



# Seoul in India's (new) middle order convergence

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## Abstract

As both India and South Korea build their ties on the basis of democratic partnership and ASEAN centrality, the need for Seoul to emerge as a strong partner in India's Indo-Pacific initiatives is vital. India's quest for a more serious multilateral network is continuously growing in the security sphere, and Korea's induction in the same via the "Plus" framework of the quadrilateral hints at potential for successful connects with other multilateral frameworks or bodies like the AIIB to balance economic assistance and development. Ultimately, the natural upgradation of India-South Korea relations relies intensely upon the degree to which Seoul will embrace the Indo-Pacific account that India's AEP is pitching. The merging of soft and hard power by the middle and rising power is critical to India to ensure a rules-based international order; finding a formal place for Seoul in its Indo-Pacific prism must emerge as a necessary focus of New Delhi.

## KEYWORDS

ASEAN, India, Indo-Pacific, Korea, Quad, South

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, even though geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region has been primarily defined by competition between the great powers, the United States and China, other stakeholders (major and minor), have also been intent on expanding their roles in the region by strengthening cooperation with regional powers through bilaterals and minilaterals. Recognizing the growing value in assertiveness and strategic autonomy, the countries in the



region are also gearing to move beyond the traditional bipolar narrative fueled by the United States and China, and increasingly putting their own national interests at the forefront. Such trend is exemplified by South Korea and India; both countries been carefully balancing their China-United States act so as not to appear liaising with either superpower (H.-K. Kim, 2022). However, as important middle powers in Asia, the two sides must effectively coalesce, in collaboration with other like-minded partners, to not only play a balancing act between the two hegemonic powers but also explore potential avenues that help diversify their geostrategic and goeconomic interests in the Indo-Pacific region—where they can explore the minefield of untapped avenues.

India's foreign policy has shown remarkable amenability. Its network of relations in the Indo-Pacific demonstrates that it has gradually moved away from nonalignment to multi-alignment, and now to pointed-alignment, with a dedicated focus on strategic autonomy. While some have labeled New Delhi's strategic autonomy as nonalignment packaged in a different form, the political and diplomatic overtures show a substantial and marked shift away from India's nonalignment doctrine (Smith, 2020).

The baggage of history and varied definitions notwithstanding, India's current foreign policy has been tested to the brim during the ongoing war in Ukraine. And although a selective Western (both American and European) audience may criticize India for its “silence” and “fence-sitting” on the matter—the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has repeatedly called out the West on its perceived inaccuracies and self-righteous notions—politically, so far, India has escaped any direct repercussions or fallout (Jaishankar, 2022). Even the Quad has moved beyond the differences debate that some commentators are still caught up in. India's network of relations with Russia and its like-minded Indo-Pacific partners have influenced its foreign policy decision-making (in terms of its position on the Ukraine War); but, at the same time, it has demonstrated the resiliency of New Delhi's network structures in the Indo-Pacific.

This influence of network structures is amply evident in the Republic of Korea's (ROK; South Korea) foreign policy making and regional security calculus as well. For instance, in the weeks leading up to the Ukraine war, the ROK also faced a similar dilemma, though the stands and trajectories of both countries have been rather different. The then Moon administration, while condemning the invasion initially, dillydallied by not immediately imposing unilateral sanctions and mutely supporting the Western sanctions against Russia, which is a critical voice in its fight against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) and a trade partner. However, unlike India, amid criticism and pressure from the United States, South Korea finally unveiled additional sanctions and gave humanitarian and nonlethal military aid to Ukraine, which drew praise from the US government (Reuters, 2022; Shin & Kim, 2022; Yonhap, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

In this context, both India and South Korea have markedly different network structures in the region. However, as the United States–China great power competition and events like the Ukraine crisis cause geopolitical reverberations across the world—especially in the Indo-Pacific—both India and the ROK will see changes in their roles and relational ties in the region.

