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MIDDLE POWER SYNERGY: COMPARING INDIA AND SOUTH KOREA'S APPROACHES TO REGIONAL ORDER

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1. INTRODUCTION

The middle power notion has resurfaced as one of the key analytical terms in modern international relations, especially when it comes to the discourse of regional order in the context of great power rivalry and systemic uncertainty. With an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world order, the role of middle powers as potential stabilizers, coalition builders, or norm entrepreneurs who can influence the dynamics of the region without the huge material capabilities is frequently discussed (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993; Acharya 2014). In this context, India and South Korea are often collectively referred to as the middle power in Asia which possesses common features such as the economic potential, diplomatic range and the sensitivity to the strategic autonomy. But even when it seems that they come together, their policies toward regional order still have significant differences, which are not well studied in comparative studies.

The literature on the foreign policies of India and South Korea has the tendency to focus on each nation individually, which can be bilateral relationships, strategic culture of a nation, or region-related plans, including India and the Indo-Pacific-related initiative or middle power diplomacy of South Korea (Lee 2016; Pant and Passi 2021). Although the bulk of this literature offers useful information, it seldom poses the question of whether middle powers also aim at implementing similar strategies of order-building in the region only because of their common status. Consequently, the hypothesis of the synergy of middle power is often assumed and not tested. This is especially true in studies that describe the relations between India and South Korea as being mainly viewed through the prism of strategic alliance, technological cooperation, or shared democratic ideals, without questioning what logics inform their respective views on how to approach regional order. This article disproves the belief that shared middle power status inevitably leads to strategic convergence. It counters that India and South Korea are two different templates of middle power behaviour that have developed under dissimilar threats perception, geo-political location and past experiences. Although the goals of both states are to maintain strategic autonomy and manage great power politics, they pursue them using strikingly different approaches. The policy of India towards regional order is selective leadership, security-driven engagement and issue-driven coalitions especially in the Indo-Pacific structure. South Korea, in contrast, is more conservative and functional, that is, it follows a policy of economic cooperation, institutional engagement, and diplomatic restraint in its external affairs to ensure stability and risk management in its foreign affairs.

The main research question then that informs the study is not whether India and South Korea are middle powers but how the middle power conceptualizations are reflected in practice. Are there any significant areas of convergence in their approaches towards regional order, or are their approaches indicative of radically different ways of thinking about middle power diplomacy? This article tries to shed light on variation among the category of middle powers by putting India and South Korea in a comparative framework and to show that middle power behaviour is not homogenous and that it is not necessarily synergistic.

Analytically, the article brings to debate the issue of regional order by changing the focus of analysis on formal alignments and declaratory partnerships towards the formative strategic logics within which foreign policy behaviour is defined. It contends that middle power strategies towards regional order can be more well characterized as context-specific responses to uncertainty, as opposed to being a product of a shared identity or shared normative interest. Here, the contrast between India and South Korea gives us an excellent chance to answer the question of how various middle powers manage to go through the same systemic pressures and choose different strategies. The study is methodologically a secondary literature, policy document and available empirical analysis based qualitative comparative approach. Instead of attempting to rank or assess the effectiveness of the strategy implemented by each nation, the article aims at identifying convergence and divergence trends in regional order by nations. In this way, a subtle evaluation of middle power behaviour can be achieved without overgeneralizing and without exceptionalism of the country.

2. MIDDLE POWER THEORY AND REGIONAL ORDER: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The middle power has occupied a questionable place in the international relations theory. Originally applied to the states which were not in the position to obtain the material means of the great powers and yet had an influence on the situation outside their own territories, this category has been changing along with the changes in the international system (Holbraad 1984; Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993). Middle powers are no longer

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considered in terms of quantitative measures of economic size or military spending, but increasingly middle powers have qualitative characteristics in how they act, behave strategically, and engage in regional and global orders (Acharya 2014; Ravenhill 2018). This change in behaviour forms the conceptual basis of the comparison of both India and South Korea as middle powers that have acted similarly within the same systemic pressures but have taken different strategies in the region.

