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SOUTH KOREA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: FROM STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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Abstract: *Despite being urged and called upon by the United States to develop an Indo-Pacific strategy since 2017, South Korea showed signs of reluctance until the end of 2020, only officially announcing its strategy in 2022. This article aimed to clarify the reasons for South Korea's ambiguity from 2017 to 2020 and the factors behind its transformation in the subsequent period. Utilizing the comparative analysis method and autonomous strategic theory, the article argued that South Korea shifted from a "strategic ambiguity" to a "strategic autonomy" to reduce dependence on China and the United States, asserting its position as a middle power. The results showed that before 2020, challenges from North Korea and economic relations with China made South Korea cautious about participating in the Indo-Pacific strategy. However, staying on the sidelines risked isolating it within the US alliance network. Meanwhile, concessions created opportunities for China to extend its influence over South Korea, even in cultural and social domains. Based on this, the article concluded that South Korea's shift in approach to the Indo-Pacific region was necessary to affirm its middle power status.*

Keywords: *Indo-Pacific Strategy; South Korea; US-Korea Relations; Strategic Ambiguity; Strategic Autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

South Korea is known as a middle power, characterized by many famous technology brands and the leading entertainment industry in the region. Economically, this country ranks third (after China and Japan) in East Asia, thirteenth among developed industrial countries, sixth in foreign exchange reserves, and second in the world in shipbuilding (Thúy 2020). Regarding security and politics, South Korea is one of the two key allies of the United States in Asia (along with Japan), contributing to the formation of the security structure in the region. Since its introduction in 2017, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) promoted by the United States (US) has garnered significant attention. While South Korea is geographically situated within the Indo-Pacific region and possesses vested interests in the strategic arc, its response to the FOIP has been somewhat ambiguous. This trend changed significantly in the middle of 2021 when the South Korean government had more proactive interactions and substantial commitments to the region. The hallmark of this change is the strategic document "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region", announced by South Korea in December 2022. It officially marks the end of its vagueness.

This article aims to elucidate the changes in South Korea's approach to the Indo-Pacific region, explaining why, during the period 2017-2020, Seoul exhibited some hesitation in engaging with the US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. It also aims to show why, post-2020, the country has assumed a more proactive role in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on South Korea's strategic ambiguity or strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific region has been addressed in various works. In the article "South Korea and France's Indo-Pacific Strategies: Potential Partnership and Challenges", Kang (2021) predicts that South Korea will transition from an ambiguous strategy to an autonomous strategy upon the official announcement of its Indo-Pacific strategy. However, according to her assessment, in the near future, it will be challenging for South Korea to participate in the US-led Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea, given the current stance shaped by influential factors within the country. Choe Wongi (2021), in the article "New Southern Policy - Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy", discusses South Korea's strategic autonomy through the New Southern Policy (NSP) - a foreign policy initiative stamped by President Moon Jae-in, launched in 2017. Wongi argues that the NSP represents Seoul's aspirations as a middle power to attain greater strategic autonomy by shouldering larger international responsibilities and roles - which it considers will be commensurate with its position and capabilities in the global community. In this regard, Seoul has endeavored to diversify its foreign economic relations, redirecting its diplomatic efforts towards Southeast Asia and beyond, concurrently fostering proactive cooperation within the region. However, Seoul's ambitions as a regional middle power have been significantly hindered as the country sidesteps sensitive strategic issues from the "pillar of peace" of the NSP to minimize the risk of being drawn into the quagmire of US-China strategic competition. Instead, Seoul prioritizes development cooperation to leverage its own developmental experiences.

Meanwhile, Seoul's collaboration with Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy is limited to a bilateral basis. Seoul only engages with the US in non-sensitive areas such as development cooperation and non-traditional security. For this reason, Choe Wongi assesses that South Korea's operational space is severely restricted compared to the sense of responsibility expected of a regional middle power that the country imposes on itself. Based on this, he recommends that Seoul should expand the "pillar of peace" of the NSP beyond non-traditional security issues while adopting a more balanced and proactive stance in participating in regional strategic and security matters.

