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Understanding South Korean Middle Power Diplomacy Discourses Through the Concept of *Sadae* (Serving the Great)

Young Chul Cho and William A. Callahan

This study aims to examine South Korean middle power diplomacy discourses using premodern Korea's diplomatic thinking-cum-practice of sadae (serving the great) as a heuristic device. It is argued that current discourses of South Korea as a middle power resonate with sadae because they strive to secure the existing liberal international order led by the West and the United States. It also argues that it is both necessary and healthy for South Korean middle power diplomacy studies to denaturalize its self-evident faith in the existing liberal international order—a not universal but particular order among several possible others in history—with South Korea celebrating and appropriating liberal values. This would prepare South Korean middle power diplomacy research to tackle uncertainty, difference, and pluralism in global politics while producing more responsible and responsive scholarship in international relations.

Keywords: Middle power diplomacy; IR knowledge production; *sadae* (serving the great); South Korea; liberal international order.

* * *

South Korea is no longer the war-torn, impoverished country that was depicted in the American war-comedy drama *M*A*S*H* (aired on CBS from 1972 to 1983). Since the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), South Korea

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has been making tremendous progress in almost all spheres—from politics to economics to culture. This rapid and successful development has allowed South Korea to become a well-suited and responsible member of international society that contributes to global governance along with developed countries and great powers. The scope of the South Korean perspective has expanded beyond inter-Korean and East Asian regional relations to the ones that are "more international." Considering South Korea's elevated international standing and capacity, elites and scholars of international relations (IR) studies there have considered redefining and repositioning the country in the era of post-Cold War globalization (Ikenberry & Mo, 2013; Mo, 2015). Additionally, there has been an increasing demand in South Korea for the establishment of a Korean school of IR. This would produce the theoretical resources needed to guide the country's foreign behavior and develop a distinctive South Korean academic niche in the global IR community, like the English school (Chun, 2010; H. K. Kim & Cho, 2009). South Korea has consequently been treated as a significant middle power, and scholarship in middle power diplomacy has been substantially underway in South Korea since the mid-1990s and has been one of the most popular research topics since 2010. While there is abundant research on South Korean middle power diplomacy that includes its definitions, roles, and strategies as a middle power (E. Kim, 2015; S. J. Lee, 2016; Sohn, 2020), there is scant research on the ways in which middle power diplomacy knowledge is produced by IR scholars in the country.

This paper aims to examine South Korean middle power discourses using premodern Korea's diplomatic thinking-cum-practice of *sadae* (serving the great) as a heuristic device[1] rather than a modern IR theoretical tool often associated with the principle of causality. *Sadae* was a way of interacting with hegemonic China during the premodern East Asian tributary system to secure its political autonomy and survival. It is argued that current South Korean middle power diplomacy discourses resonate with *sadae* thinking since it is based on a default mindset of "securing the existing liberal international order led by the West, more to the point, America" (Ikenberry & Mo, 2013; S. Lee, 2019; S. J. Lee & Suh, 2016; Mo, 2016; Soeya & Lee, 2014). South Korean middle power diplomacy is concerned with improving the country's international standing and protecting its national interest within the liberal international order (LIO), which is considered to be the ideal IR framework for South Korea. This implies that the traditional and non-Westphalian concept of *sadae* is useful to understand the contemporary middle power reasoning that guides Seoul's strategic

[1]This implies that *sadae* will be used as a way of setting out the major traits of South Korean middle power discourses as a social phenomenon so that its prominent characteristics might be shown as clearly and explicitly as possible. *Sadae* as a heuristic device is then a method of preliminary analysis.

thinking and behavior in international politics. Thus, this paper is significant because it argues that it is both necessary and healthy for South Korean middle power diplomacy scholarship to denaturalize its self-evident faith in the existing LIO—an order that is not universal but particular among several possible others in history—with South Korea celebrating and appropriating liberal values. This would better prepare South Korean middle power diplomacy research to tackle uncertainty, difference, and pluralism in global politics while producing IR scholarship that is more responsible and responsive. While this paper's assessment of South Korean middle power diplomacy research is not exhaustive, it captures broad and conspicuous tendencies in the research. In addition, while this paper questions South Korea's uncritical faith in the existing LIO, it does not suggest that South Korean IR studies have not critically scrutinized the LIO or discussed alternate international orders (Cha, 2018, 2020; H. Lee & Jeon, 2018).

Consequently, two normative points should be noted. First, this paper does not posit that *sadae* and the LIO—concepts which were foreign to Korea before their importation and appropriation—are fundamentally inappropriate and harmful to South Korea. Rather, *sadae* as an art of "living with the great" is a common and useful technique practiced by relatively weaker powers that reveals the (semi-)peripheral's agency, role, and interest in relation to the center. Liberal values such as human rights and democracy constitute the social fabric of South Korea just as Confucian ethics have been central to Korean life. South Koreans have imported, digested, and internalized liberal values in their own ways (S. Kim, 2014), and liberal values at present are both Western and South Korean. However, the unquestioned faith of South Korean middle power diplomacy in the LIO could academically and politically translate into *sadaejuui* (*sadae*-ism), hampering creative thinking regarding ongoing global politics. *Sadaejuui* (*sadae*-ism) as the ideology of serving the great—a sort of toadyism—is problematic because it colonizes oneself by voluntarily castrating one's agency. In this paper, a distinction is made between liberal values as a critical part of human heritage and the existing LIO as a particular one formulated by certain power structures at a specific moment in history. Second, this paper's assertion of the critical consumption of the LIO in South Korean middle power discourses does not suggest that it is inevitable or desirable for South Korea to follow an illiberal and rising China in the near future. It has become increasingly popular among Chinese and even American IR scholars to postulate that Asian countries subscribe to and follow narratives of contemporary Chinese values and ideology such as *tianxia*, moral realism, and the Sino-centric tributary system once the country is in a position of dominance (D. C. Kang, 2007, 2010; Ren, 2020; Yan, 2019; Yan, Bell, & Zhe, 2011). However, it is highly

unlikely for Asians to do so in the foreseeable future, as there is a gulf between the rosy pictures projected by Chinese IR and Beijing's current ways of interacting with its people and other Asians. Perhaps, it is necessary for Beijing to reflect on this Asian skepticism to achieve what it really wants—international respect (Cho, 2019; Cho & Ahn, 2017; Cunningham-Cross & Callahan, 2011).

