

South Korea's Strategic Autonomy: Maintaining Regional Stability Amid US-China Competition

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Executive Summary

The stresses of the China-US strategic competition are felt most acutely in East Asia. The line between the United States and China's spheres of influence can be roughly drawn along four flashpoints from north to south in East Asia: the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the China-Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. Connecting these flashpoints creates a line that cuts across East Asia from top to bottom which the United States is trying to maintain and China is trying to break. This is the fault line of great power confrontation, which runs right through East Asia.

As China's military footprint grows in the region, many in Washington and Seoul question its willingness to engage in meaningful diplomacy. For this reason, Washington has recognised Seoul as a true strategic partner. While this recognition comes with certain benefits, such as reassurance against North Korean provocations, it also demands South Korea to play a bigger role in the US global strategy and be drawn into a network of states that encircle China. And while the Yoon administration claims that it is strengthening the alliance with the United States chiefly to counter the threat from North Korea, in doing so, the administration is taking sides between the United States and China. The Yoon administration is pursuing diplomacy that makes it difficult to improve relations with China at a time when the Korean Peninsula risks becoming a theatre for great power competition and proxy conflicts.

President Yoon also expressed support for the Biden administration's division of the world into "democratic" and "authoritarian" countries, a worldview that does not allow for compromise. For South Korea, which developed as an open trade country, pursuing an ideologically driven "blocisation" in this manner arguably generates constraints on its foreign policy flexibility.

To prevent the advent of a new Cold War, South Korea needs to take an active role in de-escalating the China-US conflict in Northeast Asia. It is important to build an alternative cooperative security architecture that can maintain regional stability, which is being shaken by the China-US strategic competition. Now is the time to ask fundamental questions about what kind of stability is achievable and beneficial to the region.

For countries in the region, avoiding unwanted involvement in a China-US conflict and minimising collateral damage will be no easy task. Throughout the

history of Northeast Asia, armed conflicts have occurred when emerging powers rise, and countries caught in the middle of geopolitical rivalries have suffered. Chronic bilateral conflicts have a high risk of escalating, and North Korea's nuclear development and the deterioration of US-North Korea relations pose a fundamental threat to peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. Under previous administrations, South Korea has been one of the region's most active advocates for regional cooperation and multilateral security dialogues. Consecutive South Korean administrations – both progressive and conservative – have adopted initiatives for regional cooperation and achieved some success. South Korea was especially active in the formation of mini-lateral organisations across competing blocs.

After taking office in 2017, the Moon administration sought regional cooperation through the New Southern and New Northern policies, aimed respectively at economic cooperation with Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. These policies were a means to respond to the increasingly intense strategic competition between the United States and China to relieve the pressure to choose between them.

Rather than using cooperative security mechanisms to engage with China and address its military build-up, the creation of a US-led containment network exacerbates the security dilemma in the region, perpetuating an arms race. Security concerns in South Korea and Japan, fuelled by North Korea's nuclear development, have resulted in substantial military investments, and the China-US competition's spillover into the military realm has led to scepticism of arms control regimes. Over time, most Northeast Asian countries have become a part of the arms race and are at odds with one another. This has resulted in opportunity costs for those who seek alternative approaches to security, prosperity, exchange, and cooperation.

South Korea must discard the perception that it must choose sides in the China-China-US competition. Domestically, South Korea is split on how to respond. Some argue that it is unwise to choose one side exclusively and that Seoul should take a balanced approach towards the two superpowers – an approach generally pursued by progressive governments. Others argue that strategic ambiguity is unwise and that prioritising the US relationship is the correct option, as seen in the approach adopted by the Yoon administration, as well as previous conservative governments.

However, past conservative governments have been more prone to balancing than the Yoon administration, and in theory, there is nothing stopping President Yoon from pursuing a more balanced approach.

Unlike the US-Soviet Union bipolar system of the past, the United States and China are deeply interdependent, and many countries have managed not to choose one or the other. South Korea's position in Northeast Asia, at the frontline of the China-US strategic competition, makes this task more difficult; however, it does not leave South Korea completely without options.

South Korea should pursue strategic autonomy. This approach is underpinned by its global supply chain, culture and normative values.

Building on the values underpinning strategic autonomy, South Korea should also promote solidarity with countries in similar positions. Rather than passively responding to the perception of the choice of the United States over China or vice versa, South Korea should build a “third zone” in solidarity with other countries that also seek strategic autonomy. For this purpose, South Korea should align itself with middle powers.

Moreover, South Korea’s diplomacy has been reactive to the security environment. South Korea must proactively, repeatedly, and in solidarity with other countries, declare diplomatic principles that can guide its foreign policy. In the era of China-US strategic competition, as long as diplomacy remains reactive to developments, a country cannot escape the trap of choosing between one great power or another.

The report proposes seven basic principles to guide South Korean diplomacy, grounded in strategic autonomy:

- Korean diplomacy supports cooperative security based on global governance, grounded in inclusive multilateralism and opposition to factions or blocs.
- Korean diplomacy supports regional and global peace and opposes war on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and in Northeast Asia.
- Korean diplomacy will maintain South Korea’s national identity as an open trade country, support free trade, and oppose protectionism.
- South Korea, as a divided country and a country still at war, does not intervene in conflicts in other regions or provide lethal weapons.
- Korean diplomacy supports the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and the transformation of Northeast Asia into a nuclear-weapon-free zone.
- South Korea supports freedom of navigation on the high seas and opposes changing the status quo by force.
- Korean diplomacy is committed to solving climate change, one of humanity’s greatest crises.

Proactive diplomacy creates predictability in an uncertain security environment. Doing so will further enhance the predictability of the security environment and contribute to regional stability in Northeast Asia.



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Joon Hyung Kim

Introduction

The world is facing an era of two 'mega-trends': globalisation of the liberal international order and fragmentation of this order through the revival of great power politics. This new normal is characterised by instability, inequality, and unpredictability as the United States' power is declining relative to China. The Trump administration's refusal to act as a leader of the liberal international order signalled a faltering *Pax-Americana*, and its 'America First' approach led to a major trade war with China.

