

SOUTH KOREA-INDIA TIES: BETWEEN BILATERALISM, MINILATERALISM, AND MULTILATERALISM

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In the context of the Indo-Pacific construct, the expanding gaps in global governance, the rise in minilateralism, the need to reinvigorate regional and global multilateralism, and the imperative to strengthen the rules-based liberal international order, it is important to look at the evolving trajectory of ties between India and South Korea, both Asian giants. This paper first discusses the contours of the ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy, especially through the India angle and South Korea's views added when it is needed. It then examines South Korea's importance in India's foreign policy and regional/global goals through the prism of India's relationship with the Quad partners. It also looks at their congruence and cooperation in regional, global organizations and platforms such as the United Nations (UN), ASEAN, the Group of Twenty (G20), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Finally, it explores the prospects of cooperation through select minilateral forums.

Introduction

The world and its current center of economic and political gravity, namely the Indo-Pacific are undergoing a period of great turbulence with multiple ongoing wars and increasingly destabilized conflict zones: From the rapidly deteriorating levels of violence in West Asia creating spillover effects to the heightened, dangerous “new normals” on the Korean Peninsula, the Himalayas, and the Taiwan Strait, the shadows of receding global governance and intensifying inter-state divisions are on full display.¹ In particular, China's military expansionism and coercive economic policies in its extended neighborhood have been creating palpable fear among Asian countries of a wider war with the U.S., dragging its allies and partners into the escalations.² With China accelerating its military modernization plans, these fears are not entirely unfounded.³

To make matters worse, the Indo-Pacific has become the primary battleground for U.S.-China strategic competition. Regional states in East, South, and Southeast Asia, which fear China's aggressive tactics, are also worried about the fallout of being forced to choose between the major powers, namely the U.S. and China, which are also vital partners. For example, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) is a U.S. treaty ally but China is still the ROK's largest trading partner.⁴ Moreover, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol, who came into the office two years ago claiming to pursue a tougher stance on China, has tempered his China diplomacy: From taking a diplomatic out from meeting former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi during her controversial Asia visit to participating in the resumed China-Japan-ROK trilateral after a gap of four years in 2023.⁵ The ROK has also been hesitant about antagonizing China or unequivocally

supporting the U.S. in case of a potential escalation, say in the Taiwan Strait.⁶

At the same time, the ROK-U.S. alliance is “broadening in scale and scope.”⁷ Yoon has also signed the “Washington Declaration” with the US that not only guarantees extended deterrence against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and greater information sharing, but also raises alarm for China because of increased U.S. presence in the region.⁸ The bolstered three-way cooperation between Japan, the ROK, and the U.S. has also started a “new chapter” for Japan-ROK relations—the two have historical disputes—which has included joint military exercises as well as calling out China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea amid “unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific” and a reference to the Taiwan Strait in their joint statement at Camp David.⁹

Importantly, South Korea has signaled a shift toward “strategic clarity” and launched the “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific” in December 2022. This includes the widely debated Yoon vision for the ROK becoming a “Global Pivotal State.” But has the vision worked thus far?

Furthermore, on the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK has signaled a major policy shift in the new year (2024), adding to Yoon’s challenges: At the back of worsening relations with the U.S. and South Korea, the DPRK has formally abandoned any efforts toward reunification and reconciliation with the ROK; abolished all acts on inter-Korean economic cooperation; intensified military provocations; and, even threatened the use of nuclear weapons against the South.¹⁰

Moreover, the Chinese and Russian support for North Korea, including blocking efforts to toughen sanctions on the North, has created a ripple effect on the strategic situation in East Asia and beyond.¹¹ In a scenario where measures toward dialogue with the North have dried up, the ROK has a tough task at hand, particularly in terms of fulfilling the current President Yoon Suk Yeol’s foreign policy objectives of expanding beyond the remit of the North Korean threat.

