

# New Regionalism Beyond Asia-Pacific: South Korea's Multidimensional Approach to the Eastern Mediterranean

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## Abstract

South Korea is extending its diplomatic reach beyond Northeast Asia to diverse regions. This article examines South Korea's engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean through the theoretical lens of new regionalism, which emphasizes multidimensional cooperation across non-contiguous regions. Despite not being a priority region in South Korean foreign policy, the Eastern Mediterranean presents an intriguing case of functional engagement driven by economic interests, energy security concerns, and strategic calculations. Türkiye and Egypt serve as compelling case studies, selected for their strategic autonomy within the region, gateway positions connecting different geographical areas, and robust bilateral relations with South Korea. Drawing on an extensive literature review and official documents, this study reveals how South Korea employs a sophisticated, sector-specific approach focused on defense cooperation, technology transfer, and infrastructure development to build meaningful cross-regional relationships. Our findings demonstrate that South Korea's Eastern Mediterranean engagement illustrates its maturation as a middle power capable of navigating complex regional dynamics while pursuing functional interests beyond its immediate neighborhood. By examining how a non-Western middle power constructs relationships with non-priority regions, this study contributes to broader theoretical discussions about new regionalism, middle power diplomacy, and the evolving nature of cross-regional engagement in contemporary international relations.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Türkiye, Egypt, Middle Power, Defense and economic cooperation

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, South Korea (Republic of Korea) has steadily expanded its foreign policy horizons beyond its immediate Northeast Asian neighborhood. This strategic pivot toward a more multilateral approach represents Seoul's recognition of its growing global influence and the need to diversify its diplomatic and economic relationships. While regions like Southeast Asia and the Middle East have traditionally received more attention in Korean foreign policy frameworks, the Eastern Mediterranean presents an intriguing case of engagement with a non-priority region that nonetheless holds strategic value.

This article examines South Korea's evolving relationship with the Eastern Mediterranean through new regionalism theory, which emphasizes the complex interplay of economic interests, security concerns, and cultural exchanges across geographical boundaries. Unlike traditional regionalism, which focuses primarily on geographical proximity, new regionalism accounts for functional relationships that transcend conventional regional boundaries—precisely the cross-regional engagement that characterizes South Korea's approach to the Eastern Mediterranean. The theoretical significance of this engagement extends beyond bilateral relations to broader questions about how contemporary middle powers navigate international systems through functional cross-regional cooperation. South Korea's approach represents a departure from traditional geography-bound regionalism toward flexible, issue-specific engagement that transcends spatial limitations—a pattern that illuminates evolving dynamics in international relations.

This strategic calculation is particularly significant given South Korea's historical geopolitical constraints. Korea has employed various strategies to secure its nationhood, with geopolitical calculations playing a central role. Surrounded by powerful neighbors—China, Russia, and Japan—diplomatic means and strategies have been crucial for the nation's survival. These strategies have included strengthening military power, paying tributes to appease adversaries, and “band-wagoning” with the strongest regional power (Kang 2011). South Korea sometimes sought neutrality or a “balancer” role in regional dynamics, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful (Jeon 2021). Korea has, therefore, served as a typical example of what Marshall (2016) calls a “Prisoner of Geography,” making its current efforts to transcend these constraints through engagement with distant regions like the Eastern Mediterranean particularly noteworthy.

South Korea's historical geopolitical constraints evolved through remarkable industrialization in the 1970s, transforming it into a significant middle power with growing economic influence and diplomatic reach (Ban 2020: 54). The Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013) adopted a utilitarian foreign policy approach, separating economics from politics, while Korea's G-20 membership provided crucial leverage in multilateral arenas (Arsac 2014).<sup>1</sup>

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1 For survival and prosperity, South Korea focused on the North-East Asia region for a long time. Surrounded by the United States, China, Russia and Japan, South Korea's diplomatic assets were buried under “Four Great Power Diplomacy.” Also, Korea was held as a prisoner of “North Korea.” Escaping from these “Geopolitical Liabilities” was only possible after the 21st century, albeit never escaped totally.

The Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022) expanded Korea's geopolitical reach through the "New Northern Policy" targeting Eurasia connectivity and the "New Southern Policy" promoting cooperation with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (RoK Northern/Southern Economic Cooperation Committees 2017). Under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration (2022-2025), Korea has pursued its vision as a "global pivotal state," leveraging accumulated national and soft power to advance liberal democratic values and contribute to a rules-based international order (RoK MOFA 2024: 210).

The Yoon administration emphasizes enhanced cooperation with the Global South, particularly Africa, Central Asia and ASEAN countries, while strengthening defense industry cooperation with Türkiye and pursuing participation in mega projects (Nam 2023; RoK MOFA 2024: 26). These strategic initiatives reflect South Korea's growing interest in regions beyond its immediate neighborhood, with the Eastern Mediterranean emerging as an alternative focus for energy and economic opportunities.