One of the key discussions of middle power literature is whether middle powers have a common strategic orientation or these behaviours are essentially context-based. The functionalist early approaches focused on coalition-building, multilateralism and norm entrepreneurship as characteristic in the theme of middle power diplomacy (Cooper 2013). In this respect, middle powers were perceived as stabilizing forces that could mediate between great powers and smaller states. Nevertheless, this assumption is questioned by a more recent literature that state that middle power behaviour is highly heterogeneous with regard to the perception of threat, regional hierarchy, and domestic strategic culture (Acharya 2014; Goh 2016). Instead of making a coherent category, the middle powers can be a continuum of approaches which are conditioned by varying restrictions and opportunities.

This article holds on to the latter view by considering middle power status as a situational and relational status and not as a given identity. The concept of middle powers in this case implies the states that act under structural conditions left by the stronger states, yet they have enough agency to influence the terms under which they engage. This knowledge alters the analytical focus on whether middle powers are the leaders or influencers of regional order or how they cope with uncertainty, exposure, and risk in their external environments. This is specifically useful in areas where there is a hijabiting power structure where blatant leadership can receive strategic opposition instead of collaboration. This analytical framework is further narrowed down to the concept of regional order. Regional order does not merely mean how power is distributed in a geographic area, but the pattern of expectations, institutions, practices, and norms, which organize interaction among actors in the region (Ikenberry 2011; Acharya 2014). Notably, the order in the region is not single-handed. It is usually stratified, divided, and disputed, especially in such areas as the Indo-Pacific or wider Asia, where there exist many visions of order. To middle powers, participation in regional order thus entails decisions regarding adherence, involvement and restraint and not the subjugation to alter the system in any way.

In this framework, it is analytically possible to distinguish two ideal-typical ways of regional order. The former focuses on selective leadership in which states aim to influence regional agendas by coalitions around issues, through strategic signalling and observable involvement in security/government projects. This strategy usually is characterised by increased risk of strategic exposure and rivalry. The second focuses on functional involvement whereby the states place special focus on economic cooperation, institutional involvement, and diplomatic leeway in an attempt to maintain stability and to reduce risk. Each of the approaches is not necessarily any better or worse, and it represents various evaluations of vulnerabilities, opportunities, and constraint. This distinction is better put out in relation to India and South Korea. The two can often be said to be middle powers but there are great variations in their regional surroundings. India works in a sphere where it has a relative material superiority and direct security rivalry, especially in Indo-Pacific. South Korea, on the other hand, is in a more limited position, being a country between major powers, and being deeply embedded in asymmetric structures of alliances. These divergent structural locations imply that the convergence of middle power strategies to regional order may not take place automatically even when states have similar economic capabilities or diplomatic ambitions.

In order to reflect such a divergence, the article utilizes a comparative behavioural model that revolves around four analytical dimensions, namely: (1) perception of threats and strategic exposure, (2) the instruments of engagement preferred, (3) tolerance of leadership and visibility, and (4) institutional and coalition-based co-operation approaches. These dimensions can compare systematically without assuming convergence or hierarchy. They also make it possible to evaluate the presence of meaningful synergy in India and South Korea approaches to regional order or whether their strategies include different logic of middle powers. The fact that India and South Korea are placed in this context allows the article to go beyond the description of the foreign policy and actually test the extent to which middle powers can translate the conditions of the structure into practice. This method adds to the middle power theory in the sense that it brings about diversity in the category and the fact that the middle power diplomacy is better described as a collection of adaptive techniques as opposed to a homogenous model of behaviour. This way, it gives the empirical analysis of what follows the conceptual foundation.

