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THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH

From New Southern Policy
to the Indo-Pacific Strategy

DR. TUNCHINMANG LANGEL







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**The Republic of Korea's Foreign Policy Approach:
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ABSTRACT



This research paper delves into the ever-changing nature of the Republic of Korea's (ROK) foreign policy specifically in relation to its transition from the New Southern Policy (NSP) to the Indo-Pacific Strategy. By examining its global interactions, relationships, alliances and challenges, the paper explores how the ROK's policy decisions have been shaped by the regional and global undercurrents. The study provides an analysis of the ROK's foreign policy choices from Moon Jae-in's presidency to Yoon Suk-yeol's term, assessing their alignment with security priorities, middle power status, aspirations of becoming a "Global Pivotal State", evolving interests and the global security landscape. From the implementation of the NSP to embracing the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework this research offers an examination of the ROK's approach to foreign affairs. Ultimately it highlights how foreign policy reflects a nation's ability to juggle needs, regional powers and international obligations while demonstrating evolution either through progress or continuity.

INTRODUCTION



Foreign policy can be defined as the consolidation of a set of principles, policies, decisions, and a thought-out course of actions adopted by a nation-state to secure and preserve its goals of national interest in international relations. Foreign policy decision-making of any nation-state is generally influenced by their domestic priorities as well as their international considerations. Often the elements in question are in unison, leading to a cohesive foreign policy that guides a nation's relations with other countries while securing its own national interests. As there are several dimensions that are constantly changing over a period of time, it also necessitates that a country's foreign policy choices continuously evolve to remain consistent with the dynamic influences.

This Sapru House research paper delves into the foreign policy approach of South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea (ROK). The research primarily focuses on the New Southern Policy (NSP) of the previous Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022) and studies the progression or continuity towards the "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific".¹ This Indo-Pacific Strategy was announced on 11 November 2022 by the current administration under President Yoon Suk-yeol at the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Cambodia. On 28 December 2022, the Yoon Suk-yeol

1 *Yonhap News Agency*, 2022, "White House hails S. Korea's own Indo-Pacific Strategy, expects stronger security ties", 28 December 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221228005052325?section=national/diplomacy>



administration unveiled the official public version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy.² The strategy document emphasises how the ROK is aspiring to become a “Global Pivotal State”, which means it would “actively seek out agendas for cooperation and play a larger role in shaping discussions regionally as well as globally”.³

Consequently, Seoul has sought out a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Vietnam to celebrate their 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2022. With Japan, it is on the path of reconciliation through a future-oriented approach as the increasing North Korean nuclear threat and its conventional attacking capabilities further destabilise the region. After a long hiatus of 12 years, the Republic of Korea and Japan had three Summit-level meetings in a span of two months⁴ by May 2023, soon after the relationship was reinvigorated with the first Summit meeting on 16 March 2023.⁵ The increasing frequency since 2022 resulted in ROK and Japan having their fifth bilateral Summit-level meeting in August 2023 at Camp David.

India and the ROK also marked their 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2023, and the new Indo-Pacific Strategy unveiled by ROK has also called for advancing their Special Strategic Partnership. Additionally, ROK’s President Yoon Suk-yeol completed a six-

2 *The Korea Times*, 2022, “Seoul seeks cautious balance in US, China ties via Indo-Pacific Strategy”, 29 December 2022, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/12/120_342566.html

3 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

4 *Prime Minister’s Office of Japan*, 2023, “Japan-ROK Summit Meeting (Summary)”, 21 May 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/diplomatic/202305/21rok.html

5 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 2023, “Japan-ROK Summit Meeting”, 16 March 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page1e_000593.html

day tour to the United States in April 2023, which was the first in 12 years by any Head of State of the ROK.⁶ The State visit was to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the US-ROK alliance, and it arrived at a crucial juncture of increasing geopolitical conflagrations such as the Ukraine-Russia conflict, as well as the rising nuclear tensions in the Korean Peninsula. With the Washington Declaration on nuclear deterrence being signed during the visit, President Yoon Suk-yeol declared it as an upgrade of the US-ROK security alliance to a new paradigm based on nuclear deterrence.⁷ Building upon the momentum of their proactive strategic outreach and security initiatives the ROK government under Yoon Suk-yeol released its official National Security Strategy (NSS)⁸ on 7 June 2023.⁹ As such, this research will attempt to perceive whether the ROK has undergone at least a gradual, if not a drastic, progression or continuity in its foreign policy approaches in order to stake a claim for a larger global strategic role amidst the shifting undercurrents of geopolitics.

It is important to acknowledge that the ROK faced much adversity in the past to arrive at the global heights where it stands today.

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- 6 Steve Inskeep and Anthony Kuhn, 2022, "South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to hold meetings with President Biden", *NPR*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/26/1172113888/south-korean-president-yoon-suk-yeol-to-hold-meetings-with-president-biden>
 - 7 *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2023, "Yoon Suk Yeol says Washington Declaration upgrades alliance", 2 May 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/05/02/national/diplomacy/KoreaUS-summit-Yoon-Suk-Yeol-Washington-Declaration/20230502183306402.html>
 - 8 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, 2023, "The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy: Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity", 8 June 2023, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1
 - 9 *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2023, "Yoon government releases first security strategy paper", 7 June 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/06/07/national/politics/Korea-National-Security-Strategy-Yoon-Suk-Yeol/20230607184116614.html>



The study therefore analyses the foreign policy decisions of the ROK since Moon Jae-in's term to Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency.

With the history of the Cold War and the Korean War that ensued from it, the ROK became an alliance partner of the United States. As a result, Seoul's policy responses had to be aligned with that of the US. Additionally, the rising military presence and economic growth of China have resulted in the ROK once again getting caught between major powers such as the US, China and even Japan. Any nation-states' pursuit of foreign policy objectives permeates from its ability to manoeuvre strategic relations to enhance its role in the international community, which is often stymied by constraints that are a combination of both intrinsic and instrumental reasons.¹⁰

The research draws upon insights from the available scholarship on ROK's pursuit of global relations. In the common corollary propositions, the formulation and strengthening of foreign policy are reflective of a nation-state's capacity to effectively manage domestic requirements, regional powers and its global commitments. The pursuit of it is then substantiated through the spectrum of progression or continuity. The study therefore analyses the foreign policy decisions of the ROK since Moon Jae-in's term to Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency. It explores whether ROK's foreign policy decision-making has been cohesive with their national security priorities, their middle power status, the evolution of

10 John Bennett Brake, 2022, "Prestige and the Restraint of Power in International Relations", *University of Cambridge*, April 2022, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.86969>

their national interests, and the global security environment. This research paper covers the period from the NSP to the acceptance of the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework to obtain a unit-level analysis of ROK's foreign policy approach.

Taking into perspective the foreign policy approaches under the Moon Jae-in administration between 2017 and 2022, and the current administration under Yoon Suk-yeol, the study principally explores three sections upon which ROK's foreign policy approach is being premised for this research. The first section examines how ROK perceived the geopolitical expanse of its foreign policy frontiers in the recent past. The second section looks into the context of ROK's foreign policy measures, which have been designed at the crossroads of autonomy and alliance diplomacy as it evolves from the middle power status into a "Global Pivotal State". It highlights the changes, progression and continuity in the foreign policy approaches of ROK. It deals with in detail the context of ROK's foreign policy approach, which as per the study is on the path from middle power diplomacy to undertaking commitments towards global leadership through the aspiration of a "Global Pivotal State". The third section explores the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework juxtaposed with ROK's quest for security, peace, prosperity and foreign relations. The fourth section explores the India-ROK relations amidst the shift in foreign policy approaches of Seoul since 2017. The final section is the conclusion, which surmises the study and provides an overall analysis of the findings. As such, the study will focus on the foreign policy approach of ROK from the point of view of the external environment and put an emphasis on how the



In the 21st century, as a result of its democratisation and the onset of economic globalisation, ROK undertook dynamic transformations in its domestic policies, which consequently helped re-shape its foreign policy approaches.

international system or the structure of that system has shaped the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea.

1. GEOPOLITICAL EXPANSES OF ROK'S FOREIGN POLICY FRONTIERS



Over the past 70-plus years since the Republic of Korea government was established in 1948, the country has transformed itself from one of the most impoverished nations to an economic powerhouse and an exemplar of liberal democracy.¹¹ As a result of which, ROK has grown significantly in terms of national power and its status in the international community, and had been considered as a middle power.¹² In the 21st century, as a result of its democratisation and the onset of economic globalisation, ROK undertook dynamic transformations in its domestic policies, which consequently helped re-shape its foreign policy approaches.

With the focus of this study on the recent past since 2017, the research begins with how the ROK started to exercise a degree of

11 *Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS)*, 2022, "Transition to a Democracy and Transformation into an Economic Powerhouse", <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Transition-Democracy-Transformation-Economic-Powerhouse>

12 YH Kim, 2019, "Diplomatic Achievement of the Republic of Korea and Challenges in the Twenty-First Century", In: *South Korea's 70-Year Endeavor for Foreign Policy, National Defense, and Unification*, Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1990-7_3

autonomy through pursuing lesser dependency on its alliance with the US, under the Moon Jae-in administration. Seoul was seemingly departing from traditional diplomatic methods of bandwagoning. ROK as a middle power approached global and regional agendas but with constraints on tangible strategic manoeuvres. The Moon Jae-in government chose to find an independent route separate from its conventional partnerships to mobilise international pressure on North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. It sought to appease the Pyongyang leadership through a policy centred on dialogue without external influences. The country then looked beyond their traditional trade partners, such as the US, China, Russia, and Japan, in an attempt to expand cooperation with ASEAN and India. The NSP was introduced as a diversification initiative primarily with an economic focus, and it lacked agencies to engage regional and global politico-security issues. Thereafter, the research pursues how ROK's foreign policy approach evolved into a more Indo-Pacific centric framework once the Yoon Suk-yeol government took over in May 2022. President Yoon Suk-yeol set the outline of developing ROK as a "Global Pivotal State" that would "actively seek out agendas for cooperation and play a larger role in shaping discussions regionally as well as globally while embracing the Indo-Pacific".¹³ The new approach is observed as a transition from its traditional status of middle power, emphasising projection upon hard power. In the changing nature of the world order, ROK under President Yoon has given priority to expanding and substantiating cooperation with the US, NATO and even Japan. Abandoning Moon's strategic

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region", 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1



Abandoning Moon's strategic ambiguity, President Yoon has aligned ROK's national interests to undertake decisions based on strategic autonomy regarding not just North Korea but also the increasing geopolitical realities of the Indo-Pacific.

ambiguity, President Yoon has aligned ROK's national interests to undertake decisions based on strategic autonomy regarding not just North Korea but also the increasing geopolitical realities of the Indo-Pacific.

New Southern Policy

On 9 May 2017, Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party won the 19th presidential elections of the Republic of Korea with 41.08 per cent of votes. He was elected at the back of the massive political and financial scandal that had led to the impeachment of Park Gyun-he, thus ending a decade of conservative rule in ROK.¹⁴ With the landslide victory, Moon Jae-in sought to address the public demands of reforming the politico-economic structure, which he had earlier emphasised would be his aim to “overcome the current crisis of security, diplomacy and the economy and rebuild the nation”.¹⁵

With President Moon Jae-in beginning his term, Seoul was stated to be dealing with what his administration considered as a static

14 Charlie Campbell, 2017, “Moon Jae-in Elected South Korea's New President by Landslide”, *Time*, 9 May 2017, <https://time.com/4771881/moon-jae-in-president-election-south-korea/>

15 *Time*, 2017, “Will South Korean Presidential Hopeful Moon Jae-in Pull the World Back from Nuclear War?”, 15 April 2017, <https://time.com/4745910/south-korea-elections-moon-jae-in/>

foreign and trade policy that centred around only a few countries such as the US, China, Japan and Russia. Between 2015 and 2017, it is reported that the US and China together accounted for 38.1 per cent of ROK's total exports, and in terms of total value of exports and imports as well, China and the US together accounted for 35 per cent.¹⁶ Moreover, ROK was experiencing difficulties with China due to the THAAD missile defence system deployment issue in 2016, and the Trump administration with its "America First" policy had also constrained ROK's exports to the US. The THAAD deployment was to project a deterrence capability against the increasing threats of nuclear tests and missile launches by North Korea. However, under the Moon Jae-in administration, the THAAD became a hindrance in approaches towards China and North Korea. China had even imposed a travel ban on ROK due to the diplomatic row over THAAD. Regarding North Korea, President Moon Jae-in's policy was centred on dialogue that strived to engage in talks with North Korea to de-escalate tensions, which further added to the resulting review of the THAAD deployment for a short while during the initial days of Moon Jae-in presidency. The induction of the Trump administration also introduced an increase in the US-China trade rivalry, in addition to the "America First" policy of protectionist measures impacting trade. With the former US President Donald Trump having long accused China of unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft, Trump's presidency opened the doors for dialling up the rhetoric and eventually imposing tariff and trade

16 Sungil Kwak, 2018, "Korea's New Southern Policy: Vision and Challenges", *Korea Institute for International Economic Policy*, 12 November 2018, https://think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/9407/KIEPopinions_no146.pdf?sequence=1



barriers on China. Such a scenario created further pressure for ROK to diplomatically balance between the US and China.

