

Anatomy of the Republic of Korea's Niche Strategic Engagement in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS): ROK's Tailor-Made Strategy and its Security Policy Implication

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Abstract: Republic of Korea's engagement in Southeast Asia could be generally understood as its Official Development Aid (ODA) strategy in most academic interpretation. Nonetheless, this article examines not only Korea's traditional ODA approach toward Southeast Asia but also Korea's uniquely tailor-made strategy toward Indo-China Peninsula in particular as well as what is to be done. In other words, this article intends to take further step beyond ODA interpretation of this particular subject over this region. This study specifically provides with multi-dimensional analysis of Republic of Korea's involvement in Mekong River Sub-region as well as its regional and global security policy implication. The main thesis of this study is that Korea had no choice but to pursue Niche diplomacy toward the region because Korea did not possess full capacity enough to compete against Japan or China. In this sense, Korea's own development experience is very unique and perhaps the only experience that no other country in the world has possessed. This article contends that Korea's knowledge based capacity building projects toward Greater Mekong Sub-region such as KSP, CIAT, special Master's degree training projects, local capacity building process, and etc. will continue to increase and diversify in terms of scale and contents. Again, based upon Knowledge based capacity building projects, Korea is in the process of producing a wide range of its unique tailor-made ODA programs for each member states of GMS. Unlike Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea also tends to put more emphasis on creating exclusive Master's degree Training Program which is centered on trainees of ODA Recipient countries. In this regard, Korea's approach is aiming at strengthening discrimination by introducing a systemic evaluation system for training projects. This program will also turn out linchpin of ROK's new strategy toward Mekong River area.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps, Republic of Korea (ROK)'s engagement in Southeast Asia is generally understood as its Official Development Aid (ODA) strategy in most academic literature. Nonetheless, this article examines not only Korea's Niche ODA or public diplomatic approach toward Southeast Asia but also Korea's uniquely tailor-made strategy toward Indo-China Peninsula in particular. This study argues that Korea has no choice but to pursue Niche Diplomacy in terms of its ODA approach toward Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in order to compete with China and Japan (Chongkittavorn, 2019; Robinson, 2019). For major powers such as the US, China, Japan, or Germany possess far better ODA cards and much more superior financial capacity than ROK. In this regards, ROK should maximize its unique potential while developing its own Niche strategy stemming from its own unique experience and promoting more local needs based upon human centered philosophy.

At the same time, this study also intends to take further step beyond ODA interpretation of this particular subject in GMS. ROK's future engagement in GMS does not simply represent its ODA strategy but also guides milestone for ROK's future public diplomacy strategy all over the world. Therefore, this paper analyzes a number of ROK's unique soft power strategy elements which can compete against Chinese or Japanese one, while bringing the conceptual framework of Niche diplomacy. In addition, this study also aims to provide with multi-dimensional analysis of Republic of Korea's involvement in Mekong River Sub-region from its regional and global security policy implication. This paper seeks to pitch strong policy making caveats for strategic engagement in GMS and its repercussion for ROK's top leadership.

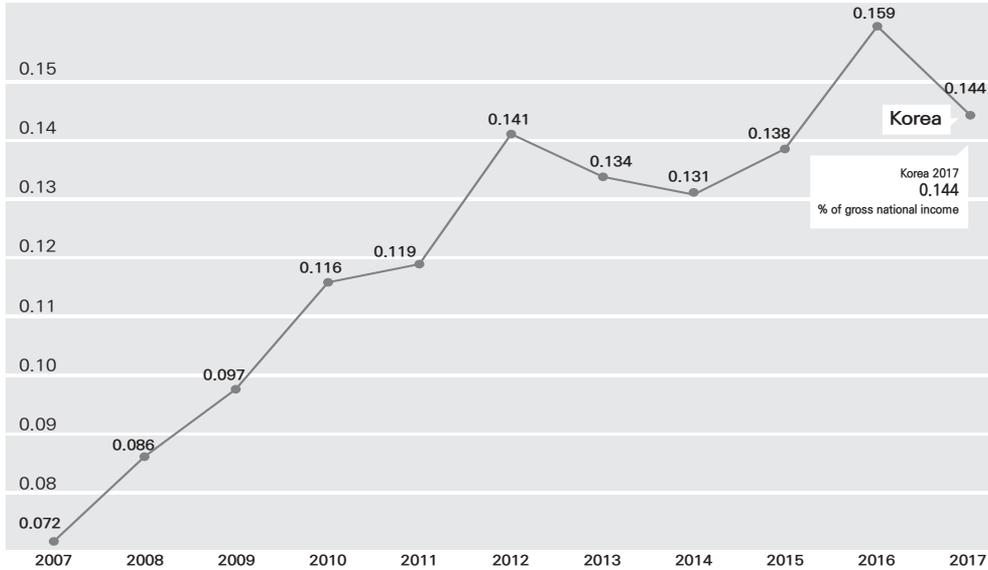
BACKGROUND

Republic of Korea (ROK) hosted the first ROK-Mekong Foreign Minister meeting in Seoul on October 27th - 28th 2010, and announced Han River Declaration in order to establish comprehensive partnership between ROK and Mekong river

states. But even prior to 2010, during the 1980s, ROK had participated in Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) while attending the Mekong Commission. And ROK provided some member states of Mekong Commission with ODA. Moreover, following the establishment of GMS in 1992, MRC in 1995, and ASEAN, ROK has also actively taken part in a number of events of regional development activities (Sangkhamanee, 2019; MRC, 1995; 2010; 2014; 2018).