3. INDIA'S APPROACH TO REGIONAL ORDER

The Indian approach to regional order is a unique approach to the middle power behavioral pattern founded on strategic independence, perception of security as the primary threat and a selective leadership practice. Even though it has been said that India is an emerging or aspiring great power, its actions in regional institutions and coalitions portrays a logic, which is more aligned with the middle power diplomacy in the state of constraint. Instead of trying to create a single vision of regional order, India has been able to pursue a moderated course that involves restraint that is autonomy-but does not deny issues-led leadership. This is where India can still be seen and play a role in regional politics without making any commitments that can restrict its strategic freedom (Pant and Passi 2021; Acharya 2014). The long-standing focus on strategic autonomy is one of the characteristics of the Indian regional strategy. Strategic autonomy, which dates back to historical experience of non-alignment and post-colonial statehood, has remained influential in explaining why India is never keen in formalizing alliances or

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accepting to be under security hierarchies. Modern understandings of strategic autonomy are however different with the Cold War non-alignment. India does not alienate itself to major powers as an aspect of its foreign policy, but instead, has chosen to be selective on whether to interact with various actors and maintain decision-making autonomy. This stance has allowed India to attend a variety of forums, including, though not necessarily limited to, the Quad, regional economic projects, without necessarily identifying with any of them (Mohan 2017). India, in this regard, is neither revisionist nor status quo oriented in its approach to regional order, but adaptive and hedging in nature. The issue of security takes a center stage in the regional perspective of India. In contrast to most middle powers whose interaction in the region is more economic or institutional, India confronts directly territorial issues and the unremitting rivalry in security, in its continental peripheral areas and in the maritime periphery. These circumstances have influenced a regional policy that has turned deterrence, balancing and signaling in addition to diplomacy. The participation of India in the Indo-Pacific depicts this dynamic. Although the discourse on the Indo-Pacific is officially based on inclusive and cooperative principles, the discourse of the Indian Indo-Pacific is implicitly motivated by the fears of asymmetry of power in the region and the freedom of navigation (Jaishankar 2020). Consequently, the Indian involvement in regional order-building is enlivened with security logic as it can be expressed in developmental or normative terms.

Meanwhile India has tended to favor issue based coalitions over institutional leadership. This model enables India to be involved in the leadership of the region but not bear the discharges or risks involved in taking official leadership positions. The Quad is an example of such a strategy. The participation of India is based on practical collaboration, including, but not limited to, maritime awareness, disaster relief, and supply chain resilience, as opposed to the alliance type of commitment. According to scholars, these arrangements show that India would like to influence regional outcomes without overexposing itself strategically (Goh 2016; Pant 2022). Such a selective involvement highlights the middle power nature of India in controlling the agenda without necessarily having to be responsible to keep the entire regional order. This trend is also supported by the economic diplomacy of India. Although India has been recording an increasing market base and manufacturing interests, it has been wary of region-wide trade agreements which may limit freedom of domestic policy. Internal economic resilience and external integration are the priorities that it can be seen through its withdrawal out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Regarding the regional order perspective, this decision is a message that the involvement of India is more predetermined by domestic considerations of the political economy than by strategic ones. Instead of inserting itself deep in the regional economic institutions, India opts to have bilateral or flexible arrangements that do not jeopardize policy space (Mukherjee 2020).

Normatively, India has posed itself as an advocate of inclusive regionalism, rules-based order, though it has not taken the role of normative enforcer. Such ideas like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) demonstrate the efforts of India to determine a regional vision without the imposition of strict standards and commitments. This rhetoric stance enables India to enjoy the first mover status without infuriating other regional powers that fear oppression. According to Acharya (2014), it is the restraint of middle powers in a pluralistic regional order where the legitimacy of states relies on consent instead of coercion. Combined, the Indian policy towards the regional order may be interpreted as a middle power policy that is both aggressive and cautious. India is quite tolerant to strategic visibility and even security interaction than most middle power, but still, it is not liberal enough to formalize leadership or engage in binding obligation. The combination itself indicates that India is a unique large but limited actor, one that wants to influence the regional dynamics and at the same time retain its autonomy and control risk. Instead of establishing regional leadership on a comprehensive basis, India has been functioning by choice of selectivity, issue-based alliances, and strategic signaling thus, keeping itself flexible amidst a changing regional environment.

