

RESEARCH BRIEF

Historic and Contemporary Middlepowerism for Harmony and Coexistence in Northeast Asia

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When President Moon Jae-in came to power in the Republic of Korea (ROK) in May 2017, the new administration announced that research on, and restoration of the Gaya legacy would be one of its priority projects (Yoon, 2019). The government (controversially) instructed academics to prioritize research on the ancient, almost mythological civilization, the foundations of which have been dated to almost 2,000 years ago. Gaya thrived for some 500 years at a time of geopolitical struggles on the Korean Peninsula alongside the much larger political entities of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae).

The Moon administration, and indeed the President himself, may have been motivated by domestic political desires to launch a joint peace and conciliation project between two regions of the country that have long been fierce rivals: the liberal North and South Jeolla provinces and the conservative North and South Gyeongsang provinces (Yoon, 2019). There is perhaps a great deal for the contemporary polity of the ROK to learn from a civilization with many interacting components (or “Gayas”), the nature of which has been summed up in the single word “coexistence,” allowing it to survive while the states of the Three Kingdoms competed for hegemony (Bae, 2019).

It is, however, in the survival and even thriving of this middle power civilization within a hostile international operating environment that contemporary Korean policymaking has perhaps the most to learn, rather than domestic political coexistence. South Korea’s recent history has been that of a smaller power surrounded by regional and global behemoths (often characterized among Koreans as a “shrimp among whales”). This self-perception has persisted even though the ROK, by many measurements, ranks among the top dozen or so powers in the world (Howe, 2017a). This research, therefore, looks to translate the half a millennium of Gaya success to South Korea’s role in the contemporary Northeast Asian operating environment.

Middlepowerism

Notions of what it is to be a middle power are essentially contested, as indeed are conceptualizations of measurements of power and their aggregation. Thus, a middle power can be described as one that has somewhat middling access to resources, pursues strategies appropriate to middlepowerism, or has a modest ability to impact the external operating

environment (Howe, 2017a). Middle powers lack “compulsory power,” the military resources to dominate others, or the economic resources to bribe countries into adopting policies that they would not otherwise pursue. Yet they differ from the small or “system ineffectual” states with little or no influence. They are, potentially, “system affecting states” that can have a significant impact within a narrower policy area, or in conjunction with others (vom Hau et al., 2012).

By these definitions, both the Gaya confederation and present-day South Korea can be considered middle powers, even if they have not always been referred to as such due to pre-existing terminology in the case of Gaya, and only a very recent adoption of middle power self-referencing in the ROK (Lee & Park, 2017). More importantly, however, this research will assess the extent to which Gaya pursued middle power-relevant policies to survive among the great powers of its time, and whether there are any lessons to be learned or parallels to be drawn with the situation in which South Korea finds itself.

Critiquing the dominant conceptual dichotomy of the early 1970s between great powers and the rest, Carsten Holbraad (1971) emphasized the importance of the mid-sized state and attempted to evaluate the function of certain states by observing physical capacities related to economy, military, and population—defining states that are situated between great powers and weak states as middle powers. Laura Neack (1992) further categorized middle power in accordance with measurements of power resources. However, these structural perspectives can be criticized for being too rigid to observe the constant changes through which states go in the international system (Howe & Park, 2019).

Instead, the behavioral studies of “middlepowermanship,” focusing on policy initiation and advocacy in the areas of peace and multilateralism (Holmes, 1970; Cooper et al., 1993), are seen as more relevant to this research. From a policy perspective, middle power states have significantly been defined by their internationalism (Rudderham, 2008). Status as a middle power is conferred in accordance with behavior rather than size. Here too, as will be developed further below, Gaya represented an early but clear example of middle power behavior. In terms of the traits and behavior of agents, middle powers are considered neither strong nor weak in international relations. Middle-power diplomacy aims to secure

diplomatic autonomy and increase leverage over great powers through coalitions and network building. Gaya successfully managed these agendas for centuries, and the ROK now aspires to similar roles and international policy platforms.

Gaya: Peaceful Coexistence, Survival, and Flourishing

By around 300 BCE, the Iron Age, introduced from mainland China, had spread throughout the Korean Peninsula. The development of solid iron tools facilitated social differentiation and the formation of competing polities. In the first century BCE, in what has become known as the Three Han (*Samhan*) Period, the Byeonhan, Jinhan, and Mahan confederacies emerged in the central and southern regions of the Korean Peninsula. The Samhan confederacies eventually merged and developed into the Gaya, Silla, and Baekje kingdoms, respectively ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Busan). The name “Samhan” also sometimes refers to the Three Kingdoms period of Korea (c.57 BCE–668 CE), with the three polities referenced in this instance being Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. It will be noted, however, that despite the polity continuing to prosper for most of this latter extended period, Gaya is left out of the terminology due to its diminutive size. It is important, therefore, to assess how this shrimp was able not only to survive but also to flourish when surrounded by such comparative whales.

