



WHAT WILL BE THE INDIA-ROK TRAJECTORY POST 2022 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS?

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As Moon Jae-in moves towards the end of his presidency, his legacy in the foreign policy domain consists most prominently of his administration's New Southern Policy (NSP) Plus, which comes as a strategy to bolster ties with ASEAN and India. Since 2018, India and South Korea have seen great momentum in both defense and economic domains. With a change in guard in the Blue House, this paper argues that regardless of a change in the leadership, India will continue to be a key focus in South Korean regional and international outlook. The NSP Plus highlights the congruence between the ROK, India, and ASEAN in key areas (including the Indo-Pacific), and is thus poised for continuity under the next government. Under its Act East Policy, New Delhi is increasingly concerned with peace and security in East Asia, including in the Korean Peninsula. Its existing and long-standing ties with Pyongyang can be an asset for Seoul to enable North-South exchanges that advance the peace process. Further, South Korea's greater interaction with India and alignment with India's inclusive approach and multipolar vision for the region will be vital.

Introduction

The 20th South Korean presidential elections, set to take place on March 9, 2022, will mark the end of Moon Jae-in's single five-year term (2017-2022). Presently, in the ongoing chaotic and fierce race to succeed Moon, the two main contenders are Yoon Suk-yeol of the opposition conservative People Power Party and Lee Jae-myung of the ruling progressive Democratic Party.¹ However, in what has become dubbed as the 'unlikely election'² between

two largely unpopular candidates, both campaigns have lacked meaningful debate and focused instead on mudslinging; relevant issues such as growing income inequality, fight against COVID-19, and housing crisis have been sidelined. Hence, Moon's successor will have an uphill battle in garnering domestic support and pushing forth his political agenda.³

A key question to note post-elections is whether the Republic of Korea's (ROK) foreign policy, under its new government, will be characterized by continuity or change. The two leading candidates have different visions on foreign policy: Lee intends to pursue "pragmatic and balanced" diplomatic efforts focusing on national interests, whereas Yoon has been more hawkish, stressing on upgrading ROK's alliance with the United States (US), adopting stricter measures for national defense vis-à-vis North Korea, and collaborating with like-minded democratic states to contain China.⁴ Whoever is elected to the Blue House, whether conservative or liberal, will need to navigate the increasingly complex and volatile regional geopolitics. Apart from the three major foreign policy concerns, namely Seoul's relationship with North Korea, its stand on the US-China rivalry, and its relationship with Japan, the new leadership in the ROK may review its policy outlook and ties with important regional players like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states and India. In recent years, the Moon administration has sought to build deeper cooperation with ASEAN and India in a bid to diversify its economic and strategic relationships through initiatives like the New Southern Policy (NSP), which was unveiled in 2017 (the Presidential Committee on NSP was established in 2018), and the upgraded NSP Plus, announced in 2020 (launched in 2021).⁵

“Whoever is elected to the Blue House, whether conservative or liberal, will need to navigate the increasingly complex and volatile regional geopolitics”

Post the elections, will the momentum built through the NSP fade away or emerge stronger? What trajectory could the India-South Korea cooperation take under a new South Korean government, and

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where does New Delhi stand in Seoul's long-term foreign policy? More specifically, in coming times, can India and South Korea cooperate within the realms of the varied global initiatives targeting the Indo-Pacific, such as the Build Back Better World (B3W, of the Group of Seven, G7); Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI, India-Japan-Australia); Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad, comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia); and AUKUS (Australia-UK-US)? How can the ROK under a new leadership liaise meaningfully with ASEAN and India so as to strengthen their regional stake and impact in the Indo-Pacific geopolitics, which has so far been dominated by extra-regional powers?