This discussion indicates that the calibrated leadership in uncertain situations rather than the facilitation or mediation defines the type of middle power behaviour in India. This position stands out with respect to middle powers that do not make institutional embedding or economic diplomacy their main tool of regional order. This difference is further demonstrated by the implication of the approach taken by South Korea, to which the next section will be devoted.

4. SOUTH KOREA'S APPROACH TO REGIONAL ORDER

The approach to the regional order in South Korea is typified as a middle power strategy as a result of geopolitical vulnerability, embeddedness in alliances, and preference of stability-oriented interests of engagement. South Korea is in a much more limited strategic environment, characterized by its proximity to the key powers, unresolved security threats on the Korean Peninsula, and highly interdependent economy with other regional actors, in comparison to India, whose regional posture is one of selective leadership with strategic signaling. These realities have promoted a type of middle power politics that puts more emphasis on foreseeability, institutional involvement, and functional collaboration than on open leadership or agenda-setting (Lee 2016; Ravenhill 2018).

The major feature of the regional strategy of South Korea is the focus on minimizing its risks instead of promoting the strategic assertion. Being a state that lies at the point of U.S. rivalry with China, South Korea is in critical exposure to changes in regional power relations. This has created a foreign policy attitude that does not take hard alignment decisions but aims to maintain diplomatic flexibility. Although South Korea is formally allied with the United States, it has always been careful to balance its interaction in the region so as not to offend China, its greatest trading partner. Researchers have observed that such balancing

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posture is more of constraint management than a hedging in the conventional meaning in which regional projects are weighed in their ability to create instability or retaliation (Goh 2016; Kuik 2016). The most important way that South Korea relates to regional order is through institutional participation. South Korea has not been building coalitions, defining broad strategic themes, but engaged in multilateral forums, economic structures, and functional cooperation programmes such that it can participate without taking on an excessive political risk. Involvement in ASEAN-driven mechanisms, developmental alliances, and economic connectivity initiatives is an indication that it prefers to integrate itself into existing regional frameworks instead of rehabilitating them. This strategy can be discussed as the part of a larger trend of middle power behaviour according to which the influence is exerted not by direct or confrontational actions but by institutional means (Cooper 2013).

A very central place among the regional engagements of South Korea is played by economic diplomacy. Being a much-trade-based economy, South Korea has regarded regional order as synonymous with economic stability and resilience of the supply chain. Free trade agreements, investment partnership and industrial cooperation have not only been serving commercial purpose but also diplomatic purpose by strengthening South Korea as a stable and development-oriented partner. South Korea has been aggressive in economic institutionalization compared to the cautionary attitude of India towards regional trade integration as a way of anchoring itself in the regional networks. This approach represents an evaluation that economic embeddedness provides a more sustainable foundation of regional presence than a security-based approach to leadership in a competitive environment (Lee and Kim 2020).

The soft power activities of South Korea also strengthen this instrumentalism towards regional order. Educational exchange, development aid, technological collaboration, and cultural diplomacy have been used as auxiliary tools that increase the stability in relations without eliciting strategic paranoia. Notably, such efforts are hardly explicitly geopolitically oriented. They instead focus on mutual good, capacity building and the shared development experiences. This positioning helps South Korea to be visible and active without creating the impression of strategic ambition. Such soft power forms as Nye (2011) and Melissen (2011) suggest are best put to work as background conditions that help bring about cooperation as opposed to instruments of persuasion or influence. This apprehensive stance can be seen in the regional discourse of South Korea. Middle power diplomacy, responsible stakeholder behaviour, and global contributor narratives are all concepts that focus on participation and contribution and not on leadership or dominance. Even recent projects proposed under Indo-Pacific rubric have been packaged in all-inclusive non-confrontational terms, with a great care not to project it as a zero-sum game. This rhetorical caution reflects the policy behavior and highlights South Korea preference in maintaining the status quo rather than disrupting the situation in the region (Lee 2016).