In general, previously ROK's main policy had aimed at poverty reduction and rural development in Mekong Region. Moreover, ROK intended to produce more domestic experts on Mekong region in Korea at the same time. And the primary objective of ROK's Mekong Policy was somehow to utilize Korea's distinctive soft power strategy. More specifically, ROK had three objectives: 1) to strengthen the partnership with ASEAN, 2) to promote sustainable development in the region; and 3) to encourage human centered development (Sangkhamanee, 2019; GMS, 2001-2018, Joint Ministerial Statement).

In this regard, EDCF and KOICA turned out the two main control towers within Korean government bodies which created wide range of assistance and funds to Southeast Asian countries up to now. Since Korea became OECD member state, ROK dramatically increased overseas development assistance (ODA) disbursement in Mekong River area. According to 2014 EDCF Annual Report statistics, Korea has provided about US \$ 1.8 billion ODA and became the 16th largest donating nation among 29 Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member states (Sangkhamanee, 2019; Choi et al., 2019; Park, 2013). Since 2011, Korea has continued to increase aid volume to maintain its ODA global status and even hosted the 4th High Level ODA Forum (HLF-4) in Busan, Korea, as Figure 1 indicates (Sangkhamanee, 2019). Korea's 2013 ODA volume also totaled at about US \$ 1.3 billion. Among this particular volume, bilateral loan was US \$ 500.6 million accounting for 38.2%, while bilateral grants totaled at US \$ 809.0 million, which consisted of 61.8% of total ODA volume (Sangkhamanee, 2019). Moreover, in 2013, compared with previous year, Korea' multilateral ODA to regional development and other international organizations has also increased dramatically by US \$ 446 million (Sangkhamanee, 2019).

Figure 1. Net ODA of Korea 2007-2017: Total % of gross national income

Source: OECD on http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=319778, accessed on 19th of December, 2019.

EDCF Policy on Mekong Region:

In 1987, ROK founded the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF) under the direct control of the Export-Import Bank of Korea (Exim Bank), the branch of the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE). EDCF became one of the most important ROK's leading institution to control Korea's various ODA programs.

EDCF made a huge loan commitment in 2014 while conducting 28 projects in 13 different nations with US \$ 1,273 million scale. Given Korea's traditionally close economic relations and geographical proximity to the region, ASEAN countries were the biggest recipients for EDCF's loan commitment accounting for 74.9% of overall fund. Accordingly, the Mekong countries were also part of the primary target for Korea's loan program. Vietnam turned out ROK EDCF's largest recipient country with total volume of US \$ 2 billion, as Table 1 shows (Sangkhamanee, 2019).

Table 1. 2016-2017 Korea Aid Rankings (OECD Statistics)

Rank	Country (Amount, \$ million)
1	Vietnam (187)
2	Cambodia (64)
3	Myanmar (62)
4	Ethiopia (54)
5	Indonesia (54)
6	Tanzania (52)
7	Philippines (52)
8	Laos (47)
9	Uzbekistan (45)
10	Afghanistan (42)

Source: OECD ODA Statistics. Retrieved June 7, 2019, from https://public.tableau.com/views/AidAtAGlance/DACmembers?:embed=y&:display_count=no?&:showVizHome=no#1.

Also, regarding loan disbursement, EDCF also shared its disbursement to Asia as the first priority, comprising of 54.6% in 2014 (Sangkhmanee, 2019). Vietnam equally turned out the biggest recipient country in disbursements by USD 129 million (Sangkhmanee, 2019). It is interesting to note that despite the creation of EDCF in 1987, establishing a relationship with other Mekong countries except Thailand took almost another decade. EDCF also had a very unique experience with China since 1997, while providing financial assistance to Kunming (Sangkhmanee, 2019).¹

KOICA

ROK also founded another ODA commanding center, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in 1991. KOICA which is branch of ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also provided numerous grants, technical assistance to developing countries. Above all, KOICA's main role was to identify global development issues and encourage socio-economic aspect of the national development of partner countries. In this sense, KOICA's main strategy was to maximize ROK's potential of cultural linkage and geographical proximity with ASEAN states (Sangkhmanee, 2019).

KOICA has also produced a wide range of aid programs to Mekong River

1. This is Kunming City Elevated Highway Construction Project which costs US Dollar \$ 5 million.

states. These individual programs include infrastructure improvement, aids in kind and in cash, emergency reliefs, creation of development studies institutions, collaborations of experts, medical practitioners, Taekwondo instructors training, recruiting volunteers, NGOs, administrative training, international organization cooperation, the advocate of ROK's global Saemaul Undong program (SMU), and so on (Sangkhamanee, 2019).

