

## Republic of Korea's Environmental Diplomacy towards Mongolia and its Achievements

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### Abstract

ROK's environmental diplomacy towards Mongolia has made remarkable progress, gradually becoming one of the priorities in Korea-Mongolia's partnership, arguably contributing to Mongolia's environmental crisis mitigation and its socioeconomic development. It is analysed in this article that the evolution of such diplomacy is featured with an increasing systematisation, for the emphasis of cooperation shifting to integrate environmental issues with human development, and the participants and approaches diversifying. ROK's environmental diplomacy towards Mongolia is revealing that, first, Korea's strengths in technology play role in bolstering an in-depth environmental cooperation; second, the promising bilateral relations guarantee the governments' consensus and willingness and further promote the effectiveness of addressing transnational environmental issues; third, Korea has made improvements in multilateral institutions as an approach to address the critical environmental crisis. This article concluded that the evolution of ROK's environmental diplomacy to Mongolia reflects that how Korea, as a middle power, maximizes its national interests through multilateralism.

### Keywords

Republic of Korea's Environmental Diplomacy, Korea-Mongolia Relations, Sustainable Development, Multilateralism, Middle Power

### Introduction

While the awareness to the symbiosis and mutuality between human beings and nature emerged in the mid-nineteenth century (Tolba & Rummel-Bulska, 1998), significance progress in taking collective action to preserve and enhance the human environment has not been made until a century later when the 1972 Stockholm Conference was held. The Conference, along with its notable results ranging from adopting several critical resolutions to establishing UNEP, marked a revolution in global environmental cooperation which was officially moved from the periphery to the centre in diplomacy. It indicated a new era for balancing environmental protection and human development. As one of the participants in the Stockholm Conference, Republic of Korea (hereafter ROK or Korea) would also embark on contributing to global cooperation in environmental issues, further forming its own paradigm of environmental diplomacy. Over the past decades, the global society has witnessed the Korea's transformation to a proactive global and regional leader in environment preservation and enhancement. Moreover, placing its focus on Asia-Pacific region, Korea's environmental diplomacy has increasingly served as a strategic instrument in strengthening diplomatic relationships and advancing national interests.

Celebrating their 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations this year, Korea and Mongolia have so far achieved a strategic partnership that is characterised by mutually beneficial cooperation in a wide range of domains. Mongolia appears to be hardly replaceable in Korea's environmental diplomacy, considering its geographical proximity to Korea, severe environmental concerns, as well as the relatively backward economic and social development compared to other regional actors.

Fundamentally, this research attempts to explore to what extent and in which forms that Korea's environmental diplomacy has played a role in addressing the environment-development dilemma faced by Mongolia. In this sense, it starts with retrospecting the evolution of Korea's diplomacy regarding environmental issues. The following section figures out Korea's efforts made to mitigate Mongolia's environmental crisis. It then analyses the characters and favourable conditions of Korea's environmental diplomacy towards Mongolia. Finally, the conclusion provides a summary of this article and an outlook on the further direction against the global and regional context of environmental cooperation.

### **The Trajectory of Korea's Environmental Diplomacy**

Although ROK attended the Stockholm Conference in 1972, as mentioned above, and accredited to United Nations Environment Programme later in 1978, its participation in global environmental issues remained relatively reactive until early 1990s. It is argued here that Korea perceived the urgency of carrying out environmental diplomacy primarily due to its domestic crisis, growing from an unconcerned participant of international conference to a proactive advocator who has led global and regional environmental cooperation.

#### **1. 1960s-1980s**

As a matter of fact, Korea itself was swamped with post-war construction and had prioritised economic growth for decades. Five Five-Years Plans were launched successively from 1962 to 1986, placing considerable emphasis on industry of steel, coal energy, electricity, petrochemistry, infrastructure, and therein lies the key to cultivate a competitive heavy industry. Rapid industrialisation was realised owing to the export-oriented strategy, and the demographic composition of middle class grew remarkably along with an upgraded consumption structure. By the end of 1980s, the previously poverty-stricken and underdeveloped country impressed the global society with a "Miracle of Han River".