Among various states in the Eastern Mediterranean region, Türkiye and Egypt serve as compelling case studies because they function as what the new regionalism theory identifies as "gateway countries"—regional actors with sufficient autonomy and strategic positioning to serve as access points for broader regional networks (Börzel and Risse 2016). Both countries are regional powers with strategic autonomy, making them ideal partners for middle powers seeking node relationships rather than full regional engagement.

Our research methodology combines an extensive literature review with official documents and the insights gained from pre-research meetings with experts.<sup>2</sup> Official documents include white papers and reports from the Office for Government Policy Coordination (under the Prime Minister's Office), the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP, a government-funded research institute), Korea International Trade Association (KITA), and other sources from think-tanks under the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Science, and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). Additionally, we interviewed with three experts selected for their diplomacy/foreign policy, academia, and energy backgrounds. The interviews allowed for broader discussion of Turkish-Korean relations, emphasizing economic and defense cooperation. Semi-structured interviews utilized with open-ended questions focusing on developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region, Korea's positioning, and potential cooperation opportunities in areas such as gas exploration. These primary sources provide unique perspectives on Seoul's engagement with the region.

This study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship. Our literature review revealed minimal research analyzing South Korea's Eastern Mediterranean policy. English academic searches find few relevant results beyond general regional dynamics, mainly on energy, lacking analysis of Korea's diplomacy. Korean-language scholarship presents similar limitations. Government documents tend to address the region through bilateral relations rather than as a cohesive strategic area, typically categorizing it as a sub-region of the

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<sup>2</sup> To protect confidentiality, all participants are referenced anonymously in this study.

Middle East and North Africa.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, these government or policy institution reports mainly analyze the perspective of Korea and its foreign policy strategy or economic policy, rather than addressing detailed comparative analyses regarding the countries in the region. Academic searches using terms like “Eastern Mediterranean” (*Dong Jijoonghae*) produced limited results, with most literature focusing on intra-Mediterranean affairs rather than Korea’s policy approach. Even prominent Korean think tanks like the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), Asan Institute, and KIEP primarily use “Eastern Mediterranean” as a geographic descriptor rather than a strategic concept.<sup>4</sup>

By examining South Korea’s relations with Türkiye and Egypt, this article offers insights into how middle powers navigate international systems increasingly characterized by multipolarity and complex interdependence. Korea’s approach demonstrates how countries can leverage their economic strengths, technological capabilities, and diplomatic finesse to develop meaningful relationships even with regions outside their immediate strategic priorities.

This study contributes to our understanding of contemporary international relations in several ways. First, it highlights the evolving nature of middle power diplomacy in an era of shifting global power dynamics. Second, it demonstrates how economic interests increasingly drive diplomatic engagement across traditional regional boundaries. Third, it examines how countries like South Korea balance their primary security concerns and alliance obligations with broader foreign policy aspirations to enhance their global influence.

The Eastern Mediterranean case illustrates how South Korea’s foreign policy has matured beyond its traditional focus on great power relations and immediate neighborhood concerns. By engaging strategically with countries like Türkiye and Egypt, Korea demonstrates its capacity to pursue a multidimensional foreign policy that serves its economic interests and broader diplomatic objectives. This evolution reflects Seoul’s growing confidence as a significant middle power capable of meaningful engagement across diverse regions and complex geopolitical environments.

## Middle Power Diplomacy Through New Regionalism

South Korea’s engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean can be understood through an integrated theoretical framework that combines middle power diplomacy with new regionalism. This synthesis provides a more robust explanation for how a middle power like South Korea strategically transcends geographical constraints to build meaningful relationships with non-contiguous regions. Integrating theoretical approaches is analytically necessary, as neither framework adequately captures contemporary cross-regional engagement complexity. The

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3 The Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially categorized the world into 8 separate regions, but the East Mediterranean issues are not exclusively covered; sometimes it is dealt with by the European Bureau or the African and Middle Eastern Bureau (for more detailed information, please see; MOFA Republic of Korea (n.d.).

4 Korean academia and government often used the broad term “Middle East” without detailed distinctions, limiting deeper academic study and nuanced foreign policy. While oil-producing states were called the “Gulf region,” other countries were grouped under the Middle East. This lack of precise terms made comparative analysis of Türkiye, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria difficult. Using “Eastern Mediterranean” helps fill this terminology gap.

evolution from traditional to new regionalism fundamentally transforms our understanding of regional cooperation. Traditional regionalism, dominant through the 1980s, emphasized geographical contiguity, state-centric institutions, and formal integration mechanisms (Hurrell 1995). As articulated by Hettne, Inotai, and Sunkel (1999), new regionalism transcends geographical boundaries through multidimensional cooperation spanning economic, political, and social domains. This theoretical shift has gained substantial scholarly validation, with Börzel and Risse (2016) demonstrating how new regionalism has become the dominant paradigm for understanding contemporary regional dynamics. Unlike traditional approaches privileging proximity, new regionalism recognizes regions as socially constructed through sustained interactions rather than predetermined geographical boundaries (Acharya 2013).

