

INTERVIEW

The N of the Earth: Interview with Philip Turner,
New Zealand ambassador to South Korea

The N of the Earth

Philip Turner, New Zealand ambassador to South Korea

Philip Turner is the New Zealand Ambassador to South Korea. He has extensive experience as a diplomat and a business leader in North Asia, with a particular focus on the Korean Peninsula. He speaks fluent French and Japanese, conversational Chinese, and enjoys becoming acquainted with the Korean language. In this interview, he discusses New Zealand's position as a middle power, the impact of Korean soft power, and AUKUS.

YJIS: Could you please tell us a little bit about your path to your current career, and what led to you being the ambassador for South Korea?

Ambassador: I've had a slightly unusual career. It started off orthodoxly. I went to Auckland university, studied history and languages, a traditional arts curriculum. I really enjoyed it, but the result was limited options, one of which was the civil service. So, I got into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was fantastic, and had 12-13 years in the New Zealand Foreign Service with a short posting in Brussels and a long posting in Tokyo. Then I left, went to the private sector, and spent 18 years working for Fonterra (initially the New Zealand Dairy Board). With Fonterra we went right around the world - I worked in Brussels, Tokyo, Auckland, and Shanghai. I really enjoyed my career with Fonterra and didn't expect to go back to foreign affairs. But when this opportunity arose to come as an ambassador to Korea, I leapt at it. I thought it was a really exciting opportunity. This was 2017 during the 'fire and fury' period. I thought and still think this is one of the most interesting places in the world to be and work. I've now spent about half my time in the private and half in the public sector which is rare for a diplomat.

YJIS: What is your day to day at the embassy like?

Ambassador: During COVID things have changed a lot. Normally New Zealand politicians, officials and business leaders frequently visit Korea, and managing those visits is a huge task. There are usually a lot of big events like conferences, business promotion events, and events held by the Korean government that I attend as ambassador. We call these representational events, where you go to represent New Zealand. During COVID that's nearly all stopped. Normally that would be 40% of the job. So COVID has basically made things quieter for everyone and cut off direct person to person contact between New Zealand and Korea. We have to compensate by innovative means such as Zoom meetings...we've actually had several conversations with the Korean government directly by video from Wellington to Seoul which we've never done before. We're spending much more time in the office than we used to do. Traditionally ambassadors and diplomats spend a lot of time out, meeting people, showing our faces.

Today started with a Korean lesson, a couple of Zoom meetings with Wellington to discuss future planning, then a lunch at the New Zealand residence with a leading New Zealand export company where we got an update on how their business is doing and what the embassy can do to help, such as by helping them network. We also discussed potential promotional events for next year, the 60th anniversary of New Zealand and Korean diplomatic relations. Now I'm talking to you guys, this evening we have dinner with the chairman of a major Korean company, so we'll talk about business... and business often has policy aspects to it such as issues around market access, tariffs, and regulations. We discuss those issues and try to help them. In the meantime, we are also trying to report back to New Zealand about current issues such as North Korea, like what's happening with the End of War Declaration and if it's going to happen and what it means. We are thinking about the significance of President Moon's visit to Australia. We are thinking about the news yesterday that Korea may join the CPTPP and what that means for New Zealand...That's today's list of things to do.

YJIS: What do you enjoy most about your job?

Ambassador: I enjoy most aspects of the job. I enjoy meeting people, which is helpful because we meet lots of people. I really enjoy learning about Korea and about ordinary people's perspectives on life in Korea. Policy issues are always intellectually interesting whether it is politics, trade, security, or even public relations. I love traveling around Korea and getting to know the history and

culture of the country. And it's always good to think that you're trying to work for the interest of your country. We're basically trying to make New Zealand a better place, a stronger, safer, and more prosperous country. So, what's not to love?

YJIS: You are surrounded by other embassies in the area. Any ones you're personally close?

Ambassador. There are three embassies in this building: Norway, New Zealand, Netherlands. So, I jokingly refer to them as the "N"s of the Earth. And we also have GGGI (Global Green Growth Institute) with Ban Ki-moon as the chairman in this building as well. Just down the road we have Canada. We see a lot of each other because we are neighbours and have a lot in common. I like to refer to other small countries we talk to such as the Netherlands and Norway as PSALM which stands for Peaceful, Small And Like Minded nations. Just a joke, but with countries like the Netherlands and Norway we are very likeminded. We share values like democracy and rule of law, and we have similar political systems. We share similar interests like climate change, multilateral bodies, and international rules. We are working together very often on the same issues, so it makes sense to work together. And we like each other. We often swap notes on issues or perspectives, such as Korean politics or sometimes we actually take action together. Like making a *démarche* on the Korean government. For example, we recently took joint action around recognition of foreigners getting vaccinated outside of Korea. We felt that the rules in Korea were discriminatory since foreigners weren't getting the same recognition for their vaccines as Koreans were when they were vaccinated overseas. So, several embassies wrote letters and approached the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So that's called a joint *démarche*. And obviously we're very close to the Australian embassy, they're our best friends.