With China as ROK's largest trading partner and the US being its treaty alliance partner, ROK had been caught in the middle of balancing between the US and China trade war, which had the possibility of prolonging. These dependencies on a few countries specifically in terms of trade made ROK susceptible, leading the Moon Jae-in administration to come up with a different approach to their foreign policy. The Moon Jae-in administration therefore sought to diversify its foreign policy to "maximise its profits with confidence".¹⁷ The NSP was henceforth launched in November 2017 by President Moon Jae-in to expand ROK's geopolitical expanse and its scope of cooperation especially with the southern regions. It was aimed at strengthening South Korea's ties with India and ASEAN, while maintaining relations with the US and China. The NSP can be assessed as a strategic shift in ROK's foreign policy approaches aiming to diversify South Korea's diplomatic and economic relations beyond its traditional partners of the US, China, Japan and Russia in Northeast Asia, and balance it with new southern regions focusing on India and ASEAN.

Moon Jae-in administration's strategy to adopt the NSP was observed as misaligned with the global society shifting towards a more Indo-Pacific geostrategic orientation.

17 Sungil Kwak, 2018, "Korea's New Southern Policy: Vision and Challenges", *Korea Institute for International Economic Policy*, 12 November 2018, https://think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/9407/KIEPopinions_no146.pdf?sequence=1

However, Moon Jae-in administration's strategy to adopt the NSP was observed as misaligned with the global society shifting towards a more Indo-Pacific geostrategic orientation. Japan under late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had solidified the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" at Kenya in August 2016 by stating that "Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous".¹⁸ Even Australia had embraced the Indo-Pacific geostrategic concept in 2017 as published in their Foreign Policy White Paper,¹⁹ following which, the administration of former President of the United States Donald J. Trump outlined a vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" in November 2017 during a State visit to Vietnam.²⁰ Continuing with the shift, in June 2018 Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region during the Shangri-La Dialogue hosted at Singapore.²¹ Thereafter, the ASEAN grouping adopted the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in June 2019 at the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) held in Bangkok, Thailand.²²

18 Abe Shinzo, 2016, "Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 27 August 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af2/page4e_000496.html

19 *Australian Government*, 2017, "Foreign Policy White Paper", 23 November 2017, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/minisite/static/4ca0813c-585e-4fe1-86eb-de665e65001a/fpwhitepaper/foreign-policy-white-paper/prime-ministers-introduction.html>

20 *Department of State, United States of America*, 2019, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific", 4 November 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

21 *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 2020, "Indo-Pacific Division Briefs", 7 February 2020, https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf

22 ASEAN, 2019, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", 22 June 2019, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf



South Korea's administration under President Moon Jae-in had a lot of hesitancy and reluctance to even accept the mention of Indo-Pacific in a Joint Press Release between the US and ROK in November 2017.

It is worth mentioning that South Korea's administration under President Moon Jae-in had a lot of hesitancy and reluctance to even accept the mention of Indo-Pacific in a Joint Press Release between the US and ROK in November 2017.²³ The Press Release was stated to have one section that read: "*President Trump highlighted that the United States-Republic of Korea Alliance, built upon mutual trust and shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, remains a linchpin for security, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific*".²⁴ However, an official from the *Cheong Wa Dae* or Blue House had surprisingly remarked that the part in the statement was not jointly mentioned, and even suggested that President Moon did not sign his name down for the mentioning of "Indo-Pacific".²⁵ Consequently, there was a climb down in their position and it was clarified that Seoul and Washington would "explore areas of possible cooperation in the Indo-Pacific context".²⁶ This incident had clearly indicated that the government of ROK under Moon

23 *Trump White House Archives*, 2017, "Joint Press Release by the United States of America and the Republic of Korea", 8 November 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-press-release-united-states-america-republic-korea/>

24 Koh Byung-joon, 2017, "Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' vision poses dilemma for S. Korea", *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 November 2017, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20171110004000315>

25 Koh Byung-joon, 2017, "Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' vision poses dilemma for S. Korea", *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 November 2017, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20171110004000315>

26 Koh Byung-joon, 2017, "Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' vision poses dilemma for S. Korea", *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 November 2017, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20171110004000315>

Jae-in was lukewarm towards the Indo-Pacific concept in contrast to enthusiasts like Japan, India, Australia and the US. Seoul under Moon Jae-in had erroneously perceived that accepting the “Indo-Pacific” concept would result in ROK picking sides in the greater geopolitical contest. However, in 2019, the ROK government under Moon Jae-in after much diplomatic finessing finally figured out how to perceive the “Indo-Pacific” concept in a neutral manner.

On 30 June 2019, facing a historic Summit for the first time between North Korea and the US at Panmunjeom, the Joint Press Conference between ROK and the US following the ROK-US Summit had a singular mention on how ROK and the US “*have agreed to put forth harmonious cooperation between Korea’s New Southern Policy and the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy*”.²⁷ On deeper introspection, this was perhaps a small offering by President Moon Jae-in to indicate that ROK could acknowledge the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy in the larger scheme of leaving a political legacy that delivered a historic Summit between Seoul and Pyongyang, as well as the US and North Korea. However, this simplistic mention of alignment between the NSP and the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy was below expectation from a country that is at the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework. Seoul under President Moon could have promulgated its official version of the Indo-Pacific concept while maintaining their strategic autonomy to be equidistant from the US-China quagmire.

Overall, the NSP yielded positive results in terms of enhancing South Korea’s economic and diplomatic ties with India and ASEAN.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2019, “Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Press Conference Following Korea-U.S. Summit”, 30 June 2019, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=319902



Through the three P's (People, Prosperity and Peace) of the NSP, ROK aligned its foreign policy approach with the ASEAN's people-centred values established in the ASEAN Charter. The NSP provided a pathway for ROK to pursue a greater regional trade connectivity that aimed for mutual prosperity. The NSP also aimed to leverage India's high levels of basic science with Korea's commercialization technology and experience to foster high-tech manufacturing industries. This was to help India develop its own high-tech industries and become a leader in this field. However, there were concerns that the NSP may have been overshadowed by other regional initiatives, such as the Quad and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This dilemma was further aggravated with Seoul's approach being less than enthusiastic in its navigation towards the Quad or FOIP during the Moon Jae-in administration.²⁸

New Southern Policy Plus

By 2020, even after many of the countries in the region and outside had outlined their concepts and outlook of the Indo-Pacific, ROK under Moon Jae-in decided to introduce an upgraded NSP as New Southern Policy Plus (NSP Plus) in November 2020 at the 21st ASEAN-ROK Virtual Summit.²⁹ This development arrived even when ASEAN and India, central to the NSP, had announced their vision/outlook and approaches towards the Indo-Pacific.

28 Jiye Kim and Thomas Wilkins, 2020, "South Korea and America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Yes, But Not Quite", *Fulcrum*, 26 November 2020, <https://fulcrum.sg/south-korea-and-americas-indo-pacific-strategy-yes-but-not-quite/>

29 ASEAN, 2020, "Chairman's statement of the 21st ASEAN-Republic of Korea Summit", 12 November 2020, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/52-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-21st-ASEAN-ROK-Summit.pdf>

Naturally, persisting questions arose as to why the ROK being a central Indo-Pacific nation continued with a rather amicable NSP Plus and delayed advocating their vision of the Indo-Pacific concept. Moreover, doubts arose whether the NSP Plus had any value addition or was a mere repetition of the previous NSP, with only a “Plus” that catered to healthcare cooperation owing to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered unprecedented circumstances for the global community. Conventional wisdom and rationale, common in the 21st century foreign policies, had to be re-considered and re-evaluated. On top of the pandemic, the US-China rivalry was showing no respite. The Indo-Pacific region was witnessing increasing tensions in terms of territorial sovereignty and integrity, through attempts at forcefully changing the status quo in the East and the South China Sea. Restriction on the free flow of human resources and goods due to the Covid-19 lockdowns highlighted and encouraged the significance of new methods for business transactions through the digital economy. The disruptions in the supply chain led to the realisation that the global supply chain needed to be diversified, reorganised, and made resilient. Most importantly, the Covid-19 pandemic underscored the need for an improved and robust healthcare system through international cooperation.

As such, when ROK under Moon Jae-in introduced an upgraded version of the NSP as the NSP Plus in November 2020, they did so to promulgate certain strategic initiatives to compensate over the various shortcomings that emerged after the shifting undercurrents in geopolitics due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These initiatives



Without issuing Seoul's version of the Indo-Pacific concept but aligning potential areas of cooperation under the upgraded NSP Plus with the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, ROK administration under Moon Jae-in adopted the hedging platform without siding towards either the US or China, especially in the midst of the increasing economic and geopolitical tensions.

largely involved cooperation in public health, human resource development, cultural exchanges, trade and investment, rural and urban infrastructure development, future industries, as well as transnational issues such as climate change and environment protection. Although the initiatives sounded similar to many of the other Indo-Pacific countries' approaches, ROK under Moon Jae-in neatly packaged the areas of cooperation in the NSP Plus and showcased it as aligned to the various Indo-Pacific Strategy initiatives of countries such as the US. This way, ROK under President Moon avoided being identified as a vassal of the US. Meanwhile, the NSP Plus became a medium to advocate engaging Seoul deeper with ASEAN and India, which were deemed important alternatives to its traditional partners. This meant ROK prioritised on the hedging platform, expanding its cooperation with the Southern countries as per their policy.

The decision to upgrade to NSP Plus in 2020 was a plan to signal that after the inter-Korean Summit along with the historic US-North Korea Summit in 2019 during the term of President Moon Jae-in, Seoul was acknowledging that it could align its sovereign foreign policy areas of cooperation with the US-Indo-Pacific Strategy while upholding its national interests. This way, without issuing Seoul's

version of the Indo-Pacific concept but aligning potential areas of cooperation under the upgraded NSP Plus with the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, ROK administration under Moon Jae-in adopted the hedging platform without siding towards either the US or China, especially in the midst of the increasing economic and geopolitical tensions. The decision to adopt the NSP in 2017 was hailed as an “important step forward that marked a significant departure from Seoul’s traditional foreign policies, and expanded the existing policies’ canvas of cooperation”.³⁰ The upgrade to NSP Plus in 2020 can be stated as a continuation of the transition towards a degree of autonomy as the policy continued to focus on finding alternative partnerships outside of the traditional major powers of the US, Russia, China and Japan, which had been the mainstay of ROK’s relations. However, Seoul, while adopting the upgraded NSP Plus, was once again missing out the various underlying security considerations impacting the regional and global affairs.

The NSP and NSP Plus strategies that reverberated along economic aspects while aiming to diversify Seoul’s partnerships from its conventional collaborations are reminiscent of Uk Heo and Terence Roehrig’s (2014) analysis on how economic development affects foreign relations.³¹ To elaborate, Seoul had been witnessing economic prosperity but the over-dependence upon the US, China, Japan and Russia, especially in the midst of a global flux, required ROK to revisit its foreign policy to sustain its economic growth. Therefore, prompting a change resulting in greater involvement in

30 Choe Wongi, 2023, “South Korea’s New Southern Policy: The Limits of Indo-Pacific Geopolitics”, in Lam Peng Er. (ed.) *South Korea’s New Southern Policy: A Middle Power’s International Relations with Southeast Asia and India*, pp. 19-41, New York: Routledge

31 U Heo and T Roehrig, 2014, *South Korea’s Rise: Economic Development, Power, and Foreign Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511998355



the international system, an expansion of its set of interests and increased tools to pursue its foreign policy goals through the NSP, and later the NSP Plus.