An important aspect of the evolving China-US strategic competition is high technology with the United States rearranging its supply chain through its network of allies and partners to exclude China. Although the China-US rivalry continues to intensify, and the risks of armed conflict increase, it is unlikely that either side will outmanoeuvre the other soon. Both governments are aware that armed conflict is a path to annihilation and that their interdependence is unlikely to disappear despite decoupling and the reorganisation of supply chains. The possibility remains that they will be able to manage their differences.

The problem, however, is that the countries caught in the middle are under tremendous stress. More than sixty countries can be considered allies or friends of the United States, but nearly twice that number list China as their top trading partner. There is a large overlap between these two categories: many are economically dependent on China and militarily dependent on the United States. These relationships create a web of interdependence, distinct from the separate camps that characterised the US-Soviet bipolar system during the Cold War. South Korea (Republic of Korea, or ROK) is the foremost example of such a country, due to its long-standing alliance with the United States and its economic dependence on China. The future of the Korean Peninsula will be profoundly affected by how the China-US relationship unfolds.

China-US strategic competition and the fate of the Korean Peninsula

The stresses of the China-US strategic competition are felt most acutely in East Asia. The Chinese government sees itself as no match for the United States in a global competition; Beijing's timeline for a hegemonic challenge is long-term, and it has chosen not to actively seek conflict with the United States. However, East Asia is China's geopolitical backyard; here, it recognises that it cannot afford to back down and yield space to the United States and its allies.

The line between the two countries spheres of influence can be roughly drawn along four flash points from north to south in East Asia: the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the China-Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. Connecting these flashpoints, as shown in Figure 1, creates a line that cuts across East Asia from top to bottom which the United States is trying to maintain, and China is trying to break. This is the fault line of great power confrontation, which runs right through East Asia.



Figure 1: The geopolitical fault line in East Asia.

This fault line is under pressure. The South China Sea is a flash point between Washington and Beijing: China feels the need to exert influence over the sea lanes that carry most of its energy sources, while the United States and Japan fear that if China were to blockade or control them, it would cut off their own shipping lanes. As long as there was some level of mutual trust between the United States and China, the South China Sea did not present a major problem, but it has now become a disputed area. Recently, there has been an increase in military activity by both the United States and China in the South China Sea, increasing the possibility of armed conflict.

This trend has complicated the careful balancing of relations between the United States and China which was the hallmark of South Korea's foreign policy over the past decades and presidential administrations. The administration of President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) pursued "strategic ambiguity," a policy approach which aimed to balance relations without overtly favouring either the United States or China, especially on contentious issues like the South China Sea. Moon's main foreign policy goal revolved around reaching a state of sustainable peace – a "peace regime" – on the Korean Peninsula; he could not afford to alienate Beijing, which he considered an important partner in achieving that goal. Following the breakdown of the 2019 US-North Korea negotiations in Hanoi, North Korean interest in the peace regime faltered. Pyongyang began an extended campaign to test a range of new missile capabilities, which Beijing was either incapable of or unwilling to reign in.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration (2022-present) took the Moon government's failure to bring about a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as evidence that it must adopt a different approach to South Korea's foreign policy. What followed was a shift from Moon's policy of strategic ambiguity to a form of "strategic clarity," which was characterised by a strengthening of South Korea's alliance with the United States.¹ Consequently, Washington has been pressuring Seoul to play a more active role in the South China Sea. Indeed, Seoul has been more vocal on the issue under the Yoon administration. In particular, the 2023 Camp David Summit marked a change in Seoul's stance on the South China Sea,² when President Yoon publicly expressed his opposition to "any unilateral change in the status quo by force" in the South China Sea.³

1 Clint Work, "From Strategic Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity? The Dynamics of South Korea's Navigation of China-US Competition," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, East-West Center, July 12, 2022, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/strategic-ambiguity-strategic-clarity-the-dynamics-south-korea-s-navigation-China-US>

2 Albert Lee, "How the Camp David Summit Underscores South Korea's Stance on the South China Sea," *Korea Pro*, August 24, 2023, <https://koreapro.org/2023/08/how-the-camp-david-summit-underscores-south-koreas-stance-on-south-china-sea/>

3 Shin, Hyonhee. "South Korea's Yoon Says Forced Change in Indo-Pacific Is Unacceptable." Reuters, November 11, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-says-forced-change-indo-pacific-status-quo-cannot-be-accepted-2022-11-11/>

The cross-Strait tension between China and Taiwan is another flash point, and a conflict in the Taiwan Strait would have important consequences for South Korea's security. Cross-Strait relations have fluctuated depending on political winds on the island, with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) seeking Taiwan's de facto independence, and the Kuomintang (KMT) emphasising closer relations with the mainland. Xi Jinping's personalist rule of China has created deep anxieties in Taiwan (as well as in South Korea). Anti-mainland sentiments have grown in Taiwan in response to Xi's use of force to suppress Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution" in 2014 and the civil protests in 2019. This sentiment facilitated DPP's upset victory and return to power in 2016 and its subsequent victory in 2020. The DPP has since deepened Taiwan's ties with the United States, a development which has become the focal point of Chinese discontent since the Trump administration's pivot to Taiwan. This pivot has worsened the overall deterioration of China-US relations since the 2008 financial crisis.

US policy toward Taiwan has not changed significantly under President Biden. Then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in September 2023 led to protests by China, including live-firing exercises around the island. Another such incident could arise at any time. Several US lawmakers and former generals have predicted that China would launch an armed invasion of Taiwan by 2027 and argued in favour of the need to strengthen security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, as well as the creation of an Asian version of NATO to deter such actions.⁴ The Yoon administration has arguably taken steps in this direction by making trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan its main foreign policy goal.⁵ China views such cooperation negatively because it raises the possibility that South Korea intends to support a US-Japan intervention in a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait. In April 2023, China formally protested when President Yoon commented that "the Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue."⁶ The connection to North Korea is not incidental; South Korean experts and policymakers are uncertain about the extent to which South Korea would be able to intervene in a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, given the perceived risk (albeit small) that North Korea could opportunistically use such a crisis to its own advantage.⁷

