South Korea Releases Indo-Pacific Strategy: Analysis of Shifting Attitudes and Motivations

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Abstract. Since Trump's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" was formally unveiled in 2017, the South Korean government's perspective has undergone a dramatic shift. From being "very cautious" in the early years of the Moon Jae-in administration to "gradually approaching" in the latter years, to the Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy's release immediately following Yoon Seok-yeol's assumption of office to benchmark with the United States, which has raised concerns on all sides, this essay explores the domestic and external factors that have affected South Korea's perception of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. On the domestic front, the primary drivers are rooted in economic interests and diplomatic considerations, with political party competition exercising a significant influence. On the international level, the continuous change in the situation in Northeast Asia and the pressure from the US have also compelled South Korea to seek more influence through the Indo-Pacific policy.

1 Introduction

The Indo-Pacific Strategy is a U.S. national security strategy designed to contain China's rise, which was officially announced by the Trump administration in 2017 and officially released in June 2019. Subsequently, the Biden administration also continued this strategy, emphasizing U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation and the "U.S.-Japan-India-Australia" quadrilateral consultation mechanism, with the intention of jointly suppressing China.

For South Korea, the ROK-US alliance has been a central tenet of its long-term diplomatic and security strategy since the Cold War ended. The Indo-Pacific Strategy, on the other hand, is directed at China, which is South Korea's major trade partner. Due to its complex diplomatic dynamics with Japan and neighboring nations, South Korea initially harbored reservations regarding the Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, given the fast-shifting internal and worldwide environment, South Korea is becoming more and more aligned with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy as a result of both national and international considerations.

After President Yoon Seok-yeol took office in May 2022, South Korea upgraded the South Korea-U.S. alliance to a "comprehensive global strategic alliance" and formally unveiled South Korea's version of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" on December 28. This attracted the attention of the international community.

The goal of this paper is by analyzing the shift in South Korea's stance toward the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States, examining the causes of the shift in stance in light of the policy changes in both the South Korea and the United States, gaining a deeper understanding of the foundation of South Korea's fundamental interests, and getting to grips with the complex situation in Northeast Asia at the current stage of ROK-US relations, ROK-China relations, and other regional relations.

2 A shift in South Korea's attitude toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Following Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's suggestion, Trump formally announced the Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2017. Led by the United States, Australia, Canada, and other countries have also joined the Chinese restriction campaign. Although South Korea was initially included in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, it was cautious and evasive because of its relationship with China, Japan and its neighbors. However, South Korea has grown more active in pursuing its own interests and collaborating under this strategy as the situation in Northeast Asia has evolved. And there has been a significant shift since President Yun Seok-yeol took office in 2022.

2.1. Negative attitude toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Initially, upon the release of the official announcement of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the United States, South Korea exhibited a negative disposition towards it. Korea's initial reservations pertaining to the Indo-Pacific Strategy centered around three distinct points. First, it is highly alert to the U.S. intention to advance the strategy. South Korea generally believes that behind the Strategy

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lies the U.S. ambition to confront China and achieve hegemony and that South Korea is only a pawn in its geostrategic plan. Second, South Korea worries that supporting the US may worsen relations between China and Korea. Since their diplomatic ties were established 30 years ago, South Korea and China have grown to be significant trading partners. In order not to damage economic cooperation with China, South Korea must also distance itself from the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and not be involved in the U.S. "containment network."

Thirdly, South Korea has doubts about the United States' ability to implement the Strategy and its prospects for growth. The Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is still in its early stages, is not yet fully developed in terms of how it is operated and structured. Additionally, it emphasizes the United States' desire to safeguard its own interests in matters of international commerce and security, suggesting that the connected nations may not be overly eager to take part. As a result, there are still too many unknowns for South Korea, and it would be better for both national emotion and practical considerations to maintain a distance from them.

With this assessment, South Korea was very circumspect when the Indo-Pacific Strategy was first put forth. Given the delicate situation, President Moon refrained from making any public pronouncements, but many of his policy choices mirrored South Korea's negative attitude. For example, the U.S. side has repeatedly made official statements like "the U.S.-ROK alliance promotes a free and open Indo-Pacific region," and Moon has sent Cheong Wa Dae officials several times to explain that South Korea does not agree or has not agreed to join. South Korea has also been absent from QUAD, a key component of the Indo-Pacific strategy, which consists of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.