The following section discusses the theoretical aspects of premodern Korea's diplomatic thinking-cum-practice of *sadae*, which is used as a heuristic device to analyze South Korean middle power diplomacy discourses. The next section provides an analytical overview of these discourses and critically explores the development of related theories. The subsequent section examines the taken-for-granted teleology of South Korean middle power diplomacy discourses in terms of *sadae* followed by a discussion on how a *sadae*-suffused South Korean middle power diplomacy that favors the LIO addresses the rise of an illiberal China. The concluding section summarizes the paper's central argument and discusses its implications.

Theoretical Context: *Sadae* as a Heuristic Device

Sadae jaso (사대자소, 事大字小), serving the great, caring for the little, was premodern Korea's (e.g., the Joseon Dynasty) diplomatic strategy of interaction with China and neighboring countries in a Sino-centric tributary system based on Confucian culture in historical East Asia. The term *sadae jaso* first appeared in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* (춘주좌전, Chunchu Jwajeon, 春秋左傳), a work published in China during the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) (Kwon, 2014, pp. 149–155). Confucianism mattered more to premodern Korea than China. It was believed that "[t]raditional Confucianism set the strong power as the center in the order of great unity, recognized its leadership to enhance, and at the same time, imposed ideological bondage of civilized virtues upon the strong powers to prevent its tyranny over neighboring states" (J. I. Kang & Lee, 2015, p. 206). As the ideals of unity and harmony require each actor to fulfill their roles, the Confucian international system in historical East Asia was inherently hierarchical with the center being superior to the periphery, unlike the Westphalian state system (Chen, 2019; D. C. Kang, 2020). However, the center was expected not to serve its own interests at the expense of small and weaker neighboring countries of the periphery. This hierarchy was theoretically beneficial for all, as the periphery benefited from the center's benevolence. Later, premodern Korea was expected to recognize and appreciate the Chinese empire as the Confucian center and treat its neighbors cordially in the *sadae jaso* diplomatic practice

of Confucian civilization. Tributary envoys, kowtowing ceremonies, and investiture were concrete methods of practicing *sadae* in reference to the Chinese center.[2] The term *sadae jaso* itself reveals that premodern Korea morally and practically accepted hierarchy and inequality as matters of course in international politics. This is significantly different from the Westphalian IR perspective which views IR as politics among equal sovereign states in an anarchic world (J. I. Kang & Lee, 2015). This paper focuses more on *sadae* than *jaso*, as the former is more central to the foreign thinking and behavior of premodern Korea.

The following questions regarding the Sino-centric tributary system lie at the heart of premodern Korea's *sadae jaso*: How should a semi-peripheral (or semi-center, to be exact) Korea define its role and status in its morally interdependent relationship with the hegemonic Chinese center and its neighboring peripheries? What strategies were the most useful for securing and exercising the country's civilizational identity and practical autonomy in a hierarchical world order? The Joseon Dynasty engaged in *sadae* due to four reasons. First, Korea wanted to secure its status as a little center (소중화, sojunghwa, 小中華) between China and neighboring countries in the East Asian civilizational community (Y. Jung, 2006). This was about status, role, and self-confirmation in a Confucian civilization. This self-avowed little center status provided a discursive matrix through which the actions and words of Korean elites confirmed China's hegemony (Park, 2017). Second, Korea aimed to secure its autonomy and prevent subjugation by paying tribute to the regional hegemon as a means of national security (Y. Jung, 2006). In fact, "investiture practice signified imperial China's respect for the political autonomy of the receiving country" (J.-Y. Lee, 2016, p. 50). Therefore, *sadae* and autonomy were not exclusive but coexisted (Kwon, 2014). The practice of investiture also implies that Korea was recognized as a civilized country (Kwon, 2010). Through rituals such as the center's enfeoffment and the periphery's tributes, both sought "peaceful coexistence" in international politics (J. I. Kang & Lee, 2015, p. 188). Third, Korea used investiture (enfeoffment and tributes) to consolidate its legitimacy and security at the level of domestic politics. Indeed, a majority of the leaders of China's tributaries "manipulated external recognition from the hegemon in a form of symbolic politics but in ways that enhanced their legitimacy at home against

[2]For the functioning of tributary relations, see D. C. Kang (2020). Also, see Chen (2019) and Zhang (2015) to understand the Chinese perspective of the tributary system. See Kwon (2010, 2014) and J.-Y. Lee (2016) to understand the Korean perspective. The Chinese perspective tends to be normative by stressing Chinese benevolence as the Confucian center while the Korean perspective focuses on Korea's practical utility of engaging with the tributary system from the periphery for its own sake. In other words, the former tends to discuss the harmony of the system while the latter tells us how (semi-)peripheral actors make use of it.

domestic rivals" (J.-Y. Lee, 2016, p. 2). Fourth, Korea practiced *sadae* to secure economic gains by accepting and using the tributary system as a trade sphere in East Asia (Hamashita, 2008; Yun, 2018). These reasons show that premodern Korea as a weaker agent did not simply submit itself to the center. It took advantage of the tributary system which was a given aspect of international relations before the arrival of the West in East Asia in the late 19th century.