4 Ken Moriyasu, "Create a NATO for the Pacific, U.S. Senator Proposes," *Nikkei Asia*, June 7, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Create-a-NATO-for-the-Pacific-U.S.-senator-proposes>

5 Seong Hyeon Choi, "Taiwan on South Korea's Regional Defence Agenda as Military Ties Grow with US and Japan," *South China Morning Post*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3241775/taiwan-south-koreas-regional-defence-agenda-military-ties-grow-us-and-japan>

6 "China Lodges Complaint over South Korean President's 'Erroneous' Taiwan Remarks," Reuters, April 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-lodges-complaint-over-south-korean-presidents-erroneous-taiwan-remarks-2023-04-23/>

7 Jina Kim, "Strategic Stability on the Korean Peninsula: Dual Crisis and Risk Reduction Measures," Policy Brief, *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network & European Leadership Network*, February 2024, <https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-pacific-strategic-risks/strategic-stability-on-the-korean-peninsula-dual-crisis-and-risk-reduction-measures>

Finally, there is the Korean Peninsula.⁸ Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, its vestiges remain, and the confrontational structure between the North Korea-China-Russia and South Korea-US-Japan camps is reemerging. In 2017, tensions between Washington and Pyongyang were escalating, but mediation by President Moon in 2018 (using the Pyeongchang Olympics as a platform) turned crisis to diplomacy. However, the distrust between the two countries has not been overcome leading to a protracted stalemate following the collapse of the Hanoi Summit. In recent years, the relationship has been characterised by a lack of meaningful attempts at resolution from either side, as well as several measures that have worsened the security environment on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has revised its nuclear posture, increased its missile launches, and formally declared South Korea to be a “hostile nation.”⁹ The Yoon administration’s response has not been conducive to improving relations with North Korea. Yoon’s focus on strengthening the alliance with the United States has resulted in Seoul taking a hardline approach to North Korea, including through the unilateral abrogation of the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), which limited the deployment of soldiers and arms along the Demilitarised Zone. The Yoon administration cited North Korean violations of the CMA and promised tit-for-tat retaliation to North Korean provocations. That agreement may have been moribund even under a different South Korean government, but abrogating it entirely removed the one remaining arms control regime that existed on the Korean Peninsula.

The Yoon administration claims that it is strengthening the alliance with the United States chiefly to counter the threat from North Korea. However, in doing so, the administration is effectively taking sides between the United States and China. Intentionally or not, the Yoon administration is pursuing diplomacy that makes it difficult to improve relations with China at a time when the resurgence of great power politics could result in the relocation of great power disputes to the Korean Peninsula. Just as the US-Russia conflict was transferred to the Ukraine War, the Korean Peninsula risks becoming a theatre for power struggles and proxy conflicts.

In this author’s opinion, the likelihood of an actual conflict at any of the flashpoints along the geopolitical fault line fortunately remains small. However, the Korean Peninsula will be a key region in the China-US strategic competition in terms of testing the other side’s intentions, whether through war games, deployments of strategic assets, or other provocations. As China’s military footprint grows in the region, many in Washington, as well as in Seoul, question its willingness to engage in meaningful diplomacy. For this reason, Washington is beginning to recognise Seoul as a true strategic partner. While this recognition comes with certain benefits, such as reassurance against North Korean provocations, it also demands

⁸ For reasons of space and scope, this report will not elaborate on the East China Sea dispute between China and Japan.

⁹ Kim, Soo-yeon. “N.K. Leader Calls for Defining S. Korea as ‘No. 1 Hostile Country’ in Constitution.” *Yonhap News*, January 16, 2024. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240116000652315>

that South Korea play a bigger part in US global strategy, which increases the risk of South Korea being drawn into a network of states that encircle China. It will be difficult to restore the strategic ambiguity that the Moon administration pursued to stabilise the Korean Peninsula. South Korean progressives point to the Comprehensive Military Agreement as a sign that the Moon government's strategy had begun to show results, before the Hanoi summit, the pandemic, and eventually the election of Yoon suspended further diplomatic progress with North Korea. Conservatives, on the other hand, argue that South Korea's increasing participation in the US-led anti-China coalition is a *fait accompli* and welcome it because of its deterrence effect on North Korea. These divisions are fundamental to South Korea's foreign policy debate and understanding them is critical for states partnering with South Korea that are hoping to achieve greater regional stability.



Yoon Suk Yeol, the 20th President of Republic of Korea, at his inauguration ceremony, in front of the National Assembly, Seoul, 10 May 2022. Yang Dong Wook, DEMA (Defense Media Agency).

South Korea's internal politics and the implications for its foreign policy

Not only is the Korean Peninsula divided along the 38th parallel, but South Korea itself is divided into two political camps that deeply affect almost every aspect of life in South Korea. The conservative and progressive camps are especially divided on North Korean issues. Conservatives favour a hardline approach towards Pyongyang. Their top priority is the pursuit of “peace through power” (that is, nuclear and conventional deterrence), ensured through a strong military alliance with the United States. South Korean conservatives believe that engagement

with North Korea is unlikely to change its behaviour; they see North Korea as an incorrigible state, its leadership as deceitful, and consider negotiations with Pyongyang to be futile or even dangerous. On the nuclear issue, they see any option other than maximum pressure as useless. They believe Pyongyang comes to the negotiating table only when it needs to buy time to cheat and drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington through *tongmibongnam* (talking to Washington but shunning Seoul).¹⁰

At the other end of the political spectrum, South Korean progressives favour engagement and inter-Korean cooperation over military competition. They view peace on the Korean Peninsula as a crucial mission that must be accomplished through engagement and dialogue, in order to end seven decades of mutual hostilities. Progressives believe that North Korea developed its nuclear program mainly out of insecurity regarding the United States and its military alliance with South Korea, and that if North Korea were to be treated with less hostility, it would be willing to negotiate on denuclearisation.

The Moon government's peace initiative drew on these progressive ideas and reignited the debate over the nature of a desirable security mechanism on the Korean Peninsula. While the armistice agreement has prevented a return to war on the peninsula and granted minimum security to the Korean people, it has failed to overcome chronic tension and repeated military crises between the two Koreas, worsened by the competition of great powers. However, whenever progressive governments pursue peace or engagement initiatives in an attempt to advance from the peace-through-power structure of this security mechanism, conservative opponents condemn such efforts as jeopardising national security by weakening deterrence capability as well as the alliance with the United States.