South Korea's policy ambiguity continues to be mentioned by Kim (2023) in the article "Fitting South Korea in the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific tilt". She asserts that South Korea has the potential to become a more significant partner. However, this depends on the extent to which the country is willing to venture far beyond its comfort zone and integrate into the transforming regional architecture. Kim explains the strategic ambiguity of South Korea, noting that while the US alliance provides security assurances, South Korea remains reliant on its economic relationship with China and requires China's support for its policies regarding North Korea. Therefore, South Korea must avoid overtly aligning itself with any particular side. The retaliatory economic measures implemented by China against South Korea after the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system by the US in South Korea serve as a crucial reference point in explaining South Korea's initial hesitation in embracing concepts such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Also, looking at South Korea in the space of US-China strategic competition, Maduz, L. (2023), in the article "Explaining Korea's Positioning in the US-China Strategic Competition" (Maduz 2023), describes the stance of President Moon's administration in the period 2017-2022 as "side-choosing avoidance", "equivocation" or "strategic ambiguity". South Korea resisted immediate appeals

from the United States to participate in the 5G Clean Network initiative and to exclude Huawei equipment from its telecommunications networks. Additionally, the Moon administration refrained from officially endorsing the 2017 US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIPS) and resisted becoming a part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue alliance (Quad). Concurrently, South Korea demonstrated an ongoing interest in and endorsement of China-led economic governance structures by expressing openness to join the Belt and Road Initiative and participating in the recent Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) of 2020. In the meantime, during President Yoon's era, South Korea is poised to strengthen its ties with the United States, showcasing a fresh approach markedly different from the approach during former President Moon's tenure, which was criticized for being hesitant, passive, and leaning towards China. However, Maduz cites the perspectives of several analysts, suggesting that it is unlikely for Yoon to deviate from the previous model. A publicly confrontational stance with China and North Korea has simply never been part of the South Korean government's scenario since the end of the Cold War.

Continuing to discuss the New Southern Policy (NSP) and South Korea's middle power role, John V. Jojin (2023), in his work "South Korea's New Southern Policy and the Middle Power Quest: Implications for India-Korea Relations", posits that in the midst of escalating regional dynamics among major powers, the NSP reflects South Korea's assertion of middle power influence, characterized by a pursuit of regional autonomy and influence. The NSP stemmed from a motivation to diminish Korea's reliance on major powers and enhance its standing as a bilateral partner by pursuing a diversification strategy in economic and diplomatic endeavors. However, John V. Jojin believes that South Korea's ambiguity about the concept of the Indo-Pacific and its ignorance of geostrategic and security issues are a limitation to South Korea's promotion of its relations with India.

In general, all works acknowledge or imply South Korea's policy towards the Indo-Pacific region as a means to enhance its strategic autonomy. Previously, Seoul's ambiguity was perceived to be influenced by China, and some authors believe that South Korea will demonstrate stronger "autonomy" under President Yoon. However, none of those mentioned above works has systematically clarified the transition in South Korea's approach to the Indo-Pacific region from "strategic ambiguity" to "strategic autonomy". Building upon existing literature, this article will analyze the issue comprehensively, elucidating the reasons for South Korea's shift from "strategic ambiguity" to "strategic autonomy", examining practical actions that reflect South Korea's policy, and assessing the impacts.

METHODOLOGY

On the backdrop of the research question: "What is South Korea's policy towards the Indo-Pacific region?", this article hypothesizes that South Korea has transitioned from a "strategic ambiguity" in the pre-2020 period to a "strategic autonomy" from 2020 onwards. This shift reflects an increased commitment to the security issues in the region, aimed at affirming South Korea's role as a middle power. Through the strategic autonomy theory lens, the authors will verify this assumption while elucidating the motives behind South Korea's shift in approach.

The concept of strategic autonomy has been gaining prominence, particularly in discussions concerning America's allies, implying the independence of these nations from the United States. While its precise connotation remains somewhat elusive, it is commonly interpreted as a nation's capacity to

pursue its interests and objectives autonomously, minimizing reliance on external actors or influences (IDSA 2015).

According to the strategic autonomy theory, autonomy is a fundamental requirement for a state's survival and success in the global arena. States that are overly dependent on other actors, such as powerful nations or international organizations, may face limitations in their ability to pursue their interests and may be vulnerable to external pressure or coercion. This theory also recognizes the importance of power and influence in the global system and the role of regional integration.

On the one hand, states with greater economic, military, and diplomatic power are more likely to be able to achieve strategic autonomy. In contrast, weaker states may face greater challenges in asserting their independence. On the other hand, regional integration can provide a framework for states to enhance their strategic autonomy by pooling resources and leveraging collective power. In light of the theory of strategic autonomy, the author will clarify Korea's motivations for building its Indo-Pacific strategy, increasing its commitment to the region in terms of power, self-interests, and national identity.