As for India, even as economic and security ties with the U.S. have skyrocketed in recent years, it is heavily dependent on China for imports in key sectors including electronics and pharmaceuticals.¹² However, this economic dependence has

not come in the way of an intensifying India-China rivalry, especially in the context of multiple conflicts and standoffs in quick succession, for example, the Doklam, Galwan, and Tawang skirmishes between 2017 and 2022. The continuing lackluster negotiations in the wake of the bloody Galwan conflict have created an atmosphere of abnormality along the border, which has been reiterated by the Indian side.

China’s gains in the Indian Ocean region, particularly in the Maldives where President Mohamed Muizzu has asked India to withdraw its troops from the island nation by March 15, have been an added cause of concern for India.¹³ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s second term has consolidated India’s Indo-Pacific strategic aims of multi-alignment with important Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia, the European Union, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, the U.S., and Vietnam, as well as reinvigorated participation via regional multilaterals such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quad (comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.). India’s continued engagement with China’s partner and West’s adversary, Russia, has ensured that India is not losing historic allies despite challenges.

Against this scenario, it is important to look at the evolving trajectory between India and the ROK, two Asian giants. This is especially important in the context of the Indo-Pacific construct, the expanding gaps in global governance, the rise in minilateralism, the need to reinvigorate regional and global multilateralism, and the imperative to strengthen the rules-based liberal international order. In this vein, is South Korea’s current foreign policy narrative embracing India’s Indo-Pacific strategy? How effective is it for enhancing the India-ROK bilateral? Could South Korea envision a viable partnership with India in minilaterals and multilaterals?

This paper attempts to answer such questions by first discussing the contours of the ROK’s Indo-Pacific strategy, especially through the India angle and South Korea’s views added when it is needed. It then examines South Korea’s importance in India’s foreign policy and regional/global goals through the prism of India’s relationship with the Quad partners. It also looks at their congruence and cooperation in regional, global organizations and platforms such as the United Nations (UN), ASEAN, the Group of Twenty (G20), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Finally, it explores the prospects of cooperation through select minilateral forums.

Contours of Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The India Factor

In late December 2022, as mentioned earlier, the ROK solidified its momentous embrace of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific construct through the launch of the ROK's "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific." It comprised President Yoon Suk Yeol's overall diplomatic trajectory, including the "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) ambitions.

In June 2023, the Yoon administration released its first National Security Strategy after a gap of five years. This 107-page document spread over eight chapters elaborates Yoon's GPS vision for "Freedom, Peace and Prosperity." The goals include working toward peace on the Korean Peninsula, East Asia's prosperity, and expanding the ROK's global roles while providing "policy directions for the administration's diplomacy and national security including foreign affairs, unification and national defense" in the current fragile geopolitical landscape.¹⁴ The stress is also on pragmatic diplomacy to pursue national and global interests.

With the release of the ROK's Indo-Pacific and National Security Strategy, the New Southern Policy (NSP), launched in 2017 and rebooted as NSP Plus in 2020 by then President Moon Jae-in has become redundant, not in terms of the essence but certainly as a defining policy. The NSP/NSP Plus diversified ROK's interests, which were constrained primarily due to the U.S.-China trade rivalry, by focusing on the emerging economies of the ASEAN and India, and expanding partnerships that went beyond the ROK's traditional attraction to four major powers, namely China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. However, the policy still lacked the vision to build an "international strategy."¹⁵ Further, Moon's inability to embrace the Indo-Pacific construct openly, especially after he more or less aligned with the U.S. in the post-COVID pandemic era (e.g., his last joint statement with Biden in 2021) was seen as a crucial impediment to what Yoon has now initiated.

In this context, it is important to examine the GPS ambit and its scope of success in the ROK's strategic engagement, or lack of, with India.

