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## A Shrimp amongst Whales? Assessing South Korea's Regional-power Status

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## **A Shrimp amongst Whales? Assessing South Korea's Regional-power Status**

### **Abstract**

Recent developments in South Korea's foreign and security policies as well as major structural adjustments in the military alliance between the United States and South Korea indicate a new self-understanding on the part of South Korea in terms of playing a more assertive role in regional and even global affairs. Alongside its involvement in the so-called Six-Party Talks—a multinational framework to disarm a nuclear North Korea—South Korea's civil-military engagement in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon demonstrates that the government's foreign policy posture is not only focused on Northeast Asian affairs but is also intended to engage in other international security hot spots. However, although it has considerable material resources and capabilities—in neorealist terms constituting the power base of a state actor—South Korea is widely seen as a minor player in world politics. By means of a specific set of indicators—pretension, endowment, influence, recognition—this paper seeks to answer the question of whether South Korea is a regional power. The methodological approach used to evaluate its position will be based on analytical frameworks and typologies compiled from the literature on regional powers. Following the introduction of this approach, different concepts of the term regional power and the selection of the methodological instruments are presented. The subsequent section analyzes the selected set of indicators with regard to South Korea's potential status as a regional power. The concluding chapter evaluates the findings and raises further questions related to the regional-power concept.

Keywords: regional power, South Korea, foreign and security policy, intersubjective understanding

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Eine Krabbe unter Walen?**

#### **Eine Untersuchung zum Regionalmachtstatus Südkoreas**

Jüngere Entwicklungen in der Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik Südkoreas sowie grundlegende Anpassungen in der Militärallianz mit den USA deuten auf ein neues Selbstverständnis, eine bedeutendere Rolle in regionalen und globalen Politikfragen zu übernehmen. Neben der Beteiligung an den so genannten Sechs-Parteien-Gesprächen, in denen über die Denuklearisierung der koreanischen Halbinsel verhandelt wird, zeigen die zivil-militärischen Engagements im Irak, in Afghanistan, im Libanon und am Horn von Afrika, dass die südkoreanische Außenpolitik nicht nur regional auf Nordostasien ausgerichtet ist, sondern auch auf die „Hot Spots“ der internationalen Sicherheitspolitik zielt. Das Land verfügt zwar über beträchtliche materielle Ressourcen und militärische Fähigkeiten – aus neorealistischer Sicht die Machtgrundlage eines Akteurs –, wird jedoch weitestgehend als unerheblicher Akteur in der internationalen Politik wahrgenommen. Anhand ausgewählter Indikatoren – Anspruch, Ausstattung, Einfluss und Anerkennung – wird in diesem Beitrag untersucht, ob Südkorea eine Regionalmacht ist. Das methodische Vorgehen stützt sich auf einen analytischen Rahmen, welcher der Literatur zu Regional- und mittleren Mächten entnommen wurde. Zunächst wird diese Typologie vorgestellt, danach werden verschiedene Konzepte des Begriffes „Regionalmacht“ herausgearbeitet und die methodischen Instrumente ausgewählt. Im Folgenden werden die Indikatoren Südkoreas auf dessen vermeintlichen Regionalmachtstatus geprüft. Abschließend werden die Ergebnisse im Hinblick auf das eingeführte Konzept von Regionalmacht bewertet, was weitere Forschungsfragen aufwirft.

# A Shrimp amongst Whales? Assessing South Korea's Regional-power Status

David Shim

## Article Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Definitions and Understandings of Regional Power
- 3 South Korea—a Regional Power?
- 4 Conclusion

*[I]n the concert of powers in East Asia, South Korea will always play a minor role towards the populous countries China, Japan, USA and Russia.*

(Hilpert 2007: 15)<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The hostage crisis in Afghanistan involving the kidnapping of 23 citizens of the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) in July 2007 made the international public aware of the specific role played by the South Korean government in global security affairs. The circumstances of the release and the following controversial debate on Seoul's negotiations with the Taliban aside, the incident particularly demonstrated the government's involvement in international politics. As part of a multinational coalition, South Korean troops have been participating in

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<sup>1</sup> Author's translation. Original text: „[...] im Mächtetekonzert Ostasiens wird Südkorea gegenüber den bevölkerungsstärkeren Ländern China, Japan, USA und Russland immer nur eine Nebenrolle spielen“ (Hilpert 2007: 15).

