

ISCKMC 2020**International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»****SOUTH KOREA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY: UAE'S CASE**

Gulnara Nilovna Valiakhmetova (a)*, Irina Alexandrovna Musinova (b)

*Corresponding author

(a) Ural Federal University, 51, Lenin Ave., Ekaterinburg, 620083, Russia, vgulnara@mail.ru,

(b) Ural Federal University, 51, Lenin Ave., Ekaterinburg, 620083, Russia, irina.musinova@gmail.com

Abstract

The example of the United Arab Emirates demonstrates the key trends in the development of South Korea's relations with the Middle East. Over a relatively short historical period, Seoul's policy in the region has transformed from having a passive nature and focused exclusively on its own energy interests into an effective strategy that has made the Republic of Korea one of the leading non-regional and global players. The establishment of a strategic partnership with the UAE allowed South Korea to make a breakthrough in the Middle East, go beyond the narrow framework of economic interests and transform into a responsible power capable of making a significant contribution to the creation of a new regional security and integration of the Middle East countries as equal participants into the global economy. The article identifies the developmental stages and features of relations between Seoul and Abu Dhabi, traces the evolution of target attitudes, conceptual approaches and methods of realizing the national interests of the Republic of Korea in the UAE. The authors focus on the variety of diplomatic tools used by Seoul, and also emphasize the role of the Korean presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak in shaping the Middle East thread of the Republic of Korea's foreign policy and building a constructive dialogue with the Arab world.

2357-1330 © 2021 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: South Korea, UAE, Middle East, diplomacy

1. Introduction

In the new millennium, the Middle East remains the most volatile region in the world. Loss of control over international processes, crisis and destruction of national states and identities, exacerbation and spreading of conflicts, humanitarian catastrophes, terrorism expansion, increasing role of factors of force and chance are not only the trends in global development, which the Middle East demonstrates, it also generates them by extrapolating to the global level. At the same time, the region retains the status of the main “oil storehouse” of the planet and, accordingly, its exceptional importance in the world economy. These factors increase the role of the world community and leading powers in restoring stability in the region and integrating the Middle East countries into international economic and political processes.

Over the past two decades, the so-called new extra-regional players being China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have been gaining more and more geopolitical weight in the region. Their advance to the Middle East demonstrates a number of significant differences from the experience of traditional external actors (USA, Russia, European countries) and requires scientific understanding. Of particular academic and political interest is the experience of South Korea, which demonstrated new dimensions of its common foreign policy in the Middle East having managed to create an atmosphere of trust in relations with the countries of this rather complex and contradictory region thereby ensuring the realization of its national interests in this part of the world.

2. Problem Statement

The Middle East remained on the periphery of Seoul’s foreign policy interests for a relatively long time, since it was not of key importance for ensuring the country’s national security (unlike the United States and Northeast Asia). Successful modernization during the presidency of Park Chung-hee (1963–1979) and the oil boom in 1973 contributed to the growing importance of the Middle East for the dynamic economy of South Korea. In addition, the relaxation of international tension allowed Seoul to overcome the restrictive framework of the Cold War and by the early 1980s to establish diplomatic relations with almost all countries in the region. ROK’s Middle East policy was determined solely by the economic interests advanced to a great extent by Seoul’s apparent desire to distance itself from political participation in regional affairs. The realities of the post-bipolar era and the permanent deterioration of the military-political situation in the Middle East forced Seoul to provide a secure environment in the region (Levkowitz, 2012).

South Korea today has a wide range of interests in the Middle East. Their implementation is carried out within the framework of bilateral and multilateral interaction with the countries of the region using methods of economic, public, digital, cultural and religious diplomacy as well as through political and military participation in peacekeeping activities. At the same time, Seoul demonstrates the coordination of its actions in the region with Washington. The only exception to this rule was South Korea’s relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which Seoul brought to the level of strategic partnership, and without regard to the United States. This new format of cooperation not only contributed to the revitalization of ROK’s relations with the UAE and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf but also

gave a powerful impetus to the development of trans-regional ties between the Middle East and East Asia (Chun, 2016; Song, 2013).