Reflecting this conservative position, the conservative Yoon administration has characterised the Moon administration's peace process on the Korean Peninsula as "fake peace", declared a hardline stance against North Korea, and even hinted at pre-emptive strikes against the North Korean leadership.¹¹ The progressives argue that such rhetoric is not conducive to reconciliation but rather to conflict.

10 Past negotiations have been typified by US suspicions towards Seoul when the two Koreas began talks, and Seoul getting nervous whenever Pyongyang and Washington approached dialogue. See, Shin Mo Lew, "Inter-Korean Relations Trying to Keep Pace with North Korea-United States Relations: The Inevitable Dilemma of South Korea," *The Kyunghyang Daily*, September 6, 2018, <https://m.khan.co.kr/politics/north-korea/article/201809061958417>

11 Jeongmin Kim, "Yoon Spars with Predecessor, Criticizing 'Fake Peace' with Nuclear North Korea," *NK News*, October 4, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/2023/10/yoons-spars-with-predecessor-criticizing-fake-peace-with-nuclear-north-korea/>; See also, Kim Mi-na and Kwon Hyuk-chul, "Yoon Says Preemptive Strike is Only Answer to N. Korea's Hypersonic Missiles," *Hankyoreh*, January 12, 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1027059; Also, Yoon's position is well reflected in, "The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy: Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity," Office of National Security, June 5, 2023, https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1

They argue that the Audacious Initiative – President Yoon’s signature North Korea policy¹² – is a replica of the Lee Myung-bak administration’s (2008-2013) *3000 Plan for Denuclearisation and Opening of North Korea*, which, they argue, had no way of forcing North Korea to surrender and thus became an empty slogan for the purpose of domestic showmanship. Likewise, they argue that the Audacious Initiative is not a bold proposal to bring peace, but an offer to help North Korea, only on the unreasonable condition of its complete surrender.

The Yoon administration’s policy is to pursue national interest-driven pragmatic diplomacy, which has meant closer alignment with the United States and positioned South Korea as a more hostile country to North Korea, Russia, and to some extent, China. North Korea has openly abandoned its reunification goal and designated South Korea as a hostile country, and Russia has designated South Korea as an “unfriendly state.” China has been less openly hostile but has issued thinly veiled warnings regarding Seoul’s policy direction, such as the Chinese ambassador’s comment that South Korea should not “bet against China.” The remark was pointedly made at a meeting with the South Korean opposition leader, Lee Jae-myung.¹³

In every area, from foreign affairs to the unification policy, the Yoon government has sought to restore policies, language, and personnel of the Lee Myung-bak administration.¹⁴ Lee’s policy towards North Korea was the opposite of Kim Dae-jung’s (1998-2003) *Sunshine Policy* of engagement: rather than attracting North Korea with sunshine, he sought to scare it with storm clouds. Lee tried to abolish the Ministry of Unification (MOU), arguing that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could handle North Korea in the same manner as other countries. When that effort failed, he reduced the MOU to an agency focused on anti-communist education. Yoon has made similar efforts, appointing Kim Yung-ho as Minister of Unification, a figure who has advocated for reunification through the collapse of the North Korean regime. Kim Yung-ho has neutralised the ministry by drastically reducing the Inter-Korean Exchanges and Cooperation Department, while expanding the department focused on North Korean human rights. Moreover, just as President Kim Dae-jung’s attempt at reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea was dismantled by the Lee Myung-bak administration, the Yoon administration has sought to discredit the Moon administration’s peace process. In a statement that sums up the current administration’s view of North Korea, Defense Minister Shin Won-sik called the peace process “a well-orchestrated deception” at a meeting of

12 See: Korea.net. “An Audacious Initiative.” <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/Inter-Korean-Relations/An-Audacious-Initiative>

13 Kim Boram, “Chinese Ambassador Warns Against Betting Against China,” Yonhap News Agency, June 8, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230608009400320?section=search>

14 Bae Ji-hyun, “Back to MB? Yoon’s Appointments of Lee Administration Officials Spark Concerns of Backsliding,” *Hankyoreh*, July 31, 2023, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1102432

all military commanders.¹⁵ Minister Shin was also instrumental in scrapping the military agreement signed at the inter-Korean summit between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un in September 2018.



Former US President Donald J. Trump, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, and former South Korean President Moon Jae-in talk together Sunday, outside Freedom House at the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 30 June 2019. Shealah Craighead, White House.

“Value-based diplomacy” and “freedom” are key themes of the Yoon administration’s foreign policy. Yoon mentioned the word “freedom” twenty-one times in his first UN speech in September 2022, and further emphasised the theme in a speech titled “New Journey toward Freedom” at Harvard University during a state visit to the United States in April 2023. He argued that freedom and democracy are in crisis and vowed that South Korea would be a “vanguard of values” alongside the United States. He expressed support for the Biden administration’s division of the world into “democratic” and “authoritarian”

¹⁵ “Shin Wonsik, ‘Korean Peninsula Peace Process,’ A Piece of Well-orchestrated Fraud,” [신원식 “한반도 평화 프로세스는 잘 짜인 한 편의 사기극] *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20231213/122610495/2>

countries and has repeatedly declared that South Korea will play a pivotal role in supporting freedom and democracy around the world.¹⁶ President Yoon appears to place values ahead of national interest in international politics. He uses those values to criticise North Korea, China, Russia, or Iran in what appears to be an endorsement of the liberal international order, but his criticism of these states is hypocritical when considering his targeting of domestic journalists, labour, and civil society organisations.¹⁷ It is an inconsistent ideological worldview that does not allow for compromise.¹⁸ The UN has 193 member states. At most, fifty countries can be classified as liberal democracies; excluding all other countries would make international cooperation in the UN impossible. To put it differently, if China and Russia were excluded from cooperation based on their authoritarianism, it would be impossible to address common security challenges, such as the climate crisis or nuclear proliferation.