2.2. A shift in attitude toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Starting in 2019, during the latter part of the former President Moon Jae-in's administration, South Korea's attitude toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy showed positive signs, and South Korea began to participate in the Indo-Pacific Strategy in a cautious and limited manner. On November 2, 2019, while attending an ASEAN meeting, South Korea and the U.S. jointly released a briefing paper entitled "South Korea-U.S. Efforts to Enhance the Indo-Pacific Strategy." On November 2, 2019, while attending an ASEAN meeting, South Korea and the United States jointly released a briefing entitled "South Korea-U.S. Efforts to Enhance Cooperation between the New South Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," which was the first time South Korea explicitly stated its position on its participation in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In order to strengthen its economic links with the nations of the Indo-Pacific, South Korea has also joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a framework agreement for free trade that brings together 15 nations from the region, including China, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

After President Yoon Seok-yeol took office in May 2022, South Korea changed its previous cautious attitude toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy and joined the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Cooperation System in a more active manner. Yoon Seok-yeon is pursuing value-based diplomacy, repairing the Korea-U.S. alliance, and pushing for the transformation of diplomatic security strategy. He has upgraded the Korea-U.S. alliance to a "comprehensive global strategic alliance" and takes an active part in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, as well as expressing strong interest in the Quadripartite Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Indo-Pacific Partnership (IPP). On December 28, 2022, the President's Office of South Korea officially released the final version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity, which is in line with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. Since then, South Korea has been more active in improving Korea-Japan relations and promoting Korea-U.S. cooperation.

3 Motivations for South Korea's shift in attitude toward the Strategies

Equations should be centred and should be numbered with the number on the right-hand side. There has been a shift in South Korea's mindset as a consequence of both domestic and external causes. On the domestic front, economic interests and political and diplomatic needs are the fundamental motivations, and domestic regime rivalry plays a direct role. Internationally, the shifting circumstances in Northeast Asia and the increasing pressure from the US have compelled South Korea to shift its focus to the Indo-Pacific strategy in an effort to gain more clout.

3.1. Domestic Factors

Economic interests and diplomatic needs are the fundamental reasons for South Korea's shift in posture toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In recent years, South Korea's economy has been sluggish due to a limited domestic market and a lack of resources, and it relies on external markets to a large extent. Since the Moon Jae-in government took charge, many efforts have been made to improve the external market environment and raise the level of foreign economic cooperation, but with little success. South Korea's trade surplus in the U.S. and Chinese markets has been decreasing, and the long-standing policy of "economic dependence on China" is no longer effective. Coupled with the escalating trade dispute between South Korea and Japan, South Korea's economy has been further aggravated. Considering the above, South Korea has started to consider the Indo-Pacific Strategy to promote its economic growth and competitiveness, as many of its major trading partners are located in the Indo-Pacific region, which is also a major market for South Korean exports.

In terms of diplomatic needs, South Korea would prefer to seek more international discourse through the
Weber President Moon Jae-in has been prioritizing the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In the previous relatively non-reciprocal South Korea-U.S. alliance, South Korea was passive on many bilateral and regional issues. Therefore, from the perspective of diplomatic independence, South Korea urgently needs to gain more leverage through the Indo-Pacific Strategy to improve its voice. After the final version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy was released, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin immediately said that South Korea will now plan its strategic future beyond the Korean Peninsula, ushering in a new era of proactive diplomacy on regional and global issues. It was also interpreted as a sign that South Korea's diplomatic focus will no longer be limited to solving the Korean Peninsula issue but will instead shift to a broader regional strategy, hoping to gain more diplomatic autonomy in the international arena.

