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### **Eurasian Policy of the Republic of Korea<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract.** The article distinguishes three steps of development of the Eurasian policy of the Republic of Korea, and three interests that empowered the development of the country's Eurasian policy since the beginning of democratization both in South Korea and in Eurasian countries as a result of collapse of the Soviet Union. The first step of development of South Korea's Eurasian policy lasted through late 2000s; South Korea's elite perceived relations with Eurasian nations primarily as a means to engage North Korea on that step. On the second step, which lasted since late 2000s till late 2010s, South Korea alternated the policy aimed at engagement of North Korea, but relations with Eurasian nations continued developing; moreover, since 2013 attempts have been made to harmonize those relations, including by means of President Park Geun-hye's proposed Eurasian Initiative. Recently, the third step began, when South Korea started seeking to engage North Korea again; that is expected to place Eurasian policy even higher on the agenda of South Korea's foreign policy. Besides search for peace on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea's Eurasian policy has been driven by two other interests: economic interests and the interests of Koryo-saram, large groups of ethnic Koreans, who live in Russia, Kazakhstan and some other Eurasian countries.

**Keywords:** international relations, regionalism, Eurasia, Korea, foreign policy.

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For almost half of a century, scholars of international relations have been recognizing regions as important factors in international politics [1]. However, the regions that were important factors in international politics half-a-century ago, are not the same as contemporary regions. Throughout the half of a century, almost all regions have changed their shapes, some regions that were important factors of international politics then have lost their significance by now, and some new regions have emerged. The Eurasian region is an example of a newly emerged region in international politics. Though some scholars claim that Russian Westerners and Slavophiles used the word "Eurasia" in their debates as long ago as in early 19<sup>th</sup> century [2, p. 232], the Eurasian region started playing an important role in international politics only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For a region to start playing an important role in international politics, its role must be recognized in two instances: inside of the region and outside of it. Inside of Eurasia, there are countries, whose peoples and elites are predominantly convinced that their country belongs to the Eurasian region. Also, inside of Eurasia, there are countries, where part of the people and part of the elite are trying on a role of a Eurasian nation for themselves, thus contributing to intensification of domestic debates on regional identity of their country. In Russia, for example, one cannot say that most foreign policy practitioners and scholars in international relations are certain about the country's Eurasian identity, but it would be more accurate to speak of the "Eurasian direction in Russian [international relations] studies" [3, p. 101]. Both the confidence in former countries and the debates going on in latter countries contribute to strengthening of the role of the Eurasian region in international politics from within the region. However, recognition of a region's role in international politics from within the region is not enough.

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Recognition of the region's role in international politics from outside is equally important. Outside of Eurasia, there are countries, whose peoples and elites predominantly have a clear vision of which region of the world their country belongs to. Also, outside of Eurasia, there are countries, whose peoples and elites are involved in fierce debates on regional identity of their nations. In Australia, for example, some elite members might argue that their country would be stronger inside of Southeast Asia [4], while some others might argue that it should remain outside of the region, but few would argue that Australia is a part of the Eurasian region. However, when peoples and elites of Australia and other non-Eurasian countries start asking themselves what kind of a foreign policy towards nations belonging to the Eurasian region they would like to have, then one can say that the Eurasian region is playing an important role in international politics.

Thirty years ago the Republic of Korea did not have a policy towards the Eurasian region as a part of its foreign policy. Today, the people and elite of the republic of Korea are asking themselves what kind of a foreign policy towards the Eurasian region they would like to have. The answers they give to this question create the foundation of the Republic of Korea's Eurasian policy. At different times throughout the past thirty years, South Korean people and elite gave different answers to that question, thus South Korean Eurasian policy differed across time. This article aims at tracing the change in South Korean Eurasian policy, which emerged out of the primary desire of South Korean foreign policy, namely the quest for unification of the Korean Peninsula, and which by now has evolved into a full-scale dimension of South Korean foreign and security policy.

### **Origins of South Korean Eurasian Policy**

Article 4 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea prescribes that it "shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the principles of freedom and democracy", including by foreign policy means. First attempts of peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula took place in 1970s, when leaders of two Koreas expressed the desire to move towards unification in their joint communiqué of July 4, 1972 [5]. Despite that attempt took place in the atmosphere of détente between rival blocs manifested by U.S. President Richard Nixon's visits to China and the Soviet Union, and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's visit to the U.S., the bipolar character of the international system of the Cold War era made that attempt unsuccessful [6]. Importantly, that attempt was not based on the "principles of freedom and democracy", because transition to democracy occurred in South Korea only in late 1980s.