SOUTH KOREA AND THE US INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY FOR THE PERIOD 2017-2020

South Korea's Strategic Ambiguity

As a trading nation, about 99.7% of South Korea's energy and commodity resources are transported via maritime shipping, including the strategic sea lanes of communication (SLOC) between the Indian and Pacific oceans (Kang 2021). The economic prosperity of South Korea relies on the freedom of navigation, an open market system, and upholding the rules-based international order (RBIO) in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the benefits associated with this region, from 2017 to 2020, South Korea chose to maintain a distance from the US FOIP strategy, only selectively implementing it in areas that overlapped with the New Southern Policy (NSP) - a policy built by President Moon Jae-in in 2017 to promote South Korea's economic and political autonomy. The NSP has two fundamental objectives: (i) diversifying South Korea's markets to avoid excessive dependence on China and potential "punishment" as it experienced after the decision to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2016, and (ii) increasing solidarity among middle powers in Asia to counter risks from US-China competition in the region. These two NSP objectives are driven by the 3P principle: People, Prosperity, and Peace.

With such objectives and principles, South Korea's NSP partly overlaps with the US Indo-Pacific strategy, helping the country demonstrate solidarity with its allies. Therefore, the US recognizes South Korea's NSP and endeavors to coordinate the Indo-Pacific Economic Vision (IPEV) with NSP as a step to advance US policies in the region.

South Korea's participation in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a dialogue partner in November 2018 is evidence of its coordination efforts. Joining IORA allows South Korea to strengthen its Indo-Pacific focus in NSP, thereby preserving the core elements of NSP within the scope of FOIP operations and contributing to fulfilling the "US ally's role" in FOIP.

However, this is a limited representation of South Korea's stance. Even within the Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) - the cooperative area between the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the New Southern Policy (NSP), South Korea does not seem to be assertive. While bilateral

alliances with the United States play a crucial role in FOIP, the US-South Korea alliance is an exception. Among the three pillars of the NSP, the peace pillar is the least developed, which serves as an example of how South Korea appears to want to stay out of the region's security issues. This is most evident in the country's behavior towards the South China Sea issue. Despite the establishment of the NSP, South Korea's ambiguity towards the South China Sea issue remains unchanged.

For many years, the official position of the South Korean government, as expressed in consistent but vague statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is that South Korea supports freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and hopes that the parties concerned will peacefully resolve disputes through dialogue. In reality, these statements seem to be merely "lip service" as the country has almost no reaction to serious incidents in the South China Sea and lacks a strong position in multilateral forums.

The most prominent contribution by South Korea to this issue was its statements made in 2015. During the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) in November 2015, Defense Minister Han Min-goo stated that freedom of navigation and overflight must be ensured, and disputes should be resolved peacefully (Yonhap News 2015). Later that month, President Park Geun-hye went further at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Malaysia by calling on relevant countries to adhere to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and to respect non-militarization commitments in the strategic sea area. President Park argued that South Korea has always emphasized that disputes must be resolved peacefully following international agreements and codes of conduct and that China must ensure freedom of navigation and overflight (Shin 2015). This was perhaps South Korea's strongest public response. However, it was likely under pressure from the United States, as the US and another US ally in East Asia, Japan, have taken a firm stance and been willing to criticize China at regional and global forums.

However, despite these positive signs, South Korea has returned to a somewhat ambiguous and dualistic position. In September 2018, a South Korean warship sailed close to the disputed islands in the South China Sea, entering an area that Beijing considers as its territorial waters (in an illegal manner).

After being criticized by Chinese media for the "violation", South Korea quickly offered an explanation that its naval destroyer Munmu the Great was seeking shelter from a storm and not conducting "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs - a campaign initiated and led by the US, mainly to counter China's irrational demands in the South China Sea); and that the ship, returning from anti-piracy operations off Somalia, did not have time to "ask for permission" (Jeremy and Andrew 2018). This action demonstrated a lack of clear stance and even a tendency to avoid confrontation with China on the part of South Korea.

This ambiguity stems from several factors related to South Korea's strategic and domestic political environment.

