

SOUTH KOREA: A MAJOR REGIONAL POWER

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ABSTRACT

South Korea has a great importance not just for its neighbours (Japan, China, and North Korea), for the region of Central Asia or for the great powers (USA, Russia), but even for Europe. We cannot neglect the country's aspiring future influence and importance around the world. The economic rising of Asia's countries will bring attention on Central and Northeast Asia. I guess that Seoul will be included in many economic and political agreements and especially on issues concerning cultural diplomacy. South Korea's economic performance, the improvement of services trade, foreign investments and its great resources prove the country's assertive role on global stage.

We cannot neglect South Korea's 'soft power' expressed by its traditions, cultural values, soap operas, music already known in almost entire Europe. The success of public diplomacy for South Korea depends on its efficacy to promote its soft power. This is the most important factor of South Korea which could make it visible among regional powers. The paper underlines that the soft power component could reassert the social dimension of South Korea, the recognition and acceptance of the country's regional power by other countries.

Keywords: South Korea, soft power, regional power, middle power, Central Asia.

The last events demonstrated South Korea's influence in the Central Asia and its significance for the great actors from the international stage. South Korea is a major player in Asia and its various partnerships and collaborations situate it among the most important powers. South Korea's role in the Central Asia may be very important for the regional security.

The paper tries to show the South Korea's status as regional power from geopolitical perspective and to illustrate the influence of the country's foreign and security policy and its future aspirations.

First, we try to define the terms regional and middle power and to highlight the difference between the concepts, then to indicate the importance of Central Asia and the relations between Central Asia and South Korea, and finally to

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demonstrate the regional influence of South Korea through economic development, its foreign policy and its ability to develop the 'soft power' dimension.

REGIONAL POWER/ MIDDLE POWER

Martin Wight (1978), cited by Shim & Flamm, differentiates between the concepts of middle and regional power. He determines a local/regional and a global level. According to Wight, 'while states can be regional powers within their geographical proximity, they are regarded as middle powers in terms of the global level' (Martin Wight apud Shim & Flamm, 2013: 8).

There are diverse definitions and perspectives according to each author and each interpretation.

Concerning of what qualifies a state to be considered a regional (great) power, Oyvind Osterud (1992), cited by Shim and Flamm, formulates four 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 a middle power, might also be a great power on the world scale, can be regarded as a regional great power' (Oyvind Osterud, 1992 apud Shim and Flamm, 2013: 7).

David Shim and Patrick Flamm identified the most relevant criteria for regional powers:

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) *Influence* refers to the level of leverage or impact an actor has on important issues of regional/ global concern.

5) *Recognition* concerns the intersubjective character of interstate relations and asks how others view the actor's role as a regional power, or if it is even acknowledged' (Shim & Flamm, 2013: 8).

Sook Jung Lee (2012) underlined that Cooper (1993: 17–19) categorized four approaches in defining a middle power: '(1) a positional approach locating a middle power at the middle point in a range of bigness to smallness in terms of population, economic strength and complexity, and military capability, (2) a geographic approach physically or ideologically locating a middle power between the system's great powers, (3) a normative approach viewing a middle power as potentially wiser, more virtuous, and more trustworthy with its recourse to diplomatic influence rather than to force, and less selfish when taking responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the global order, (4) a behavioural approach defining a middle power by its behavioural tendency to

engage in *middle power man ship*, such as pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems embracing compromise positions in international disputes, or adopting the notions of ‘good international citizenship’ to guide its diplomacy (Cooper, 1993: 17–19 apud Sook Jung Lee, 2012: 6).

The most important factor for middle powers is creativity (Evans and Grant, 1991 apud Sook Jung Lee, 2012). In this case, we’re talking about middle power diplomacy.

Gareth Evans sustains that ‘middle power diplomacy’ ‘involves ‘niche diplomacy’, which means ‘concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having’ (Evans, 2011).

