of outcomes were still achieved at the summit meeting, including agreements on pragmatic cooperation involving technology and innovation, standardization, the adoption of Vision 2020, and the establishment of the TCS. Korea clearly understood that the members of the China-Japan-Korea triangle lacked mutual trust, although the Trilateral Summit and the TCS existed largely as a measure for confidence-building through a combination of Track I and Track II meetings (Green 2010, 761; Yeo 2012). Korea's primary expectations from the China-Japan-Korea triangle have been functional rather than strategic.

Korea's rising economic and socio-cultural dependence on China and Japan is important. In terms of economic performance, Korea's economy is heavily trade-oriented with a high degree of trade dependence. China and Japan are Korea's most important import-export markets. In 2015, China was Korea's biggest import and export partner, and Japan was Korea's fifth-largest export partner and second-largest import partner. Figures 1 and 2 show the trends of Korea's ris-

ing trade volume with China and relatively stable trade relations with Japan. Meanwhile, in terms of China, Japan, and Korea as an integrated region, among the three countries Korea has the highest intra-regional trade ratio, which indicates that healthy and close trilateral economic ties are somewhat of greater significance for Korea than for the other two countries. More specifically, as for the share of Korea's intra-regional imports from China and Japan, it peaked in 2004 at 33.7 percent but slowly diminished to 27.4 percent by 2014. The share of Korea's intra-regional exports to China and Japan continued to increase, reaching 31 percent in 2014 (TCS 2015, 28-29). As economic interdependence has risen, Korea's cultural ties with China and Japan were also deepening. In the most recent decade, Korea's outbound visitors to China and Japan have been following an increasing trend. In 2014, approximately 4.2 million Koreans visited China and 2.8 million Koreans visited Japan. In comparison with China's outbound visitors to Japan and Korea, and Japan's outbound visitors to China and Korea, the number of Korea's outbound visitors was less than half that of Japan's back in 2000. However, in 2013, Korea's outbound visitors exceeded either China's or Japan's.⁵ Given Korea's smaller population than China or Japan, it was a remarkable feat and was evidence of Korea's intimate cultural ties within the triangle.

Regionally, Korea takes pride in its broad "economic territory" created through a wide variety of free trade agreements. Korea's FTA strategy primarily targets large or advanced economies, which is different from China and Japan's preference in selecting developing countries as FTA partners (Ahn 2008, 106; Ahn and Kim 2012). Up until the end of 2015, Korea pursued FTA arrangements with all three economic giants of the world – the United States, China and the EU – by means of which Korea has the potential to become Northeast Asia's economic "window" to U.S. and western enterprises. Korea is clearly aware of its favorable position as a gateway for American and European companies to better get into the Chinese and Japanese markets, while facilitating Chinese and Japanese firms' outward movements into American and European markets (Moon 2012, 117). Thus, Korea's role in shaping integrated China-Japan-Korea value chains and closer industrial cooperation should not be underestimated. Noticing the great functional needs and economic benefits, Korea's domestic businesses, led by the *chaebol* groups that integrated banks, trading companies and industrial firms into full-blown conglomerates, constitute the strongest interest groups that solid-

⁵ In 2013, approximately 40 million Koreans visited China and 23 million Koreans visited Japan, bringing the total number of outbound visitor to 63 million. It was higher than China's total outbound visitors of 56 million to Japan and Korea and Japan's outbound visitors of 53.5 million to China and Korea. Data were taken from Travel China Guide.com, the Korean Tourism Organization, and the Japan National Tourism Organization.

ly call for proactive diplomacy in deepening trilateral cooperation. These highly-centralized business empires have been widely known for drawing upon tremendous resources to influence the policy-making process. Calder and Ye (2010, 197-198) examined the extent to which the Daewoo Group and Hyundai Group were engaged in Korea's energy diplomacy in Northeast Asia. Similarly, these business monopolies also have exerted substantial policy pressure on the government to stabilize the trilateral relationship. For instance, around 2013-2015 when Korea-Japan relations dropped to a freezing point, Korea's domestic business-industry groups called for diplomatic efforts to break the ice. Korea's foreign ministry also suffered a lot of public criticism for its lack of leadership and capacity to encourage resuming the Trilateral Summit.⁶

