



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

President Rivlin in South Korea: Time for an Upgrade

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,216, July 3, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On July 14, 2019, President Reuven Rivlin will land in South Korea for an official state visit. The visit can serve as a catalyst for an upgrading of relations between Israel and South Korea.

Twenty-five years ago, PM Yitzhak Rabin visited South Korea and met with President Kim Yung-sam. That visit was a milestone in upgrading relations between the two states. South Korea was wary toward Israel following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1962, fearing that an upgrade of relations would threaten its billions of dollars in projects and trade with the Arab states in the Middle East. Rabin was able to break the ice, convincing Kim to approve an advancement in economic and diplomatic relations between the two states. Following that visit, relations between South Korea and Israel gradually improved. It is now time to upgrade them even further.

The economy is a central pillar in Jerusalem-Seoul relations, and there is the potential to double trade between the two states over the next three years. Not long ago, Chaebols, a large South Korean conglomerate, opened a research center in Israel. Rivlin's visit could open the door for other South Korean companies to follow suit. The countries' Free Trade Agreement (FTA) should be finalized very soon, to the benefit of industries in both states.

This is also the time to improve political and diplomatic relations. Over the past two decades, Israel has become an important destination for Asian heads of state, including Japanese PM Abe Shinzo, Indian PM Narendra Modi, president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, and others – yet no South Korean PM or president has ever made an official visit to Israel, notwithstanding the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1962. South Korean presidents have visited many Middle Eastern capitals, but never Jerusalem.

President Rivlin's official visit to South Korea could be an opportunity for an announcement of a South Korean state visit by President Moon Jae-in to Israel and to the Palestinian Authority. By promoting reconciliation efforts, he can play a part in bringing peace not just to the Korean Peninsula but to the Middle East as well.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is an expert on East Asian security, the Korean Peninsula, and Asian international organizations.