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South Korea's two-year term in the UNSC: looking far and wide

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In January this year, South Korea began its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This marks South Korea's third time serving in the UNSC; the first time from 1996 to 1997 and the second from 2013 to 2014. South Korea's return to the UNSC supports the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's plans for South Korea to become a Global Pivotal State, one that contributes to freedom, peace, and prosperity. During the two-year term, South Korea has pledged to lead discussions on issues relating to North Korea, peacekeeping, women, peace and security, and new security threats.

A "global" pivotal state means looking beyond the Peninsula

If South Korea's first term as a non-permanent member from 1996 to 1997 marked its debut into the UNSC, the second term from 2013 to 2014 can be thought of as period showcasing its international and responsible image. This third term should focus on finessing South Korea's ability to exercise influence over specific issues that go beyond the Korean Peninsula. Demonstrating South Korea's ability to effectively address other global security concerns is imperative in order to be taken seriously as a global player and gain the trust of other states, especially those that are geographically far removed from the Korean Peninsula.

During South Korea's two-year term, key objectives should be to refine South Korea's agenda-setting capacity for a future-oriented security landscape while establishing continuity on topics that South Korea was engaged with during the first two terms in the

UNSC. Here, South Korea's foreign minister has stated that one area of focus will be on emerging security threats, including cyber. This is an appropriate and necessary agenda, one that complements both the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as well as South Korea's national security objectives. Specifically, both the SDGs and South Korea's national security objectives recognize the increasing role of technology as well as the need to establish rules to address the rapidly evolving digital transformations to protect people, businesses, and government. Indeed, there is a clear link between cyber security and building resilient infrastructure (SDG 9) and inclusive and strong institutions (SDG 16), just to name a few.

In pursuit of this goal, South Korea should host a high-level open debate on cyber security during its month of presidency in June. Given that the first time that this issue was discussed separately by the UNSC was in June 2021, it would be a well-timed opportunity to review how international events of the past three years have shaped the cyber landscape. Here, South Korea should liaise with the various relevant UN instruments, such as the Open-Ended Working Group on security and the use of information and communications technologies 2021-2025 (OEWG), which will hold its seventh substantive session in March and a high-level roundtable on ICT security capacity building at the UN headquarters in May. Accruing administrative and technical expertise ensures that South Korea has a seat at the table in future discussions relating to cyber security and promotes synergies with cyber dialogues South Korea has set up with countries like the US and the United Kingdom.

South Korea's decision to focus on women, peace and security (WPS) is noteworthy given that it is both an area of strength as well as weakness. On the one hand, South Korea has a track record of efforts to advance the WPS agenda at the international and national level. For example, South Korea's foreign ministry has hosted an annual international conference on Action with Women and Peace since 2018, and the UN Women Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality was established in 2022 to offer training programs to diverse stakeholders, conduct research, and facilitate partnerships at the national and regional levels as a pathway to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. However, South Korea also struggles with gender inequality; for example, South Korea's gender wage gap is the worst among the OECD members and women are significantly under-represented in politics.

South Korea's two-year term in the UNSC should focus on sharing best practices and lessons learned in promoting the WPS agenda, aligning the UN's WPS agenda with its own domestic objectives to demonstrate how South Korea has contributed to furthering the cause, and cooperating closely with other non-permanent members who have identified women, peace and security as areas of priority. This includes working with Mozambique, which convened a high-level open debate on WPS, to follow up on the goals set in preparation for the 25th year of Resolution 1325 (2000) which first established WPS as an UN agenda.

Parallel to these efforts, it is important for South Korea to pick up where it left off during its first and second terms at the UNSC. Specifically for South Korea, these issues include peacekeeping efforts and non-proliferation. Doing so builds a reputation as a reliable defender and interested party on each issue. It is worthwhile to note that countries that have been recurring UNSC non-permanent members have concentrated their focus on a number of key issues. Japan, for example, has served as a non-permanent member of the UNSC 12 times and have taken up issues such as peacebuilding, human security, rule of

law, and strengthening the functions of the UN as priorities. South Korea could strengthen its position as a productive member of the UNSC and important global player by developing its own portfolio of issues that it continues to work outside of and during terms on the UNSC.