At first glance, *sadae* looks similar to mainstream IR concepts such as bandwagoning, accommodation, and appeasement. Bandwagoning refers to the clear attempts of states to join forces with a rising power that is gaining supremacy in the context of the balance of power in the international system (Waltz, 1979). It is about giving in to potential threats, which is the opposite of balancing. For weaker states, accommodation is their recognition of the claims of a great power in a conflict without sacrificing their vital interests. In the parlance of both IR theory and public talk, appeasement often means weakness and cowardice, showing a serious lack of agency and will in the weaker power. At best, it is seen as an integral part of balance of power politics. Unlike these mainstream IR terms, *sadae* does not conceptually understand how the world works in terms of a balance of power, as this was foreign to East Asian Confucian thinking. In the late 19th century when China had clearly been in decline, premodern Korea avoided bandwagoning, accommodating, or appeasing the West while continuing to psychologically and practically curry favor with the Confucian center of China. *Sadae* would seem to see the world from the perspective of balancing a relationship marked by "the process of establishing and maintaining mutual obligations between state actors" (Shih et al., 2019, p. 2). This was one of relating to the center to maintain the given tributary system and secure a weaker actor's role and status within that system. The practice of *sadae* by weaker actors requires the center to perform *jaso* (caring for the little) toward the lesser actors. The loss of *sadae jaso* relationality may bring about systemic ontological insecurity. If the center cannot carry out its moral duty toward the lesser actors, it can be criticized, checked, and even overthrown according to Confucianism. *Sadae* also entails the limiting of the center in favor of the weaker.

In-Sung Jang classified *sadae* into the three categories of ideological *sadae* (*sadaejuui*), institutional *sadae* (enfeoffment and tribute), and realpolitik *sadae* (*sadae* policy) (Jang, 2014, pp. 191–195). He examined the meaning of *Sadae* as a political language to understand the correlative operation of its three aspects. While this classification is analytically acute, institutional and realpolitik *sadae* were likely to converge in the process of its practice. Instead of this classification, this paper distinguishes *sadaejuui* (*sadae*-ism) from *sadae*. *Sadaejuui* (*sadae*-ism) is an ideology of

subservience to a greater power that could be regarded as toadyism and flunkeyism. It is a total and unconditional submission to the hegemon, which was reflected in the lives, thoughts, and deeds of premodern Koreans who did not generally regard themselves as masters of their own destinies. They instead voluntarily surrendered their agency and subjectivity to a hegemon. *Sadaejuui* is an adamant belief that is both cognitive and informative to action while fervently aspiring to imitate the hegemon. As a life of service to the hegemon, self-denial and self-sacrifice are hailed as virtues, this may to some resemble a slave mentality.

In comparison, *sadae* is a strategy or technique that enables one to function effectively under any given circumstance and secure political autonomy and survival. *Sadae* depends on the prudent judgment of the formation and understanding of real politics (J. I. Kang & Lee, 2015, p. 185). The hierarchical Confucian system (e.g., the Sino-centric tributary system) was a given, inescapable condition, and premodern Korea practiced the art of living with a hegemon through *sadae* to secure its existence. Rather than an inherent characteristic of Korea, *sadae jaso* was the revelation of its semi-peripheral (or semi-center) relationship with the center and periphery.

However, *sadaejuui* (*sadae*-ism) and *sadae* are often used interchangeably in today's real politics to signify toadyism. Currently, *sadae* is an insult in both South and North Korea. For example, in the promotion of the *juche* (self-reliant) ideology and national cooperation by both Koreas, North Korea has often accused South Korea of being "America's running dog" who engages in submissive *sadae* to Washington (Cho, 2011). In South Korea, conservative politicians tend to claim that the progressive administration's foreign policy displays a disdain for the South Korea-US alliance while sympathizing with Pyongyang and obeying Beijing. Conservatives characterize progressives as pro-North Korea and pro-China "*sadae* people" ("Mi Jungsim Jung Gyeonje," 2021). Conversely, progressives view the South Korean conservative establishment as embodying a sacrosanct belief that South Korea can only achieve its security in the bosom of the United States and that the South Korea-US alliance is a matter of survival. They view Pyongyang and Beijing as clear enemies who must be crushed and contained while saying "yes" to Washington at all times (Moon, 2021). This unconditional pro-American *sadae* is neither realistic nor practical and is even dangerous in the eyes of progressives because it can risk South Korea's interests and security in the era of post-Cold War globalization. While the United States is important for South Korea, China and North Korea should be addressed prudently.

Interestingly, the term *sadae* is used more popularly in public talks and policy circles than in IR studies in South Korea. It is a politically charged term used in domestic politics for accusing rivals. However, this paper does not use *sadae* as a

politically charged term or rigorous IR theoretical tool to analyze South Korean middle power discourses but as a heuristic device to discern novel observations or a non-Westphalian understanding of middle power scholarship in South Korea.

South Korean Middle Power Discourses

Middle Power Diplomacy Scholarship as a Statecraft: A Short Overview

Since the mid-1990s, the South Korean IR community has been interested in middle power diplomacy as a useful diplomatic concept for defining the country in a complex and globalizing world. Most discourses begin with a similar narrative describing the reason behind South Korea's qualification as a significant middle power in world politics.