The GPS Ambit

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in the latter's goal of curbing China's hegemonic tactics in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, it also was an attempt to give impetus to the ROK's strategic autonomy goals, which surely included strengthening ties with not just "like-minded partners" in the Indo-Pacific such as Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, but also "key partner" China "for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region."¹⁶ However, "principled diplomacy" on the basis of "mutual respect" and "reciprocity" are key terms of approach in the ROK's latest foreign policy approach, which provides the context to the Strategy's "inclusive" principle that would no doubt fundamentally look to include China in the ROK's regional order.

Further, although maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula is central to the ROK's foreign policy, its GPS vision, as outlined by Yoon in his inauguration speech in 2022, aims to make good on South Korea's status as the 10th largest global economy:

It is incumbent upon us to take on a greater role befitting our stature as a global leader. We must actively protect and promote universal values and international norms that are based on freedom and respect for human rights. We must take on an even greater role in expanding freedom and human rights not just for ourselves but also for others. The international community expects us to do so. We must answer that call.¹⁷

The ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy then becomes a tool to trigger the GPS vision, which means that the ROK aspires to "actively seek out agendas for cooperation and play a larger role in shaping discussions regionally as well as globally."¹⁸

One of the most important elements of Yoon's new shift is South Korea's focus on its treaty ally the U.S. with the "Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance," signed in 2022, and a year later with the "Washington Declaration" that led to the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG). In February 2024, a framework document was signed that will enable the NCG "to ensure the ability to strengthen extended deterrence through joint ROK-U.S. nuclear and strategic planning in the context of the nuclear threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."¹⁹

At the same time, South Korea's GPS vision comprehensively looks at expanding security-related cooperation, particularly in maritime, economic, technological, climate, and energy security areas beyond the North Korean threat, which is still the ROK's mainstay in terms of foreign policy. Moreover, despite being seemingly soft on China, the Strategy has broadened the scope for both creating solidarity with China's rivals and enraging China by including concerns about maintaining the freedom of navigation and overflight in the critical sea lines of communication in the South China Sea, where China has excessive, disputed maritime claims and is, therefore, a sensitive factor. On top of this, the ROK

strategy has interlinked stability, prosperity, and security on the Korean Peninsula and beyond with the Taiwan Strait, a core interest area for China that considers Taiwan affairs as an internal matter.

Though there were signs that Yoon would thaw his stringent approach to China, the bilateral meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Yoon in Bali on the sidelines of the G20 summit in 2022 provided no headway.²⁰ Yoon maintained South Korea's intent to carry out cooperation with China on multiple levels, such as increasing people-to-people connect, upholding a free trade system, and jointly tackling global challenges.²¹ While Xi dithered on support for the ROK on the North Korean threat, he talked about opposing "politicizing economic cooperation or overstretching the concept of security on such cooperation."²² He was no doubt referring to the ROK's continuing cooperation on initiatives such as the launch of the Indo-Pacific strategy, joining the IPEF, and being a part of the CHIP 4, the alliance between the world's top producers of semiconductors, namely Japan, the ROK, Taiwan, and the U.S.

Although the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy and related policies are looking to build a "dual strategy" for East Asia, i.e., one that targets the challenges and threats from both China and North Korea.²³ However, domestic experts have been concerned about Yoon's China policy, and in light of the latest lackluster efforts (both the ROK-Japan-China trilateral meeting and the Yoon-Xi conversation) have urged the ROK government to "mend ties" with China, as well as Russia, a country that has been sanctioned by the U.S. and its allies for its role in the brutal invasion of Ukraine.²⁴

Whither India?

