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Mireya Solís [00:00:06] Welcome, everyone. My name is Mireya Solís, I'm the director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings. It will be my pleasure to moderate today's discussion on South Korea's Indo-Pacific role. The Yoon government will release soon the first Indo-Pacific strategy for South Korea, and that opens important questions about the desire and ability of the ROK to establish itself as an strategic actor in the region that looks beyond the Korean Peninsula and that is able to offer more than an economic partnership, as important as those elements are.

We have a terrific set of experts today to address the drivers and implications of this shift in Korean foreign policy. Let me introduce them very briefly. Victor Cha is senior vice president for Asia and Korea Chair at CSIS. Kuyoun Chung is assistant professor at the Department of Political Science in Kangwon National University, and Andrew Yeo is senior fellow and SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies at the Center for East Asia Policy Studies. Thank you very much for joining us today.

So since our time is limited and there's a lot to cover, I'm just going to jump right into the discussion, the conversation. And I would like to start with you, Andrew, if I may, because you recently released a report on South Korean foreign policy in an Indo-Pacific area. So can you tell us what are the most important findings and takeaways from your research and the report?

Andrew Yeo [00:01:48] Sure. Thanks so much, Mireya. Before I begin, I just wanted to thank our team at Brookings, Hanna Foreman in particular, for helping put this together and also for Victor and Kuyoun and you Mireya for, for joining us. And I do want to mention that Victor and I are participating in the Trans-Pacific dialogue in Middleburg, Virginia. So we're very much steeped in this conversation with Korea and also Japan. So it's, it's perfect context for talking about South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. Now, it's no secret at this point that the South Korean government, under President Yoon Suk Yeol, is ramping up its engagement with other countries in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. And we've seen this from support for the Ukraine war to greater engagement with NATO, the support for a US led multilateral economic security initiatives. But, but I do think that there is a qualitative shift in the direction of the Yoon government and how it engages other countries within the region.

The idea of a global Korea, of course, predates the U.S. government and previous South Korean governments, both progressive and conservative in orientation, have pursued some kind of global agenda, but, but you know, in the Indo-Pacific, so I refer to it reports, the Indo-Pacific network, as this was being built, there was hesitancy on the part of South Korea from joining this network. And

a large part of this hesitancy was due to the previous government's cautious stance towards China in light of Chinese economic coercion directed at South Korea. And so the Korean government at the time wasn't willing to really jump into any coalition or a grouping perceived by Beijing as being anti-China.

But in the meantime, other countries had already embraced this Indo-Pacific concept. Of course, Japan and Australia had already adopted that, that terminology. But you saw countries like the UK, France, Germany, European countries that were also beginning to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy, and even a grouping like ASEAN, which has, tries to stay in the middle between Beijing and Washington and also released its ASEAN outlook for the Indo-Pacific. So it looked odd that South Korea, an important US treaty alliance partner in Asia, was not a central part of this Indo-Pacific network. And so that's where we're seeing the Yoon government begin to shift direction, he's much more forward leaning on the US South Korea alliance, but he wants to ensure that South Korea remains a part of the Indo-Pacific network. And so what I want to highlight from the report is not so much what South Korea is doing, because I think we're hearing a lot and I know Victor and Kuyoun can say more on this, but it's really other countries perspectives about South Korea and how they see South Korea within the region.

And what I want to argue is that South Korea can become very active and do a lot of activities in the region. But I think it's important about how other countries look at South Korea as well. Of course, South Korean actions and what the Yoon government does can help shape those perceptions. But as my report highlights, and I feature Japan, Australia and ASEAN and I look at, you know, surveys and public opinion polls and how they look at Korea, but surprisingly, Korea is not really seen as a strategic leader. There is a question among Australians about who do you see as your best friend, Australia's best friend and South Korea, it ranks similar to Vietnam or Indonesia, not other US treaty allies like Japan, Canada, the UK and even with ASEAN, where you would expect there to be a much more a preference or liking or respect for South Korea given its soft power, the attraction of K-Pop or even that Korea has a similar or had a similar disposition to ASEAN, where it was hedging between Beijing and Washington. They ranked Korea like ten out of ten, nine out of ten in terms of countries that would uphold the rules-based order. So this is very surprising. So I do think the Yoon government has some work cut out for it to be able to change this change this perception. So that's one of the points that I wanted to highlight out of this report that I think may be different from

other analysts take on looking at South Korea and the Indo-Pacific. So I hand it back over to you, Mireya.

Mireya Solís [00:06:23] Thank you, Andrew, that's really interesting. And I enjoyed very much that part of the discussion of the report, because it's important to obviously discuss what South Korea's doing, but then how that will change or not perceptions from other regional actors. And this allows me then to transition to asking Victor a question. And this has to do with how South Korea is going to manage its relationship with the great powers in light of these new Indo-Pacific strategy. How is the U.S. perceiving this development in South Korea? And we heard from Andrew that in the past South Korea had been cautious because it was concerned that doing something like this might alienate or bring tension in its relationship with China. So how do you see South Korea then navigating the great powers, dynamic which grows more tense as we go forward with these new development?

