

Republic of Korea's Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific

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Looking Beyond East Asia and ASEAN

The Republic of Korea's (RoKs) Indo-Pacific Strategy¹, released on 28 December 2022, signifies a major shift in Seoul's foreign policy, moving from a close regional focus to the broader Indo-Pacific. Steps taken by previous South Korean Presidents signify a mix of continuity and incremental steps taken to diversify foreign policy. A study of South Korea's policies of the late 1990's regarding Southeast Asia under President Kim Dae-jung as a start point, followed by President Lee Myung-bak's New Asia Initiative of 2009, and President Moon Jae's New Southern Policy (NSP) of 2017 indicate these steps.² The strategy released under President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration opens a new vista of foreign policy dynamics and engagements as it recognises that the Indo-Pacific stretches from the African coast in the Indian Ocean to the Americas. This wide swath of the Indo-Pacific thus aligns South Korea with India's view of the region. The strategy is ambitious and looks at engaging nations, across six sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific (including Europe), via nine Core Lines of Effort (CLOE's) to attain the vision of a *Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*. This vision is based on three principles of cooperation: inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity. Three aspects that clearly stand out are: the *inclusivity factor*, the aspiration to evolve as a *Global Pivotal State* (GPS), and the positing of South Korea as an *Open Trading Nation that Aspires to Contribute to Global Peace*. This paper will analyse RoK's strategy for the Indo-Pacific Region and highlight pertinent aspects that merit attention.

South Korea as a Global Pivotal State

The use of the term *Pivot State* raises several questions and hence needs to be analysed. The term could be viewed in multiple ways, mainly with scepticism, due to the impact on regional and global security. Hence, there is a need to understand what South Korea means by terming itself a GPS. As per a report by the Hague Centre for Security Studies (HCSS), pivot states can be defined as states that "...possess military, economic or ideational strategic assets that are coveted by great powers."³ Further, "They are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence

¹ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (2022), Republic of Korea, <https://www.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20221228060752073.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202212>

² For more details see Hoang Thi Ha and Glenn Ong, *Assessing the ROK's New Southern Policy towards ASEAN*, ISEAS Perspectives, Issue 2020 No. 7, 30 January 2020, www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_7.pdf

³ Tim Sweijts, Willem Theo Oosterveld, Emily Knowles, and Menno Schellekens, *Why are Pivot States so Pivotal? The Role of Pivot States in Regional and Global Security*, The Hague Centre for Security Studies, 09 July 2014, p 8, <https://hcss.nl/report/why-are-pivot-states-so-pivotal-the-role-of-pivot-states-in-regional-and-global-security/>

of these great powers as measured by associations that consist of ties that bind (military and economic agreements and cultural affinities) and relationships that flow (arms and commodities trade and discourse). A change in a pivot state's association has important repercussions for regional and global security."⁴ The report identified pivot states based on the number of military, economic or ideational strategic goods in their possession and accordingly placed South Korea in the category of a pivotal state with economic strategic goods.⁵

The strategy places South Korea as "A strong democracy with a developed economy"⁶ and hence aspires to become a GPS that "actively seeks out agendas for cooperation and shapes discussions in the region and the wider world"⁷, and "will contribute to the economic and social development of the Indo-Pacific through "contributive diplomacy" commensurate with its economic stature...."⁸ The strategy thus aims at vitalising direct economic engagements through the fifth and eighth CLOEs entitled, *Build Economic Security Networks*, and *Engage in "Contributive Diplomacy" through Tailored Development Cooperation Partnerships*, respectively. In line with this approach the strategy lays out a roadmap of specific planned economic engagements with several nations across the six identified sub-regions as tabulated (See Table 1).

Ser	Sub-Region	Economic Engagement
(a)	North Pacific	(i) Evolve the United States (US)-RoK alliance into a global comprehensive strategic alliance encompassing not just security but also economy amongst other aspects. ⁹ (ii) Increase economic security with Canada through stabilised supply chains. ¹⁰ Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy released on 27 November 2022 also mentions suitable economic interactions with South Korea. ¹¹
(b)	Southeast Asia and ASEAN	Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) would be the main engagement policy with ASEAN and the existing partnerships spanning trade and socio-economic cooperation would be built upon. ¹²

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, map 1.1 and figure 1.1, p 11

⁶ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region (2022)*, Republic of Korea, p 5

⁷ Ibid, p 7

⁸ Ibid, p 38

⁹ Ibid, p 13,14

¹⁰ Ibid, p 14

¹¹ *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, 27 November 2022, pp 10-12, <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/assets/pdfs/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique-en.pdf>