Of particular interest is the ROK's strategic engagement with India, one of the fastest growing economies and soon to become the third biggest economy of the world with a rising geopolitical profile. However, in the Indo-Pacific strategy, India is listed as a "regional partner with shared values," unlike Australia and Japan that are listed as "like-minded" partners. But such semantics do not exclude a values-based strong partnership with India, who has been described as an "essential partner" by former South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin.²⁵

A year after the Strategy, the ROK government published a "Progress Report" outlining the key achievements thus far. While both the Strategy and the Report mention India,

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strengthened communication is one of the best markers of bilateral ties in the period since Yoon released the Strategy. The ROK has also made progress in maritime security, including joint exercises.²⁶ However, the National Security Strategy outlines hope for cooperation in strategically important sectors such as technology and space.²⁷ One of the major achievements for ROK has been India's procurement of the second batch of K9, the ROK's independently developed self-propelled howitzer also known as "Vajra" (thunder in Hindi)," which is under progress.²⁸

Moreover, the broadened geographical scope of the Strategy and the ROK's global ambitions will make it imperative to pursue proactive engagement with India in the next half of Yoon's presidency. Already, speculations are abound about the South Korean President being keen to visit India.²⁹ Yoon has already visited Delhi during India's G20 Presidency in September 2023 and engaged with Modi especially noting the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations and the trajectory ahead.³⁰ Besides, Yoon and Modi have also had brief interactions on the sidelines of the G20 summit on November 15, 2022, in Bali; and their first in-person bilateral talks on the sidelines of the Group of Seven (G7) summit in Hiroshima, Japan, on May 20, 2023. In these meetings, they have reaffirmed their intent to increase strategic cooperation, including in economic, advanced technologies, information technology manufacturing, EV battery technology, defense, and semiconductors.³¹

Former Foreign Minister Park Jin's visits to India during his tenure have focused not only on trade and investment but also critical and emerging technologies, as well as the need to boost strategic communication.³² In this context, India's Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri visited South Korea from August 22 to 23 for the fourth India-ROK Deputy NSA level Strategic Dialogue (the third was held in 2021).³³ Misri met the first Deputy Director of National Security, Kim Tae-hyo. He also called on Park Jin and National Security Adviser Cho Tae-yong, and met Minister Eom Dong-hwan of Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), highlighting the potential for enhanced security cooperation, including in defense and technology, economic security and supply chain resilience, enhancing Korean investments in India, and science and technology issues in the near term.³⁴

These Yoon-Modi meetings at multilateral events in tandem with the policy dialogues and ministerial visits (e.g., the fifth

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foreign policy and security dialogue held in early 2023 or Park Jin's meetings with Indian officials in the ROK and in India) before a bilateral leaders'-level visit is finally organized highlight a progressive, structured intent for growth in the strategic partnership.³⁵

But only Yoon's visit will allow a forward movement away from the 2018 Modi-Moon vision for peace and prosperity, which certainly catapulted the India-ROK ties to a "special strategic partnership." However, after five years, a lot has changed geopolitically which both the governments recognize (as also noted in the ROK Security Strategy), but there has not been a concrete leader-level development to that effect. But now, as Seoul's ties with both Washington and Japan are soaring, it is time for Seoul to look proactively toward the current geopolitical heavyweight that is India.

India's Broadening Indo-Pacific Goals: Is ROK Vital?

Undoubtedly, notwithstanding the continuing challenges in developing ties, Seoul and Delhi have both moved ahead in their NSP and Act East Policy (AEP) convergence by constituting their respective visions and strategies in the Indo-Pacific framework. In this context, besides the AEP, which is a part of India's omnidirectional multi-alignment foreign policy for various regions, the two visions outlined by Modi in the Indo-Pacific framework, namely Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and Indo-Pacific

Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) are vital for finding congruence with the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy.³⁶

From an economic perspective, trade has continued to soar: Bilateral trade spiked to record levels of US\$27.8 billion in 2022, compared to US\$24 billion in 2021.³⁷ Moreover, India has emerged as one of the top investment destinations for the ROK. Experiencing China-origin supply chain disruptions due to the COVID pandemic and China's sudden halt of strategic materials to South Korea, the ROK has adopted the "Just in Case" approach deviating from "Just in Time" approach to reduce excessive dependence on China and diversify supply chain connectivity elsewhere.³⁸ In this regard, the "Korea Plus" initiative, launched in 2016 and comprising representatives from both India and South Korea, has helped facilitate Korean businesses in India, as well as catalyzed their trade relationship and cross border investment.³⁹ Even in the financial sector, both Indian and Korean banks have been facilitating exchanges, including opening of banks in the respective countries.⁴⁰