South Korea, for example, has been a notable shift in its position in the Indo-Pacific over the last few years. In 2022, Seoul experienced a smooth transition from the cautious leadership of Moon Jae-in to the somewhat bold Yoon Seok-yeol of the conservative People Power Party, who has already pursued a stronger (“global comprehensive strategic”) alliance with the United States (White House, 2022). At the same time, with the new president's quest for “strategic clarity,” the ROK has also expressed a willingness to strengthen middle power diplomacy, acquire a “global pivotal state” status for the country while staving off the increasing threat



from North Korea, and embrace the US-led Indo-Pacific outlook (White House, 2022). Despite this new, much more active, stance in its foreign policy, the new government has not yet completely laid out a formal strategy or policy regarding India. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly necessary for New Delhi to find a formal place for Seoul in its Indo-Pacific network structures, especially as the devising of a security architecture (Snedden, 2018) for middle powers in Asia becomes crucial. Such an architecture is possible only through the amalgamation of shared interests of the two countries, as well as those of other regional powers like Japan and Australia, which are important pillars in India's regional network of relations and have considerable stakes in the region.

Considering the current volatile climate and the increasing relevance of India in the Indo-Pacific architecture, the India-ROK strategic partnership should only be bolstered. The dated New Southern Policy (NSP), upgraded to NSP Plus under Moon, encompasses a focus on India and ASEAN, but falls short of being a genuine Indo-Pacific policy. Under the new Yoon administration and its emphasis on the Indo-Pacific concept, the NSP (Plus) is likely to be enfolded in its soon-to-be-unveiled Indo-Pacific strategy (Min-ho, 2022). In this context, this article looks at the potential of the India-South Korea partnership through a network-centered approach. Delhi's perception of South Korea is assessed through the triple lens of middle power connect, economic partner linkages, and Seoul's identity as a key US ally. The Indo-Pacific has become home to a variety of various strategic and economic networks that tie together great powers like the United States with regional major and global middle powers like India, Japan, and Australia. What makes India's network structure—and by extension, its outlook and policy outcomes—different to other actors like Japan and Australia is its unique position as it is the only security partner (and not an ally) of the United States among the Quad powers. Then, how does India perceive South Korea's increasingly greater participation with the Indo-Pacific construct and its strategic place in India's network relations in the Indo-Pacific? As fellow middle powers looking to shape the regional security landscape, what is the scope for greater structural alignment between New Delhi and Seoul in the Indo-Pacific network structures?

Looking at the agency-driven structural connects, it examines the India-South Korea relationship via networks like the Quad, ASEAN (its centrality as a bridge), and new initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as means of building deeper synergy. ROK and India have become proactive powers in the region, looking to cultivate their middle (or even great in India's case) power identity. As the Yoon administration looks to upgrade existing middle-power diplomacy by positioning South Korea somewhere between the middle power and great power dynamics, assessing how actual foreign policy strategies emerge in the future is critical.

## REVITALIZING MIDDLE POWER POTENTIAL IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Despite the absence of a concretized definition of the concept, owing to their rapidly growing economic size, political clout, technological prowess, and diplomatic outreach, South Korea and India have been recognized as middle powers (Schweller, 2017). This middle power status provides both countries with several shared challenges and opportunities, which they share with other economies like Australia and Japan. For instance, as a result of the changing global political structure and the shifting power dynamics in the East Asian regional order, South Korea's middle power diplomacy has adopted a dual hierarchy: a security hierarchy of the



United States and an economic hierarchy of China (Ikenberry, 2015). The great power competition in the Indo-Pacific has compelled other middle powers and small states in the region to embrace such dual hierarchy as well, which also constitutes a balancing act. India's power-economic partner parity with China while building robust ties with the United States is another example of such dual hierarchy.

India and South Korea's strategic interests and their somewhat similar behavior during the Ukraine crisis has highlighted the constraints that both countries confront while identifying imperatives to balance international expectations amidst national interest priorities. India's middle power identity is often burdened with adjectives like "rising," "growing," or "emerging," because of the contested nature of its power projection (quest for great power identity) and perception (Miller, 2021). Ultimately, while it is a growing economy with the potential to reach great power status, presently the middle power conceptualization fits India best (Woo, 2021). For example, India does not have the financial or political clout of the United States or China, but has been evolving as a dynamic player in several developing countries in Asia and Africa, particularly in the littoral Indian Ocean Region (IOR) by promoting ideational assets (e.g., democratic ideals, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, rebuilding, and good international citizenship), increasing its maritime presence and building partnerships with "like-minded" states for maintaining peace and stability (Efstathopoulos, 2011).