Nonetheless, the astonishing economic growth came at the expense of the environment. The pollution of air, water, and noise appeared to be problematic, even escalating to a "disaster" situation in the 1970s (고태우, 2004). Immersing themselves in the pride of a growing national power, Koreans were, however, suffered from the fear of being attacked by pollution disease. The outbreak of *Onsan Illness*, *Seoul Pneumoconiosis*, and the water pollution of Han River in mid-1980s arouse broad panic and complaints, urging the administration and the society to take action. Against this background, several measures were taken by the government and civic movements were also mobilised. Still, despite of an increasing awareness of environmental preservation and enhancement, Korea's environmental governance remained preliminary and scattered with a characteristic of passive reaction, not to mention its immature environmental diplomacy.

#### **2. 1990s to early 2000s**

The end of Cold War brought about not only the reconfiguration of international order but also the popularisation of globalism, encouraging transboundary communication and cooperation in diverse fields and various forms. On the other hand, Korea came to notice that it was far from the only Asian country that suffered from negative consequences due to pressure on the environment. Sharing the similar experiences of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation over the past decades, the region was faced with environmental concerns ranging from land degradation, deforestation, declining availability of fresh water and deteriorating water quality, to the degradation of marine and coastal resources (UNDP, 1999). These new phenomena and tendencies, either positive or negative, set a proper background which facilitated Korea's environmental diplomacy that aiming at addressing not only the domestic but also global and regional environment crisis.

At home, R&D of environmental technologies became one of the key parts to increase national capacities in addressing increasingly severe environment issues. A 10-year master plan aimed at boosting improvement of environmental technologies was formulated in 1992, while a law on developing and supporting the environmental R&D was enacted in 1994, laying a foundation for the booming growth of environmental technologies in the future. Two state programs had been put into practices successively during the decades, facilitating great achievements in both after-treatment technologies, for instance, the Korea Electric Power Absorption Reactor<sup>1</sup>, and preventive technologies, such as the Highly Efficient Separation and Recycling System for Excavated Landfill Waste (환경부, 2024).

In the international level, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the “Earth Summit” and held in 1992, marked the resurgence of global environmental protection and ROK’s first step towards environmental diplomacy in a new geopolitical era. Led by the then prime minister Chung Won-shik, a Korean delegation participated in the summit and signed the convention. In 1994, ROK became one of the partner states of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which was initially proposed by UNDP, UNEP, and the World Bank in 1991 and later became a permanent and independent institution. Supporting GEF as a donor, Korea has demonstrated its constantly devotion to the international environmental goals of confronting climate change, pollution, land degradation, and biodiversity loss, etc, as well as to the regional environmentally sustainable development. The year of 1994 also witnessed the adoption of Action Plan for the Protection, Management, and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Northwest Pacific Region (hereafter NOWPAP) during the first Inter-Governmental Meeting (IGM) of Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. It was a joint effort made by these four northwest Pacific countries who requested UNEP to prepare “new action plans for seas not yet covered by the Regional Seas Programme<sup>2</sup>” back in 1989. The city Busan was chosen as the location in which a Regional Coordinating Unit has been established to undertake the role of a secretariat. In addition, one of the regional activity centers, the Marine Environmental Emergency Preparedness and Response Regional Activity Center of NOWPAP was established in Daejeon in response to marine pollution incidents. The IGM for NOWPAP are then held annually in one of the partner countries rotationally. Becoming a member state of World Trade Organisation and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 1995 and 1996 respectively, both involving committees regarding environmental issues<sup>3</sup>, Korea has been increasingly aware of the intricate correlation between environment and trade and its increasing significance in global agenda. It has thus responded to this new reality by emphasising environmental consciousness when it comes to trade policy and industry development, integrating the principles of environmental diplomacy into trade negotiation. Noteworthy, striving to get rid of the mindset of a developing country, it has tended to shift its focus away from economic growth and make a commitment to environment preservation and enhancement even at the sacrifice of short-term trade and economic interests (외교부, 2003). Apart from the state-level action mentioned above, several figures coming on the international stage have contributed to reinforce the conception of Korea’s unwavering commitment to global environmental cooperation. Among all, Ban Ki-moon, who served as the secretary-general of the United Nations from 2007 to 2016, promoted major improvements in the issue of global warming. He also appointed Han Seung-soo, the former President of the United Nations General Assembly (2001-2002), as one of the special envoys on climate change who would be responsible for assisting him in facilitating progress in the multilateral climate change negotiations within the United Nations (United Nations, 2007). Moreover, in terms of the international

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<sup>1</sup> KEPAR: A set of technological devices applied to remove sulfur dioxide from exhaust flue gases of fossil-fuel power plants, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The Regional Seas Programme has first been launched by UNEP in 1974 to address the growing degradation of the world’s oceans and coastal areas.