Victor Cha [00:07:16] Thanks for the question, Mireya. It's good to see you and Andrew, Professor Chung, I'm happy to join you for the for the discussion of Andrew's very important report. So I guess I'd say a couple of things. The first is that I think the what is at the core of Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy and how it manages and deals with the major powers is it's a strategy, but it's a strategy that's grounded in at least the President Yoon's belief and sort of core values. As we all know, Yoon Suk Yeol is not a politician. He's not a foreign policy expert. He's none of these things. And so he was a student of foreign policy. And it seemed to me that he tried to figure out what he believed in first and that that turned out to be freedom and democracy. And so you see freedom and democracy talked about in pretty much every speech he's given, the one he gave at the U.N. General Assembly and other places. And, and as I was saying to you guys, just before we got on, we just came back from a trip to Seoul where we got to spend some time with President Yoon. And it really does come through, like when we talk about foreign policy, this focus on freedom and democracy, that that I think causes him to gravitate towards these broader regional and global networks as part of an effort to support the liberal international order. And so I think that's what is driving this. So my point is that it's, I think it's less tactical in a sense, and it's really driven by, you know, sort of value-based views on foreign policy.

Now, why that's important is that if you believe in something and you follow something because you believe in it, you're willing to, you don't calculate so much what the costs of this are

going to be. It's something you believe in, like we believe in democracy. Right. We don't calculate the costs of, of our belief in democracy. And so, yes, this could rub up against particularly China, as Yoon plays a large role, whether it's in the region with Japan and trilateral relations or whether it's in Southeast Asia or whether it's supporting global institutions. This is going to bump up and rub up against, in particular, China and Russia. So we see, you know, we see Korea play a more active role in Ukraine. Personally, I wish they would even be more active in Ukraine. And we sort of see it in, as Andrew said, in they're, they're reconnecting to the web of institutions that have been created, these coalitions that have been created over the past few, over the past couple of years, both under Trump and Biden, we saw some of this coalition building under, under, under Trump as well. So, so I think that that is the direction in which they're headed, the policy towards, you know, there's a clear policy towards the United States and Japan. We see that very clearly out of Yoon.

With regard to China, there's not a clear policy, right? They never sent a special envoy to China. They never laid out what their China policy is, China strategy is. And I think that's deliberate. I think they're deliberately trying to be a little less explicit about the policy, focusing it on the United States, Japan and the Indo-Pacific, and then and then sort of dealing with dealing with China. The, the irony of all this is because Korea has taken this particular very forthright position on where they stand in terms of foreign policy, it has actually caused the Chinese to be more solicitous of, of South Korea, not angry at South Korea, but more solicitous. So China is now trying to pursue an engagement strategy with South Korea. They've been reaching out quietly for track, track two, track 1.5 dialogues with the South Koreans to try to reengage with, with the South Koreans, because they're, you know, they definitely see a change in South Korean foreign policy, as Andrew said, between the previous government and the current the new government.

Mireya Solís [00:11:41] Thank you very much, Victor, that was also fascinating and especially to hear about how China is responding with being more accommodating and then not trying to raise the temperature. And perhaps later on, we can also discuss if this might continue, given that there is an expectation of the United States regarding its allies, that they will also boost up their economic security, in particular the export control issue. So that's something that we might come to later to discuss how South Korea is thinking about navigating this issue.

And now, if I may turn to Dr. Chung, thank you so much for joining us. And I thought also from Victor it was interesting to hear how the values the vision of the leader and president Yoon particular

has left an imprint on the decision to then launch this Indo-Pacific strategy. And of course, a leader has to think about the regional, international role, but also what is happening domestically in terms of support levels, in terms of its ability to have political capital to allocate to these foreign policy initiatives. And what we hear in the reporting is that support levels are not particularly high for President Yoon. And so could you address what are the domestic political constraints as South Korea tries to play a larger international role.

Kuyoun Chung [00:13:03] Thank you, Mireya, for your excellent questions. And it's actually a very timely question as well. And also, thank you, Dr. Yeo, for inviting me to this panel today. When it comes to the domestic challenges that President Yoon actually faces these days, is the, himself actually, a lower approval rating that does not exceed 40%. It has been like several months since Yoon has become the president of South Korea, but the average approval rating is below 40%. Actually, yesterday it was about like 38 or 39%, which shows that it's pretty low compared to other president. And even when, when you compare that with President Moon, which is the previous administrations, it was pretty a low approval rating and that is actually exists amid this polarized political environment. So every political step or every diplomatic step has been challenged by the opposition party, even though the opposition party agreed with the imperative that South Korea needs to be more active, more active and take a larger role in Indo-Pacific. But still, every diplomatic move and every diplomatic policy has been challenged and polarized and politicized by the opposition party. So that's one kind of challenge, actually, that President Yoon actually faces these days.

