

South Korea Needs to Embrace a More Expansive Role in Asia

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. needs strong partners in the Indo-Pacific to serve as security, economic, and diplomatic force multipliers when confronting China.

Fear of Chinese economic retaliation has historically kept South Korea on the sidelines as China has grown increasingly more aggressive.

South Korea's new president should follow through on promises to strengthen ties with the U.S. and assume an expanded role in countering China in the Indo-Pacific.

The inauguration of Yoon Suk Yeol as South Korea's new president quickly led to alignment with the United States on a wide range of foreign and security policies. Yoon declared that a strong alliance with the United States would be the foundation for South Korea's foreign relations with China and North Korea. He rejected his predecessors' attempts to balance Seoul's relationship with Beijing and Washington.

Along with a more pragmatic approach toward North Korea, Yoon promised to expand South Korea's role in the Indo-Pacific region to counter Chinese expansionism. In the past, Seoul had demurred from doing so out of fear of antagonizing Beijing and prompting economic retaliation.

Washington has welcomed greater policy solidarity with Seoul under the Yoon administration. However,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3728>

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Yoon may face difficulties in implementing his policies due to the narrowness of his victory amongst a highly polarized electorate, a National Assembly controlled by the opposition party, and already plummeting public approval.

To carry out his pledge to enhance South Korea's regional role, President Yoon must develop an Indo-Pacific strategy that expands the country's military presence beyond the horizon. Seoul should be an active participant, if not leader, in multilateral security networks rather than an outlier. South Korea must join more regional security organizations, participate in more multilateral military exercises, and increase military capability building of Southeast Asian nations.

U.S. Urges Indo-Pacific Countries to Do More

The U.S.–China strategic competition has become the predominant paradigm in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing is now the most significant security challenge to the United States and its partners. The Biden Administration assesses China as the “only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”²¹

Through successive Administrations, the United States tried to modify, then constrain, Chinese misbehavior. Lacking the capacity to do so alone, Washington sought to create coalitions of like-minded Indo-Pacific nations to defend democratic values, uphold international norms, and rebuff Chinese encroachment on the sovereignty of its neighbors. America's allies and partners serve as security, economic, and diplomatic force multipliers when confronting China.

As part of this effort, Washington has long urged South Korea to assume a greater security role beyond the Korean Peninsula, as well as more forthrightly defend the rules-based international order and values common to democracies.

South Korea's Balancing Act. Instead, Seoul resisted U.S. entreaties and sought to remain on the sidelines by refraining from criticizing Chinese actions or doing the minimal amount to satisfy Washington. South Korea pursued a risk-averse hedging policy in which it balanced its relations with its security guarantor (the United States) and its largest trading partner (China). South Korean officials privately commented that Seoul's “heart was in Washington, but its wallet was in Beijing.”

South Korea was fearful of triggering Chinese economic retaliation as Beijing had done against Japan in 2010 after incidents near the disputed

Senkaku Islands, against South Korea after its 2016 decision to allow U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense system, against Australia in 2020 for barring Huawei and ZTE from its 5G networks, and against Taiwan in 2022 by banning imports from more than 100 Taiwanese companies in response to Taipei accepting a visit by U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi.

Beijing reacted to South Korea's THAAD decision by banning some South Korean products, increasing inspections to impede trade, restricting tourism, limiting distribution of South Korean movies, and encouraging domestic boycotts of South Korean goods. South Korean manufacturers suffered at least \$7.5 billion in economic losses,² and the South Korean tourism industry may have suffered as much as \$15 billion in losses.³

Seoul eventually capitulated to Chinese pressure by accepting Beijing's demand for "three noes" in which Seoul promised: no additional THAAD deployments, no integration of its missile defense system into the more comprehensive allied network, and no trilateral military alliance with Japan and the United States. South Korea's self-constraining policy decision undercut its national security and sovereignty.

A False Paradigm of Choice

South Koreans often lament that Washington is "forcing Seoul to choose between China and the United States," though they do not make similar complaints about Beijing. As a U.S. official commented, "We don't ask our partners in the region to choose between the United States and China. We ask our partners to contribute to the rules-based order."⁴ The United States emphasizes that democracies should not shy away from upholding their national security.

South Korea does not face a single strategic decision in which it must irrevocably choose between its ally or trading partner. Instead, Seoul makes a series of tactical decisions that cumulatively reveal whether it will prioritize its short-term and long-term national security interests or its short-term economic self-interests.

The nature of South Korea's relationships with China and the United States could not be more different. The U.S.–South Korean partnership is based on America's help in maintaining South Korea's independence and sovereignty, and the shared values, principles, and objectives of democracies. The military alliance is irreplaceable for South Korea's national security. The U.S. sacrifice to defend South Korea is etched in the names on the wall of the Korean War Memorial.