The traditional period used by historians for Gaya chronology is 42–562 CE, with some of the city-states of Byeonhan evolving into the Gaya confederacy in the 3rd century CE. This corresponded with the replacement of the previous elite in some principalities (including Daegaya) by elements from the Buyeo kingdom, who brought a more militaristic ideology and style of rule (Shin, 2000). Between 391 and 412 CE, Gaya came under pressure from Goguryeo, with a major invasion in 400 CE severely damaging the Gaya confederacy, centered around Geumgwan Gaya in the lower reaches of the Nakdong River. Later, during the sixth century, Silla began to actively expand its territory, eventually conquering Geumgwan Gaya in 532 CE. Daegaya was conquered in 562 CE as punishment for assisting Baekje in a war against Silla, causing Gaya to vanish from history ([Plaque with

background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae). In this brief history, we can see some of the reasons for Gaya's flourishing, but also the seeds of its demise.

The first, and perhaps most important lesson to be learned from Gaya, is the value of coexistence, with active cooperative existence built and maintained between the different communities and polities of the federation, and in their relations with external entities (Yoon et al., 2019). Although no strangers to conflict, and indeed coexistence eventually came to an end through forced consolidation, much of Gaya's flourishing can be attributed to the primacy of this value in inter-polity relations (Yoon et al., 2019).

Although other states in East Asia at that time typically competed with each other to develop into ancient kingdoms with centralized systems of political power, the members of the Gaya confederacy maintained their own independent and equal sovereignty and established a shared culture through active exchange. ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Goryeong).

Even at the height of its power, Garaguk (Dae Gaya) did not consistently attempt to subjugate and absorb surrounding polities (once resistance from Ara Gaya had been encountered), preferring instead to allow the "greatest international market of the time" to flourish (Yoon et al., 2019; Daegaya, 2013).

Gaya burial groups have been used as evidence of multiple cultures living together in harmony (Yoon et al., 2019). The multiculturalism of Gaya has been revealed in human remains and artifacts demonstrating immigration, assimilation, and cross-fertilization of ideas from Japan, the frigid northern latitudes of Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, as well as other parts of the Korean Peninsula (Yoon et al., 2019). Even the Gaya creation myth extends to the incorporation of outsiders, with King Suro descending from heaven, and his queen, Heo Hwang-ok crossing wild seas to join him, purportedly from the Ayodhya nation in India ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Janggun; Daegaya, 2013).

In terms of external relations, there is evidence of extensive trade between Gaya and foreign partners, both near neighbors and further abroad, unearthed through archeological investigations in Korea and overseas. These include ornaments, utensils, armor,

and weapons, indicating active exchange between the various polities of Gaya and Baekje, Silla, Goguryeo, the Wa of the Japanese archipelago, Okinawa, multiple polities in China, the northern steppe communities, and even as far away as South, Central, and Western Asia ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daegaya; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Bokcheon; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae; Yoon et al., 2019). Much of this international trade was conducted along maritime routes. Hence this leads to the second takeaway from the study of Gaya—the importance of shipbuilding.

The people of Gaya, especially those living in polities with extensive coastal and river frontage, were aware of the importance and potential of maritime resources. The importance of boats to the people of Gaya is reflected in their prevalence in the unique object-shaped pottery of the society (Yoon et al., 2019). Although extensive international networks were created and maintained by polities of the Gaya federation, over land and sea, "maritime trade was particularly brisk, as Gaya travelled to Kyushu, Japan through Tsushima Island; to Dongye via the East Sea; and to Nangnang Commandery and Mahan (later Baekje) via the South Sea and West Sea" ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae). The dynamic marine trade also contributed to diplomatic relations, exchanges, and negotiations ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daegaya). Gaya's rise was based on maritime resources (Yoon et al., 2019). So too, however, was Gaya's eventual decline precipitated by the loss of its advantages in maritime trade with China, the west and south coasts, and Japan ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daeseong).