Third, Korea also has used China-Japan-Korea trilateralism as a political tool to help restore its bilateral relations with Japan. Structurally, trilateralism can work as a supplementary mechanism to enhance the three pairs of embedded bilateral relations and function as a 'safety valve' to ease bilateral conflicts. For instance, in 2014 and 2015, the United States demanded Korea maintain good relations with Japan because the United States did not want to see conflict between its two Northeast Asian allies. In this context, to restore relations with Japan through the Trilateral Summit became the most feasible way out of the impasse, given the goals of accommodating both U.S. requests and domestic anti-Japanese voices that opposed the government's holding of a bilateral summit directly with Japanese leaders.

CONSISTENT ACTIVISM AND INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP IN TRILATERALISM

Korea's middle-power diplomacy in the China-Japan-Korea triangle can be examined in terms of its intellectual contributions; that is, offering public goods in agenda settings, vision designs, and institution building. Korea is well known for its personality politics – Korea's presidency is institutionally strong and has substantial leverage and power in mobilizing the National Assembly and other civil society groups during the president's five-year tenure (Robertson 2006, 10). Shin (2015, 242) argued that Korea's political leadership always constituted the key motivator behind the country's foreign policymaking. The 1997 Asian financial crisis provided critical momentum for Korea's regionalist diplomacy. To date,

⁶ Interview with Professor Moon Chung-in, former chairman of Korea's Presidential Committee for the Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative (December 4, 2015).

Korea's regionalist proposals included Kim Dae-jung's ASEAN Plus Three (APT), Roh Moo-hyun's "Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative" (NACI), Lee Myung-bak's "New Asian Diplomacy," and Park Geun-hye's "Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative" (NAPCI). Among all varying regionalist visions, Korea has maintained a consistently positive diplomatic activism in furthering China-Japan-Korea trilateralism. The construction of the China-Japan-Korea triangle always has been listed as a critical goal of Korea's diplomatic agenda.

Dating back to the 1990s, Kim Dae-jung was well known for his diplomatic activism in the APT. President Kim, together with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, was regarded as a supporter of East Asian regionalism led by East Asians. The Kim Dae-jung government (1998-2003) made two major contributions to the evolution of trilateralism. First, realizing the ineffectiveness of the IMF and APEC in helping to resolve the Asian financial crisis, the Kim Dae-jung government turned to the burgeoning APT mechanism and played a key role in institutionalizing the APT framework. During the Second APT Summit in Hanoi in 1998, Kim Dae-jung proposed the idea of creating a Track II "East Asian Vision Group (EAVG)." Second, Kim Dae-jung was the initiator of the China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit. Early in November 1998, Korean Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil told journalists at a Japan-Korea Cabinet Member Meeting in Kagoshima that he suggested to Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo to hold a summit meeting among China, Japan and Korea on the occasion of the APT Hanoi Summit. However, later during the APT Hanoi Summit, Kim Dae-jung and Obuchi Keizo's joint proposal was rejected by Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji (*Asahi Shimbun* 1999).⁷ It was on the occasion of the Third APT Summit in 1999 that Zhu Rongji responded to Obuchi and Kim's proposal positively, so that the first Trilateral Summit was convened in the informal format of a breakfast meeting.

Korea's interests in the China-Japan-Korea triangle reached a peak during the Roh Moo-hyun government. Since its inauguration in February 2003, Korea's regional policy was shifted to the "Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiatives" (NACI). President Roh declared a "peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia" as one of his key diplomatic goals and shared his vision that Korea should stand as a "Northeast Asian business hub" in the region. To do this, the Roh government made efforts to expand Korea's FTA network with other East Asian countries. In particular, he made strong suggestions to China and Japan in concluding a China-Japan-Korea trilateral FTA (CJK FTA) at an early stage (Ahn 2005, 9).⁸ In addi-

⁷ In the late 1990s, China was reluctant to hold the summit meeting due to concern that the meeting might touch upon political issues related to North Korea and Taiwan.