<sup>3</sup> The Trade and Environment Committee was created as one of the bodies of WTO in 1995, whereas the Environment Policy Committee was established as part of OECD in 1970. [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/bodies\\_divisions\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/bodies_divisions_e.htm); <https://oecdgroups.oecd.org/Bodies/ListByIndexView.aspx#>

convention, ROK had ratified up to 46 conventions, protocols, treaties, and agreements regarding climate, ocean, hazardous chemicals, and biodiversity by 2008 (환경부, 2024).

Perceiving the potential seriousness of the transboundary environmental crisis induced from economic growth, Korea has taken the initiative to promote mechanisms for cooperation among countries of North-eastern Asia. First, Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation (NEACEC), originating from a bilateral symposium on environmental science and technology between Korea and Japan to a multilateral conference involving China, Mongolia, and Russia, was established in 1992 in response to the environmental degradation. Annual meetings of NEACEC were held from 1992 to 2007, providing a platform in which officials and experts were encouraged to exchange information and discuss over issues, including pollution treatment, waste management, ecosystem protection, desertification prevention, etc. Second, North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) is the first inter-governmental mechanism that was jointly initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission in 1993 to respond to regional environmental challenges. As the most comprehensive multilateral mechanism in this area, NEASPEC not only considers regional priorities but bridges that with international goals and national interests, identifying air pollution, nature conservation, desertification, and land degradation, low carbon cities, and marine protection as five programmatic areas. Third, the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (TEMM) is one of the most institutionalised mechanisms among Korea-Japan-China from 1999, aiming at promoting regional environmental management and contributing to global environmental improvement.

During this period, Korea had been carrying out its environmental diplomacy by showing a positive posture in responding to the international call for environmental enhancement on the one hand, and an active engagement in bilateral and regional environmental cooperation on the other. Specifically, recognising the diversification of national interests and negotiation fields, it had conceived its environmental diplomacy based on the principles of contributing to protecting environment and establishing environment-friendly industry, and of strengthening multilateral cooperation and promoting the participation of non-governmental organisation (외교부, 2003).

### 3. 2008-2020s

While Ban Ki-moon took his post as the secretary-general of UN in 2007 and later took a hard line on the issue of combating global warming, the newly inaugurated Korean administration appeared to march towards sustainable development with increasingly pragmatic measures.

A sustainability-oriented vision for mid-to long-term development was announced by President Lee Myong-bak in 2008, reflecting its determination to realise a considerable cut in greenhouse gas emissions by virtue of a transition from energy-intensive industries to low-carbon ones. In light of this, the Lee administration then proposed National Strategy for Green Growth and established the Presidential Committee on Green Growth in 2009, embarking on formulating national plans for sustainable development. The launch of Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) in 2010 signified a watershed after which Korea changed from a participator to a proactive initiator in international and regional environmental cooperation. Dedicating to supporting developing countries and emerging economies with balancing between economic growth and ecological preservation, GGGI has been registered as a treaty-based intergovernmental organization in October 2012 and accepted as an observer in United Nations General Assembly in December 2013, and is credited as the only institution focusing exclusively on green growth. Green Round Table is another flagship project initiated by Korea. Since 2016, the conference has been held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aiming at strengthening environmental cooperation with international organisations, public institutions, and private sectors, expanding the participation of civil society, and realising the ultimate goal of green economy and sustainable development (외교부). In line with these initiatives, the administration put forward a series of R&D programs, attempting to cultivate environmental industry which addressing environmental issues and, meanwhile, functions as a new engine of national growth and exportation through commercialization. As a result, technologies, ranging from the fields of atmospheric and water environment, water supply and sewage treatment, to that of resource recycling, have been developed and promoted, contributing to public interests both at home and abroad.

Furthermore, Korea has remained an active participation in multilateral environmental cooperation. First, the international conventions ratified by Korea has increased up to 50 by 2024. Second, Korea participates in Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 (P4G) and held the second summit in 2021. The P4G dedicates to the net zero transition in low- and middle-income countries through offering grant financing to locally targeted solutions in climate-smart agriculture, food loss and waste, water resilience, zero emission mobility and renewable energy (Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030, 2024). Third, Songdo, a smart city built in Korea, is designated as the location in which the permanent headquarters of Green Climate Fund (GCF) would be established in 2013. In line of the aim of Cancún Agreements, the institution was set up to provide developing countries with finance to mitigate or adapt to climate change. This site selection of its headquarters could be explained as either the increasing international impact of Korea's role in environmental issues or the role of Ban Ki-moon.

