

Korea–Middle East Cooperation: Comprehensive Partnership towards a New Horizon

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The bond between Korea and the Middle East can be traced back to thousand years. Over the past few decades, we have also built and nurtured a relationship of win-win structure. For Korea, the Middle East was the reliable partner that supplied energy so critical to its economic development. For the Middle East, Korea was the trustworthy and diligent partner that provided the skills and the manpower needed for its modernization and infrastructure development.

However, it is also true that as our relationship has been focused mainly in the economic interests of both sides, the relative importance of the partnership went through the cycle of ups and downs reflecting the market condition of the given times.

In view of the political and social transformation in the Middle East and the economic achievements in Korea over the last decade, it is time for Korea to 'revisit the Middle East' and the Middle East to 'rediscover Korea.' In other words, it is time for us to recalibrate the character of our relationship so that we may elevate it to reflect the progress we made over the years and fulfill the potential to bring a more prosperous future.

With a view to meeting such demands and challenges of our time, I would like to characterize Korea's policy towards the Middle East as the "Comprehensive Partnership towards a new horizon." Under this new partnership, we will seek to a relationship that is less vulnerable to the capricious changes of the times. We will seek to a relationship that contributes to the common prosperity of the region and the world this coincides with the vision of promoting the well-being and happiness of the global community put forward by the new government of Korea.

To begin building this partnership, I believe three Cs are needed: mutually “complementing” economic relations, mutually “contributing” political relations, and mutually “communicating” cultural relations.

First, let me address the mutually complementing economic cooperation.

Today, the Middle East is reaching beyond its traditional role as the global supplier of energy and the major player in the global financial market. The region is making preparation for the post-oil era by looking into possible new growth in areas such as renewable energy, information technology (IT), nuclear energy, and the health and medical industry. Korea welcomes such policy direction of the Middle East and hopes that this will, in turn, lead to an opportunity to foster a more future-oriented and multi-faceted partnership with the Middle East.

In this regard, there are already Korean nuclear power plants being built in the UAE, and hundreds of Middle Eastern patients are arriving in Korea for medical treatments in Korean hospitals. I believe that such new and diverse trends in our bilateral cooperation show the path we should take toward the future.

Next, let me address the mutually contributing political relations.

In international relations, it is hard to maintain a long-term relationship without firm and mutual trust. Furthermore, the peace and stability of the Middle East is inseparable from the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and the world. Our relationship is no longer defined only as the supplier and buyer of petroleum. Events occurring in global hot spots such as the Korean Peninsula and the Middle East affect the strategic calculations of key stake-holders that shape the larger contour of the global security landscape.

Thus, as a stake-holder in maintaining the peace and stability in the Middle East, Korea is making active contributions in the international community’s efforts in places like Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, and South Sudan, safeguarding and making peace. Also as a member of the UN Security Council, Korea is looking for ways to make positive contributions in the process of resolving the Syria crisis, for example, by hosting the third Working Group Meeting on Economic Recovery and Development of Syria in few weeks time.

Furthermore, Korea is reaching out to engage not only individual partners, but also regional organizations through strategic dialogues in an effort to deepen its relationship with the Middle East. For example, on the occasion of the UN General Assembly, I held the first Foreign Ministers’ Meeting with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) during which the two sides agreed to hold regular strategic dialogues in the future, and also held the first Ministerial Meeting with the Arab League during which

a memorandum of understanding was signed establishing a high-level channel of dialogue.

Finally, let me address the mutually communicating cultural relationship.

Korean art and culture is receiving an enthusiastic reception throughout the world, a phenomenon often referred to as the Korean Wave. The Korean Wave is also occurring in the Middle East. Perhaps, the fact that there are many similarities between our two cultures such as the common emphasis on the importance of family and friendship, and the preservation of tradition make the Korean Wave more receptive in the Middle East. At the same time in Korea, the 140-thousand-strong muslim community has become a sturdy bridge that links our two peoples and cultures.

In this vein, I believe that our younger generations are invaluable assets for our two cultures that will one day become the catalysts for a more prosperous common future together. It is with such belief that we included the session for the next generation in this year's Forum.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the arrival of the first group of Korean construction workers in the Middle East. In commemoration of this historic event, Korea and Saudi Arabia are jointly launching an initiative tentatively called the “Saudi Homecoming Day” a series of events for retired Korean construction workers to visit Saudi Arabia to witness for themselves their legacy and contribution. Through such an initiative, we hope to deepen our ties with our friends in the Middle East by recalling our contribution in laying the groundwork for economic growth.

October 25, 2015

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