First, it is a habit of focusing on security on the Korean peninsula in the security foreign policy history of the South Korean government. South Korea's historical foreign policy has placed significant emphasis on North Korea and fostered bilateral relations with four key global powers: the United States, Japan, China, and Russia. These nations hold considerable sway over North Korean affairs, which has led South Korea to allocate relatively less attention to broader strategic and security concerns within the region. This trend has been particularly strong during the Moon Jae-in presidency, which has placed greater emphasis on improving inter-Korean relations. Meanwhile, the

FOIP approach to dealing with security threats from China could draw South Korea into the US military campaign outside the Korean peninsula. Despite being constrained by the role of an alliance with the United States, South Korean leaders still want to limit that role on the Korean peninsula. In addition, in such a limited vision of the Korean peninsula, due to US-North Korea tensions, South Korea's participation in FOIP is more likely to destabilize the Korean peninsula as North Korea may use increased military activities in the Indo-Pacific region as an excuse to engage in provocative actions against South Korea. Consequently, when FOIP initially emerged in late 2017, South Korea reluctantly joined the initiative, primarily due to concerns regarding its adverse impact on inter-Korean relations.

Secondly, there is the factor of China. South Korea has pursued autonomy amidst the competition between the US and China but cannot resist its leading trading partner - China. The US FOIP, at its core, aims to counter the rising power of China and its influence in the region; thus, adhering to the FOIP, the US would introduce complexities into the diplomatic ties between South Korea and China. Notably, China stands as South Korea's primary trade partner, with exports to China surpassing 162 billion USD in 2018 (Statista 2023). Additionally, despite South Korea's aspirations, China has played a significant role in the inter-Korean relationship since the conclusion of the Korean War. The prospects of reunification between the two Koreas hinge on China's support, as it remains the principal advocate for North Korea and possesses the necessary influence to enforce international sanctions aimed at curbing North Korea's nuclear programs. As long as South Korea's foreign policy continues to revolve around North Korea, South Korea cannot counter China.

SOUTH KOREA'S INCREASED COMMITMENT TO THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION FROM 2020: TOWARDS STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Although the ultimate goal of the NSP is autonomy, which a middle power like South Korea should have, with the habit of thinking and calculating economic interests related to China, South Korea's goal has not been achieved. However, in the later years of President Moon Jae-in's administration, South Korea has begun to change. Signs of increased engagement in the Indo-Pacific region began to emerge in 2020. In March 2020, the nation engaged in its inaugural Quad Plus gathering alongside New Zealand and Vietnam. While the Quad Plus has yet to be established as an official entity and focuses primarily on aligning Covid-19 strategies, South Korea's involvement can be interpreted as indicative of the country's receptiveness to adaptable approaches in the Indo-Pacific region.

A significant shift in South Korea's position occurred during the South Korea-US summit held in May 2021, featuring President Moon and President Biden. Within the Joint Statement, these two leaders expressed their shared aspiration for a region that upholds democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law domestically and internationally. They committed to preserving the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, adhering to South Korea's National Security Strategy (NSP) and the US vision of an Indo-Pacific that is free and open. Additionally, the parties pledged to collaborate in fostering a secure, prosperous, and dynamic region. Furthermore, the statement underscored the significance of upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait (Kang 2021, 14).

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One highlight of this summit is that President Moon has endorsed the FOIP framework while not officially outlining South Korea's strategy for the Indo-Pacific. The joint statement by the leaders contains key elements of President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy targeting China, although not explicitly mentioning it. President Moon committed South Korea to oppose any disruptive, destabilizing, or threatening activities based on rule-based international order (RBIO) in the Indo-Pacific and expanding the operations of the US-South Korea alliance to a larger regional security context, such as the South China Sea and Taiwan (Kang 2021, 14). The statement also acknowledges that while significant overlap exists, US and South Korean interests are not entirely congruent. This may result from President Moon's desire to avoid a clear link between his support for FOIP and his anti-China stance. He may be willing to endorse FOIP only on the condition that South Korea does not appear to be explicitly anti-China. This suggests that President Moon remains cautious and is only making minimal changes necessary to satisfy both the South Korean and US public, given that the US domestic opinion is somewhat disappointed with the "distance" of this ally from FOIP, and the government is under pressure to control the pandemic and access to vaccines.

President Yoon Suk Yeol corrected South Korea's hesitations under President Moon Jae-in. President Yoon Suk Yeol has a different strategic vision and political orientation than his predecessor, Moon Jae-in. From the early stages of his candidacy, Yoon Suk Yeol demonstrated his view that "South Korea's policy will not be restricted to the Korean Peninsula" and emphasized greater involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. In his Foreign Affairs article titled "South Korea Needs to Step Up", Yoon Suk Yeol noted that his vision for South Korea is to expand its capacity and role in foreign policy and diplomacy beyond the Korean Peninsula and to integrate itself into Indo-Pacific collaborative bodies in the theater, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Yoon 2022). Yoon highlighted the benefits of South Korea's participation in the Quad (Abhishek 2022), promising active cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, restoring bilateral relations with Japan, restoring trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan, and prioritizing the enhancement of strategic and comprehensive relations with the United States. President Yoon sees the relationship with the United States as the centerpiece of South Korea's foreign policy and is committed to seeking a comprehensive strategic alliance with Washington. The new president emphasizes that Seoul needs to play a greater role as one of the top 10 economies in the world[1].