¹² *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region (2022)*, p 15

Ser	Sub-Region	Economic Engagement
(c)	South Asia	(i) Enhance economic cooperation with India by upgrading the ROK-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). ¹³ (ii) Pursue reliable and mutually beneficial economic partnerships with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and other South Asian countries. ¹⁴
(d)	Oceania	(i) Continue to reap the benefits of complementary economic relationship with Australia, South Korea's largest trading partner in Oceania. ¹⁵ (ii) Continue to expand economic cooperation with New Zealand, as its fifth largest trading partner. ¹⁶
(e)	African Coast of the Indian Ocean	Design programmes to share experiences and knowledge on economic and social development considering the different and diverse conditions of each country. ¹⁷
(f)	Europe and Latin America	With Latin American nations expand partnerships and collaboration on matters pertaining to economic security and trade, amongst others. ¹⁸

Table 1: Planned Economic Engagement with Nations: RoK's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022

Source: Author

Apart from the specific economic engagements mentioned in Table 1, South Korea can be expected to pursue other forms of economic engagement with friendly/ like-minded nations to support mutual non-traditional threats and challenges. These will either be in some direct form of engagement or would aid development of other aspects in pursuance of the stated vision. These are highlighted in the next section of this paper.

As a GPS with economic strategic goods the strategy seeks to balance Seoul's approach to China, the US, and its own national interests. It states that China is South Korea's "key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region", and that Seoul will pursue a policy to "nurture a sounder and more mature relationship" in the pursuit of shared interests "based on

¹³ Ibid, p 17

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid, p 19

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid, p 20

¹⁸ Ibid, p 21

mutual respect and reciprocity, guided by international norms and rules.”¹⁹ Further, the strategy also states that South Korea, Japan, and China account for 25 per cent of the global GDP, and hence considers trilateral cooperation amongst the three nations as an indispensable element for establishing stability and the achievement of prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific.²⁰ The strategy, therefore, looks at resuming the ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Summit, reinforcing the capacity and structure of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), and harmoniously developing ROK-US-Japan cooperation and ROK-Japan-China cooperation.²¹ These avenues are considered highly ambitious given the state of existing US-China relations, and any extra tilt towards China could increase the scepticism associated with South Korea’s status as a GPS. This sort of approach also signifies a change in Seoul’s foreign policy approach that strives to place its national interests first rather than perceived reactions from Beijing and Washington and the associated ‘balanced diplomacy’ approach aimed at striking a strategic balance between the US and China.²² However, “Despite the complexity and multitude of challenges, the US alliances, in the region now known as the Indo-Pacific, provide a security blanket through ‘security guarantees’ that are meant to deter or address any conflict arising from power transition and balance of power struggle.”²³ Therefore, the US-RoK alliance, and its subsequent envisaged development into a global comprehensive strategic alliance, would ensure a continued alignment with the US approach to the region while balancing interactions with China. It is interesting to note that the US Indo-Pacific strategy released in February 2022 looked at engaging the region through ten CLOEs. There is a distinct convergence between the US and South Korean CLOEs which indicates the strength of the alignment between South Korean and the US approach to the region.²⁴

Core Lines of Effort

In line with its positioning as a GPS, South Korea is looking at expanding “the geographical scope and breadth of cooperation”.²⁵ This engagement across the wide swath of the Indo-Pacific would be conducted through nine CLOEs. The geographical area is immense and the scope of the CLOEs quite vast. Seoul would find it a difficult task to meet all the requirements and will therefore need to persevere with patience while navigating the complexities of engagement, cooperation, and balancing. Some pertinent aspects that emerged CLOE wise are enumerated below. CLOEs five and eight have been addressed earlier hence are not included in this section.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 14

²⁰ Ibid, p 37

²¹ Ibid

²² For more details see Choe Wongi, *The ROK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy under President Yoon: Key Elements and Strategic Implications*, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, Focus, 20 December 2022, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/eng/pblct/PblctView.do?csrfPreventionSalt=null&pblctDtaSn=14106&menuCl=P11&clCode=P11&koreanEngSe=ENG&pclCode=&chcodeId=&searchCondition=searchAll&searchKeyword=&pageIndex=1>

²³ See Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar, *Towards Shaping a Favourable and Positive Maritime Environment in the Indo-Pacific*, 27 July 2022, <https://maritimeindia.org/towards-shaping-a-favourable-and-positive-maritime-environment-in-the-indo-pacific/>

²⁴ See Captain Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, *The US Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022: An Analysis*, Table 1, National Maritime Foundation, 03 May 2022, available at <https://maritimeindia.org/the-us-indo-pacific-strategy-2022-an-analysis/>