<sup>2</sup> The author would like to thank Dirk Nabers, Jeffrey Robertson, Frank A. Stengel, Ryoma Sakaeda, and Martin Beck for helpful comments on earlier versions of the draft. The paper was mostly written before the 2008 change of government.

rebuilding the war-torn country under the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom. But South Korea is also playing a crucial (but not well-recognized) role in other international-security hot spots. In 2004 Seoul deployed 3,600 troops to Iraq to support the nation-building process, the third-biggest contingent after the United States of America and the United Kingdom. In Lebanon, South Korean troops are now part of the United Nations peacekeeping mission to monitor and secure the cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah forces, which staged a month-long war in May 2007. However, Seoul's foreign and security policies are not limited to the region of the Middle East; the country is also very present in another central issue concerning ongoing global and regional security affairs. As a member of the so-called Six-Party Talks in Northeast Asia, South Korea is working together with the United States, Japan, China and Russia to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear (weapons) program.<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, one might ask if these developments indicate Seoul's ambition to play a bigger and more distinguished role in regional and international relations. Is it reasonable to ask if Seoul's active engagement in current international and regional security politics might represent its wish to be regarded as a considerable (regional) power? As the introductory quote suggests, virtually nobody regards South Korea as anything but a middle power. It is often considered to be a shrimp among whales, with limited leeway to maneuver between other powerful regional players such as China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. The question to be examined here is the putative regional-power status of South Korea, because the country represents an interesting case in the debate on naming regional powers. For instance, one criteria for being a regional power is the material resources of a country, such as the size of its economy, military or population. In these realms, as will be shown later, South Korea is quite capable of keeping up with other assumed regional powers. So the main question this paper will ask is whether South Korea is a regional power or not, and if not, why.

The methodological approach used to evaluate South Korea's position will be based on the analytical frameworks and typologies compiled from the literature on regional powers. This approach will be introduced in the next section along with the different concepts of the term regional power and the selection of the methodological instruments. Subsequently, indicators of South Korean's putative status as a regional power will be analyzed. The concluding section will evaluate the findings and raise further research questions in reference to the regional-power concept.

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<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, it is hard to imagine South Korea not being involved in any North Korea-related issue, but, for instance, as the events of the so-called first nuclear crisis during the 1990 show, the Agreed Framework reached between the United States and North Korea was basically a product of direct bilateral negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang which left Seoul on the sidelines.

## 2 Definitions and Understandings of Regional Power

If one takes a brief look at the recent literature regarding the theory of regional powers, one can find a comprehensive collection of diverse definitions and concepts—regional great power, major regional power, great power, major power, secondary regional power and middle power, to list only some<sup>4</sup>—which overlap and intersect in terms of their meaning. It seems that only the notion of the superpower is not contested, otherwise there exists a rich pool of diverse offers.

When it comes to thinking of candidates who could be or actually are regional powers, the ongoing debate in various realms such as politics, the press and the scientific community generally cites the “usual suspects”: Brazil, China, India and South Africa.<sup>5</sup> Further aspirants are Iran, Mexico, Nigeria or Japan (cf. Rubin 2006; Huntington, 1999: 36; Buzan/Waever 2003: 34; Nolte 2007: 3). This list of potential regional powers can be extended quite arbitrarily,<sup>6</sup> something which indicates the difficulty of grasping the term conceptually and highlights the multitude of various definitions. Often, the conceptualization of the term lacks clear distinctive characteristics in relation to other similar classifications, so that several terms are applied for one and the same country.

While, for instance, Jonathan H. Ping (2005) classifies India as a middle power, Samuel Huntington elevates it to the category of major regional powers, which are in certain ways dominant in a region but not able to project their interests as globally as the only superpower, the United States (Huntington 1999: 36). In contrast, the US government sees the South Asian country as a potential great/world power, citing its democratic development and its political and economic freedom (White House 2002: 26). Japan may function as another example of the alternating usage of the term regional power. In the eyes of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003: 35) Japan represents a great power because of its hesitation to claim superpower status and its unbalanced power resources; Andrew F. Cooper et al. (1993: 19) consider it a middle power which demonstrates the tendency to seek multilateral solutions to international problems, to seek compromise in international disputes, and to practice good international citizenship. Interestingly, Ping (2005) does not even consider Japan a middle power. Another example of the mixing of the terms regional power and middle power is provided by Daniel Flemes (2007a, 2007b). While Flemes on the one hand treats India, Brazil, and South Africa as

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<sup>4</sup> Nolte counts additional definitions such as second-tier states, intermediate states and middle-tier states (Nolte 2007: 7).

<sup>5</sup> In Germany there is also an extensive debate on this topic, in which three of the biggest foreign policy institutes present their—not necessarily mutually exclusive—conceptions of the term, with the German Development Institute developing the notion of “anchor countries [Ankerländer]” (e.g. Stamm 2004), the German Institute of Global and Area Studies formulating “new regional powers [Neue regionale Führungsmächte]” (e.g. Nolte 2006), and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs promoting “new leading powers [Neue Führungsmächte]” (e.g. Husar et al. 2009).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Robert Pastor (1999: 25) includes Argentina, Iraq, Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan in addition to the above-mentioned countries.



so-called emerging middle powers (Flemes 2007a), he later treats the same states (2007a: 7)—and, elsewhere, South Africa (2007b)—as regional powers, thereby handling both classifications as interchangeable.