Compared to the previous period, Korea's environmental diplomacy has revealed an increasing interest in taking a lead in environmental issue. Specifically, ROK has demonstrated an essential upgrade in its environmental philosophy, leading to a shift in the paradigm of environmental diplomacy. Responding to the global call, the administration not only incorporates the vision of developing environment-friendly economy into the national strategy, but also strives to play a role in promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation in sustainable development. Since the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the global society has witnessed Korea's proactive posture in proposing new model of global development, i.e., the initiative of green economy or green growth.

### **ROK's Contributions to Environmental Crisis in Mongolia**

Located in the hinterland of the Eurasia, Mongolia appears to be a fairly low-profile country compared to its counterparts in North-eastern Asia. Still, Mongolia is hardly replaceable in Korea's regional diplomacy when it comes to its geographical proximity with Korea, its strategic significance in Korean Peninsular peacebuilding, as well as its role as a gateway to promote Korea's new northern policy. Celebrating their 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations this year, Korea and Mongolia have so far achieved a strategic partnership that is characterised by mutually beneficial cooperation in a wide range of domains. Among all, cooperation in environmental governance is one of the most steadily growing and arguably promising fields, not merely because of Mongolia's threatened environmental security, but also on the account of regional environmental concerns. Before digging into Korea's environmental diplomacy to Mongolia, it worth identifying what have threatened the environmental security of Mongolia.

#### **1. Environmental crisis faced by Mongolia**

Mongolia has been vulnerable to environmental crisis largely because of its geographical and natural conditions on the one hand, and human activities on the other. As the second largest land-locked country, Mongolia is far from the oceans and thus dominated by anticyclones centred over Siberia and whilst hardly influenced by any oceanic moisture. It has a typical continental and semi-arid climate with scarce precipitation and consistent temperature fluctuations. It is topographically constituted by mountain zones in the northern and western parts of territory, basin areas in between, uplands and plains in the east, and Gobi Desert in the southern part, roughly sloping from the west and the north to the east and the south. Despite of the developed river system in the north, two-thirds of the territory is characterised by interior drainage basins.

##### **1) Climate change**

Mongolia's geographical location and natural conditions inevitably increase its vulnerability, making it one of the most susceptible countries to climate change (Монгол Улсын Их Хурал, 2022). It is observed that Mongolia's annually average temperature has increased by 2.24 °C while the annual precipitation decreases 7% from 1940 to 2015 (UNFCCC, 2018). In spite of complicated causalities, climate change is believed to result in a wide range of extreme weather events and natural hazards in Mongolia over decades. Drought, both meteorological and hydrological, is one of the critical issues that threatens this inner-land country which has experienced deficient rainfall, decreasing surface and subsurface water flow (World Bank & Asian Development Bank, 2021). Even worse, a dry summer combined with a cold winter usually leads to the slow-onset disaster, *dzud*(зүд) which



is unique to Mongolia and proved to have increased in frequency and intensity recently. Flood is another severe hazard caused by climate change, mainly because that the exposed lands are unable to absorb all the precipitation in a short interval of time. Thus, climate change has profound and extensive impacts on Mongolia, ranging from natural to economic and social conditions, posing a hardly reversible damage to its river flow volume, biodiversity, food production, living conditions, and human health, etc.

## 2) Land degradation

The second crisis faced by Mongolia is land degradation, for that 76.9% of the total territory is degraded by 2020, of which heavily and severely degraded lands occupy 23.3% (Монгол Орны Цөжилтнийн Атлас, 2020). A set of three indicators, i.e., land cover, land productivity, carbon stocks above and below ground, is proposed by United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Science and Policy Interface (SPI) to suggest land-based natural capital and its associated ecosystem services (Orr et al., 2017). In accordance with these measurements, it is assessed that the tree-covered areas and grasslands have experienced the most severe degradation. Basically, land degradation is induced by natural conditions combined with human activities, including Mongolia's geological location in an area prone to desertification, the alternating drought and flood, water and wind erosion, increase in livestock to support the blooming cashmere industry, excessive logging, overexploitation due to the dominance of mining industry in contemporary national economy, rapid urban expansion etc. Considering its complex causes and effects, land degradation has become rather tricky that requires comprehensive approaches and multi-cooperation among various sectors.