South Korea underwent a successful democratization after decades of authoritarian military dictatorship. Today, it is a vibrant liberal democracy whose political achievements far exceed those of former non-Western colonies (Hahm, 2008; Lim, 2019). The 1950–1953 Korean War ruined South Korea's economy, making it one of the poorest countries in the world and heavily dependent on international emergency relief. Nevertheless, the South Korean economy ranked among the 10–15th globally within seven decades, and its current GDP per capita is over 30,000 USD. South Korea has managed to achieve a "compressed modernity" (Chang, 2016). The country not only strengthened its economy but also transformed itself from a recipient country to a donor country in international development cooperation, becoming a member state of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2010. South Korea's cultural power is on the rise not just in Asia but worldwide, signified by worldwide crazes that include the boy band BTS, the academy award-winning film *Parasite* (2019), and Netflix series such as *Crash Landing on You* (2019) and *Squid Game* (2021) (Y. Kim, 2016). South Korea has hosted international events that include the G20 Summit in 2010, the OECD High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011, the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, and the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018. Its relatively small territory is home to an enormous population of over 50 million, and its human capital was ranked 15th out of 169 countries in the 2011 United Nations Human Development Index. Unlike other middle powers such as Norway and Canada, South Korea's regional geopolitical culture is still precarious, and it should be treated with care by the countries of its region. Without the ambitions of great power, South Korea can act as an effective meditator in the region due to its unique situation. Despite the definitional

debate on South Korea as a middle power (S. Kang, 2015), it is widely agreed that South Korea is a unique and significant middle power that is contributing to global governance in the 21st century (E. Kim, 2015; S. J. Lee, 2016; Sohn, 2020).

In summary, South Korea has been making tremendous progress in almost all aspects, allowing it to become a valued and responsible middle power in the era of post-Cold War globalization. Therefore, it is essential to redefine and position South Korea in world politics according to its elevated status and capacity for itself and the world.

Consequently, precisely what roles South Korea can and must play in world politics are a key subject of research. Yul Sohn suggests the following three roles for South Korea as a middle power in today's networked world: (1) a convener who brings together different actors—both state and non-state—to collaborate on common issues, interests, and norms; (2) a connector and broker who supplies the method for transitioning, converting, and translating different networks and structures; and (3) not an entire system designer but an architect who is able to perform system adjustments and adaptations that improve convertibility, decrease redundancy, and provide hierarchy (Sohn, 2012, p. 33). Sangbae Kim also postulates three roles for South Korea as a middle power: (1) playing a brokerage role among East Asian countries by taking advantage of its geopolitical location; (2) playing a convener's role of collaborating and working together with small and middle powers to resolve common problems; and (3) playing a sub-programmer's role to provide useful patch program for the entire system run by great powers (S. Kim, 2014, pp. 13–22). Taking a more down-to-earth approach, Chaesung Chun provides more specific suggestions in the area of security strategies. The first is to help great powers reduce mutual strategic mistrust, particularly in Sino-US relations. The second is to develop an issue-specific conflict settlement apparatus such as a six-party talk to dismantle the North Korean nuclear program. The third is to further multilateral institutions or actively participate in and advance existing institutions such as the UN, the OECD, and the WTO. The fourth is to preemptively import globally established norms to East Asia to establish a problem-solving code for East Asians. This includes the country's pursuit of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), for instance. The fifth is to build a cooperative network among like-minded middle powers to enhance their position in relation to great powers. This would include MIKTA, a partnership of middle powers comprising Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia. The sixth is to become a co-architect in building and enhancing the regional security architecture such as ASEAN Plus Three (Chun, 2016).

As for its shortcomings as a middle power, most South Korean MPD discourses admit its limitations in completely addressing traditional security issues such as

military security and high politics that are the main concern of great powers. Thus, it is realistic and practical for South Korea as a middle power to contribute to non-traditional security issues or niche areas that include economic crisis management, finance and banking policies, nuclear non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, combating piracy and maintaining the security of sea-lanes, peacekeeping operations, climate change, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and sustainable development. Rather than using hard power, it should exercise soft power, network power, public diplomacy, international development cooperation, and multilateralism.

While global governance is a buzzword in the field as in any other state-centric mainstream IR perspectives, the foremost aim of most scholars of middle power diplomacy is to secure and improve South Korea's national interests. Accordingly, the key question is, "what strategies should Korea choose to secure its own national interest through actively performing the role of a middle power?" (C. H. Lee & Jung, 2010, p. 62). Discourses in this vein are instrumental rather than reflective. The notion of securing national interests is an epistemological given for scholarship which is guided by South Korean state-centric ethics rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. It is not a scientific, objective, universal, and value-neutral academic endeavor that is sought by the mainstream IR positivists who constitute the majority of South Korean IR studies. South Korean middle power discourses seem to be a nationalist pursuit of knowledge produced for the state, its leaders, and its scholars.

In practice, middle power diplomacy and similar discussions have affected conservative and progressive governments in South Korea in ways such as the Roh Moo-hyun administration's (2003–2008) Northeast Asia Initiative wherein South Korea was posited as a key facilitator of regional cooperation and the Lee Myung-bak administration's (2008–2013) Global Korea which posited the country as a critical middle power (S.-M. Kim, 2016, p. 3). Scholars and policy practitioners have also collaborated on various occasions such as *The Role of Middle Powers in the 21st Century International Relations* (2013), an international conference co-hosted by the Korean Association of International Studies (KAIS) and the Korea Foundation (KF), a governmental body under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There was also *U.S.-China Strategic Competition and South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy*, a strategy symposium in international diplomacy co-hosted by the Maeil Broadcasting Network (MBN) and the East Asia Institute, a think tank. In South Korea, it is not rare to see scholars become policymakers. Professors of international relations now hold the positions of first vice minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, president of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, president of the Korean Foundation, president

of the Korea International Cooperation Agency, and head of the Institute for National Security Strategy (a think tank of South Korea's National Intelligence Service). In fact, there appears to be a "revolving door" between academia and policy circles in South Korea. This is not to say that there is anything disreputable about researching middle power diplomacy and other topics for the state, but it does belie a largely positivist ethical orientation that is dependent on mainstream IR. South Korean scholarship aims to produce value-laden knowledge for the state from a top-down perspective in the name of rigorous scientific IR research.