Seoul's diffident relationship with Beijing is based on commercialism and fear. China is clearly not a reliable economic partner when it retaliates against South Korea for protecting its sovereignty and national security. Beijing's repeated economic and diplomatic arm-twisting underscores the nature of the Chinese regime and its relationship with South Korea.

Rather than being a reliable partner in facilitating improved inter-Korean relations, Beijing repeatedly resisted punishing Pyongyang for its repeated attacks and threats against South Korea and violations of U.N. resolutions. China defended North Korea after the regime's deadly Cheonan and Yeonpyeong-do attacks that killed 50 South Koreans in 2010.

Pulling Punches on China

This fear of Chinese economic reprisals led to years of South Korean conciliatory policies that avoided confrontation, conflict, and criticism. South Korean timidity included resistance to criticizing Beijing's sovereignty transgressions in the East and South China Seas, reluctance to condemn China's crackdown on human rights in Hong Kong and genocide against Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, and hesitancy to stand with other democracies in upholding common principles of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Seoul was even reluctant to create an Indo-Pacific policy strategy out of concern it would be perceived as being directed against China.

Nor did Seoul respond strongly when Chinese military jets made incursions into South Korea's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), Chinese auxiliary fishing fleets repeatedly entered South Korean waters, or when Beijing imposed an ADIZ over South Korea's Ieodo Island. South Korean administrations also felt that antagonizing Beijing could jeopardize Chinese assistance in inducing Pyongyang back to denuclearization negotiations or reducing inter-Korean tensions.

Annual surveys by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)-Yusof Ishak Institute consistently shows that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has low trust in South Korea as a strategic partner to hedge against uncertainties stemming from the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. In the 2022 survey, 40.2 percent of ASEAN respondents chose the European Union as their most trusted strategic partner, followed by Japan (29.2 percent), Australia (10.3 percent), the United Kingdom (8.4 percent), South Korea (6.8 percent), and India (5.1 percent).⁵ South Korea's low standing was the consequence of its "long-term neglect of political-security cooperation with ASEAN countries."⁶

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

There is a disparity between South Korea's stated aspirations and the actions it is willing to undertake. Seoul seeks the prestige of a global player while avoiding corresponding responsibilities. South Korea is the world's 10th-largest economy, has the 10th-highest level of defense spending,⁷ and the eighth-largest active-duty military.⁸ Yet, Seoul has been unwilling to play a leadership role commensurate with its capabilities, as well as to actively shape the regional order.

South Korea is economically dependent on a free and open Indo-Pacific, including freedom of navigation—99.7 percent of the country's trade volume is transported by sea.⁹ Despite this, Seoul repeatedly demurred when asked by the United States to criticize China's expansionism in Southeast Asian waters and threat to freedom of the seas.

Pre-emptively capitulating to an authoritarian regime due to fear of potential retaliation has left Seoul a follower rather than a leader in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in comparison to other U.S. allies, such as Australia and Japan. By self-isolating, South Korea self-marginalized itself, reacting rather than influencing the regional environment. One must be on the court to be in the game.

However, it will be increasingly untenable for South Korea to continue sitting on the fence due to China's aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific, the strong international response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the February 2022 joint Russian-Chinese statement of mutual support.¹⁰ The United States has called on nations to take a strong position against authoritarian regimes, and nations that adopted hedging strategies faced strong international criticism.

Moon Jae-in's Hedging Strategy

President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) continued the South Korean trend of meekly defending democratic principles in order to avoid economic repercussions. Moon's hesitancy to criticize China was evident in his May 2021 joint summit statement with President Joe Biden. At first glance, the joint statement seems a strong affirmation of democratic ideals in which both leaders pledged “to maintain peace and stability, lawful unimpeded commerce, and respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea...[to] emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”¹¹

A closer look at the document, however, shows that Moon only blandly opposed Chinese actions while refusing to mention China by name. The Biden Administration had tried to convince Moon to adopt stronger language against China but to no avail.¹² Seoul also pledged to promote “human rights at home and abroad” but did not include any reference to Beijing’s human rights violations.

The Moon administration portrayed the joint statement as a strong step forward while concurrently downplaying its importance. South Korean officials stressed that it was the first time that Taiwan had been included in a U.S.–South Korean joint statement. Yet, when asked by journalists if Beijing might respond strongly, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong stressed that the Taiwan issue was expressed only “in generalities.”¹³ First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun believed that Beijing would appreciate that the summit did not specify China.¹⁴ Seoul also downplayed any significance in subsequent interaction with Taiwanese diplomats.¹⁵

The document was disappointing in comparison with the April 2021 U.S.–Japan joint statement between Biden and then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.¹⁶ By contrast, Japan directly criticized Chinese human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang Province, intimidation against Taiwan, and Beijing’s belligerent actions in the East and South China Seas.