⁸ Interview with Professor Moon Chung-in, former Chairman of Korea's Presidential Committee

tion, he created the Presidential Committee on the NACI and appointed Professor Moon Chung-in to head the Committee. In 2004, Korea's GDP was ranked as the tenth largest in the world, although Sino-Japanese relations were at a low point due to Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. This domestic and regional context influenced Korea's intention to make a greater contribution and take more of a leadership role (Cha 2007). A policy report publicized by the Committee elaborated that Korea aimed at three roles in Northeast Asia: as a "bridging" state among regional powers, as a "hub" state for peace, finance, logistics and tourism, and as a "promoter" for regional cooperation (PCNACI 2004, 17-18). The NACI specifically put forward projects involving energy cooperation, transportation network cooperation, environmental cooperation and socio-cultural cooperation (Moon 2006, 237-238). In 2005, President Roh furthered his NACI concepts and disclosed a new strategy defining Korea as a "balancer" in Northeast Asia (Roh2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d). This new strategy saw Korea as a bridging nation between the continental power of China and the maritime power of Japan, as Roh himself pointed out in an ambitious way: "[T]he power equation in Northeast Asia will change depending on the choices Korea makes" (Roh 2005d). It may have been this overconfident stance and relatively aggressive use of diplomatic terminology that brought about a lot of the criticism of the NACI. Many argued that it was unrealistic and exaggerated Korea's position compared to the positions of the greater powers of China, Japan, and the United States. Nonetheless, although the NACI ceased to exist after Roh left office, it left behind a great and varied intellectual legacy of regional cooperation ideas for successors to draw upon.

Trilateralism comprised one key component of the NACI concept during Roh's presidency. Roh embraced a long-term vision of the countries of Northeast Asia pushing forward with reconciliation along the lines of what had been accomplished in Europe. He expected Japan and China to behave as Germany and France had done, with Korea playing the roles of mediator and cooperation promoter (Rozman 2007, 208). Noticing the dilemma of growing intra-regional economic interdependence among the three countries on one hand, and increasing political discord among the three on the other, the Roh government for the first time publicly addressed the need for strengthening trilateral policy coordination and institutionalizing the Trilateral Summit independent of the APT process (PCNACI 2004, 10-23). Early in the development of the Trilateral Summit – on the occasion of the APT in 2004 – President Roh proposed to his counterparts Koizumi Junichiro and Wen Jiabao the possibility of convening an independent

Trilateral Summit (Shin 2015, 239). He repeated this proposal on several occasions in the years following but was rejected by Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2007 and *Hankyoreh Online* 2007).⁹ His proposal was ultimately adopted in 2007 when Fukuda Yasuo took power in Japan, bringing with him his “pivot to Asia policy.” In fact, although President Lee Myung-bak was the one who attended the first independent Trilateral Summit in December 2008, the majority of diplomatic coordination was done during Roh’s presidency. Thus, the hosting of the independent Trilateral Summit in 2008 was the result of a growing need for a joint response to the global financial crisis, but was also largely attributable to Korea’s proactive policies under NACI concepts.

Korea’s regional policy experienced a big change during President Lee Myung-bak’s term (2008-2013). Lee restored the U.S.-led bilateral alliance as a foreign policy priority and put the ratification of the Korea-U.S. FTA as one of his most important goals during his tenure (Kang 2010c, 552). Starkly different from his predecessors, President Lee detached his regional policy from Northeast Asia and obtained a broader view that Korea should not limit its influence within Northeast Asia, but rather expand to East Asia and the world. Lee also exhibited great interest in accommodating international organizations in Korea. As a result, in 2012 the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) became the first international organization located in Korea (John 2014, 338). On the other hand, in East Asia, the Lee administration put forward his “New Asian Diplomacy” concept in 2009, proclaiming Korea’s intention to bypass China and Japan and seek a detour to ASEAN countries. It marked an ambitious bid to compete with China and Japan in the leadership of East Asian regionalism (Hundt 2011, 81).