And another challenge is actually coming from its attempt to reconcile with Japan. And current Yoon administration acknowledged that it is not possible to take a larger role in the Indo-Pacific without a conciliation with Japan. And given that every multilateral and minilateral kind of cooperative platforms are led by Japan, South Korea needs to be more connected and have kind of better relations. Even though a number of issues are still lingering between two countries, they understand it is imperative to improve their relations with Japan. But that has been challenges as well. And even though there is a little level of kind of consensus that it is, it is necessary to improve their relationship with Japan, at the public level, it has not been politicized, especially by the opposition party. So that's another issues that Yoon administration has to face when it actually takes a kind of a larger role in the Indo-Pacific and take a kind of specific steps with, cooperate with Japan as well.

One, another challenge is the South Korea's internationalism as well. So considering its relationship with Japan, South Korea might think about moving out of this Northeast Asia parameters. As you can see from this Pacific four initiative, South Korea, especially under the Yoon administration, tried to take a larger role beyond the East Asia and beyond Indo-Pacific parameters and need to be kind of connected with our European partners as well. But given that there is a war in Ukraine, South Korean publics are kind of worried why we have to be there in the European theater, given that there is the likelihood that Russia might take a course of action to South Korea as well.

So it is a matter of the scope of internationalism. Well, South Korean publics are understand that we can take a larger role in the Western Pacific and Northeast Asia, but they are not really understood why South Korea has to be there in the European theater as well, given that there is another revisionist power in the European theater, Russia. So all of these kind of challenges are kind of working together to prepare South Korea to take a larger role in the Indo-Pacific and take the kind of more specific steps and more specific plans in the Indo-Pacific for South Korea these days.

Mireya Solís [00:17:21] I thought I had unmuted myself. Thank you very much Kuyoun for those very insightful sort of remarks. And certainly we've already got questions from the audience about the Japan Korea angle, and we'll go into that. And this allows me to remind our audience, please do send us our questions. We want to be sure to address the interests of the audience, and that's the best way we have to gauge where you would like us to take this conversation. And I also thought Kuyoun in your remark about this question as to what is the boundary, how far should we be leaning forward? Should we be thinking about our most immediate neighbor, or should we thinking about the Indo-Pacific? Or how does the situation in Ukraine then changes how South Korea conceives of its own international role? Very, very interesting.

So let me have this opportunity to bring you all into the conversation, to be able to interact with one another. And perhaps the best way to do this is to ask you what is new here? I mean, as Andrew mentioned, many countries now have come out with their own Indo-Pacific strategies. And the first thing I noted, probably from my own background, coming from doing a lot on Japan Andrew as you read your report, is that I mean, I'm used to thinking of FOIP, the free and open Indo-Pacific. That's sort of the package. I wonder if that's going to be the set-up objectives that South Korea uses or is it going to have its own set of objectives? And even when you have the United States and Japan, for example, using the same term, you could actually make the case that the way they operationalize

their strategy is different. Japan has had a stronger economic engagement component than the United States.

So if we start to unpack what we can expect the Korean version of the Indo-Pacific strategy to be, are there going to be any distinctive traits or is it going to be very much fully aligned with what we see other countries doing in the region? So whoever would like to take that one first?

Andrew Yeo [00:19:28] I can take a first stab at that. And so on one hand, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, it complements all the other strategies that are already out there. Canada just came out. I didn't realize it, but Canada came out with the Indo-Pacific strategy last week also, so we're seeing more and more. But there is, all of these strategies have some attention to, you know, a rules-based order about freedom, there's an economic component you know talking about economic security and also a strategic component. I do want to say and I say this without having actually read or seen South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy yet, because it hasn't been formally released, but based on his conversations with officials from, from MOFA in interviews that I did for this report and study, I do think that the angle on freedom and democracy is going to be I think people will be surprised to see South Korea highlighting that facet or that dimension of the strategy. Again, I haven't seen it, so I could be wrong, but, but one sign for this is that we've, we've heard that South Korea will help co-host the Summit for Democracy with the Biden administration.

And as Victor mentioned in all of the major foreign policy speeches that Yoon has given, he's used the word freedom, actually, my research assistant, Hanna, did an analysis of this, but he's freedom more than a dozen times in a short speech. So I really think that this is going to be highlighted, and that brings out the values orientation of the strategy. And I don't think that the Europeans who have come out with their strategy, they don't, I mean, values are important to them, but they don't emphasize that or they're not foot stomping that in their strategy. I still think they're a little bit cautious in how they want to frame this. So in some ways, it's as if the Yoon government has latched on to the values-based diplomacy. So that will come out, I think, in the strategy. And I do think that there will be some attention to the technology.