While contested, the concept of middle power diplomacy remains analytically valuable when properly contextualized. Following Jeong's (2019) critical realist framework, we understand middle powers as operating within structural constraints while exercising significant independent agency in their diplomatic strategies. This perspective acknowledges the material limitations and distinctive capabilities that characterize states like South Korea. Rather than viewing the contested nature of middle power theory as a weakness, we argue that this definitional complexity reflects the nuanced position such states occupy in contemporary international relations—possessing sufficient capabilities to influence specific issue areas while lacking comprehensive resources to shape global order unilaterally (Chapnick 1999).

The theoretical integration of middle power diplomacy and new regionalism emerges from their structural compatibility and mutual explanatory power. Both frameworks were developed in response to the limitations of traditional approaches in explaining post-Cold War international relations, sharing assumptions about the importance of state agency, the multidimensional nature of contemporary cooperation, and the inadequacy of great power-centric analyses. Middle power theory explains why states like South Korea seek cross-regional engagement—to maximize influence despite resource constraints—while new regionalism explains how such engagement becomes possible through multidimensional cooperation that transcends geography.

South Korea's adoption of new regionalist principles resulted from specific historical conditions that created necessity and opportunity. The constraint-driven innovation thesis suggests that Korea's historical "geopolitical liabilities" (Oh and Lee 2020) compelled diplomatic innovation beyond its immediate neighborhood. Marshall's (2016) concept of "Prisoner of Geography"<sup>5</sup> captures Korea's traditional limitations, making its current cross-regional engagement particularly significant as an attempt to transcend these constraints. This strategic imperative coincided with Korea's economic transformation from the 1970s onward, which provided the material capabilities necessary for middle power diplomacy while remaining sector-specific rather than comprehensive—making functional cooperation particularly attractive (Ban 2020).

5 Tim Marshall (2016) used the concept of "Prisoner of Geography" to show how geography shapes a state's survival, posing challenges and opportunities in foreign policy. South Korea exemplifies this, trapped by great powers and unable to escape its geography, leading to passive geopolitical choices.

The post-Cold War international context provided additional enabling conditions. Reducing ideological constraints, increasing economic interdependence, and the proliferation of issue-specific international organizations created opportunities for middle powers to engage selectively across regions. As Flesmes (2007) demonstrates, contemporary middle powers increasingly pursue “compartmentalized multilateralism”—engaging across multiple regions in specific issue areas—a behavioral pattern that aligns perfectly with new regionalism’s emphasis on functional cooperation across geographical boundaries.

This theoretical synthesis generates “functional cross-regional diplomacy,” with several distinctive features. First, selective engagement with strategic regional nodes rather than comprehensive regional integration allows middle powers to maximize strategic impact while efficiently allocating limited resources. Second, issue-specific cooperation concentrates on areas where the middle power has comparative advantages, exemplifying new regionalism’s rejection of comprehensive approaches. Third, through sustained collaboration with strategically positioned “gateway” countries, middle powers can access broader regional networks without requiring direct relationships with all regional actors.

South Korea’s Eastern Mediterranean strategy exemplifies these principles by focusing on Türkiye and Egypt as gateway countries, multidimensional cooperation spanning defense, economic, and technological domains, and flexible bilateral arrangements that avoid formal institutional membership requirements. This approach demonstrates what Chae (2012) identifies as “complementary regionalism”—engagement with one region that enhances rather than competes with relationships in the other regions.

The analytical framework reveals how middle powers like South Korea can overcome geographical constraints by strategically applying new regionalism principles, creating meaningful cross-regional relationships without comprehensive integration. However, this approach also has limitations, particularly its emphasis on functional cooperation, which may underestimate cultural and historical factors in sustaining long-term relationships. Additionally, the framework may most apply to middle powers with specific technological and economic capabilities, potentially limiting broader generalizability.

By examining South Korea’s relations with Türkiye and Egypt through this integrated lens, we gain insights into how middle powers navigate international systems increasingly characterized by functional networks rather than geographical boundaries. This evolution suggests that contemporary regionalism must account for the growing importance of cross-regional cooperation and the strategic agency of secondary powers in constructing these relationships. Having established the theoretical framework, we now examine how functional cross-regional diplomacy manifests in practice. The following analysis traces South Korea’s multidimensional engagement with Türkiye and Egypt, demonstrating how middle power capabilities are leveraged through new regionalism principles to construct meaningful cross-regional relationships.