RECENT DEVELOPMENT

ROK's recent participation in Mekong Project was further consolidated by President Moon's New Southern Policy. This policy was directly designed by Blue House office in the latter part of 2018. Up to this moment, despite several official meetings organized by relevant ROK's government departments, it is undeniable that overall country's interests towards Mekong region and Southeast Asia was still minimal. Nonetheless, during Moon's administration period, ROK's commitment and national interests toward this region was highly upgraded and promoted at the presidential office level. And national perception towards this area has also dramatically transformed from not only tourist attractions to new political and economic strategic partners.

Previously, On September 6, 2010 for the first time ever, ROK has hosted GMS forum in Korea with 150 participants including over 100 domestic companies (ROK Ministry of Strategy and Finance, 2010). ROK emphasized that Mekong River region will turn into the 2nd Han River miracle, with Asia's new frontier spirit while leading 21st century. So far ROK has only participated in small scale project such as railroad construction and water resource management for GMS project. Nonetheless, ROK will increase activities such as transportation infrastructure, trade, environment, energy and ICT.

Specifically, ROK is planning to provide GMS with the following programs: construction of transportation infrastructure, promoting active investment through the simplification of regulation, joint cooperation for climate change, development of clean and renewable energy, the establishment of IT infrastructure and electronic government (Cambodia Constructor Association). Furthermore, since 2011, Korean companies including Hanhwa, Daerim, Hyosung, Incheon Airport Corporation, Korea Consultants International, SK have been very active on this. And ROK has also started the following project from 2011: development of tourist resources, the development of bio energy, small hydro power, railroad infrastructure in the rural area of Vietnam and Laos (Cambodia Constructor Association; Korea News Plus, 2019).

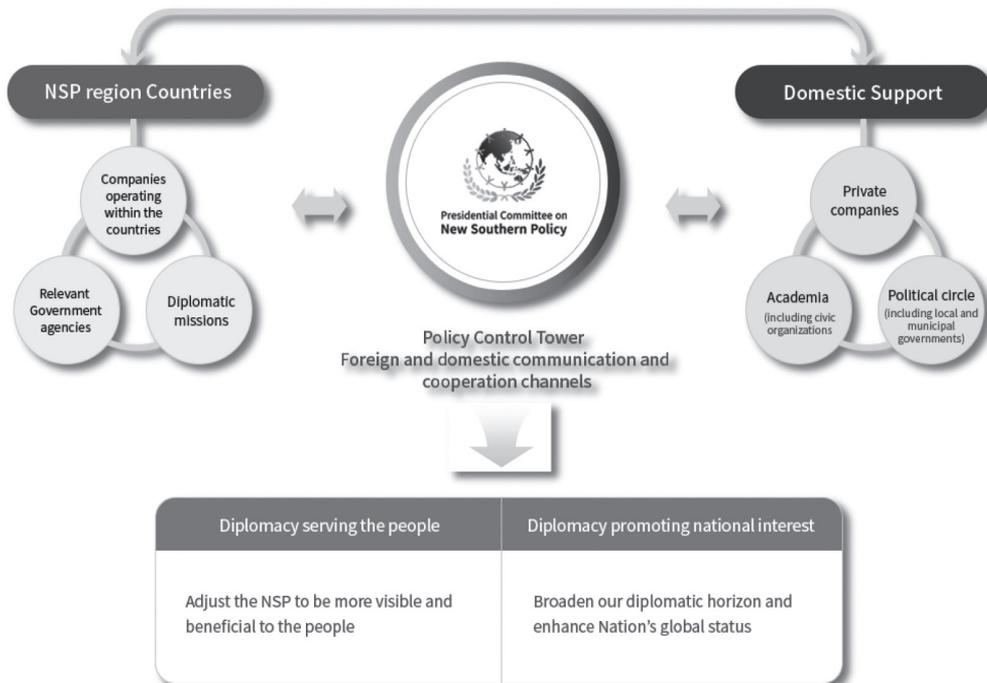
In 2010, ROK made some substantial achievement throughout GMS forum. First, ROK Ministry of Economy and Finance and ADB agreed on pursuing joint consulting for GMS and introduce Korean model of development strategy, and participating in ROK's Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP) module project for ODA, as well as renewing the MOU of 3.5 billion US dollar ADB joint loan program. Secondly, in the realm of environment, ADB and other Korean government agencies such as Korea Environment Institute, Korea Adaptation Climate Change Center, Korea Forest Service agreed to sign MOU for the development of GMS. Thirdly, ADB agreed on arranging bilateral business meeting between Korean companies and ADB on developing new market in Mekong River area in infrastructure, communication, environment, trade and investment. In particular, ROK considers that Mekong River states' biggest strength is abundant natural resources, massive labor forces and the will of people for economic prosperity and economic openness. More specifically, ROK companies are very keen on Vietnamese oil industry, Myanmar natural gas, Thai rubber industry, Laos timber, Cambodian fishery business. Fourth, at the minister level, Thailand and ROK discussed the possibility of building nuclear power plant. Laos Ministry and ROK discussed signing on EDCF, KSP, Green Growth and Global Green Growth Institute cooperation. ROK has provided 0.932 billion US dollar for transportation infrastructure and water resource development project through EDCF (Cambodia Constructor Association). And the 1st Mekong-ROK summit took place on 27th of November 2019 (Chosun Ilbo, 2019; Peace and Prosperity-the New Southern Economic Policy and New Northern Policy, 2019).