NSP Plus: Enhancing Regional Diplomacy through Soft Power

President Moon's lasting legacy might be his efforts toward realizing "inter-Korean rapprochement" and establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula; however, it is his foreign policy initiative NSP (now NSP Plus), which aims to bolster ties with India and the ASEAN states, that has the potential to emerge as a game changer for the fragile regional dynamics, not only economically and culturally but strategically as well.⁶ The NSP was launched as a core diplomatic initiative to elevate ties with countries in the "New Southern" region, due to their significant growth potential and fast-growing markets, through 94 major projects under 19 categories centered

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on “People, Prosperity, and Peace.”⁷ Over the last four years, NSP has sustained momentum through actions like upgrading partnerships, increasing high-level consultations and exchanges, and enhancing trade and development relations.⁸

The upgraded NSP Plus has reorganized existing projects into seven key areas to tackle the “new wave” of challenges such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; rising protectionism across the world; expansion of frontier/future technologies—artificial intelligence, platform economy, big data, and synthetic biology; and increased non-traditional security threats including climate change and natural disasters:⁹

1. Comprehensive public health collaborative endeavors
2. Rural and urban infrastructure development
3. Emerging technologies and industries cooperation
4. Safety and peace promotion at the transnational level
5. Education and development of human resources
6. Cultural exchanges
7. Sustainable trade and investment

This values-driven initiative is in synergy with the NSP partner nations’ policy initiatives, such as the “ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework,” the bloc’s consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis, and India’s “Act East Policy,” a diplomatic endeavor with the extended Indo-Pacific neighborhood that hinges on “commerce, culture, and connectivity.”¹⁰ Moreover, the ROK’s NSP supports “the building of an ASEAN community grounded in ASEAN Centrality and also advocates a greater role for India in the international community.”¹¹ The ROK’s relationship with ASEAN has grown tremendously since 1991 when the ROK became ASEAN’s full dialogue partner: The two have not

only continued to work together in the prolonged fight against the COVID-19 pandemic through expanded supply of vaccines in the region, but also enhanced cooperation in non-traditional security areas.¹²

India and the ROK see each other as “indispensable” and “central” partners; and while there have been some advancements in India-ROK bilateral ties, progress has been relatively slow with considerable scope for cooperation in new areas. Even as South Korea looks to managing its competing ties with the US and China, advancing its middle power diplomacy with countries like India can prove to be crucial. India and the ROK’s intention to “explore tripartite partnership for development in third countries” is a step in the right direction for an India-ROK-ASEAN collaboration, an important potential grouping to foster peace and safety in the turbulent Indo-Pacific region.¹³

In all, the NSP (Plus) highlights the congruence between the ROK, India, and ASEAN in key areas, and is thus poised for continuity under the next government—even if under a different branding and with new details.

“... while there have been some advancements in India-ROK bilateral ties, progress has been relatively slow.”

Accelerating Defense Cooperation

In July 2018, President Moon visited India, which saw not only an upgrade of bilateral ties to a Special Strategic Partnership and the announcement of several proposals that brought new momentum to their relations, but also a key shift in Seoul’s policy toward India.¹⁴ In 2019, this visit was reciprocated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that helped show the ROK’s key position in India’s Act East Policy.¹⁵

In the defense domain, both countries share several bilateral mechanisms, including 2+2 dialogues, joint committee meetings, defense industries and logistics dialogues, joint defense research and development meets, and regular bilateral naval exercises to increase interoperability.¹⁶ Notably, in 2019, both states concluded a naval logistics sharing agreement (which India currently shares with only a handful of other countries like the US, Japan, Australia, Singapore, and France) and cooperation on defense training and educational exchanges agreement.¹⁷ The two also exchanged a “Roadmap for Defense Industries Cooperation” in 2020.¹⁸

“[India and the ROK] could cooperate effectively in this area through trilateral ... and minilateral groupings, such as the plus frameworks of Quad, Five Eyes, and AUKUS...”

