

The Gist of Seoul's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract

In its inaugural Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea pledged to bolster the regional rules-based order to protect freedom, democracy, and human rights. The document expands on President Yoon Suk-yeol's previous promises to accept greater responsibility for defending democratic principles and is consistent with the national security strategies of the United States and its allies. Seoul stressed the threat of North Korea's growing nuclear and missile arsenal, however, once again, held back from unambiguously defining the Chinese threat to the same extent that Washington, New Delhi, Tokyo, and others have.

Following the announcement of his Audacious Initiative (담대한 구상) in August 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol published the first Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS) for South Korea, entitled the *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*. The strategy projects Seoul's long-term regional goals focusing on the Indo-Pacific theater. This represents significant progress in terms of national strategy. It suggests South Korea has officially set a policy guideline on how to position itself in the Indo-Pacific, where deepening strategic competition between China and the United States is heightening geopolitical tensions. While the IPS lacks specifics on how to achieve Seoul's strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific, the international context and timing of the strategy's announcement are noteworthy.

The IPS notes, "Rising geopolitical competition involving diplomacy and security, economy and technology, and values and norms have stalled the drive for cooperation among Indo-Pacific nation. . . . Korea aspires to become a Global Pivotal State that actively seeks out agenda for cooperation and shape discussions in the regions and the wider world." The strategy outlined nine core lines of effort (LOE) centered around international norms, priority sectors, and cooperation through partnerships.

First, the international norms of rule-based order, democracy, human rights, nonproliferation, and counterterrorism were included in the first three LOEs. While emphasizing South Korea's commitment to preserving peace and cooperation based on rules and international laws, the report paid close attention not to draw the ire of countries in the region who do not share these commitments—especially China, North Korea, and some ASEAN countries—by stating "we sup-

port an Indo-Pacific where nations that represent diverse political systems can move forward together peacefully.”¹

Second, LOEs 6 and effort 7 focused on strengthening cooperation in “critical domains of science and technology” and “climate change and energy security.” Suggesting how South Korea can help close the digital gap in the region, the report proposes collaborations developing technologies, including semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum science, advanced biology, telecommunications, and space. Moreover, climate change and energy security are other areas highlighted for South Korea’s possible growing contributions. Science and technology, climate change, and energy security target Seoul’s bigger role in cooperative partnerships, especially toward ASEAN countries.

Third, expanding comprehensive security cooperation, building economic security networks, and engaging in “contributive diplomacy” are emphasized to develop cooperative partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. As President Yoon stated in November 2022, contributive diplomacy and cooperative partnerships target Southeast Asian countries: “Peace and Stability in the Indo-Pacific region directly affects our survival and prosperity. That is why I propose fostering a ‘free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region’ through solidarity and cooperation with major countries including ASEAN.”² To ASEAN members that hold increasing strategic value under current US–China competition in the Indo-Pacific theater, Seoul proposes a “tailored development cooperation” to meet each countries specific needs and strengthen mutual trust. By targeting that niche, South Korea aims to position itself as a stronger geopolitical player in the region.

The three principles of cooperation are inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity. In line with South Korea’s aim to become a “global pivotal state,” inclusiveness is highlighted throughout the report. Contrary to those who say the IPS barely mentions China,³ the new report contains strong messages for China. Discussion of *inclusiveness* mainly targets Beijing’s concern of being targeted by any Indo-Pacific strategies that aim to penalize China in favor of Washington. In this context, the report states that Korea, a US ally, aims to be a global pivotal state that is not “hostile” toward China. If it were not for the Yoon administration’s close relationship with Washington, US leaders could have viewed this as a mixed message. However, the fact that Yoon can confidently include such phrasing in official documents illustrates that Seoul is not concerned about delivering a wrong message to Washington and proves that the US–ROK alliance stands strong.

The *global pivotal state* narrative is the most controversial part of the initiative and the key difference from the approach of Japan, Australia, and India. The Quad members officially have clearly placed the grouping in the US camp; whereas South Korea may prefer to position itself in the middle. This may read as Seoul’s

attempt to balance autonomy and alliance, yet, considering the value of the US–ROK alliance to Seoul's global strategy and the history of the partnership, Washington's concern of losing Seoul to Beijing is a bit of a stretch. At the center of South Korea's decision to claim itself as a global pivotal state lies a sophisticated calculation aimed at protecting Seoul's nascent strategy from Beijing's attack or severe political competition between the United States and China. In the initial stage, the Korean IPS will need to survive the turmoil of strategic competition, and close coordination within the alliance framework on expanding the strategy will be a prerequisite to its success.