So on the economic side, South Korea's comparative advantage is really in areas like critical and emerging technologies and supply chain semiconductors. And South Korea recognizes this. So I think we'll see, I don't know how detailed they'll be, but it sounds like they'll emphasize that a bit more. And when it comes to, you know, trying to build coalitions, you know, this is something that maybe

Koreans can help, help lead. There's already, it's already a crowded space in terms of different coalitions and groupings, which Korea has not really been fully a part of since the building of this Indo-Pacific network over the last five, five or six years. But, but I think that's one area where South Korea can highlight.

Victor Cha [00:22:18] Yeah. I just add, just to pick up where Andrew left off and Mireya's question of like sort of how will this be different? I didn't bring it with me, but we did this chart of all of the, Andrew seen it, right? This chart of all these coalitions, these multilateral dialogues that were started in Asia, you know, things like the blue dot network, the clean network, you know, all these things connecting all the major democracies in Asia and, and Korea was significant because it was not connected to any of them. Right. It was connected to none of them. And so that what's different now is that's definitely changing, right? Because as Dr. Chung said, you know, the, the, the Yoon government sees a clear connection between their bilateral relationship with Japan and plugging into all of these networks so that, you know. So that's one.

The other is that, you know, it's been traditional Korean foreign policy to sort of be very tactical with regard to China. Right. A lot of hedging. Right. Even when, even when the previous government announced their, their southern diplomacy. Right. When they announced their southern diplomacy, they, they you know, they would not support the free and open Indo-Pacific, but they announced their southern diplomacy. And then the summit between Moon and Biden. They said that the, the southern diplomacy connected with the free and open Indo-Pacific, but only on sort of economic and cultural issues. So they clearly tried to hedge on the security issues. So this Indo-Pacific strategy, when it comes out, that's one of the things you're going to look for is, for one, I think Andrew is right. It's going to amplify the focus on values-based diplomacy, freedom and democracy.

But what are they going to say on the security issues like freedom of navigation, like, you know, the Taiwan Straits, these sorts of things? An early indication is the Phnom Penh statement, the Cambodia statement that came out between Biden, Kishida and Yoon, which made very clear statements about Taiwan, about democracy, about security. You know, that that's a significant document. That's a very, as Mireya, you know well, we have not seen something like that among the three leaders and that's so far ranging. Right. And I think that's an early indicator of sort of where this Indo-Pacific strategy, this Indo-Pacific strategy will come out. So I think it's, it's quite different.

Again, part of it, I think, is related to Yoon and his personal views on this. Level one leaders do matter, but the other part of it, you know, one could argue, is that there is so much instability in the external environment, you know, the war in Europe, China, Taiwan, there's so much instability, and up until recently, lots of concerns about US domestic politics. Right. The return of Trump and all that, which I think has now been basically nullified by the midterm results. But a lot of uncertainty. And what do states do when there's a great deal of uncertainty? They try to find a way to, to, to seek more, to plug more into and find assurances in the existing institutions. And so I think one could even argue that while Yoon certainly is behind a lot of this, one could even argue that the external environment is such that almost any leader might have felt compelled to be more connected to the networks in the region, given the uncertainty in the external environment.

Kuyoun Chung [00:25:48] Yeah, I can pick up from what just Victor Cha mentions about Yoon's administration positions and actually President Yoon emphasized multiple times about actually rule based orders in the Indo-Pacific area, which is pretty different from the previous administrations. And from that context, actually, Yoon's administration emphasized maritime security and maritime law enforcement in ASEAN's, ASEAN area, as well as the rest of the Indo-Pacific area as well, which shows that South Korea is no longer kind of hedging between US and China and take a more clearer positions against Chinese revisionism in the region. That's a kind of, one kind of differences that Yoon administration is taking in terms of Indo-Pacific strategy.

But at the same time, MOFA and especially the MOFA, is taking a kind of a cautious approach when it comes to the, when it comes to the issue of inclusiveness, even though they are taking a clearer position compared to the previous administrations, MOFA when they actually announces this Indo-Pacific strategy, they emphasize its inclusive factors as well, which shows that South Korea is not exclude any other countries in the region, including China.

Mireya Solís [00:27:20] Sorry, I keep forgetting. Thank you all. This is really great. And I have now so many questions that I want to ask you about. And I'll also start bringing some of the questions from the audience. But if I can pull some of the threads together, if South Korea is indeed moving towards a values based diplomacy and willing to call out perhaps in a much more explicit way, human rights violations, if it's going to lean on what is widely recognized, its technological prowess, and work with the United States in boosting economic and security capabilities, and perhaps and it's a question I'll go along with some of the recent actions on export controls, and I would love to hear your views on

that. This does indicate that a major and I think Kuyoun put it really well, that we don't have as much that hedging, that cautious attitude vis-a-vis in China. What will this do then to the South Korea China relationship? And is the Yoon government prepared to navigate some of the turbulence that might be coming from being more explicitly converging toward some of the parameters of U.S. policy in the region?