As far as the total amount of ROK's ODA support for GMS states was concerned, total aid including credit aid and grant aid along with East Asia climate partnership was US \$ 2.2 billion. Among them are EDCF portion 1.78 billion US \$ (transportation, electricity and other economic infra), grant ODA 410 million US \$ (education, medical treatment and social infra) plus East Asia climate partnership 11.7 million US \$ (Vietnam and Cambodia water resource and electricity infra). It is important to point out that 932 million US \$ out of 1.78 billion \$ was solely spent on GMS program itself. And as for the KSP support, Vietnam and Cambodia were the major two receiving nations and yet Laos was added on the list since 2010. For Vietnam case, between 2004 and 2009, 27 different project was implemented and Vietnam Development Bank was founded in May 2006 in due course. For Cambodia, between 2006 and 2009, 9 different project was carried out. And the ROK private sectors' total investment on GMS states was 9.1 billion US \$ with 180 thousand cases back in 2008 (ROK Ministry of Strategy and Finance, Press Release Report, 2010).

NEW SOUTHERN POLICY

ROK’s strategic interests and involvement in GMS was further consolidated by President Moon’s emphasis on Southeast Asian countries. The Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy (2019) is a special committee under the Presidential Commission On Policy Planning focusing on developing the core concepts and strategies of the New Southern Policy, managing boundary of responsibilities of diverse departments, identifying joint projects to be pursued by the Departments, and reviewing and assessing the performance and progresses, as Figure 2 demonstrates (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2019).

Figure 2. New Southern Policy



Source: <http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/introduce/introduce02Page.do>

Figure 3. Symbol of New Economic Southern Policy Committee



Source: <http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/main.do>

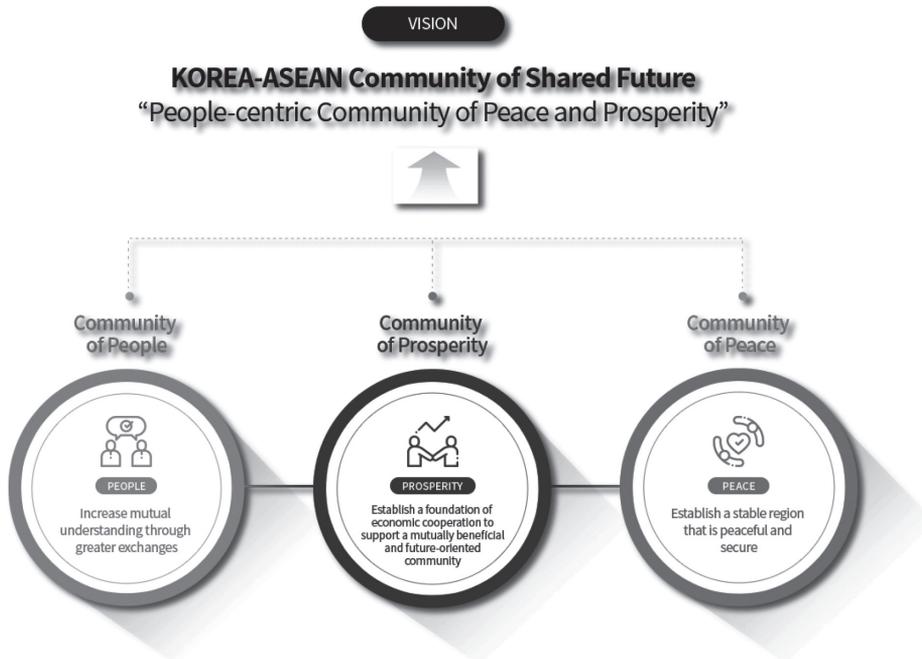
The Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy's Identity is a symbolic mark inspired by the concept and vision of building a, "People-centric community of peace and prosperity." It symbolizes the people of the world holding hands together while surrounded by rice and laurel leaves that stand for prosperity and peace, as Figure 3 indicates (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2019).

Background

One of the reason why ROK takes ASEAN or GMS in particular so seriously has to do with the following strategically important factors in the region. First, GMS is considered to be the vast blue ocean of a huge economy spread across the Southern region (http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=k&menu_cate=&id=&board_seq=260782). Second, this region is full of young and dynamic population with a potential of fast growth rate. Third, this region is spotlighted Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) region with a big consumer market. Fourth, GMS is continuously growing middle class population (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy).