Transition to democracy in South Korea did not happen overnight, but its most important phase took place during Roh Tae-woo presidency in 1988-1993. In his UN General Assembly speech of 1988 the President of the Republic of Korea declared that peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula is possible only in case if, in addition to the two Korean states, two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and two regional powers, China and Japan, are involved in the process [7, p. 243]. As of 1988, South Korea did not have diplomatic relations with either the Soviet Union or China. In 1990, Roh Tae-woo and Mikhail Gorbachev met in San Francisco and agreed to establish diplomatic relations between their states later the same year. Thus, the foundations of South Korean Eurasian policy were laid. After collapse of the Soviet Union, South Korean policy towards the fifteen newly independent post-Soviet states grew on those foundations.

Kim Young-sam, Roh Tae-woo's successor as President of the Republic of Korea, continued the Eurasian policy course founded by his predecessor. Actually, he was one of the founders of the policy course. In 1989, before the Soviet-South Korean summit, Kim Young-sam visited the Soviet Union and met with Yevgeny Primakov, then Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (today the institute bears Primakov's name), future Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998) and Prime Minister of the Russian Federation (1998-1999). In 1997, Primakov visited Seoul and signed the "hot line" agreement, which established a special communication link between official residencies of Russian and South

Korean presidents.

While diplomatic relations with most Eurasian nations were established during Roh Tae-woo presidency (except for Turkmenistan, which only established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1997), first economic relations linked South Korea and Eurasian nations under Kim Young-sam presidency. When Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, visited South Korea in 1995, economic cooperation as well as South Korea's assistance policy concerning Koryo-saram, a group of almost 100 thousand ethnic Koreans permanently living in Kazakhstan, were on the agenda of the meeting. Though unintentionally, the role of South Korea in economic development of Eurasian nations was not always positive in those years: liberalization of the financial sector undertaken by Kim Young-sam's administration became one of the triggers of the Asian financial crisis of late 1990s [8], which badly hurt the economies of the new independent states of Eurasia.

South Korean approach to peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula changed significantly together with transition of power from Kim Young-sam to his successor Kim Dae-jung. Unlike his predecessors, who pursued hostile policies against North Korea, Kim Dae-jung launched the Reconciliation and Cooperation Policy towards the North, which became famous under the name of Sunshine Policy [9]. The policy aimed at engaging North Korea in relations with the South. In 2000, the policy resulted in first summit meeting between North and South Korean leaders in Pyongyang; on the same year, Kim Dae-Jung was awarded Nobel Peace Prize for the success of the Sunshine Policy. However, South Korea failed to host North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Seoul the following year thanks to newly elected U.S. President George W. Bush's opposition to the idea of such a summit.

Though South Korea's approach to relations with North Korea changed significantly under Kim Dae-jung, the country's Eurasian policy remained in place. Moreover, U.S. opposition to the efforts aimed at reconciliation between North and South Korea convinced Kim Dae-jung better than anything else that peace on the Korean Peninsula couldn't be achieved without greater involvement of Russia and other Eurasian nations. Newly elected Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Seoul in 2001 (Putin visited Pyongyang in 2000). Throughout his presidency, Kim Dae-jung paid special attention to development of relations between South Korea and Central Asian countries, as well as between South Korea and Mongolia.

To conclude, bilateral international system of the Cold War era divided the Korean Peninsula and failed to help rapprochement of the two Korean states during the détente of 1970s. Unilateral international system of 1990s failed to assist unification of the Korean Peninsula following the strategy that worked in the case of Germany in 1989-1990 [10]. Below, we will demonstrate how multilateral international system that emerged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century influenced the development of South Korea's Eurasian policy.

### **South Korean Eurasian Policy in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Roh Moo-hyun, who was elected to succeed Kim Dae-jung as President of the Republic of Korea in 2003, continued the Sunshine Policy, though in a different situation. North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003. In response, six-party talks aimed at convincing North Korea that it should close its military nuclear program began. The six-party talks involved exactly the six parties that Roh Tae-woo once dreamed of discussing peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula: two Korean states, the U.S., Russia, China and Japan, despite the relative power of China and Russia changed by 2003 compared to relative power of China and the Soviet Union in 1988. Six rounds of talks took place in 2003 through 2007 without significant progress; the talks were officially discontinued in 2009.

Despite the U.S., Russia, China and Japan considered South Korea under the Roh Moo-hyun administration a "small power", its ambition to play greater than ever role in international

relations was not left unnoticed [11]. South Korean foreign policy ambition at that time was not confined with attempts to play greater role in security consideration in Northeast Asia alone, but South Korea attempted to intensify relations with nations in other regions of the world, including Eurasia. In terms of Eurasian policy, Roh Moo-hyun collected most of the fruits planted by his predecessors. Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, visited South Korea in 2003, and Roh Moo-hyun returned the visit in 2004. In 2005, the Association for Kazakhstan Studies in Korea was established with the aim to improve relations between the two countries by means of supporting academic research on various topics of mutual concern, including Korean minority in Kazakhstan. In 2004, Roh Moo-hyun also visited Russia.