Victor Cha [00:28:43] So I'll go first. I mean, so I think the dilemma that this poses for Korea, right? Hedging, hedging tries to, you know, hedging strategy tries to minimize costs. And then when you start making choices, you start to have to bear the costs of that, particularly when, you know, when one of the countries, when you're hedging is going to impose costs and may retaliate against you. So I think, you know, this is something that is most likely coming. And but it's you know, and, and it's, it will be triggered by as Mireya, as you said, you know, the many of these new economic security initiatives that are being led by the United States. First it's the export controls on semiconductors, but as we know, the intention of the administration is to expand this to other areas biotech, quantum computing, A.I., you know, a whole bunch of other issues. And these will be difficult choices very clearly for both. I mean, it's challenging for the South Koreans in two respects one in terms of the government, because it would be a clear sort of choice that was being made.

And the other is, you know, once you make the choice wrangling the, the, the companies, the private sector to do what the government wants, which is not an easy feat in Korea, unlike Japan, where there's a lot of cooperation between big business and government, that's less the case in Korea. So, so it's, it's not easy in many respects. The, but I would sort of step back and say that that the costs or the threat that South Korea faces with regard to China is obviously not isolated to South Korea, and it actually applies to every country that would consider being part of these secure supply chains and protection of high-end commanding heights technology. They'll all be subject and potentially vulnerable to Chinese economic retaliation, China will find a vulnerability somewhere and use economic, economic coercion so that, it's not something that only South Korea has to deal with, it's something that everybody that everybody has to deal with.

And so in a blatant act of self-promotion, I'll say that in the January-February issue of Foreign Affairs, I have an article coming out looking at this whole question of how to blunt how to stop Chinese economic coercion among the 16 countries that have been the victims of Chinese economic coercion, because we need to come up with a strategy to deal with that, if any of these efforts are going to be

successful, whether we're talking about secure supply chains or protecting commanding heights technology, we have that has to be complemented with a strategy for dealing with Chinese economic coercion. I have some specific comments on what I think Korea should do on export controls and semiconductors, but I'll, I'll hold that until we hear from what other people have to say.

Andrew Yeo [00:31:52] And just briefly add to what Victor says. I'll be quick here. But on one hand, you know, what Kuyoun mentioned is the term inclusivity. And I think South Korea is very cognizant of the fact that they don't want to make this really about anti-China position. And so they, they do want to still work with China. I think there will be some caution. But at the same time, there, there is this safety in numbers effect. And South Korea back in 2017, when they were facing economic coercion, was really perceived by China as the weakest link. And so they were targeted by China. No, China went after other countries like Australia as well too later. But I think it's different in 2022. Now you see this network of Indo-Pacific, like minded allies and partners, and it's going to be much harder for Korea or excuse me, much harder for China to really direct such economic coercion at only, only in South Korea. So I think there are some calculations, it's a calculated bet on the part of the Yoon government that if they join together with other like-minded partners, that there could be some response, effective response to China and Chinese economic coercion that didn't exist just five, five years ago.

Kuyoun Chung [00:33:07] Yeah, actually, I agree with Dr. Yeo about his point. And actually, the Yoon administration tried to take a more cautious kind of Chinese policy at this moment, given that we still were kind of maintaining free trade agreement with China. And at the same time, China is very important in starting a dialogue with North Korea as well. So in that sense, it is not possible to decouple our relations with China at this moment, but at the same time, Yoon administration is taking a much stronger position toward China. Recently, recently, he said that China will face more U.S. strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula if it does not, if it is not kind of helping us kind of starting a dialogue with North Korea. So which means that South Korea is more aligned with the United States in terms of dealing with China at this moment.

So and this is kind of a lesson, as Dr. Yeo mentions, that is a kind of lesson from 2016 at that deployment, kind of economic coercion issue. We don't want to be a kind of weak link in the kind of U.S. led coalition subnetwork. We will be more aligned with the U.S. and other like-minded countries so that we can have better leverage and kind of more secure in terms of our network.

Mireya Solís [00:34:32] Thank you very much. We received a significant amount of questions from the audience and I think I highlight, I identify three major topics and I want to make sure we try to address all of them. So I want to put them in your radar. One is the Japan South Korea relationship because again, as Kuyoun mentioned, Japan is very networked in the region and South Korea now is attempting to play a larger role, improving that bilateral relationship is an important step along the way. So that's one topic I'll turn to. Then there's a fair amount of questions about South Korea's military role, where defense transfer agreements are playing a, a larger role in military exercises in the region, not just circumscribed to the peninsula. That's sort of a topic of interest to several people in the audience. And then how is Korea going to latch on to the regional architecture? And it can be quad plus, it can be CPTPP. So that's sort of a set of issues that I'm going to try to make sure we cover.