Why did the UAE take priority positions in South Korea's Middle East strategy? Why did the independence of Seoul's Middle East diplomacy first manifest itself in relations with Abu Dhabi? Researchers in South Korea and the Middle East explain this by a complex of reasons of a historical, international political, economic, domestic political, cultural and religious nature. With all the vastness and variety of research topics on the role of the UAE in South Korea's Middle East policy, discussions on the above issues are still relevant.

3. Research Questions

The subject of research in this article is the historical stages and features of the transformation of the target attitudes and methods of implementing South Korea's Middle East policy as exemplified by the development of its relations with the United Arab Emirates from 1980 to the present.

4. Purpose of the Study

The analysis of the development of relations between the Republic of Korea and the UAE is aimed at identifying the factors that allowed Seoul to overcome numerous objective obstacles on the way to mutually beneficial cooperation with Abu Dhabi and to bring bilateral cooperation to the level of special strategic partnership in record time.

5. Research Methods

The complex nature of the Middle East policy of the Republic of Korea predetermined the application of a multifactorial approach and methods of historical and international political research in this work. The authors were guided by the principles of the historiographic tradition and reliance on official sources of information. The methods of systems analysis made it possible to consider bilateral relations between Seoul and Abu Dhabi in the context of international and regional processes as well as taking into account the national development trends of both countries. Situational and event analyses were applied to assess the effectiveness of South Korea's Middle East strategy at the present stage.

6. Findings

It is possible to distinguish several stages in the history of relations between ROK and the UAE. The first stage covers the period from the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1980 to early 2003. It is characterized by the gradual intensification of interstate cooperation on oil supplies, labor migration and the promotion of South Korea's business interests in the UAE (construction business, export of household appliances, etc.). At this time, Seoul had not considered the Middle East in the long term and, consequently, there was practically no regional policy with this regards, and decisions were made on a case-by-case basis in the bureaucratic offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Azad, 2013). Globalization, increased dependence on oil imports and growing turbulence in the Middle East have

required South Korea to develop comprehensive measures to protect national energy interests by diversifying bilateral trade with the countries of the region as well as political and military participation in the settlement of regional conflicts (Levkowitz, 2012).

The second stage in the development of relations between South Korea and the UAE covers the period of the *Roh Moo-hyun* administration (2003-2008). The beginning of fundamental changes in Seoul's Middle East policy was evidenced by the emphasis on the security sphere and the promotion of multilateral formats of interaction, primarily with the *Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCG)*. On November 15, 2006, *ROK* and *CCG* signed the first military memorandum of understanding and began negotiations to establish free trade zones. This symbolized Seoul's departure from its traditional foreign policy direction towards engaging with the United States and East Asian countries (Al-Sudairi, 2012; Jeong, 2019).

Roh Moo-hyun became the first South Korean president to visit the UAE. His visit to Abu Dhabi on May 12, 2006 resulted in signing the *Security Cooperation Agreement (2007)*, which became an extremely important milestone in the history of bilateral relations. The activities of the *ROK-UAE Joint Economic Board* established at the same time contributed to the explosive growth of bilateral trade, an increase in Korean investment in infrastructure projects in the UAE and a construction boom (symbolized by the famous *Dubai's Burj Khalifa*, the tallest building in the world, which was built by *Samsung C&T Corporation*). Additionally, the foundations were laid for *ROK's* resource diplomacy aimed to gain direct access to oil and gas fields in the Middle East and gave its results in the UAE under the successors of *Roh Moo-hyun* (Jeong, 2019) at that time. In addition to the methods of vertical diplomacy, new formats of multilateral interaction began to be created (Korea Middle East Cooperation Forum, etc.).

The third period is associated with the presidency of *Lee Myung-bak* (2008–2013) and can be characterized as a triumph of South Korean diplomacy in the Middle East. It based on the strategic partnership agreement between *ROK* and the UAE. *Lee Myung-bak* was the first and the only President of South Korea who knew the specifics and business culture of the region rather well. During his 27 years at *Hyundai Construction*, he led many Middle East projects. This enabled to significantly expand and deepen the established interests of Seoul in the region. One of the key features in the relationship between *ROK* and the UAE during the *Lee Myung-bak* era was close interaction with the UAE royal family and an unprecedented number of high-level official visits (39 reciprocal visits at the level of state heads and ministers), which launched similar processes in the business circles of both countries and contributed to the atmosphere of trust (Azad, 2013; Jeong, 2019). The development of tools for vertical and horizontal diplomacy allowed Seoul to make a breakthrough in the Middle East.