## South Korea's Engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean: The Cases of Egypt and Türkiye

South Korea has shown increasing interest in the Eastern Mediterranean due to its strategic importance in global trade and energy routes. The region's geopolitical significance, particularly concerning maritime security and access to natural resources, has caught the attention of Korean policymakers and businesses alike (Yoo and Lee 2023). As a result, Korea has been gradually expanding its economic and diplomatic ties with regional countries, albeit within the broader framework of its Middle East and North Africa (MENA) policy.

Most South Korean administrations have viewed the Eastern Mediterranean region through the lens of their broader "Foreign Policy Extension towards the Middle East." While the region has not been a central concern, the relationships between its key actors have been. South Korea has consistently regarded Türkiye, Egypt, and Israel as strategic partners, shaped by historical ties, geopolitical interests, and shared political circumstances (Song 2023). Through examining Korea's engagement with Egypt and Türkiye, we can observe how the principles of new regionalism—multidimensionality, functional cooperation, and cross-regional networks—manifest in practice.

### Historical Foundations of Relationships

The historical contexts of South Korea's relationships with Türkiye and Egypt differ significantly, shaping distinctive patterns of engagement that reflect the adaptive nature of new regionalism. Türkiye's relationship with South Korea has deep emotional and historical roots, while Egypt represents a more recent strategic calculation focused on economic opportunities and regional influence. Türkiye's participation in the Korean War (1950-1953) constructed an enduring bond between the two nations. This historical solidarity has resulted in a discourse where Koreans see Turkish people as "blood brothers" (*hyul-meang*) for their wartime contribution. This emotional foundation exemplifies how shared historical experiences can transcend geographical distance to create meaningful cross-regional ties, a key aspect of new regionalism's emphasis on socially constructed regions. By contrast, South Korea and Egypt established diplomatic relations on April 13, 1995, developing mainly through high-level visits: Egyptian President Mubarak to Korea in 1999, President Roh Moo-Hyun to Egypt in 2006, and President El Sisi to Seoul in 2016. The 2016 visit marked the adoption of a Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership, highlighting cooperation in various fields (Bordoloi 2021). Unlike the more emotionally charged ties with Türkiye, South Korea's relations with Egypt reflect a strategic effort to grow influence in a region with limited historical engagement.

Egypt's long-standing ties with North Korea add complexity to its relations with South Korea. Egypt and North Korea established diplomatic relations in 1961, and in the early 1970s, North Korean pilots trained Egyptians before the 1973 war with Israel. Even under President El Sisi, Egypt maintained its North Korea policy and initially opposed United Nations sanctions on Pyongyang (Ramani 2017). This connection motivates South Korea to strengthen ties

with Egypt, hoping to use Egypt’s influence to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. This dynamic illustrates how South Korea’s regional engagement strategies often intersect with its core security concerns, demonstrating the interconnectedness of different policy domains characteristic of new regionalism.

### Economic Cooperation

Türkiye connects Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, while Egypt links the Mediterranean with the Middle East and Africa. These positions and active diplomatic roles make them natural partners for South Korea’s functional cross-regional diplomacy. During South Korea-Türkiye Free Trade Agreement (FTA) talks, officials highlighted Türkiye’s role as a geopolitical hub bridging Europe, Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. The Chief Negotiator called Türkiye a “bridgehead” (Park 2012: 4), and the Ministry of Trade described it as a “geopolitical gateway” at the 2017 joint committee in Ankara. Similarly, publications from Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and Science and Technology Policy Institute (STPI) emphasized Egypt’s strategic importance using similar terms (STPI 2002b; KOTRA 2023). These phrases also appear in presidential policy briefs (RoK Policy Briefing 2022). Expanding economic partnerships, with growing trade and investment, support this case selection.

For South Korea, both Türkiye and Egypt are regarded as economically significant countries within the Eastern Mediterranean region. As shown in Table 1, as of 2024, Türkiye ranked third among all Korean trading partners in the broader Middle East (based on combined export and import values), and stands out as the largest trading partner for Korea within the Eastern Mediterranean specifically (Workman 2024). In the case of Egypt, while it ranks sixth overall among Korea’s Middle Eastern trading partners, it is the second largest trading partner in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Tag 2024). Notably, among the top five countries in Korea’s Middle Eastern trade rankings, four are occupied by major oil-producing states, whose trade volumes are heavily influenced by the high value of petroleum and natural gas. In this context, Egypt’s trade volume with South Korea cannot be underestimated.

