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South Korea's Pivotal Aspirations in the Indo-Pacific Region

By Bo Ram Kwon

SYNOPSIS

*Reinforcing South Korea's security alliance with the US, diversifying security partnerships, and envisioning a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific will buttress the aspirations of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration to make the country a Global Pivotal State. The direction of Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy is set.**

COMMENTARY

South Korea's security outlook is shaped by its ambitions to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific region as well as by constraints characterised by its evolving threat perceptions, what Richard Haas has called the "dangerous decade." Realistic choices have to be made in managing relationships to effectively deter North Korea as Pyongyang continues to develop its missile and nuclear capabilities, as well as cyber and crypto offensives, and opportunistically leverages its relationship with China.

Priorities of a Global Pivotal State

Maintaining an ironclad alliance with the US is given top priority to bolster deterrence against North Korea but, as a major hub in the US alliance network, importance is also attached to expanding the frontiers of cooperation in order to uphold the rules-based international order. Meanwhile, South Korea strives to maintain strategic cooperation with China due to its unique dependence on the Chinese market and Beijing's political influence in Pyongyang. Although its willingness is in doubt, China is in a position to deter North Korea's further testing or use of nuclear weapons as well as to influence its coming to the negotiation table.

The Yoon administration has pledged to grow South Korea into a Global Pivotal State. This will be done by broadening its diplomatic bandwidth to harness the region as a

whole to secure its national interest rather than focus solely on engagement with North Korea to resolve the nuclear problem. Seoul has taken bold steps to expand and deepen new and existing partnerships in the region while developing its own strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific.

These endeavours are being supplanted by diversification of economic partners as well as upgrades in defence partnerships, efficient resource allocation and innovative investments in the defence sector.

Reinforcing the ROK-US Alliance

First, building stronger and expansive ties begins with reinforcing the ROK-US alliance. The ROK-US Summit (May 2022) produced a joint statement and detailed fact sheet that reinforced the deterrence dimension of the military alliance as well as specific venues for cooperation on technology and defence. This largely reflected what was agreed upon in the Moon administration, which shows continuity in underlying strategic thought with regard to alliances. The two countries have not only revamped their joint military training and exercises to send a strong message to North Korea, but the US has also reaffirmed its commitment to extended deterrence.

The 54th Security Consultative Meeting specified that the US will, in the event of an attack on the US or its allies, utilise “the full range of its defence capabilities, including nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities and advanced non-nuclear capabilities.” Both countries will strengthen information sharing, consultation process, as well as joint planning and execution to deter and respond to North Korea’s threats. The US also promised to increase the frequency and scale of strategic asset deployments to the peninsula, as well as jointly enhancing space and cyber capabilities through better communication and joint exercises. Furthermore, the allies agreed to hold annual Tabletop Exercises (TTX) that includes a scenario where North Korea uses its nuclear weapons.

South Korea is also raising its profile as an advocate of free and open trade, which speaks on behalf of all stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific that have benefited from the current trade and finance system. The US is harnessing its economic power that comes from the ability to restrict other states’ access to crucial goods, services, finance, and information to win the strategic competition with China.

Concerns are rising that the US is using protectionist policies for nationalistic purposes, which places its economic security interests before those of the rest, even its closest allies. Legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the CHIPS and Science Act are geared toward creating an exclusively favourable environment for American or US-based firms and disadvantaging those who do not comply with its regulations and continue to rely on Chinese materials or its market. This was the case for South Korean firms such as Hyundai Motor Company, Samsung Electronics, and SK Hynix.

South Korea believes that serious discussions are needed in bilateral and minilateral settings to identify ways to make allies and partners “co-prosper” before prescribing “collective resilience.” This refers to the US asking like-minded states to bear with major economic and political costs now in return for perhaps larger but uncertain

benefits in the future to comply with its initiative to decouple from the Chinese economy, especially in critical technologies.

Diversifying Security Partnerships

Second, South Korea is diversifying its security partnerships to include members of NATO, ASEAN, and the Pacific Islands that are region-based, as well as coalitions like Fab 4 (a.k.a. Chip 4) that are capabilities-oriented. As a non-member of the QUAD, AUKUS, or Five Eyes, South Korea felt it had fallen behind and looked to new minilateral partnerships to catch up. Such a latticework of agile partnerships is what the Biden administration prioritises to sustain its influence in the Indo-Pacific. South Korea's relationship with China may have initially lowered the chance to join these coalitions, but it is making its way back into the game through proactive diplomatic efforts.

President Yoon Suk Yeol attended the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand where the joint communique recognised China as a threat for the first time. South Korea has joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as a founding member. South Korea was invited to join Fab 4 along with Taiwan and Japan, a US initiated coalition of semiconductor producers that aims to create a resilient chip supply chain.

Envisioning a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region

Third, South Korea presented its own Indo-Pacific strategy framework during the recent ROK-ASEAN Summit. It offers a vision of a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific built on a rules-based order and underlines the importance of core values such as freedom, human rights and the rule of law. It also condemns unilateral change of the status quo by force. What motivates this strategy is the shift in security landscape where China and Russia are engaging in revisionist actions, the growing importance of economic security, and the demands of next generation Koreans for more active global engagement.

Yet, there are significant factors that distinguish South Korea's strategy from that of other like-minded nations. North Korea is the primary existential threat. Strategic cooperation with China must be sustained to buttress the spirit of "mutual respect and reciprocity" while drawing a clear line against coercive and revisionist behaviour that impacts the rules-based order.

Lastly, trilateral security cooperation with the US and Japan is necessary to effectively deter North Korea and negotiate from a position of strength.

In all, South Korea is poised to increase bilateral, minilateral and multilateral security cooperation in the region as its Indo-Pacific strategy pivots it closer towards the US. Likely partners include Australia, Japan and European allies, as well as ASEAN. The Yoon administration has proposed an engagement policy towards Southeast Asia that succeeds and builds upon the New Southern Policy by notably strengthening the "peace" pillar. This goes by the name of Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative.

Not only will it increase economic cooperation with ASEAN member states, South

Korea will reinforce defence ties by organising a meeting between the respective defence ministers and proactively taking part in joint military exercises with ASEAN member states. Since the mid-2000s, South Korea has steadily increased its participation in multinational military exercises in the Indo-Pacific and has earned recognition to be a reliable partner. During RIMPAC 2022, a South Korean national served as the Commander of Combined Task Force (CTF) 176.

South Korea as a Defence Force Multiplier

Meanwhile, South Korea is not shy about its defence building ambitions and these have been reflected in steady defence budget increases across several administrations. Arms exports to Southeast Asia and recently Europe have significantly increased. The war in Ukraine has played a part. However, the rise in sales has benefited from South Korea's capable defence industrial base and cost-effective conventional capabilities, as well as its willingness to transfer sufficient technology for maintenance and repair, and standard operation procedures to its partners. This is the essence of capacity building. As a US ally that respects the value of freedom, transparency, and the rule of law, South Korea is in good standing to increase interoperability among a wider range of partners and become a true force multiplier in the Indo-Pacific region.

South Korea's aspirations to become a global pivotal player are not entirely new. However, the Yoon administration's strategic drive comes at a crucial time when North Korea is bent on heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula, and the US and China are narrowly focused on competing to win. The war in Ukraine creates an opportunity for North Korea to take advantage of the rift between democratic and non-democratic leagues, which makes it even more difficult for diplomacy to deliver positive results. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy framework is in its early stages but the direction is set and holds promise to contribute to peace and stability in the region.

* The ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy document, "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, And Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region" (https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133), was released recently after the completion of this paper.

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