While Seoul's IPS is topically very comprehensive, it lacks sophisticated action plans and requires more work to finesse the LOEs outlined and to incorporate them into every step of South Korea's foreign policy and diplomatic activities. The gist of South Korea's IPS is as follows: (1) South Korea is very much committed to the peace and stability of the region, (2) South Korea is neither targeting nor excluding China, and (3) South Korea will resolve its confrontation with nuclear North Korea while by abiding international rules.

In addition to the content of the first IPS, the timing of the announcement is also of critical interest. Since the inauguration of President Yoon, many observers expected a much more hardline approach to North Korea and security issues—a critical change in policy direction from previous Moon administration. South Korea has resumed US–ROK joint military exercises, tested submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), conducted missile defense exercises, and deployed F-35 fighters. In addition, Seoul increased its defense budget from 51.6 trillion won (USD 41.7 billion) in 2022 to 57 trillion won (USD 45.5 billion) in 2023. Much of the increase was allocated for developing the 3Ks of kill chain, the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system, and the Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR) plan.⁴ All this occurred amid North Korea's relentless missile tests—67 times in 2022 alone, including tests of 51 short-range missile, 2 SLBMs, 7 intercontinental ballistic missiles⁵—and aerial exercises,⁶ and Pyongyang's calls for an “exponential” increase in nuclear capacity.⁷

Amid increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Yoon's Audacious Initiative for regional and global peace through the denuclearization of North Korea was announced in August 2022. It was the administration's effort to persuade Pyongyang to deescalate and accept step-by-step economic and financial support for its own sustainable growth. Different from previous proposals of bringing North Korea to the negotiating table by offering carrots before any commitment from Kim Jong-un, this initiative included Seoul's salami tactic-like approach. The initiative promises drastic measures, including exemptions for current sanctions on Pyongyang's mineral resources conditioned on North Korea's sincere and responsible

participation in the negotiation process. This is to allow North Korea to allocate the revenue toward purchasing daily necessities like food and basic medical supplies and to expand cooperation with Seoul in areas like welfare, drinking water supply, and forestry management. The initiative further stipulates Pyongyang's denuclearization will be met with comprehensive measures to match political, economic, military benefits Kim currently seeks through his nuclear program.

Despite the grandiose yet realist approach, the initiative failed to render a noticeable impact on policy circles, domestic or international. Insiders pointed to the mistiming and the lack of coordinated public relations efforts of the current foreign ministry for such lack of influence. Above all, North Korea "trashed" the proposal by officially calling Yoon "foolish."⁸

The administration announced the IPS in late December 2022 after the not-so-successful launch of the Audacious Initiative and during an ongoing standoff with North Korea exchanging missile tests and shows of force. The timing suggests that the Yoon administration intended to change the escalatory atmosphere between the two Koreas and set a new tone for the year 2023. Through incorporating North Korea in a global context under Indo-Pacific security and stable growth targeting an international audience, and by showing Pyongyang that Seoul is strengthening South Korea's partnerships, including existing alliances, for a "free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region" and not just aiming to foil North Korea, the report laid out possible channels for cooperation on multiple levels and across different domains.

After South Korea announced its IPS, Kim Jong-un vowed to boost the quality and quantity of North Korea's arsenals. He called for North Korea to increase its nuclear capabilities, focusing on tactical nuclear weapons targeting South Korea. In previous years, Pyongyang was more focused on countering what it perceived to be the threat posed by the United States rather than South Korea. Now what we see is a slight change in Pyongyang's tone: what dictates Pyongyang's drive for nuclear weapons? And who is the main enemy, South Korea or the United States? Does South Korea's plan for growing influence in the region and its promotion of cooperation and partnerships lead Kim to see Seoul as a greater threat? Considering rising tensions and military threats on the Korean Peninsula, including North Korea's recent drone flights on the South Korean side of the border and aggressive pursuit of tactical nuclear weapons, some argue that an escalatory arms-race dynamic is emerging between the two Koreas beyond military modernization and competition.⁹

In addition to North Korea's response to the new IPS, there are a few other matters to carefully watch in the near future. First among these is China and South Korea's complicated relationship and how these two dance around geopolitically sensitive issues such as THAAD, cross-strait issues, and North Korea.

Another is the future of US–ROK alliance—especially how the two nations utilize the trilateral cooperation of the United States, Japan, and South Korea to further build a stronger alliance network and draw practical cooperation and policy coordination. The most critical factor that will determine the success of the IPS for South Korea will be in the details of how capable Seoul is in operationalizing its long-term strategy around these areas. 🌟

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Notes

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4. Ha Jong-min “내년 국방예산 57조원, 전년비 4.4% ↑ ...3축체계 603억 증액,” *Newsis*, 24 December 2022, <https://newsis.com/>.
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8. Mitch Shin, “North Korea Trashes Yoon’s ‘Audacious Initiative’ for Denuclearization,” *The Diplomat*, 19 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
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