

South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Ray of Hope or Losing Steam?



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South Korea needs to reconfigure its ties with regional like-minded partners beyond North Korean concerns.

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In late July, South Korea signed a memorandum on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework (TSCF) with the United States and Japan. This first-of-its-kind agreement seeks to institutionalize trilateral defense efforts in the face of regional threats and challenges through policy consultations, information sharing,

trilateral exercises, and defense exchanges. Days earlier, President Yoon Suk-Yeol attended the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Washington, where, besides drawing attention to the threat from North Korea and the “simultaneous” security risks for Asia and Europe, he highlighted the collusion between “autocratic regimes”—almost a direct reference to China, Russia, and North Korea—and the need to defend the international order based on universal values and norms.

Both the trilateral agreement and South Korea’s NATO push bode well for President Yoon’s Indo-Pacific policy, which, two years after its release, has appeared as a non-starter despite promising a headline-driving “Global Pivotal State” concept. This is especially important amid debates about whether Yoon’s strategy and policy documents are little more than “liberal-internationalist word salads” gaining ground among international observers, especially after his party’s resounding defeat in the National Assembly elections.

But are such measures with the West enough to propel South Korea as a pivotal state to help foster international order and order in the Indo-Pacific specifically, and does that not conflict with its consideration of a nuclear deterrent? How will the NATO engagement help South Korea’s strategic ties in Europe? And how can Yoon give momentum to diversifying strategic ties with other critical Indo-Pacific stakeholders such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), EU member states, and India, some of whom are also looking for greater strategic autonomy?

Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Pivot: Yet to Bloom

When, in late 2022, South Korea launched its pivot to the Indo-Pacific, namely the “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region,” there seemed immense possibilities for the country to leverage its status as an economic-technological global powerhouse to transform its diplomatic profile, including as a “Global Pivotal State.” Yet in the two years, the achievements seem to have been centered around the preoccupation with North Korea, between the Washington Declaration and the Japan-South Korea-United States trilateral cooperation. In terms of the latter context, for South Korea, the focus for the trilateral *bonhomie* is

on the North Korean regime's accelerated ballistic missile launches, boosting of North Korean nuclear weapons capabilities, and the recent defense pact with Russia. Indeed, South Korea's recent efforts to foster order in the Indo-Pacific are held back by strong and developing Northeast Asian security challenges.

Nonetheless, the perceived threat from China for the wider Indo-Pacific is also well within the South Korean foreign policy remit despite the new domestic constraints: both its trilateral partners Japan and the United States have openly cited China's behavior, including attempts to "reshape the international order for its own benefit at the expense of others," as the main reason for strengthening the alliance in East Asia. South Korea, while not verbally instigating China too much, has not objected to such assertions, and in its Indo-Pacific strategy, it stresses the principles of inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity. Moreover, South Korea was an integral part of the three-day multi-domain "Freedom Edge" exercises in the East China Sea, which also looked to enhance interoperability in the face of China's "aggressive behavior" and unilateral attempts to change the maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.

South Korea's non-economic engagement with China remains fraught, with even the much-awaited China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit failing to produce noteworthy results and skirting around security concerns. China has not been willing to criticize North Korea's tactics. South Korea has continued to prefer the United States as part of the new-found "strategic clarity" for Korean Peninsular concerns in particular. That China is still South Korea's largest trade partner highlights that balancing or hedging between China and the United States—its top security partner—can never completely be avoided unless South Korea gives earnest momentum to its diversification goals.

Wither India and ASEAN

In such a scenario, it is disappointing that South Korea has not accelerated the ties with both Southeast and South Asia enhanced by Moon Jae-in's signature New Southern Policy (NSP), which, despite centering on economic diversification, did change the policy discourse. The current narrative seems to revolve around the security concerns of the United States and South Korea. So even the seemingly definitive region-specific plan, such as the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative

(KASI), has not been able to truly augment its strategic cooperation with ASEAN and its member states beyond economic engagements. With the two partners set to upgrade to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” in late 2024, perhaps the diplomatic and security ties will receive a fillip in the coming months.

With India, too, the negotiations for upgrading the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement have been rather slow; the technology and security cooperation has not found its gears despite some military exchanges; and, importantly, Yoon has not yet visited India on a state visit. At the same time, Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar’s visit in March signaled future cooperation in critical areas such as semiconductors, supply chain resilience, and green hydrogen. However, the fact of the matter is that South Korea needs to reconfigure its ties with regional like-minded partners beyond North Korean concerns before time runs out for Yoon.

Ties with Europe: On an Uneven Keel or Surging Ahead?

