

## Rethinking Middle Power as Identity: The Case of South Korea

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[The middle power concept](#) has come a long way in academia despite debates on its definition. The concept's prominence can be seen as emerging from Australia and Canada, with influential practitioners and academics who have utilized and advanced the middle power concept (Pratt 1990, Evans 1995; Holmes 1996; Cooper 1997; Ping 2005). For instance, the former Foreign Minister of Australia, Gareth Evans promoted Australia as an active "middle power" in the early 1990s through major foreign policy efforts such as environmental protection in Antarctica, peacebuilding in Cambodia, and arms control that gained international recognition (Evans 1995; Cooper 1997). In fact, as an academic, Evans continues to identify Australia as a middle power not so much by its physical capacity, but by its "[diplomatic influence, credibility, and cooperative mindset](#)" that Australia is capable of making meaningful impact in areas such as regional security, free trade, climate action, and nuclear risk reduction in Asia-Pacific and the wider world.

On the other hand, a reasonable question has been raised about the concept's real-world application. Robertson and Carr (2023) argue that the middle power concept has become inseparable from certain behavioral assumptions that "[middle powers are International in focus, Multilateral in method, and Good Citizens in conduct](#)" even though it no longer reflects the actions or roles of countries such as Canada, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico today. Without capturing anything substantive about these medium-sized countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they contend, it is time for the concept to be "historicized."

### Middle power as a state's national identity

Yet, what should be done with a concept that even if analytically outdated and at times empirically mismatched, has become embedded in a state's national identity? In the case of South Korea, the middle power concept has been deeply internalized as its self-conception and foreign policy rhetoric. The middle power concept became officialized as part of South Korea's foreign policy position in 2013 under the Park Geun-hye administration. Then Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se described middle power diplomacy as a conscious move beyond economic rankings, casting South Korea as a "[regime designer, good coordinator, and bridge](#)," a country that shapes rather than merely accepts international order. And this continued during the Moon Jae-in administration as described by then Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa, South Korea was no longer a small nation caught between great powers. South Korea's global recognition via G20 membership, cultural influence, and successful hosting of major international events were achievements of a [strong middle power](#).

In fact, even prior to such officialization, South Korean government leaders routinely identified South Korea as a middle power and encouraged corresponding behaviors as both aspiration and responsibility. For example, President Kim Dae-jung invoked the [middle power identity](#) to position South Korea as a responsible contributor to global peace and development. Similarly, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Han Seung-soo

emphasized that as a middle power, South Korea could shift from being a policy-taker to a policy-maker through its United Nations membership. He argued that multilateral diplomacy, grounded in universal principles, provides middle powers greater influence to shape global norms through intellectual and moral leadership (Han Seung-soo 2007).

The Roh Moo-hyun administration continued this trajectory by articulating a vision for a more equitable global order that included middle powers as essential contributors to shared prosperity. In his [address at the 2005 UN General Assembly](#), President Roh stated that the new international order must be one of co-prosperity where “great powers, weak states, and middle powers” co-exist and benefit together. He called for the global eradication of poverty and discrimination, and warned against the resurgence of great power-centric thinking, urging powerful states to engage in self-reflection and restraint to uphold peace and shared values. Such vision was reiterated by then Minister Song Min-soon, who explained that Korea’s rise from war-torn devastation to a top ten economy, aided by UN and allied support placed it in a [unique position](#) to give back through peacekeeping. He highlighted that Korea’s historical experiences, geopolitical distance from major conflict zones, and cultural tolerance made it particularly well-suited for humanitarian engagement. For Minister Song, contributing to international peace and development was not only a moral duty, but a defining characteristic of Korea’s middle power identity.

Under President Lee Myung-bak, the middle power discourse was scaled up further especially in the lead up to hosting the G20 Seoul summit in 2010. The Lee administration portrayed South Korea as a [global agenda-setter](#), leveraging its developmental success and geopolitical location to mediate between major powers and shape global norms, especially on development and green growth. And in line with this approach, then Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan emphasized the need to strengthen South Korea’s [soft power diplomacy](#) as a middle power, that a country’s international influence depends not only on military or economic strength, but also on cultural appeal, national values, and global image.

### **South Korea as a Global Pivotal State?**

President Yoon Suk Yeol’s implementation of “Global Pivotal State” as South Korea’s key foreign policy position should be viewed as an extension of South Korea’s middle power identity. In his [2024 New Year address](#), President Yoon Suk Yeol declared that South Korea as a core democracy in Northeast Asia is now playing a leading role across security, economy, and culture from the Indo-Pacific to the Atlantic. He reaffirmed the government’s commitment to realizing the vision of a Global Pivotal State (GPS) that fulfills greater responsibility and contribution in the international community.

In outlining the Yoon administration’s [foreign policy direction for 2024](#), Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul presented the GPS vision as a forward looking strategy to elevate South Korea’s international role. That is, South Korea’s willingness to play a bigger role and contribute in a way that matches South Korea’s enhanced national capabilities rather than passively accepting geopolitical fate. The GPS vision was a means to bridge the gap between how South Korea is perceived by the international community and how it perceives itself, its evolving self-image as a proactive, capable, and norm-contributing actor.

Although the term “middle power” is largely absent from the GPS discourse, not only did the GPS vision retain many of South Korea’s middle power functions such as multilateral engagement, norm-shaping, and bridge-building, the middle power rhetoric continues to be part of its foreign policy discourse, most notably through [MIKTA](#), a “middle power consultative platform” described as one of the key vehicles for reaffirming South Korea’s steadfast commitment to global peace and prosperity. In addition, when it comes to encouraging South Korea to uphold its ethical standards aligned to its aspiration to GPS, the basis of who South Korea is still begins from South Korea’s middle power identity grounded in normative leadership (Republic of Korea 2023). And as stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the references of South Korea’s international and economic stature were not intended to link humanitarian assistance to South Korea’s strategic objectives, but rather to describe its [role as a middle power](#) in the international community. This demonstrates how South Korea’s identity as a middle power continues to inform and legitimize its evolving global role under the GPS vision.

### Identity before behavior

Robertson and Carr are correct in observing that the traditional behavioral assumptions attached to middle powers no longer universally applies. Indeed, not every action taken by a self-identified middle power like South Korea aligns with the conventional behavioral expectations. However, the most significant contribution of the middle power concept may lie in its role in state identity construction. For South Korea, “middle power” is not merely a label for past behaviors, but a progressive and evolving framework through which it redefines who it is and its role in the world. This ongoing process of self-characterization, driven by both aspiration and a sense of responsibility reflects South Korea’s effort to become a more engaged and constructive member of the international community beyond narrow national interests. While the concept may remain analytically and empirically limited in some respect, it nonetheless can shape how states imagine, perform, and assert themselves in global affairs. Therefore, the study and analysis of what such a concept represents for these non-great, yet globally important actors remain essential, as does renewing the academic-practice nexus.

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