Oyvind Osterud (1992) formulates four conditions which characterize a state as a regional great power. According to these conditions, a state which is geographically part of a delineated region, is able to stand up against other states in the region, is highly influential in regional affairs, and, unlike to a middle power, might also be a great power on the world scale can be regarded as regional great power (Osterud 1992: 12). But, in reference to the latter condition, Flemes asserts “that the author [Osterud] is mixing the characteristics of regional powers and great powers and making the distinction between regional powers and middle powers more difficult” (Flemes 2007a: 10). The distinction of a middle power from a regional power seems to be particularly unclear (Nolte 2007: 10). Whereas Eduard Jordaan (2003) differentiates middle powers into traditional and emerging middle powers, Flemes (2007b) equates the latter term with regional powers. Martin Wight (1978) differentiates between the concepts of middle and regional power in terms of geographical boundaries and determines a local/regional and global level. While states can be regional powers within their geographical proximity, they are regarded as middle powers in terms of the global level (Wight, 1978: 63). Here, a conceptual difference between a middle power and a regional power is outlined, as the former term seems to refer to a state in the global hierarchy while the latter concept relates to a regional, more geographically limited context. However, Andrew Hurrell (2000: 1) states that the hitherto existing approaches and attempts to develop a theory of intermediate powers have led to a “dead-end.” He proposes to take a constructivist position on this topic, a position which omits putative objective geopolitical and geo-economic criteria and focuses more on the socially constitutive character of such a position.

Thus the question which could be raised is how exactly to identify a regional power. To distinguish between overlapping meanings, several scholars have attempted to define the term (e.g. Hurrell 2000; Nolte 2006, 2007; Ping 2005, Husar/Maihold 2009; Osterud 1992; Wight 1978; Jordaan 2003; Cooper et al. 1993; Cooper 1997). Many of these authors have developed analytical frameworks which provide indicators to determine potential regional powers and to assess current regional or middle powers. According to these criteria, the following characteristics matter:

- (1) *Delimitation* refers to the territorial, economic, cultural, or political context in which the potential regional power is embedded.
- (2) *Pretension* concerns the question of whether leadership claims are voiced by the actor, and if so, what these claims are.
- (3) *Endowment* refers to how the actor is equipped in predominantly material terms, for instance, military, economic, and natural resources and demographically or geographically.
- (4) *Normative behavior* queries how well international norms such as the promotion of peace and peaceful conflict resolution or human rights compliance are adhered to.

- (5) *Influence* refers to how the level of leverage or impact an actor has on important issues of regional/global concern.
- (6) *Integration* refers to what kinds of institutional structures the actor is embedded or how involved it is in regional or global institutions.
- (7) *Recognition* concerns the intersubjective character of interstate relations and asks how the actor's role as a regional power is noticed by others, or if it is even acknowledged.

The article will focus on four criteria selected from those above—pretension, endowment, influence, and recognition—because some points can be neglected or are overlapping in meaning, so that they can be summarized into the other indicators (which does not mean that the selected indicators are mutually exclusive). For instance, the delimitation of South Korea can be regarded as relatively uncontested, because the government sees itself (and is seen) as part (if not the heart of; cf. “Hub of (Northeast) Asia” in NSC 2004, MOFAT 2008) of a region what is widely known as (North) East Asia. Integration into or participation in international or regional organizations or in other institutional settings can be closely connected to the ability of a country to influence outcomes of regional concern. In the next section this four-point catalogue will be applied in order to scrutinize South Korea's possible role as a regional power.

### 3 South Korea—a Regional Power?

In the recent literature about South Korea's position in the international system, there seems to be an obvious unity in regarding the country as a middle power which is unlikely to lead or incapable of leading and more likely to be led (cf. Rozman 2007, 2006; Hilpert 2007; Robertson 2007; 2006; Kim/Lim 2007; Moon 2007). In addition to Hilpert (2007: 15; see also quotation above) an exemplary case is Robertson (2007: 156), who states, “Indeed, it's hard to think of South Korea as anything but a middle power.”<sup>7</sup> However, some indications—such as a conference held in 2003 in Washington by the Council on U.S.-Korean Security Studies, which was titled “Korea's Rise as a Regional Power” and focused, according to the participants, on Seoul's growing significance in international and regional affairs (Hwang 2004)—show that it is not unworldly to think of South Korea as a regional power. Another example of this viewpoint is provided by Zhiqun Zhu, who cites the country as a “regional power” (Zhu 2005). By applying the selected indicators, we will review Seoul's position in the regional context.

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<sup>7</sup> Although Robertson considers Seoul a traditional middle power, he concludes that South Korea “has outgrown the middle-power category” (Robertson 2007: 164).

### 3.1 Pretension

Inherent to the term regional power is the connotation of leadership and a geographical reference to a specific area. Thus, the first step in analyzing South Korea's standing is to examine if there are indications of a pretension to regional leadership and which area this is related to. The latter question can be answered easily. According to official documents of South Korean government bodies, Northeast Asia, which comprises the Korean Peninsula, China, Japan, Russia Far East, Mongolia and Taiwan, is the first and foremost region on which the foreign and security policies of the administration are focused (NSC 2004; MND 2006).