Vision of New Southern Policy

Figure 4. Vision of New Southern Policy



Source: <http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/policy/policy01Page.do>

Directions for Promoting the New Southern Policy

ROK’s New Southern Policy is aimed at significantly expanding relations with ASEAN, GMS, in particular, focusing on three factors: “people, prosperity and peace,” as Figure 4 shows. First, ROK is promoting greater mutual understanding through an expansion of exchanges at people level. In this respect, ROK’s New Southern Policy is aiming at the following goals: 1) Increasing the number of mutual visitors; 2) Expanding 2-way cultural exchanges; 3) Supporting human resource capacity building; 4) Helping improve governance by enhancing public administration competencies, etc.; 5) Promoting rights of Indian and ASEAN people staying in Korea; 6) Offering support to improve quality of life (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy). New Southern Policy also emphasizes the

co-prosperity between ROK and GMS. ROK wants to achieve to build a base for mutually beneficial, future-oriented economic cooperation. In this respect, ROK wants to strengthen institutional framework for greater trade and investment while actively participating in the development of infrastructure aimed at greater connectivity. In particular, ROK stresses the importance of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSME) cooperation with GMS and improved market access to local area, while improving innovative growth competencies through new industries and smart cooperation such as building smart city program (<http://www.fnnews.com/news/201811071409372749>). Specifically, in response to each local needs, ROK's Southern Policy attempts to design a cooperative model tailored to each nation. Equally, constructing a peaceful and safe environment in the region is the third element of ROK's three major approaches. In particular, Southern Policy emphasizes cooperation between ROK and GMS over North Korean issue too. Specifically, in this respect, ROK suggests the following caveats: 1) Invigorating exchanges between Head-of-States and high-ranking officials; 2) Greater cooperation for building a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula; 3) Expanding cooperation in national defense and the defense industry; 4) Collective responses to anti-terrorism as well as cyber and maritime security; and 5) Better resilience to regional contingencies (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2019). For example, various military exchange program between ROK and GMS has been flourishing these days. Moreover, the number of non-traditional security issue related cooperation or workshop between ROK and GMS has clearly increased in recent years (Source: Interview with the former anonymous Myanmar military high ranking officer, November 4th, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NICHE DIPLOMACY

If then, what are the backgrounds of ROK's new southern policy or approach toward GMS? Where did it stem from? Perhaps the term Niche diplomacy would be very useful conceptual framework to examine ROK's strategic thinking toward GMS. Niche diplomacy is generally concerned with what small power countries should do in international politics, in order to survive or to compete against bigger power states. In reality, however, it has been more developed by the concept of middle powers which are capable of playing certain roles and also raising their voice or influence although are not strong enough to compete against big major powers. The origin of the terms Niche diplomacy is often interwoven with the concept of middle power in international relations. In Korea, also, middle power liter-

ature is even more familiar to international relations theoritian or policy makers.

In fact, the term Niche diplomacy began to emerge following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War because multi- polar system was quite evident in international relations literature. Accordingly, the literature of Niche diplomacy assumes that the role of secondary powers or middle powers cannot be neglected in international system. And yet it is important to understand that not all of secondary power states or middle power states can perform certain role in international community. They have to possess certain qualified capacity that could be influential to international community. But here the quantity measurement cannot be the major element for state to exercise their Niche diplomacy. The state which seek to project Niche diplomacy is highly likely to focus upon quality cotrol measurement. In other words, they have to resort to their soft power in most cases. Therefore, it is crucially essential for any state which seeks for Niche diplomacy to come up with unique element of their soft power strategy. This phenomenon is more evident in applying to nations' ODA strategy. It is undeniable that ODA literature has not been systemically studied from international theory perspective so far (Lancaster, 2007). At most, ODA strategy has been genetically related to nation's energy security goals or energy ambitions for great power states. In other words, great powers such as China, Great Britain, the Soviet Union has continued to link their ODA strategy with energy previously in all over the world, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia (Ahn, 2012a). China, for example, focused on either oil wells or energy transportation routes instead of local needs virtually everywhere in Africa or Southeast Asia (Harman, 2007).

Nonetheless, ROK has not really expressed its ambition to purchase energy in their ODA strategy. However, ROK's Niche diplomacy toward GMS tends to make huge different contribution to the existing literature of ODA too. It clearly transformed paradigm of ODA from energy linked to non- energy or non- string condition. Either traditional realist or liberalistic approach of ODA was not dominant factor to explain ROK case. Here constructivist approach turns out really appealing to particualr region such as Southeast Asia. Human centered network between people of different nations represent the main icon of ROK's Niche diplomacy. In short, the case of ROK's Niche ODA policy toward GMS provides milestone to the existing literature of ODA since soft power or smart power strategy was quite well received by GMS states more than economic size of the ODA donating countries.

At the same time, it is important to distinguish middle power literature from Niche diplomacy as the previous literature of Niche diplomacy has highlighted the nexus between Niche diplomacy and middle powers so far. Nonetheless, this study does not intend to use the term middle power because the concept of middle power

is both slippery and vague term. As Cooper notes, “the term ‘middle powers’ is problematic both in terms of conceptual clarity and operational coherence, this category of countries does appear to have some accentuated space for diplomatic manoeuvre on a segmented basis in the post-Cold War era” (Cooper, 1997).

Therefore, in this study, the concept of Niche diplomacy is used to explain ROK’s strategy toward GMS rather than the term of middle powers. Moreover, the stance of Korea in GMS is not quite middle powers because sometimes it surpasses China or Japan in different areana such as its soft power capacity. Nonetheless, in this study, Korea’s position begins from smal or middle power in international relations for the academic convenience. Korea is most likely positioned in this category only in terms of the ODA scale. These kind of middle power nations have very limited capacity to impose their positinos or solutioins. “They can sometimes exercise persuasive influence, but rarely decising force” (Henrikson, 2005). Therefore, in order to survie, these kind of middle power states have to create their own version according to the situation or regions, or any needs anytime. It is very important to note that the core concept of Niche diplomacy is evolution and innovation.