First off, Yoon’s presence at the 2024 NATO summit somewhat brings the focus back to the Global Pivotal State strategy, as South Korea deepened its embrace of not only transatlantic concerns but also European-Asian security affairs with his third consecutive attendance at these summits. Looking to double Korea’s contributions to the NATO Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine Trust Fund, Yoon certainly looks to become a viable, reliable partner for Europe, perhaps in Japan’s mold—the latter has steadfastly embraced its global/European responsibilities in the wake of the Ukraine war.

Moreover, South Korea’s security partnerships with the EU and its member states like Poland have been gaining steam. Reportedly, the EU, which is South Korea’s third-largest export market and the biggest foreign direct investor, is also looking for a concerted collaboration with South Korea. Korea and the Netherlands have already decided to step up their technology cooperation, including in artificial intelligence and semiconductors, during Yoon’s visit to the country. With Poland, there are reports of increased financial cooperation on the back of already grown arms sales, besides expanding on nuclear energy cooperation and supporting Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction projects. Importantly, the EU and South Korea

signed their Digital Partnership in 2022, as Seoul places a very strong emphasis on cybersecurity. In that same year, South Korea became the first Asian country to join NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) based in Estonia.

In turn, does South Korea see the EU as a legitimate stakeholder in Indo-Pacific politics? The answer may lie in South Korea's inability to go beyond the North Korean threat amid persistent domestic squabbles and scandals to achieve the lofty global aims and Europe's own indifference to Indo-Pacific politics for long. Notably, Europe's engagement with the Indo-Pacific has certainly been changing in the last few years, with economic, technological, and maritime security emerging as key concerns via its new policies and strategies amid a growing acknowledgment of China's coercive actions. Therefore, South Korea's perception of the EU within the Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape is set to evolve, especially if the former's outreach continues with partner states such as Poland and the Netherlands.

The Nuclear Angle: Shaky Foundations

In recent years, a major debate in South Korea has been about the development of indigenous nuclear capabilities. Last January, this debate garnered international headlines due to Yoon's remarks about the country acquiring a nuclear arsenal—he walked back on his comments soon after, calling such an aim “unrealistic.” Yoon's earlier rhetoric was aimed at his domestic constituents, who were worried about the United States-South Korea alliance not being enough to tackle the nuclear threat from the North.

It was also likely a negotiation tactic with the United States, as the April 2023 “Washington Declaration” suggests. Under it, the United States agreed to provide “extended deterrence,” including via nuclear-capable submarines, expanded military coordination, intelligence sharing, and nuclear planning through the Nuclear Consultative Group.

However, the debate has re-ignited in South Korea amid North Korea's continuing attacks, its defense treaty with Russia, and lack of total trust in the United States, which is set to elect a new president later this year amid concerns about the return

of a Trump presidency. Yet pursuing a nuclear arsenal would not just be an arduous task in terms of acquiring nuclear facilities or expenses but also the negative cost to South Korea's diplomatic reputation or the risks associated with the nuclear arms race in East Asia, not to mention the pushback from Washington and, likely, Beijing.

The South Korean government will also need to consider the possibility of international sanctions. It will certainly impact Seoul's bilateral ties with not just the United States and Japan—in Japan, the public is strongly averse to nuclear weapons, and it will be directly impacted by the nuclear arms race in the neighborhood—but the EU, too, which has made multiple commitments to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, with the “ultimate goal of the total elimination.” Only time will tell if South Korea will consider the “trade-offs” as necessary for becoming nuclear.

The Long and Short: “Pivotal State” Potential Yet to Fructify?

In sum, even as Seoul still prioritizes the United States ahead of the EU among the Western partners in the Indo-Pacific, the economic partnership is emerging as a greater tool for South Korea's relations with the EU. Moreover, the partnership with the United States has shown chinks, be it due to the stress on South Korea coveting nuclear weapons despite U.S. assurances or the tit-for-tat allegations of spying.

In Asia, South Korea has not gone full steam ahead in enhancing its ties with both ASEAN and India, let alone a new momentum that was expected via new policies that took forward Moon's New Southern Policy Plus vision; the earlier advancements seem to have also plateaued. Even in multilateral and minilateral platforms, whereas a trading economy, Seoul swings between economic multilateralism (as a member of multiple regional trade deals) and security multilateralism/minilateralism (e.g., the two trilateral including China and Japan, and Japan and the United States and temporary participation in the Quad Plus), a lag is visible.

For example, despite showing interest, there seems to be no movement on the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). However, South Korea's membership in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) should help support its industrial supply chain, particularly as it chairs an IPEF crisis network that looks into addressing supply chain disruptions. Vis-à-vis the security platforms, South Korea's attention is skewed toward the United States-led trilateral, as mentioned earlier.

Considering every regime change in South Korea reconfigures the old policy commitments, the Yoon government only has until 2027 to make a lasting impression on the regional and, in turn, global economic and security order—a tall task as things currently stand. Arguably, South Korea will first need to show its potential as a pivotal state in the Indo-Pacific before it can be considered one beyond the region.

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