South Korea’s attempts to fly under the radar were also evident in other international meetings where Chinese actions were discussed. After the June 2021 G7 statement expressed serious concern about the situations in the East and South China Seas, Seoul emphasized that it was not involved in any discussions related to China during the summit.¹⁷

The December 2021 U.S.–South Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) joint communique by the Secretary of Defense and minister of defense “acknowledged the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” but again without mentioning China.¹⁸ A South Korean defense official downplayed the Taiwan reference by stating that it was just a repeat of the presidential joint statement and he asked the media not to read too much into its inclusion in the SCM joint communique.¹⁹

By contrast, Tokyo agreed to stronger critical comments against China in the 2021 U.S.–Japan Security Consultative Committee Meeting (SCCM). The bilateral document described China’s behavior as inconsistent with the existing international order and a challenge to the international community.²⁰ The defense chiefs expressed serious concerns about disruptive Chinese actions and objections to “China’s unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea” as well as human rights conditions in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Characteristically Slow Response to Ukraine Invasion

South Korea's diffidence to confronting authoritarian regimes for transgressions against international norms was more recently seen after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Seoul hesitated to criticize Moscow, announced sanctions only after facing international criticism for its belated response, and then sought exemptions from sanctions citing their potential impact on South Korean companies. Seoul declared it would abide by sanctions implemented by the United States and European nations on Russian exports but, unlike other Asian democracies, would not impose any of its own.

A South Korean official explained, "We have to keep in mind that our trade relations with Russia are growing." Seoul's policy was in sharp contrast to that of Japan, which quickly implemented sanctions and a freeze on Russian banks' assets.²¹ South Korea eventually restricted exports of strategic items and technology to Russia, supported international efforts to block several Russian banks from the SWIFT international payments system, and banned financial transactions with the Russian Central Bank.²²

South Korea was a weak link in democracies standing up to authoritarian regimes, appearing to do so only after being pressured and shamed. An embarrassingly stark contrast between South Korea and the rest of the international community was the sparse attendance by National Assembly members at a virtual briefing by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Only 20 percent of legislators attended the briefing and some left during Zelenskyy's speech, as compared with standing room only audiences of other nations' parliaments.²³

New Korean President Pledges New Policy

President Yoon Suk Yeol has delineated strong foreign policy positions that are significantly different than the diffidence of Moon Jae-in. Yoon pledged to implement a principled, values-based foreign policy that would not acquiesce to Chinese and North Korean threats nor subjugate South Korean national security interests. Yoon emphasized that a strengthened "comprehensive strategic alliance" with the United States would form the foundation for Seoul's outreach to Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tokyo.

Yoon declared it was incumbent upon South Korea as a global leader and one of the world's top 10 economies to take on a greater regional role and "promote a free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific [rather than] passively adapting and reacting to the changing international environment."²⁴

President Yoon espoused that South Korea should “no longer be confined to the Korean Peninsula but rise to the challenge of being...a ‘global pivotal state’ [that] advances freedom, peace, and prosperity.”²⁵ This view is echoed by General LaCamera, Commander of the United Nations Command, the ROK–U.S. Combined Forces Command, and United States Forces Korea, who sees the “opportunity for the [U.S.–South Korea] alliance to extend its reach and become a global comprehensive strategic alliance, beyond the Korean Peninsula.”²⁶

To contribute to the peace and stability of the region, Yoon vowed to join multilateral regional cooperative initiatives, participate in trilateral security coordination with the United States and Japan, and, in conjunction with other Asia–Pacific democracies, “maintain the freedom of navigation and over-flight in the region.”²⁷

Yoon rejected Moon’s attempts at fence-sitting between China and the United States and stated that South Korea would not feel compelled to choose between the two but instead would “always maintain the principled position that it will not compromise on its core security interests.”²⁸ He declared he would replace Moon’s strategic ambiguity with “strategic clarity” by strongly aligning with Washington.

Yoon disparaged Moon’s “parochial and shortsighted conception of the national interest,” which created the impression that South Korea had been tilting toward China. The result of Moon’s approach, he opined, was that South Korea was “conspicuously silent in the face of violations of liberal democratic norms and human rights that invited outrage from other democracies.”²⁹

Yoon declared that the Moon administration had engaged in submissive diplomacy that was pro-China and pro-North Korea.³⁰ He criticized Moon for succumbing to Chinese economic retaliation at the expense of South Korea’s security interests by capitulating to Beijing’s demands for the “three noes” to settle the THAAD dispute.³¹

President Yoon participated in the June 2022 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in an affirmation of his intention to expand South Korea’s regional and global role. Four Asia–Pacific nations—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea (AP-4)—all made their first appearance at the NATO summit, reflecting the growing emphasis on cooperation among Asian and European democracies in dealing with Chinese and Russian challenges to their shared interests. Yoon said he hoped “a cooperative relationship between NATO and the Indo-Pacific will become a cornerstone of a coalition defending universal values.”³² Yoon also discussed increasing defense cooperation and arms sales with several European nations.

