

# The Institute for Regional Security

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COVID-19 and Foreign Policy in Australia and  
South Korea: Learning Lessons from Middle  
Powers in Hard Times

David Hundt

## **The Institute for Regional Security**

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**Tel** +61 2 6295 1555

**Fax** +61 2 6169 3019

**Email** [info@ifrs.org.au](mailto:info@ifrs.org.au)

**Web** [www.regionalsecurity.org.au](http://www.regionalsecurity.org.au)

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## About the Institute

We promote the peace, stability and prosperity of the peoples of the Indo-Pacific region through policy research, policy advice and advocacy, international dialogues, and the professional development of policy-makers.

## About the Author

### **David Hundt**

Associate Professor of International Relations  
Deakin University

# Middle powers and the pandemic in comparative perspective

As befits two countries that are deemed to enjoy some of the world's highest levels of global health security (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2019), Australia and South Korea have experienced relatively few daily infections and cumulative deaths by world standards during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their vaccination rates are above the global average (Ritchie et al., 2021). For South Korea in particular, responding effectively to the pandemic has become part of its 'national brand': Across more than 8,000 news articles, news transcripts, and other texts published in the first six months of 2020, there was 'an overwhelming representation of positive sentiments about South Korea's COVID-19 efforts' (Lee and Kim, 2021, 391).

The visit to Australia by South Korean president Moon Jae-in in late 2021 was an opportunity to enhance collaboration between these middle powers. As recently as September 2021, Moon had urged the two sides to 'strengthen their strategic dialogue in diverse global fields such as responding to pandemics and climate change, and arms reductions and non-proliferation' (cited in Noh, 2021). And yet, according to long-time Korea-watcher Jeffrey Robertson (2021), Australia 'is not actually recognised as a significant or serious partner' by most of South Korea's political and foreign-policy leaders.

In this paper I use the responses of Australia and South Korea the pandemic as a means of understanding their approaches to foreign policy and what this means for the possibility of deeper middle-power cooperation. I show that their 'state traditions' and their sense of regional identity (which helps to shape how countries choose to work with others) affect their pandemic-related foreign policy towards East Asia and the Pacific. The differences between them need not preclude diffuse cooperation and may even open the door to greater collaboration with another important regional power, Japan.



# State traditions and foreign policy

The notion of state tradition alludes to the fact that there are vastly different conceptions of the purpose and potential of the government to make a difference in national life (Kelly, 2008). In keeping with its liberal state tradition, in Australia there is a consensus that government should minimise its role in the life of citizens. South Korea's tradition of the 'developmental state', by contrast, envisages a much more activist role for government in all aspects of national affairs – including in addressing crises such as pandemics.

In the immediate sense, state traditions help illustrate how relations between government and citizen differ across the world. If in the liberal tradition citizens are understood to be generally virtuous, autonomous, and capable, then it is understandable that the state's role in society can be typified as preventing 'theft, force, and fraud' (Nozick, 1974). In the developmental state tradition, meanwhile, there is a greater expectation that the government can improve (or 'develop') society through purposeful action.

State traditions also shape foreign policy and are evident in the responses of Australia and South Korea to COVID-19. With Australia initially defining success as *elimination* of the virus and thus seeking to minimise infections, hospitalisation, and deaths, there was a consensus that the virus needed to be kept at a distance. Australia's approach therefore featured not only lockdowns and stay-at-home orders in jurisdictions with high rates of infection, but also restrictions on international and domestic movements. This was consistent with a long-standing prioritisation of 'border security' and the use of quarantine to control the movement of disease and people (Nethery, 2021).

The success criterion for South Korea, meanwhile, was defined as *containment* of the virus (Lee and Kim, 2021, 383). As in Australia, the Korean approach aimed to minimise infections, hospitalisations, and deaths, but there was an assumption that some infections were inevitable in a densely populated society, in part due to its close proximity to the epicentre of the pandemic, China. But recent, relevant experience

in managing pandemics, such as the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), also engendered confidence that South Korea could manage this challenge successfully (Kim et al., 2020). What is more, a priority of South Korean foreign policy was to share the lessons and means of coping with the crisis with other countries, especially in Asia.

## The importance of regional identity

A second factor that shapes the approaches of Australia and South Korea during the pandemic has been regional identity. Australia has mainly claimed a 'Pacificist' identity and engaged with the region from the outside (Hundt, 2011). In part, this is a result of Australia's debate during the 1980s and 1990s about whether it was or should try to become an 'Asian country'. That debate was decided in the negative, partly due to the response that Australia's bid to be accepted as an Asian society was rebuffed by regional leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohammed. But Australia's 'outsider' status has not precluded some notable collaborations: it became ASEAN's first official dialogue partner in 1974, the Turnbull government hosted a formal summit with the leaders of all 10 ASEAN members in Sydney in 2018, and the two sides recently upgraded their relationship to a 'strategic' partnership. Nonetheless, as an outsider to core Asian groupings, Australia tends to find common cause with other non-Asian regional powers, such as the United States, as well as those who are least comfortable with the notion of a Sinocentric regional order, such as India and Japan.