Since the inauguration of the Roh Moo-hyun government in 2003, one has been able to observe a cumulative change in Korea's foreign policy posture, which involves nothing less than a vision of building a new order in the Northeast Asian region. In a series of speeches in February and March 2005, President Roh outlined his vision of South Korea's new role in Northeast Asia (CWD 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d). He disclosed a new strategy, emphasizing the need for South Korea to act as a balancer which must take the lead in promoting peace and stability in the region. This meant establishing the country not only as a mediator or facilitator, qualities which are regarded as classical middle-power features (cf. Touval/Zartman 1985), but also as a "balancing factor" in Northeast Asia to prevent possible friction and conflict in the region (CWD 2005c). To this end, South Korea would play the main role in setting up a regional security structure to expand the current Six-Party Talks, which revolve around the North Korean nuclear program, into an institutionalized multilateral security mechanism (CWD 2007a). This strategy has also been emphasized by other key foreign policy actors in the government. For instance, the National Security Council (NSC), which assists the president in the formulation and execution of foreign and military policies, expressed in its National Security Strategy (NSC 2004) its aim to achieve peace and stability first on the Korean Peninsula and then, subsequently, to take the lead in realizing peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. The Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) also reiterated the importance of Seoul's possible role in Northeast Asia, with then defense minister Yoon Kwang-ung calling Korea a "power balancer" in the region (Jung 2005).

In his addresses at the Air Force and Military Academy in March 2005, President Roh underlined his aim to play a leading role in Northeast Asian politics and provided insight into his understanding of the strategic significance of South Korea when he declared, "the power equation in Northeast Asia will change depending on the choices we [South Korea] make" (CWD 2005d). While he stated that the situation in Northeast Asia still remained uncertain, he emphasized the need for a strong military to maintain peace and prosperity, not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in the region:

*[...] peace cannot be secured with words. It can only be maintained when backed up by power that is sufficient to punish the forces breaking the peace. [...] We have sufficient power to defend ourselves. We have nurtured mighty national armed forces that absolutely no one can challenge.*

*[...] Our armed forces are now intent on maintaining peace and prosperity not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in all of Northeast Asia. We will safeguard peace in the region as an important balancing factor in Northeast Asia.*

(CWD 2005c; 2005d)

The incidents between South Korea and Japan, which occurred in March 2005 and April 2006, serve as good examples of Seoul's new understanding and enforcement of its assertive foreign policy doctrine. The two bone of contention were the decades-old dispute regarding two rocky islets—in South Korea called "Dokdo" and in Japan "Takeshima"—located in the sea between the two countries and the conflict surrounding a Japanese textbook alleged of whitewashing Japanese crimes during Japan's colonial rule (1910–1945) in Korea. While Seoul has exercised de facto control over the islets since 1956, both South Korea and Japan claim the tiny islands as their part of territory (Choi 2005).

When the Japanese Shimane prefecture in March 2005 declared February 22 to be Takeshima Day and Japan's ambassador to South Korea stated that the islets belonged historically and legally to Japan, the South Korean government demonstrated an unusually drastic reaction. Seoul regarded Tokyo's claim to the islands as an attempt to justify its colonial rule and a denial of South Korea's sovereignty and independence. In a strongly worded statement from the South Korean president, Japan was warned that "there could be a hard diplomatic war [...] that may reduce exchanges in various sectors and cause economic difficulty." The statement further noted, "we do not have to worry much about it [...] we are determined to take the hardship on our shoulders if we really have to," demonstrating the firm resolve on the part of the Seoul government (Lee TJ 2005). To underline its stance Seoul sent four air force jets to intercept a Japanese light plane, which was flying towards the disputed islets (The Straits Times Interactive 2005). This firm reaction constituted a renunciation of the previous policy of so-called "quiet diplomacy" regarding Dokdo/Takeshima, displaying the shift in Seoul's foreign policy posture. Up until that point it had remained relatively silent regarding Japanese claims to the contentious islets in order to avoid making the islets an internationally recognized disputed area. "Quiet diplomacy" was intended to avoid attracting international interest to an issue which was not an issue in the eyes of the Korean government. In a later speech in 2006 President Roh abandoned the former policy approach, stating, "the matter of Dokdo can no longer be dealt with through quiet diplomacy" (CWD 2006). Showing his resolve and his increased self-assertiveness, he further predicted that

*[p]hysical provocations will be met with strong and firm responses. [...] We will muster every measure of our national strength and diplomatic resources until the day when the Japanese Government remedies these [islets-, Yasukuni shrine visits-, textbook-issues] wrongdoings. We will also undertake all other necessary measures. The nature of this matter is such that no compromise or surrender is possible, whatever the costs and sacrifices may be.*

(CWD 2006)

Another example which underscores this development is the incident that occurred one year later in April 2006, when Tokyo announced a plan to conduct a maritime survey near the controversial islands. Thereupon, then South Korean foreign minister Ban Ki-moon declared that the Korean government would take “stern measures” if Japan pushed ahead with the survey. In an unusual move, Seoul dispatched 18 gunboats from its coast guard to stop Japanese vessels, by force if necessary (The Straits Times Interactive 2006). A clash between Washington's major Asian allies was ultimately averted as Tokyo agreed to scrap the survey in return for Seoul delaying its plans to use Korean names for seabed features at an international ocean-mapping conference to be held in June that year (Choe 2006).