Another viewpoint supportive of the changes in the ROK foreign policy under Moon Jae-in comes from Wonjae Hwang (2017). He explains that democratisation and economic globalisation transformed the domestic politics in ROK and reshaped its foreign policies. The author argues that the independent and active foreign policy undertaken by ROK was an acknowledgment of the impact of democracy and economic globalisation. The outcome being the underpinning of autonomy in strategic decision-making, which was the mainstay of the liberal parties' foreign policy approaches, while navigating relations with China and the US. The Moon Jae-in administration, based on the outline of fostering a closer relationship through ASEAN and India, adopted the policies of the NSP and the NSP Plus to balance the US, China, Russia, and Japan who had traditionally played a dominant role in ROK's foreign affairs. However, this also meant that ROK was willing to pull away from its traditional alliance partnership with the US, under whose extended deterrence Seoul had been conventionally relying to defend itself from external aggressions ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

Global Pivotal State: Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific

President Yoon Suk-yeol's campaign for the 20th Presidential elections held in March 2022 was based on the agenda of elevating

Soon after being elected and taking charge as the 20th President of ROK in May 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol further advanced his agenda of ROK becoming a “Global Pivotal State” by introducing their official Indo-Pacific Strategy on 28 December 2022.

ROK’s stature as a “Global Pivotal State”.³² Aiming to develop into a “Global Pivotal State” means ROK would set a target of advancing “freedom, peace and prosperity” based on “liberal democratic values and substantial cooperation”.³³ Aspiring to become a “Global Pivotal State” also means that the ROK would “actively seek out agendas for cooperation and play a larger role in shaping discussions regionally as well as globally”.³⁴ Soon after being elected and taking charge as the 20th President of ROK in May 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol further advanced his agenda of ROK becoming a “Global Pivotal State” by introducing their official Indo-Pacific Strategy on 28 December 2022. The document, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific”, advances the objectives of the “Global Pivotal State”.³⁵ This strategy is aimed at enhancing South

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

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

34 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

35 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1



When it comes to President Yoon Suk-yeol, he has underscored the importance of alliance and partnerships with not just its traditional partner the US but almost all stakeholders, ranging from the Latin American countries, African nations, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Pacific Island countries and so on.

Korea's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, "an important region for the country due to its economic and security significance".³⁶

There are certain expert analyses, which have called out whether ROK has the requirements to become a "Global Pivotal State". In their perspective the requirements of becoming a Global Pivotal State means to have the capacity and the autonomy in making foreign policy decisions. It is important to highlight that in this study for the period between President Moon Jae-in's term and President Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency, all the foreign policy decision-making is considered to have been autonomous in their respective cases. Case in point, President Moon decided to find alternatives to ROK's conventional partnerships and alliance, and decided to undertake a "peace first" policy with North Korea. President Moon also advocated for a more hedging platform with regard to the US-China dichotomy. These were all autonomous pursuits in ROK's foreign policy approach under President Moon. Similarly, when it comes to President Yoon Suk-yeol, he has underscored the importance of alliance and partnerships with

36 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, "Deconstructing Republic of Korea's (ROK) 'Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific' ", *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

To be able to even advocate an official Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy is an exemplification of autonomous thinking in foreign policy approaches. It needs to be clarified that just because a geostrategic concept is known by an established lexicon of Indo-Pacific, it does not determine in any context that the nation-states promulgating their version of the policy from their worldview would fall under the same US umbrella.

not just its traditional partner the US but almost all stakeholders, ranging from the Latin American countries, African nations, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Pacific Island countries and so on. This is significant considering the ROK outlook was generally and traditionally focused upon Northeast Asia. However, President Yoon decided to exercise the country's autonomy to invite all those who shared values and interests to recognise ROK's coming of age. To be able to even advocate an official Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy is an exemplification of autonomous thinking in foreign policy approaches. It needs to be clarified that just because a geostrategic concept is known by an established lexicon of Indo-Pacific, it does not determine in any context that the nation-states promulgating their version of the policy from their worldview would fall under the same US umbrella. The ROK after years has finally its own official version of the Indo-Pacific construct, so has the US, India, Australia, ASEAN, EU and others.

In terms of capacity as well, the research undertaken analyses how the ROK has been capable enough in both the Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol terms, to tackle regional and global security challenges. The only difference has been whether the leadership wanted to



openly advocate their capacity. This also brings us to another aspect or requirement, which is capability. The two terminologies are often misused as the same, but it is amply clear that capacity refers to material resources, whereas capability refers to the ability of the country to efficiently utilise its material resources. In context of war, capacity will be arms and ammunition, and capability is defined as whether the armed forces personnel are able to operate these tools effectively and competently.

To put the capacity and autonomy argument into further context in terms of whether the ROK fulfils these criteria to project itself as a “Global Pivotal State”, let us delve into the joint military exercises that were a regular feature between the US and ROK. Under President Moon Jae-in, the United States and the ROK had aborted or reduced the scale of the US-ROK joint military exercises from 2018, in order to take stock of the progress of dialogue with North Korea. However, it was soon clear that the diplomacy had only led thus far. In 2019, North Korea had fully resumed its testing of ballistic missile capabilities. There were a total of 26 test launches in 2019,³⁷ even amidst the follow-up Summit on denuclearisation held between Kim and Trump. The peace first policy of Moon Jae-

The ROK under President Moon was accommodating disengagement from the US by aborting or scaling down their effective and regularised joint military drills, which were sacrosanct for their armed forces capacity building and capability enhancement.

37 *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, 2023, “The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database”, 28 April 2023, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/>

in was indeed a noteworthy approach, but it was also revealing that how much vulnerable the ROK is with an unpredictable authoritarian leader in the North. The ROK under President Moon was accommodating disengagement from the US by aborting or scaling down their effective and regularised joint military drills, which were sacrosanct for their armed forces capacity building and capability enhancement. This approach can be stated to have arrived from a misplaced priority on autonomy, when it had no other reliable alternative as well.

Onwards of 2022, both countries have been expanding the scope and scale of the exercises since the Yoon administration was established. The regular joint military exercises have been divided in a way that the Freedom Shield (FS) exercise is conducted in first half of a year and the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise is in the latter half. This particular re-engagement has emphasised how the ROK needs to continue enhancing its capacity and capabilities, especially when its northern neighbour has been incessant in improving and upgrading their nuclear technology and ballistic missile capacity and capabilities. Further, to showcase its autonomy, the ROK under President Yoon has moved forward with recalibration of ties with Japan, enhanced ROK-US alliance, institutionalise ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation, and developed deeper partnership with NATO through the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) in 2023.

The ROK declared itself as an Indo-Pacific nation after issuing their new strategy for the Indo-Pacific. Through their strategy document for the Indo-Pacific, Seoul has notably advocated the importance of the Indo-Pacific as “home to many key strategic shipping routes



The promulgation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the ROK has consequently unveiled a “comprehensive regional strategy encompassing the realms of the economy and security”

upon which a significant portion of ROK’s trade is dependent”.³⁸ The South China Sea is expressly pronounced as a “key sea route, which accounts for around 64 per cent and 46 per cent of ROK’s crude oil transport and natural gas transport, respectively”.³⁹ The advancement of North Korea’s nuclear proliferation and missile capabilities is now pronounced as a threat not only to the Korean Peninsula but also for the international community including the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰ The Indo-Pacific Strategy document also underscores on the technological reliance of the global community upon the Indo-Pacific region, which is host to key partners for strategic industries involved in the manufacturing of semiconductors. The promulgation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the ROK has consequently unveiled a “comprehensive regional strategy encompassing the realms of the economy and security”.⁴¹

The second part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy document also indicates that the ROK’s foreign policy regional extent has evolved since the

38 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

39 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

40 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

41 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, ICWA, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

NSP visions of Moon Jae-in. The Strategy document has expressly advocated an expansion of their diplomatic horizon beyond the scope of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. The ROK is expected to intensify strategic cooperation with vital states in the Indo-Pacific, encompassing Southeast Asia, South Asia, the African coast of the Indian Ocean. This deepening of partnership will be targeted via “network of strategic partnerships tailor-made to each region to eventually build a framework of cooperation for the Indo-Pacific”.⁴² The ROK is also looking forward on working closely with Europe and Latin America to foster a “peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific”.⁴³ In addition to the traditional strengthening of the ROK-US alliance, it is the announcement regarding Japan, Canada and Mongolia which has added a novel way forward in ROK’s approach. The significance of pursuing a future-oriented approach with Japan, based on common interests and values will conceivably shape bilateral security cooperation in the Korean Peninsula in the face of the North Korean nuclear threat. Additionally, by means of a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” with Canada, the ROK is looking towards “increased cooperation on climate change response, economic security through stabilised supply chains”.⁴⁴ Moreover, in pursuing a strategic cooperation with Mongolia, the ROK is eyeing to dynamically enhance cooperation on supply

42 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

43 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

44 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1



chain issues, particularly in relation to “rare earth elements”.⁴⁵ As Mongolia is one of the top ten resource rich countries in the world, it bodes well for the ROK to pursue a strategic cooperation with the country to lessen its dependence on China for mineral resources.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy document postulates an outlook for achieving a “Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific”.⁴⁶ The document underlines that the ROK would achieve its objectives primarily through “upholding the international norms and strengthening of the rules based-order” established on universal values such as “freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights”.⁴⁷ In a distinct and forthright manner ROK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasises a standpoint disapproving any act of “force or coercion to unilaterally change the status quo”.⁴⁸ In the process of implementing the Indo-Pacific vision, it is stated that the ROK will be adopting steps based on “three principles of cooperation – inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity”.⁴⁹ It has also purposely conveyed that ROK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy will “neither target nor exclude any specific nation and will remain open to nations with common interests”.⁵⁰ This particular case would be implied towards China, with whom the ROK’s position is still complex

45 Ankhtuya, 2022, “South Korea strengthens cooperation with Mongolia on mining”, *NewsMN*, 2 September 2022, <https://news.mn/en/797838/>

46 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

47 Ibid

48 Ibid

49 Ibid

50 Ibid

but the document states that “China is a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region”.⁵¹ The ROK is likely to continue its endeavour to engage China through economic diplomacy to eventually find “issues-based mutual resolutions”.⁵²

Building upon the NSP and the NSP Plus, Yoon’s administration announced the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) under the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a tailor-made regional policy for ASEAN. This initiative has solidified Seoul’s position on perceiving ASEAN as a “key partner for building peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific”.⁵³ The ROK has also reemphasised its support for “ASEAN centrality” and the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)”.⁵⁴ The country is planning on increasing the ASEAN-ROK, Mekong-ROK cooperation funds that would result in syncing ASEAN’s requirements with ROK’s capabilities. In context of the South Asia region, the ROK weighs India as a leading regional partner with shared values. Seoul has also specified the need to increase strategic communication and cooperation with New Delhi through senior level consultations in foreign affairs and defence aspects. With the Oceania region, the Indo-Pacific Strategy document highlights the significance of building relations with Australia, New Zealand and most importantly with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). An increasing emphasis of the ROK is now gathering

51 Ibid

52 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

53 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20230106093833927.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202301>

54 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20230106093833927.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202301>



around addressing issues being faced by the Pacific Islands such as regarding climate change, healthcare, oceans and fisheries, and renewable energy. Seoul has mentioned that it wants to support the PICs in their priorities by endorsing the “2050 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent”, along with the “Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP)” initiative. Regarding the African coast of the Indian Ocean region, Seoul is keen on advancing as well as intensifying relations with countries situated on the eastern seaboard of Africa. The primary reason for strengthening these ties is derived from the fact that the ROK has to retain a consistent presence along the eastern coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean region to protect its maritime shipping consignments of natural gas, coal, crude oil and other mineral resource trade. The Strategy document has declared that the “ROK-Africa Special Summit” will also be scheduled in 2024, which further showcases Seoul’s emphasis on expanding relations with African countries.⁵⁵

The ROK through its strategy for the Indo-Pacific has shed its previous reservations on openly recognising the growing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific as well as globally. Instead of focusing

Instead of focusing only on economic initiatives and trying to find means to depart from its traditional dependence upon the US for defence against external aggressions, President Yoon’s government is undertaking a realistic stock of the ground situation made more volatile with the continued provocations by North Korea, as well as the aggressive overtures of China in the South China Sea.

