

# Prominent Women Diplomats In The Republic Of Korea

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**Received:** 29 March 2026; **Accepted:** 25 April 2026; **Published:** 20 May 2026

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the role and activities of female diplomats in the foreign policy and diplomatic system of the Republic of Korea. In particular, it examines the lives and professional careers of several prominent women who have actively contributed to the diplomatic sphere of the Republic of Korea. The article provides a detailed overview of how these women entered the field of diplomacy and the contributions they made to the development of the sector. Furthermore, it discusses the changes their activities brought to South Korea's diplomatic sphere, as well as their achievements not only in diplomacy but also in academic and intellectual fields. The presence of such women diplomats further strengthens the distinctive characteristics and international image of South Korean diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Gender diplomacy in foreign policy, female diplomats in the Republic of Korea, Kang Kyung-wha, female foreign minister, women ambassadors, female president, Hong Suk-ja, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, CERF, academic legacy of women diplomats.

**Introduction:** In contrast to classical diplomacy, contemporary diplomacy is no longer confined to negotiation and governance conducted exclusively by men; rather, it has increasingly incorporated women into the diplomatic sphere as active participants. In recent years, the growing participation of women in diplomatic practice has been recognized as one of the significant transformations in international politics. Female diplomats play an essential role not only in advancing national interests on the international stage, but also in promoting peacebuilding, human rights, and gender equality.

In this regard, the activities of prominent female diplomats within the diplomatic system of the Republic of Korea constitute a subject of particular scholarly interest. Although the Republic of Korea has historically been characterized by strong patriarchal norms, the country's political and social modernization has gradually strengthened the role of women in public administration and diplomatic service. In particular, in the twenty-first century, Korean women diplomats have begun to occupy influential positions in international organizations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and diplomatic missions abroad. Their activities have significantly contributed to enhancing the international reputation of the Republic of Korea,

advancing its soft power strategy, and increasing its engagement in global diplomatic processes.

This article analyzes the activities of prominent South Korean women diplomats, including Kang Kyung-wha, Hong Suk-ja, and Park In-kook, and examines their contributions to the development of the country's foreign policy and international diplomacy.

## Methods

This article employs historical, comparative, and analytical research methods. Throughout the study, the political and diplomatic activities of Korean female diplomats, their role within the international relations system, and their contributions to the development of foreign policy are analyzed on the basis of scholarly sources.

In addition, a biographical approach is applied to examine in detail the careers and professional activities of selected prominent female diplomats.

## Results

For many years, the contributions, perspectives, and potential of women in diplomatic practice – and in political life more broadly – were largely overlooked. Only a few exceptional female leaders and diplomats emerged in response to the demands of their time, such as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

Margaret Thatcher and the Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi. Through their determination and political influence, these women succeeded in shaping key developments on the global political stage. While such female politician-diplomats were rare in earlier periods, their number has been steadily increasing in the contemporary era.

A similar trend has also emerged and developed in the Republic of Korea. Although diplomatic service was initially regarded as a male-dominated field, women have increasingly played a significant role in international negotiations, intergovernmental cooperation, relations with international organizations, and cultural diplomacy in the modern period. In particular, as a result of state policies aimed at promoting gender equality, the number of women in South Korea's diplomatic service has increased, and more female diplomats have begun to occupy senior positions.

The development of female diplomats in the Republic of Korea has taken place gradually. Initially, women participated mainly in informal diplomatic-related activities; however, over time they began to engage more directly in official diplomatic service. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, women had begun to occupy high-ranking positions within the foreign policy system, including even the presidency.



There are several women diplomats who have been prominent in South Korean diplomatic activity. Among them, Kang Kyung-hwa holds a

special place.

Kang Kyung-hwa is a skilled diplomat who served as the 38th Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Korea (2017-2021). Born in 1955, Kang graduated from Yonsei University in Seoul in 1977. She then earned a Ph.D. in communications from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1984 [1]. She is the first woman in the country's history to be appointed to this position and has sought global support for South Korea's initiative to cooperate with North Korea toward long-term peace and complete denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. Before joining the United Nations, diplomat Kang served as Director-General of International

Organizations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea, becoming the second Korean female diplomat to serve at the director level. She was a minister at the Permanent Mission of Korea to the United Nations from 2001 to 2005, during which she chaired the Commission on the Status of Women. Before joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1998, she assisted the Speaker of the National Assembly in the areas of women's development and parliamentary diplomacy. In 1999, he was hired as a senior advisor and chief speechwriter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and as the chief translator to the President. While working as the president's interpreter for three years, he gained his trust by serving as an interpreter during a telephone conversation between then-South Korean President Kim and U.S. President Clinton [2].

