

Celebrating 20th Anniversary – Korea and the United Nations

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We often mark anniversaries with some sort of a celebration – a round number often times is marked with more fanfare. Republic of Korea is marking the 20th anniversary of its membership in the United Nations. It is not only a nice round number but also one that is perhaps more significant than any other in its young association with the United Nations.

One of its nationals, the highest ranking official of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon has just been reelected unanimously as UN Secretary General for a second five year term. Republic of Korea served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and also served as President of the UN General Assembly. It transitioned from being a developing country to that of an industrialized country and joined the “rich man’s club”, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Such membership, however, comes with its own price tags – one of which is to increase Overseas Development Assistance. ROK has taken to this too with the same zeal that it had shown in so many other areas. It is the 11th largest contributor to the UN regular budget, 10th largest to the UN Peace Keeping Operations, this year its bilateral assistance to developing countries is to the tune of USD 1.5 billion and it plans to double it by next year and so on. These by any definition will make a country proud, but this is not the whole story of this legendary country.

I arrived in this country barely a little over two months ago. I have since then travelled on work around the country to Busan, Changwon, Pyeongchang, Suncheon, Suwon, Seoul and, of course, my current home town, Incheon. Everywhere I went I was struck by the energy and drive of people, organizations - both public and private - and, of course, the political leadership from members of the legislature at city and country level to Mayors, Ministers and the President himself – to promote national development across all sectors – social, economic and environmental, but do it in a manner that would be the envy of any society. This enthusiasm coupled with its desire to contribute to developing countries is making the country to use the United Nations and all of its Programmes and Funds to the fullest extent.

The country has championed “green-growth” and not only has set up a Global Green Growth Institute but established a Presidential Committee on Green Growth and had put in place host of measures that place being green not on the fringes of actions by society but front and center of everything that the country does. No surprise then that International Union for Conservation of Nature World Congress is scheduled to take place in Korea and a number of UN meetings including UN World Tourism Organization and UN Convention to Combat Desertification had hosted their Conference of the Parties. This on top of hosting the G-20 meeting last year and the

Fourth High Level Forum on Finance as a follow up on Paris and Accra Declarations on Aid Effectiveness will be held later on this year in Busan.

It is only to be expected then that the Regional Preparatory Meeting of the Rio+20 is also hosted by Korea. The United Nations has identified two issues as priorities for the Rio+20 conference next year in Brazil. The first one deals with green economy and the second with institutions for sustainable development. Korea pioneered green growth, an essential element of green economy. By mostly bucking financial crisis that engulfed most of the industrialized countries, it is showing the world that it is on to something. Of course, it is looking to the United Nations to spread the message, tools developed and techniques refined in the name of capacity development, technology transfer, technical assistance or whatever in reaching those that need this help most.

While it may be premature to call Korea the center of the world, it is certainly apropos to say that nothing of any consequence in the world agenda can be undertaken without Korea at the table. Is this all due to its membership in the United Nations? Perhaps not, but the country has benefitted from its membership in the United Nations just as any model country may be expected to. And importantly Korea recognizes that it has an obligation to help those countries that are much like itself not so long ago and is making every effort to work through the United Nations to make it happen.

Congratulations to Korea on its 20th Anniversary of its membership in the United Nations! May it continue to be a beacon of hope and a champion of causes that promotes global sustainability now and in the future.

Dr. Kilaparti Ramakrishna has recently been appointed by the UN Under Secretary General, Noeleen Heyzer as Head/Director of the Subregional Office for East and Northeast Asia of UNESCAP. This office is located in Songdo, Incheon where Ramakrishna lives with his family since August of this year. The views offered in this article are in his personal capacity.

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