Nonetheless, Korea’s diplomatic efforts toward trilateralism did not slow down. Indeed, the idea of institutionalizing trilateral cooperation was listed in the “100 promises of administration agendas” announced by the Lee administration in June 2011 (Lee 2011, 51).¹⁰ President Lee himself was the critical figure in the negotiation process for establishing the TCS. He was the first to propose establishing a permanent secretariat body in Seoul at the second independent Trilateral Summit in Beijing in 2009 (JMOFA 2009). His proposal was ultimately agreed upon and adopted at the third independent Trilateral Summit in Jeju in 2010. From Korea’s perspective, the establishment of the TCS in Seoul was not

⁹ Back in 2006, Korea and China took a softer approach toward North Korea at the six-party talks, whereas Japan maintained a hardline stance. During this summit meeting, because the group failed to include condemnations of Pyongyang’s abduction of Japanese citizens in its Joint Press Statement, Japan determined that regularizing the summit would be damaging to its interests.

¹⁰ “To facilitate pro-Asia diplomacy” was listed as the 85th national political agenda, along with 17 detailed sub-items. “To institutionalize the trilateral cooperation” was one of these sub-items.

merely one part of its East Asian diplomacy, but also one crucial component of the “Global Korea” strategy designed to attract more international organizations to Seoul (Lee 2012). The successful inauguration of the TCS in Seoul, instead of Beijing or Tokyo, demonstrated that Korea was at the equilibrium point within the China-Japan-Korea triangular power pattern. In the context of Sino-Japanese competition, Korea’s proposals were thought to have better “neutrality” and “credibility.” Partly for this reason, regarding the TCS budget and regulations, both the Chinese and Japanese governments finished domestic legal procedures quickly and did not suffer insurmountable domestic resistance.¹¹

During this period, Korea’s intellectual contribution took the form of productive chairmanship of the third Trilateral Summit in 2010, which was widely considered to have had highly fruitful outcomes. The three countries not only agreed on the establishment of the TCS as a permanent assisting body, but also adopted the Vision 2020 for trilateral cooperation. Despite Vision 2020 presenting a non-binding guideline or blueprint for future trilateral cooperation, it was the first intergovernmental agreement among the three countries to set up a timetable and delineate specific road maps for future cooperation. It pointed out four major dimensions of trilateral cooperation: institution building, economic cooperation, sustainable development and environmental protection, and socio-cultural exchange, and it also formulated key cooperation agendas in each of those four pillars.

All three countries underwent a transition of political leadership in 2012. In 2013, similar to her predecessors, President Park Geun-hye proposed her regionalist vision, the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). The NAPCI is based on the core concept of “trust politik,” which aims at confidence-building among various regional stakeholders in Northeast Asia (Park 2011). Nevertheless, according to the official interpretation from the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the NAPCI takes a “process-oriented” approach toward regional confidence-building but does not set up specific goals for cooperation (KMOFA 2015). The primary aim of the NAPCI lies in formalizing the “habit” for regional cooperation through existing intergovernmental mechanisms, multi-layered frameworks, and non-governmental networks. The NAPCI draws upon neo-functional beliefs in “spill-over” effect and suggests starting interstate cooperation from non-traditional security areas to high politics. Yet, the NAPCI remains in the

¹¹ The three countries signed the “Agreement on Establishing the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat” on December 16, 2010. A series of negotiations on the regulations and rules, as well as domestic legal procedures, were finished within the following half-year. On May 17, 2011, the three countries publicly released the news of the inauguration of the secretariat in September.

conceptualization stage and has not resonated sufficiently to be a well-structured national strategy with relatively clear goals, road maps and action plans (Choi 2013, 27). More skeptical voices point to Korea's capacity to convince and mobilize other regional countries to hail to the NAPCI, particularly given the passive stances of Washington and Tokyo.¹²