In March 2021, both states pledged to explore “new domains of bilateral defence cooperation and avenues to strengthen the long-standing bilateral defence partnership” and support multilateral initiatives during consultations between their defense ministers.¹⁹ South Korea has become a major defense equipment supplier for India; both states are looking to embark on a project for joint research, production, and export of military hardware as part of their 2019 roadmap.²⁰ This is also expected to boost intelligence-sharing mechanisms and technology sharing for cyber and space defense cooperation in the coming times.²¹ The two sides could cooperate effectively in this area through trilateral (e.g., with perhaps Australia, which recently signed an over US\$700 million defense deal with the ROK) and minilateral groupings, such as the plus frameworks of Quad, Five Eyes, and AUKUS, of which Quad Plus is in a nascent stage and the other two a far-off possibility at this juncture.²²

Nonetheless, such focus falls under the NSP’s peace pillar, which includes not only defense industry cooperation but also areas like cybersecurity, maritime security, emergency response capabilities, response to terrorism, inter-Korean cooperation, military diplomacy, and climate change.²³ Most importantly, such cooperation is intended to help South Korea protect and promote its strategic autonomy within its extended neighborhood in the face of the quickly intensifying great power competition between the US and China. Thus far, Seoul has been exceedingly careful in its statements and actions to avoid taking sides with either power; yet, it faces increasing and unprecedented pressure to choose sides.²⁴ As India, too, is looking to balance its ties with the US and China while upholding its strategic autonomy, increased synergy and cooperation between New Delhi and Seoul can be a critical driver to leverage their middle power strengths to achieve shared goals. This dynamic provides immense economic and strategic opportunities to the ROK, and therefore, is unlikely to get affected by whoever is elected as president in 2022.

Economic Ties: A Partnership for New Resilience

Trade and economic relations between India and the ROK gathered momentum post the implementation of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CEPA) in 2010. The annual bilateral trade reached its peak at US\$21.5 billion in 2018.²⁵ The bilateral trade in the first half (January-June) of 2021 was recorded as US\$10.97 billion, an increase of 38 percent compared to the same period in 2020 (annual trade at US\$16.9 billion).²⁶ In January 2022, the two countries held ministerial-level talks to boost the CEPA upgrade negotiations and achieve bilateral trade worth US\$50 billion before 2030, a target set in 2018.²⁷

The ROK is keen to diversify its economic and trade ties with India (and ASEAN, particularly countries like Vietnam). This is due to South Korea’s economic dependence on China (its largest trade partner) and the US-China trade war, which worsened the

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situation for the ROK, limiting its strategic autonomy and exposing it to economic blowback. For example, in 2016, after Seoul's decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems on its territory, China retaliated by imposing harsh economic sanctions against the ROK.²⁸ South Korea has so far avoided such economic coercion amid the ongoing trade war, which has impacted the South Korean semiconductor industry.²⁹

Against such a scenario, the shared values of democracy, rule-of-law, and inclusivity in the region, as well as the lack of sensitive issues hindering cooperation, between India and the ROK, have created conditions for robust trade and transnational economic cooperation. Moon's "New Deal," comprising a dual green and digital focus, offers one area where both states could potentially collaborate to enhance their economic and development relations.³⁰ The New Deal has much in common with Modi's "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (or self-reliant India) initiative that provides a plan for post-pandemic recovery; both look toward digitalizing government services to enable access for rural and socially disadvantaged people, strengthening data, building smart healthcare infrastructure, developing innovative advanced technologies for sustainable growth, and establishing smart and green cities/grids. Through collaborations in such areas, within both the public and private sectors, both states can support each other in instilling a digital and green character in their economies.