South Korea's pretension to play a greater role in the region can also be seen in other realms such as culture and the economy. The administration's efforts to promote the country as a “cultural leader” and to develop it into one of the world's top-five culture-industry nations (CWD 2003) hint at this direction. For instance, the policy of enhancing the attractiveness and success of Korean cultural products such as music, movies and dramas, also known as the “Korean wave,” point to the intent to establish a form of cultural leadership in the East Asian region.<sup>8</sup> Alongside its efforts to position itself as a cultural power, Korea also accents its economic prowess. The economic policy of the Roh administration is designed to make South Korea the regional center of Northeast Asian trade relations. In citing the country's special geographical location, the government claims that South Korea predestined to become the economic hub of the region. In stressing the geo-economic importance of the peninsula, Seoul aspires to connect its surrounding neighbors and contribute to the prosperity of the region (NSC 2004: 51).

### 3.2 Endowment

Among the candidates considered to be regional powers, such as Brazil, South Africa, India, China, Japan and Russia there seems to be one feature they all have in common—sheer size.<sup>9</sup> Be it the number of inhabitants (China, India), the size of the territory (Russia, Brazil), or the strength of the economy related to expenditures for the military or for technological research and development activities (Japan), brute material facts appear to determine the capacity to act in the international system and to reflect the position of a state in the global/regional hierarchy. Seen from this point of view, South Korea does not need to hide behind other assumed regional powers in terms of material capabilities.

According to the CIA Factbook (2007), in 2006 South Korea ranked eleventh worldwide in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) measured by purchasing power parity, accounting for

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<sup>8</sup> The Korean wave has proven to be particularly successful in (South) East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Thailand (Park 2006).

<sup>9</sup> However, in fact, it is the relative (larger) size of above-mentioned countries in comparison to their neighbors.

US\$1.2 trillion.<sup>10</sup> With approximately 50 million inhabitants, the country's GDP per capita was US\$24,500. A brief look into the regional trade statistics shows how deeply embedded South Korea's economy is in regional trade relations. According to data from the German Office for Foreign Trade (German Office for Foreign Trade 2007), China was the biggest export market for Korean goods, importing 21.3 percent (US\$70 billion) of Korea's total shipments in 2006, while Japan was South Korea's main supplier with a share of 16.8 percent (US\$52 billion) of its total imports. After the United States and China, Korea was Japan's third-biggest export destination (*ibid.*). In terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), South Korea was China's fourth-largest source, accounting for 6.2 percent (US\$4.3 billion) of China's total FDI. Sino-Korean trade was worth US\$134 billion. During a summit in April 2007 the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao and President Roh pledged to increase bilateral trade to US\$200 billion by 2012 and considered the feasibility of a free trade agreement (FTA) between their countries (Jin 2007).

With regard to military expenditures, South Korea has been positioned among the upper ranks of the aforementioned aspiring regional powers. In 2006 Seoul spent 2.7 percent of its GDP, or US\$32.4 billion on its armed forces, while China spent 3.8 percent, Brazil 2.6 percent, India 2.5 percent, South Africa 1.7 percent and Japan 0.8 percent, respectively, of their GDP (CIA 2007). In its annual publication assessing the military balance of states, the International Institute of Strategic Studies has reported that the Korean military directs 687,000 troops in peacetime, more than two and a half times the size of Japan's military with its 260,000 troops (IISS 2006: 273; 278). As part of a comprehensive military modernization strategy, dubbed "Defense Reform 2020," the government is currently enhancing its warfare and power-projection capabilities and plans to spend US\$178 billion over the next five years (MND 2006; Jin DW, 2007). As part of the modernization program a big jet-fighter procurement project was undertaken in 2001. This US\$4 billion FX next-generation-fighter program was more than just the purchase of 40 new fighters; according to John Larkin it meant that South Korea wanted to be a regional military power within the next two decades (Larkin 2001). The procurement of sophisticated reconnaissance and surveillance systems—such as airborne early-warning aircrafts, multipurpose satellites and unmanned patrol vehicles—as well as long-range strike forces including 20 additional war fighters points to the growing military capacity of the Korean Air Force to expand its operational range beyond the peninsula. The defense build-up is also reflected in other branches of the Korean military. President Roh has stated that the Korean navy should develop into an ocean-going force in order to contribute to peace in the world and on the Korean Peninsula (CWD 2007b). The launch of an Aegis-type destroyer in May 2007 was only the most recent step towards transforming the navy into a strategic mobile fleet, a process which encompasses the construction of further Aegis destroyers, submarines, anti-submarine aircraft and frigates to broaden the navy's functional scope (Jung 2007a). Moreover, the supply of military goods is increasingly covered by the

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<sup>10</sup> China came second with US\$10.1 trillion, Japan third with US\$4.2 trillion, India fourth with US\$4.1 trillion, Russia ninth with US\$1.7 trillion, and Brazil one notch before Korea with US\$1.6 trillion (CIA 2007).

domestic defense industry, reducing the country's reliance on foreign weapons technology. The US-based military journal *Defense News* has concluded that Korea is emerging as a global player in the defense industry (Jung 2007b).

