

- The Indo-Pacific: what strategy vis-à-vis China? -

**South Korea's middle power security ambition: strategic autonomy**  
*Moon's New Southern Policy and beyond*



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## *Introduction – South Korea’s uniqueness in its pursuit of New Southern Policy*

South Korea is a unique country in many aspects. The country has successfully transformed itself from an impoverished agricultural state into a resilient industrial powerhouse. Not only has the Korean economy experienced a rapid growth—with an average growth rate of nine percent between 1945 and 1995,<sup>1</sup> but also proved high resilience, showing quick recovery from both the Asian and global financial crises in 1998 and 2008 respectively.<sup>2</sup> Today, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has become the 11<sup>th</sup> world’s greatest economy through a strategy of export-led growth and industrialization,<sup>3</sup> and it has its own strengths in manufacturing industry, especially for products such as semi-conductors, smartphones, automobiles, and shipbuilding.

Although Korea’s economic development was so remarkable that the post-war aid recipient could become a Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor,<sup>4</sup> the transformation that the country went through was not limited to its economic sphere. Politically, it has become a liberal democracy after surviving decades of dictatorship, serving as a good model for those aspiring to follow the path. Accordingly, Korea seeks to leverage these strengths to elevate “its leadership potential as a global agenda setter” in various areas.<sup>5</sup> These efforts are especially outstanding in non-traditional security issues such as climate change and global health. South Korea is home to the Global Green Growth Institute, the UN-backed green climate fund, and International Vaccine Institute. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the effectiveness of the country’s policy and institutional responses have gained global media attention.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its capabilities and status, the ROK does not seem to have played an active role in the Indo-Pacific theater. Although South Korea is, by location, an Indo-Pacific country, the Moon administration refused to align its foreign policy with that of its close allies, such as the United States (US),<sup>7</sup> and pursued an independent initiative in the region, which is known as New Southern Policy (NSP). Unlike other stakeholders’ Indo-Pacific strategies which emphasize

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, “The Transformation of the Republic of Korea’s Development Co-operation: Reflections from the First Decade of OECD-DAC Membership”, UNDP Seoul Policy Centre, 2020, available at: [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/uspc/docs/DAC%20Paper\\_FINAL\\_web.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/uspc/docs/DAC%20Paper_FINAL_web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Lee, J., “The labor market in South Korea, 2000–2018”, IZA World of Labor, vol. 405, 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.405.v2>.

<sup>3</sup> Song, Su-hyun, “S. Korea Retains Position as 7th Largest Exporter in 2020”, *Korean Herald*, February 28, 2021, available at: <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210228000194>.

<sup>4</sup> Egan and Persaud, “From emerging donor to global development partner”, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), October 25, 2021, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/from-emerging-donor-to-global-development-partner-66044045/>.

<sup>5</sup> Botto, Kathryn, “South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties With India and ASEAN”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2021, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572>.

<sup>6</sup> Dyer, Paul, “Policy and institutional responses to COVID-19: South Korea”, Brookings Institution, June 15, 2021, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/policy-and-institutional-responses-to-covid-19-south-korea/>.

<sup>7</sup> Kang, Seonjou, “South Korea and France’s Indo-Pacific Strategies: Potential Partnership and Challenges”, IFRI, *Asie. Visions*, No.126, December, 2021, available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/south\\_korea\\_and\\_frances\\_indo-pacific\\_strategies\\_potential\\_partnership\\_and\\_challenges.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/south_korea_and_frances_indo-pacific_strategies_potential_partnership_and_challenges.pdf).

maritime security to check an expansionist China, Korea's NSP is focused on economic cooperation with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India.<sup>8</sup> Korea's such policy decision stems from the need to diversify its economic and strategic relationships in the midst of the US-China great power rivalry.