In this regard, there is still concern for gaps in trade and investment, amid the lack of an updated Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (the CEPA was signed in 2010). However the ongoing CEPA negotiations have concluded their tenth round, and there are increased prospects of concluding it this year, possibly in time for Yoon's expected visit to India after the elections in India and in Korea.⁴¹

On the diplomatic and security front too, things are looking up. The Fifth Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue marked an early entry point in January 2023 soon after the ROK Strategy was released. It was promising in terms of India making clear the top areas of strategic cooperation, such as defense, science, cutting-edge technologies, and infrastructure while looking into new areas in the Indo-Pacific framework, and reaffirming India's support to the ROK policy on North Korea.⁴² In April 2023, foreign ministerial-level talks reiterated the same intent with added areas such as semiconductors, space, and a refocused commitment to a free, open, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.⁴³ On March 7, 2024, visiting Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar gave a public interview in Seoul after the ROK-India Foreign Ministers' meeting to emphasize that ROK is a strategic and attractive partner in trade and technology cooperation for India's quest of "Amrit Kaal" toward 2047, one hundred years' anniversary

of India's Independence. Furthermore, the Minister also suggested that India can play an important role in resolving the ROK's demographic challenges with the lowest fertility rate among OECD states by providing high powered brains and talented workforce.⁴⁴

The ROK is also important for India achieving its "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) goals in manufacturing. In this context, India and South Korea have already started the process of joint production in the defense sector on top of viable manufacturing investment in automobiles, semiconductor, and electronics. Their defense industries' cooperation allows the ROK to retain "not only the requisite technology, distinct cost advantage, capacity to absorb capital investment, but also the political will to share threshold technology with India under the ambit of the 'Make in India' initiative."⁴⁵ This will indeed help India's aim to develop itself as a manufacturing hub for defense equipment. Moreover, the ROK's willingness to "provide an amount of USD 4 billion during 2023-25" and sign a framework agreement in this sector will be an added incentive for India's goals.⁴⁶ The visit of Indian Army Chief Manoj Pande to South Korea in November 2023 besides highlighting the India-ROK historic connect further propelled the ROK's centrality in India's regional security order vision.⁴⁷

In the maritime security sector too, India and South Korea have been holding bilateral and multilateral (e.g., a bilateral one in the Bay of Bengal in 2022 and the "Sea Dragon 23 exercises" in March 2023) naval and coast guard exercises to enhance their joint marine capabilities and interoperability quotient.⁴⁸

A Brief Look at Bilaterals with India's Quad Partners

Notwithstanding this upswing amid India's positive intent, India-ROK ties pale in comparison to India's bilaterals with its Quad partners, namely Australia, Japan, and the U.S. India holds the 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogues with all three partners. And as Quad members naturally all commit to ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led regional architecture including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus.

Australia

India-Australia have a "Comprehensive Strategic

Partnership.” With projects like the Australia-India Innovation Network and the Australia-India Centre of Excellence for Critical and Emerging Technology Policy that aim to tap into “India’s booming digital economy and innovation ecosystem, and reinforce our growing links in the space sector”; “help Australian and Indian firms commercialize critical technologies and services, access investment, and encourage the development of deeper supply chains”; and, work towards shaping global technology standards, the ties are indeed mature.⁴⁹ They also have a critical minerals partnership that will help build resilient supply chains in this vital sector.⁵⁰ Besides, their cooperation ranges from space (e.g., collaboration on satellite communication) to regional integration initiatives, such as the Bay of Bengal Trade and Energy Partnership.⁵¹ Australia has also reiterated its support for India’s permanent membership on a reformed UN Security Council (UNSC).⁵²