55 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

only on economic initiatives and trying to find means to depart from its traditional dependence upon the US for defence against external aggressions, President Yoon’s government is undertaking a realistic stock of the ground situation made more volatile with the continued provocations by North Korea, as well as the aggressive overtures of China in the South China Sea. Not only has the President Yoon’s government enhanced its relations with the US, to the point of even calling it a “nuclear-based alliance”,⁵⁶ but the ROK has also recalibrated ties with Japan, and even strengthened and expanded cooperation with NATO.⁵⁷ President Yoon’s government is advocating its preparedness as a key actor pursuing agendas for cooperation in economic and security realms to accomplish its objectives as a “Global Pivotal State”. The ability to officially link the economic and security propositions of securing the Indo-Pacific oceans illustrates a substantive shift in ROK’s foreign policy approach when compared to the Moon Jae-in administration.⁵⁸

National Security Strategy

ROK’s transition towards the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework received a further boost when the Yoon Suk-yeol government’s first National Security Strategy (NSS) was introduced on 7 June

56 Lee Haye-ah, 2023, “Yoon says alliance with U.S. upgraded to ‘nuclear-based alliance’”, *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 June 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230606001500315>

57 *Office of the President of the Republic of Korea*, 2023, “‘Tailored partnership’ with NATO to boost security cooperation”, 12 July 2023, <https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/D8vhNAG5>

58 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849



ROK's transition towards the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework received a further boost when the Yoon Suk-yeol government's first National Security Strategy (NSS) was introduced on 7 June 2023.

2023.⁵⁹ Previous governments had also issued their NSS in 2014 and 2018. The Moon Jae-in government had issued the 2018 NSS focusing on building a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula. In comparison, the 2023 NSS under President Yoon Suk-yeol is focusing on fostering a sustainable peace in the Korean Peninsula supported by strong security. The 2023 NSS arrived in the backdrop of President Yoon's proactive outreach and advocacy of their new Indo-Pacific Strategy to develop ROK as a "Global Pivotal State". The subtitle of the 2023 NSS is stated as "Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace and Prosperity", which also echoes the sentiments of President Yoon's vision. There are said to be two versions of the NSS, with one for public distribution and the other being the confidential version distributed to each ministry for utilisation as a policy implementation guideline.⁶⁰ In context of the publicly available version, the NSS highlights three national security objectives or goals listed as follows:

- Protect national sovereignty and territory to promote public safety

59 *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2023, "Yoon government releases first security strategy paper", 7 June 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/06/07/national/politics/Korea-National-Security-Strategy-Yoon-Suk-Yeol/20230607184116614.html>

60 *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2023, "Yoon government releases first security strategy paper", 7 June 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/06/07/national/politics/Korea-National-Security-Strategy-Yoon-Suk-Yeol/20230607184116614.html>

- Establish peace on the Korean Peninsula and prepare for a unified future
- Lay the ground for prosperity in East Asia while expanding their global role

The 2023 NSS is divided into eight sections. The NSS as a whole assesses the overall national security strategy and provides evaluation of ROK's security environment. The NSS highlights the tenets of ROK's strategy and objectives pertaining to national security. It identifies the following as major security challenges for the ROK:

- North Korean weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats
- US-China competition
- Supply chain crisis
- New security threats (cybersecurity, climate change and infectious diseases)

As per the document, the most pressing issue is North Korea's continued advancement of its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, which are weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This conundrum of how to tackle North Korea has been an existential threat since the end of the Korean War. With only an armistice signed between the North and the South in 1953, but no formal peace treaty ever established, the two Koreas have been technically at war ever since. The only changes observed in approaches is on whether to undertake an appeasement policy or a more hardliner approach. The Yoon Suk-yeol administration through its Indo-Pacific Strategy and the NSS is stated to have taken a cue from the



In order to counter the nuclear and missile threats, the NSS has underscored the importance of the trilateral security cooperation between the ROK, the US, and Japan.

failures of the former administration under Moon Jae-in, which had an appeasement-based approach with North Korea.

The change in approach is visibly illustrated via the NSS of 2023. In order to counter the nuclear and missile threats, the NSS has underscored the importance of the trilateral security cooperation between the ROK, the US, and Japan. Till August 2023, the leaders of the three countries have had four meetings since 2022 under the trilateral security cooperation. In comparison, the Moon Jae-in era of 2017-2022 witnessed only one Heads of State Trilateral Leaders' Summit on 6 July 2017.⁶¹ Moreover, considering the recent past relations with Japan being detached, the administration of President Yoon through the NSS has further stressed on the need for recalibration of ties between Seoul and Tokyo into a forward-looking, cooperative partnership.

As stated earlier, the two countries, the ROK and Japan, are therefore now converging on the mutual security interest regarding the threat from North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile capabilities. In the year 2023 alone, the two leaders from ROK and Japan met for their fifth bilateral meeting on 18 August 2023 at the sidelines of the Camp David Summit.⁶² This fifth meeting following their previous meetings at Tokyo, Seoul, Hiroshima and Vilnius is evident enough

61 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017, "Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting", 6 July 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/page3e_000703.html*

62 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023, "Japan-ROK Summit Meeting", 18 August 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page1e_000743.html*

to showcase the seriousness and significant shift in approach by President Yoon as compared to the Moon Jae-in era. There have been other pressing issues also highlighted in the NSS such as the intensifying US-China strategic competition leading to tensions over economic security. Other non-traditional security issues raised in the document as new emerging security threats were climate change, cyber warfare, supply chain disruption, and the need of better health security especially due to the global shocks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia crisis.⁶³ Moreover, the spread of fake news – refugee crisis due to displacement of people from civil war affected regions – is stated to be fuelling the debate of contributing to the spread of terrorism and hate crimes.

Another area that is underscored as an important emerging security threat is the impact of environmental destruction, which causes natural disasters and food shortages resulting in a threat to the survival of humanity. Consequently, the political and security threats are contributing to global economic instability with countries shifting towards protectionists tendencies amidst the escalating economic security risks. The NSS suggests that individual countries cannot address these threats alone and that a comprehensive approach is needed to effectively mitigate their impact. The ground situation at the moment showcases that the ROK is indeed approaching its goals and objectives of the NSS via rapprochement with Japan, the enhancement of the ROK-US alliance, and undertaking steps to institutionalise the ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation.

63 *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2023, "Yoon government releases first security strategy paper", 7 June 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/06/07/national/politics/Korea-National-Security-Strategy-Yoon-Suk-Yeol/20230607184116614.html>



The NSS also highlights how in the past years since 2020, there has been a significant contraction in international trade leading to commodity prices skyrocketing, resulting in rapid deterioration of the economic security environment. Certain countries like Russia are being accused of weaponizing energy resources, contributing to increasing oil prices, while other major grain-producing countries are seemingly implementing export controls, which has aggravated the global food crisis. The NSS report also draws attention to an emerging pattern where countries dealing with supply chain disruptions are seeking self-sufficiency by forming economic alliances. These strategies are often referred to as “reshoring”, involving the relocation of production facilities back to the domestic market, or “friendshoring”, which involves transferring production facilities to allied countries. These policies are being actively followed given the current situation to regain control over production. The protectionist tendencies are shifting the global value chains from free trade towards an exclusionary trajectory. In the case of advanced technology, the US-China competition has showcased how protectionist tendencies have made an inconvenient appearance. Advanced technology is becoming more and more intertwined with national security, and countries are competing to establish dominance in cutting-edge fields like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum computing. With the escalating competition over technological supremacy, there is an unavoidable crisis emerging that will prompt a reshaping of the global semiconductor and battery sectors in the coming years. In such a scenario, the ROK through its NSS has put forward the idea of collaborating with the US and Japan in the realm of semiconductor manufacturing and advancement. Seoul recognises an increasing

Recognising the critical positioning of the Indo-Pacific as a major maritime logistics route encompassing 65 per cent of global population, 62 per cent of world GDP, and 46 per cent of global trade, the strategic importance and active engagement with the Indo-Pacific is prominently underscored.

necessity to bolster economic and technological partnerships with allied nations, with a focus on the ROK-US alliance.

The NSS of 2023 has also emphasised the significance of the Indo-Pacific security environment. Such proactive focus on the Indo-Pacific geostrategic construct had been missing in the former administration under Moon Jae-in. The publishing of the Indo-Pacific Strategy document in December 2022 and the NSS in June 2023 has removed all apprehensions regarding whether the ROK considers itself central to the Indo-Pacific or not. These steps advocated by President Yoon is a paradigm shift in comparison to how President Moon had been reluctant when it comes to the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework because it ran adrift of his approach on autonomy.

Recognising the critical positioning of the Indo-Pacific as a major maritime logistics route encompassing 65 per cent of global population, 62 per cent of world GDP, and 46 per cent of global trade, the strategic importance and active engagement with the Indo-Pacific is prominently underscored. There are three primary concerns with the Indo-Pacific security environment. First, it is the growing geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific, which is becoming the centre stage for the escalating rivalry between the US and China. In this context, the NSS report notes that China aims to expand its ties with ASEAN and accelerate its efforts to shape



the regional economy to align with its interests, notably through initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In response to this, the US has introduced its Indo-Pacific Strategy and launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), with the aim of strengthening economic and security collaboration with its regional partners and countries that share democratic values.

The NSS text also mentions that increasing tensions, particularly in the maritime domain, have led to greater military risks, prompting countries to adapt their security strategies accordingly. Second, it is the growing pursuit of pragmatic diplomacy within the Indo-Pacific countries amid the US-China strategic competition. In this context, the NSS addresses how the US-China rivalry is impacting the Indo-Pacific as the central arena. As a result, countries whether from within the region or outside of it, have introduced their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. These strategies recognise the vital significance of the Indo-Pacific and aim to increase their active involvement in the region. Giving an example of Australia, the NSS states that countries are pursuing minilateral cooperation such as Quad and AUKUS to enhance security cooperation with the US while also broadening their relationship with countries that share similar democratic principles. The third primary concern is the declining incentives in pursuit of cooperation as economic competition leading to protectionist measures intensifies in Northeast Asia. Specifically, the NSS highlights that in Northeast Asia, the increasing alignment among China, Russia, and North Korea has eroded the cooperative momentum required to address

The NSS does well to present its primary focus on the traditional ROK security dilemma, i.e., the Korean Peninsula. It emphasises the North Korean nuclear threat, the intensifying economic hardship faced by the people of North Korea, and the efforts of neighbouring countries to extend their influence in the midst of the impasse between North and South Korea.

regional security challenges, such as the issue of North Korean nuclear capabilities.

The NSS does well to present its primary focus on the traditional ROK security dilemma, i.e., the Korean Peninsula. It emphasises the North Korean nuclear threat, the intensifying economic hardship faced by the people of North Korea, and the efforts of neighbouring countries to extend their influence in the midst of the impasse between North and South Korea. Additionally, by emphasising North Korea's ongoing development of various strategic and tactical weapons, such as nuclear capabilities and new missiles, the NSS highlights the increasing and significant threat posed to neighbouring countries. The NSS identifies that the launch of over 70 ballistic missiles in 2022 under the pretext of testing reveals that the Pyongyang regime has prioritised defence capabilities over the economic hardships of its residents, which have been exacerbated by ongoing sanctions and containment measures due to the pandemic.

There are four significant powers that surround the Korean Peninsula, carefully observing the evolving geopolitical dynamics with substantial interests aimed at enhancing their influence



in the region. The US in alliance with the ROK is focusing on the denuclearisation of North Korea through sanctions and diplomatic engagements. Japan is actively participating in a trilateral security cooperation with the US and ROK. However, China and Russia, which are both permanent members of the Security Council, are more inclined towards a political resolution to the Korean Peninsula issue, and both the countries express their diverging opinions through opposing the international community sanctions against Pyongyang over their provocations.

