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South Korea as a “global pivotal state”: the role of partners

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo | 21 April 2022

Key Issues

- South Korea’s strategic dilemma is often exaggerated. By focusing on South Korea’s actions rather than its rhetoric, it is possible to understand that Seoul is siding with the US and other partners rather than taking a middle ground between Washington and Beijing.
- The ROK-US alliance is crucial to allow South Korea to become a “global pivotal state” capable of using its diplomatic, economic, military, and soft power resources to strengthen its foreign policy.
- South Korea’s partnerships with like-minded countries and institutions in Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and Europe are also crucial for the incoming Yoon Suk-yeol presidency to turn its foreign policy vision into reality.

President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol has stated that the main goal of his foreign policy will be to make South Korea a “global pivotal state”, with a focus on promoting freedom, peace, and prosperity based on Seoul’s liberal democratic values and – crucially – cooperation. South Korea has certainly been openly brandishing its credentials as an active middle power with a global role since Kim Young-sam presented his “globalisation” (*seggyewa*) policy in the 1990s. Lee Myung-bak, in particular, called for a “Global Korea”, a policy also pursued by Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in. Seoul’s invitation to the 2020 and 2021 G7 summits proves that South Korea has become a relevant global actor.

There is often talk about Seoul’s “strategic dilemma” between the United States – its long-standing ally – and China – its largest

economic partner. In reality, this dilemma is greatly exaggerated if one analyses South Korea’s foreign policy actions rather than its rhetoric. Seoul long ago decided that when it comes to foreign policy and security, its past, present, and future lies with the US and other like-minded partners. This has become even clearer in recent years, following China’s economic sanctions on South Korea after the Park Geun-hye government agreed to the deployment of the THAAD’s anti-missile defence system; as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Moon Jae-in government joined calls to investigate the origins of the pandemic and started to take part in Quad+ meetings; and, in recent weeks, with South Korea becoming one of only a handful of Asian countries joining in the pushback against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, most notably through sanctions.

In reality, therefore, South Korean policy-makers have long been acting as if their country has a “strategic non-dilemma”. They understand who is South Korea’s ally and who its partners are – even though they see no incentive to openly criticise China or to “decouple” from their neighbour, which is unrealistic. Yoon will certainly build on the first tradition, while perhaps becoming more vocal about what most South Koreans would argue is Beijing’s aggressiveness. But the core of Yoon’s foreign policy strategy will be to work together with partners to ensure that South Korea becomes a more relevant global actor.

The role of the ROK-US alliance

Along with autonomy, the ROK–US alliance continues to be a cornerstone of South Korean foreign policy. Conservatives may emphasise – or be seen to emphasise – the alliance over autonomy, with the opposite being true for Liberals. In reality, however, successive South Korean presidents have pursued a stronger alliance with the US as a central component of South Korean foreign policy and as an enabler of their foreign policy. Yoon, certainly, has made clear that he will prioritise strengthening the ROK–US alliance as a means to broaden the horizons of Seoul’s foreign policy during his tenure.

From a South Korean perspective, stronger relations with the US could enable Seoul’s foreign policy in two ways primarily. Firstly, the alliance provides Seoul with a platform to make its voice heard in a wider range of global issues. Take the cases of the 2010 G20 summit or the 2012 Nuclear Security summit, both of which were held in Gangnam. Or take the cases of Seoul’s hosting of the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial in 2021, or its speaking role at the Summit for Democracy right afterwards. South Korea hosts these events or gets speaker billing out of its own right as one of the few full democracies in Asia. But close alignment with the US certainly helps South Korea’s case. As the world emerges from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, no doubt the Yoon government will look at opportunities for South Korea to host or speak at events and can count on the support of the US for its endeavours.

Secondly, South Korean policy makers see foreign

policy benefits from a strong ROK–US alliance in multiplying the power projection of its own assets. These assets not only refer to military capabilities: South Korean firms are world-leaders in areas such as semiconductors, electric batteries, or green ships. They are also global players in biotech, nuclear energy, or electric vehicles. As the US and its allies and partners work to reduce reliance on China as a manufacturing hub, the South Korean government finds itself sitting down at tables discussing resilient supply chains, semiconductor standards, or vaccine distribution. More often than not, the US chairs these tables. With the Yoon government taking office, this will only continue.