Regardless of the outcome of these diversification efforts, South Korea's main security concerns—most evidently nuclear-armed North Korea—have revolved around Northeast Asia since the Cold War era. Furthermore, the international geopolitical landscape has been rapidly evolving, with the rise of right-wing populism and escalation of tensions, especially around the Russian border. On top of all this, Korea is especially at the crossroads of change, with the new presidency of Yoon Suk-yeol which just started on May 10, 2022. Against this backdrop, South Korea is required to review and realign its strategy and partnerships in the region accordingly.

This essay will explore the principal security dilemma and strategic environment of South Korea to understand the motivation behind Moon's pursuit of his flagship foreign policy initiative, New Southern Policy, instead of developing an Indo-Pacific strategy aligned with its partners'. After a close analysis of NSP, including its details, results, and limits, we will turn to Yoon's (expected) foreign policy. We can find important clues to this from his inauguration speech and the pledges he made. In particular, the article *South Korea Needs to Step Up* that he published on *Foreign Affairs* during the presidential campaign gives us a clear vision on his foreign policy direction.

### ***South Korea's strategic environment and security dilemma***

South Korea's dependence on major powers in dealing with nuclear-armed North Korea originated from the complexity and urgency of the problem. The ROK's top security concern since its division has been the existence of North Korea, and the stakes grow even higher as the latter is building up its nuclear arsenal. In this context, the four great powers—the US, China, Japan, and Russia—have been traditionally considered most important to South Korea's foreign policy although Moscow's influence on the Korean Peninsula has been reduced relatively.<sup>9</sup> As witnessed during the six-party talks—a series of multilateral dialogue held intermittently between 2003 and 2007 aimed at halting North Korea's nuclear program<sup>10</sup>—denuclearization of North Korea is not only a shared security concern of these countries but also a complicated problem, which requires multilateral involvement.

This strategic environment, which necessitates South Korea's dependence on great powers to deal with North Korea, creates a security dilemma for the former. In the current global geopolitical landscape where the US-China rivalry intensifies, South Korea is put to the test of taking sides. However, in the face of nuclear threat posed by North Korea, taking either side will endanger the national security of the ROK; While China is South Korea's largest trading partner and China's role in dealing with North Korea is crucial, the US is Korea's closest ally and its most important security guarantor.

In parallel, actors were encouraged to rethink their strategy for the Indo-Pacific region mostly due to China's pursuit of hegemony, especially in the maritime domain. Among others, it was

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<sup>8</sup> Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, <http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/>.

<sup>9</sup> Botto, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Arms Control Association, "The Six-Party Talks at a Glance", last updated on January 2022, accessed on May 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>.

the previous Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who promoted the idea of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as a strategic concept to address a revisionist China.<sup>11</sup> This FOIP concept has gained even more momentum as the Trump administration adopted it. The “Asia-Pacific” has officially been replaced by “Indo-Pacific” to refer to the US strategic sphere across Asia,<sup>12</sup> and most of US allies and partners, including Australia, France, the UK, and the ASEAN, also adopted the FOIP concept and pronounced their own Indo-Pacific strategies accordingly. Despite different characteristics of each country’s strategy, the essence and common feature of the FOIP lies in ensuring rules-based order, especially freedom of navigation and free trade, since the concept was invented in response to China’s expansionist move in the oceans.

As a trading nation, South Korea’s economic prosperity and international trade depends on freedom of navigation. About 99.7 percent of South Korea’s energy resources and cargoes use sea-borne transportation, including the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, South Korea upholds these shared values such as rules-based international order, freedom of navigation, and open market system. And it is an Indo-Pacific country itself by location. However, the country has been reluctant to align its foreign policy with these like-minded partners. Instead, it has been pursuing an independent flagship initiative focused on economic cooperation with India and ASEAN countries.

This divergence mainly stems from the forementioned security dilemma derived from its dependence on both China and the US due to the existence of North Korea. Since the US’ FOIP is aimed at countering China’s regional influence, following the US FOIP would complicate relations with China. Moreover, the maritime area which carries strategic importance for South Korea is different from that of other actors. Unlike Australia, Japan and the ASEAN countries, for example, South Korea does not border East or South China Sea, nor Indian Ocean or Taiwan Strait, where China’s increasing assertiveness is mostly present. Rather, developing an ocean-oriented Indo-Pacific strategy is more likely to affect negatively inter-Korean relations and bilateral relations with China, both of which are top priorities of the ROK’s foreign policy.