The AP4 held a separate summit meeting to discuss the Ukraine invasion and its impact on the Indo–Pacific region. The four leaders pledged to promote cooperation with NATO as well as amongst themselves to maintain peace and stability in the Indo–Pacific region.³³ The AP4 meeting was an important step toward coordinating responses to regional threats, including Chinese economic coercion, and should form the foundation for additional meetings as well as multilateral military exercises.

Yoon will find support for his firmer policy in the South Korean populace’s deteriorating view of China and growing perception of Beijing as a security threat. Between 2015 and 2020, South Koreans’ negative impression of China doubled from 37 percent to 75 percent, according to the Pew Research Center.³⁴ China was identified as a security threat by 83 percent of South Korean respondents and an economic threat by 60 percent of respondents.³⁵

However, the South Korean public will not support a needlessly confrontational or provocative policy that invites Chinese economic retaliation. Only 40 percent of South Korean respondents favored significantly reducing trade with China if it led to greater prices for consumers.³⁶ Discussions with South Korean officials suggest that Yoon will expand South Korea’s regional role while downplaying any perception that it is “anti-China,” instead depicting some initiatives as an expansion of its alliance with the United States.

Will Yoon Implement His Pledged Policy?

President Yoon’s pragmatic foreign and security policies are a promising development. His vow to strengthen the bilateral alliance with Washington will repair much of the damage from conflicting policies in recent years. South Korea and the United States will now be closely aligned on their approaches toward China, North Korea, and the Indo–Pacific region. The Biden Administration will welcome a South Korean ally willing to play an enhanced role in maintaining a rules-based order against Chinese encroachments.

The Yoon administration will create an Indo–Pacific strategy that adopts a more coordinated, multilateral approach toward regional threats and challenges than his predecessor. By not being overly fixated on improving relations with North Korea, President Yoon will be less beholden to China. South Korea will adopt a firmer approach toward countering Chinese actions and no longer preemptively self-limit its policies out of concern for potential reactions by Beijing.

At the same time, however, Seoul will not needlessly antagonize China nor pronounce initiatives as directed against Beijing. As a senior South Korean official commented privately, “The Moon administration was cautious in actions, but we will be cautious in words.”³⁷

Importance of Economic Security

China’s economic retaliation and weaponization of trade ties with its Asian neighbors makes clear the increasing importance of economic security. Supply-chain shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated international concerns about overreliance on trade with China.

South Korea has repeatedly sought to diversify its trade away from China. In 2004, Seoul feared a “China Shock” arising from overdependence on China as the primary driver of South Korea’s economic growth as Beijing announced plans to slow down its economy.³⁸ One of the strategic objectives of the 2012 U.S.–South Korea Free Trade Agreement was to diversify South Korean trade away from China and towards the United States.

In November 2017, President Moon Jae-in unveiled his New Southern Policy (NSP) to promote greater economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation with 10 ASEAN countries in Southeast Asia and India. It was a hedging strategy to diversify trade away from China to reduce South Korean susceptibility to Chinese economic coercion.

The NSP consisted of three pillars: people (diplomacy), prosperity (economics), and peace (security). The NSP was a risk-averse, conflict-avoidance policy that neglected “hard” defense initiatives, focusing instead on nontraditional security issues so as to minimize conflict with China. Seoul made no reference to upholding a regional rules-based order and avoided any linkage to the U.S. Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) Strategy.

Washington sought to “align [South Korea’s] New Southern Policy and the United States’ vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.”³⁹ However, the 2020 bilateral U.S.–South Korea fact sheet and 2021 joint statement only seemed to underscore the differences, particularly on security issues. At Seoul’s request, both documents avoided criticizing Beijing for its human rights violations and threats to regional sovereign territorial integrity.

Bilateral security cooperation between Washington and Seoul was limited to soft, nontraditional security issues, such as sustainable development, transnational crimes, water management in the Mekong region, climate change, pandemics, and natural disasters. Greater emphasis was placed on developmental cooperation, infrastructure, energy, digital economy, climate change, health, and environmental protection.⁴⁰

Moon's NSP was an independent, narrowly focused policy that was not coordinated with the comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategies of Australia, France, India, Japan, the United States, and ASEAN nations. Seoul committed in the U.S.–South Korea joint statement to “maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific” but without any provisions for how to do so or any embrace of a strategic vision for a larger regional role.

South Korea Remains Overly Dependent on China Trade

The scope of South Korean trade with China shows both the necessity as well as the difficulty of reducing Seoul's economic dependency on Beijing. Despite years of trying to diversify its trade away from China to other nations, South Korea remains reliant on China for 75 percent of its key imports, as compared with 14 percent for Japan and 10.5 percent for the United States. In 2020, South Korea exported 32 percent of its goods to China, compared with 15 percent to the United States and 5 percent to Japan.