For South Korea, which developed as an open trade country, pursuing an ideologically driven “blocisation” in this manner arguably generates constraints on its foreign policy flexibility. South Korea’s foreign policy shift towards a focus on the democratic-authoritarian divide could alternatively be conceived as a paradigm shift from an inclusive continental order (the Asia-Pacific view) to an exclusive maritime order (the Indo-Pacific view).¹⁹ While the Yoon administration is assertive towards continental powers (China, North Korea, Russia), it does not apply the same assertiveness to the maritime powers (Japan and the United States). The administration made a unilateral concession to Japan over historically contentious issues such as “comfort women”²⁰ and forced labour, despite public resistance. The National Security Council of the Yoon administration also did not protest against

16 Sook Jong Lee, “Strengthening South Korean Value Diplomacy for U.S. - South Korean Normative Alignment,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/strengthening-south-korean-value-diplomacy-us-south-korean-normative-alignment>

17 See: “Yoon Orders Stern Crackdown on Civil Organizations Misusing Government Subsidies,” *The Korea Herald*, June 5, 2023, sec. Politics, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230605000114>; Ji-hyoung Son, “Crackdown on ‘unlawful’ Protests Materializes,” *The Korea Herald*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230526000560>; Scilla Alecci, “In ‘Unprecedented’ Move, South Korean Prosecutors Raid Home of Newstapa CEO and ICIJ Member Yongjin Kim,” *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists* (blog), December 7, 2023, <https://www.icij.org/inside-icij/2023/12/in-unprecedented-move-south-korean-prosecutors-raid-home-of-newstapa-editor-in-chief-and-icij-member-yongjin-kim/>

18 Jang Ye-ji, “One Year into his Term, S. Korea’s Yoon Suk-yeol Only Has Eyes for US, Japan,” *Hankyoreh*, May 10, 2023, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1091251

19 Chung-in Moon, “Asia-Pacific vs. Indo-Pacific: Paradigm Shift or False Choice?” *Global Asia* 18, no. 3 (September 2023), https://www.globalasia.org/v18no3/cover/asia-pacific-vs-indo-pacific-paradigm-shift-or-false-choice_chung-in-moon.

20 This term refers to Korean women who were subjected to sex trafficking during the Japanese colonial era, see: Dudden, Alexis. “A Guide to Understanding the History of the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue.” *United States Institute of Peace* (blog), September 16, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/guide-understanding-history-comfort-women-issue>

US wiretapping.²¹ Likewise, Korean companies invest US\$100 billion in the United States, but the US government's semiconductor and battery policies still exclude Korean companies.²²

The Indo-Pacific strategy, a policy that was originally proposed by Japan's Abe, adopted by Trump and inherited by Biden, has become the core regional policy of South Korea and a part of the US-Japan maritime vanguard against Sino-Russian continental power. The Yoon administration's own Indo-Pacific policy has aggravated relations with China by broaching the sensitive issue of Taiwan. The Global South has grown more important to the international order in recent years, but it is a non-existent agenda item for South Korean diplomats, and South Korea's influence in these countries has fallen as a result.

South Korea's diplomatic failures are seen most clearly in its relations with North Korea. Whenever South Korea calls for tough measures against North Korea, the North Korean military uses such rhetoric as an excuse to argue that South Korea cannot be trusted and provides further justification for its nuclear arsenal. While North Korea is ultimately responsible for its actions and responses to US and South Korean policies, it is not in South Korea's national interest for tensions to rise. Even seventy years after the armistice, the Korean War has not ended. It is a great disappointment that the two Koreas have gone down the path of an arms race rather than ending the war and pursuing peace. The goal should not be victory at all costs, but peace through restraint and compromise.

Building an alternative security architecture in the region

South Korea is facing a situation where tensions with North Korea are rising, and geopolitical dynamics are worsening. The more the China-US rivalry intensifies, the more Seoul's ability to manoeuvre narrows. Reunification would be the best solution to a number of problems but currently seems impossible to achieve. For now, if the two Koreas could resolve their hostilities and maintain stability, South Korea could reduce its reliance on military alliances, and North Korea would have less justification for hinging its survival on nuclear weapons. It would also prevent a repeat of the Cold War bloc structure, this time made up of a continental triple alliance (China-Russia-North Korea) and a maritime one (US-Japan-South Korea).

21 Kim Tae-hyo, South Korea's deputy national security adviser said that Washington did not have any "malicious intent," referring to leaked classified Pentagon documents purporting that U.S. intelligence authorities had been spying on allies, including South Korea. See, Sarah Kim, "No 'Malicious Intent' in U.S. Wiretapping: Deputy Security Adviser," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 12, 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/04/12/national/diplomacy/Korea-Kim-Taehyo-Pentagon/20230412173308707.html>

22 Chad P. Bown, "How the United States Solved South Korea's Problems with Electric Vehicle Subsidies under the Inflation Reduction Act," *Peterson Institute for International Economics WP-23* (July 2023), <https://www.piie.com/publications/working-papers/how-united-states-solved-south-koreas-problems-electric-vehicle>

To prevent the advent of a new Cold War, South Korea needs to take an active role in de-escalating the China-US conflict in Northeast Asia. It is important to build an alternative cooperative security architecture that can maintain stability in the region, which is being shaken by the China-US strategic competition. Now is the time to ask fundamental questions about what kind of stability is achievable and beneficial to the region, given the changing security environment and complexity of the region. For countries in the region, avoiding unwanted involvement in a China-US conflict and minimising collateral damage will be no easy task. Throughout the history of Northeast Asia, armed conflicts have occurred when emerging powers rise, and countries caught in the middle of geopolitical rivalries have suffered. Chronic bilateral conflicts have a high risk of escalating, and North Korea's nuclear development and the deterioration of US-North Korea relations pose a fundamental threat to peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Under previous presidential administrations, South Korea has been one of the region's most active advocates for regional cooperation and multilateral security dialogue. Consecutive South Korean administrations – both progressive and conservative – have adopted initiatives for regional cooperation and achieved some success. South Korea was especially active in the formation of mini-lateral organisations across competing blocs. For example, South Korea hosted a trilateral summit with China and Japan in 2008 and has hosted the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) in Seoul since 2011. It has held an annual Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum since 2014.²³ After taking office in 2017, the Moon administration sought regional cooperation through the New Southern and New Northern policies, aimed respectively at economic cooperation with Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia (including Russia). These policies were a means to respond to the increasingly intense strategic competition between the United States and China to relieve the pressure to choose between them.²⁴