The active nature of Gaya's maritime interaction with other societies and regions of the world has further been credited with contributing to the federation's diversity and sophistication (Yoon et al., 2019). At its height, the Gaya civilization was significantly more advanced in numerous fields than the larger contemporary polities on the Korean Peninsula and further afield, and it developed some of the finest cultures of the Iron Age ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daeseong). Indeed, it has been claimed that the most

powerful Gaya polity, Daegaya, developed into an ancient kingdom comparable to the three kingdoms of Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje, and thus we should talk in terms of the “Four Kingdom Period” ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daegaya). A third lesson to be learned from Gaya, therefore, is the importance of remaining at the cutting edge of innovations, whether social, scientific, agrarian, or military.

Due to their extensive international interaction, polities in the Gaya region were the conduit through which social advances such as rice farming, literacy, horse fittings, equipment and armor, and Buddhism filtered through into the Korean Peninsula ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daeseong; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daegaya; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daegu). Gaya was also a source of advances, however, especially in the fields of music, pottery, ornamentation and accessories, and most importantly, iron tools, weapons, and armor.

So important were the musical developments of Gaya, that “tune” has been ranked alongside “iron” in the special exhibitions and publications, capturing the essence of the society. The gayageum, Gaya’s iconic string instrument, produced captivating harmonies, and the musician Uruk composed 12 tunes for it upon the command of King Gasil aimed at promoting Gayan harmony (Bae, 2019; Yoon et al., 2019). Gaya pottery was fired at high temperatures, making it very hard and less absorbent than that produced by neighboring polities, and it had a strong influence on the development of Japanese Sueki ware of the Kofun period ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae). Characterized by smooth and curvaceous lines, Gaya pottery also held aesthetic appeal to neighboring societies (Daegaya, 2013). Gaya adornments also found an appreciative audience abroad, with gold and silver earrings and bracelets replacing those made from jade and glass beads around the mid-fifth century ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae). Daegaya earrings, for instance, have been discovered in large quantities in Japan (Daegaya, 2013).

Meanwhile, due to the abundance of iron and excellent forging techniques, Gaya people were able to manufacture a variety of iron implements that

enabled them to maximize their agricultural efficiency and productivity but were also valuable commodities used to sustain brisk trade with neighboring states ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae). In fact, there is evidence of a lively foreign trade being carried out using iron as a vehicle ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Bokcheon). Gaya’s abundance of iron and diverse iron products, including improvements on tools, weapons, armor, and horse equipment previously imported, allowed them to acquire rare and unique artifacts from neighboring countries ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daeseong). Iron facilitated and sustained Gaya’s rise, but also ultimately contributed to its demise at the hands of avaricious neighbors. Iron was, in fact, so precious that flattened iron ingots were even used as currency ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae).

Hence, according to Yoon et al. (2019), the reason that Gaya was able to maintain its existence over approximately 520 years was power located in its culture and, more importantly, in its iron. “Iron was the foundation of Gaya’s growth, and the driving force for the change and development of the society” ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae). Gaya was able to develop advanced forms of swords, spears, and arrows that were quite sophisticated in terms of their capacity to kill or wound, as well as their degree of penetration, whereas most of the suits of advanced iron armor that have been discovered thus far in Korea have been found in Gaya (Yoon et al., 2019; [Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Gimhae).

Ultimately, the end for Gaya came about in part as noted as a result of the decline of the maritime polities led by Geumgwan Gaya, and their naval advantages ([Plaque with background information about Gaya]. (n.d.). Daeseong), in part because of the diffusion of iron weapon technology and the covetousness of neighbors, but also as a result of the characteristics which had actually made the federation resilient—diffuse and autonomous power centers coexisting rather than a single unified state, and good relations with neighboring great powers (Yoon et al., 2019). Without unity, larger neighbors were able to pick off the Gaya polities, despite their initial technological and civilizational advances.

As noted above, Geumgwan Gaya was first invaded and heavily damaged by Goguryeo and then conquered and absorbed by Silla. Meanwhile, Daegaya, in particular, had a very close relationship with Baekje, which meant that when the latter was overrun, it also meant the end for the junior partner, which was the last and strongest of the Gaya polities (Daegaya, 2013). Ultimately, it was the inability of Gaya polities to remain neutral in the great power machinations on the Korean Peninsula that led to the end of the federation—forced to choose the wrong, losing side, and Gaya was punished accordingly (Daegaya, 2013).

South Korean Middle Power Peace Aspirations

The concept of “middle power” has been prominent in South Korea’s diplomatic narrative, used by successive governments as a framework for their foreign policy vision and strategy (Robertson, 2007). In seeking to present itself as a newly advanced country among the neighboring strong powers in the region, South Korea needed to develop new concepts to articulate its foreign policy posture and legitimize a more proactive diplomatic role. In this vein, successive administrations in the ROK have variously described its diplomatic character as that of a “balancer,” a “hub,” or indeed a “middle power.”

The Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) government’s middle-power aspiration was expressed in the Northeast Asian Initiative, which projected South Korea’s pivotal role as a balancer or hub in the region to facilitate regional cooperation in the realms of economy and security (Cheong, 2008). It was primarily, however, under the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013) that South Korea’s self-identification as a middle power took a more explicit form (Teo, 2018). Under the overarching slogan of “Global Korea,” the concept of middle power was used to support the aspiration to increase the country’s international influence by enhancing its networking capacity and convening power (Green, 2017). The government emphasized the functional aspect of middle-power diplomacy to legitimize South Korea’s role as a convener, conciliator, and proactive agenda-setter in international negotiations and multilateral platforms such as the 2010 G20 Seoul Summit, the High Level Forum on

Aid Effectiveness in 2011, and the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012 (Howe & Park, 2019).

During the Lee administration, South Korea’s middle-power identity relied mainly upon its economic strength as reflective of its unique socioeconomic development experience (Teo, 2018). In particular, Lee’s “niche diplomacy” focused on issues such as international development cooperation and the environment, known as “green growth promotion.” It sought to associate its middle power role as a bridge between developed and developing countries based on South Korea’s development experience, technological advancement, and growing economic influence. This strategy matched well with the traditional middle-power diplomatic focus on niche areas related to the normative agendas of low politics, such as human rights, international development, and the environment (Cooper, 1997). The Lee administration’s focus on global, non-security issues also enabled its middle-power diplomacy to avoid any significant distancing of South Korea from the United States.

The Park Guen-hye Administration (2014–2016) was more reluctant to apply the middle-power nomenclature to its diplomatic posture due to fear of provoking apprehension or misunderstanding in the United States and China. However, even though the use of middle-power language started to diminish early in Park’s term, nevertheless, related policies were still pursued, such as the establishment of the middle power grouping of MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia), and the promotion of the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (Lee & Park, 2017). Among the public and academics in Korea and abroad, the terminology has also been used to describe South Korea’s increasingly “middle” position between China and the United States. Examples included South Korea’s accession to the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in March 2015, and President Park’s attendance at the 70th anniversary of the end of Second World War in Beijing in September of the same year, both of which raised concerns about the future direction of the US-ROK alliance (Kim & Cha, 2016).

The Moon administration has not directly identified its diplomatic character as that of a “middle power,” but if we consider the Moon government’s “one-hundred major policy goals,” which included its foreign policy goals, the overarching themes of the administration include “responsibility,” “multilateralism,” and

“values” (Republic of Korea Government, 2017). “Responsibility” in this context means that South Korea will fulfill its duties to foster peace and prosperity in the region, which, it can be argued, is one of the characteristics of a “middle power” in the international community. In this regard, although the Moon administration has not explicitly branded itself as a middle power, its de facto foreign policy strategy remains deeply wedded to middle power diplomacy.

New policy initiatives included the aspirational “Northeast Asia Plus Community” (NEAPC) responsibility project. The presidential transition committee on foreign policy and national security had prepared a report on NEAPC, which contained three components: a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Platform, a New Northern Policy, and a New Southern Policy (Lee, 2019). The ambitious aim was to build a sustainable regional system of cooperation with the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), MIKTA, India, and Northeast Asian states (Voloshchak, 2019).

Thus, despite ongoing internal disharmony, division, and regional competition, it seems that South Korea is aware of the need to pursue policies conducive to peaceful coexistence with neighbors in both Northeast and Southeast Asia, as well as further abroad. These relations have been prioritized at the high political level of security but even more so at the low political level of economic and social engagement, with high levels of intra-regional trade, investment, and tourism. Furthermore, in terms of maritime capacity, in May 2021, South Korea regained the top spot in global orders for new ships, beating out two of the surrounding whales, China and Japan (Yonhap, 2021).

The phenomenon of the Korean wave (Hallyu), including its musical K-pop component that has been actively promoted by Seoul since the Kim Dae-jung Administration (1998-2003), shows the ongoing middle power emphasis on cultural leadership, which is also related to the policies on public diplomacy pursued by successive administrations. Seoul views public diplomacy as a way to provide information on South Korea and its activities and help create a positive image of the country and its people. In 2011, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed its first Ambassador for Public Diplomacy, making it one of the three pillars of foreign policy (along with political and economic affairs), and in January 2012, it established the Public Diplomacy Division in the Cultural Affairs Bureau.

In August 2016, the Act on Public Diplomacy, which had passed the National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee in November 2015, came into effect.