Combined, the action of South Korea with regard to regional order can be described as facilitative as opposed to directive. South Korea, unlike India, which is more tolerant to visibility and engagement in security, is more interested in stability, institutional credibility and economic integration. Its middle power approach is not directed at regional hierarchy making but rather at preservation of access and relevance in the hierarchies. Such a course is indicative of such acute vulnerability and a strategic calculus that restraint not assertion is the most viable way to hold onto a sustained engagement. This opposition does not mean inactivity or lack of agency. Instead, South Korea practices agency using the mechanism of calibration that means that the decision of involvement, the framing of involvement, and the selection of tools to use in keeping its strategic options alive are decided upon. By so doing, South Korea can be viewed as the kind of middle power behaviour that prioritizes risk management, as well as functional contribution, over leadership aspirations. The consequences of this strategy are more evident when such a strategy is directly compared with India one, which is also done in the next section.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN MIDDLE POWER APPROACHES TO REGIONAL ORDER

The comparative analysis of India and South Korea shows that common middle power does not necessarily imply the convergence in terms of regional order approaches. Although both the states act within the context of strategic constraint and under great power competition, the logics according to which they interact are different in systematic and analytically relevant aspects. Their approaches are characteristic of different interpretations of risks, leadership, and responsibility in regional frameworks, instead of reflecting a middle power synergy.

The difference at the perception of threat is very strong at this level. The regional environment of India is defined by the immediate and unremitting security threats, such as the lack of a solution to the territorial issues and the rising maritime rivalry. These circumstances result in an increased resistance to strategic visibility and the readiness to tolerate friction as a cost of doing business. South Korea, in its turn, experiences a more extreme version of the geopolitical weakness caused by its strategic location in close proximity to major powers and the unsolved security situation on the Korean Peninsula. This has given rise to a decreasing tolerance to exposure coupled with increasing preference to diplomatic restraint. Consequently, though both of these states are responsive to great power competition, India sees regional order as a venue of measured assertion, and South Korea sees it as a sphere to insulate against destabilizing forces.

These variations in perception of threats are converted into dissimilar ways of interaction. India focuses on choosing leadership by forming issue coalitions, giving signals and participating visibly in security related endeavors. This interaction is aimed at influence national agendas without establishing authority levels. The involvement of South Korea is

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facilitative, on the contrary. It focuses more on involvement in established institutions, economic systems and developmental alliances where contribution is possible without being the agenda setter. This opposition implies that abstract status influences less middle power behaviour but rather evaluates how visibility is related to vulnerability.

Another area of difference is economical diplomacy as a regional order mechanism. The two states have different ways of deploying economic engagement as a region stability element, although both believe that economic involvement is core to the stability in the region. India takes a slow path to regional economic integration, and local independence and flexibility are prioritized at the expense of institutional depth. Its partial involvement in economic systems indicates anxieties on asymmetric interdependence and national political limitations. South Korea on the other hand views economic institutionalization as a stabilizing factor. Integration on a deep level by means of trade agreements, investment networks and supply chain cooperation is both an economic and diplomatic anchor. This opposition supports the point of argument that middle powers are different not only in the instruments they employ, but in what they want those instruments to accomplish.

The aspect of soft power and normative positioning also depicts divergence. The normative discourse of India focuses on normatively inclusivity and sovereignty but does not pursue long-term normative imposition. The soft power does not serve as a key axis of the regional diplomacy, but rather as a supportive environment to the strategic interaction. In South Korea, soft power is a facilitating resource that is more valued. Cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, and development cooperation is being used to cut the friction, create familiarity in the institutions, and normalize the presence of South Korea. Notably in both instances, soft power is not used as an instrument of persuasion to cause alignment; instead, it is a relationship environmental management mechanism. It is a matter of degree and centrality and not intention.

