

SOUTH KOREAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC ERA

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Executive summary

Under President Yoon Suk-yeol, the South Korean government aims to release its own Indo-Pacific strategy by the end of 2022. Nevertheless, doubts still linger as to whether South Korea can play a larger strategic role beyond the Korean Peninsula, and cooperate with like-minded actors to strengthen the region's security architecture. This policy brief describes the evolution of South Korea's foreign policy role in the Indo-Pacific between former South Korean President Moon Jae-in's government (2017-2022) and the first year of the Yoon administration (2022-present). It also draws attention to the perspective of other regional actors, which to date have viewed South Korea as an important economic partner, but not necessarily a key strategic player in the region.

The first section provides greater context behind South Korea's oft-perceived hedging behavior between the United States and China. It unpacks how South Korea's dependence on the U.S. alliance, its desire for global recognition, and its long-term goal of greater foreign policy autonomy have at times clashed, resulting in strategic ambivalence on

foreign policy issues that extend beyond Northeast Asia. The second section demonstrates perceptions of South Korean strategic ambivalence in the Indo-Pacific among U.S. allies in Asia. U.S. allies and partners including Japan, Australia, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) see South Korea's role in the Indo-Pacific as somewhat peripheral. The third section describes the Yoon government's recent efforts to reorient its foreign policy in line with other U.S. allies to play a greater regional and global strategic role. It emphasizes the need to develop a strategy that directly advances South Korea's national interest, while explaining how South Korea's geopolitical interests align with the United States and other like-minded partners. The policy brief concludes by highlighting the political opportunities and risks facing the Yoon government in implementing an Indo-Pacific strategy.

Introduction: The challenge of embracing an Indo- Pacific strategy

In 2017, the U.S. administration under former U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.¹ In contrast to other U.S. allies, such as Japan and Australia, South Korea's initial response to the U.S. FOIP strategy was lukewarm. When Korean reporters asked for reactions to the Trump administration's FOIP strategy, Moon reportedly stated, "it was a suggestion that I never heard of before... it is difficult to understand the purpose of the Indo-Pacific strategy."² When the U.S. Department of Defense released its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in June 2019, one Korea policy analyst stated that South Korean officials were "largely content to sit out on the sidelines" and "steered clear of the Indo-Pacific as a geographic concept or a strategy."³

U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION

South Korea's concerns over increased U.S.-China competition and its fear of damaging relations with Beijing largely explain Seoul's initial tepid response to the U.S. FOIP. Seoul had experienced severe Chinese economic coercion in 2017 after it accepted a U.S.-based missile defense system on Korean soil.⁴ Facing economic losses, Moon was especially wary of further upending relations with China, South Korea's largest trade partner.⁵ Hence, South Korea avoided closely associating itself with U.S.-led Indo-Pacific coalitions, such as the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (hereafter the Quad), which China has perceived as an anti-China grouping.

As China exhibited more assertive behavior in its foreign policy and U.S.-Sino rivalry accelerated during the Trump era, U.S. allies, including Japan and Australia, tightened their relations with Washington and strengthened ties with other like-minded

governments. However, South Korea opted to take a middle position. As South Koreans have frequently quipped, it is "the United States for security and China for economy."⁶ Other regional actors, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, have also hedged between Washington and Beijing, seeking security cooperation with the United States while maintaining economic ties to China.⁷ However, given South Korea's treaty alliance status with the United States, Seoul's cautious approach drew greater attention and criticism inside Washington policy circles.⁸

Whereas the United States and other allies publicly denounced China's unilateral maritime claims in the South China Sea and threats to human rights and democracy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, South Korea avoided antagonizing China.

In the wake of Beijing's economic coercion, Seoul opted to tread lightly on issues that conflicted with Chinese interests. Whereas the United States and other allies publicly denounced China's unilateral maritime claims in the South China Sea and threats to human rights and democracy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, South Korea avoided antagonizing China. For similar reasons, Seoul chose not to internalize the Indo-Pacific concept nor engage closely with the Quad.⁹

Of course, a stark dichotomy between security and economics, and the notion that Seoul must choose between Washington and Beijing is a false one. Seoul has much deeper ties to Washington, even as it seeks to maintain positive relations with both governments. Additionally, South Korea under the Moon government endeavored to chart its own middle path by launching the New Southern Policy (NSP) in 2017, an initiative that sought to strengthen ties with ASEAN and India while reducing economic dependence on China.