North Korea Conundrum in the ROK's Foreign Policy

In the chronicles of Korean foreign policy approaches, the North Korea conundrum in the Korean Peninsula has been a permanent fixation that can seldom be circumvented due to the curse of geography. Till date, South Korea has had overall 20 Presidential elections through a democratic electoral system, whereas North Korea has had three supreme leaders (Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong Un) since 1948. Heads of State have consistently changed in the South but the North continues to remain as an innate impediment for every elected administration in Seoul, resulting in different courses of action and policies under different administrations. Consequently, when it comes to diplomacy towards North Korea, a comparative analysis between the Moon Jae-in administration and Yoon Suk-yeol administration reveals a difference in approach. Although the approach may be different, the objective has mainly remained the same, which is the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

Over the course of his administration, Moon Jae-in's policy on the Korean Peninsula echoed three goals: Peace First, Spirit of Mutual Respect, and Open Policy.

Moon Jae-in and North Korea

Moon Jae-in following his inauguration on 10 May 2017 immediately appealed for dialogue and peace with North Korea. His appeal fell on deaf ears as North Korea test launched 15 rounds of ballistic missiles, conducted a nuclear test on 3 September 2017,⁶⁴ and launched a Hwasong-15 ICBM on 29 November 2017.⁶⁵ Despite the recalcitrant behaviour by Pyongyang, the Moon Jae-in administration announced the “Korean Peninsula Peace Initiative” on 7 July 2017. The objective was a policy direction towards resetting of inter-Korean ties leading to a peaceful unification. Over the course of his administration, Moon Jae-in's policy on the Korean Peninsula echoed three goals: Peace First, Spirit of Mutual Respect, and Open Policy.⁶⁶ The “Peace First” policy was upheld as the highest priority, as well as the foundation for prosperity. In the “Spirit of Mutual Respect”, the ROK advocated “3 No's”, i.e., no desire for the North's collapse, no pursuit of unification by absorption, and no pursuit of unification through artificial means. The “Open Policy” was to

64 *CTBTO*, 2017, “September 2017 DPRK Nuclear Test”, 3 September 2017, <https://www.ctbto.org/our-work/detecting-nuclear-tests/2017-dprk-nuclear-test>

65 *Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance*, 2023, “Hwasong-15/KN-22”, February 2023, <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/north-korea/hwasong-15/>

66 *Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea*, n.d., “Three Goals”, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/policyIssues/koreanpeninsula/goals/



Moon Jae-in adamantly pursued building peace and prosperity in the Korean Peninsula with a policy centred on dialogue, which was the standard modus operandi of progressive governments in the ROK on North Korea issues.

invite public participation and interaction to ensure that the policy can be fully understood by – and made by – the people.

Moon Jae-in adamantly pursued building peace and prosperity in the Korean Peninsula with a policy centred on dialogue, which was the standard modus operandi of progressive governments in the ROK on North Korea issues. The 2018 PyeongChang Winter Games in South Korea was leveraged as an enticement to Pyongyang to enter into dialogue. There was the historical inter-Korean Summit in the inter-Korean House of Freedom at Panmunjom as well in April 2018. Thereafter, the June 2018 meeting between Trump and Kim Jong Un was held at Singapore. President Moon even went to Pyongyang in September 2018 to hold the third inter-Korean Summit meeting since he took office in 2017. Finally, the North Korea-United States Hanoi Summit was held in 2019, which became the inflection point even though Moon Jae-in wanted to paint it as a progressive milestone that would lead to the denuclearisation of North Korea. There was no substantive progress achieved as Pyongyang shifted its stance on denuclearisation and inter-Korean relations. North Korea refused any further dialogues and instead returned to incessant firing of ballistic missiles in the guise of testing.

Overall, Moon Jae-in's policy approach regarding North Korea opposed any pre-emptive or preventive military action. Seoul even declared that it will not possess any nuclear armament of its own. In addition, Moon Jae-in stated that the ROK did not seek a regime change in the North as well as no forceful unification by absorption as per South Korean terms alone. Moon Jae-in administration had also launched the NSP and the NSP Plus, wherein Seoul addressed the North Korea conundrum through the "Peace" and "Prosperity" pillar. Moon Jae-in through the NSP even sought the assistance of ASEAN as a neutral partner to help realise complete denuclearisation, permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, and improve inter-Korean relations.

Yoon Suk-yeol and North Korea

President Yoon Suk-yeol on the other hand has undertaken a more hardliner approach towards North Korea. With the helm of administration shifting from the progressive camp to the conservative camp, the North Korea conundrum is now being tackled on a completely different end of the ideological spectrum. President Yoon Suk-yeol has promulgated strengthening ROK's air and missile defences, reinforcing Washington's extended deterrence to neutralise North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile threats, and operationalising multi-domain trilateral security cooperation among the ROK, the US and Japan to enhance coordinated capabilities and cooperation. His priority is to pursue the denuclearisation of North Korea as the first step towards peace,



which will also transform the ROK into a “Global Pivotal State” that advances freedom, peace and prosperity.⁶⁷

There is already an unambiguous difference between how President Yoon is approaching North Korea as compared to Moon Jae-in. In pursuit of his hardliner approach towards North Korea, President Yoon has even adopted a pragmatic future-oriented approach to converge their security interests with Japan on North Korea’s provocations as a mutual threat. The North Korean threat has persisted as a mutual concern, but historical, political and trade disagreements have hindered Seoul and Tokyo from actively addressing it in the past. As a matter of fact, during the period of Moon Jae-in and Shinzo Abe, one of the most difficult phases of their bilateral relationship occurred when the South Korean Supreme Court, in 2018, ruled in favour of wartime labour compensation claims against Japanese companies.⁶⁸ However, following President Yoon’s election, as a symbol of resetting their relationship and ushering in a fresh era of cooperation, the first Japan-ROK Summit in 12 years took place on 16 March 2023 at Tokyo, Japan.⁶⁹

The primary objective of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has been centred on achieving North Korea’s denuclearisation and then in return provision of economic concessions. Before becoming the 20th President of South Korea, Yoon Suk-yeol had also indicated

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

68 Choe Sang-hun, “South Korean Court Orders Mitsubishi of Japan to Pay for Forced Wartime Labor”, *The New York Times*, 29 November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/world/asia/south-korea-wartime-compensation-japan.html>

69 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 2023, “Japan-ROK Summit Meeting”, 16 March 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page1e_000593.html

The primary objective of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has been centred on achieving North Korea's denuclearisation and then in return provision of economic concessions.

the potential for a “pre-emptive strike” in the event of North Korea’s provocation, particularly if it entailed a missile carrying a nuclear warhead.⁷⁰ During the National Security Council meeting on 4 October 2022, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration had affirmed its commitment to respond with strong countermeasures to any additional future provocations from North Korea.⁷¹ One of the countermeasures being considered is the implementation of the “Three Axis-Defense System”⁷² or the “three-pronged defense system”⁷³, which was initially introduced back in 2016. This system is anticipated to feature a “strategic command”, responsible for overseeing the implementation of the “three-axis” defence system. The objective of this system is to counter the threats posed by North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile capabilities. The term “three-axis” primarily corresponds to three distinct stages of military action by South Korea against North Korea. The initial phase involves the Kill Chain pre-emptive strike platform. The

70 *Hankyoreh*, 2022, “Yoon says preemptive strike is only answer to N. Korea’s hypersonic missiles”, 12 January 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1027059.html

71 *The Korea Times*, 2022, “Escalating tensions on peninsula”, 7 October 2022, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2022/10/202_337484.html

72 *The Korea Times*, 2022, “South Korea to create ‘strategic command’ to lead ‘three-axis’ system against North Korea’s threats”, 6 July 2022, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/07/103_332275.html

73 *HANKYOREH*, 2016, “South Korea announces ‘Massive Punishment and Retaliation’ in response to fifth nuke test”, 13 September 2016, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/761301.html



To secure deterrence against the North Korean threat, President Yoon has also been undertaking a proactive foreign diplomacy route to forge a deeper alliance with Washington as the central axis of his policy approach.

second phase encompasses the Korean Air and Missile Defence system. The final phase comprises an operational strategy designed to neutralise the North Korea leadership via the “Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation” plan.⁷⁴ The South Korean armed forces also conducted its annual 12-day *Hoguk* field training exercise, running from 17 to 28 October 2022.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Pyongyang still employs such military exercises like the *Hoguk* drills as a pretext for conducting more missiles tests with the capability of carrying tactical nuclear warheads. There has also been assumption about North Korea carrying out its seventh nuclear test in response to South Korea’s hardliner stance.

To secure deterrence against the North Korean threat, President Yoon has also been undertaking a proactive foreign diplomacy route to forge a deeper alliance with Washington as the central axis of his policy approach. Referring to the Washington Declaration signed on 26 April 2023,⁷⁶ President Yoon declared an upgradation of its alliance with the United States. This upgrade can be considered

74 HANKYOREH, 2016, “South Korea announces ‘Massive Punishment and Retaliation’ in response to fifth nuke test”, 13 September 2016, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/761301.html

75 Ji Da-gyum, “S. Korea begins major Hoguk field training exercise amid N. Korea’s saber-rattling”, *Korea Herald*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20221017000637>

76 *The White House*, 2023, “Washington Declaration”, 26 April 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>

a significant milestone in Seoul-Washington ties, which is now proclaimed by President Yoon as a “nuclear-based alliance”.⁷⁷ In August 2023, South Korea also conducted what has been considered as one of its largest joint military drills in years, known as the “Ulchi Freedom Shield Exercise”, with the US, which included about 30 training events based on an all-out war scenario.⁷⁸ For context, it is important to remind that the annual Ulchi Freedom exercises were suspended in 2018 due to the negotiations between the US and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) at the Singapore Summit.⁷⁹ These negotiations were part of the grand scheme of President Moon’s “peace first” policy towards North Korea. However, it was reconvened at a much smaller scale from the end of 2018 but continued as more of an abridged version till the end of Moon Jae-in’s term in 2022. The Ulchi Freedom exercise in 2021 was in fact conducted in a computer-simulated format, with no field exercises and live-fire drills.⁸⁰ It was only in 2022 that the ROK once again began an enhanced re-engagement of joint military exercises with the US after President Yoon won the elections. The resumption and expansion of the ROK-US combined exercises and training was also clearly advocated via the NSS 2023. The results of this can be observed through the exercises on the ground as the ROK revived in

77 *The Korea Times*, 2023, “Yoon says alliance with US upgraded to 'nuclear-based alliance'”, 6 June 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/06/113_352404.html

78 *Nikkei Asia*, 2023, “South Korea, U.S. begin military drills amid North Korea threat”, 21 August 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/South-Korea-U.S.-begin-military-drills-amid-North-Korea-threat>

79 *U.S Department of Defense*, 2018, “DoD Indefinitely Suspends Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Other Exercises”, June 22, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1558409/dod-indefinitely-suspends-ulchi-freedom-guardian-other-exercises/>

80 Oh Seok-min, 2021, “USFK commander calls for more achievements after summertime Korea-U.S. exercise”, *Yonhap News Agency*, 2 September 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210902005300325>



earnest its largest joint military drills with the US through the Ulchi Freedom Exercise in August 2022 and August 2023.

The NSS published by the ROK in June 2023 opened another chapter in Seoul's approach to foreign diplomacy, which not only reflects clarity and boldness in tackling the complex security environment surrounding the ROK concerning Pyongyang's provocations but also addresses the flux in geopolitics and provides a blueprint of how the ROK is aiming to become a "Global Pivotal State", which is central to the Indo-Pacific. The ROK has shown under President Yoon that it will not be hesitant to undertake measures to reinforce the country's capabilities to proactively respond to all likely scenarios of security threats.

2. CONTEXT OF ROK'S FOREIGN POLICY DIPLOMACY: FROM MIDDLE POWER TO GLOBAL PIVOTAL STATE



The Republic of Korea or South Korea has been termed a "middle power" for its framework on foreign policy for more than a decade. However, the term has different meanings and implications depending on the context and the perspective of the policy-makers. Some of the factors that influence the definition and application of "middle power" are geography, hierarchy, strategy, historical memory, budgetary constraints, regionalization and economic development.