With this direction and vision, it seems that the future South Korea not only wants to be labeled as a middle power but also aims to become one of the top leading powers in the world. Accordingly, South Korea's policy will not be restricted to the Korean Peninsula. However, it will expand its role in the region, not only in economic matters but also in politics and security in the Indo-Pacific region. Placing the United States at the center of its foreign policy does not indicate that South Korea wants to be dependent on the United States but rather shows its active involvement in responding to global and regional developments, thereby contributing to the operation of the structure - a strategic autonomous mindset.

Subsequently, the reality of South Korea has proven this foreign policy trend. The South Korea-US alliance was strengthened when South Korea was chosen as the first stop for President Joe Biden's Asia trip in May 2022. Later, the two sides upgraded their relationship to a "global comprehensive alliance", and President Yoon signed onto the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic

[1]South Korea is currently the 10th largest economy in the world. See: Global Peo Services. 2022. Top 15 Countries by GDP in 2022. Available at: https://globalpeoservices.com/top-15-countries-by-gdp-in-2022/

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Framework (IPEF) (Kang 2022). At that time, South Korea recognized that its national interest was tied to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, as President Yoon Suk Yeol stated in Cambodia in November 2022 when he attended a series of meetings with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): "Peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region are directly linked to our survival and prosperity" (Lee 2022a).

In December 2022, South Korea officially announced its "strategy for a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region" as evidence of its attachment to the region and its autonomy. Through this strategy, South Korea emphasizes the shared prosperity of like-minded countries and human rights, opposes unilateral changes to the status quo by force, maritime order based on the rule of law in the South China Sea, peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, maritime and air freedom, and other commitments. The strategy also implicitly condemns China and supports the US's intention to restrain its strategic rival, although it does not directly refer to the world's second-largest economy (Jagannath and Choong 2023). With this content, South Korea shares the US vision on security issues - such as maintaining peace, stability, and maritime and air freedom in the region. At the same time, the implications for China in the strategy also indicate the country's proactive engagement in hotspots in the Indo-Pacific region to assert its role as a middle power.

However, South Korea's strategy for the Indo-Pacific still emphasizes comprehensiveness. South Korea declares that it "does not target nor exclude any specific country" and views China as "the main partner in achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region" (Kim 2023) and "(...) will foster a healthy and mature relationship (with China) while pursuing common interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity, which are led by international rules and standards" (Republic of Korea 2022). This demonstrates that South Korea still desires to maintain a healthy relationship with China, at least in terms of the economy. However, this relationship aims for more balance and independence.

Through its strategy, South Korea aims to achieve its goals by emphasizing nine key efforts: (i) Building a regional order based on standards and rules; (ii) Cooperation to promote the rule of law and human rights; (iii) Strengthening regional efforts to combat terrorism and prevent nuclear proliferation; (iv) Expanding comprehensive security cooperation; (v) Building an economic security network; (vi) Promoting cooperation in important science and technology fields, narrowing the digital divide; (vii) Leading regional cooperation on climate change and energy security; (viii) Participating in "contributing diplomacy" through refined development cooperation relationships; and (ix) Promoting mutual exchange and understanding (Republic of Korea 2022).

South Korea's vision for the Indo-Pacific is comprehensive, covering a wide range of areas from law, security, and economics to energy, science and technology, and the environment, indicating a desire to play a larger role in the political developments in the region and the world. Recognizing the importance of peace and stability in the region, South Korea will be more decisive in security matters. The detailed documentation affirms the priority of building a regional order based on standards and rules, focusing on crucial maritime routes such as the Hormuz Strait, the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Strait, and the South China Sea.

Therefore, South Korea aims to enhance its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region to maintain a free and open area for all nations and build solid and long-lasting partnerships to cope with emerging challenges affecting regional stability. Indeed, South Korea's new commitment to the region is inclusive of all partners, including China. This approach enables South Korea to maintain its cooperation with China and is readily accepted by Southeast Asian countries, which are sensitive to

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power plays by major nations. Thus, South Korea can adapt and build cooperative relationships with regional partners based on shared principles, values, and interests.



