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CONTINUITY IN SOUTH KOREAN FOREIGN POLICY

By Jeffrey Robertson

Abstract

The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) launched in August 2008 and transformed into a treaty-based inter-governmental organization in October 2012. The GGGI positioned South Korea at the forefront of a movement to address a defining global issue and reflected classic middle power diplomacy. Despite its apparent success, the momentum of support enjoyed by the GGGI did not carry through to the subsequent administration. This raises important questions regarding foreign policy continuity in South Korea: Is foreign policy continuity still important to contemporary states? Why has South Korea been particularly challenged by foreign policy continuity? What measures could be undertaken to improve foreign policy continuity in South Korea?

This article seeks to answer these questions. It first explores continuity in foreign policy in the context of a dynamic international environment. The article then turns to the distinct structural impediments to foreign policy continuity faced by South Korea. The paper utilizes the example of APEC to ascertain optimal policy inputs for continuity and associates these with practical recommendations to supplement and ultimately complement constitutional reform – the main impediment to foreign policy continuity in South Korea. The article concludes with a look at what increased continuity could mean to South Korean foreign policy.

Key Words: *South Korea, foreign policy, continuity, middle power, constitutional reform.*

Continuity in South Korean Foreign Policy

The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) launched as a non-profit foundation under Article 32 of the Civil Code of the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) in August 2008 and transformed into a treaty-based intergovernmental organization in October 2012. As a foreign policy initiative, it was visionary. The GGGI positioned South Korea at the forefront of a movement to address the defining global issue of the post-Cold War era. It concentrated diplomatic resources in a specific policy niche. It encompassed coalition building and demonstrated diplomatic activism. It shook off South Korea's historical association with security, political legitimacy, and economic modernization, and replaced it with a commitment to global leadership and good international citizenship. In foreign policy tradition, it recalled classic middle power diplomacy – Canada's work on human rights and peacekeeping, and Australia's work on non-proliferation and trade liberalization during the early 1990s. The GGGI positioned South Korea as the innovative global middle power of the 2000s.

The GGGI was one part of a multifaceted policy initiative to raise the nation's diplomatic profile. It enjoyed the full support of the Lee Myung-bak administration (February 2008 – December 2012). Yet, even before the administration's end, cracks began to appear. As presidential elections loomed, efforts to ratify the agreement to establish the GGGI as an international organization in the National Assembly faltered. With strong ties to Lee Myung-bak,¹ commentators questioned its future.² In the early stages of the Park Geun-hye administration, it was all but discarded.³ Despite subsequent efforts to position green growth in the new government's agenda, the momentum was lost. The GGGI was forfeited to the lack of continuity in South Korean foreign policy.

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The case of the GGGI is a cautionary tale that turns our attention to questions of continuity in foreign policy: Is foreign policy continuity important to contemporary states? Why has South Korea been particularly challenged by foreign policy continuity? What measures could be undertaken to improve foreign policy continuity in South Korea? This article seeks to answer these questions. It first explores continuity in foreign policy in the context of a dynamic international environment. The article then turns to the distinct structural impediments to foreign policy continuity faced by South Korea. The paper then utilizes the example of APEC to ascertain optimal policy inputs for continuity and associates these with practical recommendations to supplement and ultimately complement constitutional reform – the main impediment to foreign policy continuity in South Korea. The article concludes with a look at what increased continuity could mean to South Korean foreign policy.

Foreign Policy Continuity

To speak on the importance of continuity in foreign policy seems to be at odds with contemporary sentiment. Across the globe, leaders buoyed on by domestic constituencies are seeking to break with long-standing, sometimes blindly-accepted conventions of the international environment.⁵ This is occurring at both the policy and practice levels. Policies, including those relating to security alliances, trade, and the movement of people, which stood throughout the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era, are being questioned.⁶ Practices, including those relating to status, hierarchy, secrecy, and sovereignty, which have stood since the transformation from the 'old' to 'new' diplomacy at end of the First World War, are similarly being questioned.⁷ Why then should continuity be an issue of concern to a state as young and dynamic as South Korea?