South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol has articulated a national vision centred on becoming a "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) and has indicated his dedication towards assuming a position of global leadership. He has stated that South Korea will embrace a more

President Yoon has also pursued a future-oriented approach with Japan even though historical disagreements still linger in the memories of the local population of the ROK, which has often acted as a domestic risk for any government in bridging gaps with Tokyo.

substantial role commensurate with its standing, in line with the international community's appeals. This role includes sharing and safeguarding principles such as freedom, liberal democracy and the rule of law on a global scale. The ROK-US alliance was also upgraded to a "global comprehensive strategic alliance beyond the Korean Peninsula" in 2022. Based on the Washington Declaration issued in April 2023, President Yoon Suk-yeol has even claimed that the ROK-US alliance is now upgraded to a "nuclear-based alliance".⁸¹ President Yoon has also pursued a future-oriented approach with Japan even though historical disagreements still linger in the memories of the local population of the ROK, which has often acted as a domestic risk for any government in bridging gaps with Tokyo. The difference between the middle power status of the ROK and its new aspirations of becoming a "Global Pivotal State" can be seen as follows:

- The middle power status of the ROK is based on its relative position and capabilities in the international system, while the Global Pivotal State vision is based on its proactive role and contributions to global governance.

81 Lee Haye-ah, 2023, "Yoon says alliance with U.S. upgraded to 'nuclear-based alliance' ", *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 June 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230606001500315>



- The middle power status of the ROK is often constrained by its regional dynamics and security challenges, especially with regard to North Korea, China and Japan, while the Global Pivotal State vision is aimed at expanding its diplomatic horizons and partnerships beyond its immediate neighbourhood.
- The middle power status of the ROK is subject to change and inconsistency depending on the domestic politics and preferences of different administrations, while the Global Pivotal State vision is intended to be a long-term and consistent strategy that transcends partisan differences.

Primarily, the ROK under Moon Jae-in, with its policy centred on dialogue to bring peace and unification of the Korean Peninsula, was unable to embrace its role as an autonomous middle power when dealing with the existential threat of North Korea. Whereas the ROK under Moon Jae-in had merely tied itself to the regional hegemons and actions of North Korea,⁸² it also had to balance its alliance with the US, its economic interdependence with China, its historical disputes with Japan, and its security dilemma with North Korea. The NSPs promulgated by Moon Jae-in as a diplomatic tool was inconsistent to project ROK's relative position and capabilities in the changing international system. On the other hand, President Yoon's vision of a "Global Pivotal State" has brought a radical shift in ROK's pursuit of its aspirations for global leadership and global governance. The ROK is no longer restricted but is expanding its diplomatic horizons and partnerships extending towards the wider

82 Iain Watson, 2020, "South Korea's changing middle power identities as response to North Korea", *The Pacific Review*, 33:1, 1-31, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2018.1518923

Indo-Pacific. The Global Pivotal State vision is a lucid indication of the necessary transition from ROK's earlier diplomacy under President Moon which were inconsistent to its relative position as a middle power in the shifting geopolitics. Seoul is now on the path of a future-oriented outlook that is long-term and consistent enough to transcend domestic politics.

Factors shaping current strategic choices and approaches to adopt

As per the analysis of this research paper, in the current geopolitics, the context of ROK's foreign policy diplomacy can be analysed from three perspectives: geopolitical environment, relative capacity, and domestic politics. First, the geopolitical environment refers to the external conditions and constraints that affect ROK's foreign policy options and behaviour. The ROK is located in a region where four major powers (the US, China, Russia, and Japan) compete for influence and interests, and where a nuclear-armed North Korea poses a constant threat to its security and stability. So, it has to navigate this complex and dynamic environment while maintaining its sovereignty, autonomy, and identity.

Second, relative capacity refers to the internal resources and capabilities that enable ROK's foreign policy actions and achievements. The country has transformed itself from a war-torn and impoverished country to a prosperous and democratic nation, with a strong economy, a capable military, and a vibrant civil society. The ROK has also developed its soft power, such as its culture, technology, and diplomacy, to enhance its international reputation and influence. The ROK has leveraged its relative



capacity to pursue its national interests and values, as well as to contribute to global governance and development. At the current juncture, the ROK is also in the stage of abandoning its strategic ambiguity, evolving from its middle power status to a transitional position confident of its military capabilities, as well as military alliances to address regional and global security issues.

Third, domestic politics refers to the internal factors and actors that influence ROK's foreign policy preferences and decisions. The ROK is a pluralistic democracy, where different political parties, interest groups, media outlets, and public opinions compete for power and representation. The ROK's foreign policy is subject to electoral cycles, policy debates, social movements, and public sentiments. The ROK's foreign policy is also shaped by its historical memory, national identity, and cultural values. The Japan-ROK historical disputes especially in the memory of the domestic population had been a persistent hurdle for any government in bridging gaps with Tokyo.

Given this context of ROK's foreign policy diplomacy, the analysis of this study is well supported by the argument of Scott A. Snyder (2018) that Seoul has been oscillating between two axes: outward orientation versus inward orientation, and alliance versus autonomy.⁸³ However, as per this research, there is a merging of the two axes that Seoul has been pursuing. A significant positive correlation has been observed where President Moon's policy approach can be associated with an inward orientation on the

83 Scott A. Snyder, 2018, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, Columbia University Press, <https://doi.org/10.7312/snyd18548>

platform of autonomy, although President Yoon was candid in his approach to be outward oriented with alliances as a fulcrum for his policy.

In the context of alliance and autonomy, there are said to be four approaches: “parochial alliance dependency, alliance-enabled internationalism, internationalism plus autonomy, and independence through neutralisation”.⁸⁴ The study has indicated that the mentioned approaches do show a correlation with the Seoul governments since 2017. Graph 1 showcases the political spectrum of ROK’s foreign policy approach from the term of Moon Jae-in to Yoon Suk-yeol. The graph is drawn through the tabulated scores given in Table 1, which is as per the analysis of this research paper. On a scale of 1 to 10, the score of 0 is to indicate that the concerned government policy had no correlation with the approach mentioned. The score of 5 is to portray that the fragments of the government’s policy matched with the mentioned approach but with conditions. The score of 10 is for showcasing a positive correlation.

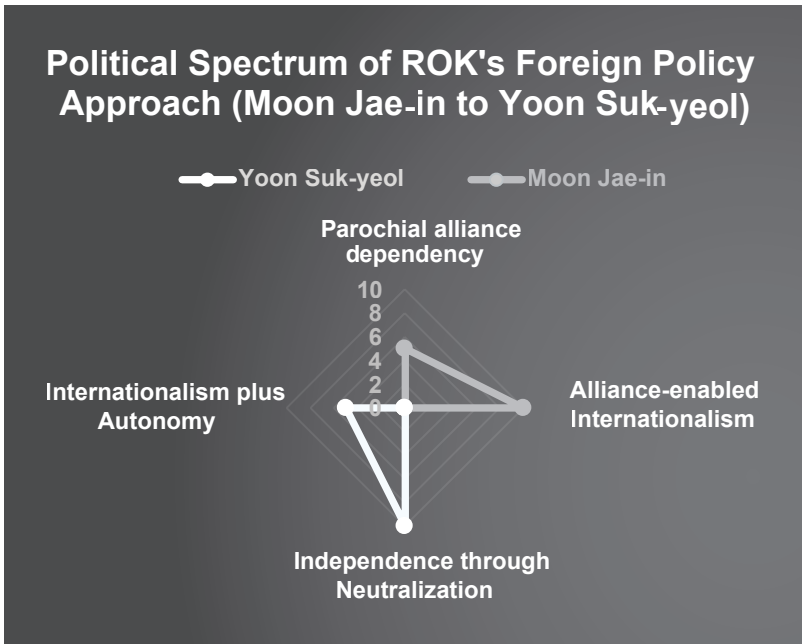
Independence through neutralisation is an approach that reduces or abandons the alliance with the US in favour of other regional or global alignments while seeking ROK’s self-reliance or neutrality. This approach reflects an inward orientation that emphasises ROK’s sovereignty or identity, as well as an autonomy maximisation that challenges or rejects the US influence or interference. Through this study, it can be deduced that the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022) would fit into the independence through neutralisation approach. This analysis comes through an understanding of the

84 Ibid



Table 1

Presidents	Parochial Alliance Dependency	Alliance-enabled Internationalism	Independence through Neutralization	Internationalism plus Autonomy
Yoon Suk-yeol	5	10	0	0
Moon Jae-in	0	0	10	5



Graph 1: Political Spectrum of ROK's Foreign Policy Approach

approaches that the Moon government adopted via the NSP when it sought to elevate its relations with ASEAN and India to the level of the other major powers, whereas President Yoon's policy does not reflect any abandoning of the ROK-US alliance and has a very outward-looking approach.

Internationalism plus autonomy is an approach that balances the alliance with the US with other regional or global partnerships while pursuing ROK's own interests or values. This approach reflects an outward orientation that recognizes the diversity and complexity of international affairs, as well as an autonomy enhancement that asserts ROK's independence or leadership. This approach has been evident during the terms of the progressive administrations. As such its most recent example can be the term of President Moon, who advocated for less dependent relations with the US, a more constructive engagement with North Korea, and a more active role in regional issues. The notion of pursuing lesser dependent relations with the US arrived to hedge against the US-China rivalry. Under the presidency of Moon Jae-in, the country was finding means to resolve the North Korean issue, and in order to serve its own interests and values Seoul was strategically ambiguous when it came to playing a more global leadership role in terms of the South China Sea and China's aggressive overtures. Therefore, at times ROK was vulnerable when the decisions of global leadership role had to be undertaken. Hence, President Moon's policies reflected parts of this approach but was lacking when it came to a full-scale internationalism-based agenda.

Alliance-enabled internationalism is an approach that utilises the alliance with the US as a platform for expanding ROK's global role and influence while cooperating or competing with other regional or global actors. This approach reflects an outward orientation that seeks to participate in or shape international affairs, as well as an alliance enablement that benefits from the US support or partnership. This approach was dominant during the post-Cold



War era (1988-2007), when the ROK pursued a proactive diplomacy under the slogans of “Nordpolitik”, “New Asia Initiative”, “Global Korea”, etc. For the present Yoon Suk-yeol administration (2022-present), it is evident that their approach is applicable with alliance-enabled internationalism as can be inferred through their Indo-Pacific Strategy and the National Security Strategy, which gives impetus to the US alliance for regional and global partnerships, while pursuing ROK’s national interests and values. On the other hand, President Moon’s administration was reluctant to utilise its alliance with the US to expand ROK’s global role and influence.

Parochial alliance dependency is an approach that prioritises the alliance with the US as the sole guarantor of ROK’s security and prosperity while neglecting or resisting other regional or global engagements. This approach reflects an inward orientation that focuses on domestic issues or peninsular affairs, as well as an alliance dependence that relies on the US for protection or guidance. This approach was prevalent during the Cold War era (1953-1987), when the ROK faced an existential threat from North Korea and had limited diplomatic relations with other countries. President Yoon’s term can be stated to have fragments of the parochial alliance dependency as his government has enhanced and upgraded ROK’s alliance with the US. However, ROK under President Yoon has not neglected or resisted any other regional or global engagements as can be observed through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, recalibration of ties with Japan, and expansion of partnership with NATO. This indicates how ROK under President Yoon is extensively oriented outwards, and its focus ranges from the Korean Peninsula to the wider Indo-Pacific. On the contrary, President Moon’s policy had

The ROK's foreign policy diplomacy passed through a crossroad where it had to balance its alliance with the US and its autonomy in an era of rival powers, towards an acceptance of its aspirations in becoming a "Global Pivotal State" and expanding partnership as well as strengthening alliances as deemed necessary.

limited to no scope of prioritising its traditional alliance with the US.

Under President Yoon Suk-yeol, there is a distinctive departure from his predecessor who was mostly focused on inter-Korean cooperation. It is a return to conservative leadership and a return to the restoration of the US-ROK alliance that had languished due to a misplaced emphasis upon courting North Korea during the predecessor's term. President Yoon Suk-yeol's government is more focused on creating a "Global Pivotal State", as well as realigning their emphasis on the US-ROK alliance.