Seoul will probably also become more active in “hard security” tables focusing on maritime security, cybersecurity, or missile defence. South Korea takes part in joint naval exercises with the United States’ and other navies, cybersecurity exchanges and tabletop exercises, or discussions about the use of missiles for deterrence purposes. But certainly, it is not as vocal as other actors about these matters – starting with the US itself. Sometimes Seoul seems to want it both ways, pleasing Washington and Beijing at the same time: allowing the deployment of THAAD while announcing the “Three No’s” policy to suggest that there will be limits to this deployment. Yoon is likely to be more open about South Korea’s participation in this type of activities, since Seoul is already part of them anyway. This could – or should – serve South Korea to strengthen links with the Joe Biden administration, which appreciates US partners taking unequivocal stances.

Concerning Beijing, it remains to be seen whether the incoming South Korean president will try to assuage its concerns in parallel. Yoon has already held a call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, a first for a president-elect before taking office. The readout from the call suggests that Yoon will strive not to “lose Beijing” despite a more open alignment with Washington. It also reads as if China is also worried about the new president’s policy and wants to influence him from the outset. This will be the challenge for Yoon to reconcile a more open alignment with the US with South Korea’s decades-old view that unnecessarily antagonising China is counterproductive.

South Korea's Asian and Indo-Pacific partners

South Korea has long sought to boost its ties with countries across Asia, and in particular in the East Asian region. In recent years, it has also increased its diplomatic and economic footprint in the broader Indo-Pacific through collaboration with partners across the region. The more these partners are

explicitly framing the group as not being “anti-China” – even if South Korean policy makers know that it is – the Biden administration has made it easier for the Yoon government to slowly integrate South Korea in the group's structures. Having said that, there is a non-negligible number of South Korean policy makers who doubt that formally joining the Quad would bring any advantages to South Korea other than the symbolism of being part of the



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like-minded, the better it is for Seoul. The incoming Yoon government has already indicated its wish to strengthen trilateralism with the US and Japan, as well as its willingness to potentially join the Quad involving the same two countries plus Australia and India.

Trilateralism has suffered its ups and down since Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo launched their first formal trilateral cooperation mechanism in the late 1990s, during the Kim Dae-jung years. In recent years, for example, political problems between Japan and South Korea have weakened trilateral cooperation. Nevertheless, trilateral meetings among the top diplomats and defence officials as well as intelligence sharing and security cooperation have continued. With Yoon taking office and Abe Shinzo having left the prime ministership, trilateral summits at the leader level may also be possible again. This would give new impetus to trilateral cooperation, with the US again acting as an enabler of one of Yoon's foreign policy goals.

The question of the US-led Quad is less clear-cut. South Korea is already coordinating with Quad working groups in areas such as vaccines, critical technologies, or climate change. Yoon wants to involve South Korea in these groups more openly. The substance compared to existing cooperation probably would not change dramatically, but the political messaging would be very different. By

organisation. These reservations have only grown in recent weeks, as the Quad has shown its disunity in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. President-elect Yoon and his team are probably still leaning towards eventually joining the group, but this would have been more certain had India joined the other Quad members – and indeed, South Korea – in their actions against Moscow.

For one area where Yoon is certain to build on the policy of Moon and his other predecessors is strengthening security, political, and economic cooperation with Australia and key ASEAN countries. The December 2021 defence deal between Seoul and Canberra, cooperation between South Korea and Indonesia in a jet fighter development programme, cybersecurity exchanges between Seoul and Singapore, or arms transfers from South Korea to Vietnam are several examples of the ways in which the Moon government has strengthened links across the Indo-Pacific. Yoon is bound to build on these ties, which has enhanced South Korea's partnerships in the region.

