South Korea’s Green Growth Strategy and East Asia’s New Developmentalism

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Like most other East Asian countries, the path of South Korea’s contemporary economic development has been a very energy-intensive one, based on rapid and resource-hungry industrialisation. This is increasingly acknowledged, however, both inside and outside the region that East Asia’s development policies and practices are unsustainable, costly and exacerbate various energy security risks. South Korea and most of its regional neighbourhood such as Japan and China are either already heavily energy import dependent or fast becoming so. The tolerance threshold of East Asian rising middle classes of bearing the environmental costs of industrialisation is falling, even in still predominantly poor nations like China. East Asian governments are also having to calibrate the increasingly high climate change risks of continuing to depend on old models of industrial development. South Korea’s ‘Green Growth Strategy’ launched by the Lee Myun-bak administration in 2008 has been at the forefront of a wider regional trend of low carbon development strategies recently formulated by East Asian governments. These are based on the promotion of green energy sectors (e.g. renewables, energy efficiency, fuel cells, and electric vehicles) and emerging ‘clean’ industries of the 21st century, such as nanotechnology. Furthermore, the introduction of these strategies constitutes a reinvigoration of state capacity for macro-development planning in East Asia in what may be called a ‘new developmentalism’ based on new transformative economic objectives. At the same time, though, it is evident that the same strategies and associated plans will continue to significantly promote high carbon and ecologically damaging industrial activities. This paper will critically evaluate South Korea’s Green Growth Strategy, positioning it in the context of reformulated developmental statism and state capacity, examining its core components with case studies on green energy, considering its underlying politico-economic philosophies, and discussing the extent to which it forms part of a substantive paradigm shift towards low(er) carbon development in East Asia, or whether it is just another development policy phase that will soon pass.