Nevertheless, South Korean leaders since the 1990s, whether progressive or conservative in political orientation,¹⁰ have perpetually sought to strike a balance in relations between a close ally and a rising partner.¹¹ South Korea's strategic dilemma is not new. It is, in fact, embedded in a deeper historical context.

Modern Korea has struggled to maintain autonomy among the region's great powers. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Korea has experienced colonization, war, and national division. Historical legacies still have a bearing in the contemporary era, as South Koreans see their foreign policy both constrained and shaped by great power competition. The latest iteration of geopolitical competition has wedged South Korea between the United States and China. At the heart of this dilemma is South Korea's quest for greater foreign policy autonomy, but also its need for security through the U.S.-South Korea bilateral alliance framework.¹²

Regional perceptions of South Korea

The perception that South Korea remains less strategically engaged in the broader Indo-Pacific region extends beyond Washington policy circles. Policymakers and experts in Asia have also observed South Korea's strategic absence and its reluctance to take a strong stand against China's flouting of international rules and norms. Whereas the United States and other allies have publicly denounced China's unilateral maritime claims in the South China Sea¹³ and threats to human rights and democracy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong,¹⁴ South Korea avoided antagonizing China.

On the institutional front, U.S. allies and partners forged additional links and networks by building coalitions such as the Quad, AUKUS, and other multilateral groups. By contrast, South Korea was seen as a bystander limiting its strategic ties to mostly bilateral partnerships.¹⁵ Although Seoul participated in existing multilateral forums, such as

the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asia Summit, until recently it had not sought membership in new Indo-Pacific oriented institutions.¹⁶ As policy watchers in Beijing even observed, South Korea was the "weak link" within the U.S. alliance system in Asia.¹⁷

A discussion of Japan, Australia, and ASEAN's respective perceptions of South Korea offers a more detailed snapshot of regional perceptions of South Korea as an Indo-Pacific player and as a strategic partner.

JAPAN

Although South Korea and Japan maintain a limited degree of security cooperation and intelligence sharing to address North Korean missile threats, the two U.S. allies have been unable to forge a robust, long-term security partnership. Tokyo and Seoul share common regional security concerns, ranging from China's militarization of maritime disputes to natural disasters and pandemics. However, historical animosity, further aggravated by domestic politics, has prevented the two sides from building further strategic trust outside of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral framework.¹⁸

As China adopted a more assertive position during the 2010s, Japan and South Korea reacted differently to China's growing threat. Consequently, the two allies diverged in their response to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Under the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership, Japan sought to balance against China's threat. Meanwhile, rather than balance against China, the Moon administration attempted to preserve a positive working relationship with Beijing while turning its attention to inter-Korea engagement. The dramatic downturn in Korea-Japan relations in 2018 created even greater political distance between the two U.S. allies.¹⁹ Under such conditions, South Korea became further marginalized in Japan's regional strategic outlook. Nowhere is this reflected better than in Japan's 2021 Diplomatic Blue Book. In the section describing Indo-Pacific cooperation, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentions India, Australia, ASEAN, the United

Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Netherlands as Indo-Pacific partners. South Korea, however, is omitted from this discussion, despite its proximity to Japan and close relationship with the United States.²⁰

AUSTRALIA

South Korea's bilateral relationship with Australia has deepened and broadened over the past decade. The two countries have held a 2+2 ministerial meeting biannually since 2013.²¹ This makes Australia and the United States the only two countries with which South Korea regularly holds a ministerial dialogue. In 2021, Canberra and Washington elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.²² South Korea has also emerged as Australia's fourth-largest trading partner and export market.²³

Australian views of the United States and other U.S. allies and regional partners, in comparison to Australian views of South Korea, highlight the perception gap between South Korea and the rest of Asia. In 2021, Australia held more favorable views of the United States, Japan, and Taiwan than of South Korea. This finding is backed by data from a Lowy Institute poll tracking Australian attitudes toward regional actors. Although Australians have relatively warm feelings toward South Korea, registering 57 (out of 100) in 2020,²⁴ and 63 in 2022,²⁵ these numbers fall well below those of U.S. treaty allies, such as Canada (80); the United Kingdom (77) and Japan (74). Australians' feelings toward South Korea instead track closely to that of Vietnam, Indonesia, India, and Taiwan.²⁶

When asked which countries might be seen as Australia's "best friend" in Asia, South Korea ranked lower than China, Japan, Indonesia, India, and Singapore (the six countries included in the survey figure) in 2014, 2016, and 2022, respectively.²⁷ Australians' views of China as a "best friend" dropped considerably between 2016 and 2022 (from 30 percent to 6 percent). Nevertheless, Australians' views of China still ranked slightly above that of South Korea. Perceptions of South Korea as a "best friend" to Australia have remained flat, hovering between 4-5 percent.²⁸