Thus, while being aware of its great power ambitions and limitations, India has been fully committed to its middle power role especially in the Indo-Pacific. It intends to push forward its burgeoning strategic autonomy goals, as well as national security (both continental and maritime) and economic interests by pursuing an independent multidimensional engagement policy within the region. This involves coordinated engagement with various stakeholders and states (big, small, or other established middle powers like Australia and Japan). The process gained steam more emphatically post Modi's second term and the 2020 Galwan border conflict that escalated the "abnormality" and significantly enhanced mistrust in India-China relations (MEA, 2022b). However, in its engagement with the major powers in competition, despite its ongoing tensions with China and a marked tilt toward the United States, India has largely retained the power-parity equation with China. New Delhi's increased participation in China-centered formats like the Quad, as well as its adoption of what is perceived as an anti-West stance where it suits its purposes (e.g., its repeated abstentions in the UN apropos the Russian invasion of Ukraine) is driven more by its national interests than any "anti-China" attitude.

In comparison, South Korea, which has been classified as a "complete middle power" for decades now, has long emphasized economic multilateralism and capacity building due to its fixation on the North Korean threat (Abbondanza, 2022). The fear of dilution of what it views as a core national interest (i.e., deterrence against the DPRK)—amid historic animosities with neighbors (e.g., Japan) or lack of requisite attention to the extended neighborhood (e.g., India)—has thus far forced Seoul to pursue hedging and balancing between the major powers. This has often resulted in it being seen as an inflexible, myopic, or equivocal middle power.

However, the heightened global circumstances of today are hindering such a balancing approach, even if a nonconfrontational, inclusive policy is still valid. Therefore, in recent years, ROK's landmark foreign policy initiatives like the New Northern Policy (NNP) and the NSP have tried to utilize its middle-power potential to be more than an onlooker to the geostrategic activities constantly unfurling in the Indo-Pacific and instead actively shape its security environment; it has succeeded, too, albeit partially.

Through the NSP, ROK's support for a free and open Indo-Pacific leaned toward tacit compliance. The reticence of earlier years (due to aforementioned multiple reasons, from the



United States–China dichotomy to Japan's involvement) has been slowly dissipating (Yeo, 2020). In May 2021, the Moon-Biden joint statement went a step further and agreed to “align the ROK's New Southern Policy and the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific” (White House, 2021). Thus, Yoon's embrace of the US Indo-Pacific strategy and push for developing ROK's own Indo-Pacific strategy a year later was not anomalous; however, the timing (soon after his presidential inauguration) highlighted the immediacy of the global and regional situation, as well as South Korea's new-found ardor for an increased international role and recognition (White House, 2022).

## SEOUL IN INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC PRISM: RECONFIGURING ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT

India's relationship with other countries, including Japan, Australia, and ASEAN states, are important drivers in New Delhi's approach toward South Korea. The Japan factor, most prominently, emerges as a vector of interest; strong India–Japan ties as opposed to historic animosity between Japan and South Korea make the East Asian countries wary of Indian engagement on certain matters, such as intelligence sharing in multilateral engagement. Importantly, Japan–India ties have grown at a considerably faster pace than the South Korea–India bilateral, largely driven by their convergence on the Indo-Pacific that Seoul is only just beginning to come around to Panneerselvam (2016). As South Korea adopts the Indo-Pacific concept to a greater degree and the Yoon administration looks to build the country into a “global pivotal state,” New Delhi and Seoul can upgrade the scope and depth of their middle power diplomacy. Bolstering their bilateral can help them explore further opportunities like a trilateral arrangement with Tokyo.

As India calls for a free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific. India's vision for the Indo-Pacific integrates the principle of “ASEAN-Centrality,” as well as supports an inclusive approach that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations; peaceful resolution of disputes through dialog; adherence to international rules and laws; and the right to freedom of navigation and overflight for all in the international seas. Cooperation and collaboration with varied like-minded partners across the region (through a pointed alignment strategy) is integral to this approach, so as to provide a comprehensive shared response to common threats in the region. Through a proactive regional foreign policy of seeking such strategic, political, economic, and security partnerships, India has become a central node in the Indo-Pacific network of relations. How does it see South Korea's role and position within this network structure?