Although there are these divergences, there are some limited areas of convergence. Both India and South Korea do not profess to operate on a regional leadership that is allied, they like to have loose alliances rather than binding ones and they operate within non-confrontational realms. They are also both sensitive to regional pluralism, and do not impose single-handed visions of order. The similarities, however, can be more regarded as common drawbacks than as the sign of strategic synergy. The logics behind the choice of policy are still different.

Combined, the comparison shows that middle power synergy cannot be assumed based on similar categorization. India and South Korea represent two variants of middle power involvement: the leaders are selective and promising signals, and the other is facilitative, embedded in institutions, and containing risk. These policies are internal logical and external rational, but fail to bring a convergence to a single model of regional order-building that is the middle power.

The implications are significant to the theory and practice of this finding. Analytically, it highlights the necessity of analyzing the middle powers in terms of a heterogeneous category, which is determined by the location of powers, the threat environment, and the historical experience. In practice, it implies that the cooperation of middle powers cannot be based only on the similarity in the status or values, but must consider differences in the strategic priorities and tolerances. The following part discusses the implications of these findings to the general argument on middle power cooperation and regional governance

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR MIDDLE POWER COOPERATION AND REGIONAL ORDER

The relative comparison between India and South Korea has wider implications on the conceptualization of middle power cooperation and order building in the modern international relations. The implicit assumptions in much of the available literature is that middle powers as partners in a regional level are pre-established by their similar status and limitations. The results of the current research problematize this assumption by proving that the middle power cooperation is not predefined and automatic but depends on the similarity of strategic logics, threat perceptions, and risk tolerance. A prominent implication is related to the boundaries of middle power coordination in the areas of a similarity of the hierarchies of power. However, both India and South Korea exist in the conditions of high great power rivalry, but their reactions to this state of affairs are very different. The selective leadership and use of strategic signaling in India is indicative of how this country is inclined to tolerate friction in regional intercourse. The restraint and functional participation in South Korea is a sign of an attempt to avoid exposures to destabilizing forces. These opposite orientations imply that the idea of middle power cooperation is not limited by the absence of common interests but by the different evaluation of the risk-creating effect of engagement itself. Due to this, collaborative efforts would be more apt to appear in low-salience, functional areas, including development cooperation or capacity building, than those which are directly connected to security or governance of a region.

The implications of the findings on maintenance of order in the region in the absence of the hegemonic leadership can also be made. The middle powers can bring about order by playing differentiated roles, whereby emphasis is placed on stability as opposed to change as opposed to filling the leadership gaps collectively. The approach of India helps in achieving regional order by influencing the agenda and giving an indication of preferences whereas the approach of South Korea helps in achieving the reinforcing of the institutional continuity and economic interdependence. Such contributions are both complementary and uncoordinated. This is an indication that the middle power strategies can happen in parallel so that regional order is achieved without necessarily being synergistic or sharing

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leadership frameworks. The other implication is on the overextension of the concept of middle power in policy and scholarship. Existing diagnoses run the risk of obscuring significant difference in diplomatic practice by discussing middle powers as an unified category. The comparison above shows that middle power behaviour should not be considered as a model, but just as a range of adaptive strategies. This also has an impact on the assessment of middle power initiatives. The main measure of effectiveness is not the capacity to influence or be aligned, but whether the strategies will effectively handle uncertainty, maintain autonomy, and remain engaged over time.

The analysis also indicates that middle power cooperation is more practical at the normative and process levels more than the strategic level. Rhetorically, India and South Korea meet on rhetoric of inclusiveness, respect of sovereignty and rules-based interaction. Nevertheless, these common principles fail to become convergent strategies of forming the regional order. This detachment underscores the significance of making a distinction between normative conformity and strategic fit in the process of evaluating the future of middle power cooperation.