The China-Japan-Korea triangle makes up one of the most important pillars of the NAPCI concept. Despite the Korean government officially clarifying the difference between the two – trilateral cooperation focuses on technical and functional cooperation while the NAPCI aims at broader concepts of peace and security cooperation – it has also addressed the need for mutual complementation between the two regionalist visions (KMOFA 2015, 30). Among all existing mechanisms that the NAPCI has been envisioning to link with – APEC, APT, TCS, East Asian Summit, and ARF – the China-Japan-Korea triangle is the only Northeast Asia-based regional architecture. Trilateral cooperation is of far greater depth and breadth than vague NAPCI concepts, and ought to be the starting point for future steps of NAPCI policies.¹³ To mobilize and expand the functions of the TCS is also one of the easiest ways to make manifest NAPCI ideas (Park 2013, 47-48; Lee 2014). Early in 2012, when Park Geun-hye ran her presidential election campaign, she declared that “three political agendas would be the key issues in order to overcome the Asian paradox: grand reconciliation, construction of a responsible Northeast Asia, and the China-Japan-Korea troika cooperation” (Shin 2015, 245-246).¹⁴ For instance, the convening of the Top Regulators Meeting Plus (TRM+) on Nuclear Safety has been widely deemed as one of the major NAPCI outcomes. It was rooted in the original China-Japan-Korea trilateral-based TRM (2008-2013) and was elevated to TRM+ in 2014 with the participation of Mongolia, Russia, and the United States. The Korean government further proposed the establishment of a Northeast Asia Nuclear Safety Consultative Body in a meeting in October 2015 and tried to make it a sample of progress within NAPCI agendas (*Yonhap News* 2015c). The TRM+ has created a model of “membership spill-over” from the already-institutionalized trilateral cooperation to broader geographic coverage.

¹² Interview with Professor Moon Chung-in, former Chairman of Korea's Presidential Committee for the Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative (December 4, 2015).

¹³ Interview with Ambassador Shin Bong-kil, former Secretary-general of the TCS (November 19, 2015).

¹⁴ The speech was given by Park Geun-hye on the one-year anniversary ceremony of the TCS (October 15, 2012).

LIMITATIONS OF MIDDLE POWERS AND CONDITIONAL BRIDGING

Middle-power theories posit that the bridging policy and leadership-taking of middle powers have many limitations. Middle powers are expected to be able to take intellectual leadership and entrepreneurial leadership but have few opportunities in terms of structural leadership. This paper selects Korea's chairmanship of the postponed Trilateral Summit from 2013 through 2015 as a case study and puts forward the concept of 'conditional bridging' to capture Korea's approach. The concept has two implications: first, during the darkest times of the trilateral relationship, Korea fulfilled its chairmanship and acted as a responsible cooperation facilitator; and second, Korea simultaneously adopted a "wait-and-see" bridging strategy on issues of high politics.

As chair for trilateral cooperation, Korea's intellectual contributions and cooperation facilitation efforts did not fade at the working level. Table 2 summarizes Korea's proposals during this period. In particular, the Trilateral Cooperation Fund (TCF) continues to be one of the most meaningful ongoing signature events, with an aim to develop into a model of public-private partnership under the umbrella of trilateral cooperation. The fund aims to provide financial support for non-governmental projects and is expected to be launched with a certain amount of "seed money" invested by the three governments. The fund also will be open to voluntary contributions from other public and private sectors. The TCF concept was originally put forward by Korea's Foreign Ministry (*Yonhap News* 2013) and was, in principle, agreed upon at the Sixth Trilateral Summit in November 2015.¹⁵

¹⁵ Original concepts of the TCF and the Trilateral Cooperation Vision Group (TCVG) came from the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The rudimentary concept papers were further improved upon and completed by the TCS.

Table 2. Selected Ongoing Key Proposals of Cooperation by Korea

Proposals	Progress	Notes
Trilateral Cooperation Fund (TCF)	In progress	Agreed in principle at the Sixth Trilateral Summit
Trilateral Policy Consultation on Middle East Affairs	In progress	Agreed on at the Seventh Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting (March 2015) ¹⁶
Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic	Achieved	Proposed at the Sixth Trilateral Summit. The First Dialogue was convened in Seoul (April 2016)
Top Regulators Meeting on Nuclear Safety Plus (TRM+)	Achieved	Expanded from TRM to TRM+ with expanded membership
Trilateral Cooperation Vision Group (TCVG)	Pending	Example-learning from the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) for Track II cooperation ¹⁷
Northeast Asia Development Bank	Pending	Written in the Sixth Trilateral Summit Joint Declaration
Northeast Asian Nuclear Safety Consultative Body	Pending	Proposed by Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Byung-se at the Eighth TRM+
Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on Public Administration	Pending	Proposed by the Korean Ministry of Security and Public Administration to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs in October 2015 (<i>Yonhap News</i> 2015b)
Trilateral Employment and Labor Ministers Meeting	Pending	Proposed by the Korean Ministry of Employment and Labor in 2013

Source: Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the TCS website (summarized and edited by the author)

Nevertheless, when confronted with sensitive political issues, Korea's middle-power bridging diplomacy in the triangle turned out to be more flexible and cautious. Korea's fulfillment of the chairmanship towards the resumption of the Trilateral Summit was a good case in point.