Besides the strategic dependence, South Korea’s security dilemma is exacerbated by its heavy economic reliance on China and the latter’s economic coercion. When Seoul deployed a US missile defense system called Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in 2016 in response to the increasing North Korean missile threat, China imposed a massive economic retaliation against the ROK.<sup>14</sup> China inaccurately claimed that the X-band radar of the THAAD, if deployed in Korea, will undermine the former’s nuclear deterrent.<sup>15</sup> With that for an excuse, China banned a wide range of goods imports from cosmetics and tech products to tourism and cultural exchange. More recently, in 2021, South Korean drivers were panic when China tightens supply of urea, which is an additive used in diesel vehicles to reduce emissions.<sup>16</sup> This time, China placed a *de facto* ban on exports of urea to assure supplies in its domestic market, following the Chinese ban on coal imports from Australia. Since 97% of Korea’s urea imports came from China, the price skyrocketed. These experiences made Seoul realize that it cannot afford to antagonize China, and it also needs to diversify its economic portfolio.

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<sup>11</sup> “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI)”, Nairobi, Kenya, August 27, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Kang, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Botto, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cha, Sangmi, and Yang, Heekyong, “S. Korean drivers panic buy urea after China tightens supply”, Reuters, November 5, 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/skorean-drivers-panic-buy-urea-after-china-tightens-supply-2021-11-05/>.

## *New Southern Policy: South Korea's ambition of strategic autonomy*

The rise of China and its aggressive actions in the surrounding water led other stakeholders to seek a strategic approach towards the FOIP, focused on military and maritime security elements. However, South Korea took a different path by designing “a purely functional cooperation agenda” by setting aside sensitive strategic issues.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned above, this is due to South Korea's unique security environment and concern: the geographical distance from these maritime areas; the risks of being drawn into “the quagmire of US-China strategic rivalry”; and its heavy economic dependence on China and the country's economic coercion. All these elements led the ROK to realize the need to diversify its economic portfolio and strategic relationship to gain more *strategic autonomy* in its decision making.<sup>18</sup>

The Moon administration's New Southern Policy (NSP) clearly reflects this ambition. The NSP is South Korea's first unified diplomatic initiative targeted South and Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> The goal was to elevate ties with India and ASEAN countries to the level of those with the four traditional partners—the US, China, Japan, and Russia. The NSP consists of three pillars: People (Sociocultural cooperation), Prosperity (economic cooperation), and Peace (political and security cooperation). However, the policy's principal emphasis is placed on the economic realm (*Prosperity*). This shows Seoul's will to expand its economic horizons through diversification to reduce the risks of concentrating trade reliance on China and amid rising geopolitical sensitivity in Asia.<sup>20</sup>

In effect, the ASEAN is an ideal partner for South Korea's economic diversification because ASEAN, as a combined entity, was Korea's second-largest trading partner (14.7%) after China (25%) as of 2020, and Korean investment into ASEAN has doubled since 2011.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, South Korea can serve as a model of democratization and economic development by sharing its firsthand experiences and know-how with the ASEAN states. Under this pillar of economic cooperation (*Prosperity*), South Korea has pushed ahead with new negotiations for free trade agreements and launched an official development assistance (ODA) strategy.<sup>22</sup>

By contrary, the “Peace” pillar is relatively underdeveloped and merely focused on non-traditional security issues such as climate change and global health. The global health initiatives have been added to this category after the NSP was upgraded and rebranded as NSP Plus in late 2020 to reflect changes in the demand and environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> However, cooperation in security field is disproportionately lacking and does not involve larger and comprehensive geopolitical issues in the region. This imbalance in the design of the NSP can prevent the partnership from being a full-fledged regional strategic one, and instead will

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<sup>17</sup> Choe, Wongi, “New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy”, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), *Asie. Visions*, No. 118, January, 2021, available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/choe\\_new\\_southern\\_policy\\_korea\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/choe_new_southern_policy_korea_2021.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Botto, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, <http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/>.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, Jaehyon, “Korea's New Southern Policy: Motivations of ‘Peace Cooperation’ and Implications for the Korean Peninsula”, The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, 2019, available at: <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/koreas-new-southern-policy-motivations-of-peace-cooperation-and-implications-for-the-korean-peninsula/>.