But in other fields as well, South Korea is proving to be able to keep up with more obvious major powers. For instance, in its latest report on technological innovation capabilities in selected countries of East Asia, the European Commission (EC 2006) categorized South Korea, along with Japan, as the current "global leader" (ibid. 4) in specific high-technology industries. With investments of approximately 3 percent of its GDP into research and development activities, South Korea has outranked relevant science and technology players, for instance, the United States (2.68 percent), Germany (2.51 percent), and France (2.13), and has almost equaled Japan (3.13 percent) (MOST 2007).

Furthermore, South Korea is leading in various economic branches, such as the heavy industries (ships, cars, and steel), the petrochemical industry, and in electronics industry (semiconductors, wireless telecommunications equipment, computers). Within the global trade system it is keen to accelerate the conclusion of FTAs with the world's biggest and most important economies and regions. In April 2007 Seoul reached an FTA with Washington, something which has provided an opportunity for Korea's export-oriented economy to grow further. South Korea is currently holding preliminary talks, working-level discussions and negotiations with China, Japan, Canada, India, and Mexico over the potential conclusion of a bilateral free trade pact. It has already agreed to start FTA negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, and it has sealed agreements with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Chile, Singapore and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Study groups to examine FTAs with, among others, the Gulf Cooperation Council, South Africa and MERCOSUR have also been established (Ravenhill 2009: 232; *The Korea Times* 2009a/b/c). In March 2009 Seoul signed a tentative FTA with the European Union, which will create the world's second-largest free trade area after the NAFTA (*The Korea Times* 2009d). With regard to South Korean economic development in the future, a report by the investment bank Goldman Sachs has stated that Korea will have the world's second-highest per capita income by 2050, trailing only the United States. The report proposed adding Korea to the list of so-called BRIC states—which includes the typical regional-power candidates Brazil, Russia, India and China—and changing the acronym to BRICK (KBS Global 2007a; 2007b).

To summarize, in terms of material capabilities such as the military, the economy and science and technology resources, South Korea appears able to support its claim for a more considerable role in regional politics.

### 3.3 Influence

This section will review South Korea's influence in regional affairs with respect to processes of regional institutionalization and integration and issues of regional security. As previously mentioned, the focus of South Korean foreign policy activities is Northeast Asia. Hence, most of Seoul's attempts to advance regional cooperation have been centered on this region. Nevertheless, efforts towards a geographically broader approach concerning the promotion of regionalism in East Asia have also been undertaken. Indeed, Robertson concludes that, unlike Beijing or Tokyo, Seoul "did not accord strategic considerations great value in its approach to East Asian regionalism" and further elaborates that "it did not seek a leadership role" (Robertson 2006: 6), citing among other things the unstable political system, the missing leadership claim, and limited diplomatic resources as reasons. Yet how South Korea influenced the East Asian integration process by providing the ideational basis cannot be overlooked. An initiative of then president Kim Dae-jung provided a blueprint for expanding multilateral cooperation in depth and breadth among the East Asian nations. The advisory committees proposed by the president, the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) and East Asian Study Group (EASG), which were created in 1999 and 2000, formulated the vision statement of East Asian regionalism, recommending the founding of an annual summit meeting consisting of the so-called ASEAN+3 states (Lee 2006a).<sup>11</sup> Based on the EASG/EAVG reports, the inaugural East Asian Summit (EAS) was held in December 2005.

Moreover, Seoul also proved capable of playing a crucial role in fostering interregional cooperation. After contributing to the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989, it took the initiative in formulating the so-called Seoul APEC Declaration two years later. This declaration allowed China, Hong Kong and Taiwan to participate as economies (and not as states) in the organization. As the chair nation of the APEC forum in 2005, South Korea established the Anti-Corruption and Transparency Task Force and drew up a roadmap for implementing the so-called Bogor Declaration, intended to set up a free trade and investment area in the APEC region. In addition, the Korean administration announced the contribution of US\$2 million to the APEC Support Fund from 2007 to 2009 to promote capacity-building projects in developing countries (CWD 2007c).

In addition to its efforts to shape and coordinate multilateral activities in a broader geographical context, Seoul also emphasized its commitment to further institutionalization processes in the Northeast Asian region. Various initiatives and propositions, such as the Six-Party Talks, the North East Asian Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), the North East Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED), the North East Asian Cooperation Initiative (NACI), and the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), outline South Korea's resolve to establish

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<sup>11</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The so-called "Plus Three" states are China, Japan, and South Korea.



an institutionalized regional order with a focus on Northeast Asia. For instance, through the now defunct KEDO<sup>12</sup> Seoul took on the main burden (approximately US\$1.45 billion) in financing the building of two light-water reactors and delivering of 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually in return for the shutting down of North Korea's nuclear reactors and reprocessing facilities. With respect to the current framework to dismantle Pyongyang's nuclear program, Seoul has consistently advocated Washington's flexibility in the Six-Party Talks in order to induce the United States to take a more cooperative stance concerning direct US-North Korean contacts, financial sanctions and other pending issues.