Middle power diplomacy was exercised in different ways concerning the countries position, their influence among great powers, their cooperation with other countries and their creativity. Some writers were talking about ‘middle power activism’– a form of power that includes ‘firstly, an opportunity for potentially effective action, secondly, the need that resources simply have to be concentrated where they are likely to have the most useful impact, thirdly, there has to be in most cases a degree of intellectual imagination and creativity applied to the issue – an ability to see a way through impasses and to lead, if not by force of authority, then at least by force of ideas and fourthly, effective middle power diplomacy involves credibility on the part of the country applying it’ (Ibidem).

Referring to creativity, Kevin Rudd was talking about ‘creative middle power diplomacy’– ‘a means of building, consolidating and enhancing the regional and global rules-based order’ (Rudd, 2012).

As authors in domain highlight, ‘the cooperative internationalist approach’ is the essence of the middle power diplomacy’ (Ibidem), it’s the only way to discuss about world’s problems.

Sarah Teo, Bhubhinder Singh and See Seng Tan underlined that ‘there are three ways of defining a middle power–according to capabilities, function or behaviour. Middle power diplomacy generally involves adopting an internationalist perspective, actively participating in multilateral forums, leading in a specific niche area and acting as a bridge among nations’ (Sarah, Bhubhinder & See, 2013).

‘Since the 1990s, the Seoul government has started labelling Korea as a middle power, promoting the country’s image as a key Asian and global actor’ (Ibidem).

South Korea is a middle power, but it has all the resources to become an important regional power.

CENTRAL ASIA-PIVOT FOR THE GREAT POWERS

For centuries, Central Asia was at the crossroad of the empires and civilizations (Russia, China, India, Persia and the Ottomans).

The region re-emerged in the XXIst Century as an area of interest for the great powers, especially for its natural and mineral resources, but also because of its geographical position (Central Asia is an axis connecting the West and the East).

Being surrounded by many cultures and countries – Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet in western China and southern Siberia in eastern Russia– Central Asia became a point of attraction for other powers. We are talking about China, the United States, Russia, Western Europe and, now South Korea.

‘Central Asia is located in the Eurasian Continent between Asia and Europe, and holds great strategic importance in terms of military and security. Second, this area has large amounts of oil and gas resources, enough to be called ‘the second Middle East,’ and therefore, the region is economically valuable as a new source of supply for energy resources’ (Jae-Young, 2009).

The region has a strategic importance for Washington, Beijing and Russia. Practically, it is viewed as a theatre where the great powers may interact, ‘a theatre where America might counter a revived Russia or China, or a place to blunt any extension of Iranian influences’ (Blank, 2008). Moscow and Beijing view the region as a strategic place for defending their interests. As Stephen Blank highlights, ‘this asymmetry of interest is a major factor in the competition among states for influence in the region (Ibidem).

Central Asia is the hub where the great powers meet, an intersection of geo-strategic and geo- economic interests, a region which circumscribes the competition between international powers, a place where ‘competing systems for international order are fully engaged’ (Blank, 2008). That’s why, Central Asia is considered a region of growing importance in the future.

CENTRAL ASIA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

‘In July 2012, the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between South Korea and the five Central Asian states was celebrated marking an extraordinary expansion of political, economic, and social exchanges between South Korea and the region. Activities included cooperation on energy and natural resources construction and infrastructure, science and technologies, medicine and healthcare, finances, textile, and agriculture’ (Hwang, 2012).

Professor Matteo Fumagalli observed that ‘Seoul’s involvement in the region may be divided into two main phases: in the first decade following the independence of the Central Asian republics, South Korea maintained a low profile and after 2000 when The Roh Moo-hyun administration began to pay some attention to the Central Asian markets’ (Fumagalli, 2012: 72).