Even post Moon's presidency, the New Deal will continue to be a priority as the new administration will look to adapt its national economy, which is showing uneven growth (shrinking drastically in 2020 due to the COVID-induced repercussions and showing a high jump in 2021), to respond to the challenges of the new era (including climate change and technological competition).³¹

Moreover, considering their shared commitment to strategic autonomy, India and the new ROK government must look to supply chain resilience as a central agenda in their already robust economic partnership. The pandemic revealed critical

vulnerabilities in national supply chains, especially in sectors like semiconductors; and therefore, building resilient supply chains must be a top agenda in the coming year. Seoul and Washington have already reaffirmed their cooperation in the area.³² And the recently launched Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) would hopefully propel South Korea to push for deeper India-ROK cooperation—while working on bilateral consultations, Seoul could also potentially join the SCRI as an adjunct member. India and South Korea are two of the region's largest economies and joint efforts, alongside other key actors like Japan, Australia, and ASEAN, can be critical to avoid supply chain disruptions in the future and ensure "strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth in the region."³³

[Moon's]... New Deal has much in common with Modi's "Atmanirbhar Bharat" ... to developing innovative advanced technologies for sustainable growth..."

Injecting New Momentum in 2022

The Indo-Pacific region is today an intense geopolitical theater with multiple minilateral arrangements—like Quad and AUKUS—looking to balance China. The introduction of AUKUS, with its agenda to equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and to cooperate on critical defense technologies, has raised alarm amongst neutral regional powers (like the ASEAN) of an escalating arms race and the onset of a new Cold War. South Korea has welcomed AUKUS as a sign of the US commitment to regional security, hoping that the US would be willing to grant this technology to South Korea, too, especially as the Revised Missile Guidelines, which restricted its missile development capacity, were recently terminated (2021).³⁴ Nonetheless, the pact has also raised critical questions about South Korea's position in the US-China rivalry, overdependence

on China for its economy, and reliance on the US for its security.

Under such conditions, as a formidable middle power in the region, the ROK is bound to face growing pressure to formulate an Indo-Pacific strategy that responds adequately to the great power contest, as well as to counteract the growing synergy among China, Russia, and North Korea; this will be the foremost challenge for the new administration. Here, injecting new momentum to policies like the NSP and finding avenues to accelerate cooperation with regional powers like India will be a systemic need for Seoul. Still, until now, Seoul has been somewhat hesitant to openly align its strategic interests with India (or even to formally declare the NSP's alignment with Indian initiatives) to avoid angering China—despite shared overtures on issues like freedom of navigation and upholding a democratic, rules-based order. Accordingly, there has been little effort to cooperate with India and ASEAN concurrently under the NSP, giving it a “piecemeal feel” rather than a holistic one that integrates India into Seoul's broader neighborhood approach.³⁵ In the near future, these states could liaison together when working with values-driven frameworks incongruent with their foreign policy outlook like Global Gateway and B3W, which are seeking “equal” and strong strategic local partnerships, so as to better leverage their shared interests and consolidate their stand in the region.³⁶

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Beyond the China factor, as the ROK looks to reinvigorate a strategic partnership with Japan under its “two-track” strategy—“cooperation in strategic

and mutually beneficial fields such as the North Korean nuclear issue, economy and culture while taking a firm stance on history issues”—India (which shares a 70-year-old close diplomatic partnership with Japan) can play a constructive role in the ROK's negotiations with Japan.³⁷ Similarly, under its Act East Policy, New Delhi is increasingly concerned with security and stability in East Asia, particularly in the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, it is in a good position as a regional stakeholder with long-standing diplomatic ties with Pyongyang to enable North-South exchanges that support the peace process, even as ROK simultaneously solidifies the security aspect. This is in line with both leading presidential candidates' manifestos (i.e., establishing a “peace economy” on the peninsula and “preemptive strikes” as deterrent).³⁸

Thus, regardless of which party – or candidate – assumes leadership, India is poised to remain a key focus in South Korea's medium- to long-term foreign policy planning, partnering not only economically but also in terms of regional security and defense. Both states are also bound together by their shared values and regard for strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, irrespective of this potential and synergy, the incoming administration will need to make concerted efforts to ensure that this focus translates into concrete action. The new government must be ready to face an unruly “diplomatic security environment,”³⁹ and therefore, will need to ensure that India and the ROK overcome differences and maintain (if not accelerate) their current growth trajectory.■

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