At 2007 elections in South Korea, total alternation of government took place in the country, which, statistically, happens once in every four elections [12]. Newly elected President Lee Myung-bak alternated the foreign policy that had been implemented by the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. He declared the Sunshine policy towards North Korea a failure; six-party talks on North Korean nuclear program discontinued, though the latter change occurred primarily thanks to election of Barack Obama President of the U.S. to replace George W. Bush. Despite Lee Myung-bak did not need the help of Eurasian countries in engaging North Korea in multilateral frameworks, he nevertheless continued developing political, economic and humanitarian relations with those countries. In 2009, he visited Kazakhstan; and in 2010, he hosted Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Seoul. Economic relations between South Korea and Eurasian countries continued developing despite of the consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008.

Park Geun-hye, who became the first female President of the Republic of Korea in 2013, represented the same political party as Lee Myung-bak (the party overcame a number of splits, mergers and re-brandings throughout 2010s). Under her leadership, South Korea continued with a similar foreign policy. Importantly, it was under her leadership, when Eurasian policy of South Korea started being called by that name officially. In 2013, Park Geun-hye proposed a “Eurasian Initiative”, which initially focused on security issues, both hard security issues, including North Korea’s military nuclear program, and soft security issues, primarily environmental considerations [13]. Later on, South Korea expanded the scope of the initiative, which thus became a proposal to build a framework aimed at improving political, economic and humanitarian relations between South Korea and other East Asian nations, on one hand, and Russia and other Eurasian nations, on the other.

It was characteristic of 2010s that multiple initiatives aimed at developing ties among and between Eurasian and East Asian nations were proposed. In 2013, the same year when Park Geun-hye proposed her Eurasian Initiative, newly elected President of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping proposed his “One Belt One Road” Initiative aimed at greater engagement of Eurasian, Middle Eastern and African nations with China, which gained popularity under the name of the Belt and Road Initiative. Also, in 2015 Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union. In late 2010s member states of the Eurasian Economic Union and China agreed on practical steps aimed at linking the Eurasian Economic Union with the Belt and Road Initiative. Time will demonstrate if it will be possible to find a space for South Korea’s Eurasian Initiative among the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative linked together. At the same time, it is clear already now that the proposal of the Eurasian Initiative indicated transformation of South Korea from a small power into a middle power [14].

Relations between South Korea and Russia significantly improved under Park Geun-hye’s administration. In 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Seoul. Russian nationals were allowed to travel to South Korea visa free, and South Korea’s nationals were allowed to travel visa free to Russia as a result of that visit. In 2014, when the U.S., Japan, Canada and multiple European countries introduced sanctions against Russia as a response to downing of the MH17 plane on the way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur in Ukrainian airspace, South Korea refused to join

the sanctions, despite of significant American pressure. Formally unrelated to that, Park Geun-hye was impeached in 2017 after having served as President of the Republic of Korea for more than four out of maximum five years permitted by the country's constitution [15].

At a result of the impeachment, another total alternation of government took place in South Korea. Newly elected President Moon Jae-in, who represented the political party of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun (this part also underwent a number of splits, mergers and re-brandings throughout 2010s), reversed the country's foreign policy again by returning to the basic principles of the Sunshine Policy. That required strengthening of relations with Russia and other Eurasian nations, because past experience demonstrated that it was impossible to break isolation of North Korea without their contribution. Also, Moon Jae-in initiated a conflict between South Korea and Japan over compensations for Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910-1945 despite U.S. criticism of such South Korean foreign policy. That required strengthening of relations with Russia and other Eurasian nations in order to counter-balance American and Japanese pressure on South Korea. One may expect that Moon Jae-in will attempt to develop Park Geun-hye's Eurasian Initiative, though probably under a different name.

### **Conclusions**

South Korea's Eurasian policy has been developing throughout the past thirty years along with democratization and upgrade of international political status of the country. Thirty year ago, South Korea was making its first steps on the road towards democratization, the country's elite or public was not much interested in international politics outside of the Korean Peninsula, and the country's foreign policy was confined to strategic alliance with the U.S. Within the thirty years, South Korea has made a significant path towards democracy, it has learned to defend its interests not only in East Asia, but also in other regions of the world, and finally, it has evolved from a small into a middle power. That has been the environment, in which South Korea's Eurasia policy has been developing throughout the past thirty years.