So far, Delhi has looked at Seoul through a tripartite lens: fellow middle power, key US ally and major bilateral economic partner. One of the major reasons for this economic focus is the trade (over)dependence on China, which is a common trait for both India and South Korea. For India, the calculus with China is exceedingly complicated due to their still on-going boundary dispute, which Delhi seeks to resolve while Beijing wants to put on the backburner. Yet, despite growing tensions, India-China bilateral trade is witnessing an upswing with bilateral trade reaching US\$125 billion in 2021 (Mitra, 2022). India faces a growing trade deficit with China, and considerable asymmetrical interdependence in critical areas, and is therefore it is increasingly looking for diversification (AIR, 2022; Nandi, 2021).

Similarly, economically, South Korea is considerably dependent on China as its largest trade partner, accounting for over 25% of total exports worth US\$644.4 billion (The Korea



Times, 2022). It is also a critical party in South Korea's equation with the DPRK as a facilitator or channel between the two neighbors. Such economic and geopolitical importance in ROK's strategic networks means that China can exacerbate the already tense situation by using these variables as leverage. South Korea has already borne the repercussions of China's economic retaliation in 2017, as a result of Seoul agreeing to host American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile systems on its territory (J. Lee, 2017). The experience not only demonstrated the intense vulnerability of the South Korean economy, but also Beijing's willingness to employ economic coercion to compromise the sovereignty of its erstwhile close trade partners. For South Korea, the incident highlighted the need to diversify away from China; for India too, the incident was an example of China's coercive diplomacy toward its partners.

In 2018, this changing mindset toward diversification—for both countries—became an important factor in driving the ambitious India-ROK “future-oriented partnership for People, Prosperity, and Peace” (3Ps), based on shared universal values of democracy, free market economy, rule of law, commitment to a peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rules-based region (MEA, 2018). This goal was aligned with their respective foreign policies, India's Act East Policy (AEP) and inclusive Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision (MEA, 2018), and South Korea's NSP. Diversification from China has made the expansion of bilateral trade a key tenet of promoting mutual prosperity. Several hiccups remain: for instance, the India-ROK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2009, is yet to be upgraded and their full potential and complementarities yet to be realized. South Korea's engagement with the Indo-Pacific concept, however, has given both countries new momentum, as seen in the 2022 India-ROK ministerial-level bilateral meeting (Ministry of Commerce & Industry India, 2022). In addition, the scope of realizing the goal of raising bilateral trade to US\$50 billion by 2030, which was agreed to in 2018, has also been given a new lease on life with trade going up 40% from 2020 to an all-time high of US\$23.7 billion in 2022 (MOFA, 2022).

As a middle power ally of the United States, a G20 power and a Quad Plus participant, as well as a potential member of the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA; pending approval of DEPA's joint committee),<sup>1</sup> South Korea's middle power status—and its position in the Indo-Pacific—is rooted in US-driven democratic engagement. Such overtures further cement its role as a global and regional governance actor especially as multipolarism in Asia grows rapidly (Cooper, 2013). Yoon's recent decision to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) shows the changing stance and posture of Seoul's foreign policy (Hankyoreh, 2022), and its emerging overture toward the Indo-Pacific concept. The next step for Seoul will be to explore a more explicit association with the Indo-Pacific. Already, Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy commits it to “principles of freedom, peace and prosperity build on a rules-based order” and displays a definite pivot toward the United States's FOIP strategy (Ryall, 2022; SCMP, 2022; White House, 2022). With India already well-integrated into the United States Indo-Pacific network structures like the Quad, Quad Plus, G20, and the IPEF, the opportunity is ripe for India and South Korea to enhance collaborations. In fact, the United States, as a central actor within the Indo-Pacific network structures of both India and the ROK can be a facilitator for greater political interactions between the two middle powers, including through a trilateral framework.

At the same time, for India-ROK ties to elevate further, there must be critical focus on various other areas of synergy, such as maritime security and emerging technologies. Although some cooperation in these sectors is already underway, practical collaborations need rejuvenated efforts. Seoul's introduction of an Indo-Pacific strategy could prove to be the



impetus for such an escalation in the coming years. Already, India is actively pursuing technology-focused defence cooperation with South Korea (along with other like-minded states like Japan, Australia, Vietnam, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States). India also has a logistics support agreement with South Korea (signed in September 2019) that has expanded the Indian navy's reach in the Indo-Pacific to the ports of South Korea (The Hindu, 2019). Such an engagement is conducive to India's direct involvement in Northeast Asia, and a way for New Delhi to pursue a greater role as a legitimate dialog partner in the region.