**Table 1.** South Korea-Middle East Trade Volume (Exports plus Imports), Ranking and Amount (Billion dollars)

Year Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6
2020	Saudi Arabia 260	UAE 90	Türkiye 70	Qatar 70	Kuwait 40	Egypt 20
2021	Saudi Arabia 290	UAE 100	Qatar 90	Türkiye 80	Kuwait 45	Egypt 24
2022	Saudi Arabia 370	UAE 120	Qatar 110	Türkiye 90	Kuwait 50	Egypt 24
2023	Saudi Arabia 346.2	UAE 110	Türkiye 105	Qatar 100	Kuwait 50	Egypt 39
2024	Saudi Arabia 350	UAE 120	Qatar 110	Türkiye 105	Kuwait 55	Egypt 32

Source: Korean Statistical Information Service

Our paper excluded several significant Eastern Mediterranean states for strategic reasons. Syria, effectively a failed state due to prolonged civil war, remains difficult for South Korea to engage with despite recent government changes, as international sanctions persist. Lebanon offers limited incentives for close cooperation due to geopolitical instability and minimal economic collaboration—bilateral trade has remained around \$100 million annually since the 2000s, placing it outside Korea’s top 100 trading partners (KOSIS 2025). While Korea engages with Israel in defense and advanced technology sectors, recognizing its strengths in artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductors (KDI 2023), these collaborations remain distinct from Seoul’s broader energy and infrastructure strategy. Political sensitivities are paramount: South Korea deliberately limits political alignment with Israel to protect vital economic interests with Arab oil exporters, who supply 58% of its crude oil imports (Yang 2024: 93). Consequently, Türkiye and Egypt—viewed as more politically neutral partners—are preferred for Korea’s macro-level economic cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

South Korea’s economic relationship with Türkiye is formalized through a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which entered into force on May 1, 2013. Korea is among only a few Asian states with which Türkiye has established such an agreement, highlighting the priority both countries place on their economic relationship. Despite this framework, as seen in the report of the KIEP, the economic relationship remains imbalanced, with Türkiye running a persistent trade deficit with Korea—a situation Türkiye faces with most East Asian countries (Jung et al. 2010). In 2019, Türkiye exported \$1.01 billion to Korea while importing \$5.72 billion, highlighting this substantial imbalance (OEC 2025).

South Korea’s economic engagement with Egypt similarly prioritizes expanding trade and investment, though without the formal structure of an FTA (Jung et al. 2010). Recent discussions have explored the possibility of establishing an FTA between the two countries, aiming “not only to eliminate existing trade barriers but also promoting industrial development and investment on both sides, such as designating industrial zones and carrying out supply chain cooperation” (Samir 2021a). South Korea’s ambassador to Egypt, Hong Jin-Wook, stated that “Korea considers Egypt as its main investment destination in Africa and the Middle East region,” indicating Korea’s perception of Egypt as a strategic gateway to broader regional markets (Samir 2021a).

Official Development Assistance (ODA) plays a more prominent role in South Korea’s economic engagement with Egypt than with Türkiye. Egypt was selected as a priority country for Korean ODA and a key development partner in the MENA region for the period of 2021–2025 (Samir 2021b). According to a whitepaper published by the Office for Government Policy Coordination, as of 2021, Korea was supporting 14 development projects in Egypt, demonstrating a more development-focused approach compared to its relationship with Türkiye (RoK Office for Government Policy Coordination 2024).

Both relationships demonstrate South Korea’s emphasis on functional cooperation in specific economic sectors rather than comprehensive integration, a characteristic approach of middle powers engaging with distant regions. Infrastructure development features prominently

in both relationships, with Korean companies involved in major construction projects in both countries. In Egypt, as the KITA has reported, the Korean delegation has expressed interest in infrastructure projects such as developing Cairo's subway system (KITA 2016), while in Türkiye, Korean firms have participated in various construction and energy infrastructure initiatives.

## Defense and Security Cooperation

Defense cooperation has emerged as a key dimension in South Korea's relationships with both countries, representing a significant example of functional cooperation across non-contiguous regions. These defense partnerships demonstrate how middle powers can extend their influence beyond their immediate neighborhoods through specialized technical collaboration, a hallmark of new regionalism's multidimensional approach.

South Korea's defense ties with Türkiye have grown, focusing on meeting Türkiye's military technology needs amid shifting geopolitics. The interviewee, who was a distinguished personnel in the diplomatic field, noted significant changes in defense cooperation (*Interviewee-Diplomatic Field* November 2021). Key was the October 2021 letter of intent where Korean firms Doosan and Science and Technology (SNT) Dynamics agreed to supply engines and transmissions for Türkiye's Altay tank (Bekdil 2021). This deal gained strategic weight after Korea replaced Germany, which limited arms exports to Türkiye. On January 30, 2023, SNT Dynamics signed a contract with BMC, one of Türkiye's commercial and military vehicle manufacturers, for a 1,500-horsepower transmission, with deliveries planned from 2023 to 2027 (SNT Dynamics 2023). In July 2023, Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin visited Türkiye—the first official visit in eight years—meeting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and promoting bilateral cooperation in defense, nuclear power, and infrastructure (Kang 2023). The Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade (KIET) highlights this case as an example of Korea leveraging Türkiye's altered relations with Western partners to become a trusted supplier of advanced military tech (KIET 2014).