Northeast Asia is a region of economic interdependence, influenced by trade and global value chains, as well as natural disasters and epidemics. There is a need to strengthen cooperation and coordinate policies on areas of common interest. However, the combination of the revival of great power rivalry, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the rise of hostile nationalism have destabilised multilateralism in the region. It is increasingly difficult to discuss and build consensus on the issues of traditional security as well as cooperate on “softer” non-traditional issues. Unlike the abovementioned initiatives pursued by previous South Korean governments, the Biden administration's focus on multilateral cooperation has

23 Shin Bong-kil, “Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) of China, Japan and the ROK,” The Asan Forum, October 15, 2014, <https://theasanforum.org/trilateral-cooperation-secretariat-tcs-of-china-japan-and-the-rok/>

24 Kathryn Botto, “South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (October 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572>



2019 한·아세안 특별정상회의 2019 ASEAN-Republic of KOREA Commemorative Summit

제1차 한·메콩 정상회의 The 1st Mekong-Republic of KOREA Summit

Nov. 25-27, 2019 Busan, Republic of Korea



Former Foreign Minister of South Korea, Kang Kyung-wha, gives the opening briefing of 2019 ASEAN-Republic of KOREA Commemorative Summit, on 24 November 2019. Jeon Han, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

been characterised as a bespoke strategy, with overlapping minilateral groupings such as the Quad and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) that only include allied and friendly countries, with a clear view of containing China.²⁵

Rather than using cooperative security mechanisms to engage with China and address its military build-up, the creation of a US-led containment network exacerbates the security dilemma in the region, perpetuating an arms race. Security concerns in South Korea and Japan, fuelled by North Korea's nuclear development, have resulted in substantial military investments, and the China-US competition's spillover into the military realm has led to scepticism of arms control regimes.²⁶ Over time, most Northeast Asian countries have become a part of the arms race and are currently at odds with one another. This has resulted in huge opportunity costs for those who seek alternative approaches to security, prosperity, exchange, and cooperation. According to the 2022 statistics from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), five of the world's top ten military spenders are from Northeast Asia: the United States (\$877 bn),

25 Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, "How America Can Shore Up Asian Order: A Strategy for Restoring Balance and Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2021-01-12/how-america-can-shore-up-asian-order>

26 Tong Zhao, "Underlying Challenges and Near-Term Opportunities for Engaging China," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-01/features/underlying-challenges-near-term-opportunities-engaging-china>

China (\$292bn), Russia (\$86.4bn), South Korea (\$46.4bn), and Japan (\$46bn).²⁷ South Korea's increasing role in this arms race is a consequence of its precarious geopolitical position. The Moon government increased military spending to reach the capability goals required to transfer wartime operational control from the United States to South Korea, enhancing South Korea's agency and independent decision-making over its security policy.²⁸ Under Yoon, this process remains incomplete, even as South Korea's military spending continues to increase.²⁹

In recent years, the economic agenda has been politicised and securitised. In November 2019, countries in the region took an important step forward by agreeing in principle to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement – notably, this effort was not driven by China or the United States. However, since then, the United States has not endorsed RCEP, and instead, focused on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an exclusive economic and security regime that excludes China.³⁰ Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been cast as a grand inclusive project to provide public goods to the region in the form of infrastructure, yet there are significant concerns in the region that China seeks to leverage these investments into outright coercion, even among countries less aligned with the United States. Discussions on the future vision of peace and security in Northeast Asia have remained insubstantial.

Since World War II, except for the Korean War, Northeast Asia has seen neither active conflict nor active peace. It is a "low-level" peace, a so-called "peace through security" or "peace through deterrence," maintained by nuclear deterrence and a balance of powers. Inherent to this structure is the risk of regional conflicts or even proxy wars between the United States and China, which could erupt at any time. Therefore, there is an urgent need for sustainable regional crisis management and cooperative security, that does not rely on an unstable balance of power and the goodwill and restraint of individual great powers. Of course, there are existing security structures in the region, including a network of bilateral alliances where the political commitment of each country is high. In the short term, it is essential to build multilateral consultations on peace and security, which are currently under-institutionalised in the region, to minimise the risk of regional conflict and

27 "The Top 15 Military Spenders, 2022," *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, April 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/visualizations/2023/top-15-military-spenders-2022>

28 Lami Kim, "A Hawkish Dove? President Moon Jae-in and South Korea's Military Buildup," *War on the Rocks*, September 15, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/a-hawkish-dove-president-moon-jae-in-and-south-koreas-military-buildup/>

29 Clint Work, "No More Delays: Why It Is Time to Move Forward with Wartime OPCON Transition," 38 North Special Report, June 2022, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/22-06-Clint-Work-OPCON_FINAL.pdf; for 2024 report on Asia military spending, See, Karl Dewey, "Asian Defence Spending Ambitions Outstrip Growth," *IISS*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/02/asian-defence-spending-ambitions-outstrip-growth/>

30 Inu Manak, "Unpacking the IPEF: Biden's Indo-Pacific Trade Play," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/unpacking-ipef-bidens-indo-pacific-trade-play>

find a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. In the medium to long term, the region must establish consensus on its vision of peace and security.

The Korean Peninsula is a useful starting point for this endeavour. Realistically, given the sharp differences in the region, a comprehensive solution is unlikely to materialise anytime soon. Therefore, countries that share at least a few common interests should take the initiative. This was part of the agreement resulting from the 2019 trilateral summit between China, Korea, and Japan in Chengdu, where the leaders of the three countries expressed their support for “dialogue and negotiations for the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a permanent peace regime, reaffirming that they are common interests of the three countries.”³¹ Although there is a long way to go in terms of starting discussions between research institutions in the three countries, this agreement could serve as a *modus operandi* for peace and security consultations in the region and prompt the creation of a more permanent platform for this kind of engagement. However, the momentum of the agreement was disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, and the recent military cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo could also present obstacles to further trilateral cooperation with China.