Throughout its existence, the ROK has placed an emphasis on remaining at the cutting edge of scientific knowledge. Immediately after the end of the Korean War, despite financial limitations, the ROK government initiated a “national campaign for literacy,” contributing to an increase in the adult literacy rate from 22% in 1945 to approximately 80% in 1960 (Pillay, 2010). Since the 1960s, the government has focused on providing an education system based on the needs of human resources (Pillay, 2010). The focus of the government’s educational plan has moved from primary to secondary education and finally to the tertiary level, according to its economic advancement (Lee, 1997). Consequently, South Korea has achieved the greatest increase in human capital stock, with the most spent on education, and the most educated workforce in the world (Howe 2017b). At 4.64% of GDP, South Korea spends more on research and development than any country other than Israel, another middle power looking to survive in a hostile operating environment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021).

The semiconductor industry is the contemporary equivalent of iron as the foundation for technological advancement and the core ingredient of practical manifestations of advances in both the civilian and military fields. As pointed out by President Moon, South Korea has steadfastly ranked No.1 globally in terms of the memory semiconductor market share for the past 20 years (Moon, 2021). Although, when compared to the global behemoths of the United States, China, and Russia, the ROK military capacity is relatively limited, it still ranks in the global top 10 for military expenditure at US\$36 billion/annum, with the world’s seventh largest army at 630,000 active personnel with an additional 2,900,000 personnel in the reserves, and the sixth largest air force, with up-to-date power-projection capabilities (Howe, 2020).

It would seem, from the above analysis, that the contemporary ROK has learned a great many of the lessons of historic Gaya in terms of navigating a path as a middle power shrimp among whales. All that remains, therefore, is for South Korea to avoid the pitfalls (if possible) that ultimately led to Gaya’s demise. Yet, internal harmony remains ever-elusive, and the Moon

Administration appears to have failed to bridge and perhaps has even exacerbated divides between the different regions and among socioeconomic groupings, especially with regard to housing policies (Kim, 2021).

At the same time, while being conscious of the likely disaster of siding completely with either of them, Seoul has been subject to tremendous political, economic, and even security pressures from the two regionally competing great whales. Things came to a head over the deployment in South Korea of the American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile defense system with its penetrating radar system and potentially to be used against not only North Korean weapons but also those of China. Hence, Kim and Cha (2016) have described the ROK's position as being between a "rock and a hard place."

This is not to imply that there is nothing that South Korea can do to avoid the same end that ultimately befell Gaya, but rather more creative thinking is required in terms of its middle power niche diplomacy, and more effort in terms of bridging internal divides as well as those between the two fraternal enemies on the Korean Peninsula.

Whoever wins the Presidential election in March 2022, the next administration will face major ongoing domestic divides. Distributive injustice has spiraled since the transition to a neoliberal growth model in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Property prices seem to have completely escaped the control of policymakers. Both major political groupings have held power during this period of increasing social conflict, and the standard policies of the political right and left have done little to alleviate the situation. At the same time, the ROK has undergone a remarkable transformation from an ethnically homogenous entity to one with a foreign population topping 2.5 million in 2020, and accounting for almost 5% of the nation's total population of 51.64 million (Korean Immigration Center, 2020). So merely exhorting the people to unite in a national project for those of shared blood is no longer sufficient to get everybody pulling together.

Instead, governance in ROK needs to shift to a bottom-up focus where all are granted freedom from fear, want, and indignity. In practical terms, this could mean radical social welfare and distributive programs such as universal basic incomes, major construction of subsidized housing, and education programs focusing

on multiculturalism, human rights, and human security. It could also mean encouraging immigration to address Korea's demographic timebomb, maintain Korea's competitive edge, and promote multiculturalism as a boon rather than a threat.

At the international level, ROK needs to forge partnerships with other actors in the region and further afield that share similar interests as well as concerns regarding the increasingly dangerous behavior of the three global whales, the United States, China, and Russia. With the proliferation of international governance issues needing attention, there are golden opportunities for middle powers like Korea to do well while also doing good. But also, through partnerships addressing these issues, middle-ranked powers can overcome traditional distrust such as that between Korea and Japan, or Australia and Indonesia. It is noticeable how much better have been small and middle powers in dealing with the great challenges of COVID-19 (and other pandemics), climate change, and the humanitarian crisis than have been the three whales. Thus, ROK could contribute to a climate of disruptive innovation in international governance.

With policies such as these forging internal strength and unity, as well as external solidarity and relevance, the ROK could not only survive but also thrive for many years to come, and, potentially, avoid the fate of Gaya.

Declaration of Ownership

This report is my original work.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by my institution.

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