Similarly, South Korea's defense cooperation with Egypt has grown rapidly recently (Defense Acquisition Program Administration 2025). Despite North Korea remaining a key issue, the two countries are strengthening ties in defense and research and development (R&D). In 2023, Korea ranked 10th globally with \$13.5 billion in weapon exports, totaling over \$38 billion in three years (An 2024). In February 2022, Egypt signed a \$1.7 billion contract with Hanwha Aerospace (a leading private aerospace company of Korea) for the K-9 howitzer and K-10 armored vehicle, its largest defense deal with Korea (Yoon 2023). As part of this agreement, Hanwha plans to transfer technology and collaborate with local manufacturing, showing Korea's support for Egypt's defense industry. Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) is negotiating to supply the FA-50 advanced trainer, competing against China and Italy, aiming for production in Egypt with Korean tech support for local use and possible exports (Kim 2022).

These defense relationships reveal a sophisticated approach to cross-regional engagement beyond simple arms sales, including technology transfer, joint production, and

long-term strategic alignment. For South Korea, these partnerships offer expanded markets for its growing defense industry while enhancing its global strategic footprint (KIDA 2025). For Türkiye and Egypt, the relationships provide access to advanced military technology with fewer political conditions than might be imposed by Western suppliers. This mutual benefit illustrates how functional cooperation in specific sectors can drive broader political alignment across regions, a key insight of new regionalism theory.

## Technology and R&D Partnerships

Technology transfer and R&D cooperation represent another dimension of South Korea's multifaceted engagement with Egypt and Türkiye, illustrating new regionalism's emphasis on knowledge networks and non-traditional forms of cooperation. These initiatives demonstrate how Korea leverages its technological strengths to build sustainable relationships that transcend conventional diplomatic and economic ties.

In Türkiye, South Korea's technology cooperation is characterized by private sector leadership and commercial applications. A notable example is Samsung's establishment of an R&D center in Türkiye in partnership with local tech firm Semper-Tech in 2015. As Samsung Electronics Türkiye President Joung explained, "We consider Türkiye a key country among our global markets...Türkiye's young, skilled, and well-educated population" were key factors in the decision (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Investment Office 2015). A key development is the technology transfer deal between Türkiye's SPILSAN Energy and South Korea's Top Battery to produce Türkiye's first Lithium-ion cell battery (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Investment Office 2020). It is considered part of South Korea's strategy to engage Türkiye as a near-peer technological partner with strong manufacturing capability and market potential (Korea Institute of S&T Evaluation and Planning 2023).

By contrast, South Korea's technology cooperation with Egypt places greater emphasis on capacity building and institutional development. A cornerstone of this approach was establishing the Korea-Egypt Technical University in Beni Suef Governorate in 2019. The KOICA plans to invest \$8 million in the university by 2026, providing practical educational courses tailored to local industrial needs in fields such as mechatronics and ICT (Yonhap News 2024). Korea's Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP), operated by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, partnered with Egypt's Science and Technology Park for Electronics and Industry (STPERI) to transfer Korean experiences in science and technology development.<sup>6</sup> These initiatives reflect a more development-oriented approach that aims to build Egypt's long-term technological capabilities rather than focusing primarily on commercial partnerships.

Recent developments highlight the continuing evolution of these technology partnerships (KIEP 2025). In January 2025, Egypt's Minister of Local Development met with South Korea's Ambassador to Cairo to discuss expanding bilateral cooperation in local

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<sup>6</sup> For more detail, please see: 2020/21 KSP Policy Consultation Report (Strategic Plan of STPERI for Egypt), organized by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Republic of Korea. <https://www.ksp.go.kr/english/pageView/info-eng/794?listCount=10&page=0&srchText=&nationCd=EG>.

development, focusing on solid waste management, environmental conservation, and rural development technologies (Daily News Egypt 2025). In February 2025, discussions between Egypt's Deputy Prime Minister for Human Development and the Korean Ambassador resulted in a \$9 million grant project for strengthening emergency medical services in Upper Egypt and a \$10 million joint venture for producing poultry vaccines (Precedence Research 2025).