The Moon administration pursued the creation of “the Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility” as its flagship policy: a mid-to-long-term strategy to counter attempts by the great powers to put South Korea under their influence, such as through the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and Russia’s New East Asia Policy. Through this policy, the Moon administration intended to take a leading role in fostering an environment for regional peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia and beyond amid its tension-ridden and competitive geopolitical situation, while promoting South Korea’s national interest.

Embracing a hybrid form of alliance order and multilateral order in this way is the most realistic starting point towards an inclusive and cooperative regional order. As suggested by Amitav Acharya, the current security environment in the region is such that the so-called multiplex form – a hybrid of the US-led bilateral alliance and multilateral groupings such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) – could be a viable option. Like a theatre showing multiple movies at the same time, as opposed to the single-screen system of the past, Acharya predicts that the future of international politics will not be characterised by a hegemonic or bipolar system, but rather by a mix of coexisting systems.³² This system is not a world of great powers alone, but one where regional powers, middle powers, and supranational organisations will play a larger role than ever before, particularly by developing regionalism, which will allow for a gradual shift away from the

31 “8th Trilateral Summit in Chengdu, China,” Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, December 24, 2019, https://tcs-asia.org/en/board/news_view.php?idx=3327

32 Amitav Acharya, “After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 31, no. 3: 271-285 (September 2017), DOI:10.1017/S089267941700020X

influence of the US-led hegemonic system. Where there is no longer a single power that can claim leadership, collective leadership based on multilateralism could be reinvigorated, especially through the concerted efforts of middle powers. As Acharya emphasises, the world order is becoming more pluralistic and non-hegemonic. It should be increasingly shaped by the “Rise of the Rest.”³³

Even in the scenarios of continued US dominance, an intensification of the China-US strategic competition, or emerging Chinese hegemony, exploring the coexistence of an alliance order and a multilateral order remains important. Of course, the success of a hybrid security architecture depends on the existence of a common interest in deepening economic interdependence and institution-building to reduce tensions and prevent crises. In other words, multilateralism is a difficult option in the context of great power security dilemmas but nevertheless can serve as a complementary alternative.

33 Fareed Zakaria, *Post-American World, and the Rise of the Rest* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Amitav Acharya, *The World after 1989: 'Unipolarity', Globalisation and the Rise of the Rest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp.179-217.

Recommendations for Enhancing South Korea's Role

Even if the China-US relationship remains fraught in the geopolitical, geoeconomic, technological, and ideological spheres, it should not be referred to as a new Cold War yet. China remains interdependent with the world and participates in numerous international institutions. The Biden administration's rhetoric regarding China is getting tougher, but it is not gearing up for a full-fledged confrontation. One could compare the current South Korean government's pursuit of a strategy to manage the 21st-century rivalry between Washington and Beijing, to how Joseon, the last royal dynasty of Korea, responded to the historical transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties of China. The Joseon dynasty sided completely with the waning Ming dynasty and eventually paid a heavy price when the Qing dynasty emerged victorious as the imperial dynasty of China and proceeded to invade Joseon. This comparison is indeed flawed in some respects; the United States cannot be like the Ming dynasty, and it will be difficult for China to become a mighty empire like the Qing dynasty once again. Additionally, modern-day South Korea pursues cooperation with a broad number of states in a way that it was unable to in centuries past. But one clear lesson to take from Joseon's experience is that siding too closely with a hegemon can come at a substantial cost. South Korea's alliance with the United States is vital to securing South Korea's future, because – as public opinion polls in South Korea show – there is a concern in South Korea that China's rise might one day pose a real threat. But the alliance could also pull South Korea into a conflict that is not of its choosing. To avoid this fate, South Korea should develop *strategic autonomy* – a principled stance on how to respond to any action by the United States or China that could pose as a potential risk, with the possibility of intensifying into an actual new Cold War.

Instead of choosing or balancing: strategic autonomy

South Korea must discard the perception that it must choose sides in the China-US strategic competition. Domestically, South Korea is split on how to respond. Some argue that it is unwise to choose one side exclusively and that Seoul should take a balanced approach towards the two superpowers – an approach generally pursued by progressive governments. Others argue that strategic ambiguity is unwise and that prioritising the US relationship is the correct option, as seen in the approach adopted by the Yoon administration, as well as previous conservative governments. However, past conservative governments have been more prone to balancing than the Yoon administration, and in theory, there is nothing stopping President Yoon from pursuing a more balanced approach. Unlike the US-Soviet Union bipolar system of the past, the United States and China are deeply interdependent, and many countries have managed not to choose one or the other. South Korea's position in Northeast Asia, at the frontline of the China-US strategic competition,

makes this task more difficult; however, it does not leave South Korea completely without options.

Given the relative importance of the security relationship with the United States, the (progressive) Roh Moo-hyun administration's "balanced strategy" was inaccurately framed by the domestic conservative opposition as being contradictory to the aim of maintaining a strong ROK-US alliance.³⁴ The Moon administration tried to avoid that framing by stressing that the relationship with the United States is fundamentally important to South Korea, but also that it does not harm the ROK-China relationship. Simply speaking, the importance of ROK-US relations and ROK-China relations can never be equal. To further this reframing, it might be advisable to use another term than the much politicised, "balancing". A good candidate is *strategic autonomy*, which is a term that both India and countries in the EU (notably France) are already using to emphasise their desire to maintain strong relations with both the United States and China. The widespread usage of the term by countries that already have close relations with South Korea would reduce the risk of politicisation.

As opposed to the politicised values that the current South Korean administration bases its foreign policy on, there are two objective values on which South Korea should develop its strategic autonomy. The first is the 'value' of the global supply chain. Experts estimate that there are approximately twenty-five countries with competitiveness in the value chain of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, in the four decisive areas of bio, batteries, chips, and rare minerals.³⁵ South Korea has core competitiveness in all but the last of these areas. South Korea's general manufacturing competitiveness ranks third in the world after Germany and China, but in bio, batteries, and chips, it is ahead of Japan, Taiwan, and the Netherlands, not to mention Germany and China. This competitive edge is why advanced Western countries, including the United States, consider South Korea a strong economic partner. Of course, South Korea remains heavily dependent on the United States for original technology, and on China for market dominance and raw materials.

