



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

South Korea's New Southern Policy: An Indo-Pacific strategy in disguise

Introduction

On March 9, 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol became the new President of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) after a tight presidential election (Choe, 2022). This could lead to new orientations of the 2017 New Southern Policy, a foreign policy strategy centred around the Indo-Pacific that the former President Moon Jae-in laid down during his mandate.

The Indo-Pacific concept is a geopolitical concept that has been on the rise since its first mention by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. During an address to the Indian Parliament in 2007, he developed this new geographical ensemble at the “*confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans*” (Wilkins and Kim, 2020). Subsequently, this descriptive term of a maritime Asia was used in Australia’s 2013 Defence White Paper, before being complexified by Japan and turned into the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in 2016. Being the FOIP or only the Indo-Pacific, all concepts try to give an answer to the rising maritime and terrestrial assertiveness of China. They can have a geopolitical or geoeconomics component, or they can combine both as the United States (US) progressively did (Wilkins and Kim, 2020). After the Japanese publication of strategic papers containing the FOIP notion, the US quickly adapted it to suit its objectives of containing China: in May 2018, the American Pacific Command was rebranded the American Indo-Pacific Command ; in July 2019, an Indo-Pacific Strategy Report was published by the US Department of Defence (Wilkins and Kim, 2020). The Indo-Pacific became “*the standard American lens for the region*” (Medcalf, 2019). European countries also elaborated on this concept a bit later, with France being the first in a 2018 speech, followed by Germany and the Netherlands in 2020, with the European Union finally publishing its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021 (Jaffrelot, 2022). However, Asian adoptions of the concept (except Japan) were scarcer because of several reasons. The example of South Korea on this point is particularly relevant. South Korea almost has a geographic foot in the Pacific Ocean and can be considered as a relevant actor in the Indo-Pacific dynamics. However, it has still not endorsed the Indo-Pacific terminology in any of its strategic documents. The foreign policy strategy that is the closest to this Indo-Pacific concept is the New Southern Policy (NSP), updated in 2020 to a New Southern Policy Plus.

Therefore, we could wonder to what extent South Korea’s New Southern Policy is an Indo-Pacific strategy in disguise. First, we will focus the difficulties South Korea had to get rid of the underdog’s role since the end of the Cold war. Then, we will develop the means South

Korea has found to acquire foreign policy autonomy through the NSP. Finally, we will evoke how South Korea can elaborate its NSP in order to blend in the Indo-Pacific strategies of other actors without too much making an enemy of China.

I- The roots of the New Southern Policy: a post-Cold war quest for foreign policy autonomy

Since the end of the Cold war, South Korea have tried to sustain an autonomous foreign policy, despite being constrained by its heavy reliance on the US for security affairs and on China for trade matters. A rapprochement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could be a solution to this stalemate.

A/ A weakened dependency of South Korea's foreign policy on the actions of the United States

The US is one of South Korea's main allies against the North Korean threat. Indeed, the main security concern of South Korea is its threatening neighbour, and that is so since the partition of the Korean peninsula after the Korean war in 1953. Therefore, US forces has been based in South Korea since 1950, and their current amount is of about 28 500 personnel (Strategic Survey, 2021). The US presence in South Korea is seen by most South Korean as necessary, especially as North Korea is currently developing and testing nuclear weapons able to reach the South Korea capital and beyond. Therefore, because the US is one of the main guarantors of South Korean security, the ROK's foreign policy is partially constrained by the actions of the US on the international scene.

However, since the end of the Cold war, ROK presidents attempted to make South Korea an independent and powerful Asian actor. President Roh Moo-hyun was one of the first after the democratisation process of South Korea to define South Korea as "*a hub for security and economic cooperation*" balancing China and Japan (Ferrier, 2020). Then, President Lee Myung-bak put into application his slogan of "Global Korea" by enhancing South Korea's role in international bodies like the G20 (Kim, 2016). The foreign policy strategy of the following President Park Geun-hye was also to maintain South Korea's regional and middle power status, something that President Moon Jae-in continued to promote notably through its NSP oriented toward the Indo-Pacific.

It could have been expected that South Korea would adhere to the US strategy on the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, the ROK kept a foot-dragging attitude toward the US attempts to make it recognise its FOIP strategy. The Indo-Pacific concept has been evoked twice during presidential US visit to South Korea, in 2017 and 2019, without much recognition except a consensus in 2019 around a needed "*further harmonious cooperation between*" the NSP and the FOIP (Jung, Lee and Lee, 2021). This could notably be explained by the fact that South Korea has been focusing more on the Eurasian landmass since the partition of the peninsula, and because it does not want to antagonise its main economic partner by supporting the US' policy of Chinese containment.