The paper proposes that this stabilization is attained not by a coordinated leadership, but by distributed and cautious interaction, in which states play their roles in accordance with their weaknesses and strengths. Middle powers neither substitute great powers nor do they redesign regional orders together. They instead maintain the operation of the regional systems by keeping the exposure, keeping the institutional presence and preventing the actions that would increase instability. In this respect there should be no middle power synergy as failure. Instead, it is realistic accommodation to structural conditions where restraints and differentiation is a rational reaction. This trend can be identified to view regional order as a product of many overlapping and disproportionate inputs and not centralized leadership. The final part is a continuation of these implications and is a reflection on what the comparison between India and South Korea would say about the changing position of the middle power in the international relations of the present-day generation.

7. CONCLUSION

This article aimed at investigating the issue of whether shared middle power position provides strategic synergy in strategies of regional order through comparison between India and South Korea. Instead of supposing convergence on premise of categorization, the research assumed a comparative and behaviour-based structure to examine how each state understands and implements its middle power role in the context of strategic uncertainty. These results show that India and South Korea do not turn to the same middle power policy. Rather, they are clear and internally consistent forms of middle power involvement based on different threat perceptions, geopolitical location and risk evaluation.

This has been demonstrated to indicate that India pursues regional order by a logic of selective leadership, which consists of strategic independence and issue-based coalitions with precise security involvement. This is a strategy that demonstrates the relative material potential in its region and vulnerability to direct security threats by India. South Korea, in its turn, undertakes a facilitative and stability-focused approach based on institutional involvement, economic unification and diplomatic restraint. South Korea is a country with a more limited strategic environment, and predictability and risk-containing is a priority instead of agenda-setting and leadership. These variations are not occasional or temporary, but they are responses to different regional situations which are structurally based. The article contributes to the literature on middle powers and regional order in three more general ways by foregrounding these contrasts. First, it questions the belief that middle powers are a homogenous group sharing common strategic tastes. Although the two countries (India and South Korea) have been regularly lumped together in policy and academic discourse, their deeds indicate that middle power status may not dictate strategy in any homogenous manner. Middle power diplomacy arises in its place a collection of institutionalized practices as determined by exposure, vulnerability and experience of history.

Second, the article can be related to the discussions of regional order as it illustrates that differentiated and uncoordinated contributions can be made to maintain the order. While India and South Korea do not build and manage regional order together, neither do they aspire to replace great power leadership. However, they help to make regional systems work, by their parallel strategies of selective assertion and institutional stability respectively. This observation implies that regional order in the current Asia is never the result of consistent leadership alliances, but rather of stratified and irregular practices that emphasize continuity over change.

Third, the research narrows down the conceptual insights of middle power cooperation. The lack of synergy between South Korea and India cannot be viewed as the failure of the diplomacy and the non-congruence. Instead, it is the manifestation of the boundaries of collaboration in the circumstances with the risk tolerance, strategic exposure, and regional priorities divergence. Middle power cooperation seems most feasible in the low-salience functional fields and not those that entail security or governance needs that demand unanimous risk acceptance. This observation warns against the policy anticipations which view the middle powers as substitutes or naturally allied participants.

There is also a research implication of the results. It would be more helpful in comparative studies of middle powers to pay more attention to variation within behaviour and contextual constraint as opposed to attempts to sharpen categorical definitions. Future studies can expand this framework to include other middle powers that act in secondary regions or can investigate how a change in the perception of threat changes the middle power strategies over time. Specifically, longitudinal analysis may provide insight into whether the convergence or divergence of middle power approaches are likely to take place as

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regional orders change. To sum up, middle power behaviour cannot be viewed as a coherent model but a range of approaches aimed at coping with uncertainty. India and South Korea are examples of how regions order can be negotiated in non-dominant and non-alignment ways. This diversity enables one to consider middle power roles in a more subtle and realistic way in an international system that is getting more fragmented. Instead of seeking synergy, the scholars and policymakers ought to seek how the differentiated middle power strategies interrelate to outline the contours of regional order.

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