In conclusion, the ROK must cope with the geopolitical environment, relative capacity, domestic politics, and make strategic choices among four possible approaches: parochial alliance dependency, alliance-enabled internationalism, internationalism plus autonomy, and independence through neutralisation. The ROK's foreign policy diplomacy passed through a crossroad where it had to balance its alliance with the US and its autonomy in an era of rival powers, towards an acceptance of its aspirations in becoming a "Global Pivotal State" and expanding partnership as well as strengthening alliances as deemed necessary.



3. ROK'S TRANSITION TOWARDS THE INDO-PACIFIC GEOSTRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: PROGRESSION OR CONTINUITY?



Through the study in this paper, it can be ascertained that the Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol administrations have been operating on different spectrums when it comes to their foreign policy approaches. The question that persists is whether the transition of government has resulted in the progression or continuity of the foreign policy approaches since 2017. As explained earlier, the NSP and NSP Plus strategies reverberated along economic aspects while aiming to diversify Seoul's partnerships from its conventional collaborations; it was reminiscent of how economic development affects foreign relations.⁸⁵ Seoul had been over-dependent upon the US, China, Japan and Russia, but the global flux required the ROK to revisit its foreign policy for sustaining its economic growth while taking a chance on its security considerations underpinned traditionally through its alliance with the US. Therefore, during the Moon Jae-in era, the ROK in order to be involved more prominently in the international economic system pursued a hedging approach to not pick sides between the US and China, and hence decided to expand its set of interests and increase its tools for pursuing foreign policy goals through the NSP, and later the NSP Plus.

In between 2017 and 2022, the foreign policy undertaken by the ROK expressed the underpinning of autonomy in strategic decision-

85 U. Heo and T. Roehrig, 2014, *South Korea's Rise: Economic Development, Power, and Foreign Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511998355

making to lessen their dependence on the ROK-US alliance, which has traditionally been the liberal parties' foreign policy agenda, while steering relations between its major trade partner China and its treaty ally the US. On the outline of fostering a closer relationship through ASEAN and India, the policies of the NSP and the NSP Plus were adopted to balance the US, China, Russia, and Japan, the traditional dominant players in ROK's foreign affairs. However, ROK was strategically ambiguous in its role as a middle power facing the shifting undercurrents of geopolitics.

After his election as the new President of ROK, Yoon Suk-yeol pushed towards the agenda of ROK becoming a “Global Pivotal State”. His administration introduced ROK's first official Indo-Pacific Strategy on 28 December 2022. The document, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific”, took forward the objectives of the “Global Pivotal State”.⁸⁶ Building upon the NSP and the NSP Plus initiatives, the Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to elevate South Korea's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, as it holds significant economic and security importance for the country.⁸⁷ The Indo-Pacific Strategy document underscored the significance of forging connections not just with ASEAN, India, Australia and New Zealand, but also with the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) and Africa. Emphasising concerns like climate change, healthcare, oceans and fisheries, and renewable energy challenges experienced by the Pacific Islands, the strategy prioritised supporting the 2050

86 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, 28 December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133&page=1

87 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea's (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849



Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent, as well as the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative. South Korea also conveyed its strong interest in strengthening and expanding its relationship with countries located along the eastern coastline of Africa. South Korea recognises the need to maintain a steady presence, particularly along the African coast in the Indian Ocean region, to ensure the safe maritime transportation of essential resources such as crude oil, natural gas, coal and other minerals.

As mentioned earlier, the Indo-Pacific Strategy highlights that South Korea has overcome its previous hesitations in recognising the growing global and Indo-Pacific security challenges. Under the Yoon Suk-yeol government, South Korea asserts its preparedness as a key participant actively pursuing opportunities for collaboration in both economic and security aspects, aligning with its goal of becoming a “Global Pivotal State”. This shift which links the economic and security considerations of safeguarding the Indo-Pacific waters, represents a notable change in the ROK’s foreign policy approach compared to the previous administration.⁸⁸

The analysis undertaken in this paper suggests that President Moon’s and President Yoon’s governments have been functioning at contrasting ideological wavelengths. President Moon’s approaches were in line with “independence through neutralisation”, and its balancing of the US portrayed “internationalism plus autonomy” aspect although in a limited scope. ROK under President Moon was strategically ambiguous and was vastly restricted with the North Korean issue in terms of undertaking proactive global

88 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, “Deconstructing Republic of Korea’s (ROK) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’”, *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

diplomacy steps. On the other hand, President Yoon’s policy approach has been outward-looking, future-oriented, hardliner, and focusing on building partnerships and alliances with like-minded parties to get ROK involved in setting global agendas and expanding the country’s perspective from the Korean Peninsula to the wider Indo-Pacific.

Taken together, the analysis presented here underscores an evolution as the ROK transitions towards an Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework. It has shed its strategic ambiguity and decided to issue policies that are long-term and could even cut across partisan domestic politics.

4. ROK EMBRACING THE INDO-PACIFIC: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR INDIA?



In 2017, to enhance Seoul’s strategic autonomy, President Moon Jae-in introduced the NSP to forge stronger ties with emerging economies of India and ASEAN for economic diversification, as the intensification of rivalry between the US and China had put enormous constraints on Seoul’s policy choices. New Delhi also shared fundamental values and strategic interests, which Seoul found to be vital for balancing an assertive China. India and the ROK bilateral relationship, which was elevated to a “Special Strategic Partnership” in May 2015, had received a shot in the arm with the introduction of the NSP in 2017, as India was considered a central pillar for ROK’s new policy.⁸⁹ It has already been established

⁸⁹ *Embassy of India*, 2022, “India and Republic of Korea: A Vision for People, Prosperity, Peace and our Future”, 10 November 2022, <https://www.indembassyseoul.gov.in/india-and-republic-korea-vision-people-prosperity-peace-and-our-future>



by many experts on South Korea's foreign policy that the NSP was a hedging platform amid the US-China Strategic Competition.⁹⁰ Eventually, the NSP was restricted to an "economic and functional cooperation program with developmental assistance", and it could not effectively "engage in broader regional political and security affairs".⁹¹ Furthermore, India at that moment had begun to step forward in promoting the Indo-Pacific concept, especially with the India-Japan Vision 2025 signed in December 2015. On the other hand, ROK was still having reservations and was still ambiguous in its approach even when its alliance partner the US had already issued their Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2017. ROK under President Moon was maintaining ambiguity over any articulation of its position and was seemingly reluctant to endorse the Indo-Pacific concept.

However, with the introduction of President Yoon Suk-yeol, the case for strategic outlook has taken a more proactive approach. It is already evident that the new President has undertaken comprehensive steps to elevate ROK into a "Global Pivotal State" by officially releasing their first Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022. This also resulted in pushing for an upgradation of its alliance with the US with focus on nuclear deterrence, and publishing the NSS advocating protection of national sovereignty and territory, peace

90 Choe Wongi, 2023, "South Korea's New Southern Policy: The Limits of Indo-Pacific Geopolitics", in Peng Er, L. (Ed.), *South Korea's New Southern Policy: A Middle Power's International Relations with Southeast Asia and India* (1st ed.), Chapter 2, pp. 19-41, Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003353133>

91 Choe Wongi, 2023, "South Korea's New Southern Policy: The Limits of Indo-Pacific Geopolitics", in Peng Er, L. (Ed.), *South Korea's New Southern Policy: A Middle Power's International Relations with Southeast Asia and India* (1st ed.), Chapter 2, pp. 19-41, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003353133>

It is expected that with the ROK having begun the way forward in terms of their Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework, the bilateral defence and security cooperation between India and ROK will also be provided a fillip.

in the Korean Peninsula through denuclearisation, and a global role for ROK. The embracement of the Indo-Pacific by ROK has led to the shedding of any inhibitions of articulation regarding Seoul's position and endorsement of the concept. It is also a welcome move for India-ROK's Special Strategic Partnership.

It is expected that with the ROK having begun the way forward in terms of their Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework, the bilateral defence and security cooperation between India and ROK will also be provided a fillip. As the world undergoes unprecedented shift in geopolitics, New Delhi and Seoul with their Indo-Pacific framework will consider this as an opportune moment to work together for peace and stability in the region. Several factors, one of them being the Ukraine conflict, have posed extraordinary challenges on all fronts such as the food and energy crisis. There are also supply chain disruptions being caused due to the great power rivalry between the US and China. China's assertive policies have also continued to threaten freedom of navigation in the open seas, raising territorial sovereignty and integrity disputes in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait. North Korea's provocative test launching of ballistic missiles into the territorial seas of South Korea and Japan has also led to a greater need to call for commitment to the goals of universal and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament and the objectives of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and



their delivery systems.⁹² The pressing and demanding challenges require India and ROK to synergise on the current geopolitical concerns through their Indo-Pacific outlooks and strengthen their partnership across the full spectrum including defence cooperation.

With the ROK finally embracing the Indo-Pacific and endorsing their position openly on global governance issues specially giving precedence to the overlapping of economic and security agendas, there are key areas in the bilateral relationship emerging as convergence of strategic and security interests between the two countries. Defence cooperation has already been an important aspect of the India-Korea Special Strategic Partnership. India and South Korea also signed a logistics pact in 2019, which assures logistical support for the Indian Navy while operating in the Indo-Pacific in the ports of South Korea. Indian warship *INS Sumedha* and ROK's navy ship *Hansando* and *Dae Cheong* participated in a maritime partnership exercise in the Bay of Bengal on 1 October 2022.⁹³ Such exercises need to be further bolstered as they prove to be mutually beneficial for strengthening maritime cooperation and interoperability between the two navies.⁹⁴ India is also trying to upgrade its naval capabilities in response to the growing presence of the Chinese navy. In this aspect, areas such as naval shipbuilding

92 ANI, "India, South Korea discuss disarmament, non-proliferation", 31 March 2022, <https://aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-south-korea-discuss-disarmament-non-proliferation20220331230432/>

93 *The Hindu*, 2022, "Two Korean naval ships arrive in Chennai on a four-day visit; to hold joint exercise with Indian Navy", 28 September 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/two-korean-naval-ships-arrive-in-chennai-on-a-four-day-visit-to-hold-joint-exercise-with-indian-navy/article65945974.ece>

94 Jude Sannith, 2022, "South Korean warships Hasando and Daechong dock in Chennai for 'Passex' operations with Indian Navy", 28 September 2022, <https://www.cnbctv18.com/india/south-korean-warships-hasando-and-daechong-dock-in-chennai-for-passex-operations-with-indian-navy-14821781.htm>

The safety and security of the SLOCs, especially in the Indian Ocean region, is vital for South Korea, and India with its geostrategic positioning becomes an ideal defence and security partner for South Korea.

and submarine building are sectors where India and ROK can collaborate, as ROK is a technology leader and has one of the most competitive naval shipbuilding industries. However, there are still gaps in the local expectations and technology transfer requirements on defence cooperation.

South Korea has already demonstrated its interest in securing the sea lines of communications (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean, which are key routes of energy imports. Korea imports approximately 60% of its oil consumption solely from West Asia. South Korea ranks among the world's top five importers of liquefied natural gas (LNG), coal, and total petroleum liquids. South Korea relies exclusively on tanker shipments of LNG and crude oil. Therefore, the safety and security of the SLOCs, especially in the Indian Ocean region, is vital for South Korea, and India with its geostrategic positioning becomes an ideal defence and security partner for South Korea. Consequently, India's experience and role in the Indian Ocean region and beyond as a preferred security partner will be a boon for ROK's need for securing the SLOCs.

India and South Korea have also reached a consensus to collaborate on enhancing the resilience and robustness of global supply chains. They also explored potential opportunities for cooperation in emerging technologies. During the 5th Foreign Policy and Security



Dialogue (FPSD) held in Seoul, South Korea in January 2023, Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs of India, briefed the Korean delegation about the investment opportunities available to Korean companies in India, spanning manufacturing, infrastructure, and various other sectors.⁹⁵

There have also been suggestions on trilateral cooperation. With Vietnam and the ROK recently announcing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and India having its own strategic partnership with both ROK and Vietnam, it can provide a novel collaborative approach for defence, security and economic cooperation to bring peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹⁶ The other trilateral cooperation can be India-Japan-ROK and India-ROK-Indonesia.

