

Seoul's Impaired Comprehensive Security

Adding "Water" to the Security Agenda of the Yoon Administration

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Abstract

After assessing the urgency and existential threats of Korean water issues and the conditions of the security agenda referred to in securitization theory from national, regional, and international levels, this article argues that water needs to be added to Korea's comprehensive security approach. As water security is no longer limited to tackling national water supply or disaster management, a broader scope of water challenges needs to be understood. This new perspective will encompass national energy efficiency and carbon reduction in the water sector with technological innovation in response to the climate crisis, transboundary issues between the two Koreas that rarely recognized but have severe potential risks, and saturation of the domestic water market. This article concludes by calling for South Korea's security agenda to bolster the idea of securitizing water issues via highlighting the importance of the Mekong River for South Korea's proper geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific realm and stronger ties with its like-minded allies and partners by sharing strategic concerns of regional water issues as part of Seoul's national security agenda.

The Biden administration released its new *Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS)* in February 2022, highlighting a more comprehensive concept of security that focuses on regional interconnectivity, particularly among economy, climate, energy, and technology.¹ As a key vehicle of the White House Action Plan on Global Water Security, issued in June 2022, the US Department of State released a plan on water through the *U.S. Global Water Strategy 2022–2027* and underlines that the United States views water security as an issue of national security and commits contribution to global water security. It also highlights anticipating and reducing conflict and fragility related to water as the strategic ob-

jective that underlines US encouragement to partner countries to build the political will to prioritize sound water management and to build their capacity for cooperative management of shared waters.² To enhance regional stability and counterbalance China's growing assertive influence, Washington is strengthening ties with its traditional allies and expanding new security partnerships with the Southeast Asian community. South Korea, as one of Washington's long-standing allies in East Asia, also has expressed its support for the *IPS* and Pres. Yoon Suk-yeol has stated that his administration's diplomatic and security strategy strongly aligns with that of the United States. The concept of *comprehensive security* that Yoon advocates for the Indo-Pacific era, however, seems to be missing a critical element of nontraditional security: water security. This article examines this missing element of comprehensive strategy for the Indo-Pacific security and explores possible policy options for Seoul.

Yoon's Comprehensive Security in the Indo-Pacific Era

When Yoon came into office in early 2022, he declared that comprehensive security would be the new administration's core concept. The term *comprehensive security* is often reiterated in Seoul's strategy and direction of policy. It incorporates economy, energy, technology, and environment, substantially broadening South Korea's scope of security while providing in-depth consideration of the regional geopolitical context. Additionally, President Yoon has shown his deep understanding of the value of the US-ROK alliance partnership across various sectors and the implications of the bilateral relationship for his security policy direction. At a closer look, the comprehensive security of the Yoon administration seems like an innovative and bold strategy that addresses a variety of challenges Seoul is facing from economic recessions, energy crises, and strategic positioning in the global supply chain that directly targets strategic sectors of technologies and resource-based industries. As South Korea seeks a bigger role as a responsible middle power in the Indo-Pacific to expand Seoul's influence, the successful implementation of this comprehensive security is likely to contribute to achieving South Korea's policy priorities.

The Importance of Securitization: Copenhagen School's Theory

The Yoon administration views security from a broader scope by securitizing different urgent issues and preparing solutions based on strategic cooperation with the international community. This helps in gaining the public's trust in the government by prioritizing problems of general livelihood as part and parcel of the security agenda and linking that agenda to critical global challenges. More-

over, this strategic approach aims at better positioning South Korea in the regional geopolitical milieu at the same time. The fact that a broad range of security issues require collective responses from geoeconomic, and geopolitical actors supports South Korea's drive toward strengthening cooperative ties with like-minded global partners.