In 2007, he held key leadership positions at the United Nations, including Deputy Chairman of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Deputy Emergency Coordinator and Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs in 2013, and Senior Policy Advisor to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [3]. Since October 1, 2025, she has been serving as Seoul's first female ambassador to Washington [4].

Kang Kyung-hwa is the most prominent female diplomat who has achieved success in the diplomatic sphere thanks to her strong will, foresight, diplomatic composure, high qualifications and experience. During her tenure at the UN, she became a world-class expert on refugees and human rights, enhancing Korea's



international prestige not only economically but also morally. Through her work, she demonstrated in practice that women can also participate in the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea.

Hong Suk Ja is the first female diplomat of the Republic of Korea and the first woman in the country's history to run for president. Hong Suk Ja was born on July 25, 1933, in Seoul. She was an intelligent student and therefore had educational opportunities that were rare for Korean women at the time. In his youth, Hong wanted to be a diplomat. This dream prompted the future diplomat to learn more English and French. He enrolled as an undergraduate student in the

Department of Political Science and Diplomacy at Dongguk University, graduating in 1955. She was the only female student in the program. After graduation, the future diplomat began her postgraduate studies at Ihwa Women's University, where she became the first student to receive a master's degree in politics and diplomacy in 1956. He also went to Boston in August 1956 and earned a second master's degree in political science from Boston University in 1958 [5]. She helped create a platform for women's rights in South Korea. Her efforts for gender equality influenced Korean society and contributed to changing stereotypes about women in South Korea in the second half of the 20th century.

From December 1958, he began his career as an assistant to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Within a year, Hong Suk-ja and another woman, Jeong Seong-suk, were appointed as the first female Korean diplomats. Initially, Khan worked in the protocol office and served as an interpreter for the Foreign Minister's wife when she met with the wives of foreign ambassadors. In 1962, Khan traveled to New York as a Carnegie Fellow at Columbia University through a program to train diplomats from developing countries. His re-acquaintance with American society caused him to look at Korean society differently. She became an advocate for women's rights [6]. He served as Vice-Consul at the Consulate General in New York from 1965 and as Third Secretary at the Permanent Mission to the United Nations in 1967. In November 1987, she ran for the thirteenth presidential election from the Social Democratic Party under the slogan "A Political Miracle is a Woman President", but did not receive enough votes. He later worked as a professor at Dongguk University and worked diligently to educate the next generation. She is also the author and editor of several works. In particular, her publications include "Crossing



Another Horizon", the edited volume "Theory and Practice of the Women's Liberation Movement", and her autobiography "To a Higher Place" [7]. This diplomat also made a significant contribution to the country's development not only through her political activities, but also through her

productive scholarly work in the academic field.

Park In-kook is recognized as one of the prominent female diplomats and ambassadors in the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea. She began her career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1985 and currently serves as the Ambassador-at-Large for Public Diplomacy (Vice Ministerial level). Born in 1962, she completed her Bachelor's degree in History at Yonsei University. She later obtained a Master's degree in International Relations from Columbia University in 1989, and in 2010 she began working there as a visiting scholar. Ambassador Park has served twice (in 1995 and 2006) at the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations in New York. She has also held diplomatic positions in China, India, and the United States. Within the Korea National Institute for International Affairs (IFANS), she worked as Director of the Planning and Research Division, Director of the Regional Cooperation Division under the Multilateral Trade Bureau, and Director-General for Development Cooperation. From 2018 to 2021, during the administration of President Moon Jae-in, she served as the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to the United Kingdom.

Her appointment as Ambassador to the United Kingdom was attributed to her extensive experience in political, economic, and public diplomacy. In particular, through her active engagement in public diplomacy, including interviews with foreign media outlets and participation in international events such as the "Korea-China High-Level Think Tank Seminar," she made a meaningful contribution to promoting international support for peace on the Korean Peninsula and the policy of denuclearization. Furthermore, she is regarded as one of the diplomats who contributed to the international recognition of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics as the "Peace Olympics" [8]. Ambassador Park's experience encompasses a broad range of political and economic issues, as well as advocacy work at the United Nations in the fields of human rights and the advancement of women's rights and empowerment. She is currently engaged in promoting Korea's attractiveness on a global scale and in fostering understanding and support among foreign publics for the Republic of Korea's diplomatic policies [9].



the Republic of Korea and is regarded as a senior figure who has held high-ranking positions within the country's foreign affairs system. Born on 1 January 1963, she studied at Seoul National University and later at Johns Hopkins

University in the United States, both of which are prestigious institutions. Through this academic background, she established herself as a highly qualified professional in the field of international relations. Her diplomatic career is marked by several notable achievements in the history of South Korean diplomacy. In particular, she became the first female diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea to be promoted to the rank of Vice Minister. Park Jiya is widely recognized as an expert in multilateral diplomacy. From 2018 to 2021, she served as the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations Office in Geneva and other international organizations, where she carried out highly effective diplomatic activities [9].

