



## WHY IRAN MATTERS TO SOUTH KOREA — AND WHY SOUTH KOREA'S MIDDLE EAST POSTURE SHOULD MATTER TO THE UNITED STATES

A Curated Conversation with the Korean Ambassador to the United Nations  
by Joseph Braude



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The controversial Iranian nuclear framework agreement presented on April 2nd in Lausanne is being closely watched 6,500 miles east of Tehran, on the Korean peninsula. Beginning in 1994, the rogue state of North Korea broke a series of promises to the international community to submit to nuclear inspectors and disarmament. In 2009, it declared that it had developed a nuclear weapon. As the country most gravely threatened is the democratic Republic of Korea to Pyongyang's south, I sat down this week with Oh Joon, the country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, and asked for his perspective on Lausanne.

Seoul is an increasingly active player in the Middle East. In 2012, a South Korean consortium began to construct four commercial nuclear power reactors in the United Arab Emirates, in a deal approved by the International Atomic Energy Agency and valued at \$20 billion. Trade with the broader region has grown rapidly. With respect to Iranian efforts to dominate Arab politics through proxy militias, South Korea has generally sided with Sunni Arab leaderships, and earlier this week conveyed support for the U.N. Security Council resolution banning the export of arms to the pro-Iranian Houthi fighters in Yemen. But the country also doubled its import of Iranian crude oil last month in anticipation of a nuclear deal. Relying almost entirely on foreign oil imports, South Korea is economically disposed to chart a delicate political course between its suppliers in Iran and the Gulf.

**Q: Where does your government stand on the proposed framework for an Iranian nuclear agreement, and why?**

*A: Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, there have been only two countries that were suspected of deviating and developing nuclear weapons: Iran and North Korea. We welcome the Iran framework agreement, especially because it has important implications for the North Korean nuclear issue. The latter's nuclear program is more complicated and advanced than Iran's —but we hope that what facilitates the deal with Iran would also work for negotiations with North Korea. That is, the principle that if you give up the possibility of weaponization of nuclear energy, then you will be welcomed by the international community instead of being isolated. That's what the Iranian deal could show once it is finalized, and it should be an important lesson for North Korea as well.*

**Q: But the North Korean case is often used, to the contrary, to sound a cautionary note about a deal with Iran, because the country reneged on prior agreements that were reached.**

*A: And indeed in both cases, what matters most is the genuineness of the country's intention. But there is a glass-half-empty, glass-half-full view of the Iran deal that enables one to compare the two cases in two ways rather than one. On the one hand, if you think the Iranians will eventually do what the North Koreans did in the past, then there is no way to be sure about this deal. But if the deal goes forward and the outcome is the opposite*

— that Iranians proceed to honor the agreement and gain the benefits North Korea also wants — then, even though the North Koreans might have cheated in the past, you can hope that we will be able to have a successful deal with North Korea too.

**Q: What bearing does the Korean nuclear power project in the UAE have on the Iranian question?**

*A: That if you truly are under tight safeguard arrangements with the IAEA, there is no way for you to divert and develop weapons out of a peaceful program. So what I'm saying is, having nuclear programs itself is not dangerous, as long as the programs are peaceful, and as long as there are safeguards.*

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The Korean position on Lausanne may find its way into the debate over whether a deal with Iran should be signed. Supporters of the framework agreement can respond to opponents' use of the "North Korean cautionary tale" with the observation that the South actually wants to see a deal go forward. At the same time, the Korean envoy lends credence to the view that no agreement will effectively block a country from developing nuclear weapons if its real intent is to do so. As for the notion of an Iran deal as a test case for a possible future agreement with North Korea, the logic would presumably appeal more to the world's superpower, which considers itself a Pacific power and has its sights on the Peninsula, than Israel and the Gulf States, which are both in Iran's sights — and within its shooting range.

But the significance of Korea's posture in the Middle East goes beyond the polemics of the Iranian nuclear negotiations. South Korea is a prominent example of numerous Asian powers that share a growing appetite for Middle Eastern oil, as well as a penchant to compete with the United States for lucrative business deals in the region — Seoul's nuclear contract in the UAE being a case in point. These powers profit from America's formidable military expenditure on securing the sea lanes of the Gulf, but have not been asked to contribute to American efforts in the region to an extent commensurate with the benefits they receive. Unlike China — the largest power and Gulf oil importer in Asia— South Korea is a longtime ally of the United States which shares American democratic values. Can it be tapped to assist in the promulgation of those values in Arab countries?

Perhaps the answer begins with an assessment of the "soft power" tools South Korea has at its disposal. As shown in [this short documentary about Seoul's impressive Arabic radio network](#), the country has built a cadre of Korean nationals with broadcast-quality fluency in the language. Korean pop music and cinema enjoy an outsize Arab audience, and the country promotes cultural partnerships in the region through a variety of exchange programs. These assets are indicative of the country's potential to help spread an agenda of incremental political and social reform in Arab countries.