B/ China as an increasingly important economic partner

China plays a massive role in South Korea's economic and security landscape.

South Korea's economic dependence on China has been rising, with China being now South Korea's largest trading partner with merchandise exports amounting to USD 136 billion for 2020 (The Diplomat, 2020). This represents about 8% of South Korea's GDP, because of the heavy reliance of its GDP on exports (Ferrier, 2020). Hence, because its economic growth partly relies on Chinese continuous imports, South Korea lacks leverage to have independent stances on sensitive issues related to China.

Moreover, Chinese backing is also needed for South Korea to keep some leverage over its nuclear neighbour. China is the main trade and security partner of North Korea, and one of the main actors of the pacification process of the Korean peninsula since the 1980s. China support is even more needed as North Korea is becoming a more global threat, defying bans on nuclear weapon development and able to commit complex cyber-attacks (Strategic Survey, 2022).

Thus, through the test of various foreign policy approaches, South Korea is trying to pursue an autonomous foreign policy strategy "*without antagonizing China, while at the same time leveraging its middle power status in the Indo-Pacific*" (The Diplomat, 2021). Looking toward ASEAN is one of the possibilities it has found to do so.

C/ South Korea progressively looking toward ASEAN

To decrease its economic dependency on China and its security reliance on the US, South Korea decided to focus its efforts on foreign policy toward ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries.

Relationships were progressively established between the ROK and ASEAN, starting from the beginning of a sectoral dialogue between the two in 1989, leading to further deepening of political and economic relations. In 1991, the relations between ASEAN and South Korea were upgraded to a level of full dialogue partnership, followed by the beginning of multilateral meetings between ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea in 1997. A speeding up of the process was observed after 2004 and the first declaration about ASEAN and South Korea on a Comprehensive partnership and Treaty of amity and cooperation in Southeast Asia. Subsequently, several free trade agreements were signed in 2006 and 2007 while an ASEAN-South Korea Centre was established in Seoul in 2009 (Bondaz, 2022). This huge deepening of relations was done in parallel to bilateral rapprochements of South Korean with ASEAN members such as Vietnam.

This opening to countries outside East Asia can be well understood by using the framework of the 'one rod and three concentric circles' (Strategic Survey, 2021). The rod represents the South Korea-US alliance, and the concentric circles encompass North Korean, then China and Japan as regional neighbours, then the global world. South Korea is currently trying to develop the second and third circles of its foreign policy, with its NSP and by increasing its economic, social and strategic cooperation with ASEAN.

II- An ASEAN-centred policy to timidly emancipate itself from China

The New Southern Policy involves Indo-Pacific countries (ASEAN, India) to promote cooperation in economic, social, cultural and scientific realm, but falls short of addressing security issues brought upon by China's rise, because of South Korea's dependency on its threatening trade partner.

A/ The combination of People, Prosperity and Peace for a middle power strategy

Introduced by President Moon Jae-in at the Korea-Indonesia Business Forum in 2017, the New Southern Policy aims at enhancing “*ASEAN-Korea relations to the same level as the four major powers [the US, China, Japan and Russia] around the Korean Peninsula*” (Wiklins and Kim, 2020). This strategy covers India and the 10 members states of ASEAN, while all initiatives falling under the NSP are coordinated by a presidential committee set up in 2017. It is the southern twin of the New Northern Policy that was inaugurated at the same time (in 2017), but during the Eastern Economic Forum in Russia (Rinna, 2020). However, the NSP was given more importance because of the political will of South Korea to increase trade and economic relations with ASEAN. This is well exemplified by the visit of President Moon Jae-in in person to all ASEAN countries during his mandate, showing the strong political will and credibility of the Moon administration to sustain consistent relations, projects and agreements with ASEAN (Bondaz, 2022).

The NSP is organised around three Ps: People, Prosperity and Peace (even if the last one is not as supported by tangible initiatives as the two others). All Ps aim at increasing trade exchanges, foreign direct investments, tourism, cultural exchanges, and more importantly commitment between the partners (Bondaz, 2022). First, the People pillar considers the health (“*combating covid and beyond*”), educational (“*people-centered education*”) and cultural aspects (“*gaining a deeper mutual understanding through culture*”) of ASEAN-ROK cooperation (Government of ROK, 2022). This could increase academic exchanges and research cooperation as well as promoting foreign culture products. Second, the Prosperity section focuses on green growth and infrastructure building with the three components of “*sustainable economy together*”, “*enhancing quality of life through infrastructure development*” and “*developing industries with innovative technology*” (Government of ROK, 2022). Finally, the Peace pillar wants to shape “*a community of greater safety and peace*” through transnational cooperation, notably in the realms of protection of marine environment, fight against transnational crime or carbon footprint reduction (Government of ROK, 2022). By explicitly not mentioning China and focusing more on economic and cultural aspects, the NSP tries not to anger its main economic partner.