South Korea, meanwhile, has contributed to not only Pacificist regional projects but also 'Asianist' and even 'Northeast Asianist' ones. Unlike Australia, South Korea's identification as an Asian society has never been questioned. As such South Korea has been an active participant in the 'ASEAN plus Three' grouping and a valuable partner in regional projects such as an East Asian Community. As an insider to Asian regionalism, South Korea has found common cause with fellow Asian countries in ways that have not been available to Australia (Hundt and Kim, 2011).

Australia's outsider status, combined with its liberal-infused foreign policy, sometimes results in it criticising what it sees as the imperfections of other countries (such as China's human-rights violations) and even regional initiatives (ASEAN as a mere 'talk shop'). Australia is thus drawn to regional configurations such as the 'Indo-Pacific', which allow for outsiders such as itself and the US to be included. By contrast South Korea's developmentalist tradition, and status as a core Asian state, encourages it to work with the imperfect aspects of the region to find solutions to issues of common concern. Freed from identity-related constraints, South Korea can instead focus on using its dextrous foreign policy to further its own ends as well as to cooperate with others.

## Show us how much you care: The branding of foreign policy

Both countries have played a role in the development of vaccines and the production of test-kits, masks, and other measures to protect against the virus. But whereas Australia's involvement has mainly been through the COVAX initiative, South Korea has made its own independent contribution to the production of the equipment and vaccines that have helped the region recover from the virus. In keeping with the developmental state tradition's emphasis on industrialisation, South Korean firms have produced masks and test-kits for both domestic use and export. In May 2020, for instance, South Korea donated 2 million masks to the US to relieve shortfalls during the first wave of the virus. Another 500,000 were gifted to the Department of Veterans Affairs, in a symbolic repayment to the US military for rescuing South Korea during the Korean War (Lee and Kim, 2021, 388). A Korean test-kit was developed and distributed within weeks of the virus reaching Korean shores, thanks to close collaboration between the government and industry (Kim et al., 2020, 568). These material contributions have enabled South Korea to distinguish its contribution to the recovery from that of other countries.



Australia, meanwhile, has invested in the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access ('COVAX') process, which has been managed through the World Health Association with the goal of ensuring vaccine production and supply at affordable prices and guaranteed supply for signatory countries. Australia has also invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Covid-related vaccine and therapeutic research at home and overseas. But vital supplies of face masks, PPE, and other crucial equipment have been imported due to Australia's under-developed industrial base, which has spurred some debate about the efficacy of 'reshoring' and 'supply chain management' since mid-2020. This debate has coincided with the lingering trade dispute with China, which has been another reminder of Australia's vulnerability to external shocks and 'long-distance globalisation' for the supply of everyday goods. Compared to South Korea, Australia had commensurately less capacity to produce its own masks and test-kits, which in turn reduced its capacity to directly assist needier countries.

When we look at the distribution of vaccines, a similar pattern has emerged: South Korea has been able to share its vaccines and products directly to other countries and attach 'made in Korea' labels to them, whereas Australia has worked with its partners such as the US. As a Quad member, in early 2021, Australia was one of four countries that pledged to deliver 1 billion doses by 2022 to the Indo-Pacific (Jennett, 2021). Australia promised to deliver 20m doses for the Pacific and Southeast Asia, with 2.5 million set aside for Indonesia (Dziedzic, 2021).

As valuable as these efforts were, their capacity to promote Australia as a force for good in the region was necessarily diminished by the fact that they were bundled into the Quad and Australia's partnerships with larger partners such as the US. It would be reasonable to assume that recipients of Australia's generosity would give greater credit to say the United States, where most of the vaccines are made, rather than Australia. The significance of announcements such as Australia's decision to commit new resources to assisting ASEAN and the Pacific to manage and recover from the virus (e.g., Payne, 2020) risk being overlooked or at least obscured when so much of pandemic-related foreign policy is conducted in unison with larger allies.