<sup>21</sup> “Key Updates of the 2020 ASEAN & Korea in Figures”, ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2021, available at: <https://www.aseankorea.org/eng/Resources/publication.asp>.

<sup>22</sup> Kang, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy.

keep focusing on beneficial and piecemeal bilateral projects.<sup>24</sup> Hence, to achieve the original goal of strategic autonomy, Seoul is required to expand the “Peace” pillar of its NSP beyond non-traditional security issues and take a more balanced and proactive stance in its engagement in regional strategic and security issues.<sup>25</sup>

### *At the crossroads of change*

With new presidency starting very recently, South Korea’s foreign policy is also at the crossroads of change. Even though the NSP was the Moon administration’s most consistent foreign policy initiative, the policy is very likely to be abolished. This lack of continuity in foreign policy is typical in South Korea due to the president’s limit to *one* five-year term. Moreover, as President Yoon is a conservative as opposed to progressive President Moon, it is expected that Yoon will take a path more towards alignment with its traditional allies such as the US and Japan. We can confirm his ideas on future security posture by investigating the pledges he made during the presidential election campaign and [his inauguration speech](#) that he delivered on May 10, 2022. Especially, the article titled [South Korea Needs to Step Up](#) published on *Foreign Affairs* in February 2022 clearly specified Yoon’s vision on future foreign and security policy.

First of all, Yoon is expected to realign its diplomatic priorities with its traditional allies and partners, most evidently the US and Japan.<sup>26</sup> Yoon specifies concretely that “a deeper alliance with Washington should be the central axis of Seoul’s foreign policy.”<sup>27</sup> This is because the ROK’s main security concerns revolve around Northeast Asia. Although ASEAN and India share common interest with South Korea, such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and stability in the Taiwan Strait, Seoul’s hierarchy of priorities in security policy differs and will continue to differ from that of its NSP partners, posing a main obstacle to security cooperation between them.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, Yoon indicates that China is not a credible partner especially considering its recent coercive actions. He harshly criticized Moon’s “three Nos” policy, describing it “overly accommodating”. Following China’s extensive imports ban after the THAAD deployment in 2016, then-President Moon pledged: 1) no additional THAAD deployments; 2) no participation in a US missile defense network; and 3) no establishment of trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan. However, Yoon condemned these pledges “undercut” South Korea’s sovereign right, and he added, Seoul should remain open to additional deployments of THAAD “in proportion to” North Korea’s growing missile threat.<sup>29</sup>

Yoon’s vision for “a deeper alliance with Washington” signifies “*a comprehensive strategic alliance*,” which may involve Seoul in US military operations outside the Korean Peninsula—an option which a progressive leader Moon did not prefer.<sup>30</sup> Although a noticeable shift in Moon’s stance on the FOIP was observed during the ROK-US summit held in May 2021, Seoul has engaged the US only in those areas that are not politically sensitive such as development

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<sup>24</sup> Botto, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Choe, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Yoon, Suk-yeol, “South Korea Needs to Step Up”, *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Botto, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Yoon, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Kang, 2021.

cooperation and non-traditional security area.<sup>31</sup> However, Yoon's rhetoric expresses a clearer direction towards realignment with the US FOIP, implying even the likeliness of South Korea joining the US-led Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea.