First, foreign policy continuity concerns reputation. States and the individuals that represent them, judge future behavior based on previous behavior,⁸ and establish, strengthen and maintain reputation to demonstrate consistency and credibility.⁹ A state that consistently demonstrates credibility in its actions finds it easier to signal policy intent, while a state that consistently fails to demonstrate credibility finds it harder to signal policy intent.¹⁰ This applies not only to security interaction¹¹ but also other areas of foreign policy interaction.¹² Continuity builds and strengthens diplomatic reputation.

Second, continuity in foreign policy concerns policy capacity – the motivation, inspiration, organization, management, funding, and ultimately political momentum to sustain a specific course of action. In order to put their own resources behind a policy, partner states need to be confident that this capacity will continue long enough for a program to succeed or to become self-sustaining. Within the exigencies of domestic political processes, there must be the means to maintain policy capacity, to encourage partners to buy into policy initiatives. Continuity demonstrates the capacity to sustain support for initiatives through to completion.

Third, continuity in foreign policy concerns the perception of the roles played by a state. Roles have a particular impact on the creation of foreign policy. As noted by Thies and Breuning: "Roles... make intuitive sense to policymakers"¹³ who base individual decisions and actions on their conception of the national role, including "general decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and the functions, if any their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system."¹⁴ A policymaker's conception of the state and their 'image' of appropriate diplomatic behavior underpins decision-making. Over time, decision-makers – such as diplomats, speechwriters, or policymakers – internalize a set of beliefs regarding how they should behave, which serve as a "cultural script" or "blueprint."¹⁵ Continuity reinforces role perceptions and thus increases predictability in diplomatic interaction.

Despite the above, there are no studies that focus specifically on foreign policy continuity. There are a large number of studies that touch upon continuity within the context of change.¹⁶ However, these studies can be distinguished from the current study. First, these studies generally do not focus on change and continuity of *policy* (courses of action selected from among alternatives to guide and determine decision-making), but rather change and continuity in *tradition* (patterns of thought, action, or behavior transmitted through material objects or cultural constructions through time). Second, these studies generally pay more attention to change than continuity. This reflects the normalization of continuity in states, such as China, Russia, France, India, and other states with long-established foreign policy traditions, as well as the tendency of academic research to be conducted on states with long-established foreign policy traditions. Put another way, the majority of such studies look at changes to long-established traditions rather than continuity and the building of tradition in younger, more dynamic, states.

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**The Challenges to Foreign Policy Continuity in South Korea**

The lack of continuity in South Korean foreign policy stems from a range of structural impediments, including: single five-year presidential terms; an imbalance in executive/legislative influence; a weak party system with a preference for differentiation amongst political leaders; and the absence of bipartisanship on core issues. These issues are well recognized as impediments to public administration and governance, but are rarely addressed in the context of foreign policy continuity.¹⁷

The Constitution of the Republic of Korea was written in the summer of 1987, marking the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. Since that summer, the constitution has structured “the way in which democracy evolves” and defines “the range of body politics.”¹⁸ In the aftermath of the democratic transition with popular trust in government at low levels the constitution was a guarded success. It limited the presidency to a single five-year term, provided the legislature with four-year terms and greatly increased its power. Yet, as the democratization period recedes into the more distant past, public demands on the political system have changed. There are calls for both a transformation in political culture and more effective governance – greater adherence to the spirit of democracy and at the same time capable, efficient, and productive government. It is the latter of these that particularly applies to foreign policy continuity.

The single five-year term combined with the office’s overwhelming dominance in foreign policy is an impediment to effective policy. Foreign policy initiatives require more than a single five-year term. They need ongoing active support or at least a willingness to sustain them. Westminster parliamentary systems with a degree of relative political party stability allows countries, such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, to maintain a greater degree of continuity. Presidential systems with a degree of relative political party stability and more than a single term allow countries, such as the United States, a greater amount of time to consolidate initiatives before changeover. The single five-year term and the overwhelming dominance of the presidential office in foreign policy means that a new administration must implement its program in a timeframe that is not conducive to either domestic administration or international diplomacy.

On coming to power, a new administration routinely makes new political appointments to key positions and establishes new programs. This means there is at least a six to twelve-month settling in period during which the bureaucracy is less effective.