For South Korea, partnerships across East Asia and the Indo-Pacific serve to diversify its foreign policy and boost its autonomy by creating new synergies with different partners. These partnerships also enhance South Korea's own security, since they are driven by a common perception that China is becoming more assertive and that no single country

in the region can stand up to Beijing by itself. Thus, this closer alignment with Indo-Pacific partners helps South Korea to stand up to China without the need to side openly only with the US. But as some South Korean policy makers acknowledge, this is another area where the ROK–US alliance serves Seoul well. After all, many of the countries with which South Korea is boosting its diplomatic and security ties have stronger ties with Washington as well. This is no coincidence.

The role of Europe

In recent years, diplomatic and security relations between South Korea and Europe have reached new heights. For Seoul, Europe is a natural partner. Democratic backsliding is a reality across many parts of the world. South Korea has, so far, avoided this trend and in fact its democracy has become even more resilient in recent years. Europe is home to the largest numbers of democracies. In this context, values matter as much as capabilities for Seoul seeking to boost its ties with Europe. South Korea’s clear stance on the Russia–Ukraine conflict has only helped to underscore this. The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had phone calls with President Moon on March 3rd and with President-elect Yoon on March 29th. The latter proposed the Ukrainian leader to meet once the war with Russia is over.

Yoon has already indicated that he will send a presidential envoy to Europe in the coming weeks. He will be the second president in a row to do so. President Moon was the first in South Korean history to dispatch an envoy to Brussels. In addition, Yoon has already held phone calls with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. European leaders making time to talk to a president-elect at a time when they are understandably busy with Russia’s aggression of Ukraine underlines the importance the EU and South Korea attach to each other. From a European perspective, this is excellent news because it shows that South Korea’s push to boost ties with the EU and key European partners transcends administrations. Add NATO, with South Korea becoming one of four key Asia-Pacific partners of the Brussels-based security organisation.

Cooperation between South Korea and Europe relies on many different layers. When it comes to economics, Europe follows the US: South Korea’s cutting-edge technologies is in focus. When it comes to values, Europe sees Seoul as one of its few partners that genuinely shares the same values. When it comes to security, South Korea combines capabilities, a willingness to cooperate, and, again, values. From a European perspective, only Japan and, more recently, Taiwan fit this bill as well.

We can expect the Yoon government to press ahead with stronger cooperation in areas including cybersecurity, maritime security, or capacity-building in Southeast Asia and potentially India. This could take the form of bilateral South Korea–EU cooperation, NATO “NAC+4” meetings and projects, minilateralism involving the G7, South Korea, and other partners, or bilateral exchanges between South Korea and selected European countries. South Korea–US–Europe trilateralism is also a possibility, again underscoring the role that Washington can play in supporting Yoon’s foreign policy. The Korea Chair upcoming report *Korea-EU Cooperation: Moving to the Next Level* expands on some of these points in relation to the EU.

Once again, the China factor is crucial to understand South Korea’s push for greater collaboration with Europe. European countries and institutions such as the EU and NATO share Seoul’s concerns about China’s more assertive foreign policy stance. The Yoon government is very likely to see cooperation with Europe as a means to balance China’s assertiveness. From a South Korean perspective, Europe is an attractive partner because European leaders believe that a modicum of engagement with Beijing is desirable. In this respect, South Korea and Europe have a similar position towards China.

All in all, the incoming Yoon government’s push for South Korea to become a “global pivotal state” will be easier to realise if South Korea works together with partners. The world’s still-strongest great power, the US, is doing this under Biden. So does the economic power, the EU. Fellow middle powers from Australia and Japan to France and the UK also understand the value of working with partners. South Korea does too. We can expect Seoul to more openly show where it sits in global affairs this coming May.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ramon Pacheco Pardo

Ramon Pacheco Pardo is KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) of the Brussels School of Governance. He is also Professor of International Relations at King's College London, Adjunct Fellow (Non-resident) with the Korea Chair at CSIS and Non-Resident Fellow at the Sejong Institute. His next book is *Shrimp to Whale: South Korea from the Forgotten War to K-Pop* (Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2022).

ramon.pacheco.pardo@vub.be

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Visitor's address:

Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Mailing address:

Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

info_bsog@vub.be

www.brussels-school.be