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Reforming Global Governance in an Age of Economic Security: South Korea's Strategic Role in a Changing Order

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Contemporary international order is undergoing a dual transformation: the weakening of traditional multilateral institutions and the simultaneous rise of economic security as a central organizing principle of global politics. Institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organization, and the G20 have increasingly struggled to provide effective coordination amid war, geopolitical rivalry, and the securitization of trade and technology. Yet this moment should not be understood simply as the collapse of multilateralism. Rather, it is more accurately seen as a period of institutional reconfiguration, in which new forms of selective openness, exclusion, and rule-making are emerging. Read together, the papers by Victor Cha, Christina Davis, and Danny Quah offer three distinct but complementary perspectives on this broader transformation.

These questions were at the center of the international conference "Democratic Multilateralism at the Edge: Security, Economic Statecraft, and Institutional Resilience in Transition," convened on April 20 by Korea University's Institute for Interdisciplinary Unification Studies (IIUS), together with the Seoul Forum for International Affairs (SFIA) and the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI). The three papers presented in that setting illuminate this transition from different angles. Victor Cha's "Bending the Governance Architecture:

Reform of the G-7” argues that the G7 should be expanded and institutionally strengthened to fill a growing governance vacuum. Christina L. Davis’s “Multilateralism and the Management of Economic Security” shows how multilateralism has long managed the tension between openness and security, and how it is now being reconfigured around selective openness. Danny Quah’s “The Rest of Us: Incentives, not Power, in Rebuilding World Order” shifts attention away from great powers and toward smaller states whose survival and prosperity depend most directly on workable rules. Read together, the three papers ask one larger question: who will shape the next governance architecture, and according to what principles?

Victor Cha’s “Bending the Governance Architecture: Reform of the G-7” begins from a compelling diagnosis: the world is facing a governance vacuum. The United Nations Security Council has been constrained by major-power rivalry and war; the WTO has proven increasingly unable to restrain the weaponization of trade; and the G20, although broader in representation, has become less effective as geopolitical divisions deepen. At the same time, the policy agenda has expanded considerably. Issues such as AI governance, supply chain resilience, pandemic preparedness, clean technology, and economic security require more sustained coordination and more effective rule-making than existing institutions have thus far been able to provide. Against this background, Cha argues that the G7 should evolve beyond its traditional role and become a more capable platform for global governance. From a Korean perspective, one of the paper’s most striking contributions is its argument for G7 expansion, especially the claim that South Korea and Australia should be first in line. Equally important is the way the paper frames South Korea not merely as an aspirant seeking symbolic inclusion, but as a country capable of adding real functional value in areas such as advanced technology supply chains, support for Ukraine, AI governance, global health, and anti-corruption.

This is an important shift in emphasis, because it moves the discussion from one of status to one of contribution. At the same time, the paper invites a distinction between two analytically separate questions: whether South Korea has a persuasive case for joining the G7, and what role South Korea would actually play if admitted. On the first question, the argument is convincing. On the second, however, the paper could go further. From South Korea’s standpoint, at least three issue areas appear especially relevant: digital and AI governance; supply chain resilience and economic security, particularly in semiconductors, batteries, and critical minerals; and development cooperation, global health, and middle-power coalition building. Korea’s case for participation should therefore rest not only on the claim that it deserves a seat at the table, but on the claim that it can help address the practical governance challenges that the G7 increasingly faces.

This point is especially salient on the Korean Peninsula, where deterrence, sanctions enforcement, technology controls, and supply chain security intersect in concentrated form. It is even more important at a time when North Korea’s deepening ties with Russia, alongside China’s renewed efforts to consolidate relations with Pyongyang, point to a broader pattern of authoritarian alignment across the security and economic domains. That trend suggests that the Korean Peninsula should no longer be viewed merely as a regional flashpoint. It is also an increasingly important site where sanctions enforcement, military cooperation, strategic logistics, and economic security converge in ways directly relevant to the future agenda of the G7. In this sense, Korea’s case for G7 participation should be framed not simply in terms of recognition, but in terms of problem-solving capacity—specifically, the concrete governance gaps Korea can help fill and the ways in which its participation would make the G7 more effective, not merely larger. A further strength of Cha’s paper is that it does not stop at membership expansion. It also takes institutional design seriously. Its proposal for a Troika-style standing secretariat and implementation-oriented task forces is among the paper’s most practical

contributions, precisely because it addresses the problem of discontinuity that arises when the agenda shifts too sharply from one host country to the next. For South Korea, this is especially relevant. If Korea is to participate more deeply in the G7 framework, its role should not be limited to prestige or visibility; it should also involve strengthening continuity, implementation, and institutional effectiveness. Yet two broader questions remain. Why the G7 in particular, rather than other multilateral arrangements? And can G7 reform adequately address the problem of legitimacy, especially vis-à-vis the Global South? Even with South Korea and Australia included, the G7 would remain a club of advanced democracies. That may improve capability, but it does not fully resolve the issue of representation.

Christina Davis's "Multilateralism and the Management of Economic Security" is especially valuable because it helps us reconceptualize multilateralism under contemporary conditions. Rather than treating multilateralism as a collapsing order, the paper suggests that it is being reconfigured into a framework for organizing selective openness. This is a highly productive intervention. The central question is no longer whether multilateralism survives in some abstract sense, but on what basis some actors are included and others excluded, and who has the authority to exercise that discretion. In an era marked by export controls, friend-shoring, strategic exceptions, and techno-industrial competition, the key issue is not openness versus closure in the traditional sense. It is the governance of conditional openness.