To be clear, the survey results do not mean that Australians necessarily harbor negative views of South Korea. However, they do suggest that South Korea falls outside the scope of Australians' regional and global radar. Despite close bilateral relations, Australia and South Korea hold different policy priorities in sustaining a rules-based Indo-Pacific order. Australia's resolute stand against Chinese economic coercion and its immediate support for U.S. calls to ban Huawei telecommunications equipment – compared to South Korea's more tentative response – serves as a case in point.²⁹

As one prominent Australian foreign policy expert remarked in a roundtable conversation in 2022, South Korea has been mostly "outside of the picture" and "doing its own thing" on Indo-Pacific cooperation.³⁰ The comment was not directed as criticism against South Korea. Rather, it reflected South Korea's post-Cold War geostrategic reality, one that prioritized the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia ahead of the wider Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN

In recent years, Seoul has invested in significant diplomatic capital to boost its relations with ASEAN, as attested by the Moon administration's launch of the NSP. Although the NSP no longer exists in name as official policy, the Yoon government is expected to continue cultivating relations with the ten members of ASEAN and India.

Despite greater attention to ASEAN through the NSP, and the immense popularity of Korean pop culture in Southeast Asia, South Korea's overall standing in the region remains "lukewarm."³¹ A survey of Southeast Asian thought leaders in academia, business, government, and the non-profit sectors in 2022 reveals that ASEAN members have little confidence in South Korea's ability to provide regional leadership. When asked which countries had the "strongest confidence to provide leadership and uphold a rules-based order," South Korea ranked 9 out of 10 (or 0.8 percent), below that of New Zealand and Australia.³² Of the ten countries, only India ranked lower than South Korea. In 2021, South Korea ranked last out of ten countries.

When it comes to finding a “most preferred and trusted strategic partner for ASEAN” to hedge against the uncertainties of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, South Korea ranked fifth, falling behind the European Union, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom.³³ These findings are somewhat surprising given that South Korea, like ASEAN, prefers a more inclusive regional order that does not exclude any specific countries including China.³⁴ As Sarah Teo argues, however, “such views correspond with the perceptions of South Korea as a relatively low-profile player in regional geopolitical shifts, unlike other U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia.”³⁵

A PERIPHERAL PLAYER?

South Korea’s peripheral position in the Indo-Pacific is somewhat surprising when matched against its middle power status and capabilities. South Korea has the tenth-largest economy in the world. Less well-known but equally notable is the fact that South Korea ranks tenth in global defense spending.³⁶ During Moon’s tenure, South Korea increased annual defense spending by an average of 7.4 percent.³⁷ The \$50.2 billion it spent on defense in 2021 is comparable to the defense spending of France, Germany, and Japan.³⁸

South Korea also wields significant soft power regionally, and increasingly globally. In addition, globally recognized brands such as Samsung and Hyundai, cultural icons from K-Pop groups BTS and Blackpink, to award-winning television shows and movies such as *Squid Game* and *Parasite*, have also helped boost the country’s profile. As a democratic, developed, and technologically advanced country, South Korea should naturally be seen as a “like-minded” country that is ideologically aligned with other democratic partners in the region. Yet despite South Korea’s sizeable cache of hard and soft power combined with global ambitions, its neighbors have viewed the country as missing in action in the Indo-Pacific. Seoul has not been a major player in the broader regional landscape, nor was it seen as a natural multilateral defense partner. Several analysts described South Korea as the “weakest link” among democratic partners, and in danger of becoming a second-tier ally should it continue to distance itself from Indo-Pacific initiatives.³⁹

Crafting South Korea’s role in the Indo-Pacific

To be seen as a serious player in the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea must overcome perceptions of its strategic ambivalence. Drafting an Indo-Pacific strategy is an important first step. However, South Korea’s role and place in the Indo-Pacific is not just a function of scaling up its own foreign policy priorities toward a global audience. Instead, South Korea’s foreign policy behavior is shaped by the larger strategic environment and the dynamic relationships that exist between and among a network of different regional actors. Other Indo-Pacific countries, first and foremost the United States, and second, key allies such as Japan and Australia, must also recognize and accept South Korea as a relevant strategic actor in the region.