The launch of India's open global program, called the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI), at the East Asia Summit in 2019 (under the SAGAR vision) provides yet another opportunity for cooperation with the ROK in the maritime domain. Delhi's intent behind the IPOI is to draw on the existing regional cooperation architecture and mechanisms by focusing on seven central pillars conceived around maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, and academic cooperation; and trade connectivity and maritime transport.

As a "net security provider" in the IOR, India and South Korea can find ample room for cooperation in areas of common priority. For example, India can look to include the ROK as it pursues maritime minilaterals (including trilaterals) with Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines as a part of its pointed-alignment strategy. Such an engagement would also, importantly, fit well with South Korea's focus on ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific. Such cooperation can fall under a focus on cooperation in third countries within the India-ROK bilateral, which would help both countries integrate each other better within their networks.

India and South Korea can also cooperate on maritime avenues such as modernization of ports, shipping, and blue economy. Initiatives like the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR, *n.d.*)—which aims to create greater maritime domain awareness in collaboration with regional and partner countries like France for sharing information on developments in the IOR including piracy, human and contraband trafficking, unregulated and unreported fishing, and maritime terrorism—are important for identifying gaps in policy (Baruah, 2020; IFC-IOR, *n.d.*). With regional cooperation being a core objective of the IFC-IOR, South Korea can find immense ways to collaborate through this initiative.

South Korea faces multiple maritime security threats and needs secure sea lanes for its trade which flows largely through the contentious IOR, with over 90% of its crude oil imports passing through the South China Sea (Hynd, 2022). Therefore, the delay in ROK's direct participation in the Indo-Pacific security architecture, despite involvement in activities such as joint naval exercises and port visits, humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) and antipiracy operations, has not only affected its power projection but also hindered its own interests. Any new variant of the NSP, or its upgraded form of the policy, must fill the gap in maritime security concerns, which do not feature as comprehensively in the NSP/Plus, for South Korea to develop its own blue water ambitions (Hynd, 2022; PCNSP, 2018). India is a credible partner in this regard, and can play a vital role in helping Seoul bolster its maritime role in its neighborhood and its ambitions in the sea domain.

Being a forerunner in digital connectivity (Gillispie, 2021) and smart city innovation (B.-H. Lee, 2019), South Korea can work together with India to help advance a "tripartite partnership for development in third countries" by means of such sectors (MEA, 2018). In 2019, South Korea established a \$425 million fund to prioritize smart city development in several countries, including ASEAN states and India (Botto, 2021). As part of climate technology cooperation of



the NSP, ROK, and India should proactively collaborate to tackle climate change, which as the Fiji Defence Minister Inia Seruiratu warned at the 2022 Shangri La dialog, is “the single greatest threat to our very existence” in the Indo-Pacific (TRT World, 2022).

Further, both India and South Korea can capitalize on their respective strengths to take forward industrial cooperation, including collaborations on start-ups, research and development, and critical and emerging technologies (Moon, 2019). Here, India's world-class pool of information and communications technology (ICT) professionals and an innovative ecosystem, and South Korea's advanced information and communication technologies as well as manufacturing and commercialization capabilities, are critical assets. The NSP and AEP are already geared toward building a global open innovation platform and jointly responding to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Together, they have the potential to be the leading drivers of this new digital shift in coming decades.

Finally, on the question of the resolution of issues on the Korean Peninsula, India's interest lies in a stable region. Over the past 50 years or so, India has maintained a low-key diplomatic relationship with the DPRK. In fact, India is one of the only 24 countries in the world to have an embassy in Pyongyang. Until recently, India was also one of North Korea's largest trade partners, though volume-wise, the trade was negligible compared to China (Buchholz, 2019; Panda, 2020). However, as of April 2017 in reference to UNSC sanctions, India's trade with the DPRK (except in the food and medicinal categories) has been restricted (Embassy of India, 2021). At the same time, New Delhi has supported South Korean calls for peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. For instance, India slammed DPRK's May 2022 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests against South Korea in the United Nations Security Council (Louis, 2022). In view of the “relationship characterized by friendship, cooperation, and understanding,” India could play a constructive role in the North-South engagement process, and Yoon could utilize India as a “channel of communication” and a responsible “intermediary” (Embassy of India, 2021).