South Korean overreliance on trade with China is even more dire in a number of critical resources. The Korea International Trade Association assessed that 1,850 items that South Korea imports have a minimum 80 percent dependence on China.⁴¹

South Korea imports 98 percent of its diesel exhaust fluid (DEF), also called “urea water,” from China, as well as 100 percent of magnesium ingots used in manufacturing automobile chassis and aircraft. Shortages of DEF in 2021 disrupted the South Korean agriculture and shipping industries.

South Korea also relies on imports from China for 94.7 percent of tungsten oxide to make semiconductors, 83.5 percent for lithium hydroxide, a key material in secondary batteries, and 86.2 percent for neodymium magnets that are used in disk drives and magnetic fasteners.⁴²

President Yoon advocates that the South Korean government and corporations work together to diversify the supply chain of key strategic resources in order to reduce economic dependence on China.⁴³ A Yoon administration official commented, “We need to diversify imports [and develop] supply chain alliances. The government will manage the supply chain which is core to the idea of economic security.”⁴⁴

During their May 2022 summit meeting, Presidents Biden and Yoon agreed to deepen and broaden cooperation on critical and emerging technologies, enhance economic and energy security, protect and promote critical and emerging technologies, and secure and diversify global supply chains.⁴⁵

To implement these pledges, the two presidents directed their national security councils to launch an economic security dialogue aimed at

promoting investment as well as research and development cooperation, assessing greater defense industry cooperation through a Reciprocal Defense Procurement agreement, and creating a Supply Chain and Commercial Dialogue to detect and address potential supply-chain disruptions, including of critical minerals.

President Biden identified semiconductors as a critical product to U.S. security and his Administration has called for “friend-shoring” of supply chains where production is diversified away from China to the United States or other trusted U.S. allies and partners. The U.S. is pushing for a “Chip 4” semiconductor alliance with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Some Progress on Diversification. South Korean firms have recently been redirecting investment away from China and toward the United States due to deteriorating economic conditions and increasing political risks. A Korea International Trade Association survey revealed that a majority of Korean companies were considering further downsizing or relocating their operations out of China. Chinese labor costs and regulations are increasing, the country’s economic growth is slowing, and firms face risks from Chinese government intervention.⁴⁶

South Korean export volume to China decreased during the past three years while concurrently rising to the United States. From 2018 to 2021, China’s weight in South Korean exports decreased from 26.8 percent to 25.3 percent while exports to the United States rose from 12 percent to 14.9 percent.⁴⁷

In July 2022, South Korean SK Group announced a \$22 billion high-tech investment in the United States for production of semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, and pharmaceuticals. Samsung has started construction on a \$17 billion semiconductor chip factory in Texas and announced a long-term \$192 billion investment plan to build up to 11 more chip plants in Texas.⁴⁸

Several South Korean companies indicated decisions for additional diversification away from China to the United States but had temporarily put those plans on hold prior to announcement due to recent economic conditions, including rising prices.⁴⁹

South Korea’s Military Has the Capacity for Broader Regional Role

South Korea has a formidable, highly capable military. It is a large force with advanced weapons and innovative military education and training. South Korean military spending has increased, and Seoul appears to be procuring the right mix of capabilities. The defense budget increased an average of 7 percent annually.

The U.S.–South Korean military alliance is strong and fundamentally sound. Military officers and policymakers from both countries highlight the strength of their military forces and the unique integrated command structure that enables highly effective warfighting capabilities. In May 2021, the United States agreed to Revised Missile Guidelines, removing the limits on South Korean missile payload and range. This will enable South Korea to strike targets further than the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea faces an existential threat from North Korea’s nuclear, missile, chemical-warfare, and conventional forces. Therefore, Seoul must focus its military forces predominantly on that threat and continue ongoing efforts to augment South Korean military capabilities.

However, South Korea can concurrently use its impressive military capabilities to engage in security issues beyond the Korean Peninsula. Seoul has military assets, including a blue-water navy, which are essential for responding to the North Korean threat.

Building on a Strong, But Minimal, Regional Security Presence

As Washington calls for Seoul to play a larger regional security role, the good news is that the latter will be building on an existing foundation. The South Korean military has been involved in regional security relationships, capacity-building efforts, and military exercises, though at low levels, particularly when compared with other regional militaries.

Security Relationships. South Korea is involved in several regional security-related meetings including the Asia Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM-Plus), Asia Security Summit, Seoul Defense Dialogue, and South Korea-ASEAN special summit. Seoul engaged with Australia with “two plus two” meetings of their foreign and defense ministers to discuss North Korea, Indo–Pacific strategy, and defense cooperation. The ministers pledged to enhance cooperation in the arms industry and revive a bilateral agreement on defense industrial cooperation which had expired in 2011. Australia subsequently signed a \$700 million contract for K9 self-propelled howitzers.⁵⁰

Seoul has signed Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSAs) with: Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. South Korea has a Defense and Logistics Cooperation with the Philippines and provided retired naval vessels to Manila. Seoul has supported the export of defense articles by holding an export conference with the coast guards from 10 ASEAN countries.⁵¹