RECENT FOREIGN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS BY THE YOON GOVERNMENT

Yoon began his presidency in May 2022 intending to shift South Korea’s foreign policy priorities in-line with those of the United States. As Yoon laid out in an article for *Foreign Affairs*, the U.S.-South Korea alliance acted as “the central axis of Seoul’s foreign policy.”⁴⁰ Yoon also described South Korea’s role as a “global pivotal state,” meaning that South Korea’s foreign policy interests lay beyond the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. South Korea would become more engaged in the Indo-Pacific region and active in global affairs.

The Yoon government has already taken several steps to signal its intent to engage more closely with like-minded Indo-Pacific countries and elevate its status. This has meant working with and supporting other U.S. allies and partners; defending norms, values, and principles such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights; and contributing to regional and global goods. Tangible steps in the first few months of the Yoon government include:

- **Support for the war in Ukraine:** At the United Nations, South Korea has voted consistently with other democracies to condemn Russia's invasion and support Ukraine. Both the Moon and Yoon governments contributed aid and assistance to Ukraine. This included up to \$100 million in humanitarian assistance,⁴¹ as well as the provision of weapons via Poland⁴² and the Czech Republic.⁴³
- **Greater engagement with NATO:** Yoon attended the NATO summit in June 2022. South Korea has taken greater interest in NATO and European affairs. Most notably, South Korea has signed arms deals with Poland, which in turn is helping (in)directly support Ukraine's defense against Russia.⁴⁴ South Korea is in discussions regarding arms and weapons sales with other NATO countries in the Baltics and Eastern Europe.⁴⁵
- **Improved relations with Japan:** Yoon has stated a clear desire to improve bilateral relations with Japan.⁴⁶ Although a formal bilateral summit has yet to take place, the leaders of the two countries have already met three times during Yoon's first year in office: first at the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Madrid, and then at the U.N. General Assembly in New York, and finally during the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh. The two countries' foreign ministers, Yoshimasa Hayashi and Park Jin, also agreed to work together to address North Korea's nuclear threat and find a workable solution to address South Korea's court ruling against Japanese companies for using forced wartime Korean labor.⁴⁷ Nearly a dozen trilateral meetings between the United States, South Korea, and Japan have also taken place among senior and working level officials. In response to increasing North Korean military threats, the United States, Japan, and South Korea also conducted trilateral anti-submarine warfare drills and anti-ballistic missile defense exercises. The renewal of bilateral relations carries the potential to strengthen much-needed cooperation in Northeast Asia through the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral relationship.

- **Support for U.S.-led multilateral economic security initiatives:** South Korea agreed to join the U.S. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. It will also participate in the Chip 4 semiconductor alliance with Taiwan, Japan, and the United States, despite facing objections from China.⁴⁸ Although South Korea has approached the Chip 4 with some caution, referring to the group as a "consultative body"⁴⁹ rather than an alliance, the Yoon government in principle seeks to enhance partnerships with like-minded countries to make semiconductor supply chains more resilient.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH KOREA'S ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Under Yoon, South Korea aims to become a relevant strategic player in the Indo-Pacific region, and more ambitiously, a self-described "global pivotal state." South Korea's soon-to-be-released Indo-Pacific strategy will represent a milestone signaling the country's intent to become an active player in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. However, given the networked nature of Indo-Pacific relations, South Korea's actions alone will not be enough.

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How *other countries* engage with South Korea and whether they embrace Seoul as an Indo-Pacific player will be just as important as South Korea's own efforts to expand the scale and scope of its foreign policy. For instance, given Japan's overall positive standing in the region and its centrality within the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific network, an endorsement from Tokyo might lead other countries to warm up

to South Korea's role as a legitimate Indo-Pacific partner. Conversely, Japan's marginalization of South Korea could undermine the Yoon government's efforts to be seen as an Indo-Pacific player, discounting recent South Korean contributions to promote a rules and values-based regional order.

To be sure, South Korea's foreign policy strategy, and the actions it takes, will affect outside perceptions of South Korea. That is, South Korea's status and its standing among other states will be shaped, or at least informed, by the policies that it implements. To that end, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy should endeavor to build horizontal network ties to the region through bilateral and multilateral means. Several additional steps can signal Seoul's reliability as an important strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific network. These include:

- **Standing with other Indo-Pacific countries**, including the members of the Quad, to support the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and open sea lines of communication.
- **Advancing norms and standards** on issues which play to South Korea's core strengths, such as digital trade, emerging technologies, climate change and green growth.
- **Actively participating in Indo-Pacific regional economic initiatives** such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the CHIP 4, and taking a lead role in areas where Seoul carries comparative advantages and experience as an economically developed, technologically capable, fully consolidated democracy in Asia.
- **Asserting its own right to self-defense in the wake of unprecedented North Korean missile and nuclear threats**, even when facing potential backlash from China. This includes increased joint military exercises with the United States, Japan, and other concerned parties, the deployment of additional strategic assets, and enhanced missile defense capabilities.
- **Reaching out to other like-minded Indo-Pacific countries for political support** in advancing peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, while also extending South Korean support to advance existing rules and norms in regional hot spots such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Ukraine.
- **Mobilizing support for human rights and democracy at home and abroad.** South Korea has a special role in advancing North Korean human rights domestically and internationally. As one of the few successful cases of third-wave democratization in Asia, and as a vibrant civil society, South Korea can also do more to promote civil society growth and democratic capacity-building in Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam. In concert with other countries, it should also voice concerns regarding Beijing's treatment of the Uyghurs in western China. South Korea can also exercise its voice on rights and freedom through the U.N. system.

Conclusion

Despite its status as a U.S. treaty alliance partner, until recently South Korea has played a limited role in the Indo-Pacific. This has been intentional to some degree, given South Korea's geopolitical constraints amidst great power competition and its more vulnerable economic position relative to other U.S. allies. However, the Yoon government's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to reorient South Korean foreign policy in line with that of other like-minded countries in the region.

Yoon has tasked his North America Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to spearhead South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. Although the final draft will be the product of an inter-agency vetting process, the strategy will likely complement and overlap with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy given its development in the North America bureau. In broad terms, it will advocate a free, open, prosperous, and resilient Indo-Pacific. However, given South Korea's unique historical, political, and stra-

tegitic circumstances, the strategy is more likely to be guided by a form of *pragmatic liberal internationalism*: pragmatic in its cautious approach to navigating U.S.-China competition; but forward-leaning in its outward embracement of norms, values, principles, and global engagement in its foreign policy.

Although the Indo-Pacific strategy will represent a new direction for South Korean foreign policy, it should build on past achievements and recent developments. For instance, elements of the Moon administration's New Southern Policy are expected to be incorporated into the strategy given the inroads already built in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the Pacific Islands may also factor into South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy as preparations are underway to host an inaugural summit in the Pacific Islands in 2023.⁵⁰

As South Korea prepares to unveil its Indo-Pacific strategy, two key dilemmas remain. First is whether Seoul's policy efforts can change regional perceptions about its role as an Indo-Pacific player. Although there has been a marked shift in the Yoon government's foreign policy narrative, particularly in its articulation of freedom and values, South Korea's overall geostrategic situation in Northeast Asia is largely unchanged.⁵¹ South Korea's proximity to China makes Beijing an omnipresent factor in Seoul's strategic calculus. And a flurry of North Korean missile tests in the second half of 2022 may also pull Seoul's attention back to the Peninsula, limiting its bandwidth and diminishing its diplomatic capacity to stay engaged in the broader Indo-Pacific region. These two perennial strategic problems may limit the Yoon government's ability to take on a more active foreign policy role.

Second, South Korea's domestic political environment will remain an obstacle in the implementation of Yoon's foreign policy. Yoon's approval rating has hovered below 30 percent for much of his first year in office, threatening to undermine his positive foreign policy agenda.⁵² Although there appears to be broad, bipartisan consensus about boosting South Korea's profile as a global pivotal state, issues central to South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, such as improving Korea-Japan ties, may require domestic

political support from the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). However, the DPP has used Yoon's perceived foreign policy missteps to criticize the ruling government, even calling for the resignation of Foreign Minister Park Jin.⁵³

For this reason, the Yoon government must ensure that it develops an Indo-Pacific strategy that squarely advances South Korea's national interest, and work to build a strong domestic consensus around its security and foreign policy agenda. Exhibiting fealty to Washington may help regional actors see South Korea as a legitimate Indo-Pacific player. To gain wider domestic support, however, the strategy must emphasize how South Korea's geopolitical interests align with that of its strongest ally, the United States, and other like-minded regional actors. This is not easy, especially if the domestic political agendas of "like-minded" countries appear to undercut South Korean interests.⁵⁴

South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy will be a significant step forward in articulating not only the Yoon government's foreign policy agenda, but the future trajectory of South Korea's evolving grand strategy.

Despite these challenges, South Korea has much to offer the Indo-Pacific region. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy will be a significant step forward in articulating not only the Yoon government's foreign policy agenda, but the future trajectory of South Korea's evolving grand strategy. Overcoming South Korea's perception gap by engaging with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific — both bilaterally and multilaterally — will ultimately enhance South Korea's long-term economic and security interests.

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