

MIKTA

## Can South Korea Reshape MIKTA?

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, Seoul is tasked with chairing the middle power grouping to global significance.

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By **Troy Stangarone**

South Korea is experienced in running international fora during international crises. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Seoul served as the chair of the fifth G-20 summit. Now it finds itself as the chair of MIKTA during the combined global health and economic crisis sparked by COVID-19.

During the Seoul G-20 in 2010, South Korea shepherded agreements among the world's major powers that helped to

strengthen the global economic and financial system. While the summit endorsed the work of the Financial Stability Board on systemically important financial institutions and new capital requirements for financial institutions under Basel III, South Korea also drove an agenda that included the creation of financial safety nets to aid countries during economic crises and added a development agenda to the G-20's focus.

MIKTA is a different type of forum than the G-20. Founded in 2013 by Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, MIKTA serves as a cross-regional consultative platform designed to find creative solutions to regional and global problems.

Previous middle power initiatives have focused on discrete issues, such as Canada's work to initiate the Ottawa Process that resulted in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction. MIKTA currently lacks that sort of specific focus.

While MIKTA has potential as a middle power convening group, it has yet to live up to that potential. The COVID-19 crisis and South Korea's role as the chair of MIKTA could, however, serve as a catalyst to adjust the grouping's mission and make it a more effective interlocutor with a broader set of middle powers.

South Korea and its partners in MIKTA share a common interest in ensuring that the international system remains grounded in a rules-based order, one that is increasingly in question with the uncertainty surrounding U.S. global leadership and China's rise. That interest in maintaining an international system bedded in rules is a strong basis for cooperation.

What makes MIKTA unique, however, is its limited membership and cross-regional nature. That design makes MIKTA small enough to avoid becoming encumbered by its membership, as has happened to some international organizations, but also gives the group a unique nature that could help bring together the perspectives of different parts of the world.

It would be natural if South Korea were to also use its time as the MIKTA chair to focus on North Korea and the existing COVID-19 crisis. MIKTA has previously been supportive of inter-Korean

relations and on multiple occasions has called on North Korea to live up to its international obligations, and it recently put out a joint statement expressing its solidarity with the international community on handling COVID-19. Dealing with these two issues alone could be a daunting agenda in itself.

In the current crisis, there is a global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, face masks, and medical gowns, while developing areas such as Africa lack the number of ventilators that would be needed if the continent were to see the types of infections that other parts of the world have seen.

This is a space where MIKTA could play an important supporting role in providing assistance and coordinating supplies to affected regions. While MIKTA countries do not have the capacity to meet all the needs of the world's developing countries during the crisis, MIKTA could help to identify needs and direct resources to developing countries, including PPE and test kits that its members are able to produce beyond their own needs.

As one of the exemplars of how to handle the crisis, South Korea could serve as an example in this area during its time as chair. It recently hosted an online presentation for 400 health officials in 13 countries on its containment measures. It is also ramping up its exports of test kits. While South Korea has its own unique role to play in the crisis, working through MIKTA could help to amplify that assistance for countries dealing with COVID-19.

With the nature of the COVID-19 crisis and the need to find a vaccine, there is also an opportunity for MIKTA to play a role in the development of new standards and norms for the cross-border transfer of medical data for use in artificial intelligence to develop new medical treatments.

More broadly, South Korea should use its time as chair to prepare MIKTA for a larger role post-crisis while honing the group's focus. At the moment, MIKTA has worked as a consultative platform on issues such as the Inclusive Digital Economy Hub and developing educational curriculum for refugees. Each was developed by the chair at the time.

Focus would be key to a more impactful MIKTA. As an existing group, MIKTA can pursue efforts on a series of discrete challenges facing the international community rather than a single issue, but would need limit its efforts to a small number of issues to ensure that it does not lose focus.

There are two ways that South Korea could encourage MIKTA to develop deeper norms. The first would be to serve as a platform for middle power discussion on norms for emerging areas such as the use of artificial intelligence in military and civilian applications. Because of MIKTA's cross-regional nature it can work to develop rules that take into consideration unique circumstances in different regions. As a platform for norm development, MIKTA would put forward proposals for new norms and regulations that could be adopted by other middle powers.

The second would be to focus on deepening MIKTA from an institutional standpoint. While MIKTA could keep its structure with a core group of countries, on specific issues it could look to recruit like-minded partners to further develop its work on certain issues.

If MIKTA is to serve in this capacity, one gap that will need to be filled is its lack of African representation. While complete inclusivity is perhaps not achievable while maintaining the flexibility that comes from having a small group, adding a member that could bring the perspective of an African country would help to fill a significant gap in MIKTA's capacity.

Any shift in the role of MIKTA would require the agreement of South Korea's partners, but the challenges for global coordination and action that COVID-19 crisis have presented suggest that the world may no longer be able to rely on the United States to lead a global response in the face of a future crisis. While the middle powers that make up MIKTA do not have the capacity to replace the United States in the international system, the group can serve an important role in coordinating for middle powers in future crises and as a platform for experimenting with new norms.

## The Author

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