²⁵ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region (2022)*, p 13

Build Regional Order based on Norms and Rules

To contribute towards strengthening the international rules-based order, Seoul “aims to serve as a hub for cooperation networks in the Indo-Pacific”.²⁶ While the strategy states that South Korea will work with like-minded nations who share the same vision and principles of a free, open, and prosperous region, the present focus would remain limited to select nations. Given the proximity and alliance driven relationship the US-Japan-Republic of Korea tri-lateral would in all probability drive the agenda of this CLOE. The statement released after the tri-lateral meeting held on 13 November 2022 clearly indicates the strong convergence²⁷ and hence the mention in the strategy of the trilateral as a useful platform of cooperation²⁸. Termed as *Bloc Diplomacy* or *Americanisation of South Korean diplomacy* by some critics, this approach has been criticised as impacting the stability and peace of the Korean Peninsula.²⁹

The mention of the meeting of the four Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) leaders at the June 2022 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Summit appears out of place. This meeting essentially discussed two aspects. The first was the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The second was the indivisibility of the security of the Indo-Pacific and Europe flowing from which four nations (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and RoK) would take the lead in deepening communication between the Indo-Pacific and NATO.³⁰

The second aspect about the security of the Indo-Pacific and Europe being indivisible is highly debatable and may not be acceptable to many Indo-Pacific nations, especially linking NATO to the Indo-Pacific. Although the strength of the US-RoK alliance and similar US strength in NATO could have influenced this inclusion, it is important to note that the dynamics of Europe and the Indo-Pacific are not the same. Hence, to include NATO in the region may not be the right approach. Further, this approach could impact the inclusivity factor. There are existing regional initiatives that can be exploited to support this CLOE — as well as other CLOEs — like those stemming from the QUAD leader summit meetings and working with nations on the seven spokes of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). This would enhance the *multilateral cooperation* approach mentioned in this CLOE.³¹

Cooperate to Promote Rule of Law and Human Rights

²⁶ Ibid, p 23

²⁷ See *Phnom Penh Statement on US – Japan – Republic of Korea Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific*, 13 November 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/13/phnom-penh-statement-on-trilateral-partnership-for-the-indo-pacific/>

²⁸ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (2022), p 13

²⁹ See *In opting for bloc diplomacy, Yoon puts Korean Peninsula peace at stake*, 17 November 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1067726.html#:~:text=In%20opting%20for%20bloc%20diplomacy%2C%20Yoon%20puts%20Korean,down%20on%20the%20policy%20he%20dubs%20%E2%80%9Cvalues%20diplomacy%E2%80%9D

³⁰ See *NATO Asia-Pacific partners (AP4) Leaders' Meeting*, 29 June 2022,

https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/ki/page1e_000413.html

³¹ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (2022), p 23

Seoul would find congruence with other like-minded nations on most of the aspects, except perhaps the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In this regard a neutral approach towards ending the conflict could provide the required congruence, especially with nations, like India, which have a strategic relationship with Russia, and are calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Strengthen Non-proliferation and Counterterrorism Efforts across the Region

Regarding nuclear issues this CLOE focusses on North Korea, and as it is a vital security national interest would remain focussed largely on the Korean Peninsula. However, the issue of counterterrorism is a welcome aspect and Seoul could look at encouraging more Indo-Pacific nations to come onboard the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG). Presently, the FATF has 14 Indo-Pacific nations as members and one as an observer.³² The APG has 41 active members making it the largest global FATF-style regional body (FSRB). Further, 11 members of the APG are also members of the FATF. This overlap could aid a twin pronged approach in addressing common national and regional threats and challenges stemming from terrorism.

Expand Comprehensive Security Cooperation

The success of this CLOE would be dependent on South Korea's capacity and capability, available and planned, considering the vast canvas covered. Further, cooperation being the keyword it would be better to plug into existing mechanisms as this could address the lack of capacity and capability. For example, this line of effort looks at "cooperation on real-time maritime monitoring and information sharing through participation in international discussions on the establishment of a Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) system."³³ In order to take advantage of collective capacity and capability this aspect could be undertaken as part of the QUAD Indo-Pacific MDA (IPMDA) initiative.

The repeated inclusion of NATO with the intention to "to expand cooperation with NATO to effectively address transnational security challenges, including emerging technologies and climate change"³⁴ could heighten certain national sensitivities and raise issues mentioned earlier, under the first CLOE.

The reference to QUAD as a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue should have been avoided as the term *Security* raises issues and could deter nations from joining QUAD led initiatives, especially when viewed as choosing sides between China and US led forums, especially by ASEAN. This is an important aspect as the strategy "firmly supports ASEAN Centrality and the AOIP (ASEAN Outlook of the Indo-Pacific)"³⁵.