Therefore, South Korean research is a form of statecraft carried out by scholars who either wittingly or unwittingly see themselves as guardians of national security alongside the country's leaders.

Crafting System-maintaining Theories: South Korean Middle Power Diplomacy Theory Development

With regard to middle power diplomacy, there are two distinct strands of theory development in the South Korean IR community. One is Woosang Kim's alliance transition theory which is based on Organski's (1968) well-known realist power transition theory (W. Kim, 2015, 2016) and the other is Sangbae Kim's network theory of world politics (S. Kim, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2020).

Woosang Kim points out that Organski and other mainstream IR scholars in the West do not take middle powers seriously in their research. He posits three types of middle powers: the pivotal, the satisfied, and the dissatisfied (W. Kim, 2015). A pivotal middle power is satisfied with the status quo and has sizable military/political and economic capabilities to influence regional issues of both high and low politics. Like South Korea, it is also geopolitically situated between the hegemon and a rising challenger in the region. A satisfied middle power is an ordinary one that actively participates in human security and issues of low politics with like-minded countries. As in the case of Norway, it does not have the physical capabilities to influence regional issues of high politics. A dissatisfied middle power embodies a sizable capability to influence regional issues due to its dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Alliance transition theory posits two arguments: "First, when a dissatisfied rising challenger, with the support of its dissatisfied major power and/or middle power allies, catches up with the dominant power and its major power and middle power allies, major war is very likely. ... Second, the pivotal middle powers in the international power hierarchy play an important role in maintaining the status quo" (W. Kim, 2015,

p. 258). In other words, pivotal middle powers matter in high politics and particularly in great power competitions for world supremacy. Moreover, pivotal middle powers like South Korea are essential for the existing hegemon to secure the status quo, as they add to peace and stability in the world.

As a Korean-style theory of middle power diplomacy, alliance transition theory may reinforce the hegemony of mainstream America-based IR scholarship while seemingly relegating South Korean IR as a supplementary sphere that provides unique regional independent variables to mainstream IR theories. South Korean IR is a test bed for the application of mainstream IR theories, and the alliance transition theory at best occupies a small and compartmentalized space within mainstream American IR.

By comparison, Sangbae Kim's approach is more eclectic and less traditional (S. Kim, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2020). According to him, the first generation of middle powers like Canada, Australia, Sweden, and Norway sought active international roles in the 1980s and early 1990s (S. Kim, 2016, pp. 29–33). They are now mostly rich Western countries with normative power. Second-generation middle powers such as Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Nigeria, and Malaysia emerged in the 1990s and early/mid-2000s. These countries are mostly regional powers that are authoritarian at home and have become more vocal about international issues. As a newly established middle power, South Korea belongs to the third generation because it functions in an international environment that is far more complex and unpredictable than in the past 30–40 years. Consequently, conventional Western middle power theories (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Higgott & Cooper, 1990; Pratt, 1990) do not provide enough theoretical resources for South Korea. Therefore, there is a need to construct a third generation of theories of middle power diplomacy to guide South Korea's future strategic endeavors.

Roughly speaking, the network theory of world politics is a selective amalgam of different network theories that include social network theory, network organization theory, and actor-network theory. It aims to provide guidelines for the new roles of South Korea as a third-generation middle power. Since mainstream IR theories serve great powers and are inadequate for South Korean middle power diplomacy, the above-mentioned network theories are both necessary and useful. In addition, Sangbae Kim argues for the adoption of a "complex geopolitics" perspective that comprehensively embraces classical geopolitics, non-geopolitics, critical geopolitics, and post-geopolitics (S. Kim, 2020, pp. 24–29). His main concern is the discussion on the three middle power roles of South Korea as a broker, a convener, and a sub-programmer. His perspective is South Korean-centric and aims to formulate specific future national strategies for the country.

However, a meta-theoretical problem exists in the network theory of world politics. This is evident in the mixing of classical geopolitics and critical geopolitics like the blending of positivist realism with post-positivist post-structuralism in IR studies. Nevertheless, the network theory of world politics appears interested in the pragmatic usage of theories that are suitable for South Korea. The pragmatic nature of the network theory of world politics forsakes the intellectual consistency of theory development and replaces it with a "whatever works" framework for the South Korean state. Theory development is driven by statism and an eclectic use of different, even incompatible concepts and theories inside and outside the mainstream IR.

In brief, the two theories mentioned above are theoretically different. The network theory of world politics uses network theories and favors liberalism and constructivism with nominal mention of critical IR. The alliance theory represents a staunch realism. Both theories are ethnocentric for the South Korean state in a system run by great powers. In fact, they are system-maintaining theories that collaborate with mainstream IR theoretical perspectives to understand the functioning of the world from the perspective of great powers.