She also served as Chair of the Government Group within the International Labour Organization (ILO) and held the positions of Special Envoy for issues related to international security, counter-terrorism, and cybersecurity. Throughout her career, she also made a significant contribution to the training and development of diplomatic personnel by serving as President of the Korea National Institute for International Affairs (IFANS), where she played an important role in strengthening the professional capacity of future diplomats [10]. With her extensive knowledge and professional experience in diplomacy, Ambassador Park provides advisory support on the Republic of Korea's international exchanges, including cooperation with foreign cities, the organization of international events, and the invitation of international organizations. Ambassador Park has also contributed to enhancing Seoul's international reputation by sharing the city's advanced policy achievements with the world in areas such as smart cities, transportation, climate action, and other related fields [11]. Over the past 36 years of diverse professional experience, Ambassador Park is widely recognized as an international relations expert with strong competence in diplomacy and

security affairs. One of her most significant contributions to the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea lies in her role at the United Nations Office in Geneva, where she effectively represented and defended Korea's national interests. Through her diplomatic engagement, she helped position the Republic of Korea as an active participant in global discussions on key issues such as global health and labour rights.

Lee In-ho is a prominent diplomat and one of the leading historians specializing in Russian studies. Born and raised in Seoul on 19 May 1936, she studied at Seoul National University before moving to the United States in 1956. She completed her Bachelor's degree in History at Wellesley College, and later obtained both a Master's degree and a PhD in History from Radcliffe College and Harvard University. In 1972, she returned to Korea to serve as a professor of History at the College of Liberal Arts, Korea University. In September 1979, she was appointed Professor of Western History at the College of Humanities, Seoul National University [12]. Because she possessed exceptionally advanced academic knowledge and experience – rare among female historians of her time – she was able to overcome the significant barriers faced by women and was appointed as a professor at Seoul National University. Lee also served on various governmental and semi-governmental committees and councils, including the Presidential Commission on Education, the National Commission for Compiling Korean History, the National Commission on Globalization, and the Korean Broadcasting System. In 1996, she was appointed Ambassador to Finland, and in 1998 she was appointed Ambassador to the Russian Federation, a position she held until 2000. This marked the first time in Korean history that a Korean woman served as an ambassador or head of mission in diplomatic posts in different countries [13]. Her appointment as an ambassador in 1996, followed by her continued rise to one of the highest diplomatic positions even during a change of presidential administration, serves as a clear indication of the high level of respect she commanded within South Korea's still male-dominated public sphere.

After retiring as ambassador to Russia, he served as chairman of the Korea Foundation. Since 2004, he has served as a department professor in the Department of History in the College of Humanities at Myeongji University. Since 2010, he has also served as the Chairman of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Despite his advanced age, he still serves as the director of the Kukmin Academy, the foundation of Kukmin University. Lee Eun-ho's primary foreign policy activities are characterized by a constant focus on women's issues, the interests of foreign workers, or refugees and low-income people from North Korea [12].

Park Geun-hye is the first female President of the Republic of Korea. Born on 2 February 1952 in Samdeok-dong, she is a South Korean stateswoman who served as the President of the Republic of Korea from 2013 to 2017. She graduated from Seongsim Girls' High School in Daegu in 1970. In 1974, she obtained a Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering from Sogang University, and later studied French at the CUEF (Centre Universitaire d'Études Françaises) in Grenoble, France. Park Geun-hye is also the author of several books, including autobiographical works such as "If I Had Been Born in an Ordinary Family" (1993), "Accepting Hardship as a Companion, Adhering to the Truth" (1998), "My Mother, Yuk Young-soo" (2001), and "Despair Makes Me Stronger, Hope Leads Me Forward" (2007). Since 1994, she has been a member of the Korean Writers' Association [14]. Following the



assassination of her mother, she was compelled to return to Korea, after which she began to engage actively in politics. From 1998 to 2012, she served as a member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea. On 19 December 2012, she was elected President of the Republic of Korea with 51.6% of the vote, becoming the country's first female head of state. Prior to assuming the presidency, she overcame numerous challenges throughout her political career. Despite facing several assassination attempts directed at her and her family, her determination and commitment to political leadership remained unshaken. During the period of 2013–2014, she was ranked 11th on Forbes'