As Professor Matteo Fumagalli notes, ‘diplomatic relations between South Korea and the newly independent republics in the region were established in 1992’ (Ibidem). In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, South Korea positioned itself as main investor and partner for Central Asia’s countries. Calder & Kim, cited by Prof Fumagalli, underlined that ‘Seoul’s push to cooperate with and invest in Central Asia owes to three distinct but related strategic predicaments in which South Korea finds itself: ‘the lack of local sources of energy (South Korea imports about 84

percent of its energy); heavy reliance on oil (50 percent); and heavy dependence on the Middle East as the main supplier of hydrocarbons (75 percent)' (Calder & Kim, 2008: 1 apud Matteo Fumagalli, 2012: 82).

After the financial crisis from 1997, South Korea expanded its interest in Uzbekistan and, then in Kazakhstan. 'In 2006 Uzbekneftgaz and Korea National Oil Corporation and Korea Gas Corporation signed a Memorandum giving the two Korean companies exclusive rights of exploration and exploitation of two oil and gas deposits in Chust-Pap and Namangan-Terachi' (Peyrouse, 2010, apud Fumagalli, 2012: 88).

Being interested in Uzbekistan's hydrocarbons and uranium, 'in 2008 Korea Electric Power (KEPCO) signed an agreement for the purchase of 2,600 tons of uranium (approximately 9 percent of South Korea's total consumption) by 2015' (Peyrouse, 2010, apud Fumagalli, 2012: 88).

South Korea improved its relations with Uzbekistan concerning projects in oil, gas, car building, constructions, etc. South Korea developed economic relations with Kazakhstan. 'The trade volume between South Korea and Kazakhstan increased from about USD 10 million in 1992 to about USD 800 million in 2007. In 2008, Kazakhstan was ranked as South Korea's 78th export country, falling 15 levels from the previous year' (Jae-Young, 2009).

South Korea's influence in the Central Asia is relying not only on hard power (oil, natural gas, hydrocarbons or uranium), but also on regional soft alliances with countries from the region. The mixture of economic and cultural, diplomatic power upgrades South Korea dimension of regional power. In this perspective, the Korea – Central Asia Cooperation Forum launched in November 2007, with participation by all five Central Asian countries was 'designed to broaden networks and operate regular dialogue and cooperation channels' (Hwang, 2012), increasing the diplomatic relations. The Korea Development Institute (KDI) wants to attract students from around the world especially for the sharing of the development experiences. Many students come from the Central Asian Republics, in particular Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Ibidem). This experience shows the willingness of South Korea to improve its soft relations with countries from Central Asia.

Concerning South Korea's foreign policy, its ties with the US, China and Japan redefine the main position of the country in the region. Since 2005, President Roh Moo-hyun proposed a South Korea's foreign policy doctrine 'declaring that South Korea should play the role of a balancer so that tensions do not revive and escalate in Northeast Asia' (Zhiqun, 2009).

In 2009 South Korean President Lee Myung-bak implemented a new policy, 'New Asia Initiative'. 'The new initiative seeks to upgrade Korea's role as a power player in Asia by engaging the region and creating stronger ties. It will broaden South Korea's diplomatic horizon in two new directions. First, it will expand South Korea's traditional foreign policy focus from Northeast Asia to the entire Asian region. Second, the scope of cooperation will be extended from economy to security, culture, energy and other sectors' (Zhiqun, 2004).

South Korea is a member of ASEAN and hosted the G20 Leaders' Summit in Seoul in November 2010, and the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012.

South Korea is a 'proactive actor in the international arena by initiating a speedy and significant response to the earthquake in Haiti (January 2010); joining the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), an international cooperative effort to combat proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; sending ships to join in multi-national efforts to battle pirates in the Gulf of Aden; and contributing to peace-keeping operations (PKO) around the world' (Hwang, 2006).

All these show the implications and contributions of South Korea to the global community.

In an article from 'E- International Relations', 'South Korea's Foreign Policy in 2013: Building Trust in East Asia', the author, Sarah Teo was talking about 'Park's trustpolitik approach to South Korea's foreign relations in East Asia. While China and ASEAN have expressed support for President Park's initiatives, Japan and North Korea seem less amenable to Seoul's trust-based strategy' (Teo, 2014).

South Korea tries to manage its relations with neighbours and with the great actors. It has strengthened its alliance with the US and has improved its relations with China.