Working Behind the Scenes to Restore Focus on North Korea's Weapons Programs and Human Rights Violations

Meanwhile, in advancing discussions on North Korea in particular, South Korea faces a host of problems. Namely, conflicts in Europe and the Middle East divert international attention away from the Northeast Asian region. Moreover, a divided UNSC obstructs meaningful progress on addressing threats posed by North Korea, such as its nuclear and missile development and testing. Indeed, the last time that the UNSC adopted a resolution condemning North Korea was in 2017. Since then, UNSC action on North Korea has been blocked by China and Russia and the deadlock is expected to continue. Further complicating the matter is the fact that South Korea's own relationship with Russia is at a rocky point after South Korea expressed support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion in 2022 and the growing military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang.

In such context, it would be imprudent for South Korea to go heads-on in trying to bring China and Russia to the table to address the North Korea problem. Rather, South Korea should work behind the scenes to create a political milieu that is conducive to China and Russia taking action and raises the cost for those that condone North Korea's behavior.

As a non-permanent member, South Korea can shape the agendas and procedures of the UNSC through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms including acting as the UNSC president for the duration of one month and as penholder, or cooperating with the penholder, where South Korea would lead the drafting of a UNSC resolution. Specific issues can also be raised as a formal agenda with the approval of nine UNSC members. Through these avenues, South Korea can initiate discussions and engage in coalition-building to propel a specific issue.

Here, an appropriate topic includes the implications of North Korea's human rights violation on global security. One aspect of this theme is the link between North Korea's overseas workers and its nuclear development; specifically, the violation of workers' rights, including harsh working conditions and siphoning of wages to be diverted to fund North Korea's nuclear development. This topic would breathe new life into Resolution 2397 passed in 2017, which acknowledged that revenue generated from North Korean overseas workers contribute to North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programs and decided that UN member states shall repatriate North Korean overseas workers from their territory by the end of 2019. This is also a timely issue in light of reports claiming that as many as 3,000 North Koreans working in factories in China have taken part in riots to protest over unpaid wages earlier this year.

The topic is also a suitable one to discuss among other non-permanent members (in addition to South Korea, non-permanent members include Algeria, Guyana, Sierra Leone and Slovenia, Switzerland, Ecuador, Japan, Malta and Mozambique), a number of whom have experience hosting or expelling North Korean workers. For example, in 2016 and 2017, Malta and Algeria respectively stopped issuing work visas for North Koreans and have claimed to have sent all the workers back. In 2018, Mozambique provided evidence to the UNSC Panel of Experts that a joint fishing venture that hired about 40 North Korean

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workers had been dissolved, although it reported in 2020 that almost 100 North Korean doctors are still working in the country. Through dialogue and consensus-building, this is an opportunity for South Korea to create a norm against the use of North Korean workers, which will, in the long term, come to constrict China and Russia's practice of hosting of North Korean workers.

Conclusion

A successful two-year term will help establish South Korea as a genuine global pivotal state. Despite the challenges facing South Korea on advancing discussions on North Korea, there is also much working in its favor. Current foreign minister Cho Tae-yul is a former ambassador to the UN who is familiar with the mechanisms of the UN and brings with him his network of personal contacts. South Korea can also tap into and build on the institutional memory of having previously served on the UNSC. There is also potential for positive chemistry among other non-permanent members, such as Japan, which will help acquire political momentum in pushing agendas forward. Here, South Korea needs to resist striving for short-term goals and instead look to how it can shape the future security landscape. It can do so by addressing North Korea related issues in a low-key manner and taking up issues that affect global security such as cyber and WPS, making full use of its entrepreneurial and technical capacities.

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