ROK also unveiled an ASEAN-specific plan, called the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), which will form a core component of ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy. In this regard, India can be an ideal partner for Korea to enhance its regional strategic and economic outreach. This can be achieved through India's very own Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), announced during the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok on 4 November 2019 with seven pillars for cooperation:

- Maritime Ecology
- Maritime Security

95 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023, "5th India-RoK Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue (FPSD)", 17 January 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36128/5th_IndiaRoK_Foreign_Policy_and_Security_Dialogue_FPSD

96 From ICWA-RIS and KNDA-KIEP First 2+2 Dialogue, 27 October 2021

- Marine Resources
- Capacity Building and Resource Sharing
- Disaster Risk Reduction and Management
- Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation
- Trade, Connectivity and Maritime Transport

ROK will do well to join or lead the Maritime Security pillar and the Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation pillar, as per the Special Strategic Partnership.

As per this study, with the ROK embracing the Indo-Pacific and India being a consistent advocate of the concept, there are a few recommendations that can be the focus for the next 50 years:

- Focus on defence and security cooperation. There is a need for constructing a strategic pillar that will ensure cooperation in the defence industry and future technologies.
- ROK’s defence and shipbuilding companies need to be encouraged to invest in India’s defence acquisition programme.

☞ The strengthening of defence cooperation can be observed with an example of the K-9 Vajra Howitzers from South Korea, assembled by L&T – 100 are already inducted in the Indian Army and 100 additional orders are currently in the process.⁹⁷

☞ Similarly, with ROK’s vast experience in cutting edge submarine technology and advance systems, India’s

97 Kapil Kajal, 2023, “Indian Army orders 100 additional K9 Howitzers”, *Janes*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/indian-army-orders-100-additional-k9-howitzers>



next-gen submarine project (Project 75) provides ample scope for bolstering defence cooperation in alignment with Seoul’s new Indo-Pacific outreach.⁹⁸

- Regularise and institutionalise bilateral military exercises between the two countries.
- With the supply chain disruptions and industries being relocated, opportunities have arisen, and ROK can even help India become a semiconductor manufacturing hub.
- Provide a platform for a trilateral mechanism between Vietnam-India-ROK, ROK-India-Japan, and India-ROK-Indonesia, to tackle the mitigating consequences of great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

Even the trade and investment aspect of the partnership can be further enhanced, which has been on the rise since 2017.

Table 2

S. No.	\Year	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
1.	Export	4,460.98	4,705.07	4,845.15	4,684.62	8,085.03	6,654.10
2.	%Growth		5.47	2.98	-3.31	72.59	-17.70
6.	Import	16,361.77	16,758.97	15,659.70	12,772.97	17,477.20	21,227.32
7.	%Growth		2.43	-6.56	-18.43	36.83	21.46
11.	Total trade	20,822.75	21,464.04	20,504.85	17,457.59	25,562.24	27,881.42
12.	%Growth		3.08	-4.47	-14.86	46.42	9.07
16.	Trade balance	-11,900.80	-12,053.90	-10,814.55	-8,088.35	-9,392.17	-14,573.21

Source: Department of Commerce, Export-Import Data Bank

⁹⁸ Manish Kumar Jha, 2023, “After Hanwha’s K-9 Vajra, submarines are the potential area to collaborate with India, says Kim Dae-Young, EVP”, *Financial Express*, 28 June 2023, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-after-hanwhas-k-9-vajra-submarines-are-the-potential-area-to-collaborate-with-india-says-kim-dae-young-evp-3144944/>

India and South Korea's total bilateral trade reached US\$27.88 billion in 2022-23 as per the data provided by the Department of Commerce, Export-Import Data Bank. It was a 9.07 per cent growth from the previous year, perhaps signalling that the impediments of the supply chain due to the Covid-19 pandemic is returning back to the pre-Covid phase.

If we look at the specifics, the figures show that India made exports of US\$6.65 billion to ROK in 2022-23, whereas India's imports from ROK were at US\$21.23 billion in 2022-23. The amount of exports from India to the ROK has dropped by 17.70 per cent in 2022-23. The amount of imports grew by 21.46 per cent in 2022-23, but is lower than the growth of 36.83 per cent in 2021-22. During the year 2021-22, all major exported items from India to ROK including iron ore (215.5 per cent increase) and aluminium (143.6 per cent increase) had shown a significant increase.⁹⁹ The most imported items from Korea included electrical machinery and electronic equipment (30.47 per cent increase) and Iron & Steel (53.39 per cent increase), in 2021-22. However, the trade balance still remains in deficit, due to certain market access issues for Indian goods. As the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations are currently undergoing, India looks forward to reaching an agreement which will address mutual interests of both the sides and play an important role in strengthening and deepening economic cooperation between the two countries. Consequently, efforts need to be in place to scale up operations for doubling the bilateral trade and investment to US\$50 billion by 2030.

⁹⁹ *The Economic Times*, 2022, "Bilateral trade between India and Korea grew 40% to \$23.7 billion in 2021", 2 June 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/bilateral-trade-between-india-and-korea-grew-40-to-23-7-billion-in-2021/articleshow/91968386.cms>



As the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations are currently undergoing, India looks forward to reaching an agreement which will address mutual interests of both the sides and play an important role in strengthening and deepening economic cooperation between the two countries.

As an indication of Seoul's updated perspective on New Delhi's strategic importance, South Korea's new Indo-Pacific Strategy, issued on 28 December 2022, underscores the need to strengthen the Special Strategic Partnership between India and South Korea. In context of the South Asian region, South Korea has emphasised its views of India as a key regional partner sharing common values.¹⁰⁰ Seoul recognises India's significant growth potential driven by its large working-age population and cutting-edge expertise in IT and space technologies. South Korea has expressed its desire to enhance strategic communication and cooperation with India through high-level exchanges in foreign affairs and defence matters. The proposal for upgrading the ROK-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to strengthen bilateral ties is a matter of particular significance. Furthermore, the value of strategic collaboration between the two nations is reaffirmed through the ongoing security and strategic dialogues conducted by high-ranking officials, as well as through Track 1.5 and Track 2 platforms. These gatherings offer a platform for both countries to comprehensively assess bilateral matters, seek avenues for enhancing substantial

100 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, "Deconstructing Republic of Korea's (ROK) 'Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific' ", *ICWA*, 31 January 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=8975&lid=5849

cooperation, and engage in discussions regarding major regional and global concerns.¹⁰¹

The relationship between India and South Korea have remained strong ever since they established diplomatic ties. South Korea's cultural and soft power diplomacy has made a notable impact globally and particularly in India, where the youth exhibit a strong interest in embracing Korean language, cuisine, culture, and pursuing higher education opportunities in South Korea.

Prior to 2023, the last Head of State level visit between ROK and India was held in 2019, when Prime Minister Modi visited South Korea on 21-22 February 2019. The visit had provided the bilateral relations a momentum in interaction and a framework to progress deeper into the partnership. With India's presidency of the G20 in the year 2023, which elevated its position as a leader of the Global South, in addition to being the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between India and South Korea, the bilateral meeting of President Yoon Suk-yeol and Prime Minister Modi at the sidelines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi provided further guidance through executive leadership and maintains the momentum in the partnership. The bilateral Summit resulted in extensive deliberations on (1) strengthening strategic communication and cooperation in celebration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between South Korea and India, (2) enhancing cooperation in the defence industry, supply chain, infrastructure, and EV battery technology, and (3) consolidating values-based solidarity in the region and on

101 Tunchinmang Langel, 2023, "Japan-India-South Korea Trilateral for the Indo-Pacific", *ICWA*, 19 April 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9313&lid=6031



The bilateral meeting of President Yoon Suk-yeol and Prime Minister Modi at the sidelines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi provided further guidance through executive leadership and maintains the momentum in the partnership.

the international stage.¹⁰² This bilateral Summit contributed to the much-needed impetus in solidifying their leadership roles in global governance. India and ROK are in the process of taking a proactive stance together in terms of reformed multilateralism and expand their scope of comprehensive cooperation on wide-ranging global issues with countries that share the same vision and principles, while promoting a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

CONCLUSION: SUMMARY OF ROK'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE INDO-PACIFIC



The Republic of Korea's foreign policy approach has undergone a paradigm shift in recent years, from the NSP to the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In December 2022, the ROK unveiled its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which seeks to expand South Korea's engagement with the region. The strategy emphasises the importance of a rules-based order, economic cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. It has unveiled ROK is no longer strategically ambiguous and is willing to undertake more roles as a pivotal state that sets the agenda for global governance.

102 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2023, "President Yoon Seok-yeol holds summit meeting with Indian Prime Minister on the occasion of G20 summit", 11 September 2023, https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_26079/view.do?seq=379&page=1

Comparison of the NSP and the Indo-Pacific Strategy reveals that there is a significant evolution in the approach. The NSP aimed to elevate ROK's relations with India and ASEAN to the same level as its relationships with China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. The policy sought to deepen Seoul's economic, political, strategic, and sociocultural cooperation with India and ASEAN members, and to realise mutual prosperity and peace in the world including East Asia. The NSP envisioned a Korea-ASEAN future community that emphasises the 3P: People, Prosperity, and Peace, whereas the Indo-Pacific Strategy places greater emphasis on security and defence cooperation, reflecting the changing geopolitical landscape in the region. The Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to expand South Korea's engagement with the entire Indo-Pacific region. The strategy aims to enhance South Korea's strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, India, ASEAN, Africa, Latin America, and Pacific Islands to contribute to regional as well as global peace and prosperity.

Overall, in terms of implications for ROK's foreign policy, the shift from the NSP to the Indo-Pacific Strategy reflects Seoul's growing interest in the region and its desire to play a more active role in shaping the regional order. However, ROK will need to navigate the complex geopolitical dynamics of the region, including the rivalry between the United States and China, to achieve its objectives.

It was significant to pursue this study as the vast literature available on ROK's foreign policy approaches have focused primarily through the lenses of ROK's economic diplomacy. Hence, pursuing the progression of ROK's foreign policy required a more detailed focus on the discourses of Seoul's foreign policy approach amidst the shifting undercurrents of geopolitics. The research paper locates



The shift from the NSP to the Indo-Pacific Strategy reflects Seoul's growing interest in the region and its desire to play a more active role in shaping the regional order. However, ROK will need to navigate the complex geopolitical dynamics of the region, including the rivalry between the United States and China, to achieve its objectives.

ROK's strategic foreign policy shifts amidst the unilateral changes to the status quo occurring by force in the international security environment, especially since the Moon Jae-in government was elected. Considering the typecasting of Seoul's foreign policy as continued attempts at balancing between the United States and China, it was pertinent to investigate how the international security factors have eventually impacted their foreign policy outlook.

This study of the evolution in ROK's foreign policy approach addressed the pertaining issues of how a sovereign nation-state makes accommodative changes in its foreign policy decision-making. It was particularly important to analyse ROK's case as its decision-making process on foreign policies have often been imbued with strategic ambivalence due to regional and global influences hampering its policy autonomy. Moreover, it is now evident that ROK has started to look beyond the Korean Peninsula and embrace the notion of pursuing the role of a "Global Pivotal State" as an important player in the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework. Therefore, identifying the prospective role of ROK within the Indo-Pacific, especially as the undercurrents of geopolitical shifts hinder the international rules-based order, provides a broader impetus to gain analytical insight into Seoul's evolving foreign policy.

Moreover, it is now evident that ROK has started to look beyond the Korean Peninsula and embrace the notion of pursuing the role of a “Global Pivotal State” as an important player in the Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework.

The study also helps understand how ROK has perceived the regional players such as India in its foreign policy outlook over the years. With India and ROK celebrating its 50 years of Special Strategic Partnership in 2023, this study identifies ROK’s regional outlook and national priorities, which are now being remedied through a new proactive Indo-Pacific Strategy. This research also provides recommendations on areas of convergences and potential opportunities that will align the India-ROK dyad in attaining a more dynamic global role. The study draws out the transformations in overtures, which ROK has adopted for securing its national interests, gradually progressing towards an approach that is no longer strategically ambivalent but proactive.



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