³² See <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/about/membersandobservers/>

³³ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region (2022)*, p 29

³⁴ *Ibid*, p 30

³⁵ *Ibid*, p 16

Strengthen Cooperation in Critical Domains of Science and Technology and Close Digital Gap

Due to South Korea's standing "as a global leader in science and technology innovation"³⁶, this CLOE could become the linchpin of the strategy. The many areas mentioned under this CLOE could complement the *Critical and Emerging Technologies* initiative of the QUAD, and the *Science Technology and Academic Cooperation* pillar of the IPOI, which presently has only Singapore onboard.

Lead Regional Cooperation on Climate Change and Energy Security

While this line of effort has all the standard elements of addressing climate change and energy security, two aspects emerge that can enhance regional cooperation. The first is Seoul's plan to contribute to the "establishment of infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region for an effective response to climate change".³⁷ To effectively realise this aim South Korea could look at joining the Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI)³⁸, which has several Indo-Pacific nations as members including the QUAD, and also work with India on the IPOI pillar regarding *Disaster Risk Reduction and Management*. This approach could also complement the QUAD initiative on Climate to convene a Climate and Information Services Task Force and provide technical assistance to Indo-Pacific nation, especially the small island developing states. The interlocking of these initiatives could empower Indo-Pacific nations to address climate change issues effectively.

The second aspect is nuclear energy, and Seoul looking at actively participating in the Indo-Pacific Nuclear Market and seeking to establish a framework for nuclear cooperation in the region.³⁹ As per the World Nuclear Association, Asia has about 140 operable nuclear power reactors, around 30 to 35 are under construction and there are plans to build an additional 40 to 50.⁴⁰ The status of nuclear power plants in the Indo-Pacific region is as tabulated below (See Table 2).⁴¹

Ser	Nation	Power/ Research Reactors Operable	Power Reactors Under Construction	Power Reactors Planned
(a)	Australia	-/1	-	-
(b)	Bangladesh	-/1	2	-
(c)	China	54/16	22	42
(d)	India	22/5	8	12
(e)	Indonesia	-/3	-	-

³⁶ Ibid, p 33

³⁷ Ibid, p 35

³⁸ For details on CDRI see <https://www.cdri.world/cdri-overview>

³⁹ *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region (2022)*, p 38

⁴⁰ For details see <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/others/asias-nuclear-energy-growth.aspx>

⁴¹ Ibid

Ser	Nation	Power/ Research Reactors Operable	Power Reactors Under Construction	Power Reactors Planned
(f)	Japan	33/3	2	1
(g)	South Korea	25/2	3	-
(h)	North Korea	-/1	-	-
(j)	Malaysia	-/1	-	-
(k)	Pakistan	6/2	-	1
(m)	Vietnam	-/1	-	-
Total		140/36	37	56

Table 2: Status of Nuclear Power/ Research Reactors in the Indo-Pacific
Source: <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/others/asia-nuclear-energy-growth.aspx>

This initiative could face some resistance from China and Russia as both nations oppose the idea of the Indo-Pacific and therefore any US or US ally/ strategic partner led regional initiatives. Plus, nations which have nuclear power plants built by Chinese or Russian assistance may come under pressure and refrain from joining the envisaged framework. Further, there could be an increase in the list of nations whom China and Russia are offering nuclear power plants with the package of finance and fuel services. This could complicate overtures to join the envisaged framework. As per the World Nuclear Association these nations are:⁴²

- **By China:** Cambodia, Kenya, and Thailand.
- **By Russia:** Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, and Vietnam.

The degree of difficulty to establish a framework for nuclear cooperation in the region would depend on the contents, and for the drafters and negotiators the devil would be in the details.

Promote Mutual Understanding and Exchanges

The last CLOE seeks to benefit from the soft power of people-to-people exchanges which would exploit the digital and cultural domains as a part of a two-way cooperative public-diplomacy approach. This would be an interesting line of effort to observe given the cultural diversity of the region.

Moving Ahead

South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy is a big step and major foreign policy shift as Seoul seeks to engage nations and address contemporary issues that define and delineate the Indo-Pacific. Generally, nations, especially middle powers, would prefer to pursue an incremental approach. Having placed the strategy in the open domain, and expressed an aspiration to become a GPS, South Korea would have to pursue the CLOEs carefully and incrementally. The minilateral

⁴² For details see <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/others/emerging-nuclear-energy-countries.aspx>

cooperative approach expressed throughout the document would be a good method to engage nations and strengthen existing initiatives, like those of the QUAD and IPOI, by adding value that flow from South Korea's core strengths. Foremost on the list of these strengths is its economy, science and technological innovativeness, cultural outreach, relations with ASEAN and like-minded nations including India, Australia, and Japan, and South Korea's geographic position in East Asia. These strengths can be exploited to balance China and Russia while forging the South Korean vision of a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, through cooperative mechanisms.

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