Japan

India and Japan have a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership.” Their Indo-Pacific visions call for a free and open regional order amid growing economic, technological, and security, as well as regional engagements. Japan and India have also come together to develop India’s northeastern region; Japan has been involved in several infrastructure projects in India such as Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail as a developmental partner; and, the two are also coordinating for developing linkages to the strategically important Matabari port in Bangladesh.⁵³ Their “2025 Vision” aims to enhance regional connectivity through the convergence between AEP and Japan’s “Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure.” As per its 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), Japan intends to “reinforce strategic collaboration... deepen bilateral and multilateral defense exchanges ... in a broad range

of fields including maritime security and cybersecurity, while promoting training and exercises as well as defense equipment and technology cooperation.”⁵⁴ As part of the G4, they share a common agenda for UN reforms.

The United States

India and the U.S. share a “Comprehensive Global and Strategic Partnership” and their ties in recent years have shown a consistently upward trajectory. The China factor has been an added incentive for this increase in strategic momentum. India is part of several U.S.-led mechanisms such as the Quad, I2U2, IPEF, and India-Europe-Middle East Economic Connectivity Corridor, among others. Of late, their security and defense cooperation has been a highlight, including regular institutionalized bilateral dialogue, military exercises, and defense procurements.⁵⁵ They have also signed four foundational military agreements, namely the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (2016), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (2018), Industrial Security Agreement (2019), and, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (2020). The year 2023 has been particularly significant with several important events such as Modi’s state visit to the U.S., and the inauguration of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) that will shape their future-oriented technological partnership.⁵⁶ The growing U.S. trust in India was underlined by the jet engine deal, which will help India’s self-reliance production goals.

Parsing Their Convergence in Multilaterals

For both India and the ROK, value-based and effective multilateralism is the key for upholding the rules-based international order. The same is reflected in the ROK’s GPS vision of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and India’s motto of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (“One Earth, One Family, One Future” highlighting the interconnectedness of societies and the need for a cooperative approach to resolve the challenges of today) during the G20 presidency in 2023.

As the ROK’s Indo-Pacific strategy expands the outreach to the rest of the world, it becomes imperative for the country to shoulder more roles and responsibilities in the multilateral agenda, and not just for de-risking from China. These agenda items include secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs) responsible for global trade; digital access and innovation; climate action; global public health; food and energy security; fair trade mechanisms; enhancing coordination

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within forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO), IPEF, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the UN; reforms in multilateral institutions, and infrastructure connectivity. The same is, of course, true for India, which in addition also has regional/global multipolar ambitions. Responsible international governance that leads to effective and reformed multilateralism is one of the most important common goals.

In this context, South Korea also hosted on March 30, 2023 the Indo-Pacific Regional Meeting of the Second Summit for Democracy, that focused on anti-corruption, and co-hosted the virtual leaders' plenary on March 29 along with the U.S., the Netherlands, Costa Rica, and Zambia. In the latter event, Modi virtually addressed the plenary session, highlighting the convergence in democratic values between the two sides and their focus on inclusive growth guided by the "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" overarching principle.⁵⁷ In September 2023, India was one of the countries invited by the ROK for sharing its anti-corruption policies and systems. As the ROK looks to host the third Summit for Democracy in 2024, the two partners can work together on strengthening the core values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights to advance global solidarity in the right manner.

