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[K-Diplomacy Inquiry Series 1]
Middle-Power Coalition Diplomacy:
Beyond Value and Norm-Based Approaches

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Introducing the *K-Diplomacy Inquiry Series*

The Lee Jae Myung administration aims to strengthen South Korea's capabilities in both diplomacy and security. This vision has been articulated in the administration's presidential campaign platform and in its address to the United Nations General Assembly, where South Korea was defined as a "Responsible Global Power." INSS provisionally refers to this foreign policy orientation as "K-Diplomacy," and has established the *K-Diplomacy Inquiry Series* to explore its practical directions and support efforts to realize the administration's national security vision.

This series examines, inter alia, great-power diplomacy grounded in pragmatic engagement and strategic autonomy; the expansion of middle-power solidarity; strategies toward the Global South; the redesign of geopolitical strategy beyond the Indo-Pacific framework; and new possibilities for soft-power diplomacy. Taking as its point of departure the concerns raised in Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, this issue examines the prospects of existing middle-power coalitions while seeking to move beyond mere emulation of existing models by proposing a new diplomatic framework grounded in South Korea's distinctive strategic assets.

Abstract

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Keywords

middle-power coalition, strategic assets, soft power, strategic partner, network diplomacy

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In his address at Davos in January 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney characterized the current international order as undergoing a structural "rupture"—a condition in which the foundational mechanisms of the existing system are breaking down. His argument is clear: the present crisis should not be understood as temporary instability or a transitional phase. Rather the norms, rules, and institutional frameworks that have long underpinned international politics are losing their capacity to generate compliance and predictability. Accordingly, middle powers can no longer formulate their diplomatic strategies on the assumption that the existing order remains intact.¹⁾

Carney's remarks also highlights the growing prevalence of hypocrisy and double standards in the international system, particularly since the advent of the second Trump administration. While countries such as Canada have benefited from the liberal international order, major powers have simultaneously claimed selective exemptions and applied international law inconsistently. In this context, Carney underscores that middle-power diplomacy must begin with a clear recognition of the uneven application of international norms.

1) Mark Carney, "Principled and Pragmatic: Canada's Path," Special Address at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2026, Davos, January 19, 2026, World Economic Forum (<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>).

This line of inquiry raises fundamental questions regarding the operational logic of traditional middle-power diplomacy. In the current international environment, norms and declaratory solidarity alone are insufficient to secure negotiating leverage or stability. The international landscape calls for redefining middle-power coalitions not as expressions of moral solidarity, but as "structures of substantive cooperation" grounded in the strategic assets and niche capabilities of participating states. This paper adopts this premise and examines how South Korea can design and expand such coalitions based on its own strategic assets.

Changes in Middle-Power Diplomacy: The Rupture of Order and Middle Powers' Selective Cooperation

The significance of Carney's remarks lies in the fact that the dynamics he identified are already evident in contemporary international practice. Middle powers no longer unconditionally support the policies of major-power allies solely on the basis of alliance commitments. Rather, they selectively calibrate the scope and intensity of cooperation according to legal standards, strategic considerations, domestic political constraints, and economic interests. A pertinent example is Spain's recent response to a U.S. request to utilize its military bases. When the United States sought access to the Rota and Moron bases in connection with military operations against Iran, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez declined, stating that "one illegal act cannot be countered with another illegal act."²⁾ Spain further prohibited aircraft involved in the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict from transiting its airspace.

2) Pedro Sánchez, "Institutional statement by the President of the Government of Spain concerning the recent international events," Palacio de la Moncloa, March 4, 2026 (<https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/intervenciones/Paginas/2026/20260304-official-statement-speech.aspx>).

As emphasized in Carney's Davos address, the central challenge for middle-power diplomacy is not a binary choice between alignment with major powers and isolation. Rather, it lies in the capacity to calibrate cooperation on a case-by-case basis and, where necessary, to leverage coalitions and shared standards to enhance bargaining power. This implies that middle-power coalitions must enable flexible coordination that reflects national legal standards and political judgment, even in times of crisis.

Limits of the Traditional Middle-Power Diplomacy Model

The traditional model of middle-power coalitions, grounded in the multilateral order, has come under increasing strain, particularly since the inauguration of the second Trump administration. Several factors account for this shift. First, norms are increasingly instrumentalized, eroding their legitimacy. Universal principles such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are selectively interpreted and deployed within the context of great-power competition, undermining their normative credibility. Second, the fragmentation of rules has narrowed the diplomatic maneuvering space. As the interlinkage between security and economic domains intensifies, geopolitical considerations increasingly permeate non-traditional areas such as environmental governance, development cooperation, and public health.³⁾ As a result, the scope for traditional "niche diplomacy" has contracted significantly. Third, structural constraints have intensified with the erosion of the unipolar order. As the U.S.-led system weakens, international politics is increasingly shaped by power competition rather than institutional cooperation, compelling middle powers to make more explicit strategic choices.⁴⁾

3) Sangbae Kim et al., *Middle-Power Diplomacy on Emerging Stages: A Complex Geopolitics Perspective* (Seoul: Sahoepyeongron Academy, 2020), pp. 12-36.

4) Tae-seo Cha, "The End of Middle-Power Diplomacy in the Post-Unipolar Era? The Sociology of Knowledge of Middle-Power Discourse and Shifts in South Korea's Grand Strategy Paradigm," *Institute for International Studies Working Paper*, No. 250

In this context, there is a growing need to redesign middle-power coalitions not as normative communities, but as consultative mechanisms for coordinating strategic interests. Such frameworks should be evaluated not only in terms of shared values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, but also in their capacity to address concrete challenges, including economic security. Key criteria include the ability to jointly respond to supply chain disruptions, coordinate in technological competition, and establish alternative systems for defense logistics, shipping, energy, and finance in times of crises. In essence, the focus of middle-power diplomacy is shifting from "who shares values" to "who can deliver substantive capabilities."