These technology partnerships demonstrate South Korea's adaptive approach to engaging with different regional partners based on their specific needs and capabilities. Science and Technology Policy Institute (STPI) analyzes that the emphasis with Türkiye is on commercially viable partnerships between advanced industrial players. At the same time, the Egyptian relationship focuses more on knowledge transfer and capacity building (STPI 2002a). Both approaches, however, reflect Korea's strategic use of its technological advantages to build multidimensional relationships that extend beyond traditional diplomatic and economic ties, exemplifying the diversified engagement strategies characteristic of new regionalism.

### Energy Dimension: Navigating Complex Regional Dynamics

The energy and geopolitics nexus in general (Arıboğan and Bilgin 2009) and the energy and Eastern Mediterranean nexus (Ediger, Devlen, and McDonald 2012) are particularly attracting attention since the importance of the issue's geopolitical framework. Energy cooperation represents the most complex dimension of South Korea's engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean, intersecting with territorial disputes, regional rivalries, and global energy security concerns. Korea's activities in this sector, particularly through its national gas company KOGAS, illustrate the opportunities and challenges of functional cooperation in politically sensitive domains—a critical aspect of new regionalism's emphasis on the interplay between functional cooperation and geopolitical realities.

In recent years, significant gas field discoveries have significantly transformed the Eastern Mediterranean energy landscape. The region includes eight significant basins: Cyprus basin, Eratosthenes High, Latakia basin, Levant basin, Judea basin, Nile Delta basin, Western Arabian province, and Zagros province (EIA 2013). While initial discoveries such as Israel's Tamar field (2009) and Leviathan field (2010) generated relatively little regional tension, the discovery of the Aphrodite gas field in the 12th Block of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC)<sup>7</sup> by US-based Noble Energy in December 2011 triggered significant disputes between Türkiye, Greece, RoC, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) over continental shelves and exclusive economic zones (EEZs). South Korea entered this complex landscape through KOGAS's participation in joint bidding for 6 out of 12 marine blocks in Cyprus' first licensing round. In partnership with Italian energy firm ENI (80% stake to KOGAS's 20%), KOGAS secured rights to blocks #2, 3, and 9.

Considering KOGAS is part of the international consortium drilling in Cyprus. It could impact the bilateral relations between Türkiye and South Korea. The interviewee, an energy

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7 Türkiye does not acknowledge the Republic of Cyprus as a legitimate state. Instead, Türkiye refers to it using the term the "Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus."

expert in Türkiye, commented that if KOGAS continues drilling activities in the blocks where Türkiye has claimed, it might damage the relations; however, they also added that KOGAS might consider selling its shares instead of tightening its ties with Türkiye (*Interviewee-Energy Sector* December 2021). In contrast, an expert holding a Ph.D. on Cyprus issue, stated that both South Korea and Türkiye have challenging geopolitical neighborhoods, and they could be more cooperative in the Eastern Mediterranean in respect of energy issues to create a new dimension in their relations (*Interviewee-Scholar* December 2021). The same interviewee expressed that in addition to KOGAS's interest in Cyprus energy, Korea has actively established energy cooperation and investment within Iraq in the late 2000s, therefore, it should be noted that the Eastern Mediterranean in fact is a wider region encompassing more than the coastal states, all of them viable options of energy acquisition for Korea (*Interviewee-Scholar* December 2021). In this regard, we argue that the Eastern Mediterranean region is not a distinct region within the geopolitical vision of Korea but instead an intersection of areas through which it can develop economic and political bilateral ties.

Yet, there is some fresh news from the region. The Greek Cypriot administration's energy minister announced that surveys in blocks 2 and 9 found no promising natural gas, leading to license non-renewal and KOGAS's expected withdrawal (Gençtürk 2025). While this outcome is disappointing, it doesn't mean KOGAS will abandon the region. KOGAS remains committed to securing stable natural gas supplies amid high import dependence and continues overseas exploration to support national development. Although it withdrew from blocks 2, 3, and 9, KOGAS may return, aiming to help South Korea become a low-carbon, green energy leader through its natural gas business (Cho 2023).

## Comparative Analysis: Patterns and Variations in South Korea's Approach

South Korea's engagement with Türkiye and Egypt reveals both common patterns and significant variations in its approach to the Eastern Mediterranean, providing valuable insights into how middle powers like Korea adapt new regionalism principles to different regional contexts while maintaining coherent strategic objectives.

Common to both relationships is South Korea's emphasis on functional cooperation in specific sectors rather than comprehensive integration. Defense cooperation, technology transfer, and infrastructure development feature prominently in both cases, reflecting Korea's strategy of leveraging its industrial and technological strengths to build multidimensional relationships. This sector-specific approach allows Korea to develop meaningful cross-regional ties without formal institutional frameworks or geographical proximity, a hallmark of new regionalism's flexible understanding of regional engagement. Both relationships also demonstrate South Korea's pragmatic balancing of economic interests with broader strategic considerations. While commercial opportunities drive much of Korea's engagement, these economic relationships serve broader objectives such as enhancing Korea's global strategic footprint, securing energy resources, and potentially gaining diplomatic support on Korean

Peninsula issues. This multidimensional approach reflects the new regionalism's recognition that economic, security, and political domains are increasingly interconnected in contemporary international relations.