## YOON'S INDO-PACIFIC OVERTURES: QUAD CALCULUS

Yoon's growing Indo-Pacific focus presents hope of a more active Seoul in the Indo-Pacific domain. At the same time, one should not overemphasize either the embracing of the Indo-Pacific construct or Yoon's ability (who is still a political novice) to maneuver the difficulties that will surely arise post this clear, enhanced US-tilt. Moreover, Moon's landmark initiative NSP is rather significant even today. Although Yoon is likely to rebrand the NSP, the policy is expected to continue in form and substance, likely as a part of its recently released Indo-Pacific strategy; this recalibration is poised to include greater emphasis on India, with the same underlying objective of building a stronger India-ROK bilateral. Through South Korea's renewed Indo-Pacific framework, India's AEP could cooperate on issues like vaccine diplomacy and ventures like the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) (S. Y. Kim, 2021). Furthermore, India's Quad-driven multilateralism is growing in the security sphere, and ROK's induction into the Plus framework of the quadrilateral hints at potential for successful connect with other multilateral bodies to balance economic assistance and development.

Yoon's statement that he would consider joining the Quad to strengthen Seoul's military position shows that the Moon Jae-in era of prioritization of an inclusive foreign policy could be coming to an end. The Yoon administration has indicated that it is willing to take a much stronger stand toward China, as well as on the Indo-Pacific, especially as an increasing number



of countries release their own policies for the region. These overtures are welcome by India, which has long sought to build stronger maritime defence, technology, and economic ties with South Korea. As India's own foreign policy develops a "pointed alignment" strategy, a South Korea-India middle power nexus presents itself as a venture of immediate focus and immense potential. Both countries can use their middle power identity and shared imperatives to build a connect between global and regional roles for both actors (Mo, 2016). Although Delhi and Seoul have sought to enhance ties for some time now, their bilateral has remained limited and unable to achieve its immense potential. This is evident when the India-ROK partnership is compared to the India-Japan trajectory. However, engagement with the Indo-Pacific construct and the Quad platform can offer a way to quickly build synergy on points of shared interest, while working on overcoming their differences through bilateral channels.

As a tiger economy that has seen immense prosperity under the international trade order, South Korea regards its economic development and security as inherently tied to the liberal international order. Hence, it endorses liberal values like freedom of trade, navigation, and communication as well as upholding of a rules-based order and democracy. Such interests are directly in alignment with the Quad and the Quad countries' individual visions—making the ROK's inclusion in the grouping (or an iteration of the grouping) theoretically ideal. Seoul's inclusion in the abstract Quad Plus format—primarily formed to exchange experiences pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic—was received with much fanfare; many viewed it as a gradual embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept for South Korea. Nonetheless, there have been no tangible outcomes from Seoul's connect with the Quad Plus. Yoon, however, via his Quad focus has shown that his administration is keen on building stronger security and economic ties with the Quad, especially over the ROK's fears vis-à-vis China's economic muscle and its willingness to leverage it to coerce other countries into "favorable" behavior. Furthermore, Yoon recognizes that to rebuild focus on the Korean Peninsula (and, by extension, levy greater pressure to denuclearize on the DPRK), South Korea must establish itself as a more active and more influential player in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation with the Quad, in this context, can be an added advantage for Seoul and help it elevate its regional role.

Ultimately, deeper collaborations between South Korea and the Quad—even if only on issue-based initially—is now possible post-Seoul's acceptance of the Indo-Pacific framework, as well as the Quad's wide-ranging constructive ambit. This will allow room for middle-power-driven growth—based on South Korea's expertise and agreements with the Quad states bilaterally—in digital interactions via 5G and 6G, critical mineral supply chains, semiconductor industry development, better digital governance norms, regional infrastructure, vaccines, and health security, green shipping, sustainability, educational exchanges, improved navies, and coast guards, disaster aid, maritime cooperation, cyber capacity building, and data sharing (Glaser et al., 2020).