Nowadays, the country wants to improve the relationship with China, especially because the China's conduct is important for the situation in Asia-Pacific region. 'The South Korean population in China is burgeoning, especially in cities near the Korean Peninsula, such as Dalian and Qingdao, which, by around 2005, had over 80,000 and 30,000 South Korean residents, respectively. The South Korean communities in these cities have built schools, hospitals, markets, and homes, and many enjoy a higher quality of life there than in their native country' (Bonji, 2014).

The relations between South Korea and US have been improved especially from economical point of view. South Korea has become a trustful trade partner of the US. 'South Korea has achieved a remarkably high level of economic growth and is now the United States' sixth-largest goods trading partner with a trillion-dollar economy. Major U.S. firms have long been leading investors in South Korea, while South Korea's top firms have made significant investments in the United States' ('US Relations with South Korea', Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2014).

Washington is interested in a closeness of China and South Korea's relations; it needs the cooperation of both China and South Korea in dealing with North Korea.

United States also needs Japan to maintain the stability in East Asia. That's why, the Japanese government is under US pressure to improve the relations with China and South Korea. US sustain that an important thing for Japan is to improve its relationship with South Korea for the sake of regional security.

METHODOLOGY ASPECTS

The paper wants to evaluate South Korea's position and influence in Central Asia and to demonstrate if South Korea is a regional power. In this perspective, we'll try to use analytical frameworks and typologies compiled from the literature. Besides these, we'll concentrate on the comparative and analytical perspectives to show how South Korea has improved its position and ranking in regional power.

SOUTH KOREA-A MAJOR REGIONAL POWER

Despite all its history (occupied by Japan in World War II, marked by Korean War in 1950), South Korea moved towards democracy in the 1980s and succeeded to develop its industry in an impressive way.

Bedeski (1994) stated that 'insecurity was a driving force in South Korea development. First it was the insecurity of poverty. Living standards were among the lowest in Asia after the war. Then it was the military insecurity. North Korean threat of a second invasion stimulated national reconstruction. And third – insecurity of national identity required positive actions to overcome some of the attraction of the nationalism advocated by Pyongyang' (Bedeski, 1994).

As Bedeski underlined, a series of Five Year Development Plans developed in 1961 transformed the country from an agrarian one to an industrialized one.

The paper tries to re-examine development stages of the South Korea in its way to increasing the role as a regional power. The table can show the comparison between the development stages of the South Korea.

1953–1961	After the Korean War, the South Korean economy depended on US aid. In 1961, GNP per capita was about 82\$ (Bedeski, 1994). The economy was based on textile industry. Population growth necessitated rapid transformation. 'The Rhee government was characterised by corruption and inability to implement any viable economic policy' (Park, 2000).
1962–1979	'Unlike his predecessors, Park developed a concrete economic development objective' (Park, 2000). His strategy changed from import to export orientation. South Korea relied on heavy- industry, the country becoming more competitive on the market. In 1970, GNP was about 675 \$ (Bedeski, 1994). 'South Korea exported cement, fertilisers, petroleum products, textiles, etc.' (Park, 2000). In 1972, Park launched the Heavy Chemical Industrialization Plan, known as the 'Big Push'. 'The plan was motivated by the need to build up a defence industry as