Capacity Building. South Korea has an extensive military industry and is the world's fastest growing arms exporter, rising from the 31st-largest arms exporter in 2020 to the eighth-largest arms exporter in 2021, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute arms transfer database.⁵² In 2022, military exports are expected to be higher than \$10 billion, almost three times larger than South Korea's total arms exports in the preceding decade.⁵³

South Korea has sold military equipment to Southeast Asian nations with the Philippines and Indonesia being two large purchasers of South Korean weapons, accounting for 16 percent and 14 percent of total sales, respectively.⁵⁴ Military sales to Southeast Asian nations include Australia (a \$1 billion deal for 30 self-propelled howitzers and 15 armored supply vehicles); Indonesia (TA-50 aircraft, Type 209 submarine, and KFX/IFX joint fighter aircraft); Malaysia (corvette, K200 APC, and training ship); New Zealand (fleet tanker); the Philippines (FA-50 aircraft, AAV-A7, and Pohang-class corvette); Thailand (frigate and T-50 aircraft); and Vietnam (corvette).⁵⁵

The South Korean Ministry of Defense has transferred military supplies that its armed forces no longer use to nations in need. Seoul is extending the scope of free transfers of military equipment to Southeast Asian countries, including naval vessels, aircraft, maneuvering equipment, firepower equipment, and engineering equipment.⁵⁶

South Korea will provide a second decommissioned Pohang-class corvette to the Philippine Navy to augment anti-submarine, anti-ship, and anti-aircraft warfare and coastal patrolling operations in the littoral environment.

Overall, the South Korean navy has transferred 40 ships to 10 friendly countries to facilitate defense cooperation.⁵⁷ These sales and transfers of weapons and military equipment builds the capabilities of Southeast Asian militaries while indirectly improving interoperability and habits of cooperation with South Korean and U.S. forces. However, these sales have been driven by commercial interests and supporting domestic arms industries rather than by a strategic plan to enhance South Korea's regional security role or capacity building against Chinese maritime incursions.

Military Exercises. South Korea has been a participant in several multilateral military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region, including Cobra Gold, Pacific Dragon, Pacific Vanguard, Pitch Black, Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), South Korea-Philippines Passing Exercise (PASSEX), Sea Dragon, and Talisman Saber. Seoul has been an observer in the Super Garuda (Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, and the U.S.) military exercise.

Challenges to Policy Implementation

President Yoon vowed to stake out a bolder, more expansive South Korean role in the Indo-Pacific. Initial indications are that he will pursue a values-based foreign policy that is less conciliatory toward Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang than his predecessor Moon Jae-in's policy. However, his administration has not yet articulated the parameters of the new role, nor how his regional policies will differ from those of his predecessors. Early discussions with Yoon administration officials did not elicit details of new security initiatives in Southeast Asia. Seoul appears to remain focused predominantly on the North Korean threat.

President Yoon will be hampered in delivering on his pledges by a deeply divided electorate, a razor-thin election victory, an opposition-controlled legislature, weak public approval ratings, and lengthy domestic policy agenda. Is it also uncertain how receptive Southeast Asian nations will be to South Korea, or any nation, incorporating the region in enhanced measures to counter Chinese intimidation efforts.

Yoon's policies appear firmly in line with those of the United States and provide greater potential for policy coordination and progress. However, given Yoon's domestic and economic constraints, U.S. policymakers and alliance managers will need to balance pushing Seoul on policy decisions with risking undermining relations with Seoul or jeopardizing Yoon's political standing.

Recommendations for South Korea

South Korea must become a reliable regional security partner. For 70 years, other nations have augmented South Korea's defense against North Korea. It is past time for Seoul to reciprocate and play a larger role commensurate with its capabilities to assist Southeast Asian nations in protecting their sovereignty and countering Chinese aggression and provocation.

South Korea must engage in a comprehensive whole-of-government strategy to enable it to assume a larger regional security role. The initiative should be comprised of several key pillars. South Korea should:

- **Define** its regional role and articulate detailed steps toward attaining it;
- **Criticize** Chinese sovereignty transgressions and human rights violations more forthrightly;

- **Improve** economic security to reduce vulnerability to Chinese coercion and economic retaliation;
- **Augment** regional security relationships with like-minded democracies in the Indo–Pacific and Europe;
- **Increase** military and intelligence exchanges;
- **Assist** regional partners’ security capacity building, particularly for maritime domain awareness and security; and
- **Increase** participation in regional multilateral military training and exercises in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.
- **Defining Its Regional Role.** The Yoon administration announced it will produce South Korea’s first Indo–Pacific strategy by year’s end. In the document, Seoul should emphasize that it shares core security interests with other liberal democracies and will become a forceful advocate for free trade, good governance, rules-based international order, and protection of nations from intimidation.

Seoul should define the parameters of a larger leadership role and articulate the means it will use to shoulder more responsibility in the region. Seoul needs to get off the bench and step up to the plate if it wants to have a role in defining the future of the Indo–Pacific region rather than reacting to developments.