Figure 1: Core Lines of South Korea in its Indo-Pacific Strategy
(Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea 2022)

Based on policy adjustments towards the Indian Ocean-Pacific region, South Korea has carried out a series of activities demonstrating an increased commitment to the issues in the region. South Korea has reinforced its relationship with its ally, the United States, by participating in the 28th Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) in June 2022 and the 3rd Free Guardian Exercise in March 2023, the largest bilateral exercise since 2017, when the former President Donald Trump's administration reduced its scale to ease tensions with Pyongyang and continued to maintain small-scale exercises due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, South Korea has shown a cooperative spirit with the United States in downgrading relations with Japan. In November 2022, the South Korean navy sent a 10,000-ton logistics support ship, Soyang, to participate in the International Fleet Review (IFR) held by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) for the first time in 20 years (Maritime Executive 2022). On March 16, 2023, President Yoon Suk-yeol of South Korea visited Japan twice and attended a summit meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in Tokyo, marking a significant step towards normalizing Japan-Korea relations since 2018. In particular, President Yoon Suk-yeol's visit to Japan was planned after Seoul officially proposed a plan to compensate for wartime forced labor victims through a public fund contributed by its own companies instead of directly from related Japanese companies (Lee 2023). This proactive move shows the South Korean government's considerable effort, given that animosity towards Japan is deeply ingrained in the national psyche.

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South Korea has also sent a message about strengthening relationships, especially defense and security relationships, with the EU[2], India[3], and Australia[4]. It plans to participate in Quad working groups[5] in areas where Seoul has expertise, such as new technologies, healthcare, and climate change. These steps demonstrate South Korea's consistency in increasing its commitment to the issues in the Indo-Pacific region.

COMMENTS ON SOUTH KOREA'S INCREASED ENGAGEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: AFFIRMING ITS AUTONOMY

From the changes in South Korea since the end of President Moon Jae-in's term and primarily through the release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the Yoon administration in December 2022, South Korea demonstrated a desire for strategic autonomy, specifically toward achieving independence to avoid economic dependency on China and security dependency on the US, thereby asserting its role as a middle power. Economic dependence on China or security-political dependence on the US has had negative impacts on South Korea. For many years, as an ally of the US, South Korea has also faced pressure to "contribute" to US strategies in the region, which has caused tensions in its relations with countries that have animosity towards the US, such as China and North Korea. In addition, being alongside the US has made South Korea partly reliant on US strength, thereby lacking opportunities to demonstrate its role. As with Japan, the presence of US military forces in South Korea has become a "shelter" for the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, not only in the threat from the North but also in other security issues in the region. While Japan has a different motivation for strong involvement in the South China Sea issue, which is the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with China in the East China Sea, South Korea is not trapped in a relationship with China in such a form.

The thing that most directly affects Korea is the issue of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which is a common issue involving many countries, including the US, which has shown the most concern. With the nature of a superpower and the trend of containing China, the US will undoubtedly participate in the regional situation, at least to ensure the maintenance of freedom of navigation. From this perspective, Korea can completely "hike" US actions, thereby still ensuring its interests in the East Sea without the need for resolute action and certainly without the need to "provoke" China.

However, during the presidency of Donald Trump, the United States exerted pressure on South Korea. With the belief that "America is first", Trump reevaluated the alliance relationship. In addition to signing the USMCA to replace NAFTA, the US renegotiated trade agreements with South

[2]See: Nicola Casarini. 2021. The EU's Growing Security Cooperation With South Korea. *The Diplomat.* Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/the-eus-growing-security-cooperation-with-south-korea/

[3]In February 2022, South Korea participated in the Milan drills led by India for the first time. Earlier, Korea also sent a message that it wanted to tighten ties with India. See: Yonhap News.2022. S. Korea to take part in India-led joint naval exercise: sources. *Yonhap News*. Available at: https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220222003900325. Also see: Stanly Johny.2018. S. Korea wants to elevate ties with India. *The Hindu*. Available at: https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/s-korea-wants-to-elevate-ties-with-india/article24988305.ece.