First, Korea has not sought to step into Sino-Japanese disputes, but rather to offer a series of trilateral diplomatic arrangements that could incorporate the Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship into a minilateral diplomatic setting. President Roh's declaration of Korea as a "hub" of Northeast Asia and a mediator between China and Japan ended up receiving harsh domestic criticism and skepticism from neighboring countries (Rozman 2008, 96). Subsequent Korean governments have learned from Roh's experience and have realized it was not wise

¹⁶ See the Joint Press Release of the Seventh Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting. http://www.tcs-asia.org/dnb/board/view.php?board_name=2_1_1_news&view_id=325&page=2 Accessed at (December 2, 2015).

¹⁷ According to the rudimentary proposals of Korea's Foreign Ministry, the TCVG will be composed of 13 experts including four from each country and one from the TCS.

to overplay Korea's role. Korea has a rather clear understanding that a Sino-Japanese grand reconciliation was unlikely to come about in the foreseeable future. Whenever the atmosphere for holding Japan-Korea and China-Japan bilateral summits is not conducive, Korea's hosting of the Trilateral Summit offers a backup option that incurs less domestic resistance in all three countries. Despite trilateralism remaining subordinate to bilateral approaches in Northeast Asia, it still helps supplement the prevailing bilateralism by offering a kind of diplomatic buffering. Thus, Korea's hosting of the Sixth Trilateral Summit was not only a trilateral-based mechanism, but also an important policy tool to put Sino-Japanese relations back on track.

Second, Korea tended to take a "wait-and-see" approach – it wanted to make a contribution by bridging between China and Japan, while at the same time it did not want to touch upon sensitive issues or encourage uncomfortable feelings on either side. Korea was highly concerned about giving the wrong impression that it was taking sides. Yoshimatsu (2014, 182-183) shared a similar view that Korea did not intend to show leadership between the two great powers, instead adopting a check-and-accommodate strategy by clearly examining the intentions of China and Japan and firmly adhering to its position as a middle power. Many critics pointed out that although Korea continued its working-level coordination with Japan and China during 2013 and 2014, it did not convey strong political messages to China in order to convince China to come back to the table.¹⁸ During 2013 and 2014, Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping met at least three times in bilateral visits and at the APEC Summit. However, it seems that Park did not push China hard to set agendas for the Trilateral Summit. Korea's attitude changed after Xi had a courtesy meeting with Abe at the APEC Summit in Beijing in November 2014. Noticing the symbolic turnaround in the Sino-Japanese relationship, President Park reacted quickly and openly suggested resuming the Trilateral Summit during her attendance at the APT Summit in Myanmar only a few days after the APEC Summit (*Yonhap News* 2014). Since then, President Park increasingly has called for the resumption of the Trilateral Summit on several diplomatic occasions, including the Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting in March 2015 and during her visit to China to attend the upcoming 70th anniversary of the end of World War II (*Yonhap News* 2015a). Korea's shift from quiet diplomacy to acting enthusiastically by urging further cooperation efforts was interpreted as its "conditional" bridging role – it intended to bring trilateralism back on track whilst taking into account China and Japan's sense of comfortableness in order not to provoke

¹⁸ Interview with Ambassador Shin Bong-kil, formal Secretary-general of the TCS (November 19, 2015).

either side.