	Park increasingly doubted the USA's commitment to defend South Korea' (Park, 2000). To finance the plan, South Korea had to borrow heavily from abroad. Anyway, it was starting a 'new political era' (Park, 2000) for South Korea
1981–1991	President Chun hadn't an economic development plan. The technocrats from Chun regime had two goals: 'price stability and market liberalisation. On the one hand, this brought down inflation, on the other hand the liberalisation programme failed to control or limit the power of ' <i>chaebol</i> ' (Park, 2000). Between 1986 and 1989, the economy grew in South Korea –'12.9 percent in 1986, 12.8 percent in 1987, 12.4 percent in 1988' (Ibidem). In 1990, South Korea had a competitive economy.
1992–1996	'Korean economy continued in its rapid development. The growth reached almost 9% rate in 1994 and 1995, the inflation rate stayed at a 4% level and the unemployment rate amounted to unprecedented 2 percent' (Luděk Kouba) .
1997–2008	In 1997, South Korea passed through an economic crisis. Then, South Korea started to adopt deep reforms: 'direct measures in the financial sector and broader structural reforms' (Luděk Kouba). The World Bank's study 'Korea as a Knowledge economy' (2006) states that in 1998, Korea started its plan 'to make a transition to an advanced knowledge-based economy'. Director General for Strategic Planning at the Ministry of Planning and Budget, Joonghae Suh, indicated that 'in accordance with economic development stages, Korea has gained substantial achievement in education and human resources development, science technology investment, and information and communications infrastructure expansion. Especially, strong leadership of the Korean government was effective during industrialization, and recently, the role of government has changed to a system planner' (World Bank's study, 2007)

Source: the periodization (years) until 1991 was (were) taken from Park, P.H.,2000 'A Reflection on the East Asian Development Model: Comparison of the South Korean and Taiwanese Experiences', Thailand, Japan, and the East Asian Development Model, edited by Frank-Jurgen Richter: 141–168.

In several years, South Korea managed to raise its regional influence through economic development and through its foreign policy.

Even if South Korea achieved its 'middle power status' (as Hwang said), it is a great regional player through its 'central role in representing the interests of Asian nations in the international arena' (Hwang, 2012).

South Korea is not perceived as a great regional power just because of its economic development and modernization, but especially because of its influence through its culture and traditions.

We cannot neglect South Korea's 'soft power' expressed by its traditions, cultural values, soap operas, music already known in almost entire Europe.

The success of public diplomacy for South Korea depends on its efficacy to promote its soft power and this is the most important factor of South Korea which could make it visible among regional powers.

Soft power- 'co-opts people rather than coerces them. It can be contrasted with 'hard power', which is the use of coercion and payment' (Nye, 2004: 5).

Soft power resists in its ability to attract, so we can name it as 'attractive power' (Ibidem).

Joseph Nye Jr. describes the sources of soft power for a country: its culture, its political values, its foreign policy.

In a recent survey of G-20 nations published in the newspaper *Chosun Ilbo*, 'the Hansun Foundation ranked South Korea 13th in the world in terms of national power' (Nye, 2009).

South Korea is ranked 9th concerning hard power resources in terms of high-tech weapons and advanced information communications infrastructure. But, as Joseph Nye Jr. underlined, 'for these 'hard power' ingredients to become true engines of the country's growth and prosperity, they must be backed by more sophisticated and highly efficient 'soft power. South Korea has impressive soft-power potential' (Ibidem).

Being member of OECD and G-20, 'South Korea became the world's 11th largest economy (Ibidem), with 'per capita income reaching more than \$33,200' (2013 est.) (CIA World Factbook).

Beyond these, South Korea has a democratic political system and the human rights are well protected. 'The country has evolved into Asia's most advanced democracy' (The Economist Democracy Index, rated by The Economist Democracy Index (Democracy Index 2012. A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit).

The main strategy for South Korea is to develop its tools of cultural and social interaction: 'The Korea- Central Asia Cooperation Forum was launched in November 2007, with participation by all five Central Asian countries. This forum, along with other regional ones Seoul has launched in recent years, is designed to broaden networks and operate regular dialogue and cooperation channels' (Hwang, 2012).

Also, there is attractiveness for South Korean culture. The traditions of Korean art, its cuisine and its soap-operas have already spread around the world.

As Joseph Nye said, it's 'the Korean wave' – 'the growing popularity of all Korean things, from fashion and film to music and cuisine' (Nye, 2009).

Concerning David Shim and Patrick Flamm most relevant criteria for regional powers, we try to demonstrate if South Korea corresponds to these criteria.