## 3) Pollution

The issue of air and water pollution in Mongolia emerged in early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has conspicuously deteriorated ever since the democratization. Herders who were deprived of means of production due to either natural disasters or social transformation have flocked into cities, especially the capital, searching for new livelihood. Such an intensive rural-to-urban migration has led to a rapid growing size of Ulaanbaatar (World Health Organization, 2019). Nonetheless, a majority of the immigrants have no access to permanent housing but informal settlements. As a result, the “*ger*” district, possessed by former herders, has gradually formed in the north of Ulaanbaatar, accommodating over half of the population of the capital. The raw coal burnt in the *gers*' traditional stoves then is responsible for up to 80% of Ulaanbaatar's air pollution in winter, characterized by the high concentration of particulate matter (World Health Organization, 2019). In 2020, Ulaanbaatar's PM<sub>2.5</sub> reached an average of 46.6 µg/m<sup>3</sup>, making it rank third among regions and countries with the highest fine dust concentration around the world (IQAir, 2020). It is reported that air pollution accounts for over 4000 disease deaths in Mongolia each year (World Health Organization, 2018).

## 2. Evolution of ROK's Environmental Diplomacy towards Mongolia

Basically, Korea cooperated with Mongolia in the field of environmental issues under the framework of regional institution during the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Originating from a bilateral symposium between Korea and Japan, Northeast Asia Conference on Environmental Cooperation (NEAC) was established in 1992 to involve five NEA countries including Mongolia, providing a platform in which government organizations and research institutes were encouraged to exchange information and participate in discussion. Comparing to its relative looseness, North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) is the first inter-governmental mechanism that established to respond to regional environmental challenges. As the most comprehensive multilateral mechanism in this area, NEASPEC not only considers regional priorities but bridges that with international goals and national interests. Both NEAC and NEASPEC have laid foundation for Mongolia-Korea developing relations on jointly addressing environmental crisis. Apart from efforts in governmental and state-level, private sectors, think tanks, and citizens contribute to bilateral cooperation by establishing non-governmental organization, such as Northeast Forest Forum (NEAFF), which was founded in 1998 with the aim of improving forest environment in Northeast Asia. Still, in-depth collaboration was absent over this decade, which could be explained by the transformation in both countries. Korea just became an official member of OECD and a net donor in 1995 whereas Mongolia was going through one of the most painful social transitions that this state had ever experienced. In

light of this, it was hardly likely that two states were in the mood to develop a productive environmental cooperation.

On the verge of the new century, the bilateral diplomatic relations was enhanced to Complementary Partnership for the 21st Century (21세기 상호보완적 협력관계) in 1999, and was then promoted to Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation (선린우호협력 동반자관계) in 2006. The first decade of this new century, thus, witnessed a welcome development in Korea's environmental diplomacy to Mongolia. For one thing, a range of memorandums of understanding and cooperation agreements were signed between governmental departments concerned. Based on the Agreements on Environmental Cooperation that comes into force since 2000, a joint committee on the environment has been established to take charge of conducting research on desertification prevention, providing assistance to water resources development in Mongolia, supporting Korean environmental industry's entering into Mongolia's market, etc (환경부, 2006). A Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation on Meteorology, signed between Korea Meteorological Administration and Mongolia Ministry of Environment and Tourist (hereafter MET) has directed biennial meetings aimed at scientific research on sand and dust weather since 2003. Another MOU for Cooperation on Preventing Desertification and Yellow Dust, first signed between Korea Forest Service<sup>4</sup> and Mongolia's MET in 2006, has focused on combating desertification and reducing its damage to the region through carrying out programs on forest plantation (장민영, 2021). For another, considering the increasing frequency of Mongolia sand and dust storm and its subsequent impacts on the whole region, tailored programs were implemented with the attempt to strengthen Mongolia's ability to response. NEAFF, as a critical power of non-governmental level, has embarked on building shelterbelt in Mongolia's territory since 2000 (국가기록관, 2007). In supporting of the action plan of Mongolia's "Green Wall" national program (Хороон Хэрэм), a Korea-Mongolia Greenbelt Reforestation Project was proposed in 2006 and put into effect for decades. Besides, ROK's technological export to Mongolia has constituted a critical part of bilateral environmental cooperation. For example, the separation and recycling system for landfill waste has been introduced to Mongolia to relieve the pollution of Ulaanbaatar.