In certain cases, more fundamental administrative changes, such as reorganizing ministry functions can lead to a longer settling in period. On coming to power, the Park Geun-hye administration reorganized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, reassigning the trade function to the newly formed Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE). An assessment of the efficacy of combining trade and foreign affairs in a single ministry is beyond the scope of this paper (and has been the subject of multiple studies in other jurisdictions). However, the fact that such reorganizations can occur without substantial research and legislative debate, and the fact that such reorganizations are immensely disruptive to the administration foreign policy, are central to the study.

“On each change of administration successful initiatives were lost to policy differentiation”

Reflecting the above, a new administration effectively has four years to implement its key diplomatic initiatives. The nature of international diplomacy means that only in rare cases when circumstances are conducive will there be enough time to even commence a new diplomatic initiative. Election periods in partner states, routine pre-scheduled diplomatic events, unexpected international crises, and the ever-recurring unexpected crises with North Korea, mean that within a four-year period there is little time to effectively concentrate resources to make progress on key diplomatic initiatives. Consider the Park Geun-hye administration: On coming to power in February 2013, the Park administration implemented fundamental administrative changes affecting MOFA and MOTIE. At the same time, it had to deal with the response to a North Korean nuclear test undertaken two weeks earlier. During 2013, it also had to deal with a distracted United States as attention turned inwards to prevent a government shutdown, a worsening crisis in Syria attracting global attention, and to end the year, a unilateral announcement by China on the establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea covering South Korean claimed territory, and the announcement of China’s own key diplomatic initiative, the One Belt, One Road initiative. It’s fair to say the Park administration’s diplomatic initiatives – Trustpolitik, Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), and the Eurasia Initiative – faced an uphill battle from the start.

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subject.²⁵ Reports and briefs indicated a high-level of knowledge regarding the proposed initiative as an option to address the challenges. In November 1989, economic and foreign ministers of Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States met in Canberra. APEC was born.

APEC is a unique case. In November 2016, APEC marked its 28th economic leaders' meeting in Peru. In the context of continuity, it approaches a Weberian ideal type – a logically constructed abstraction used to highlight, explain, contrast, and compare specific phenomenon. In Australia, the APEC initiative has sustained continuous support, despite the two mainstream parties having widely different views on multilateralism.²⁶ What does APEC tell us about foreign policy continuity?

First, foreign policy continuity is strengthened by the bureaucracy investing in an initiative. Rather than a top-down imposition of an idea, APEC was the result of bottom-up filtering of ideas.²⁷ When the bureaucracy has the ability to initiate, prepare, lead, and implement an initiative, it assumes a degree of responsibility for its continuity. The bureaucracy does not associate the initiative with the government of the day, but rather with organizational and personal accomplishment. Foreign policy is always decided by the executive, but is also interpreted and shaped by the bureaucracy. Bureaucracies by their nature are rational, efficient, and objective-oriented institutions. Their specialist nature means that they are inherently predisposed to continuity as a means to increase predictability. The value of an empowered bureaucracy goes beyond policy implementation to policy creation and development. An empowered bureaucracy can advise and most importantly, advise against, policy decisions of the executive, thus tempering and moderating more rampant political excesses. Essentially, an initiative becomes de-politicized and at the same time bureaucratized.

In the context of South Korea, strengthening the independent policy capacity of the bureaucracy would require implementing measures to depoliticize the civil service. This could be achieved through exempting government policy think-tanks from political appointments on administration changeovers and providing further training to lower and mid-level staff in policy creation. While understandably the most difficult, promoting an organizational culture that encourages innovation and new ideas is essential. The Australian DFAT InnovationXChange program serves as an ideal example.²⁸

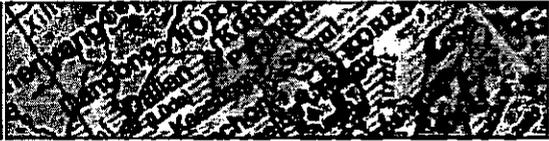
Second, foreign policy continuity is strengthened when the domestic constituency invests in an initiative. APEC and its forerunner PECC were the genesis of tripartite network of government, business and academic elite.²⁹ Support filtered across these networks to reach domestic constituencies even before the government sought to formalize the initiative. When the domestic constituency has the ability to directly influence an initiative, it assumes a degree of responsibility for its continuity. The initiative is not associated with a specific party, political movement, event, or personality, but rather with an idea.