However, significant variations exist in how South Korea engages with each country. The relationship with Türkiye builds upon deep historical bonds forged during the Korean War, creating an emotional foundation that facilitates cooperation across multiple domains. By contrast, the relationship with Egypt represents a more recent strategic calculation focused on economic opportunities, potential influence regarding North Korea, and Egypt's position as a gateway to broader African and Middle Eastern markets.

The nature of technology cooperation also differs significantly between the two relationships. With Türkiye, South Korea emphasizes commercially oriented R&D partnerships between advanced industrial players, reflecting Türkiye's relatively developed manufacturing capabilities and attractive consumer market. The one with Egypt, however, focuses more on knowledge transfer, capacity building, and institutional development, reflecting Egypt's different development needs and Korea's more ODA-oriented approach to the country (KOICA 2021). Another notable difference lies in how South Korea navigates the complex political contexts of each relationship. With Türkiye, Korea has capitalized on Türkiye's strained relations with traditional Western partners, positioning itself as a reliable alternative supplier of advanced military technology. In Egypt, Korea has engaged with the unique opportunity presented by Egypt's historical ties with North Korea, attempting to leverage this connection to advance its core security interests on the Korean Peninsula.

These variations demonstrate South Korea's sophistication as a middle power engaging with distant regions. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, Korea tailors its engagement strategies to different regional partners' specific historical contexts, capabilities, and geopolitical positions. This adaptive approach exemplifies the theoretical synthesis of middle power diplomacy and new regionalism, demonstrating how states can leverage specific capabilities through flexible, multidimensional engagement strategies that transcend traditional geographical limitations.

## **Conclusion: South Korea as a Strategic Actor in the Eastern Mediterranean**

South Korea's engagement with Egypt and Türkiye demonstrates its evolution as a sophisticated strategic actor capable of meaningful engagement beyond its immediate neighborhood. These relationships reveal key dimensions of Korea's Eastern Mediterranean approach, contributing to our understanding of its foreign policy evolution and broader theoretical discussions about new regionalism and middle power diplomacy.

First, South Korea demonstrates remarkable adaptability in tailoring its engagement strategies to different regional contexts while maintaining coherent strategic objectives. Whether building upon historical bonds with Türkiye or developing new strategic ties with

Egypt, Korea shows a nuanced understanding of each country's unique position and potential value. This adaptive approach challenges conventional understandings of regionalism, primarily geography-bound, and demonstrates how functional relationships can transcend spatial limitations.

Second, South Korea effectively leverages its technological and industrial strengths to build multidimensional relationships that transcend conventional diplomatic and economic ties. From defense cooperation to R&D partnerships, Korea's functional cooperation in specific sectors creates mutual dependencies that strengthen bilateral relationships. This sector-specific approach allows a middle power like Korea to develop strategic depth in relationships without requiring the comprehensive engagement typically associated with extraordinary powers.

Third, South Korea navigates complex regional dynamics with pragmatic flexibility, particularly evident in its Eastern Mediterranean energy exploration approach. While pursuing its energy security interests through KOGAS's activities, Korea has carefully managed potential diplomatic tensions, ensuring that contested energy issues do not undermine its broader regional relationships. This balancing act represents a sophisticated form of issue compartmentalization that allows middle powers to engage in potentially contentious domains while preserving overall relationship stability.

Fourth, South Korea's Eastern Mediterranean engagement reflects its identity as a middle power seeking to maximize its global influence through strategic partnerships beyond its immediate region. By engaging with gateway countries like Egypt and Türkiye, Korea extends its economic and diplomatic reach into broader regional markets and forums. This strategy of leveraging key regional nodes to access wider networks exemplifies how middle powers can amplify their global influence despite limited resources.

These case studies significantly contribute to understanding how new regionalism principles manifest in practice. South Korea exemplifies how middle powers can construct meaningful cross-regional relationships that serve specific functional interests and broader strategic objectives through its multidimensional, adaptive, and functionally oriented approach. Moreover, Korea's experience offers a distinctive non-Western perspective on cross-regional engagement that enriches theoretical discussions often dominated by European or American models of regionalism. This engagement strategy reveals Korea's maturation as a global actor capable of sophisticated diplomatic and economic relationships across diverse regional contexts, while providing valuable insights into the evolving nature of regionalism in an increasingly interconnected world.

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## Notes

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