According to the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, politicians and other decision-makers carefully choose national security policy rather than accepting it. When political concerns are described as *dangerous, menacing, threatening, or alarming*, leaders perceive them as extreme security challenges that must be addressed immediately. Theorists attempt to consider nonmilitary threats of various kinds by adding ideas like *human security* and *regional security*, which broadened the security agenda. These securitization theorists determined five sectors: economic, societal, military, political, and environmental. Each sector's specific threat is articulated as threatening a referent object.³

As securitization theory states, actions are often legitimized under the language of *urgency* and *existential threats* when an issue is securitized.⁴ This implies that securitization of an issue renders legitimacy for new policies and actions.⁵ The Yoon administration identifies *comprehensive security* as including "economy, energy, technology, and environment" as a notion of national and foreign policies. Among all issues included in Yoon's comprehensive security, energy and economic risks were well articulated in particular and responded to the imminence of the matters, positioning them at the center of a timely national agenda.⁶ This was well-received by the public in that energy and economic crises from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and an extended period of pandemics were imminent threats to the public.

In this regard, the efforts of the Yoon administration to strengthen ties among different urgent issues included adopting comprehensive security as its essential strategy. Domestic and international audiences also positively acknowledged the undertaking. In addition, the new approach was based on timely exposure of the risks via the administration's public announcement and policy adoption on broader-ranged national security agenda that is not limited to military security but nontraditional security. This may also imply the political needs of President Yoon: running advanced diplomatic and strategic policy with the broadened concept of security as an impactful political strategy differentiated from the former administration.

Comprehensive Security without Water Agenda

While nontraditional security issues that include climate, economy, environment, and technology are well securitized and prioritized in the notion of Seoul's

comprehensive security, another core security agenda is nowhere to be seen: water.⁷ Based on interconnectivity with other newly adopted security agendas, water security is also urgent and poses existential threats that have not been appropriately recognized.

The South Korean conceptualization of comprehensive security does not include water because of the government's and domestic audience's fragmented understanding of water issues. The public largely understands water merely as an in-nation-supplied resource that requires disaster management at times.⁸ According to UN Water, however, *water security* now encompasses ecosystem sustainability and energy efficiency in its total management beyond the scope of supply and resource management. The concept is also related to economic value creation and trade technologies outside the country, as well as food production and security.⁹ As comprehensive security suggests, there is no longer an independent sector to be developed or sustained without proper management of interlinkages among respective areas. Likewise, security enhancement of water does not only come from national water management but also in consideration of regional and international water issues together and how a nation-state is engaged in regional and international geopolitical contexts. Additionally, competing referents and priorities render water an instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, valuable resource critical in every other security agenda.

Understanding Water as a National Security Priority in South Korea

Water, as with other security priorities, has its *urgency* and poses an *existential threat*, evidenced by more frequent unexpected deviation of average precipitation at the national level and disasters caused by climate change domestically and globally. The security prioritization of the water sector in South Korea also refers to the ongoing transboundary river issues between the two Koreas that may bring unexpected damage to South Korea. In addition, there are already existing transboundary conflicts between China and North Korea, the issues of Ap-rok and Du-man Rivers that could be potential threats and challenges for a reunified Korea in the future.

South Korea typically has abundant rainfall but still suffers from a lack of available water resources. However, Koreans use water daily without realizing the water shortage, thanks to a stable and inexpensive water supply. Citizens cannot experience water scarcity as the water intake facilities are well equipped and maintained nationwide, and the cost of water is reasonable. Thus, Koreans do not feel the necessity to limit their water consumption.¹⁰