YJIS: What was the most surprising thing to you about Korean culture? Whether that's when you first came here or still?

Ambassador. Probably the success of Hallyu. I think it's surprising to Koreans too, right? I arrived in the beginning of 2018, and it was already happening. The first internet meme to get a billion hits was Gangnam Style and the first to hit 10 billion was Baby Shark. So, Korea has produced the most popular internet hits ever, plus you have BTS and Blackpink and films like Parasite and Minari. How did that happen? It feels like Korea is having its moment in

the sun to me. This is the Korean moment. The world's attention is on Korea in a way that it hasn't been before. It's extraordinary, a huge achievement for Korea. I think we are all struggling to understand how it happened.

YJIS: Any favourite K-pop groups?

Ambassador: Everyone who went to New Zealand. Like BTS went to New Zealand in 2019. Rap Monster studied English in New Zealand. Rose and Jennie from Blackpink, one studied in New Zealand, and one was born in New Zealand. All these New Zealand connections. The song Savage Love was written by a 17-year-old New Zealand South Auckland boy named Jawsh who wrote the song in his bedroom. He wrote the song, Jason Derulo picked it up and produced it into a professional song that went viral in the US. And then BTS heard that song and said they wanted to do that song and that's how it became a worldwide hit. BTS has been really good to Jawsh, who was just a kid when he wrote the song. BTS gave him the recognition for writing the song and he's become mega famous.

YJIS: Have you been back to New Zealand recently and do you see the effects of the Korean wave there?

Ambassador: I was back in June and July, and yes, a little bit. I did public events in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch talking to New Zealanders and the Korean community. Lots of people, all the young people are talking about hallyu. The feeling is remarkable. The Korean Government organises an international K-pop dance competition every year. The only condition is that you can't be Korean. The last one they had was before COVID. A New Zealand team made it through to be one of the 12 finalists, so we went to Changwon and supported them in the global finals. They didn't win, but still it was a great achievement.

YJIS: How easy do you find the language?

Ambassador: It's difficult, eh? It's very difficult for English speakers. I speak Japanese and a bit of Chinese. So, I know that Asian languages are already very different, but Korean is one of the most difficult languages there is. It makes us all modest. Day 1 you learn Hangul and you think you can do this, and then for the next 3 years...minimal progress!

YJIS: Would you consider New Zealand and South Korea as middle powers?

Ambassador: I guess the question is, what is a middle power? From a New Zealand perspective, we would certainly see Korea as an extremely successful country in many ways. It feels like Korea has arrived at the top table of the world. If you think about where Korea was 50 years ago, and then their economy took off, they democratized, they joined the UN in 1992, they got recognition from China and Russia at the same time, they joined the OECD, the WTO, the G20 and then last year for the first time they got invited to the G7 meeting. They are now by some counts the number 10 economy in the world, with the 6th largest military. Korea has become a world leader and a very influential country in just a few decades.

I think with that leadership and success comes responsibility. Many countries including New Zealand are very pleased to see Korea be so successful and are now keen to see Korea take an even bigger leadership role in the global issues we confront like climate change. Under the Moon Jae-in government Korea has indeed taken a far more forward leaning stance on green issues, such as the 2050 net zero target, the green new deal that was announced last year, and hosting the P4G summit this year.

We talked earlier about the hallyu phenomenon, a fantastic example of soft power. In that area too Korea has become very influential. You could say Korea is one of the biggest cultural influences in the world. When I first came to Korea I would talk about New Zealand as a small country and Koreans would say: "New Zealand's not small, it is physically a lot bigger than Korea". But that's the way New Zealand sees itself. So maybe it's New Zealand that needs to change our mindset on this. We tend to emphasize Korea's economic power, industry, cultural power, but some Koreans look at New Zealand and see unspoiled environment, big amount of land and large amounts of ocean and fishing resources and a peaceful, stable corner of the world.

So, what is a middle power? It depends on the context and your point of view. New Zealand has a very strong reputation in Korea for its nature, a clean pristine environment, a well-run society, good governance, and the rule of law, since it's one of the least corrupt countries in the world. All these things contribute to our reputation and our national brand. Does that make us a middle power? I don't know, possibly. It depends on your point of view.

YJIS: How does New Zealand's absence in the trilateral security agreement between Australia, US, and the UK with the Aukus military deal speak to its role in the region?