Trade negotiations are commonly regarded as embracing more than economic issues, but also act as an extension of high politics. Likewise, Korea's position in the China-Japan-Korea Trilateral FTA (CJKFTA) has shown elements of a "wait-and-see" passivism. Its stance on the CJKFTA remains very much unclear, or contentious. Given the increasingly close ties with China, Korea has put a greater priority on a China-Korea FTA (CKFTA) than the CJKFTA (Yoshimatsu 2015). Korea and Japan had negotiations on a Japan-Korea FTA (JKFTA), but several studies also have shown that a JKFTA would generally be more beneficial to Japan than to Korea (Madhur 2013). The JKFTA negotiation stagnated in 2004 due to both bilateral diplomatic disputes and domestic resistance in both countries from interest groups that would lose out in the free trade agreement (Ahn 2006). Korea's inertia in bilateral FTA negotiations with Japan has seemingly affected the CJKFTA negotiations as well. Going back to the Fifth Trilateral Summit in Beijing in May 2012, the Japanese media reported that Seoul was unwilling to include a specific timetable on starting the CJKFTA negotiations in the summit's joint declaration (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2012). Korea's high priority on a CKFTA and less willingness to participate in CJKFTA also has been due to its concern that Japan may become its biggest business rival in securing access to China's huge market.

CONCLUSION

Korea's rise to economic and cultural prominence has made research on Korea's middle-power policy a widely discussed topic. Today, scholars accept a wide and diverse range of countries into the "middle power" category in terms of the influence of those countries at sub-regional, regional or global levels. Current literature on Korea's gaining middle-power status diverges into two major schools. One school argues that Korea primarily plays the role of a "regional middle power" among the major stakeholders in Northeast Asia (Armstrong, Rozman and Kim 2006; Shim and Flamm 2012; Shim 2009; Chun 2014; Yoshihide and Lee 2014; Kim 2009; 2010). The other school of optimists regards Korea as a "middle power" that could exert influence not limited to within Northeast Asia but more broadly towards East Asia or the Asia-Pacific region. According to this view, Korea's "middle power" status would be comparable to other well-acknowledged worldwide middle-power countries such as Australia, Brazil and others (Robertson 2007; John 2014; Bridges 2014; Hundt 2011).

Among Korea's varying regionalist visions, this study focuses on the China-

Japan-Korea triangle and argues that Korea has proactively mobilized its diplomatic resources in enhancing the institutionalization of China-Japan-Korea trilateralism since the late 1990s. The Korean Peninsula, even prior to its division into North and South, has always been overshadowed by its two larger neighbors, to the extent that it has been treated at various times as a client state of China or Japan. However, in recent years, thanks to its rapid increase in economic power, Korea has strengthened its position within the triangle. Apart from being a more confident, independent actor, it has also displayed a growing potential to be a cooperation facilitator. Korea's diplomatic activism fits into the assumptions of middle-power theories that middle powers act as facilitators of cooperation, or "bridges." Korea's diplomatic interest in strengthening the China-Japan-Korea triangle has deep roots in historical, economic, and political perspectives. This triangle makes up Korea's four key diplomatic components: great-power diplomacy, neighboring diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and multilateral diplomacy. Korea also has an abiding need for the respect, understanding, and the support of its two neighboring powers for Korean unification (Rozman 2007). Social surveys indicate that Koreans, in general, have a higher recognition of being a "Northeast Asian citizen" than Chinese and Japanese, which is evidence of Korea's solid Northeast Asian identity (Whitney and Shambaugh 2008).

To conclude, Korea's exercise of middle-power diplomacy is vital for trilateralism. Korea has acted as the main idea generator and agenda-setter throughout the evolution of trilateralism, including the first trilateral breakfast summit in 1999, the first independent Trilateral Summit in 2008, and the establishment of the TCS in 2011. To be specific, Korea's middle-power diplomacy works in two ways: by making intellectual contributions and by conditional bridging. On one hand, Korea often assumed intellectual leadership in the triangle and consistently presented new plans, proposals and blueprints with regard to institution building. On the other hand, Korea's presence in the triangle has provided a safety valve for easing potential Sino-Japanese confrontations. The Sino-Japanese relationship reached a freezing point from 2012 to 2015, leading to the interruption of the Trilateral Summit. In this context, Korea's chairmanship and diplomatic efforts in resuming the Sixth Trilateral Summit in November 2015 seemingly created a new diplomatic pattern in which trilateralism could supplement bilateralism to help restore Sino-Japanese relations. Furthermore, Korea's bridging strategy has been conditional and flexible. When confronted with sensitive political issues, Korea has adopted a cautious "wait-and-see" strategy and firmly adhered to its position as a bridging middle power, rather than trying to assume the role of leading power. Korea has repeatedly shown that it did not wish to challenge the other regional great powers.

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