South Korea pursued three main interests by means of developing its Eurasia policy. First, South Korea wanted to break the isolation of North Korea from outside, which was impossible without contribution of Russia and other Eurasian states. Second, it wanted to secure its economic interests in Eurasia, which is vital for South Korea as a country, whose economy heavily depends on exports. Third, it wanted to improve humanitarian relations with Eurasian nations aiming at securing the interests of Koryo-saram, large groups of ethnic Koreans, who have lived in Russia, Kazakhstan and other Eurasian countries since late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite South Korea's foreign policy course significantly changed across the thirty years, especially in 2008 and again in 2017, those three interests remained high on the country's agenda. As a result, South Korea's Eurasian policy has developed from establishment of diplomatic relations with Eurasian countries in early 1990s to proposal of Eurasian Initiative in 2010s, and beyond.

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### **Корея Республикасының еуразиялық саясаты**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада Корея Республикасының еуразиялық саяси дамытуының үш кезеңі, сондай-ақ КСРО-ның құлдырауы салдарынан Оңтүстік Кореяда да, Еуразия елдерінде де демократияландыру процестерінің басталуынан бастап осы елдің еуразиялық саясатын дамытуға ықпал еткен үш негізгі мүдделер көрсетілген. Оңтүстік Корейдің еуразиялық саясатының бірінші кезеңі 2000-шы жылдардың екінші жартысына дейін жалғасты. Бұл кезеңде Оңтүстік Корей элитасы Солтүстік Корейді әлемнің басқа елдерімен тығыз қарым-қатынасқа тарту мақсатында Еуразия мемлекеттерімен қатынастарды қарастырды.

2000-шы жылдардың екінші жартысында басталып, 2010 жылдың екінші жартысына дейін жалғасқан екінші кезеңде Оңтүстік Корей Солтүстік Корейді әлемнің басқа елдерімен тығыз қарым-қатынасқа толығымен тартуға бағытталған саясатынан бас тартқанымен, Оңтүстік Корей мен Еуразия мемлекеттері арасындағы қатынастар дамуын жалғастырды. Сонымен қатар, Оңтүстік Корей Президенті Пак Кын Хең еуразиялық бастамасын іске асыру арқылы 2013 жылдан бастап осы қатынастарды үйлестіру әрекеттері жасалды.

Жақында басталған үшінші кезеңде Оңтүстік Корей тағы да Солтүстік Корейді әлемнің басқа

елдерімен барынша тығыз қарым-қатынаста болуына тағы да ұмтыла бастады, соның арқасында Оңтүстік Корейдің сыртқы саясатындағы еуразиялық бағыт маңыздылығы артады деп күтуге болады. Корей түбегінде бейбітшілік орнатудан басқа, Оңтүстік Корейдің еуразиялық саясатын дамытуға ықпал ететін тағы екі мүдде - экономикалық мүдделер; сонымен қатар Ресей, Қазақстанда және басқа да Еуразия елдерінде тұратын Корей-сарам, этникалық кәрістердің үлкен тобының мүдделерін қорғау.

**Түйін сөздер:** халықаралық қатынастар, регионализм, Еуразия, Корей мемлекеті, сыртқы саясат.

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### **Евразийская политика Республики Корея**

**Аннотация.** В статье выделяются три этапа развития евразийской политики Республики Корея, а также три основных интереса, которые способствовали развитию евразийской политики этой страны с начала процессов демократизации как в Южной Корее, так и в евразийских странах в результате распада СССР. Первый этап развития южнокорейской евразийской политики продолжался до второй половины 2000-х годов, на этом этапе южнокорейская элита рассматривала отношения с государствами Евразии в качестве способа вовлечения Северной Кореи в более тесные отношения с остальным миром. На втором этапе, начавшемся во второй половине 2000-х годов и продолжавшемся до второй половины 2010-х годов, Южная Корея отказалась от политики, нацеленной на всемерное вовлечение Северной Кореи в более тесные отношения с остальным миром, однако отношения между Южной Кореей и государствами Евразии продолжали развиваться. Более того, начиная с 2013 года, делались попытки гармонизации этих отношений, в том числе путем претворения в жизнь Евразийской инициативы южнокорейского президента Пак Кын Хе. На недавно начавшемся третьем этапе Южная Корея вновь начала стремиться максимально вовлечь Северную Корею в более тесные отношения с остальным миром, благодаря чему можно ожидать роста значения евразийского направления во внешней политике Южной Кореи. Помимо мирного урегулирования на Корейском полуострове, двумя другими интересами, способствующими развитию евразийской политики Южной Кореи, являются экономические интересы, а также защита интересов Корё-сарам, большой группы этнических корейцев, проживающих в России, Казахстане и других странах Евразии.

**Ключевые слова:** международные отношения, регионализм, Евразия, Корея, внешняя политика.

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