American Liberal Hegemony and *Sadae*-suffused South Korean Middle Power Diplomacy

The Default Mindset of South Korean Middle Power Scholarship: Securing the Existing Liberal International Order

While South Korean studies of middle power diplomacy vary in their scope, content, and application, scholars have operated with one default mindset: a robust, unconditional commitment to the LIO. Jongryn Mo states, "South Korea has emerged as a new middle power that ... supports liberal international order with its leadership diplomacy" (Mo, 2016, p. 587). Yul Sohn recommends that the current Moon Jae-in administration's middle power diplomatic strategy should consider securing South Korea's national interests through short-term efforts to address the North Korean nuclear problem and long-term efforts to construct a liberal regional order in Asia (Sohn, 2017). According to Sook Jong Lee and Hyee Jung Suh, "[F]rom experiences gained since Korea began pursuing a middle power diplomacy strategy in the late 2000s, we can draw some thoughts that can be useful to other middle powers. ... [M]iddle powers need to reconfigure alliances with great powers to strengthen the liberal international order" (S. J. Lee & Suh, 2016, pp. 212–213). Soeya and Lee (2014, p. 86) define a

middle power as "a strategic concept, implying a particular style of diplomacy or characteristic of a national strategy backed by a commitment to liberal values."

Therefore, securing the LIO appears to be unquestionable in South Korean middle power discourses due to the belief that the country has made great progress and benefitted under the LIO. Consequently, South Korean IR scholars rally for its continuation and are willing to reproduce it. South Korean middle power scholarship strongly holds that the LIO is universal and good for all since South Korea's success has proven its validity (Ikenberry & Mo, 2013; S. Lee, 2019). Middle power scholarship does not question South Korea's self-evident commitment to the LIO. How then is the LIO generally understood by South Korean IR? In their book *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and International Order*, Ikenberry and Mo (2013, p. 168) state:

> Over the last 60 years, large parts of the world have operated within an American-led and Western-centered system of liberal international governance. It is a distinctive type of order, organized around open markets, multilateral institutions, cooperative security, alliance partnership, democratic solidarity, and American hegemonic leadership. It was based on a vision of a "one world" system of rules and institutions. ... It became the organizing logic of the wider global system. It was only in these last two decades that it has been possible to speak of a singular system of global governance.

This is a "distinctively liberal hegemonic order" in which the United States as the victor in World War II has projected its own domestic images and values into the realm of IR backed by its dominant national capabilities (S. Kang, 2020, p. 330). The existing LIO is invoked frequently as a shorthand for the American-led liberal hegemonic order (Ikenberry, 2020, p. 316). In South Korea, the LIO connotes and denotes American liberal hegemony, which is often taken for granted as inherently good and essential for its national security. It is in this context that defining and positioning South Korea as a middle power indicates that the country intends to be "a good citizen" in the world as "a responsible follower of global governance rules [under U.S. liberal hegemony]" (S. J. Lee & Suh, 2016, p. 163), and it "never attempt[s] to share or encroach upon the dominant U.S. structural power" (E. Kim, 2015, p. 3).

Here, Yuen Foong Khong's "American Tributary System" can be used as a heuristic device to revisit South Korean IR's conventional sense of the LIO (Khong, 2013). Drawing on ideas and implications of the Sino-centric tributary system in historical East Asia, he argues, "The United States has instituted the most successful tributary system the world has ever seen" (Khong, 2013, p. 1) in contemporary world politics in the form of its liberal hegemony. In this system, the United States is and should be recognized as "*the* power or hegemon" while others emulate American liberal democratic norms and institutions for their own good. From its perspective, the

United States and the world are safe as long as these tributes are performed, and the country feels a certain "equanimity" (Khong, 2013, p. 2). Interestingly, South Korea is the closest tributary country of the United States meeting 14 out of the 15 criteria. These include participating in its wars since 1945, hosting American troops and bases, addressing both Houses of the United States Congress, and signing Free Trade Agreements. South Korea ranks even higher than Australia, the UK, and Japan.

Considering Khong's (2013) overall discussion, there is no need to limit our thinking space by constraining the definition of a tributary system to something unique to premodern China. As assumed in the Westphalian system, a tributary system of IR is neither anarchical nor equal. Rather, hierarchy, inequality, and hegemony are its essential conditions. A tributary system is also a container that embraces different moral values and ideologies. For instance, the tributary system of premodern China embodied Confucianism plus Sino-centrism, while that of the United States embodies liberal democracy and American exceptionalism. The hegemon projects its own internal images and values onto the realm of IR backed by its dominant hard power. The hegemon seeks to (re)make others in its own image. In so doing, the hegemon by and large stipulates the rules of international relations.

Along with the hegemon's hard and soft power, the roles of subordinates or tributaries who care about their status and autonomy are also important to ensure the functioning of the tributary system. South Korea appears to be engaging in *sadae* as it did in premodern times, while the center is not China but the United States as the guarantor of its security. South Korean IR/policy circles recognize and accept this hierarchy and inequality, the superior position of the United States, and its status as the "hub" in the hub-and-spokes metaphor often used by security experts. Japan is also no exception. A sort of *sadae* competition sometimes manifests between Seoul and Tokyo toward Washington to display their closeness to the hub, revealing their respective subordinate positions in the tributary hierarchy. Having subordinates imitate cultural ideas of the hegemon such as Confucianism or liberal democracy is central to the hegemon's legitimacy in the tributary system, making it appear universal and beneficial for all. In this sense, the tributary system is a co-constitution of the hegemon and subordinates, and *sadae* is a lubricant that facilitates its workings.