In this sense, the development of particular contents is deemed crucial for any state which seeks for niche diplomacy. Constrained by the scale of resource and the limited finance capacity as well as the lack of experience, Korea had no choice but to pursue Niche public diplomacy while maximizing its full capacity. Here Korea’s full capacity in terms of public diplomacy means its tailor made soft power stragetgy and the quality control rather than quantity focus. If then, what would be the specific elements of ROK’s Niche Strategy toward GMS? (Morgenthau, 1962).

ROK’S MAIN NICHE STRAYEGY TOWARD MEKONG RIVER SUB-REGION

More specifically, first, within the framework of New Southern Policy, ROK is planning to host more high level meeting with Mekong river states on a regular basis. In particular, ROK will expand the current foreign minister meeting up to other relevant ministries level such as energy, trade, industry, education and cultural department. Secondly, ROK wants to create more comprehensive dialogue and comprehensive strategy toward this region. In other words, Seoul wants to take multi- dimensional approach meaning by beyond economic viability, more political and diplomatic approach required, and looking at cultural approach related to human network and constructivist approach necessary. For example, ROK seeks to balance the proportion of its ODA to the region creating diverse program such as

credit aid for road, railroad, dam construction and grant aid for small scale project. One of ROK's Niche strategy toward this region is lied in its soft power approach in connection with sharing Korean pop culture and promoting educational program and exchange of young students at high school and university level. Perhaps popularity of Korean wave in this region is something monumental and unique that China or Japan has not possessed before. This is very convincing approach if the case of the Vietnamese illustrates quite well. As the bilateral Vietnamese-Korean relations became so close in the last few years, a number of Vietnamese students who study in Korean university began to outnumber Chinese students for the first time in 2018. Quite similar to Vietnamese students, Korea also expects more students coming from other parts of Mekong region.

Perhaps, once again, it is important to understand that Korea's most important strategy toward Mekong region is to pursue Korea's uniquely tailor-made ODA approach: human centered Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP). The basic concept of KSP is to transfer Korea's own experience and long term network between humans, for example: introducing SaeMaUI development project (Ahn, 2012b). In this respect, KSP seeks to analyze individual states' need for education, health policy, energy and environment while shaping unique and different program from Chinese and Japanese ones. Good examples are green growth, ICT and educational field. Korea's Niche strategy is even open to establish strategic partnership with middle power states such as Australia, while looking at the possibility of joint cooperation type. More concrete examples of ROK's tailor made strategy include (Capacity Improvement & Advancement for Tomorrow) CIAT program as well as human networking and KOICA Fellowship program. Moreover, special Master Program for developing states and GMS states in Korea Universities is one of Korea's very unique and long terms strategy toward this region. Finally, in the foreseeable future, ROK is also planning to create the possible ROK-Mekong Institute for long term R&D purposes. The possible role of this institute is to host seminar and international conference and policy making, and to connect ROK companies with Mekong region, while promoting Mekong interests among Korean society simultaneously.

In particular, with regard to Korea's tailor-made approach, it is important to understand the background of this approach. Korea's ODA policy toward this region, or in general is located in very difficult situation amid other competitive countries. There is no possible way for South Korea to compete against China or Japan. In other words, Korea's ODA scale is extremely limited compared with China and Japan because South Korea has to spend on national defense budget. For South Korea's national budget is not even comparable to those of China and Japan

(Brautigam, 2018). Therefore, it is very difficult for South Korea to use the same approach for ODA like China or Japan does. South Korea desperately had to come up with some sort of very unique version while maximizing its strength with limited sources.

In this sense, Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP) turns out ROK's moto for its ODA policy strategy. And it is safe to note that KSP will become the core element of ROK's Niche public diplomacy and ODA policy toward this region.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING PROGRAM (KSP)

ROK's Knowledge Sharing Program is the flagship of ROK's unique ODA program, given that ROK's ODA's total scale cannot be compared with the US, China or Japan, in terms of quantity matters. Therefore, ROK is aiming at rather quality control for its ODA policy abroad. The KSP is a knowledge-based development cooperation project that provides policy suggestions tailored to partner countries based upon Korea's own experience and knowledge of economic development. And there is no wonder KSP would turn out ROK's main strategy toward GMS.

Korea used to be one of the most impoverished countries in the world 1948, but through international aid and its own efforts to build a sustainable foundation for growth, the country has eradicated poverty and has achieved a remarkable socio-economic transition, becoming one of the leading global economies. Korea joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee in 2010, making its official transformation from an aid recipient into a donating nation.

Korea's development experience employs practical solutions accumulated through trial and error, and its knowledge of successes and failures has turned into a great asset for developing countries to help take on development challenges and promote sustainable growth. There is no doubt that Korea's experience would be also very useful among Mekong River Area.

Hence, the Korean Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF) launched KSP in 2004 to cope with the rising demand for deriving policy implications of the Korean development model and contribute to sustainable prosperity abroad. Korea has employed leading source of knowledge sharing by conducting the KSP with over 76 countries and has promoted the concept of knowledge-based cooperation along with hosting the G-20 Seoul Summit in 2010 and the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in 2011 (KSP Homepage Vietnam Section, 2019).