[4]See: Alie Peter Neil Galeon. 2022. S. Korea, Australia to Boost Bilateral Defense Cooperation. *The Defense Post*. Available at: https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/11/25/korea-australia-defense-cooperation/

[5]See: Yonhap News. 2023. (LEAD) S. Korea to accelerate Quad working group participation: official. *Yonhap News*. Available at: https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230308005351325

Korea (9/2018) and Japan (10/2019). Trump called the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) a "job-killing deal", asserting that the agreement had destroyed 100,000 American jobs (Noland 2018). In particular, his demand that South Korea pay $5 billion for the presence of US troops in South Korea in 2019 (Hyonhee and Joyce 2021) increased pressure on South Korea to become more independent in terms of security from the United States. Although under the presidency of Joe Biden, the United States has taken steps to mend the alliance relationship, the "Trump shock" still serves as a cautionary tale for this Northeast Asian country to walk on its own two feet.

Furthermore, Biden's commitments also only serve the interests of the United States. The bitter pill that France had to swallow with AUKUS in the recent past is the most apparent evidence for this argument. Therefore, South Korea must establish its position and maintain its strength. Building a realistic perspective and actively participating in the Indo-Pacific region, where the United States and other allies are increasing their presence, will help South Korea achieve this goal.

Meanwhile, China has been South Korea's largest trading partner for many years. Bilateral trade between China and South Korea in 2018 reached $268.6 billion, which was more than the combined trade between South Korea and the United States and Japan (Global Edge 2018). With such an economic dependence on China, any political or military action taken by South Korea that implies a message to China will come at a cost. The repercussions of the "garlic blockade"[6] in 2000 and the most recent economic punishment by China in 2017, related to South Korea's installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system for the United States, are still strongly felt.

The 2000 incident caused severe damage to South Korea's phone and chemical industries, while the 2017 crisis caused a series of major brands in the country, such as Hyundai, Kia, and Lotte, to suffer losses and tourism in South Korea to decline. Furthermore, China can impact South Korea's economy by banning the export of rare earth minerals - a tactic that China used against Japan in 2010 and even the United States during the US-China trade war.

The significance of China for South Korea extends beyond economic cooperation and into the realm of security. From South Korea's previous perspective, if the United States maintains its role as one of the key players in the Korean Peninsula issue, China also occupies a similar position, albeit in a different way. The US is a factor in preventing potential military threats from North Korea, while China can influence and, to some extent, control North Korea's behavior. China's direct involvement in the Korean War (1950-1953), signing of the Armistice Agreement(1953), standing alongside North Korea during the Cold War, and maintaining economic relations with North Korea even during the period when the country was under sanctions by the US and UN, makes its role possible. In this regard, China is an important factor for South Korea in addressing the nuclear threat of North Korea and creating conditions for the unification of the Korean Peninsula. This reality puts South Korea in a weak position in its relationship with China. The increasing commitment to the Indo-Pacific region indicates a shift in South Korea's perception. By pursuing a more independent foreign policy approach that is less cautious regarding security-political issues with implications for China, South Korea not only reduces its dependence on China but also secures its strategic interests, including

[6]The occurrence transpired when the Korean government implemented substantial levies on low-cost garlic imports originating from China as a measure to safeguard Korean farmers, subsequently inducing China to impose an embargo on the importation of mobile phones and chemical commodities originating from South Korea. It is noteworthy that at the time of this incident, garlic imports from China only accounted for $9 million, while South Korea's exports of phones and chemical products to China amounted to over $471 million. See: Don Kirk.2000. Just a Little Garlic Overpowers Asian Trade Ties.*New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/08/news/just-a-little-garlic-overpowers-asian-trade-ties.html.

security concerns on the Korean peninsula. Proactively engaging in regional issues and promoting relationships with other partners will help South Korea achieve its goals. Once South Korea attains a global position, it will have sufficient resources and capabilities to address its security issues.

Through the Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea can promote the economic security structure by actively engaging in numerous multilateral initiatives, such as the Comprehensive Regional Economic Partnership (RCEP), expeditiously joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), expanding comprehensive economic partnerships with ASEAN and India, and the Digital Economic Partnership Agreement. This will help ensure supply chain stability while minimizing the risk of economic coercion from China towards South Korea. The importance of becoming less dependent on China's influence becomes even more critical as anti-China sentiment has surged in South Korea. Previously, the South Korean public viewed China positively due to their economic and trade relationship, which supported President Moon Jae-in's ambiguous stance between the US and China. At the same time, South Korea was an ally of the US. However, the economic retaliation by China against South Korea following the deployment of THAAD in 2016, the Hong Kong issue in 2019, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 have all contributed to a decrease in the favorable perception of China among the South Korean population. Remarkably, the incidents in 2021 where South Korea accused China of practicing "cultural imperialism" (Choi 2021) have further heightened the nationalistic sentiment among the South Korean people. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, anti-China sentiment in South Korea has reached its peak, reaching 75% in 2020 (Laura, Kat, and Christine 2020). With the significant shift in South Koreans' attitudes towards China, it becomes increasingly challenging to maintain a balanced approach to the FOIP. Therefore, achieving independence to avoid being influenced by China is not only a subjective desire of the South Korean government but also meets the needs of the domestic population.