Ambassador: Aukus is an agreement between three countries, all of which are members of the Five Eyes intelligence exchange group, of which New Zealand is a member. New Zealand is not interested in operating nuclear-propelled submarines. We have different strategic needs from Australia, and we have an anti-nuclear policy. But our government has not ruled out other areas of cooperation with Aukus countries that might be useful to both New Zealand and those other countries. Aukus is still being developed, so we still don't know what its full scope will be. But it's possible that in some areas New Zealand may wish to be associated with or to work with Aukus, for example, in areas like cyber or defense cooperation. There could be scenarios where it would make sense for us to work together, and we are open to that. But as I said, we don't have a need for nuclear-propelled submarines. New Zealand sees the world through a Pacific lens. Our neighbourhood is the South Pacific. We have enormous concern for what is happening with our Pacific Island neighbours where there are big challenges around climate change, economic development, how COVID-19 has affected tourism, issues around dealing with the pandemic and providing medical help, corruption, under development and strategic competition in the Pacific. All these things make us concerned, and we look at the security environment as a Pacific nation first. We recognize that the Aukus countries have a slightly different geopolitical perspective. The other thing to say to your point, there's no indication that the three Aukus countries want anyone else to join Aukus. There's been no invitation to other countries. We understand why the three countries got together and we respect that.

YJIS: Are there any lessons South Korea can take from this situation?

Ambassador: New Zealand and Korea share a lot of similar interests. From a New Zealand perspective, Korea is one of the few countries in the Indo-Pacific that shares our values to a very large extent: democracy, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, free press, free markets, freedom of navigation and so on. On values we are very aligned. But our interests too are very similar. We both have one big ally; we both have China as our number one trading partner and we both have a strong friendship with many similarly aligned countries. Our ally is Australia, and Korea's ally is the US. Neither of us belongs to

other major regional groupings like the QUAD, ASEAN - or Aukus. In that sense we are in a similar situation. Korea is much geographically closer to its neighbours than New Zealand. But we have similar exposure in terms of our trading reliance with China. In Korea's case this has been the cause of some tension with China over the years. And now we see tensions between China and Australia now. We think this kind of economic tension is very unhelpful to everyone. Like Korea we are looking for ways to manage a very dynamic geopolitical situation in the region: how do we balance relations with big powers like the US, China and Japan while preserving our values and interests. In that sense we have a lot in common. Both of us find talking to the other useful because few others have the same overlap of interests.

YJIS: How do you think the continued COVID-19 pandemic will affect New Zealand and South Korea, and their relations with each other?

Ambassador: Firstly, both countries have done really well to date. In fact, in the OECD, the top two performers in terms of deaths and hospitalizations from COVID are New Zealand and Korea. So, both countries lead the OECD, but they've done it in very different ways. Korea's approach has been to keep the borders open and avoid lockdowns but do lots of public health measures like wear masks, limit social gatherings and that kind of thing. New Zealand has had a different approach where we sealed the border from the beginning and have had lockdowns on a couple of occasions with the result the New Zealand was able to achieve elimination—we had zero cases for a long time. Now there are some cases, though still low. We've both been talking together a lot; we admire each other's performance, and we learn from each other. And both countries can learn from other countries and see what has worked and not worked so well. I think that's been really valuable. The main issues we have right now is that there's so little person to person contact. The Korean government has kept the border open and allowed visits especially by political leaders and business leaders. So, President Moon is traveling to Australia this week. Whereas we've had very little travel from New Zealand. The Prime Minister travelled to Australia. The foreign minister and trade minister have travelled but that's it. One thing we're looking forward to is being able to resume visits to Korea and have our leaders or business leaders travel back and forth. Zoom is great, but it's not the same as physically being in the same room as someone. You can maintain a relationship on Zoom, but you can't start one or build one. So that's the next step for

countries like New Zealand and Korea and hopefully that'll happen in 2022.

YJIS: Do you have any advice for GISIS students who wish to become ambassadors or otherwise work in this field?

Ambassador: It's a wonderful field to work in if you are interested. The first thing is to just follow your passion and soak up knowledge and experience. I'm very keen on experience as well as knowledge. Knowledge is useful. But it's even more useful to apply knowledge in a real-world way. Experience different aspects of life. If you never leave home, it's hard to understand the world. Getting out there, traveling, and working in other countries, meeting a lot of people, listening to other people, and understanding other people's points of view is the most important thing. And then if you can find a way of applying that to joining a foreign ministry or think tank or university or working in that field, that's great. I spent half my career in business, in the private sector, so I think that's a great thing to do. Broad experience, diverse experience is really helpful.