The two Koreas and Africa in the 21st century

At the end of May 2016, South Korean President Park Geun-hye paid her first official state visit to Africa, visiting Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya. While South Korea’s relationship with Africa today is largely understood in terms of resource diplomacy, a rivalry with North Korea persists – highlighted during President Park’s recent visit. This commentary takes a look at how the two Koreas have made inroads in Africa, while simultaneously fending off each other. Despite competition for influence, both Koreas have faced challenges in their attempts to export their respective ideologies and developmental models to the continent.

Africa - the diplomatic battle field

For most of the second half of the 20th century, Africa served as a battlefield for diplomatic recognition between Cold War powers. Both North and South Korean battles for influence in Africa during this period can be situated within this context. Before the 1990s, North Korea’s diplomatic relationship with Africa outpaced that of South Korea. A number of African countries received military support from North Korea in its battle for independence during the 1950s and early 1960s. North Korea won a number of allies through promoting anti-western rhetoric; in particular, its ideological pillar of _juche_ - meaning self-reliance or autonomy in Korean - a political philosophy which held appeal for a number of post-colonial African states. The 1970s saw the peak of North Korea’s Third World diplomacy. However, it was not to last. The collapse of communism in the late 1980s marked a new era for South Korea, allowing it to expand its relations on the African continent. South Korea adopted increasingly pragmatic approach to foreign affairs, with Africa being no exception. Within this context, its rapid economic growth is perceived by many African actors as a desirable model. South Korean global electronics brands, Samsung and LG, have secured dominant positions in the market and contributed to South Korea’s image on the continent. Since South Korea became a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), its developmental model has underpinned its soft power, namely which it wishes to share with other developing nations.

During this same period, North Korea’s increased economic and political isolation has seen its Cold War influence wane – although this has not prevented competition between the two Koreas in their African diplomatic outreach. Following the recent visit between Park and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, the South Korean government announced that Uganda, one of North Korea’s closest allies, would sever its relationship with North Korea. The South Korean government’s announcement was immediately followed by criticism from the Ugandan government, which stated that South Korea unilaterally made this disclosure public. Despite this diplomatic hiccup with Uganda, South Korea has vigorously expanded its outreach to include North Korea’s allies. In fact, following the African visit, South Korean foreign minister continued on to Cuba, one of the closest of friends of North Korea for decades, where he proceeded to normalise diplomatic relations with the socialist island state.

Despite these shifts, North Korea has continued to counter South Korea’s diplomatic expansion in Africa. In
May, the President of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly of North Korea - the official head of state, Kim Young-nam - attended President Obiang Nguema’s inaugural ceremony in Equatorial Guinea. During his visit, he met with African leaders from Chad, Gabon, Central Africa, Congo, Mali, Burundi and the former president of Mozambique. A week later, a delegation from the Mozambique Liberation Front Party (FRELIMO) visited Pyongyang. In April 2016, Angola and North Korea discussed co-operation on public security and North Korea agreed to send medical doctors to Angola.

**Underlying problems faced**

While the two Koreas compete openly or covertly on the African continent, both sides have faced a relative decline of their diplomatic strategies. North Korea's *juche*, once successful in dissemination to allies in the Third World, is now the quaint preserve of the deeply isolated “Hermit Kingdom”. Similarly, South Korea's export of its developmental model to Africa is merely one tree in a forest – with competition (rather than co-operation) with China and other emerging countries that also wish to boost their partnerships with African states. Emerging partners have made forays into Africa offering unprecedented support. Under the circumstances, it has become difficult to identify what is so special about South Korea’s developmental experience. For instance, immediately following President Park’s visit to Uganda and Kenya, Turkish president, Recep Erdoğan, followed hot on her heels, visiting both Uganda and Kenya. Additionally, South Korea's developmental process, achieved under an authoritarian government, is a difficult model to replicate amongst democratic African countries. With North Korea's foreign policy unique, but based on dismal development, and South Korea’s foreign policy based on stellar development, but by no means unique, both Koreas may need to re-think their strategies for retaining a diplomatic edge in the 21st century.