Meanwhile, South Korea's domestic regime rivalry and conservatism provided the domestic foundation for the launch of the South Korean version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and directly promoted the launch of South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The former Moon Jae-in government focused on restoring North-South relations but achieved limited results, coupled with escalating trade disputes between South Korea and Japan and cooling relations between South Korea and the U.S., which led to the Moon Jae-in government and its ruling party coming under heavy criticism from conservatives and opposition parties as well as a decline in support. In order to break the passive situation, the Moon Jae-in government started to approach the "Indo-Pacific Strategy." In last year's presidential election, Yoon Seok-yel, the candidate of the National Power Party, defeated Lee Jae-myung, the candidate of the Joint Democratic Party, to become president. After taking office, the Yoon Seok-yul government changed its previous negative attitude and vigorously promoted pro-U.S. diplomacy, proposing the values of "liberal democracy and market economy." This coincided with the Biden administration and directly contributed to the official release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

3.2. International Factors

The alteration in South Korea's stance toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy is significantly influenced by the evolving situation in Northeast Asia. In recent years, China's rise to power in Northeast Asia has had a tremendous impact on the power structure of the region, and its ranking as the world's second-largest economic entity and its increasing influence in the international political arena in Northeast Asia have made the United States and Japan uneasy. To offset China's influence, many nations in the area, notably South Korea, have worked to fortify their connections with the US and other Indo-Pacific nations. The launch of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the U.S. and its major allies has provided an international environment for the emergence of the Korean version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

At the same time, tensions on the Korean Peninsula are one of the important factors to consider. The former President Moon Jae-in has been prioritizing the improvement of relations with North Korea in the early years of his administration. South Korea has been making active efforts to ease tensions on the peninsula and promote the process of denuclearizing the peninsula as a solution. However, since the post-Hanoi summit dialogue between North Korea and the U.S. has been difficult and sanctions against North Korea have not been eased, the highly anticipated cooperation between Russia and North Korea has remained on paper. The "New North Policy" is unable to make substantial progress, so at this time, South Korea also needs to come up with another solution to the North Korean problem.

There is also the U.S. factor. The U.S. government has contributed to the shift in South Korea's attitude in two ways. On the one hand, the U.S. has been very aggressive in putting pressure on South Korea and showing sincerity to South Korea, such as by including South Korea in the Indo-Pacific Strategy in several official statements and making Seoul the first stop on Biden's first trip to the Indo-Pacific to show its recognition of South Korea's importance, hoping that South Korea will be more closely integrated into the U.S.-centered system and strategic arrangements. On the other hand, the renewal of the Indo-Pacific Strategy itself has also given South Korea more room to participate in it. Over time, the Indo-Pacific Strategy has increased the options for countries to cooperate with the U.S. in infrastructure, finance, high technology, social governance, and other economic and social areas within the framework of the Indo-Pacific Strategy from its initial concentrate on military and security areas. This allows South Korea to see the possibility of strengthening the U.S.-Korea alliance while avoiding stimulating China too much.

4 Conclusion and prospects

In conclusion, the South Korean government preferred to avoid discussing it because of its ties with China, Japan, and other nearby nations at the commencement of the formal release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the Trump administration. The change in South Korea's attitude is the result of a combination of domestic and international factors. From a domestic point of view, South Korea's own economic interests and diplomatic needs were the root causes of the change, and the rivalry between the Conservative Party and the Progressive Party played a direct role. At the international level, the changing situation in Northeast Asia, and the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, as well as pressure from the U.S., have forced South Korea to turn to the Indo-Pacific strategy to gain more voice.

Regarding the prospects for the future, South Korea's participation in the Indo-Pacific strategy has both benefits and disadvantages, contributing to the protection of its own interests and security but also having the potential to exacerbate regional tensions and hostilities. At the economic level, the revival of trade and investment with Japan could alleviate the enormous pressure exerted by the epidemic and the semiconductor crisis. Cooperation with ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific
Economic Framework (IPEF) to find new economic growth points could effectively improve Korea's economic situation. From a diplomatic point of view, the integration of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the promotion of "value diplomacy" to win the recognition of the international community, such as Japan and the United States, will contribute to raising the voice of Korea in multilateral platforms such as the G7 and the U.S.-Japan-India-Australia quadrilateral mechanism and strengthening the position of Korea in the regional order. However, the United States and South Korea have collectively exerted great pressure on North Korea, which has led to North Korea's retaliation measures and caused the situation on the Korean Peninsula to deteriorate in an unprecedented way. South Korea has made excessive concessions on the issue of forced labor, and relations between South Korea and Japan have improved, but there is no guarantee that relations between South Korea and Japan will improve in the long term. Although the Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy does not contain any content aimed at China, the strategy itself has the attribute of the United States forming a small circle with several countries to resist China's strategy. Therefore, South Korea should be very cautious as the slightest mistake would make it a victim of confrontation between the U.S. and China.

References