Similarly, the IPEF is a great platform for both India and South Korea to enhance their bilateral connect and some strategic autonomy to raise their voice against the big powers' unilateralism at the expense of smaller economies as evident in the U.S. unilateral sanctions on "high tech" products to China. Given that the two are close to achieving an upgraded CEPA and India is absent from global trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, of which the ROK is a member) and the more advanced Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, which the ROK is likely to join soon), the IPEF with its core feature as a "negotiation platform" will provide an opportunity to coordinate with a range of diverse countries "to mitigate economic insecurity and harness the strengths of the Indo-Pacific as the world's economic engine by creating a zone of economic cooperation."⁵⁸

Even in the G20, which seems to have become a primary forum for multilateral diplomacy for India after the 2023 presidency especially related to developmental initiatives for the Global South, the India-ROK synergy could be further developed. As co-chair of the G20 International Financial

Architecture Working Group, which operates under the finance track, the ROK has been propelling engagement on "expanding multilateral development bank (MDB) reform measures, including the expansion of MDB loans to developing countries," as well as looking to help restructure the debt for low-income countries.⁵⁹ The Korean agenda in the G20 also includes "building an inclusive world," which is in line with Modi's agenda.⁶⁰ Besides, cooperation on supply chains and support for green transition especially for vulnerable countries are other vital areas.

In the UN system, which most exemplifies global multilateralism, both India and the ROK advocate reforms for the UNSC, including increase in diverse representation, transparency, and effectiveness.⁶¹ They also are aware of the near impossibility of reforming the veto power of the Permanent Five, namely China, France, Russia, the UK, and the U.S. However, the two differ on the key issue of increasing permanent members. India is a member of the Group of Four (G4 – along with Brazil, Germany, and Japan), which is in agreement over the following:

[...] enhancing the role and participation of G4 members as major contributing countries to the maintenance of international peace and security in the Security Council, the G4 Ministers reiterated their support for each other's candidatures as aspiring new permanent members in a reformed Security Council, which they aimed to achieve through an open, transparent and democratic process, consistent with the UN Charter.⁶²

The ROK, on the other hand, aligns with the Uniting for Consensus group (UfC; Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Italy, Malta, Mexico, Pakistan, ROK, San Marino, Spain, Türkiye), which is not in favor of expanding the UNSC permanent members.⁶³ India and the ROK will, therefore, need to work on enhancing communication to better understand the other's perspective and to devise concrete measures for such reforms.

Prospects for South Korea-India-ASEAN Cooperation

ASEAN is central to the ROK's strategies and foreign policy outreach in the Indo-Pacific. In November 2022, Yoon also launched a targeted policy to that effect, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), in addition to the Indo-Pacific Strategy. KASI is one step away from the ROK-ASEAN

establishing an ASEAN-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024, as per official records from the Republic of Korea.⁶⁴ The ROK is strengthening the strategic aspects of its relationship with Southeast Asia by focusing on security-oriented sectors including maritime security and defense, besides the financial and developmental areas.

In this regard, India is already ahead as it elevated ties with ASEAN to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022. India has been proactively pushing for connectivity-related cooperation with ASEAN, including in digital, physical, social, and economic arenas. In this context, the domestically successful digital public infrastructure is looking ripe for a greater convergence with the ASEAN and other like-minded states like the ROK.⁶⁵ For example, India and Singapore have already launched a real-time cross-border payment link between India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Singapore's Pay Now, which will "will enable customers of participating financial institutions in Singapore and India to send and receive funds between bank accounts or e-wallets across the two countries in real-time."⁶⁶

Notably, the Indian government is keen to institutionalize the India-ASEAN-ROK trilateral dialogue. In February 2023, India and the ROK also participated in the maritime security working group meeting of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus and conducted maritime security exercises to strengthen regional cooperation. Infrastructure connectivity, climate action, innovation in environmental technology, and digital access could be important areas of synergy. For such purposes, the ROK is looking to double the budget for ASEAN-related cooperation funds.⁶⁷

In all, due to the ROK's conventional economic linkage with resource-rich ASEAN since its outward looking development strategy adopted in the early 1960s coupled with the recent Indo-Pacific Strategy pivot, India's AEP and IPOI, and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific should find convergence. This is particular relevant as all three sides have "inclusivity" as a common ground. Plus, India and the ROK have time and again reiterated their complete commitment to ASEAN Centrality.