However, there is growing evidence that the meteorological cycle, on which most countries depend for water security, is deviating from traditional patterns

due to climate change. Thus, it will become increasingly more difficult for South Korea, and others, to maintain the current stability of water supply using the same water management practices in the future, mainly due to climate change, which brings unexpected water-related disasters. In winter 2021, Korea experienced a record drought—the worst in 50 years—with the accumulated precipitation amounting to less than 10 percent of the average year. In the subsequent spring, when water is most needed for agricultural pursuits, there were concerns about damage to crops such as onions and garlic due to drought. In response, the Korea Rural Community Corporation started supporting 165 cities, counties, farmers, and fishermen across the country to develop emergency groundwater in preparation for emergency disasters and for securing and managing groundwater better because groundwater charges only 10% of total water usage in Korea even though the groundwater can be a useful resource of water to use.¹¹ To compound the problem, in summer 2022, South Korea's worst flooding in 80 years focused attention on the global climate crisis' impact on the country. After storms dumped as much as 141 millimeters (5.5 inches) of water, President Yoon held an emergency meeting at the country's National Disaster and Safety Status Control Center.¹² These sequential crises—having two different extreme cases of drought and flood in one year—implied that one-size-fits-all resource management no longer applies, as Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), the exemplary model of local-based customized water management denotes flexible, situation-tailored, and area-specific management systems dealing with urgent threats.

Increasing energy efficiency is the core element of climate security in terms of carbon reduction, the globally shared value each nation-state makes efforts.¹³ Water in South Korea also is an area that needs developing policies and technologies for energy efficiency and carbon reduction in the industry as well as in households. For instance, South Korea has been developing and using alternative water resources, such as wastewater reuse, groundwater reservoir, and riverbank filtration, to increase the efficiency of water use and management that eventually links as a response to climate change.

Transboundary water issues between North and South Korea mainly come with high risks of sudden unnoticed discharges from North Korean dams with flood risk and long-term water shortage at the upstream dams. It is a serious challenge to be resolved and managed within the scope of national security. In summer 2022, North Korea released water from a dam near the inter-Korean border without giving prior notice to Seoul, as the North has been drenched by heavy downpours as recently as August 2022. The North was adjusting the Hwanggang Dam's water level to alleviate the problem of heavy rainfall. However, under an inter-Korean agreement signed in October 2009, Pyongyang was obligated to

notify Seoul in advance of North Korea's plans to release dam water—an obligation that was ignored.¹⁴

Looking more closely, the Bukhan and Imjin Rivers are transboundary rivers between the two Koreas that originate in North Korea and flow into South Korea. Since North Korea has built dams upriver, flow output and fisheries productivity have decreased in South Korea. At the Imjin River, fishermen have suffered from sudden, unannounced discharges by North Korean dams. After North Korea constructed the Imnam Dam on the upper reaches of the Bukhan River, the downstream flow was reduced. This also led to difficulty in the operation of hydroelectric dams and the maintenance of water supplies. Although dialogue on flood prevention from the Imjin River occurred several times after the Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, discussion on substantial measures was minimal. From 2001 to 2009, six unannounced water discharges from North Korea brought tremendous losses of property and fisheries in South Korea.¹⁵

As a security matter, water encompasses several different issues, including disaster risk management, climate resilience, transboundary conflict resolution, economic value creation, technology transfer, food production, energy generation, and industry vitalization aligned with carbon reduction. These are profound implications that water has sufficient features of urgency and threatening factors that must be included in South Korea's comprehensive security approach. It is essential to underline that water is the common area of most nontraditional security issues, including the economy, energy, climate, and food.

Understanding Water as a Regional Security Priority in Korea: Focusing on the Mekong Conflict as a Case Study

Understanding the geopolitics of the Mekong conflict as a case study will surely induce Seoul to place water on the list of South Korea's security priorities. The Mekong River is the largest river in Southeast Asia, with a length of 4,800 km. It flows into the South China Sea through China's Yunnan province and Guangxi Autonomous Region, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The five Mekong countries not only have a population of 240 million living in an area of 1.94 million square kilometers but are also promising emerging markets with the fastest economic growth in Asia.¹⁶ The downstream regions of the Mekong—Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand—are substantially impacted by what happens upstream, which is mostly managed by China, and there is no standardized data to be shared. Sadly, there are continuous difficulties in providing consistent water management to help local riparian people because the states sharing this international river are not equally powerful.¹⁷ If Laos and Cambodia depend

on China on land, that dependence comes to consequences elsewhere, where China becomes more powerful. Competition for water can intensify as shared water resources between nations and communities deteriorate or become limited, escalating tensions and boosting the conflict. This is particularly true for shared water bodies for which there are no cooperation agreements in place.¹⁸