Furthermore, South Korea has demonstrated autonomy in its relations with the United States and China by engaging more extensively in the Indo-Pacific region. This move enables the nation to reinforce its standing and satisfy global expectations for an increasingly influential South Korea in terms of its economic and cultural impact. Given its status as a significant economy with advanced technological capabilities, South Korea wields considerable soft power and influence in the security and economic framework of the region. Nonetheless, South Korea's foreign policy, particularly regarding security, has faced criticism for its narrow focus solely on Northeast Asia. The South Korean political leadership acknowledges these global expectations.

The new Indo-Pacific strategy represents a fundamental change, with an extended diplomatic outlook that aligns with the country's "national prestige and status".

When the specific strategy was announced, the Office of the President of South Korea also reiterated that this is South Korea's first comprehensive regional strategy, demonstrating its commitment to expanding diplomatic space and enhancing its role and contribution to the region (Lee 2022b). These commitments align with South Korea's elevated position and the expectations placed on Seoul by the international community. The content of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and recent activities of South Korea in the region demonstrate that the country aims for autonomy in both security-political and economic aspects. Strengthening participation in maritime security issues promoting cooperation with US allies and like-minded partners, like India and the European Union, in mechanisms and practical activities will help South Korea achieve its goals of security-political autonomy. Presently, South Korea is engaged in various maritime exercises, including the Milan

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exercise conducted by India and the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), led by the United States, and has also initiated initiatives centered on maritime awareness, capability enhancement, and intelligence sharing. These efforts augment South Korea's capability to interact and remain prepared for any eventuality.

Furthermore, South Korea's involvement in the Quad activities in the "Plus" format or working groups and its participation in the NATO Summit and Cyber Defense Group in 2022 have helped to assert its expanded role in global affairs. Meanwhile, expanding economic diplomacy endeavors to build stronger ties with middle and lower-ranked economies in the region while exhibiting greater responsibility within the multilateral economic cooperation framework, which can help Northeast Asian nations reduce their reliance on China's economy. Accomplishing these two dimensions can elevate South Korea's global standing, consolidate its position as a middle power, and potentially propel it toward being a significant global power.

CONCLUSION

The root cause of South Korea's indecisiveness can be traced to the influences of both the United States and China. Likewise, the transformation from ambiguity to strategic autonomy can be attributed to these two nations' influence. It is important to note that South Korea's association with the two countries differed during the two phases. Previously, South Korea depended on the United States for external security concerns in the Korean Peninsula and took a cautious stance towards China to avoid any impact on the economic benefits arising from the Sino-Korean relationship. However, South Korea's enhanced engagement in the Indo-Pacific region was subsequently motivated by its desire for independence from the United States and China. This aspiration was articulated in South Korea's New Southern Policy in 2017. Nonetheless, South Korea's potential was not yet sufficient during that period to enable it to undertake more robust activities with China.

As of 2022, South Korea has gained a profound understanding of the sentiments associated with a nation's dependency on external entities. The Trump administration's insistence that South Korea shoulder the cost of maintaining US military presence on its soil, as well as the world's largest superpower's endorsement of a trade agreement that was beneficial to the US, imparted a lesson to South Korea about the futility of "hiding in the shadow" of any country, including allies. To establish its position in the region, South Korea should establish a comprehensive framework that covers all critical areas for the Indian Ocean-Pacific Ocean region and proactively contribute to cooperation mechanisms. While shared with the US, South Korea's actions and policies are not intended to increase dependence on the US but rather to assert its strategic autonomy in front of its major ally.

The frayed people-to-people relations between South Korea and China have compelled South Korea to seek autonomy from the Northeast Asian powerhouse. China's "cultural invasion" tactics have raised concerns among South Koreans about its overt attempts to draw South Korea into its sphere of influence, creating an urgent need for South Korea to assert its independence from China. Greater dedication to the region's pivotal concerns, as outlined in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, will aid in reducing South Korea's economic reliance on China. Although it has faced some backlash, mostly diplomatic censure, from China, the South Korean government's shift exhibits favorable prospects owing to its all-inclusive approach, which serves as a basis for securing backing from domestic and global constituencies.

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