An interesting aspect of this *sadae*-suffused South Korean middle power diplomacy is that South Korea sometimes feels compelled to prompt the United States as the hub to meet and maintain its liberal ideals when it appears to be failing to do so. This was seen in American unilateralism in the Iraq war, economic polarization, the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of populism, xenophobia, racial anxiety, and Trump's disdain for multilateralism. From the South Korean perspective, the United States is

required to carry out its moral duties at home and abroad. According to Chaesung Chun, South Korea has currently taken the LIO far more seriously than Trump's United States, contributing significantly to its formation and continuation. US-China cooperation would have been possible if the current international order were better maintained (Chun, 2020). S. Lee and Park (2021, p. 250) argue that "the future of the U.S.-led liberal international order ... will depend on whether the United States has [the] ability and will to continue to provide public goods and whether the international community centered on middle power countries in the [Indo-Pacific] region, will support or show solidarity for U.S. leadership."

The default mindset of South Korean discourses pays homage to the political ideas and forms that underpin the very core of American identity. This homage is similar to the internalization of Confucian values that characterized premodern Korea's Sino-centric mindset. South Korean middle power diplomacy both embraces the US-led liberal order and treats this order as its own. Consequently, South Korea plays a significant role in reproducing and reinforcing the liberal hegemony of the United States.

Of course, contemporary South Korea as an American ally does not view itself as a tributary or vassal, at least in public. This may be partially due to the unavailability of historical vocabulary within South Korean international relations and its Westphalian basis to describe South Korea as a tributary. Like *sadae*, tributaries, vassals, secondary states, and subordinates are derogatory terms akin to "premodern" or "backward." Thus, there is an emotional resistance toward viewing international relations through *sadae* and the tributary system. However, it is important to assert here that South Korea may have been unintentionally behaving like a tributary in its foreign relations, as shown in the previous and following sections.

The traditional non-Westphalian concept of *sadae* is useful to understand contemporary South Korean discourses that speak of Seoul's strategic thinking and behavior in international politics.

The following sub-section examines how the above-mentioned default mindset is actualized in policy-relevant discussions on how to deal with the rise of an illiberal China against the liberal hegemony of the United States. In other words, what should South Korea do in relation to the United States and China to maintain the harmony of the liberal international order according to its *sadae*-based middle power diplomacy?

South Korean *Sadae* and the Rise of an Illiberal China

Viewing China's rise as a dissatisfied revisionist power opposed to the existing LIO, alliance transition theory suggests that "a pivotal middle power such as South

Korea can be a crucial addition to the United States' capabilities for maintaining its preponderance of power over the potential challenger, the PRC" (W. Kim, 2015, p. 263). The introduction of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea is one such example of how South Korea can play a key role in containing North Korea and China alongside the United States. Woosang Kim observed, "[t]ogether with other like-minded middle powers, South Korea as a key regional ally of the United States can also act to persuade China to be a responsible member of the status quo system, by engaging substantially with China" (W. Kim, 2015, p. 263). South Korea along with other regional middle powers such as Australia and Indonesia can serve to socialize China and transform it into a responsible member of the American-centric LIO. Based on the above, alliance transition theory is the one guiding both Washington and Seoul: "The United States should be confident enough to understand the constructive intentions of the pivotal middle powers. In the absence of such understanding from the United States, South Korea ... may need to communicate more effectively with the country and persuade it to trust their intention to maintain the status quo in its favor" (W. Kim, 2015, p. 263). Normatively, Woosang Kim's theory is based on a "good liberal us/evil illiberal them" dualism. This allows and persuades South Korea to perceive China's rise from the perspective of the hegemon, the United States and the West. It is in this context that alliance transition theory appears closer to *sadaejuui* (*sadae*-ism) than *Sadae* because it is unable to view the system from a different perspective than the hegemon's. This theory can be understood as a South Korean derivative of American hegemonic stability theory, which is a good example of *sadae* middle power diplomacy that strives to secure the LIO while positioning South Korea at the core of civilization in its scholarship of international relations.

Shin-wha Lee's stance on the LIO and China's rise is similar to Kim's. According to her, non-liberal and authoritarian powers such as China and Russia are revisionists who "share a common strategic interest to cooperate to counter an 'American threat,' seek to change the global status quo, and overthrow many of the rules, norms, and values that are embedded in the liberal international order" (S. Lee, 2019, p. 371). In arguing that the values of the LIO must be maintained, she suggests several ways of strengthening it that include "establish[ing] effective foreign policies that can resist illiberal autocracies while assimilating rising powers into the liberal international order" and "mak[ing] such powers more admissible to the current hegemonic state, i.e. the U.S." (S. Lee, 2019, p. 370). The gist of her policy-relevant argument is to convert an illiberal state like China into a liberal one like South Korea to maintain American liberal hegemony. This is a typical realpolitik strategy of *sadae* to serve the great while attempting to enlighten and convert a neighboring barbarian.

China was the cultural center of historical East Asia, but a contemporary illiberal China is often treated as a wayward barbarian from the perspective of South Korean middle power diplomacy.

Soeya and Lee (2014) have conducted a multi-year project titled *The Rise of China and the Changing Trends of Middle Power's China Policy* co-organized by Seoul National University and Keio University and funded by the Korea Foundation's policy-oriented research grant program. In their findings, they observe that "the common denominator for the national strategies and interests of South Korea and Japan is to maintain and strengthen a liberal international order through middle power co-operation" (Soeya & Lee, 2014, p. 91). In his column *A Tale of Two Hegemons*, Geun Lee argues that "One [China] still dwells in the days of territorial invasion and conquest, and the other [America] is concerned more about the stability of international markets and preserving core principles, norms, and values of the liberal international order" (G. Lee, 2021). South Korea as a middle power should therefore firmly side with the United States and tame a revisionist and dangerous China. This is similar to Lee's perspective of realpolitik *sadae*.