The Mekong River is essential for riparian nations and extraregional powers, including the United States, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and India. This is because the resource itself has a high value and because there may be conflict or collaboration among the various actors and stakeholders involved in regional development in terms of infrastructure, food and energy security, climate change, and disaster management.

In this context, the Mekong is at the center of Indo-Pacific geopolitics given its relationship with China. In the South China Sea, where the primary source comes from the Mekong and Chinese power has quickly grown, all the elements of national security, particularly China's growing military presence and economic investment, and an increasing number of dispatched diplomats at every meeting in the Mekong riparian countries to represent Chinese interests illustrate how Beijing sees the Mekong as more important than before.

The mismanagement of this transboundary water resource and other related resources has escalated tension among the riparian states and communities as water resource is not only used for households but industry, agriculture, and environment while the Mekong's economic and strategic value continues to rise. Chinese eleven new dam projects on the river's main stem are under consideration. Several studies have confirmed that, in the absence of transboundary impact assessment and coordinated planning, these projects have the potential to result in a water and food security crisis. Many factors are driving up the water demand, including population growth, urbanization, industrialization, intensive agriculture development, and energy demand.¹⁹

The Mekong region's geopolitical risks are unsustainable, with unfair management of transboundary water resources and its weak regional institutions. The most serious challenge to the Mekong comes from Beijing's rapid construction of hydropower dams along the mainstream of the Mekong River, which is drastically changing the ecological, geopolitical, and socioeconomic landscape of the Mekong region. The existing regional institutions, including the Mekong River Commission (MRC), have so far been unsuccessful in providing inclusive and practical solutions to riparian states and their security threats stemming from the mismanagement of water resources of the Mekong.²⁰ In this situation, aside from the efforts of China to cooperate with the Mekong institutions, the Mekong countries are engaged in a dilemma. What China can provide to the lower Me-

kong countries is intriguing—i.e., energy generated from the dams—while most Mekong countries are suffering from reduced fishery and degraded ecosystem that directly affects the livelihoods and agriculture that requires lower Mekong countries' common strategy and posture toward China to reduce disadvantages that come from Chinese Mekong usage and aggressive dam construction.

Despite the complexity and dilemma that China and the Mekong countries have, Washington and its bloc in the Mekong have insufficient power to balance Chinese interests and influence in the Mekong countries even though considerable cooperation has been initiated and planned among these allies and partners.

Moreover, the geopolitical significance of the Mekong basin is increasing as it becomes a battleground for development cooperation among rivals. China's participation and influence in the development of the Mekong basin are rapidly increasing through Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation mechanism. From 2009 to 2021, the US government provided more than USD 4.3 billion in bilateral and regional grant assistance to the five Mekong partner countries, including nearly USD 4.0 billion from the Department of State and USAID.²¹ The Mekong–U.S. Partnership includes collaboration on economic connectivity, energy and climate security, human capital development, transboundary water, natural resources management, and nontraditional security.²² The United States reorganized the Mekong–U.S. Partnership, launched in 2020, which is the expansion of the Lower Mekong Initiative, an effort fostering integrated subregional cooperation among Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It reflects how the US more gives attention to more concrete plans and investments for the Mekong region.²³ In this regard, the Mekong region is an emerging growth center and a strategic frontier in the Indo-Pacific as the geopolitics of water resource management and security, especially transboundary water resources, are becoming more complex based on different interests of each riparian states and regional partners who are engaged in regional politics.