With the direct participation of *Lee Myung-bak* South Korean corporations won a contract for the development of nuclear power in the UAE for \$ 40 billion in 2009. For Seoul, the largest overseas contract in *ROK's* history has become a gateway to the global nuclear power technology market traditionally controlled by the United States, France, Japan, Russia and China. The opening of colossal prospects for South Korea was evidenced by the negotiations with Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the construction of nuclear power plants (Levkowitz, 2013) rather soon. However, the main advantage and innovation of the *ROK-UAE* nuclear agreement was the joint nature of the future operations and maintenance of reactors for at least 60 years. This meant the transition of bilateral relations

to the level of strategic partnership (Azad, 2013). To further consolidate efforts with ROK in the economic field, in May 2010 Abu Dhabi established the UAE Korean Business Council.

On the basis of a strategic partnership with the UAE, South Korea has made significant progress in ensuring its national energy security, which is a top priority in its Middle East policy. In 2009–2011, Seoul and Abu Dhabi agreed on joint exploration and development of oil fields in the UAE, on the construction of reserve oil storage facilities for ROK in the UAE and in Korean seaports. These agreements made South Korea, which is heavily dependent on oil and gas imports, a major oil producer and guaranteed a stable supply of energy to the Korean economy in the medium term (Levkowitz, 2013; Song, 2013).

The strategic partnership between ROK and the UAE has also expanded into the areas of construction, renewable energy, investment, high technology, medicine and pharmacology, agriculture and tourism. A wide range of scientific, educational, cultural, sports events and exchange programs have become new areas of bilateral cooperation. To develop multilateral relations with the UAE and Arab countries in the fields of politics, business, economy and culture, the Korean-Arab Society was established in Seoul in 2008. An important role in promoting a constructive dialogue between Seoul and Abu Dhabi was played by Islamic public organizations and groups of South Korea, whose activities significantly improved the country's image in the Arab-Muslim world (Song, 2015).

However, the most significant from a political point of view was the expansion of the strategic partnership between ROK and the UAE in the military sphere. In 2011, Seoul dispatched 130 troops to provide military training and equipment for the UAE Special Forces. This was the first time when South Korea had a direct military presence in the areas, which did not conduct combat operations. Seoul considered this precedent as the need to provide guarantees for the protection of Korean citizens and investments in the Middle East. Bilateral security relations also received additional impetus after the incident of the seizure of a South Korean cargo ship by Somali pirates in 2011, when the UAE royal family helped Seoul resolve the problem (Song, 2013).

The fourth and the current period in the development of relations between Seoul and Abu Dhabi is associated with the activities of the successors of Lee Myung-bak (Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) and Moon Jae-in (from 2017 until now)) as Presidents of South Korea. The present time is characterized as a process of building an all-encompassing strategic partnership, within which the priority of economic cooperation is increasingly giving way to political imperatives and security interests. Accordingly, resource diplomacy is losing its leading role and the methods of vertical diplomacy and multilateral formats of interaction with the UAE within the CCG, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation come to the fore. The expansion of defense cooperation is based on the mutual desire of Seoul and Abu Dhabi to contain Iran and restore the balance of regional security (Azad, 2018; Chun, 2016). The role of intercultural dialogue and soft power tools is significantly increasing (Jeong, 2019), new public institutions are being created (Emirati-Korean Friendship Society, Korea Culture Center), and the mediation activities of Muslim organizations in South Korea are expanding (Park et al., 2017; Song, 2015).

Moon Jae-in's visits to Abu Dhabi in March 2018 and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Seoul in February 2019 contributed to the ROK-UAE relationship to get a "special strategic partnership."