B/ The fear of Chinese retaliation limiting South Korea’s room for manoeuvre

South Korea is well aware of the limited latitude it has to challenge China. The 2017 Chinese commercial ban on South Korea’s products after the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system exemplifies this well. In 2017, the newly elected Moon government allowed the deployment of the US THAAD system on South Korean soil, in order to be more militarily prepared to face nuclear and missile tests by North Korea (Jung, Lee and Lee, 2021). China perceived this move as targeting itself rather than North Korea, which led the Chinese government to ban all tourism and entertainment South Korean products, notably those produced by Lotte, the company whose land has been bought by the government to install the THAAD system. China’s retaliatory moves importantly damaged the South Korean economy, with estimates reaching USD 25 billion before the “three no-s” agreement obtained at the end of 2017 (Ferrier, 2020). This agreement was quite detrimental to the pursued autonomous foreign policy of South Korea, because it consisted of forbidding further deployment of the THAAD system, impeding trilateral cooperation with the US and

Japan, and prohibiting South Korea to participate more in the US missile defence framework (Kim, 2022).

This event tarnished South Korean perceptions of China that were not initially that negative. China ended up being the country for which South Koreans held the most pessimistic attitudes, even before Japan, their historical enemy (Yeo, 2020). In a 2018 survey, the amount of South Korean considering China as “*a state to be wary of*” doubled in three years, from 24.5% in 2015 to 50.3% in 2018 (Jung, Lee and Lee, 2021). Actions that followed Chinese economic retaliation in 2017 fuelled these negative perceptions: the harsh repression of pro-democracy movements in Honk Kong starting from 2019 or the secretive handling of the covid-19 pandemic contributed to stimulate domestic support for a foreign policy free from Chinese influence (Kang, 2021).

C/ A diversification of South Korea’s economic and strategic alternatives

The NSP, as well as other initiatives promoted by South Korea, allowed the country to develop new economic and security strategies.

On one hand, South Korea relied on economic diversification to be less dependent on China. The fact that South Korea’s exports to China are partly intermediary goods, hence that the final demand comes from other countries than China, is a significant mitigating factor of this dependency. It means that after rethinking supply chains and diversifying their suppliers South Korean companies could continue to export huge quantities without running through China (Ferrier, 2020). Having these considerations in mind, South Korea tried to diversify its exports and imports, notably by building strong trade relations with Vietnam. Vietnam is the third largest trade partner of South Korea, just after China and the US, and is “*expected to become the second-largest after China in a few years*” (Koo, 2020). Similarly, over the last 30 years, bilateral trade between ASEAN and South Korea has increased 20-fold and people-to-people exchanges 40-fold. ASEAN is now the second market for South Korean construction companies orders, while it is the second destination of South Korean foreign direct investments (Bondaz, 2022). The NSP therefore seems to bear fruit in the economic realm.

On the other hand, to have a stronger autonomous position on the international scene, South Korea decided to support other foreign policy strategies. For instance, as soon as it was published, South Korea supported the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. A facilitating factor was that they also framed their strategy in a way to avoid any strategic confrontation with China. In the same way, President Moon Jae-in and President Narendra Modi of India discussed in 2019 the actions needed to connect the NSP with the Indian Act East Policy, India’s foreign policy framework oriented toward the Indo-Pacific (NDTV, 2019).

III- A foreign policy allowing for a careful strategic hedging between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific

Future evolutions of international relations and measures of the new President Yoon Suk-yeol could make South Korea adopt a less tepid response to the Indo-Pacific concept, allowing for stronger strategic partnerships across the region and its oceans.