In the context of South Korea, a significant missing link between the government of the day and the domestic constituency is the lack of an informed organization perceived to be neutral and independent. There is no better example than the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). After an inadequate performance in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference negotiations, in 1921 a group of diplomats, financiers, scholars, and lawyers formed the CFR to ensure the United States was better prepared for decision-making in world affairs. Much like think-tanks, it informs public debate, directly engages decision-makers, and serves as a ready source of specialist insight. Distinct from think-tanks, it derives no commercial, government, or political patronage. Creating such an independent, nongovernmental, nonprofit, and nonpartisan think-tank, above the political fray, would ensure long-term national interests are put above political interests in what would be the nation's premier source of foreign policy research and analysis. The Australian establishment of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), established for similar reasons, serves as an ideal recent example.³⁰

Third, foreign policy continuity is strengthened by the legislature investing in an initiative. The Australian Parliamentary Library and the Australian Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) published records demonstrate the high-level of information, research, and analysis provided to Members of Parliament, Senators, and Parliamentary Committees. The legislature was well-informed, provided with the ability to adequately research, recommend, initiate, and review policy. The legislature therefore assumed a degree of responsibility for the continuity of the initiative.

In the context of South Korea, strengthening the National Assembly Research Service (NARS) and the secretariat of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee would enable National Assembly members to be provided a

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similarly high level of information, research, and analysis. The Parliamentary Library of the Australian Parliament is a good example. It provides confidential, authoritative, objective, and nonpartisan advice to Members of Parliament, Senators, and Parliamentary Committees. The Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security (FADS) section has highly skilled foreign policy researchers who, through their constant interaction with decision-makers – sometimes over decades – hold a degree of institutional knowledge unmatched outside of parliament. The Parliamentary Library thus balances the commercial, government, or political prerogatives of external providers of policy advice. Most importantly, it provides a degree of continuity in the legislative capacity to investigate, assess, and evaluate foreign policy.

Benefits of Improving Foreign Policy Continuity

The measures above would not only address continuity but also other foreign policy challenges emanating from the nation's policy machinery – including reducing public perceptions of presidential excess, encouraging innovation and change in the foreign policy bureaucracy, and strengthening public consensus on the national role.

The reason for the next president's early entry into the presidential Blue House is public frustration with what's been labelled 'imperial presidency.' In South Korea, the president has always been dominant in foreign policy, with the influence of the National Assembly, the bureaucracy, and ultimately the public, severely limited. The Park administration reflected the trend in many states towards greater executive control over foreign policy. But reflecting South Korea's modern history, and the association of Park with her father's authoritarian rule, greater executive control over foreign policy was always going to be a challenge.

As noted, on coming to power, the Park administration reorganized the foreign policy bureaucracy, removing the trade portfolio from foreign affairs and placing it with industry and energy. While in South Korea it is the president's prerogative to reorganize the bureaucracy, doing so without discussion, debate or even a detailed rationale, seemed to signal what was to come. The negotiation of the 2015 "final and irreversible" agreement on "comfort women" with Japan, divided the public. The decision to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea sealed public perceptions. The policies were not necessarily bad or poorly planned, but the lack of consultation appeared to many as evidence of an "imperial presidency."

Strengthening the National Assembly's capacity to address foreign policy issues, such as through better resourcing for the secretariat of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee and the National Assembly Research Service (NARS), empowers the bureaucracy to better express opinions and thus reduce presidential excesses in policy. Leaders need frank and fearless policy advice. At the same time, senior staff need to know that providing sometimes unwanted or unappreciated advice will not negatively affect their career. Encouraging foreign ministry career officers to express opinions and reducing political appointments allows frank and fearless policy advice rather than encouragement or facilitation of political excesses.

The measures above would also potentially encourage innovation and change within the nation's foreign policy machinery. We are in a unique historical period during which both the policies and practices of diplomacy are being questioned. Policies, including long-standing conventions on security alliances, trade, and the movement of people, which stood throughout the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era, are in question. Practices, including those relating to status, hierarchy, secrecy, and sovereignty, which have stood since the transformation from the "old" to "new" diplomacy at the end of the First World War, are similarly being questioned.