Another expected divergence between Moon's and Yoon's foreign policy is a posture regarding Japan. In South Korean domestic politics, the legacy of Japanese colonization—sex slave issue in particular—is one of the most consumed populist topics.<sup>32</sup> During the Moon's administration, for example, the ruling progressive raised anti-Japanese policies to win the elections, inciting a trade war and letting the bilateral intelligence-sharing pact GSOMIA expire. On the contrary, Yoon asserts the strategic importance of Tokyo and the need to restore confidence between the two countries. He is trying to revive the spirit of existing joint declaration issued in 1998, which sought comprehensive solutions to bilateral disputes over history, trade, and security cooperation.<sup>33</sup> He also suggests setting up a high-level dialogue to engage with Tokyo on issues of cooperation as well as conflict.

Yoon is also expected to take a tougher position towards North Korea unlike Moon. He described Moon's North Korea policy as "subservient" and emphasized the importance of raising our voice against Pyongyang's continuing provocation and test-launches of missiles.<sup>34</sup> Yoon also pointed out the need for reinforcing South Korea's air and missile defenses and the US' extended deterrence against North Korea. Concerning Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, Yoon has consistently used the expression "denuclearization of North Korea" instead of "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."<sup>35</sup> However, he also promises "an audacious plan that will vastly strengthen North Korea's economy" in case of the country's taking a genuine step towards complete denuclearization.<sup>36</sup>

Yoon also hinted his will to take more proactive role in the Indo-Pacific region by willingly participating in the existing and building new partnerships. He suggested joining the Quad's working groups, other multilateral regional cooperative initiatives, and even trilateral security coordination with the US and Japan. This way, he expects Seoul to take the lead in promoting an inclusive order and shaping the geopolitical landscape favorable to itself in the region.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Closing words: South Korea's middle power security ambition in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond***

At least since 1945, South Korean foreign policy has fluctuated due to tensions between the aspiration for autonomy and the necessity of alliance, as well as the domestic political divide between conservatives and progressives regarding the direction of its foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> Today, the ROK's middle power ambition of greater strategic autonomy has been significantly hampered by external geopolitical constraints as well as internal limitations of the NSP itself.

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<sup>31</sup> Choe, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Botto, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Yoon, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Yoon, Suk-yeol, "Full text of President Yoon Suk-Yeol's inauguration speech", *Korea Herald*, May 10, 2022, available at: <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220510000429>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Yoon, *Foreign Affairs*, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Snyder, S. A., *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 10-14.

Amid the ever-intensifying US-China rivalry, the latter has been pursuing a global maritime hegemony while the former has been trying to counter it through a strategic concept of FOIP. Due to the high economic dependence on China and security reliance on the US, Seoul was compelled to pursue “strategic ambiguity” by promoting its unique regional strategy known as the New Southern Policy.

However, avoiding dealing with sensitive but imperative security issues, rather than facing and effectively dealing with them, will lead to the marginalization without achieving its goal of strategic ambiguity. Moreover, despite shared interest and great potential of India and ASEAN, the axis of Seoul’s security environment, which involves nuclear-armed North Korea, revolves around Northeast Asia, where a closer cooperation with its traditional partners such as the US and Japan is required in the end.

Despite the NSP’s focus on the Southeast Asia and economic aspect, there are overlaps between the US FOIP and South Korea’s NSP. Accordingly, during the Trump administration, Seoul accommodated the FOIP selectively where there were overlaps, hence securing autonomy within the FOIP while a meaningful shift towards alignment with the FOIP has been observed during the Biden administration. With Yoon’s new presidency, Seoul is likely to revisit its stance on the FOIP. Still, South Korea’s options would like on the continuum of aligning with the US and China at the other end and ambiguity in the middle due to the interplay of the factors that generated the current stance.

As long as China is a revisionist power intent on replacing the US-led liberal international order, the key for the US national security policy will be to check China with the dominant military power. As a country which needs cooperation with both great powers to ensure its security, especially against the nuclear armed North Korea, Seoul’s greatest foreign policy challenge will be to handle the competing interests of the United States and China and establishing its own strategic autonomy and middle power leadership in the region. - end -



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