# Managing the politics of the pandemic, high and low

In at least one respect, however, Australia's alignment with the US was certainly not overlooked during the pandemic: Australia joined its larger ally in blaming China for the pandemic and proposed an international inquiry into the origins of the virus in China. While not the only country to call for such an inquiry, arguably Australia has paid a higher price for doing so than any other country. Again, comparisons with South Korea here are apposite: Both countries have had concerns with China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, but South Korea has managed its relations with China better than Australia. Their stance on international borders is a case in point: Australia was one of the first countries to close its borders to China and other countries, and it has until recently maintained this stance. By contrast, South Korea has maintained a degree of openness on its borders, including for Chinese visitors, and the government noted that in fact it was Korean citizens who were mainly responsible for bringing the virus into the country. Maintaining such a 'neutral stance' was less provocative to China, especially at a time when so many countries had closed their borders to Chinese visitors (Lee and Kim, 2021, 387).

In the case of Australia, the worsening of ties with China has not all been Canberra's fault or responsibility: China has overreacted, retaliated unfairly, and violated its commitments to FTAs against Australia – as it did against South Korea during the THAAD dispute (see *The Economist*, 2017). But South Korea has maintained a working relationship with Chinese leaders, whereas Australian ministers have had almost no direct contact with their Chinese counterparts for some time.

If Australia's pandemic-related foreign policy has prioritised global efforts and mechanisms, South Korea's has been more focused on bilateral ties. South Korea has packaged its pandemic diplomacy within the Moon government's New Southern Policy (NSP), which aims to improve relations with ASEAN and India. The policy's three 'pillars' were economic cooperation ('prosperity'), sociocultural development ('people'), and peace-building ('peace') (Botto, 2021).

These goals are broadly similar to the types of goals that Australia identified in its response, namely health security, stability, and economic recovery (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020). Nonetheless, the ‘people’ pillar in South Korea’s NSP perhaps illustrates how and why Australian engagement with the region differs from its Korean counterpart. South Korea has demonstrated a sensitivity to the concerns of densely populated and populous developing countries such as Indonesia for the development and dissemination of ‘affordable and accessible’ vaccines, as well as economic recovery; it has made concerted diplomatic overtures to Southeast Asia, especially Singapore and Indonesia, in pursuit of these goals (de Haan, 2020). By contrast Australia’s under-delivery of vaccines to PNG and other neighbours has arguably undermined its soft power in the region.

## Conclusions

COVID has been a challenge to Australian foreign policy and offers an opportunity to reflect on what has worked and what needs to change in the years to come. The announcement in late November 2021 that the new Omicron strain of coronavirus had emerged in South Africa, described by some WHO officials as ‘the worst one yet’ (New Daily, 2021) was a reminder that health security will remain a prominent feature of foreign policy for the foreseeable future. As such, it would be a fitting topic for conversation during President Moon’s anticipated visit to Australia. The two middle powers have much to learn from each other.

Data from the Global Health Security Index (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2019) suggests that the liberal state tradition has enhanced Australia’s global health security by encouraging it to detect pandemics early and prevent them from spreading onshore, but Australia has a less impressive capacity to respond effectively to the spread of a virus. For a country that ranks fourth in the world for health security, Australia falls short in its emergency preparedness and the ability of governments to access communications networks during emergencies. As a lightly populated continent, Australia is exposed to a comparatively higher degree of risk to health threats, including environmental ones, which can spread by land, air, and sea. A lesson Australia might take from

COVID-19 is that the country effectively dodged a bullet: if it had been exposed to a higher number of infections, health systems might have been overwhelmed.

Australia might seek to learn from the response mechanisms that operated so effectively in South Korea, whose capacity to detect and respond to health crises was showcased during the COVID-19 pandemic. South Korea's willingness and capacity to vigorously engage in crisis management can, as noted in this paper, be traced to the developmental state tradition that centralises power in the executive branch of government. South Korea's contacting-tracing systems and test-kits were so effective that the Moon government was able to share Korean expertise with other countries, which has proven to be a valuable form of soft power in the past two years. South Korea's overall health security is lower than that of Australia (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2019), however, in large part due to its commensurately lower capacity to prevent pandemics from entering the country in the first place. Not only does South Korea have comparatively lax controls on international arrivals and exits, but it has been less willing to sign on to cross-border agreements on public-health responses to emergencies. In addition to the environment risks that Australia faces, South Korea is exposed to a certain degree of political and security risk thanks to the ever-present possibility of conflict with its neighbour to the immediate north.

Building on the goodwill generated by President Moon's visit in late 2021, Australian leaders should encourage South Korea to coordinate more with likeminded states to enhance their capacity to respond when the next pandemic strikes. One country that presents itself as an obvious interlocutor in this regard is Japan, South Korea's neighbour to the east. Most Australian political leaders are old enough to remember a time when the prospect of Japan being considered a close and valued ally was almost inconceivable, and yet that has been precisely what Japan has become for Australia in recent decades. Australian officials might advocate for and facilitate closer trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan on issues of common concern. The COVID-19 pandemic may be precisely the type of immediate and tangible threat that demands commonality among middle powers in Asia and the Pacific.

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