South Korea is in a particularly difficult position with a bureaucratic culture that emphasizes seniority and stability over success and achievement. This has led to a conservative, risk averse ministry unable to rapidly respond to change. A good example is the use of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. Social media requires a willingness to give greater responsibility to officers outside of the public affairs section, take risk and accept that mistakes will be made. Individual South Korean diplomats are not prolific users of Twitter or Facebook. Diplomats are afraid of making mistakes and see social media as risky. The risk averse nature of the ministry means South Korea is losing to competitors, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands or Sweden who have not only accepted risk and mistakes, but have prepared strategic plans encouraging them.

Foreign ministries are notoriously conservative institutions, but evidence, such as the Netherlands appointment of the Advisory Committee on Modernising the Diplomatic Service, the U.S. State Department's appointment of a Representative to Silicon Valley, or the Australian InnovationXChange program show that

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innovation and change is possible. Encouraging leadership, collaboration, openness, and innovation are essential to a foreign ministry that must adapt to dynamic change in policy and practices.

Finally, the measures above would also serve to strengthen public consensus on South Korea's national role. South Korea, like all states, fulfills multiple national roles. The most prominent national role over the last four administrations has been the conceptualization of South Korea as a middle power. While there is no agreement on what constitutes a middle power,³¹ for the last ten years there has been a growing consensus that South Korea's national role has evolved to conform to most interpretations of what constitutes a middle power.³²

While the Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak administrations have been widely described as demonstrating middle power diplomacy, the Park Geun-hye administration was the first to actively promote middle power diplomacy as a national strategy. Middle powers are important to global governance as entrepreneurs, initiators, facilitators, and balancers. Characteristic middle power behavior includes preferences for activist and innovative policy approaches; coalition building, particularly through multilateral engagement; the concentration of policy capital in niche areas with the highest potential for success; and the promotion of policy as "good international citizenship."³³ Strengthening bureaucratic, domestic constituency, and legislative investment in policy would not only improve foreign policy continuity but also strengthen public consensus on South Korea's national role as a middle power.

An Unprecedented Opportunity to Address Foreign Policy Continuity

Addressing the problem of foreign policy continuity must be a priority for the next South Korean administration. Commentators will inevitably put forward a number of priorities. "Fix the relationship with China," "strengthen relations with the U.S.," or "improve relations with Japan" – a standard set of suggestions, which have been routinely churned out a month before every South Korean presidential election since the end of the Cold War. But the most important priorities do not concern THAAD, the U.S. alliance, or Japanese territorial claims, but rather the nation's policy machinery. The most important priority for the

next South Korean president will be to address the challenges of continuity in foreign policy.

It pays to let creativity, imagination, and even fiction into the policy process.³⁴ Imagination, wrapped in authoritarian or populist implementation, played a central role in South Korea's development. The New Village movement, the Heavy and Chemical Industry (HCI), or the Sunshine Policy serve as prime examples. Had South Korea continued full support of the GGGI and associated green growth initiatives, where would the nation stand today?

Green growth is about addressing the two challenges of expanding global economic growth and ensuring environmental sustainability. As noted by the OECD, green growth concerns "fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies."³⁵ In a rapidly changing world, this is the biggest challenge humanity faces. Arguably, this is a challenge more significant than nuclear non-proliferation, trade liberalization, human rights, peacekeeping, and other challenges that were addressed by middle powers in the 1990s.

If South Korea had continued full support of the GGGI and associated green growth initiatives the nation would be in a different place. It would have confirmed South Korea's ability to use new and creative diplomatic approaches; secured its position as a state able to host and transform institutions; demonstrated its capacity to facilitate coalitions between like-minded states; and confirmed its ability to mediate between developing and economically developed states. A fully supported and strengthened GGGI would have positioned South Korea as an innovator, entrepreneur, facilitator, and mediator in global governance. For South Korea to maximize its benefit from investment in costly diplomatic initiatives, the nation requires foreign policy continuity.



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