**Q: How do you explain the appeal of Korean movies in the Arab world?**

*A: They are different from American or European movies in that they feature what you might call "Asian values," like the importance of family, and explore the conflict between traditional and Western values. In Arab countries, traditional values are more conspicuous than in other parts of Asia, probably due to religious reasons. So our dramas, particularly our historical dramas, readily appeal to Arab audiences.*

**Q: In 1964 your country was an autocracy with a gross domestic product roughly the same as Egypt's, whereas today you're a developed democracy and a G-20 economy with GDP five times that of Egypt. Is there a "Korean development model" an Arab country can seek to emulate?**

*A: I still recall, from when I was a kindergartener in the early 1960s, drinking milk every day in a mug with a United Nations logo, which was a part of the assistance we received from the UN. Today we are one of the few cases of a country that has transformed from a recipient of foreign aid to a donor of foreign aid within a generation. When asked to break down our "model," to the extent that there is one, I emphasize our investment in education, which is an investment in the future; a good leader with a vision for effective and efficient governance; and an inclusive society. At the beginning of our developmental stage we were not a democracy, but our culture of inclusiveness helped us become one.*

**Q: These are general principles. Have you distilled the Korean experience into a package of development concepts that outsiders can study, tailor, and appropriate? Have you built a mechanism through which to relay it?**

*A: What we offer is the Saemaul Undong ["New Village"] Movement, which was a political initiative launched in 1970 by our current president's father — a kind of self-help program for rural development. It is not a panacea, but it worked for our rural communities, and we now have a kind of*

*program to transmit it to other developing countries via the United Nations Development Program.<sup>1</sup>*

**Q: Who signs up?**

*A: It is most popular with African countries. Most oil-rich Arab countries do not have the rural areas to begin with, though I realize that some of the poorer Arab countries do.*

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Saemaul Undong was a long-term, top-down initiative by an authoritarian ruler to organize villages into semi-autonomous collectives and empower them to work their way out of poverty by building roads, irrigation systems, and housing. It aimed not only to enrich the countryside and create a national infrastructure, but also to transform the culture of defeatism and passivity that reigned in the country after years of occupation and war. Last year the government convened an international conference to [promulgate a formula](#) for the “globalization of Saemaul Undong” in the developing world. Since then, thirteen Asian and sub-Saharan countries have committed themselves to doing so in a series of “pilot village projects.” The takers were nascent democracies such as Rwanda and Cambodia, which comparatively recently achieved freedom from mass bloodshed and enjoy the stability to wage a long-term campaign in their countryside. Equivalent rural areas in the likes of Libya and Yemen, where government barely functions and civil war reigns, are understandably unlikely to partake.

But elsewhere in the Arab world, conditions are ripe for movers to learn from other aspects of the Korean experience which the “globalization of Saemaul Undong” project does not address. Consider the urban megapolis of Cairo: An autocrat has reasserted authority and risks economic ruin should he fail to attract investment, stem corruption, revamp education, and provide a space for liberal political elements to grow and take part in the affairs of state. For him and the community of elites vested in his success, what matters is not rural Korea but the story of Seoul: What did the ambassador learn in school while sipping milk out of a UN mug in the early sixties? How did the military strongman who ruled at the time build a global economic power, as well as the foundations for a democratic society that would elect his daughter president 40 years later? The answers to these questions are messier than the formula for Saemaul Undong, and selling Korean methods to an Arab country would be complex, entailing a mix of persuasion, incentivization, and political pressure — no job for the UNDP. But Washington’s many unsuccessful political development efforts in the region have shown that the “American model” does not resonate with Arab elites, and strained relations between their countries and the United States have crippled Americans’ capacity to promote it.

Ambassador Oh Joon’s novel “two-way comparison” between nuclear agreements in Iran and North Korea, quoted above, is not the kind of formulation one typically hears from a Western or Arab diplomat. It reflects the intricate thinking of an Asian power with a mercantile foreign policy, unencumbered by foreign conflict over ideologies and values and shrewd at balancing relations among powers that are at odds with one another. Some Americans feel that the United States should begin to unload some of its ideological commitments overseas and become a little more mercantile. It could more easily do so if other developed democracies such as Korea grow their own role as proponents of reform in countries where positive models for political development are needed.

The case for a more robust Korean role in Arab politics is all the more urgent because the cultural commonalities shared by Koreans and Arabs, as described by Oh Joon, are also shared by other Asian powers harboring a less salubrious ideological agenda. China's ruling communist party, in particular, has [leveraged its cache as a global power with one foot in the developing world to appeal to Arabs to follow in its footsteps](#) – a choice which proponents of democratic development naturally hope Arab countries will not make.

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<sup>1</sup> “Saemaul Initiative Towards Inclusive and Sustainable New Communities,” United Nations Development Program project document. <http://bit.ly/1OCGX7k>