South Korea should coordinate into Indo–Pacific strategy with Australia, Japan, the United States, and other partners to establish a strategic framework of like-minded democracies. President Yoon then needs to devote sufficient resources, including military, to implement the strategy and then engage in multilateral exercises to refine and demonstrate South Korea’s new expanded role.

Criticizing Chinese Transgressions More Forthrightly. Part of South Korea’s new role will be to no longer self-censor its national security policies out of fear of Chinese retaliation. Seoul should be more vocal in criticizing Chinese transgressions, including coercive actions, economic retaliation, territorial incursions, and human rights violations. Recently, South Korea has been willing to criticize Chinese actions, but unlike Japan, did not identify China as the perpetrator.

An encouraging early indicator of a more resolute Yoon administration policy was its rejection in August 2022 of Chinese claims that Seoul had agreed to constrain national security policies as well as the operation of a U.S. THAAD missile defense system deployed in South Korea. Seoul affirmed that it would not limit its efforts to defend the populace against the growing North Korean nuclear and missile threats despite Chinese hints of coercive action.

The Yoon administration is to be commended for its newfound backbone in dealing with China. It points to greater security for the South Korean people and a convergence of vision between the U.S. and South Korea on the greatest *strategic* challenge that both countries face—China’s expansive geostrategic ambition.

Improving Economic Security. South Korea should augment and accelerate ongoing efforts to diversify its trade away from Beijing to reduce vulnerability to Chinese coercion, economic warfare, and retaliatory actions. Improving economic security will reduce South Korean anxiety about the potential repercussions to implementing policies that uphold the rules-based international order.

Australia, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and in concert with Indo-Pacific and European nations, should establish collective economic security networks. An example of such efforts is the December 2021 South Korea–Australia strategic cooperation agreement to strengthen the bilateral trade of critical minerals, including rare earth minerals, lithium, graphite, cobalt, and nickel.⁵⁸ Seoul could also learn from Australia’s trade diversification initiatives in response to Chinese pressure on Australian coal exports.⁵⁹

Diversifying trade and enhancing supply-chain security will require extensive, multi-year collaborative efforts between the governments and companies of regional nations. South Korean companies previously relied on economic efficiency to determine the location of production plants overseas, but that may no longer be sufficient. Investment and trade decisions will need to consider diplomatic and security factors rather than being based purely on economic efficiencies.⁶⁰

In their May 2022 joint statement, Presidents Biden and Yoon pledged to deepen bilateral cooperation on economic and energy security, enhance partnership on critical and emerging technologies, and create secure, sustainable, and resilient global supply chains of critical supplies and technology.⁶¹ Washington and Seoul should carry out the economic initiatives contained in the 2021 and 2022 joint statements.

Though in their infancies, the Indo–Pacific Economic Framework⁶² and the Chip-4 alliance (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the U.S.) could form the foundation for trade diversification and enhancing supply-chain resilience.

Augmenting Regional Security Relationships. The Biden and Yoon administrations should strive to include South Korea in more multilateral dialogues within and beyond the Indo–Pacific region to enable a collective regional security network. Multilateral security initiatives would complement the U.S. “hub and spoke” alliance system to improve coordination and collaboration amongst partners across the Indo–Pacific.

Rather than attempting to create one grand formal security organization addressing every security threat—an “Indo–Pacific NATO”—it would be more effective to have multiple, multilateral, multi-domain security initiatives throughout the Indo–Pacific with overlapping memberships focused on specific challenges. Such mission-oriented groupings can more readily make decisions and implement security actions.

Similarly, South Korea’s recent advocacy for formally joining the Quadrilateral Security Initiative as a full member seems based on national prestige rather than effectiveness. The Quad does not have a strong security mission, instead focusing primarily on economic and developmental issues. Formal membership is less important than participating in Quad working groups or separate security initiatives.

Not all security partnerships need include the United States. As the AP-4 meeting of Australian, Japanese, New Zealand, and South Korean leaders at the NATO summit showed, regional players sharing common interests can develop multilateral initiatives without Washington’s involvement.

These regional security initiatives and partnerships are consistent with the Biden Administration’s concept of “integrated deterrence” as a latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions and flexible groupings enabling allies and partners to take on regional leadership roles themselves. The strategy strives to foster security ties amongst countries to deepen interoperability, link defense industrial bases, integrate defense supply chains, co-produce key military technologies, and deploy advanced warfighting capabilities.⁶³

Increasing Military and Intelligence Exchanges. South Korea should engage in regular bilateral and multilateral meetings of defense and intelligence officials to enhance security cooperation amongst like-minded democracies in the Indo–Pacific. Seoul should explore joining existing mechanisms or creating new partnerships. South Korea should:

