Two decades ago, South Korea was rarely called a middle power. Today, it invites ridicule to suggest South Korea is anything but a middle power. Given the concept's ambiguity and lackluster academic credentials, why did the definition become so widely applied?

The immediate answer is obvious. South Korea started to be labeled a middle power because of its spectacular growth. South Korea transformed from an "economic basket case" to an "economic miracle" between the 1960s and the 1990s. As noted by Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, by the late 1980s there was a "good case" to call South Korea a middle power. Despite this, most Korean academics during the period remained focused on more immediately relevant issues, including development and democratization, security and North Korea, and major power relations. Widespread domestic use of the label would wait another decade for a new generation of academics.

South Korea's well-known 386 generation relates to individuals who were in their 30s in the 1990s, studied (and were politically active) in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. A lesser known offshoot of the 386 generation were those who were in their 30s in the 1990s, studied and subsequently pursued postgraduate studies and early academic careers abroad through the 80s and 90s (thus playing a less politically active role), and were born in the 1960s. There are a number of reasons why this generation of scholars would transform South Korea's international relations.

First, these academics returned in the late 1990s to a more outward-looking Korea. The
universities had opened new international relations programs and graduate schools. International relations moved well beyond the focus on security, North Korea, and major power relations.

Second, these academics returned with new thinking on international relations. They brought back an appreciation of recent changes in international relations theory. They held an interest in using Korea and East Asia's historical experience to better understand international relations. Importantly, these academics also demonstrated a growing interest in Australia and Canada and their roles as middle powers.

By the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, these academics started moving into positions of power. The unique academic/policy nexus in South Korea is such that academic compete for policy influence, but also transform into policymakers as senior officials in line-departments or presidential advisors. This in turn would ultimately ensure that government support to further explore the middle power concept and its applicability to Korea. Government grant programs under the middle power banner appeared and middle power seminars popped up across the country. From here, South Korea's contribution to the middle power revival school was born.

However, concepts do not always cross borders unmolested. Einar Wigen notes that concepts go through an 'imperfectly entangled language game' in which they pass from one language to another as 'conventionalized translation equivalents' with imperfect correlations. International relations concepts passing from English to Korean are influenced by Korea's unique geography, history, politics, and culture. The middle power concept would thus come to hold distinct meanings as it entered Korean usage. Three broad approaches emerged in South Korea's academia:

1. **Adoption.** In this approach, the middle power concept as used in the 1990s was directly and deliberately adopted and applied to South Korea. At the time, this implied South Korea still had further to go on developing the characteristic diplomatic behaviors associated with middle powers. It had yet to demonstrate sustained interests and efforts in global public goods, such as multilateralism, development, nuclear non-proliferation, the environment or peacekeeping. This meant becoming a middle power required further efforts to develop a more global focus, working closely with like-minded states, and taking on greater international responsibility.

2. **Adaptation.** In this approach, specific aspects of the middle power concept were adapted to Korea's circumstances. At the beginning of the Cold War, Australia and Canada had used the inherent ambiguity of the middle power term to elicit the support of states not so obviously aligned. It served the diplomatic objectives of certain states to position themselves between the superpowers to enable freer diplomatic maneuverability. This implied South Korea could also take a more flexible and responsive approach to being a middle power, and even position itself between developing and developed states, between China and the United States, and even between North Korea and the globe, as others limited their diplomatic options in opposing platforms.

3. **Reinvention.** Others saw the middle power term as dated and not reflective of East Asia or the Korean experience. They sought to reinvent the term to suit the modern era and Korea's unique historical and contemporary conditions. While there are multiple examples, one prominent and timely example involved the use of network theory to argue that South Korea was a middle power because of its capacity to act as a node—sometimes in
Understandably, the end result of these different approaches has been a degree of foreign policy discontinuity as academics in different presidential administrations moved into positions of power. Over the last two decades, each administration has pursued their own unique interpretation of middle power diplomacy (leaving plenty of work and sometimes confusion for scholars of South Korea’s middle power diplomacy). There is only one point on which each administration agreed — it would be ridiculous to think of South Korea as anything but a middle power!

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Return to the Peninsula