If then, what is so unique about KSP? KSP is a sustainable long terms develop-

ment plan rather than short term solution. In other words, it can promote win-win development of the two nations through the formation of new networks rather than a one-off project or one time infrastructure outcome. The key idea of KSP is encouraging human networks utilizing Korea's soft power. For example, Korea established Vietnam- Korea Institute of Science and Technology (VKIST) at the request of the Vietnamese government. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2018 and complete by 2020. Seoul and Hanoi decided to pay approximately 80 billion Korean Won each, which is half portion of total expense. This plan is regarded as one of good example to promote sustainable development of science and technology in Vietnam in the longer term. Korea also set up Vietnamese social enterprise image place providing US. \$35,000 dollar in 2017 (KSP Homepage Vietnam Section, 2019).

This place was created to help Vietnamese disabled youth. This plan also represents one of good example of Korea's human centered global ODA strategy. Furthermore, ROK's KOICA has been also participated in Laos's national project of eliminate unexploded bomb between 2015 and 2018, which is projected to cost about US\$ 30 million dollars. The second plan of this project is scheduled to resume between 2019 and 2022. In particular, this second phase is aiming at expanding financial support for the victims of the explosion, along with improving the safety of the local people and establishing a platform for strengthening its capacity (KOICA-CIAT Program. 2019).

CAPACITY IMPROVEMENT & ADVANCEMENT FOR TOMORROW (CIAT)

Another ROK's tailor-made project toward GMS is global training fellowship program so called Capacity Improvement & Advancement for Tomorrow (CIAT). This particular program was launched in 2012 by KOICA. CIAT literally means seed in Korean. Its main objective is to promote economic and social development of developing countries by sharing experiences and skills accumulated in Korean development with ODA recipient countries. It is aiming at forming human networks and enhancing friendly and cooperative relations with developing countries. Accordingly, KOICA won the best award for best practices in Global Education Training 2018. It is important to understand that this program is not just a one-time project but a series of long term projects. Its goal of promoting for independently solving their own problems was quite well received by local people. Compared with other ODA programs, even Chinese and Japanese ones, ROK's CIAT aims at

localization priority. KOICA focuses upon cultivating the capacity for local leaders to solve out their local problems.

EXCLUSIVE GRADUATE MASTERS DEGRESS PROGRAM FOR ODA RECIPEINT COUNTRIES

ROK’s another unique tailor-made program is special graduate Master program for ODA recipient country students. This is very special program in that Korea set up exclusive graduate school only for ODA recipient countries, as Table 2 suggests. Whereas in Japan or other countries, the similar graduate Master program belongs to graduate school, in Korea this program is very distinctive, as Table 3 indicates.

Table 2. ROK Special Master Program for ODA

Sector	Number of Courses	Number of Trainees
Education	16	319
Health Care	3	58
Public Administration	91	1,747
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries	25	504
Technical environment, energy	13	198
Other (Gender)	7	195
Total	155	3,021

For example, the University of Seoul offers special Master program with full scholarship in the International School of Urban Studies, specifically designed for ODA recipient countries students since 2012. This program is not being controlled by the Graduate School of the Universities like elsewhere in the world. This kind of graduate school was formed in Korea purely for ODA purposes. This unique approach would serve the major platform for ROK to engage in GMS, given the fact that the number of Vietnamese students who study in Korea Universities outnumbered the number of Chinese students since 2017. In short, ROK’s future strategy toward GMS is not only confined to infrastructure development or immediate materialistic outcome, but rather aimed at local human resource development projects.

Table 3. Comparison of MASTER's Program between JDS and KOICA

	JDS	KOICA
Selection of target countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A total of 13 countries are now, most of them Asian - 99% of Asia, 1% of Ghana - 3,970 in total, 2000–2017 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Including different regions and countries - 42 % in Asia, 32.5 % in Africa, 16.4 % in Middle East, CIS, 82% in Latin America - 3,341 total, 1997–2017
Curriculum and class composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Admission to an existing graduate course in English at a Japanese university - JDS trainees and other groups of foreign students and Japanese students and mathematics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opening a separate course for master's degree training - In most cases, a class consisting only of KOICA trainees

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: SECURITY AND DIPLOMATIC POLICY

This study reviewed ROK's strategic engagement in GMS from the multi-dimensional aspect. Most of all, it is important to understand that ROK has adopted Niche diplomatic strategy in accordance with its new Southern economic policy toward GMS. Through series of trials and errors, ROK has invented its own version of its ODA strategy toward this region finally, in comparison with Japan or China. ROK's Niche Strategy stemmed from mostly quality control rather than quantity basis due to its comparatively disadvantage of aid scale to China and Japan. It is equally important to stress that in the literature of Niche diplomacy, although seemingly ROK being viewed as often middle power or small power in this stance is still debated, ROK is not strictly classified as either small or middle power states among ODA recipient local people or to this nation due to its strong unique soft power capacity. Hence it is oversimplification to judge that ROK is a small or middle state in the realm of ODA. In particular, the case of ROK's Niche strategic engagement in GMS clearly illustrated that ODA measurement or evaluation should be taken into consideration from the recipient perspective rather than providing nation aspect. Moreover, ROK case also demonstrates that the element of soft power is sometimes more appealing than the scale of ODA to local people.