A further example of how Seoul's diplomatic leverage has influenced regional security affairs is the policy of reconciliation and integration in relation to the North Korean state during the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003). The so-called "Sunshine Policy" aimed to break down the Cold War structure on the Korean Peninsula into a more cooperative mode of interaction. The first ever summit between South Korean president Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in June 2000 not only marked an unprecedented rapprochement between current and former wartime enemies, but also reflected the South Korean capacity to set the region's security agenda. In that year Kim Dae-jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his efforts to foster reconciliation and reunification between the two Koreas. As Koen De Ceuster observes, the presidency of Kim Dae-jung represented "a turning point in Korea's international positioning" because Dae-jung was able to gain support from outside powers for his Sunshine Policy (De Ceuster 2004: 9).<sup>13</sup> Not least, the atmospheric change in the region at that time was paving the way for a second unparalleled development, which occurred four months later. In October 2000 then-US secretary of state Madeleine Albright met with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in order to, among other things, prepare a possible visit by then president Bill Clinton. With respect to Seoul's policy, Rozman notes,

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

(Rozman 2007: 197-8, italics in original)

Besides its focus on founding regional security mechanisms, Seoul has also concentrated on other fields, such as the environment, to coordinate regional regime-building activities (Lee

<sup>12</sup> KEDO is an organization founded in 1995 to implement the Agreed Framework reached between the United States and North Korea in 1994 to freeze Pyongyang's nuclear program. The organization was abandoned in 2006 after years of suspension following the outbreak of the current dispute over North Korea's nuclear program in 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Despite a bribe of approximately US\$500 million, which was paid secretly by the South Korean firm Hyundai Asan to gain North Korea's consent to the summit, the diplomatic performance of Seoul can be said to remain notable because the regional consensus to engage with North Korea remains unaffected.

2006b; Yoon 2006). By concluding several environmental cooperation agreements with China, Japan, Mongolia, and Russia, as well as through multilateral intergovernmental meetings, Seoul has tried to take the lead in promoting environmental protection and collaboration. For instance, Seoul was crucial in establishing the region's first intergovernmental environmental initiative—the North East Asian Sub-regional Programme of Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC)—in 1993 and in the development of the Tripartite Environmental Ministers Meeting (TEMM) between China, Japan, and South Korea.

One can also discover the growing influence of South Korea in international governance, as its accession to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1996 and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) 2006 decision to increase Seoul's voting stakes in the financial organization have shown (Lee HS 2006). The upgrading of South Korea's quota—which is based among other things on the gross domestic product, foreign currency reserves and the openness of an economy—has ensured a bigger role in the decision-making processes of one of the world's most important financial institutions and reflects Seoul's growing standing and influence in international affairs. Moreover, in the run-up to the elections of then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's successor, Seoul was able to rally enough support to push its candidate with no objections from the crucial major powers of the UN Security Council (The Korea Times 2006).

### 3.4 Recognition

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

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

(Hurrell 2000: 3)

Thus, one might say that the term regional power is a social construction, because its meaning is based on the shared and intersubjective understanding of relevant actors. The question to ask here is therefore whether South Korea is accepted by other states as a power for regional leadership, as was stated, for instance, in its “regional balancer” policy (see Section 3.2).

On the one hand, one might say that South Korean leadership was, for instance, accepted by the country's surrounding neighbors when it dominated the Northeast Asian security agenda in 2000, with the inter-Korean summit at its peak. Seoul's policy of engaging with North Korea was fully acknowledged and supported by the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. Seoul seemed to be able to dominate the direction of the region's politics by pursuing its

strategy of bringing peace first to the Korean Peninsula and then, subsequently, to the North-east Asian region (Rozman 2006: 159).

Yet on the other hand, as Zhu (2007: 82) asserts, it is not clear if major powers in the region are prepared to concede a leading role in regional security affairs to Seoul. For instance, the Chinese government has declared that it will only support South Korea's plan to play the role of a balancing power if it contributes to peace and stability in the region, indicating Beijing's unease about an imminent power competition in the region (Jin/Yoon 2006; Sheen 2006: 15). The United States and Japan have also been hesitant about the balancer rationale, because they have feared that Seoul could distance itself from the security alliance with Washington and move closer to Beijing and because it is unclear whether South Korea intends to play a competing role as a regional leader. South Korea has made several attempts to explain to its traditional security ally its position that the balancer policy is only to be pursued on the basis of the Korea-US military alliance (Jin 2005).