Cultural values also make up an important part of South Korea's strategic autonomy. Through the Korean Wave, the influence of Korea's soft power has grown tremendously, beyond the entertainment sector led by TV dramas, movies, and K-pop idol groups to include K-food, K-fashion, and even K-disaster prevention. Korean culture is immensely popular and drives many visitors to the country each year. The influence that South Korea generates through its cultural products creates a form of goodwill that makes it very well-suited to assume a leadership

34 Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korea's 'Balancer' Policy Attacked," *New York Times*, April 9, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/09/world/asia/south-koreas-balancer-policy-attacked.html>

35 "Readiness for the Future of Production Report 2018." World Economic Forum, 2018. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/FOP_Readiness_Report_2018.pdf

role on the international stage. Such goodwill is also generated from progress in areas such as overseas development assistance.



Peace Bell at Imjingak, Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), South Korea. Lance Vanlewen, Wikimedia Commons.

In terms of normative values, South Korea has overcome imperialist invasions and wars, as well as decades of an anti-dictatorship struggle to establish its democracy. One can hardly doubt South Korea's genuine desire for peace after a history of war and division. This is essential for a stable Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia in the context of the China-US rivalry. When Korea speaks of peace, it is persuasive.

Promoting solidarity

Building on the idea of strategic autonomy, South Korea should promote solidarity with countries that find themselves in similar national positions. Rather than passively trying to respond to the perception of its exclusive choice of the United States over China or vice versa, South Korea should build a "third zone" in solidarity with other countries that seek strategic autonomy. For this purpose, South Korea should align itself with middle powers. In June 2023, *Foreign Policy* described India, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey as countries that will exert influence on the international political order in the future.

With the possible exception of India, these countries are creating a new dynamic in the China-US strategic competition by not choosing any side. Even in the Indian case, there are significant limits to what it will and won't do for the United States,

as recognised by a US observer.³⁶ Rather than being pressured into an exclusive choice between the United States and China, these countries are courting both the United States and China for their own benefit.³⁷ This group of middle powers is not a simple revival of the G77 or the Non-Aligned Movement of the Cold War era. These countries show how it is possible to maintain significant and even positive ties with the United States, while simultaneously asserting autonomy and gaining national power. In contrast, countries such as South Korea and Japan, who diminish their autonomy by aligning too closely with the United States risk becoming entangled in conflicts not of their own choosing, which could affect their national power negatively.

ASEAN comprises attractive partners for building this kind of solidarity around autonomy. As the China-US confrontation rages on in Asia, the ASEAN finds itself in a very similar strategic and geopolitical position as South Korea. ASEAN countries recognise the cost of joining the US vanguard of containment against China, which Japan has done, and the Yoon administration is on its way to doing. This author was part of the Moon administration's efforts to create the New Southern Policy, an initiative that was geographically centred on Southeast Asia and meant to create an overlapping link between the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. South Korea had success in engaging with the ASEAN (and India) through this policy. The New Southern Policy was abandoned by the Yoon administration upon taking office, who instead pursued the security-driven Indo-Pacific policy. The shelving of this policy is a great loss for South Korea and ASEAN's ability to maintain and support each other in their efforts to uphold regional stability through strategic autonomy.

Principles of proactive diplomacy

South Korea's diplomacy has been far too reactive to the security environment for a long time. South Korea must proactively, repeatedly, and in solidarity with other countries, declare diplomatic principles that can guide its foreign policy. In the era of China-US strategic competition, as long as diplomacy remains reactive to developments, a country cannot escape the trap of choosing between one great power or another.

Here, consistency is key. For example, if Seoul declares that it will always seek to uphold the principle of free trade, then Seoul can push back against measures of US protectionism (such as the IRA act) or Chinese economic coercion (as in the aftermath of the THAAD deployment) by acting on its declared principles and not resorting to a policy that can be perceived as choosing either side. In the security

36 Ashley J. Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India," *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>

37 Cliff Kupchan, "6 Swing States Will Decide the Future of Geopolitics," *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/06/geopolitics-global-south-middle-powers-swing-states-india-brazil-turkey-indonesia-saudi-arabia-south-africa/>

domain, proactively and repeatedly advocating for the principle of “freedom of navigation” could mitigate the China-US conflict in the South China Sea by showing that Seoul is not choosing between Washington and Beijing but is acting on the pre-declared principles. In addition, Seoul should clarify in advance that it will not intervene in case of the Taiwan crisis – indeed, there seems to be room for bipartisan agreement on this point, as the Yoon administration’s Defense Minister has stated that South Korea should stay out of a Taiwan Strait crisis.³⁸

The following is a proposal for seven basic principles to guide South Korean diplomacy, grounded in strategic autonomy:

- Korean diplomacy supports cooperative security based on global governance, grounded in inclusive multilateralism and opposition to factions or blocs.
- Korean diplomacy supports regional and global peace and opposes war on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and in Northeast Asia.
- Korean diplomacy will maintain South Korea’s national identity as an open trade country, support free trade, and oppose protectionism.
- South Korea, as a divided country and a country still at war, does not intervene in conflicts in other regions or provide lethal weapons.
- Korean diplomacy supports the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and the transformation of Northeast Asia into a nuclear-weapon-free zone.
- South Korea supports freedom of navigation on the high seas and opposes changing the status quo by force.
- Korean diplomacy is committed to solving climate change, one of humanity’s greatest crises.

The philosophy that underpins these seven principles is that South Korea’s diplomacy must prioritise its national interests but oppose exclusive nationalism that infringes on the interests of other countries or harms the international order. Proactive diplomacy creates predictability in an uncertain security environment. South Korea should also encourage other countries in the region to unilaterally articulate similar principles. Doing so will further enhance predictability of the security environment and contribute to regional stability in Northeast Asia.

³⁸ Kevin Chen, “South Korea Reluctant to Help Taiwan in Cross-Strait Conflict,” Taiwan News, April 26, 2024, sec. Politics, <https://taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/5674257>

About APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.

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