Sangbae Kim's network theory of world politics is more nuanced, suggesting "if South Korea is fated to be situated between the two powers, then it would be better to seek alignments with other small or middle powers ... South Korea has to seek co-operation with other countries in order to avoid confrontation between the two powers" (S. Kim, 2014, p. 20). In this sense, South Korea should act as a broker between the United States and China and a convener among middle and weak powers. He also argues that "it is sufficient [for South Korea as a middle power] to be a complementary programmer, who can provide system adjustments and adaptations that increase interoperability and compatibility and further reinforce normative values and legitimation [of the existing system]" (S. Kim, 2014, p. 21). Similarly, Sung Chul Jung argues that middle power democracies in Asia and Europe cooperate for "peace through [the liberal international] order" (S. C. Jung, 2020, pp. 141–142), especially when the strategic competition between China and the United States intensifies. Accordingly, it is desirable for South Korea to appreciate the aim and strategy of its foreign policy considering the LIO while striving to build multi-layered solidarity with other middle power democracies.

In an analysis of several recent public surveys, Cho (2021, p. 109) argues that "[a]lthough South Korea-China bilateral incidents affect the South Korean public's attitude toward China on a daily basis, liberal young South Koreans' skepticism of Beijing's political illiberalism may further the distrust of China in South Korea in the longer term." According to a joint survey by the South Korean news magazine SisaIN

and the polling company Hankook Research in 2021 (O. Lee, 2021), 58.1% of 1,000 South Korean respondents called China "close to evil" while only 4.5% described it as "close to good." The same survey showed that 62.8% of respondents aged between 18 and 29 years said that China is close to "an enemy," though the overall average of all ages was 49.1% (S. Lee, 2021). Cho (2021, pp. 109–110) further adds that "[i]t is likely that the anti-China sentiment informed by liberal values increasingly tells more on the discursive matrix of diplomacy and security in South Korea."

Intermingled with a recent growing anti-China sentiment among the South Korean public, a *sadae*-based South Korean middle power diplomacy that strives to secure the existing harmony of the LIO informs Seoul and Washington that a rising illiberal China is revisionist and uncivilized. It holds that South Korea should work with the center (the United States) to contain, socialize, and convert China to be like other like-minded democratic middle powers. It is notable that stressing the importance of the public's sentiment and middle power discourses in South Korea's case is not to say that there is a direct link between public sentiment, middle power discourses, and official foreign policymaking. Rather, public sentiment and middle power discourses can offer a strong sense of the discursive matrix within which foreign policy is discussed (Cho, 2021, p. 113). In addition, it seems clear that South Korean *sadae* middle power diplomacy complies with mainstream IR theories in its policy suggestions about how to engage with illiberal barbarians. *Sadae*-based middle power diplomacy can provide effective communication, enabling the American and Korean officialdom to speak from a common liberal vocabulary.

Conclusion

This paper reveals that current South Korean discourses in middle power diplomacy resonate with *sadae* because of its default mindset of securing the existing American-led liberal international order. This is not to say that South Korean scholarship in the local IR community dictates Seoul's foreign policymaking in a causal way. This paper is more about how IR scholars in South Korea talk about middle power diplomacy academically than how Seoul conducts it in practice. Yet as Callahan (2012, p. 641) noted, "rather than search for a clear unified foreign policy, it is more productive to analyze a range of views and catalog the possibilities that are being discussed in China [South Korea in the case of this paper], noting both their negative and positive influences." Seen in this way, South Korean scholarship provides us with a strong sense of the discursive matrix within which Seoul's foreign-policy talks are in operation.

The belief that tributaries could be enlightened by Confucian cultural values in premodern Korea has been replicated in South Korean scholarship's faith in the existing American-centered LIO that is considered to be essentially good for peace, stability, and prosperity in the world. Therefore, South Korea engages in a modern form of *sadae* as a self-help doctrine deeply indebted to the moralizing ideology of the LIO. In its scholarship, the hierarchy of the existing LIO seems to define what is permissible, desirable, or even conceivable. South Korea's middle power identity is deeply embedded in the functioning of the LIO. South Korean scholarship is seeking pragmatic methods over neutral understanding, and it is primarily interested in maintaining harmony within the liberal hegemony of the United States. It is a problem-solving and system-maintaining approach to international politics. While it seeks to become a mainstream positivist theory, it is not value-free but ethno-state-centric. These tendencies can also be observed in much research on the premodern Asian international system by Chinese scholars (Qin, 2011; Yan, 2019; Zhao, 2011).

While the existing LIO is significant for the further development of South Korea, it is necessary to distinguish liberal values as a critical human heritage from the existing LIO as a particular one implicated in certain power structures at a specific moment in history. Indeed, with liberal values cherished and appropriated in South Korea, it is not only possible but also healthy to denaturalize the self-evident faith of South Korean middle power discourses in the existing LIO. Questioning it may be more beneficial to formulate novel ways for South Korea to peacefully coexist with its diverse neighbors.

When the West arrived in the Korean peninsula in the 19th century, premodern Korea was so addicted to the Sino-centric tributary system that it was blind to the demise of the Chinese empire and the rise of the West. This political and psychological addiction prevented the country from noticing or envisioning a different international order. This also highlights a lack of agency on the part of premodern Korea which may have contributed to the country becoming a colony under Japanese imperialism as it faced the West. What if premodern Korea had problematized the Sino-centric tributary system as a particular order while keeping and appropriating Confucian ethics?

In sum, a critical analysis of South Korean middle power diplomacy could prepare the country to discern changes within the existing international system and a possible systemic transformation. This may make IR students better prepared for uncertainty, difference, and pluralism in global politics while producing scholarship that is more responsible and responsive.

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