On this basis, a number of memorandums of understanding were signed in the field of science and information and communication technologies, healthcare, small and medium-sized businesses, renewable energy, infrastructure projects, intellectual property management (Jeong, 2019; IRENA, 2019; Lee, 2016; Lee & Son, 2016). It was very symbolic that on the 40th anniversary of the diplomatic relations establishment, Seoul and Abu Dhabi implemented UAE-Korea Cultural Dialogue 2020 (Mckd, 2019). This new format of interaction aimed at rapprochement of cultures and exchange of knowledge, promoting initiatives and ideas in areas related to the preservation and development of the spiritual and material heritage of the two nations.

7. Conclusion

The inclusion of the Middle East in the sphere of vital interests of South Korea was due to the destruction of traditional structures of international security after the collapse of the bipolar system, the growth of the country's oil needs and the expansion of opportunities for Korean business in this part of the world due to the beginning of globalization processes. Until the early 21st century, ROK's Middle East policy was heavily influenced by the United States. However, as it became aware of the specifics of the geopolitical, religious and cultural space of the region, Seoul developed its own approach to interacting with its key actors. The shift in the focus of attention of Korean diplomacy to the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf is explained by impressive oil and gas reserves, geographical advantages, the relative similarity and stability of their political systems as well as the launch of strategic programs to diversify the economy, which benefits integration into the global processes of our time.

The UAE has become the fourth state (after the USA, Australia and India), relations with which have a special strategic status. The establishment of a strategic partnership with the UAE allowed South Korea to make a breakthrough in the Middle East and create favorable conditions for more active participation in restoring regional security. ROK's success in promoting its national interests in the UAE is largely based on the pragmatism of the Korean political and business elite, understanding and ability to take into account the whole range of numerous and contradictory factors that influence the decision-making process in Abu Dhabi. An analysis of the history of interaction between South Korea and the United Arab Emirates enables to draw a conclusion about the mutually beneficial nature of bilateral relations and the possibility to create the model of innovation-oriented partnership.

References

- Al-Sudairi, M. T. (2012). *South Korea-GCC Economic Relations: An Overview*. Gulf Res. Center.
- Azad, S. (2013). Déjà vu diplomacy: South Korea's Middle East policy under Lee Myung-bak. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 6(4), 552–566.
- Azad, S. (2018). South Korea's Middle East Policy under Park Geun-hye. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 11(1-2), 257–278.
- Chun, C. (2016). East Asian Security and South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy. In S. Lee (Ed.), *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (pp. 15–34). Palgrave Macmillan.
- IRENA (2019). *Renewable Energy Market Analysis: GCC 2019*. Int. Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).

- Jeong, H. W. (2019). Beyond Resource Diplomacy and Economic Statecraft: UAE-ROK Relations in the 21st Century. *Asian J. of Middle Eastern and Islamic Stud.*, 13(2), 226–245.
- Lee, K. H., & Son, S. H. (2016). Logistics Hub Strategy of the GCC Countries and Policy Implications: with a Focus on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. *World Econ. Update*, 6(16), 1–4.
- Lee, S. (2016). South Korea Aiming to Be an Innovative Middle Power. In S. Lee (Ed.), *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (pp. 1–13). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Levkowitz, A. (2012). Korea and the Middle East Turmoil: A Reassessment of South Korea–Middle East Relations. *The Korean J. of Defense Anal.*, 24(2), 225–238.
- Levkowitz, A. (2013). *South Korea's Middle East Policy*. The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.
- Mckd (2019). *The United Arab Emirates and the Republic of Korea launch the UAE-Korea Cultural Dialogue 2020 in Seoul*. <https://www.mckd.gov.ae/en/news/the-united-arab-emirates-and-the-republic-of-korea-launch-the-uae-korea-cultural-dialogue-2020-in-seoul/>
- Park, Y. E., Chaffar, S., Kim, M.-S., & Ko, H. Y. (2017). Predicting Arab Consumers' Preferences on the Korean Contents Distribution. *J. of Distribut. Sci.*, 15(4), 33–40.
- Song, N. (2013). The Strategic Partnership between South Korea and the United Arab Emirates. *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi (Security Strategies Journal)*, 17(9), 23–48.
- Song, N. (2015). Islam and South Korea's Middle East Diplomacy. *BAKS Papers*, 16(3), 60–75.