list of the world's 100 most powerful women and was recognized as the most powerful woman in East Asia. In 2014, she was also ranked 46th among the world's most powerful people, becoming the third Korean individual on the list after Lee Kun-hee and Lee Jae-yong [15]. Although her administration did not achieve particularly high economic performance indicators, her presidency was characterized by several distinctive policy directions. In domestic policy, the President focused on improving the social welfare of the population, increasing the state budget, building a "creative economy," and implementing measures aimed at reducing gender-based discrimination against women. In foreign policy, she pursued continued cooperation with the United States, sought to improve relations with China, Japan, and the Russian Federation, and implemented a policy of "peaceful coexistence and reunification with North Korea for prosperity." She also became the first South Korean President to visit Iran, with the aim of strengthening cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, she proposed an ambitious initiative aimed at integrating Europe and Asia into a single economic space. However, beginning in 2015, growing tensions in relations with North Korea, as well as the "ferry disaster" in April 2014, in which more than 300 people – mostly school students – lost their lives, led to a significant decline in public trust toward her administration [16].

In November 2016, she was accused of corruption, which led to mass protests involving hundreds of thousands of South Koreans demanding her impeachment. Her presidential powers were suspended on 9 December 2016 following a vote in the National Assembly. She was subsequently arrested on 30 March 2017 [17]. On 24 December 2021, she was granted a presidential pardon by then-President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea. She was released from prison on 31 December 2021 and, three months later, on 24 March 2022, she returned to her home [18].



Park Geun-hye's rise to high political office serves as an indication that women have become an integral part of diplomacy and high-level governance in the Republic of Korea. Moreover, despite significant

structural and political obstacles, she stands as a female leader who governed the state with determination and resilience. In particular, the foreign policy directions pursued during her administration contributed to enhancing the effectiveness of South Korea's external relations and partially improving diplomatic engagement among regional states.

Oh Hyun-joo is one of the contemporary leading figures of South Korean diplomacy, widely recognized for her achievements in multilateral diplomacy and for breaking gender barriers within the diplomatic field. Born in 1969, she began her professional diplomatic career at the Ministry of



Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea in 1994. She served for an extended period as Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations, where she gained extensive experience in multilateral negotiations and international cooperation. As a recognized expert in humanitarian assistance and international cooperation, she was appointed in 2020 as a member of the Advisory Group of the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), reflecting her professional authority and expertise in global humanitarian affairs [19]. In January 2023, she made history by becoming the first female Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to the Vatican [20]. This appointment carried symbolic significance, as Oh Hyun-joo herself is a Catholic. She successfully led the mission during the period marking the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and the Holy See. In June 2025, Oh Hyun-joo concluded her diplomatic mission at the Vatican and was subsequently appointed by the President of the Republic of Korea as the Third Deputy Director of the National Security Office. In this position, she is responsible for overseeing issues related to economic security and cybersecurity. Under her



leadership, the National Security Office has been coordinating strategically important matters, including ensuring the stability of supply chains for critical materials such as rare earth elements and semiconductors, which are essential for the country's high-

technology industry [21].

Jiso Pyo is one of the diplomats currently serving at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea. She graduated in 2004 from Korea University with a degree in English Linguistics and Literature. She also pursued further studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, as well as at the University of Jordan. Following her academic training, she served in various diplomatic missions, including Sudan, Jordan, the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations in New York, and Lebanon. She successfully passed the South Korean Foreign Service Examination while still a university student. During her university years, she developed a strong interest in philosophy and pursued in-depth studies in the humanities. She also served as the chairperson of a traditional Korean visual arts club [22]. Recently, she was appointed as the Director of the Second Middle East Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this position, she plays an important role in safeguarding the national interests of the Republic of Korea amid a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, as well as in promoting mutual development and cooperation with the Middle East.

## Conclusion

The women diplomats and leaders mentioned in this study play a significant role in the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea. Through their political and diplomatic careers, they have demonstrated that women's potential should also be recognized and valued within the field of diplomacy. They serve as role models for contemporary women, encouraging greater entry into and active participation in diplomatic careers. These diplomats have shown that the distinction between men and women is not a determining factor in diplomatic engagement, thereby reflecting the ongoing development of gender diplomacy in the Republic of Korea. Moreover, through their ideas, professional experience, and actions, women have contributed to enhancing the effectiveness of South Korea's foreign policy, improving inter-state relations, fostering a trust-based environment grounded in shared values, strengthening security cooperation, and elevating the country's international image. The number of women in South Korea's foreign policy is not limited to the figures discussed in this study; rather, it continues to grow steadily in the contemporary period.

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