And if there's time, we might go to something else. But for example, we have Alexander Liebke from the European Council of Foreign Relations and he asked, how does Japan view South Korea's heightened interest in the Indo-Pacific and David Boiling of the Eurasia Growth asks what are the prospects for Japan Korea relations to improve, given Kishida's low approval ratings. So again, we find ourselves in a situation where both leaders are having very difficult domestic contexts and that may play a role in how they think about patching up relations. And I know Andrew and Victor, I think you've been in a conference the past couple of days where these topics have been discussed. If we can take the opportunity to then also hear from you. I would just make a couple of observations. I do think that there's interest, a strong interest in Japan in seeing South Korea develop these broader Indo-Pacific strategy. I also took note, as Victor you mentioned, of that really important trilateral statement where I thought it was well done in the sense that they clearly identify the major regional issues where there is alignment in views, alignment of interests. And I think that's a very important statement. The language they use, for example, on economic coercion that we stand as one when it comes to economic coercion, I thought that was new. And where this can actually be implemented in that way, I think it's significant to follow.

Having said that, we all know that there are still some outstanding bilateral issues that are sensitive. And my sense is the Kishida administration is still taking a wait and see to see how, for example, the Supreme Court, court cases regarding forced labor during the war, the compensation for that, how that plays out, and they're trying to find a solution in a way in which that can no longer be an

obstacle to the improvement of relations. So I would say that what I took from that trilateral statement is that there is indeed a strong appetite in Japan to see South Korea step up to do this, that they welcome identification of common interest. We know that there are trade tensions, especially on the export control issue and the launch of economic security dialogue, might be good news in terms of addressing that. But again, it's always, we always go back to these issues, the comfort women issue, the forced labor issue and the current political manifestations that stand in the way. But I welcome either Andrew or Victor or Kuyoun, if you have comments on the South Korea Japan angle to the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Andrew Yeo [00:38:30] Mireya, I'm so glad you weighed in because I know you're the perfect person to really look at this from Japan's perspective. And as you mentioned, Victor and I are here at the Trans-Pacific Dialogue with Japanese and Korean former government officials, academics, experts, and I think your reading is it's correct, it comports with what I, I'm hearing and seeing here and that there is foreign momentum on Japan Korea bilateral relations. There's also on the trilateral relationship, I think the Phnom Penh statement is a trilateral on the trilateral and the Indo-Pacific, I think that's a good starting point to look at where things are heading moving forward. So at the government level, there's definitely political will I think to improve that relationship and certainly from the Yoon government, but then also from Kishida as well too.

But you know, at the domestic level, I think that's where there may be some issues for both sides and even for Kishida, it's not like his approval rating is that great as well. And when I speak with my Japanese interlocutors, they also tell me that domestic level there is, still is this Japan or excuse me, Korea, a bit of a Korea fatigue. And so they will eventually have to get to the historical issues. And I don't know if that will change the dynamics. And if I may, just with the report, I mean, one of the things that I want to foot stomp is that I do think Japan is an important part of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. It's clear that within the region, a lot of countries look at Japan as being kind of a leader, you know, aside from the United States. And if Japan were to accept Korea as part of this network or embrace Korea as part of this network, it would, it would give the Yoon government, I think, a lot more leverage and credibility to also be seen as an Indo-Pacific player. So that's why I think this Korea Japan piece is absolutely critical to South Korea's Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific strategy. Victor, I saw that you had unmuted yourself. So I don't know if you want to add anything from your insights at Trans-Pacific dialogue.

Victor Cha [00:40:34] Yeah. So a few things. I think that the, the first is that, you know, we all, we all know that like in our theory and in policy, costly signaling is credible. Right. And so there has been costly signaling by the Yoon government for the desire to improve relations with Japan, with Japan. I mean, if you go back to the August 15th Liberation Day speech, really extraordinary speech, right where he, he basically said we need to work to the future and the past will take care of itself. I mean, that's like, you know, that's bordering on like political suicidal language and in Korean domestic politics. So that's very costly signaling. Now, I agree with Mireya that, you know, the Japanese have been a little bit sitting on their hands. But I think that's changed, that's changing now because they see this costly signaling.

And so I think the prospects are good, the economic security dialogue is certainly going to be one of the ways to handle the export control issue, the bilateral dialogue taking place between Seoul and Tokyo on dealing with comfort women in labor compensation like I have no window into that, but I thought it was significant that that Aso Taro visited South Korea when it when was it? Last month? You know, I thought that was a pretty significant step. So I think everybody is hopeful there. And then the United States on the trilateral side has been doing all it can to promote trilateral dialogues. We heard yesterday that the that there had been what was the number, 22, right. Since the Biden administration has come, there have been 22 trilateral engagements between the United States, Japan and South Korea. Really an extraordinary number, right? 22 of those. So there's clearly a lot of lot of effort there.