This reframing is particularly important because it captures the institutional logic of economic security more precisely than conventional accounts of either globalization or deglobalization. Economic security does not necessarily imply the abandonment of interdependence; rather, it implies a politically managed and hierarchically differentiated form of interdependence. From this perspective, multilateralism increasingly serves not as a universal principle of inclusion, but as a mechanism for structuring selective cooperation among trusted partners. That insight is persuasive. At the same time, the paper raises a critical normative and institutional question that deserves even greater attention: how can such selectivity be legitimated and constrained? As economic security exceptions proliferate, the danger is that multilateralism becomes less a rules-based order than a flexible framework through which powerful states or coalitions determine the boundaries of acceptable participation. The challenge, then, is not simply to preserve multilateralism, but to establish procedural and normative safeguards that prevent selective openness from degenerating into discretionary exclusion.

This insight is especially relevant for Korea. South Korea is deeply embedded in the U.S.-led security order, yet it cannot fully sever its economic ties with China. Its challenge, therefore, is not simply to decouple, hedge, or remain neutral, but to define clear economic-security priorities while preserving room for managed openness and selective cooperation. In this emerging order, multilateralism may become less about universal access than about the rules, procedures, and legitimacy of conditional access. For Korea, this means that economic security strategy cannot be reduced to choosing sides; it also requires deciding where to align firmly, where to diversify, where to protect critical technologies, and where to keep channels of economic engagement open.

This creates not only strategic risks for Korea, but also an opportunity for institutional contribution. If economic-security exceptions remain unconstrained, selective openness can easily become discretionary exclusion, allowing powerful states or coalitions to define acceptable participation in ways that erode trust in the rules-based order. Korea's task, therefore, is not only to adapt to this shift, but also to help shape the

procedural safeguards and normative criteria that keep economic security from becoming an all-purpose justification for arbitrary exclusion. This is where Korea can make a distinctive middle-power contribution: by helping to balance security and openness, technology protection and market access, supply-chain resilience and development cooperation.

Danny Quah's "The Rest of Us: Incentives, not Power, in Rebuilding World Order" offers a different but equally stimulating intervention. The paper is fresh and compelling because it identifies smaller states with shared incentives, rather than great powers, as the key agents of rebuilding world order. This is a significant conceptual move. Much of the literature on order formation remains implicitly great-power centric, assuming that institutional reconstruction must ultimately be driven by the strongest states. Quah instead directs our attention to those countries whose fundamental interest lies not in geopolitical dominance, but in stability, predictability, connectivity, and workable rules. In this sense, the paper offers a more sociologically realistic account of who may have the strongest incentive to sustain order under conditions of strategic rivalry.

This argument has considerable appeal, particularly for middle powers and smaller open economies that are deeply exposed to systemic instability but lack the ability to impose order unilaterally. However, the paper would be even stronger if it clarified more concretely what "multilateral-enough" means in practice. The concept is intuitively attractive, but it remains somewhat underdeveloped analytically. How much representational breadth is sufficient? What degree of institutionalization is required for such a coalition to produce meaningful governance outcomes? And how can this framework operate under the real constraints of U.S.–China rivalry, where smaller states are often pressured to align, hedge, or compartmentalize? Without clearer answers to these questions, the argument risks remaining normatively appealing but operationally indeterminate. What is needed is a more explicit account of how incentive-based coalitions can sustain cohesion, generate compliance, and produce institutional outputs in a world still shaped by major-power asymmetry. This is particularly important because many future governance arrangements may not emerge through universal institutions, but through smaller, issue-specific coalitions that can move faster and deliver results. If so, the practical relevance of Quah's argument lies in identifying which states are best positioned not only to participate in such coalitions, but also to connect them across issue areas. In that respect, Korea is well placed to link coalitions spanning security, technology, trade, and development. .

Taken together, these three papers illuminate different dimensions of the same larger transformation. Cha focuses on institutional adaptation through G7 reform and expansion; Davis reinterprets multilateralism as the governance of selective openness under economic security; and Quah highlights the possibility that world order may be rebuilt not by dominant powers, but by a wider set of states bound together by common incentives. Their shared contribution is to move the debate beyond the familiar binaries of order versus disorder, or globalization versus fragmentation. The more relevant question is how governance can be reconstituted under conditions of geopolitical rivalry, selective interdependence, and weakened universalism.

For South Korea, the implications are clear. Korea can no longer be understood merely as a passive beneficiary of the existing international order. It is now a country with the material capabilities, policy experience, and diplomatic standing to contribute to the design of new governance arrangements. But the legitimacy of such participation cannot rest on status alone. It must rest on demonstrable functional contribution: in digital governance, supply chain resilience, economic security, development cooperation, and coalition-building among technologically advanced middle powers. The real strategic task for South Korea, therefore, is not simply to pursue entry into prestigious institutions as an end in itself, but to define more clearly what principles,

ideas, and practical solutions it can bring to the governance architecture that is now being rebuilt. In this sense, Korea's role is not only to adapt to a more fragmented order, but also to help preserve workable forms of cooperation where they remain institutionally and strategically viable.