On the security front, for the first time, South Korea along with Quad states participated in the multilateral naval exercise MILAN 2022 (February), hosted by the Indian Navy to "enhance interoperability and cooperate with India to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific region" (Korea Embassy India, 2022). In June 2022, South Korea and all the Quad states are also attending the world's largest maritime exercises, the Rim of the Pacific, which aim to bolster the Indo-Pacific through "amphibious operations, gunnery, missile, antisubmarine and air defence exercises, as well as counter-piracy operations, mine clearance operations, explosive ordnance disposal, and diving and salvage operations" (Lendon, 2022). Such exercises are relevant for increasing interoperability and resilience among like-minded partners in the event of aggravated conflict in the region.



Information sharing is another vital area of cooperation with the Quad: through the Quad's new maritime domain awareness initiative, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), South Korea (which worked with the grouping during COVID) can seek information not only for responding to humanitarian and natural disasters but also to track illegal fishing and other developments (MEA, 2022a). Such a collaboration can come about through initiatives like India's already established IFC-IOR.

The admission of the South Korean intelligence agency National Intelligence Service (NIS)—the first Asian state—into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, a cyber-defence group based in Estonia that focuses on research, training, and exercises in the field of cybersecurity, is timely for Yoon, who has global ambitions for the ROK (Dangwal, 2022). In the same vein, as an honorary Quad Plus member, even if Seoul's inclusion in the Quad grouping is not a possibility in the immediate future, South Korea can coordinate with the other four states through capacity building programs in the Indo-Pacific region under the Quad Cybersecurity Partnership (MEA, 2022).

## **INDIA-ROK MIDDLE POWER DUO: COMPLEMENTING AGENCY-WIDE STRUCTURAL CONNECT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC?**

As both India and South Korea have global aspirations, and are a part of shared multilateral networks spanning the region, both as middle powers can look to streamline cooperation in international multilateral forums and organizations (like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, Group of 7 (G7) plus and Quad Plus), as well as initiatives for strengthening the Indo-Pacific security architecture (like the latest entry, IPEF). Cooperation can come about through numerous existing initiatives: Europe's recent pivotal strategies both Global Gateway and the Strategic Compass (with the stress on tailored local partnerships); the G7's infrastructure-oriented grouping the B3W; India's own SCRI, which it heads with Japan and Australia; and Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) security agreement, whenever an expansion or a plus arrangement is sought. Additionally, regional forums like the ASEAN are important for cooperation and outreach within the Indo-Pacific. At present, such cooperation and coordination between the two countries have been somewhat limited. Moving forward, however, these platforms must be an important focus for the two middle-power nations. Such cooperation can be vital for not only building bridges and reducing their overreliance on China and deterring it from becoming over aggressive, but also fulfilling their own ambitions and interests.

Both India and South Korea are important parts of the US's network structures in the Indo-Pacific, albeit in very different ways. While South Korea is a hub in Washington's hub-and-spokes system as a traditional security ally of the United States, India shares a less formal security partnership with the United States. Yet, New Delhi's shared threat perception of China has, over the last few years, pushed India to become highly integrated with the US-led Indo-Pacific network structures and emerge as an important node in the complex and often overlapping network structures. By virtue of its strategic location as a major Indian Ocean power, India is a key pillar upholding the "Indo" in Washington's Indo-Pacific networks. On the other hand, the ROK's position in the US-led construct is comparatively less defined, primarily because of its newness. Until now, ROK's balancing equation between the United States and China made its posture in such network structures constrained at best. With its



recent tilt toward the United States, however, India can expect to see South Korea occupy a more prominent role in US-led security network.

Yet, unlike India, South Korea does not share equally strong relations with other key nodes, Australia and Japan. While ROK–Australia ties have suffered from over two decades of neglect (Robertson, 2022) and are only just finding momentum, the South Korea–Japan bilateral suffers from historical tensions that continue to impede cooperation even today. Managing these tensions and achieving the requisite foundational relationship that the Quad countries have over the past few years will therefore be a challenge for Seoul. It will impact the ROK's network structures in the Indo-Pacific. Yoon's more explicit alignment with the United States in the Indo-Pacific—and by extension, its alignment with Japan's FOIP vision—will therefore be a crucial aspect shaping its position in the regional relations.