And I would say in terms of Andrew's last point about Japan, like if Japan were to embrace Korea and their interest in them reconnecting to these networks in the Indo-Pacific, you know, I would say that that's not just desirable for Japan, it's necessary because if we are going to have, you know, coordination on things like export controls, on semi high end semiconductor technology, Korea is a critical player. It's not going to work if Korea is not, you know, Korea is not a part of it, if Taiwan is not a part of it, if the Dutch are not a part of it. It's absolutely critical that Korea be a part of this effort. So there are you know, there is what is desirable and there's what is necessary in terms of embracing this effort by Korea to reconnect to their network. And I think for Japan and for the United States, it's desirable, but it's necessary to accomplish the things that we want to accomplish vis a vis, vis a vis China.

Mireya Solís [00:43:29] Thank you both. Let me then, because time is flying. We only have 10 minutes left in our conversation. Let me talk about a larger defense or military role for South Korea. For example, Jessica Got from Princeton University asked whether we can expect a larger regional military role beyond North Korea. And also David Iwatta asks about arms sales to Poland, Australia, does that indicate that South Korea is going to play a larger role on that, not just as a middle power with economic and technological powers, but also now with a more robust defense and security cooperation posture.

Victor Cha [00:44:17] Sure. I'll go first. So on, on both of these questions on, Jess, thank you Jess for the question, Jess is a former student of mine and she was also a strategy adviser for the USFK commander, now doing her Ph.D. at Princeton. So I think in general, this desire to play a larger role is not simply limited to economics and economic security, economics, culture. You know, Korean pop culture is so prevalent and popular, it does go into the security field. You know, arms sales to arms sales to Poland, you know, these arms sales to Australia are certainly part of a very ambitious defense industrial effort to for Korea to be a major arms supplier around the world. But I don't think it's just commercial, right. I think it's part of an effort to be to play a role as a responsible stakeholder, something, by the way, that Japan has limitations in doing. Right. And so I think that's important.

Like I said earlier, personally, I would like to see the Koreans do more in Ukraine. I would like to see them do more besides simply protective equipment and humanitarian assistance. I would like to see them do more lethal support for the for the operations in Ukraine, because it's necessary, there's help that is needed that is needed there. So I think but I think this is broadly and these are broadly important steps going forward for Korea. It's the sixth strongest military in the world. So we should expect them to do more. And it's not unusual for Korea in the sense that, you know, Korea has fought with the United States in every war since the Korean War in some capacity. So I think it's an important part of their wanting to play a larger role, and it's an important part of values-based diplomacy.

Kuyoun Chung [00:46:19] Yeah. I'll add to, what Victor measures about sales. At this moment, South Korea emphasized arms sales as a very important component of its foreign policy. But at the same time, at this moment, it doesn't have that much a strategic aspect yet. But the Yoon administration is emphasizing how they're going to kind of put this issue in the kind of strategic context. They just begin to consider how they're going to work on in the Indo-Pacific perspective, its

movements. And aside from that larger role of South Korean military, so beyond Northeast Asia, that's a kind of critical issue. So it is, of course, South Korea acknowledged that it is not possible to kind of take a larger role without military component.

But at the same time, the first time they come up with is the kind of Taiwan issue, whether if there's a contingency in Taiwan, which is beyond actually in Northeast Asia, South Korea has, whether South Korea has to send their military forces or not, that is kind of first thing that South Korea MOD is kind of working on. And other than that, they are also working on whether South Korea needs to send the kind of military forces to Ukraine and other and other kind of disputed area that is kind of connected to the U.S. strategy considerations. So that's, so South Korea is considering the Pacific strategy and try to move out of this theater. But at the same time, they're not sure how far they have to kind of involved in the international kind of dispute that is related to United States.

Mireya Solís [00:47:58] Thank you, Kuyoun. So let me then go to the next set of issues that has to do with how to latch on to the regional architecture. Victor, you mentioned, and I think I've seen the graph that you're referring to, a briefing we had where you show how South Korea is not connected to these main laterals. And, you know, again, as a self-advertisement, Andrew and I were part of an effort at Brookings on the Global China Project, and we just released a report on recommendations for a U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. And there one of the trends that we highlighted is minilateralism and how, you know, a region when you had the hub and spoke alliance system, now you're beginning to see more of the horizontal connections on security dialogues, but certainly on the economic agenda. And the idea is, therefore, that there is this connective tissue in the region. And if South Korea is going to play a larger role, it should be part of it, it should be shaping it and certainly should not be marginalized from it.

But South Korea is not part, for example, of the CPTPP. And for example, we have a question from a professor, Bart Etis, and I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, from McGill University and asks whether the Yoon government will make a move or not make a formal application for the CPTPP. That's one question and I would like to put for all of you. The other question has to do with the quad, and for a long time there was a lot of discussion about perhaps a quad plus possibility so that South Korea could join some of the working groups where South Korea has a lot to contribute. That discussion doesn't seem to be as prominent these days, perhaps have fizzled a bit.

And another question I have is about IPEF, and we know that the South Korea is indeed a founding participant of a member of IPEF. But there's also been some tensions with the U.S. because of the Inflation Reduction Act and the tax incentives that discriminate against South Korean and European and Japanese firms. Is that affecting how South Korea thinks of IPEF? How could, what are the opportunities that South Korea sees broadly about IPEF to perhaps have a major move towards indeed becoming embedded in the regional architecture?