The Minilateral Blitz: Can It Garner Effective India-ROK Cooperation?

The growth of minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific is often attributed to the declining impact of regional and global

The Indian government is keen to institutionalize the India-ASEAN-ROK trilateral dialogue. In February 2023, India and the ROK also participated in the maritime security working group meeting of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus and conducted maritime security exercises to strengthen regional cooperation.

multilateral institutions, including the UN and ASEAN; the continued landscape of conflicts and wars has heightened this perception. Another factor that has contributed is the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, which has forced states like Australia, India, and Japan to find "pragmatic alternative" ways beyond bilaterals to boost their capabilities and common interests without setting up formal or legally binding arrangements.⁶⁸

For effective engagement with ongoing minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific, the ROK intends to solidify bilateral relations first with India as a likely global economic center with the world's largest population by swiftly increasing trade and FDI linkages,⁶⁹ which would then leverage the ROK's role in regional minilaterals. At present, the ROK is determined to diversify its post-China FDI destinations and induce strategic high tech FDI especially in R&D and leading edge technology development.⁷⁰ India is well poised to become ROK's strategic partner on both fronts given India's world class space and bio technologies.

India has been quite proficient in such engagements. From Quad to the so-called West Asian Quad (formally the grouping between India, Israel, the UAE, and the U.S. [I2U2]), such networks have given India an economic and

geopolitical edge. It has also engaged with non-Western forums like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which have Chinese dominance and are also expanding their global outreach.

On the other hand, the ROK has as yet not been very active in the multilateral scenario, with the U.S.-Japan-ROK and the China-Japan-ROK, MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Türkiye and Australia), and the latest CHIP 4 alliance among the handful thus far. However, the current Yoon administration is looking to change this by activating several minilateral consultative bodies to give impetus to regional cooperation.⁷¹

One of the groupings it is most interested in cooperating with is the regionally relevant Quad. To start with, the ROK would be content with even cooperating as a Plus partner or via a working group, especially in areas like supply chains, advanced technology, global health, and climate change. The advantage for the ROK is that it has already worked as a Quad Plus actor during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic along with others from the Indo-Pacific like Vietnam. As a Quad member of increasing relevance, India could facilitate the ROK's entry into the grouping in some capacity, which would certainly benefit their bilateral as well.

There are also expectations among strategic circles that the I2U2 will probably expand its membership to potentially include Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea.⁷² In view of expanding memberships of the non-Western-led forums, the U.S. would be keen to enhance the numbers for not just countering China but also reiterating that the U.S. is still strategically the most powerful player.

Both South Korea and India are also members of the U.S.-led Minerals Security Partnership (MSP). This should become a platform for them to work together on diversifying and creating more resilient critical minerals' supply chains. The ROK's latest policy visions have highlighted such a goal, too.

Notably, India, Korea, and the U.S. will launch an informal trilateral technology dialogue in the first quarter of 2024, focusing on critical and emerging technologies. The decision was first announced after the inaugural ROK-U.S. Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies Dialogue, held in Seoul in December 2023.⁷³

Finally, the two sides must look into forums that build regional integration goals and contribute to helping develop the Global South economically, environmentally, and technologically. The ROK has already pledged to increase development assistance to the developing world, including ASEAN and the Pacific countries. As per the "Progress Report," the volume of the ROK's official development assistance in 2023 showed a significant increase of 21.3 percent, compared to 2022.⁷⁴ This increase in global contributions is part of the ROK's GPS goals. The ROK is also making efforts to "sign a \$4 billion cap agreement" with India as part of the Economic Development Cooperation Fund.⁷⁵ Such "contributive diplomacy" by the ROK will help develop a greater bilateral and, in turn, regional connection with India, which has self-anointed itself as the voice of the Global South and is looking for partners who can help in its principled vision for a more equitable world.

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