Seoul's engagement with the Quad, a central Indo-Pacific network, will therefore remain a matter of great debate and consideration in policy circles. The consolidation of South Korea in the Quad Plus<sup>2</sup> structure (after its lauded cooperation with the Quad states during the COVID crisis), the role it plays with the Five Eyes (FVEY)<sup>3</sup> network and its participation as a guest nation (alongside India and Australia) at the G7 are examples which highlight South Korea's significance as an Indo-Pacific state (and an important global power). With India's own value in the global political landscape growing, collaboration between India and South Korea by means of worldwide Indo-Pacific-driven ventures is only logical.

Further, while the Quad Plus is a bridge to the Quad states for the ROK, ASEAN is a connecting mechanism for enhanced regional cooperation, which the NSP/Plus had envisioned. Moon's NSP/Plus fell short of expectations because of its trade-centric nature and limitations amid the United States–China trade war. However, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy—essentially an upgradation and expansion of the NSP—takes a more comprehensive approach. Its announcement during the ASEAN summit in Cambodia in November 2022 demonstrates continued focus on Southeast Asia, opening the door for new networks between India, ROK, and ASEAN.

Additionally, a key factor in South Korea's Indo-Pacific engagement will be Japan. Historical tensions between the two East Asian states have frequently hindered cooperation, and are likely to remain a constraint if not adequately addressed. For example, the UK-envisioned Democratic 10 (D10) framework, which held the immense promise of bringing about a more inclusive structure of the world's top democratic market economies, largely disappeared from political discourse (Brattberg & Judah, 2020); Japan's opposition to South Korea's inclusion was one sticking point in its discussions (Page, 2022). Further, Japan has been a key deterrent to expanding the scope of the NSP. However, Tokyo's centrality in the Indo-Pacific conceptualization is undeniable: It enjoys long-standing and continued bonhomie with both India and ASEAN. Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs in both regions have made Japan a critical and (more importantly) credible economic and developmental partner, and positioned it centrally within the Indo-Pacific. In this context, downplaying historical tensions in favor of cooperation on joint projects and initiatives can be of immense benefit to not only South Korea (and Japan), but also the region at large. Yoon has thus far shown the desire to welcome partnership with Japan, both in political rhetoric and in the recent summit with the United States. The ROK Defence Minister Lee Jong-sup at the Shangri-La Dialog 2022 also reiterated Yoon's normalization narrative (Yonhap, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). The new dynamics, if executed, could provide room to build minilateral partnerships such as the United States–Japan–South Korea, Australia–ROK–United



States, and India-ROK-United States trilaterals that will be helpful in containing immediate regional security threats and enhancing Northeast Asian economic and political architecture.

Similarly, South Korea's dynamic embrace of the IPEF, which includes fair trade, supply chain resilience, infrastructure, clean energy, and decarbonization, will complement initiatives like the SCRI that stress on reducing dependence on (if not decoupling from) China by building strategic trade linkages. Thus, it highlights ROK's willingness not only to break away from its Chinese economic dependency but also toward the creation of a "principled security network" (Carter, 2016). Moreover, the emergence of IPEF as a geo-economic connect, with India also a part, gives hope for strengthened India-South Korea bilateral economic ties, and might compensate the absence of India in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP; ROK is a member). As the framework is still in its initial stages, the full implications will only reveal in the time to come.

An ever-evolving scenario in the Indo-Pacific highlights an enhanced alignment of interests for India and the ROK as middle powers, and the coming years should bode well for strengthening both their bilateral ties and multilateral or minilateral cooperation. A potential constructive shift in their congruence is imminent because of their common nonexclusionary and nonconfrontational democratic ideals, which will not only allow for a middle power connect but also envisage a diplomatic convergence underpinned by ASEAN centrality.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> DEPA is a recent agreement signed by Singapore, New Zealand, and Chile to establish a digital trade order, a global digital cooperation network, which looks into issues such as digital identities, cross-border data flows, and artificial intelligence. Reportedly, Canada and China could join the digital pact (Yonhap, January 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Quad Plus format is in its nascent stages, with no formal announcement of the grouping as such.
- <sup>3</sup> In 2020, South Korea (as also France and Japan) shared information with the FVEY to study North Korean military activities (Panda, 2020). Subsequently, they were referred to as the FVEY Plus, though again not officially.

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