More specifically, in terms of ODA engagement in this region, Korea's own

development experience is very unique and perhaps the only experience that no other country in the world has possessed before. Korea's knowledge based capacity building projects toward Greater Mekong sub-region such as KSP, CIAT, special Master's degree training projects, local capacity building process, and etc. will continue to increase and diversify. Again, based upon Knowledge based capacity building projects, Korea will continue to produce a wide range of more tailor-made ODA program for each member states of GMS. Unlike Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea tends to put more emphasis on exclusive Master's degree Training Program which is centered on trainees. In this regard, Korea's approach is aiming at strengthening discrimination by introducing a systemic evaluation system for training projects. Also in comparison with China and Japan, Korea's main strategy toward GMS is promoting the development of human resources development project focused upon capacity building for sustainable development.

It is equally important to understand that in order to overcome limited development assistance funds, both ROK and Mekong River states need to develop incentive mechanism to attract more participation of private funds and personnel. Furthermore, ROK's new Southern Economic Policy under the direct control of Blue House will become a major corner stone to implement its strategy toward GMS. It is even more important to note that regardless of regime change in ROK, GMS will continue to remain the new linchpin of ROK's diplomacy, given that China market is very shaky due to THADD related political reasons and Chinese domestic economic reasons stemming from the current stagnation.

Nonetheless, there are also still obstacles to overcome on the GMS side. Mostly from the business perspective, Korean business and diplomatic circles emphasize that GMS needs to sort out the following three challenges. First, in the case of cosmetics and daily commodity manufacturing companies, Korean business communities are concerned about local regulation for distribution and customs policy in the region. Non transparent or arbitrary or unpredictable or inconsistent regulation policy is the major hindrance for Korean mid side or small companies to enter the GMS market. Secondly, contents and service related industries are worried about intellectual property rights in GMS. Thirdly, construction and infrastructure companies also concern about regulation of licensing. In short, GMS need to deal with different branches of Korean business circles according to individual needs and demands of different types of companies. There is no doubt that the current regulation or customs policy that GMS now implements need to clearly improve and updated as soon as possible.

More importantly, the development of Mekong River contains a number of

political, energy, military, environmental and human security implication (Deth, 2019; GMS 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). Most of all, GMS is the first battleground where China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) collide with the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS). There have been a great deal of lobbying and public diplomacy from each side. And large of scale of grand energy projects or major infrastructure development projects which had a special nexus with ODA program have been either discussed or in the process in the GMS since this year. In this sense, ROK has been put very awkward position amid the US- China balance of power relations. Nonetheless, President Moon's public announcement in late June 2019 to harmonize with Indo-Pacific Strategy turned out milestone in ROK's new diplomacy toward the Mekong River states (Donga Ilbo, 2019). Moreover, the first ROK-Mekong Summit just took place on 27th of November, 2019 in Busan, Korea. In particular, in collaboration with the Indo- Pacific Strategy, ROK needs to prepare for special mechanism to deal with the following objectives besides with implementing specific grand scale type of energy and environment related projects: 1) to deal with energy and environmental security in the Mekong River; 2) to implement the construction of hydropower along the Mekong River both in upstream states as well as within Cambodia; 3) to balance the tradeoffs between the relations to the need for lower electricity prices and the importance of environmental and social protection; 4) to resolve existing threats to the river's eco system and biodiversity; 5) to ensure nutritional safety net for those who live in the bottom along the river; and 6) other health security such as nutrition, hygiene problem (Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 2019).

Finally, as mentioned above, ROK's engagement in GMS is not solely confined to ROK's bilateral relations with each GMS member states, but also possesses many security and diplomatic implications for balance of power strategy between the US and China. First of all, GMS region itself will have to face many challenges amid harsh fierce economic battle or beyond that between the two major big powers in the upcoming years (Robinson, 2019; Chongkittavorn, 2019; Asia Today, 2018; Sisa Journal, 2012). Secondly, ROK government must also keep in mind the important fact that great game in GMS is highly likely to take place within strictly zero sum game trajectory in the near future. This means that ROK's Niche strategy between the two major powers may not be allowed in this type of game. In other words, ROK's ambiguous stance or theory oriented balanced strategic move between BRI and IPS in the region of GMS might cause huge diplomatic deadlock in the future.

In conclusion, it is crucially important for ROK top leadership to keep in mind

that ROK's strategic engagement in GMS does not only imply ROK's Niche public diplomacy or Niche ODA policy. This may turn out ROK's first major diplomatic challenge amidst the two major great powers' rivalry in the region. There is no doubt that ROK's Niche public diplomacy toward GMS, ODA policy in particular, should be continued and innovated in order to match more individual local needs. Nonetheless, ROK's Niche strategy, that is, official diplomacy to choose between BRI and IPS may turn out neither a good nor a smart choice. Therefore, it is vital for Korean top leadership to analyze the anatomy of strategic Niche engagement in GMS and its repercussion.

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