In his state visit to Mongolia in August 2011, President Lee Myung-bak and the then Mongolia president Elbegdorj Tsakhia issued a joint declaration to upgrade bilateral diplomatic relations. Instructed by the newly promoted Comprehensive Partnership, leaders of both countries expressed their common concerns about global warming, especially the environmental crisis faced by countries in North-eastern Asia, indicating the significance of cooperation in combating climate change (대한민국 정책브리핑, 2011). The improvement in diplomatic relation, along with President Lee's newly announced commitment to environmental enhancement, seems to herald a transition in Korea's environmental diplomacy to Mongolia. As one of the major achievements reflecting the diplomatic extension of Korea's national strategy for green growth, GGGI has contributed to Mongolia's sustainable growth through initiating multilateral cooperation. Specifically, noticing the challenges of limited implementation and financing faced by the government of Mongolia, GGGI has endeavoured to achieve poverty reduction, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and economic growth. There are 13 projects, ranging from reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting energy efficiency, facilitating energy transformation, to creating green-related job, are in implementation or completed up till now. Furthermore, a regional mechanism has been launched by NEASPEC in 2018, providing a comprehensive platform for strengthening science-based, policy-oriented cooperation on air pollution.

Besides, the bilateral cooperation carries on. While the MOU for Cooperation on Preventing Desertification and Yellow Dust was renewed and the Korea-Mongolia Greenbelt Reforestation Project entered the second phase in 2016, a ministerial-level office for environmental policy consultation has been founded in 2019 (대한민국 정책브리핑, 2019). The establishment of this joint institution suggests an effort to assemble monetary and intellectual resources from both governments and civil

<sup>4</sup> A central administrative agency affiliated to Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs.

society, coordinate the implementation of programs which used to scatter among governmental sectors and non-government organisations. The first meeting was held in two months later, in which 10 programs were discussed and improved. In addition to several projects involving biodiversity enhancement, meteorological observation, desertification prevention that have already been put into effect for years, six new programs have been designed to introduce solar power generation system, regulate landfill, improve sanitary conditions of Ger district, improve air quality, etc. (대한민국 정책브리핑). In no time, the office for policy consultation promoted the Master Plan for Ambient Air Quality Improvement in 2020. It is expected that the newly found institution can provide a channel of communication and strengthen the efficacy of Korea's environment diplomacy.

The Covid-19 pandemic did not become an obstacle to Korea-Mongolia strengthening diplomatic relations. President Moon Jae-in and President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh held a summit via videoconference, agreeing to upgrade bilateral ties from "comprehensive partnership" to "strategic partnership" in September 2021. The joint declaration on the development of a strategic partnership, which specifies five key areas of cooperation, reflects a shared aspiration of sustainable development. It states that both sides speak highly of the application of Green Growth Policy to Mongolia, agreeing to deepen cooperation in terms of preventing desertification, combating climate, addressing natural hazards and environmental pollution by constructing eco-friendly infrastructure, promoting green energy, restoring forests, reducing greenhouse gas emission, etc. (청와대, 2021). During the summit, two leaders also exchanged ideas on issues concerned with eco-friendly growth, emphasising the potentials of synergising Korea's cutting-edge technologies and Mongolia's green infrastructure construction and resource development.

## Analysis

### 1. Characterising ROK's Environmental Diplomacy towards Mongolia

The environment-related projects implemented in Mongolia have experienced a transition in issues of concern from single domains, such as desertification, air pollution, climate change, etc. to a more comprehensive but complex domain, i.e., sustainable development. In other words, Korea initially embarked on cooperation with Mongolia in fields that were either related to its own experience or concerned with regional and domestic environmental concerns. The environmental diplomacy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century tended to depend on straightforward measures attempting to address the issues one by one, while environmental issues are organically integrated with development as Korea's National Strategy for Green Growth debuted in 2008 and extends into its diplomacy.

The diversification of participants and approaches is another feature of the environmental diplomacy. Whereas governmental sectors, including Ministry of Environment, Korean Forest Service, Korea Meteorological Administration used to dominate, there is a gradual process during which programs implemented in Mongolia have been directly taken charge by specialised agencies, such as the Korea Environment Corporation, Korea Environmental Industry & Technology Institute, Eco & Partners, etc. Still, the Korea's government plays important roles in supervising how the diplomacy is conducted. It appears that the approaches adopted have varied from providing aid and loans to dispatching experts, introducing technologies, institutionalising channels of information and communication.