Andrew Yeo [00:50:40] So, Mireya, I'll briefly go through all three on this. CPTPP. Yes, South Korea is considering joining that, I think maybe six months ago, a year ago, I think there was more discussion about becoming a member. I know there are other countries like the UK that was also in line, China had also mentioned it as well too. I haven't heard that much discussion now but at the Trans-Pacific Dialogue here, one of the recommendations was to have Japan or the Japanese to actually ask or invite South Korea to become a part of the CPTPP. So that might change the Yoon government's calculus on whether to decide to join or not. But they certainly are weighing that that option.

On, on the quad plus format, you're absolutely correct. I think earlier this spring, when Yoon was elected or even during his campaign, he talked about Korea even possibly joining the quad. I think that was quickly dismissed or put on the backburner. But there was then this quad plus argument that Korea should be a part of the working groups. I do think that Korea is informed and through these working groups, but from what I've heard from other quad countries is that right now they're focusing on the fore and building up the relationships within the quad. And so South Korea, although it may become part of the conversation through these working groups, they aren't really talking about this quad plus format so much these days. So I think we've moved past that. And it's a question of how else can Korea contribute to this coalition?

And so that's where we get to the IPEF. That's where maybe Korea can play a role. And I've been hearing more on the US side about Korea and maybe playing more of a leadership or taking on more of a leadership role in the digital space, because that's something that Korea, it's been an important part, or player, player in but, but like other Asian countries I do think that there's, you know, Koreans also feel that they wish there could be something more, they wish there could be market access from the US, they wish that the U.S. would say more about, about trade. But, you know, as as

you know, the Japanese have also been saying that this is what we have and this is what we have to work with. So let's just make the best, best of it.

And on the Inflation Reduction Act, yes, that's Koreans came out very you know, they felt that they were backstabbed. There is a lot of ruckus, commotion, anger, a sense of betrayal in Korea. They're still discussing that with the United States. As you know, I don't know if you know this, but the trade minister was in, he may still be in D.C. to have another round of negotiations with the U.S. about the Inflation Reduction Act, although I do think the situation is coming down a bit because the Koreans, at least they should recognize that in the long term, IRA could be beneficial for many South Korean companies.

I think in the short term there definitely will be some economic losses, financial losses for Korean companies, especially automakers like Hyundai. But I do think that the US side is really trying to discuss how the IRA wasn't it wasn't intentional to try to hurt these foreign, foreign companies. And so I do, I don't know if there's going to be any change or shift on the on the legislation itself. But I, but they are still working out that issue. And I do think that at least the initial anger or strong reaction that Koreans felt may have may have been placated a bit, but it doesn't mean that they're still concerned about, about this issue.

Mireya Solís [00:54:16] Thank you very much for that overall assessment, Andrew and we are time, but I do want to give Victor and Kuyoun a minute if there's anything that you would like to add in closing.

Victor Cha [00:54:28] Yeah. I'll just add that the I think what Andrew said on all these things makes sense. I would add three quick points. First is on the quad. Korea has a lot to contribute to the quad agenda and I don't think the Yoon administration has given up on it. I mean, Foreign Minister Park Jin still talks about a quint every now and then, so I don't think they've given up on it, although I do agree that it's kind of fallen by the wayside for now.

The second, on the question of [inaudible] CPTPP, yeah, I think these are all important for Korea to be a part of, but where the real action will be, will be on right now, I think on sort of coalescing around export controls and whether there can be some sort of group that can be pulled together because this is something where it's in the interests of these countries to really engage with the United States and say, let's talk about how we do this together. Not like the IRA, where the US makes a decision, and everybody has to deal with the aftereffects of that.

And then finally on the IRA, I would say that, so I would direct your listeners to, to go to our website. We had in that conversation we had with Jake Sullivan, we talk specifically about IRA. And one of the things he did say in that conversation was that they were looking to try to address Korean and French concerns within the context of the current law. So not opening up new legislation, but within the context of the current law. At least that's the message that I took away.

Mireya Solís [00:56:00] To Kuyoun.

Kuyoun Chung [00:56:01] Yeah, I'll add some of the points that when it comes to Quad and as Victor mentioned, South Korea still didn't give up. We are still willing to join any multilateral led by United States and like-minded countries, as you can see from Pacific four initiative. And also when it comes to IRA, South Koreans understand that it is not just about kind of losing the game. We are kind of benefiting from this initiative as well it's kind of offsetting. And in the long term, anyway, we are in the supplier side in this, in this chain. And so it's not just about kind of complaining, but we are beginning to understand how it actually works at the kind of as a supplier position.

Mireya Solís [00:56:46] Well, thank you all. This has been really a wonderful, insightful conversation, and I appreciate you sharing your insights with our audience. And thank you, everybody, for joining. Have a good day or night.