A/ The New Southern Policy Plus allowing for sectoral cooperation on a broader range of issues

To successfully achieve not being a collateral damage of great power rivalries, the Moon administration decided it had to update the NSP to consider new international realities. Thus, in November 2020, the New Southern Policy Plus (NSP+) was launched to continue to support existing NSP projects while considering new areas of cooperation. The health, digital economy and resilience of supply chains made their entrance into the NSP+ framework, as a way to recalibrate South Korea's foreign policy strategy toward crucial areas. Indeed, cooperation in the health sector became vital for lots of countries to deal with the covid-19 pandemic. The NSP+ was a way for South Korea to forge strong relationships with ASEAN and other Asian countries, especially as it was considered a model of efficient management of the pandemic. South Korea's promise to give medical materials to India when it was facing a surge in infections is one of the numerous examples of renewed Indo-Pacific policy that South Korea carried out after the implementation of the NSP+ (The Diplomat, 2021). Besides, this NSP+ triggered more ambitious commitment of South Korea, that planned to “*double its grant aid to ASEAN members by 2022*” (Ferrier, 2020).

Nonetheless, it should be underlined that the NSP+ still focuses more on economic, social and cultural cooperation, leaving behind the security and political cooperation in order not to disturb China. The strong focus of the NSP+ on non-traditional security issues (health security, climate change, etc.) allows South Korea to soft balancing against China and get progressively emancipated (Koo, 2020)

B/ A new policy with possibilities to build partnerships

After having walked on eggshells not to anger China, South Korea is becoming more receptive to bolder cooperative actions.

In May 2021, South Korea and the US jointly stated that they would “*align the ROK's New Southern Policy and the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific*” (The Diplomat, 2021). In this joint statement, they identified key areas of cooperation between the two countries, in the sectors of energy, infrastructure and digital economy (Yeo, 2020). This was also the first time South Korea agreed to support the Indo-Pacific concept, explicitly challenging China. South Korea became more receptive to a China-challenging FOIP because of confluence of domestic and international reasons. While an anti-China sentiment was rising among the South Korean population, the government also understood that the economic component of the US' FOIP could be interesting. Called Build Back Better World, the economic aspect of the FOIP is centred on infrastructure development for “*climate, health security, digital technology and gender equality*” and strategically overlaps with initiatives of the NSP+ (Kang, 2021). In addition, South Korea agreed to do this risky move in order to have the US more engaged with North Korea, and recognising earlier agreements obtained between the US and North Korea.

The NSP+ and South Korea's firmer stance in the international area allow for new and stronger partnerships to be built, notably with Asian middle powers (Vietnam, Indonesia, etc.). Indonesia, Vietnam and South Korea share a certain economic dependency toward China and prefer not to chose sides in the great power rivalry, even though they value the security and prosperity obtained thanks to the US' help in the region (Jung, Lee and Lee). These three countries could jointly acquire more autonomy from the US and China superpowers by working together on maritime cooperation. They possess a sufficiently strong navy to carry out

non-military maritime operations, in the realm of fight against illegal fishing or piracy in the Indo-Pacific oceans (Koo, 2020). This strategy could be extremely productive, because ASEAN has already strongly emphasised maritime cooperation in its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Yeo, 2020).

Southeast Asian middle powers are not the only countries with which South Korea could build strong cooperative frameworks. France is one of them, and a French institute has been pushing for that in its 2021 report, arguing that France and South Korea both share commonalities in their will to acquire strategic autonomy, as well as in their means to do so (Kang, 2021).

C/ From strategic ambiguity to strategic certainty after the South Korean presidential election

The March 2022 presidential election led to the victory of the candidate of the conservative People Power Party against the party of the former President Moon. A foreign policy shift can therefore be expected in the following months, when the new government will be constituted. Nothing official has been published, but informal calls of foreign presidents with the new President Yoon Suk-yeol and interviews suggest that South Korea could work jointly (or join) the Quad (plus) (Moriyasu et al, 2022). Indeed, as a candidate, Yoon mentioned that South Korea would align more with the US, notably through the US' new Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (Kim, 2022). Besides, as soon as he was elected, he agreed with its Japanese counterpart to improve the bilateral relations between their two countries. These rapprochements with Japan and US make a future adhesion to the Quad not completely unlikely.

With regards to South Korea stance vis-à-vis China, President Yoon declared that *“he would follow ‘strategic clarity’”* with China, without developing much more (Sharma, 2022). When the Yoon administration will be established, further developments of his foreign policy strategy would allow us to better assess if South Korea achieved to have a foreign policy autonomy.

Conclusion

As an Indo-Pacific resident, South Korea has attempted to develop an Indo-Pacific strategy, without upsetting its major trade partner, China, and its main ally, the US. Due to these constraints, its Indo-Pacific foreign policy strategy could only be hidden behind the New Southern Policy (Plus) framework. By ingeniously decreasing its economic reliance over China, forging strong strategic relationships with ASEAN, and design frameworks to tackle non-traditional security issues, South Korea achieved to design its own but unspoken Indo-Pacific strategy.

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