As a result, Korea seems to systematize its environmental diplomacy to Mongolia with a comprehensive perspective and by involving diversified participants and approaches to provide solutions.

### 2. Broader Metaphors behind ROK's Environmental Diplomacy

In retrospect, the successive formulation of Korea's environmental diplomacy in Mongolia is facilitated and driven by several favourable conditions, including those in the aspects of science, of inter-state, and of institutions/organizations.

#### 1) ROK's strengths in science

Advanced technology is central to environmental preservation and human development. When it comes to environmental cooperation, there is no exception. It is argued that independent scientific investigations definitely play a role, ranging from spelling out explicit monitoring procedures, establishing ongoing joint research activities to specifying the scientific findings, and carrying out next steps (Susskind & Ali, 2024).



Over decades, ROK has gained advantages in scientific technologies. According to an investigation conducted by the Korea's Ministry of Environment, the standard of ROK's environmental technologies has reached 60-80% of that of western advanced countries, which enhanced from 10-30% in 1992 (환경부, 2024). Bolstered by policy support and domestic market demands, the technological advancement has obviously facilitated its environmental diplomacy towards Mongolia. Focusing on issues of climate change, desertification, pollution, etc., ROK and Mongolia have developed an in-depth scientific and technological cooperation. In general, it starts with putting monitoring devices into operation, and then collecting data which is further open for sharing, and followed by efforts to analyze data and conduct research. In this case of ROK-Mongolia cooperation, it is usually accompanied with transforming technology and training experts in this field. Noteworthy, ROK's comparative strengths in science have facilitated its environmental diplomacy to Mongolia.

## 2) Promising bilateral relations

The state, or the government, takes on a hardly replaceable role in transboundary issues of environment. It normally works towards make sure the formalization of negotiation and institutionalization of inter-state consensus, as well as the subsequent implementation in the sub-state level (Harris, 2022). In this sense, the extent to which governments are willing to cooperate can determine the effectiveness of addressing transnational environmental issues. ROK's environmental diplomacy to Mongolia is greatly benefited from the stable development of bilateral relations.

Chronologically speaking, the trajectory Korea's environmental diplomacy has not deviate from how Korea-Mongolia bilateral relations has been promoted. Since Mongolia functions as the gateway to Korea-Russia cooperation, facilitating the promotion of Korea's new northern policy(신북방정책), and also undertakes the role as a mediator to inter-Korea relations as Mongolia maintains positive partnerships with two Koreas, Mongolia is of strategic significance in Korea's geopolitical policies ever since their diplomatic relations was established in 1990. Thus, it would be rational for Korea to deepen partnerships with Mongolia in areas as much as possible. In other words, Korea's willingness to maintain an extensive and intensive diplomatic relation is the cornerstone of its environmental diplomacy to Mongolia.

Furthermore, the environmental issue becomes a guaranteed domain in Korea-Mongolia partnership. Environmental issue was probably one of the most approachable fields to develop the newly built Korea-Mongolia diplomatic relations, considering the increasing concern towards the global environmental crisis, the common challenges faced by Mongolia and the NEA region, and also Korea's capability in providing fiscal and technological aid. It gradually evolves as an area of collaboration in which both sides have not merely made certain achievements, but more importantly, accumulated experience and built mutual trust. In this sense, it seems that Korea's environment diplomacy to Mongolia is somehow one of the driving forces behind the bilateral relations.

## 3) Improvements in multilateral institutions

In most cases, environmental crisis is characterized as cross-border, regional, and even global, which can be attested by the increasing global and regional concerns over environment. In addition, the emerging notion of "sustainable development" indicates that the global society inclines to perceive environmental issues from a comprehensive stance. These phenomena prove that environmental crisis is a transdisciplinary issue and could not be solved independently. The evolution of ROK's environmental diplomacy reflects that the challenges posed with Mongolia are basically common concerns in Northeast Asia and around the world, and that ROK has made progress in its approach to contribute to this critical issue. Initially, ROK resorted to the multilateral regional institutions, such as the NEASPEC, which were supposed to provide efforts and resources. These platforms, however, have long been criticized to be dominated by state actors, driven by diplomatic principles, guided by non-coercive consultation tactics, leaving a "organisation gap" that decrease efficiency of collective decision (Calder & Ye, 2010). As ROK has advocated the idea of "green growth" and provided worldwide public goods in this aspect, the GGGI-supported projects become integral to its diplomacy to Mongolia, filling in the "organisation gap" in the region-level and improving the effectiveness of cooperation. In particular, sub-national government bodies, non-state actors, and communities (Harris, 2022) are introduced to mobilise and coordinate multilateral resources, avoiding the downsides of environmental politics in NEA region.