The reactions to the current policy of balancing show that this concept has not been endorsed by other countries. Even at home the government's initiative has invited heavy criticism from the domestic opposition, which has cited the policy as impractical and has accused the administration of weakening the country's relationship with the United States. In 2005, the then chairwoman of the largest opposition party, Park Geun-hye, criticized this foreign policy agenda and hinted at the social dimension of leadership: "The role of a balancer is possible only when [...] other countries recognize us as a balancer. But China, Japan, Russia and even North Korea do not recognize us as a balancer" (Choe 2005). Zhu (2007: 82) suggests keeping in mind that the role Seoul is currently seeking (balancing policies and functioning as a bridge between countries) is also envisioned by other states. For instance, he refers to Japan, which has used similar rhetoric and has argued that it is most eligible to function as a bridge within the Asia-Pacific, connecting the Americas and Asia. Another example is the Australian government, which has itself offered to serve as a mediator between the United States and China. The agreement between Australia and China on an annual security meeting reached at the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in September is just another sign of Canberra's policy of acting as a balancer between Washington and Beijing (Buchsteiner 2007). Since Canberra has not received many negative responses to its intention to be a facilitator—either from inside or from outside—it seems that Australia is considered by other powers to be an honest broker. Zhu (2007: 82) cites trust as the key to successful mediation, concluding, "South Korea does not seem to enjoy the trust of Japan or the United States." This makes it therefore impossible for Seoul to play its intended role.

#### 4 Conclusion

The starting point of this analysis was the observation that, to date, the practice of naming regional powers has been concentrated on many candidates, but not on South Korea, although, as has been demonstrated, the country has the (predominantly material) capacity to keep up with other aspiring regional power in certain areas. This article has asked if it is reasonable to regard South Korea as a regional power. The findings present an ambivalent picture. Using the conceptual framework developed in the second section to examine regional powers, it has been demonstrated that Seoul is eager to play a more active and self-assertive role in Northeast Asian politics and is able to keep up with relevant actors on the regional and international level in terms of certain material capabilities. Further, it has been demonstrated that South Korea can maneuver between its supposedly more powerful neighbors and is capable of influencing regional affairs according to its interests. Yet because the concept of regional power also has a social dimension, which lies in achieving intersubjective understanding and acceptance from other actors, it is difficult to fully apply the term to the country under scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> At this stage the lack of acknowledgment from other peers therefore appears to be the main obstacle to regarding South Korea as a regional power. Furthermore, if one expands the analytical indicators used here (pretension, endowment, influence, and recognition) to include criteria such as normative behavior, which was also introduced in the second section of the paper, it can be asked whether South Korea fulfils these criteria completely. For instance, South Korea's foreign policy stance is to support and promote democracy, freedom, a market economy, international law, norms of peaceful conflict resolution, and human rights (e.g. MOFAT 2008). Yet it can be asked whether the country's so-called "resource diplomacy," intended to increase the country's energy security through relations with some Central Asian (for example, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan), Middle Eastern (for example, Saudi Arabia) and African (for example, Sudan) states might conflict with these norms. Further, given the above-mentioned incidents between South Korea and Japan and Seoul's reaction to these events ("no compromise or surrender is possible, whatever the costs and sacrifices may be," see above), it seems that it is difficult for the country to balance between (partly) domestic imperatives and self-formulated pretensions of good international citizenship. A simple answer to why Seoul might not represent a regional power—provided one thinks in purely material terms—could be that it does not possess the necessary demographic numbers or geographic size in relation to its neighbors. That is to say, if South Korea were located in the Middle East, in Africa, or even in Europe one could feel more inclined to speak of the country in terms of a regional power. However, the importance or relevance of answering the question of whether Seoul represents a regional power (or not) might actually lie in its implications for the future landscape in regional affairs. One key characteristic of

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<sup>14</sup> Some studies (e.g. Gerschewski/Hilpert 2009) on South Korea's foreign policy role neglect this intersubjective character of the concept and exclusively emphasize behavioral aspects.

Northeast Asian affairs is the convergence (of interests) of several actors, such as the nuclear-power states China, Russia, the United States and the de facto nuclear state North Korea, while Japan also has to be accounted for in this constellation. Within this concert of powers, the actors involved could potentially ask themselves how to handle an additional powerful player in regional politics in the future.

Some further research questions which could be raised regarding the notion of regional powers could concern broadening the scope of the state-centric concept. It could firstly be asked if only single states can be regional powers or if it is also possible to include other entities or actors relevant in current global politics, since one constituent of the notion of a regional power seems to be the capacity to act in an external direction. In this vein, the research focus could be shifted to nonstate actors (such as nongovernmental organizations or multinational corporations), multilateral and bilateral intergovernmental institutions (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Union of South American Nations or the Japan-US / Korea-US alliance), or supranational organizations (such as the European Union). It could be asked whether the European Union, with its integrated Common Foreign and Security Policy or its European Defence and Security Policy, also constitutes a "regional power"? If so, questions about certain actors such as Germany, France, or the United Kingdom within this complex could follow. Are they then regional powers within a regional-powers complex? It can be noted that European countries have been relatively neglected in the current debate on the naming of regional powers. Yet, it should also be noted that answers to these questions depend on the use of the terms/concepts "region" and "power" in a given context. In other words, the particular notions of "region" and "power" one wishes to apply guide the answers to these questions.

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