South Korea's Strategic Choices

1) Leveraging Substantive Assets Beyond the Traditional Middle-Power Model

In the current environment, effective cooperation increasingly depends on the ability to provide resources of tangible value. South Korea, with its advanced industrial base, technological capabilities, and manufacturing capacities alongside significant soft power, is well positioned to develop coalition models that move beyond traditional frameworks. The foremost instrument for expanding and substantiating middle-power coalitions, therefore, lies in structuring cooperation around its strategic assets to generate both incentives and momentum for participation.

Among South Korea's diplomatic assets, its industrial and technological strengths are particularly significant. South Korea occupies critical nodes in global supply chains and possesses the manufacturing capacity to translate innovation into production,

(September 27, 2023), pp. 1-29.

delivery, and maintenance. Strategic sectors such as shipbuilding, defense, and semiconductors are directly linked to maritime infrastructure, security cooperation, and supply chain resilience. These capabilities enable the formation of coalitions based on interdependence and substantive cooperation rather than symbolic alignment.

In parallel, soft power constitutes another core asset. Beyond the global appeal of Korean cultural content, South Korea offers forms of cooperation that foster social familiarity and institutional trust at relatively low political cost. This enhances both the acceptability and sustainability of cooperation based on cultural attractiveness, social goodwill, and confidence in its development experience. In this sense, industrial and technological assets serve as the “hardware” of coalition-building, while soft power functions as the “trust infrastructure” that sustains long-term cooperation.

Recent developments in summit diplomacy under the current administration reflect this approach. The Lee Jae Myung administration's "K-Diplomacy" is evolving as a multilayered network spanning both the West and the Global South, indicating a transition from bilateral expansion toward a more integrated and functionally networked diplomatic strategy.

2) Redesigning Middle-Power Coalition Platforms Such as MIKTA

A key practical task is to combine and institutionalize South Korea's assets through effective coalition platforms. MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkiye, and Australia) provides a useful foundation as a trans-regional consultative mechanism not confined to a specific regional bloc. MIKTA can coordinate common agendas and test the foundations of cooperation; as such, it could serve as a useful starting point for gauging the scalability of a middle-power coalition strategy.

That said, there is a need to expand and reform MIKTA to include countries with strategic assets and crisis-response capabilities relevant to the concrete challenges South Korea currently faces—supply chain resilience, technological cooperation, energy security, and digital governance. Potential partners include Brazil, the UAE, the Czech Republic, Poland, Canada, and Sweden. Brazil can serve as a strategic axis connecting the Global South, centered on critical minerals and food resources; the UAE can function as a Middle Eastern logistics and financial hub. The Czech Republic and Poland can serve as manufacturing and defense cooperation hubs within Europe, while Canada and Sweden can be positioned as high-trust cooperation pillars that combine advanced technological capacity and resources with norm- and standard-setting capabilities.

Rather than constructing a single, rigid framework, a more effective approach would be to develop a flexible, multilayered structure in which participation varies by issue area. Such a structure—which does not bind all countries at the same level, but allows for flexible configuration of cooperation units around the capacities needed on a case-by-case basis—can be expected to deliver practical results. For example, ROK-Canada-Sweden could focus on advanced technology and supply chains, while ROK-Poland-Czech Republic could emphasize maritime security and defense cooperation, and ROK-UAE could prioritize energy and finance. Such a configuration would enable a practical platform for organizing functional cooperation based on South Korea's industrial and technological strengths and soft power, going beyond a declaratory value-based coalition.

3) Systematizing the Strategic Partner Network

South Korea has already established an extensive network of strategic partnerships, encompassing over 35 countries, including

intra-regional cooperative bodies such as ASEAN. In particular, it has elevated relations with select countries to form a multilayered partnership structure. These include "comprehensive strategic partnerships" (Australia, Canada, Vietnam, Qatar, Denmark, etc.), a "special strategic partnership" (the United Arab Emirates), a "special comprehensive strategic partnership" (Indonesia), and "global strategic partnerships" (the United Kingdom and France). However, for this expanded and diverse network to function effectively, it is necessary to systematically differentiate and restructure the functions and intended roles of each partnership.

In other words, the key to expanding middle-power coalitions lies not in a shortage of relationships, but in their sophisticated arrangement and management. Whereas strategic partnership diplomacy has thus far evolved through the expansion of bilateral cooperative agendas, the task ahead is to interconnect and integrate these relationships into a cohesive network with genuine problem-solving capacity. Given that South Korea's partnerships are grounded in substantive interests—such as economic cooperation, supply chains, technology, defense, and development cooperation—restructuring them along functional lines could significantly enhance both practical effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

One approach is to classify strategic partnerships into functional categories, such as a "core cooperation axis" (encompassing supply chains, advanced technology, and defense), a "connectivity axis" (centered on regional access and resource networks), and a "normative axis" (focused on norms, standards, and institutional cooperation). This framework would provide a practical basis for combining partners in configurations tailored to specific policy objectives.

Moreover, such functional restructuring represents the starting point for transforming middle-power coalitions from a collection of bilateral relationships into a "networked cooperation structure" involving multiple countries. Ultimately, the effectiveness of middle-power diplomacy will depend not on the strength of individual relationships per se, but on how they are integrated to enhance crisis response capacity and negotiating leverage. By constructing a networked cooperation architecture centered on its strategic assets—one that connects a diverse set of partners and builds the capacity to respond effectively to supply chain, technological, and security challenges—South Korea can reposition itself not merely as a member of the middle-power community, but as a "Responsible Global Power" capable of substantively strengthening and expanding middle-power coalitions.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.