## Conclusion: ROK as A Middle Power in the Multilateral Arena

Over decades, Korea's environmental diplomacy towards Mongolia has gradually become one of the priorities in Korea-Mongolia's diplomatic relations, arguably contributing to Mongolia's environmental crisis mitigation and its socioeconomic development. It is analysed in this article that the evolution of such diplomacy is featured with an increasing systematisation, for the emphasis of co-operation shifting to integrate environmental issues with human development, and the participants and approaches diversifying. In light of this, this article illustrated that ROK's environmental diplomacy towards Mongolia is revealing that, first, Korea's strengths in technology play role in bolstering an in-depth environmental cooperation; second, the promising bilateral relations guarantee the states' consensus and willingness and further promote the effectiveness of addressing transnational environmental issues; third, Korea has made improvements in multilateral institutions as an approach to address the critical environmental crisis.

In general, the evolution of ROK's environmental diplomacy reflects that how Korea, as a middle power, maximizes its national interests through multilateralism. It is defined as "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions" (Keohane, 1990). As an indispensable part in the global politics after WWII, multilateralism has offered middle powers with an arena in which they are able to exercise leadership and promote international reputation. As for ROK, 1990s was a critical period. For one thing, the end of Cold War was followed by the collapse of a bipolar system and the formation a multipolar international order. For another, joining OECD was a sign that the state's economic achievements had been generally recognized. Against such new surroundings, the state's fundamental assessment towards itself and the world has taken shape. Since late 1990s, ROK has identified itself as a "middle power", differentiating from major powers that are able to adopt coercive approaches and from economically late-developing countries. It has also defended multilateralism with a belief that power politics in this aspect usually involve basic consensus on cooperation (Teo, 2022). In this sense, leveraging its "soft power", i.e., the economic capacities, or cultural clout, Korea has actively participated in regional and global affairs in various aspects.

Its diplomacy to Mongolia is an epitome of such a diplomacy. Obviously, the power system in Northeast Asia where these two states locate are far more complicated than any other regions in the world. First, sovereign countries in this area are distinct in development progress, in political institutions, and in social compositions. Second, the structure of NEA is not only shaped by traditional power, rising power, but also by great powers outside from the region. Third, regionalism is far away from formation. One most illustrative example here is that the increasing economic interdependence has not brought about mutual political and security trust among actors. As its capabilities in material and diplomacy are inferior to major powers, ROK are unable, and unwilling as well, to utilize coercive measures to exert influence over Mongolia's behaviors.

Multilateralism, however, creates a space in which power is diffused away from major powers at the top to others further down the system. In this case, multilateral cooperation is central to ROK's diplomacy, for it deconstructs, to some extent, the power structure in NEA on the one hand, and empowers Korea to sway other state actors through economic, social, and ideational capital on the other. It is witnessed in the case of environmental diplomacy, ROK relies on multilateralism to leverage its financing capabilities, governance experience, development patterns. In return, Mongolia develops trust in it that Korea is highly qualified to take a lead in combating environmental crisis.

In a broader landscape, ROK maintains an active participation in global and regional affairs based on its "soft power", initiating institutions that involves major powers and late-developing countries to exchange views and make decision. It has thus managed to prevent major powers from dominating the "rule-based" international order, and to assume a role as a responsible and competent state actor.

Still, given the recent turbulence in global politics, some trends have emerged to reshape Korea's middle power diplomacy. Trump administration's strategic adjustment appears to fracture the post-war international order established by U.S. itself and its alliances. In this sense, the global faith in multilateralism seems to be weakened. Diverging from his predecessors who claimed the ROK's identity as a "middle power", the Yoon administration has made a commitment to building a "Global

Pivotal State”. It is stated in ROK’s 2023 National Security Strategy that “As a global pivotal state grounded in the spirit of freedom and solidarity, the Republic of Korea endeavors to actively address the rapidly evolving security environment”. It is unquestionable that ROK is relocating itself, specifically to chime with U.S. strategy, to play a greater strategic role in global and regional affairs. Still, the new strategy advocated by the administration does not necessarily suggest a departure away from its middle power identity or its insistence in multilateral cooperation. What matters here is how ROK will navigate the changing power politics with challenges on the international and domestic front.

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