DELIMITATION

From geopolitical perspective, South Korea has a strategic position in Asia Pacific region. It is a close ally of the US, trying to establish itself as a regional actor. South Korea- US alliance is a key to US efforts to restore balance in the Asia Pacific region. At a moment when China is growing its influence, when there are some tensions in South China Sea, when North Korea is still a threat, the position and alliances of the South Korea are more important than ever not only for the USA, but also for other partners from the region.

As David Shimm stated, '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 apud Shim and Flamm, 2013).

PRETENSION

South Korea's pretension to be a regional player can be seen in economy, but also in cultural aspects. Its efforts are concentrated to show its economic ability. South Korea aspires to be 'the center of Northeast Asian trade relations. In citing the country's special geographical location, the government claims that South Korea is predestined to become the economic hub of the region' (Shim and Flamm, 2013). Besides that, South Korea wants to maintain its position as cultural power through its ability to spread its cultural products such as movies, music, soap operas, etc.

ENDOWMENT

In less than 30 years, South Korea became from an agricultural country an industrial and commercial country. 'Heavy industries, including chemicals, metals, machinery, and petroleum refining, are highly developed' (Meri, 2005:190). In 2005, the country became a leader in high-speed internet access, mobile phones, flat screen monitors, etc. It ranked 12th in normal GDP (Bedeski, 1994).

According to Globalfirepower.com, South Korea ranked 8th in military strength. In spite of the US support, South Korea has a series of vulnerabilities consisting in "the budgetary and operational limitations within the ROK military, South Korea's territorial dispute involving Dokdo/Takeshima which has strained the ROK-Japan alliance, and South Korea's growing concerns about handling China's ascendancy' (Lee, 2013). Anyway, as Jeon Lee said, South Korea is

becoming ‘a global security contributor’ and ‘as a thriving democracy, ROK continues to exercise positive soft power’ (Lee, 2013).

South Korea improves its relations in cooperation, trade- discussions and negotiations with the US, China, Japan, Canada, India, and Mexico. ‘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)’ (Shim and Flamm, 2013).

INFLUENCE

South Korea has an influence not only as a market or in exports, but in its capacity and ability to promote its soft power through soap operas, music, culture, the so-called ‘Korean wave’.

Also, South Korea seeks to improve interregional cooperation. It contributed to ‘the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989, and then it took the initiative in formulating the so-called Seoul APEC Declaration two years later’ (Shim and Flamm, 2013). It participated in the North East Asian Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), the North East Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED), the North East Asian Cooperation Initiative (NACI), etc. Besides its capability to influence ‘regional security mechanisms’ (Shim and Flamm, 2013), South Korea improved its capacity to coordinate its activities on environmental policies. ‘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’ (Shim and Flamm, 2013).

RECOGNITION

To be recognized as a regional power, South Korea has to be accepted as having this role by other countries. Seoul’s position as a regional actor was supported by the US, China, Japan, Russia at the Northeast Asian security agenda in 2000.

Concerning Korea’s relations with its main neighbours, Seoul’s government ‘seeks to enhance synergies arising from the complementary pursuit of bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral engagements’ (Kim, 2009).

Some countries criticize the balancing role of the South Korea in Asia Pacific region, but it is considered to play a mediating role between the US and other countries from the region.

So, in this manner, as Kim Sung-han concludes ‘the ROK-U.S. alliance will remain the central axis of South Korea’s foreign and security policy for the foreseeable future, while Northeast Asian regionalism will be seen as a means to eventual peace and stability in the Northeast Asia’ (Ibidem).

CONCLUSIONS

Being situated in the most dynamic region, South Korea became the most influential actor in the area. South Korea’s economic performance, the improvement of services trade, its foreign investments, its great resources and cooperation with great powers prove the country’s assertive role on global stage. Even South Korea achieved its ‘middle power status’ (as Hwang said), it has great potential to becoming a major regional player and an important partner for international actors.

South Korea is becoming an important regional power because of its economic development and modernization, its implications in the international institutions and networks, because of its crucial role in Central Asia and, besides that, because of its soft power potential.

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