Tokyo also sees Mekong-related collaboration as part of Japan's nontraditional security agenda for planning regional cooperation for political stability in international relations and for reaping economic benefits as a return for investments and a better position in changing geopolitical dynamics. Japan continued strategic cooperation with the Mekong riparian states by sponsoring an annual Mekong–Japan summit, developed in 2008. The collaboration formulates financing and investment projects, grants assistance for human security of the Mekong region, assists financial independence concerning the rule of law, fosters cooperation concerning ocean security, and strengthens supply chains.²⁴

Likewise, Australia views the Mekong conflict, which mainly comes from differing interests between China and the lower Mekong countries, as a shared re-

gional security threat. Along with incorporating and expanding on the former Greater Mekong Water Resources Program, the Mekong–Australia Partnership (MAP) has collaborated with Australia's other programs in Southeast Asia, including economic development, the environment, infrastructure (Partnerships for Infrastructure, or P4I), security, and transnational crime (MAP–TNC), and the Greater Mekong Water Resources Program (GMSP). Australia focuses on investing in the human capacity of education and training in the region, increasing economic resilience and supporting COVID-19 recovery, boosting trade and investment through business programs, building environmental strength to enhance water security, addressing riverine and marine pollution, promoting clean energy, and responding to climate change, as well as strengthening cyber and critical technology capabilities in the Mekong, particularly in telecommunications and critical infrastructure security.²⁵

Seoul's Response to the Mekong Issues

While others in the region are putting their efforts into addressing the Mekong issue and weaving it into their national security strategy, Seoul has not been as active. This seems to be changing slowly, as South Korea makes increased overtures toward cooperation and development in the Mekong region. Seoul upgraded relations with the Mekong nations as strategic partners in 2021, emphasizing the necessity of cooperation among the countries. South Korea also pledged to work closely with the UN to manage resources and promote ecological conservation in the region, offering to increase developmental aid through the Mekong–Korea Cooperation Fund. Further funding will be invested in specific industries throughout the Mekong, including culture and tourism, human resource development, rural development, environment, infrastructure, and information & communication technology.²⁶ Accordingly, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and water-related public and private organizations have emphasized the Mekong River as important to the nation's national diplomacy.²⁷

Notwithstanding these developments, however, Seoul has not recognized the Mekong conflict and its related challenges as security issues—despite the outlined important geostrategic implications. The region's significance in foreign investment and trade directly impacts the Korean national economy and energy security enhancement not to mention geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific theater. Considering the geopolitical importance of the Mekong and the South China Sea, it is evident that Seoul must include Mekong-related issue in South Korea's comprehensive security agenda.

Conclusion

President Yoon's comprehensive security policy must incorporate water security as a matter that entails threatening risks and urgency to formulate solutions in terms of geopolitics and national security. Water issues are no different from other issues that fall under the umbrella of comprehensive security such as economy, environment, energy, and technology. It is also noteworthy that the number of unpredictable water-related disasters is increasing, brought on by climate change. Moreover, transboundary conflicts between the two Koreas often lead to severe damage to property and the ecosystem. In this context, water issues must be included in the Yoon administration's national security agenda due to the urgency and existential threats these matters may pose to national and regional security.

Given the strategic and geopolitical significance of the Mekong in the Indo-Pacific region, China and the United States and US allies—like Japan and Australia—are strengthening their ties with the regional stakeholders and increasingly developing the water-security agenda. Although South Korea has set its own pace in engaging the Mekong with different types of cooperation through foreign aid and investment in development, a more strategic approach to regional security should be applied to the Mekong. This would assist Seoul in gaining a better political position in the Indo-Pacific and avoid isolation in strategic cooperation of like-minded states in the Mekong region.

To summarize, as an issue area reflecting national security imperatives as well as international geopolitics and interlinking all the other security agenda, water security is the most “comprehensive” security area and could be a game changer in terms of national and regional security and stability. ★

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Notes

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