- **Join the Australia, Japan, and U.S. Trilateral Defense Ministers' Meeting (TDMM).** This group shares many of the values articulated in joint U.S.–South Korean bilateral statements, including opposing unilateral changes or attempts to influence the status quo in the South China Sea, objecting to China's unlawful maritime claims, and upholding freedom of navigation.
- **Join** the Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative to enable Pacific Island nations to harness collective strength through closer cooperation.⁶⁴ Founding nations include Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with France and the EU as observers. Once again, South Korea was notably absent.
- **Recommend operationalizing** the AP4 of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea by adding a security component to the AP4 meeting held on the sidelines of the NATO summit.
- **Advocate for creating** an Australia, Japan, South Korea, United Kingdom, and U.S. security pact. While this would be an expansion of the recently initiated Australia–U.K.–U.S. (AUKUS) security agreement, it would do so without the nuclear submarine component.
- **Increase** security cooperation with Europe through the European Union and NATO.

These relationships would consist of collaboration amongst the “high end” of military and intelligence-gathering capabilities. Seoul should ensure that it has sufficient military and intelligence sharing, logistics-support arrangements, and reciprocal access agreements with all of these nations. These nations could then individually and collectively reach out to South-east Asian nations to provide security assistance.

Engaging with Japan in a multilateral security context could facilitate increased bilateral defense cooperation and improve diplomatic relations absent constraints imposed by difficult historic issues.

Expanding military and intelligence exchanges raises the issue of whether to formally expand the Five Eyes (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the U.K., and the U.S.) intelligence-sharing alliance. As with South Korea joining the Quad, the actions are more important than the formal organization. Beyond the formal five-party alliance, the members already exchange information with other nations, termed Third Party Partners.

The United States, in conjunction with other Five Eyes nations, should assess the benefits of augmenting intelligence sharing on Chinese activities amongst a broader network of partners with the necessity to protect sources and methods. Intelligence comes from a variety of sources with differing levels of sensitivity and information can be shared while removing references to its sourcing.

Assisting Regional Partners' Capacity Building. Chinese maritime and aerial incursions as well as other regional challenges, such as piracy, illegal fishing, and transnational crime underscore the necessity of improving maritime domain awareness and maritime security.

Regional actors need robust regional security partnerships, enhanced sensors, and additional airplanes and naval vessels to increase intelligence, detection, surveillance, communication, information sharing, and response capabilities. Regional security capacity building could impede China's quest to push sovereignty claims.

South Korean and regional coast guards and air traffic control authorities, including Taiwan, should also be involved in coordinating maritime and aerial surveillance and reconnaissance, situational awareness, and real-time intelligence exchanges of Chinese military, coast guard, and fishing fleet movements.

This effort could be in conjunction with the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) announced in May 2022. The initiative will strive to develop a near-real-time, integrated, and cost-effective maritime domain awareness network across the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean regions.⁶⁵

Japan, South Korea, and the United States should coordinate with other defense suppliers on direct military sales, security assistance, and providing excess military equipment to Southeast Asian nations to address maritime and aerial deficiencies.

South Korean military equipment is compatible with U.S. systems, can be less expensive, and sometimes with quicker delivery, all desirable attributes for Southeast Asian nations. While Seoul has sold and transferred military equipment to Southeast Asia, there has been no discernible strategy beyond commercialism and supporting the domestic arms industry.

Increasing Participation in Regional Military Training and Exercises. South Korea should augment its involvement in existing regional military exercises, as well as assess the need to create new multilateral training opportunities. Doing so would enhance the South Korean military's ability to conduct joint and combined operations as well as to enhance regional interoperability and readiness.

Seoul should be involved in regional exercises on air and sea interdiction, anti-submarine warfare, coastal defense, maritime surveillance, mine warfare, maritime domain awareness, and operating as a combined maritime task force. South Korea could also join military exercises Malabar and Pacific Endeavor.

South Korea should increase its maritime presence in Southeast Asia, participating in combined naval patrols and in U.S.-led freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in Southeast Asia. Other nations engage in such operations, but South Korea has been notably absent. For example, in May 2019, the navies of India, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States conducted group patrols in the South China Sea.⁶⁶ In July and August 2021, warships from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States transited the South China Sea.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Yoon Suk Yeol's foreign policy pronouncements energized U.S.–South Korean relations and dispensed with disagreements that had plagued the Moon Jae-in years. There is now optimism amongst U.S. officials and Korea watchers that Seoul will adopt a pragmatic, principled approach toward authoritarian regimes. As Winston Churchill opined, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.”⁶⁸

Yoon appears likely to take greater steps than his predecessors to expand South Korea's role in the Indo–Pacific region and counter Chinese attempts to coerce Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations. Yoon is likely to do so in a low-key manner, however, by not depicting these steps as “anti-China,” perhaps making it more difficult to discern whether his policies are truly different.

That said, Yoon's actions will need to match his bold statements. The real test of his policies and South Korean fortitude will come when Beijing attempts to pressure Seoul into acquiescing to Chinese demands.

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