

ADAPTING THE U.S.-SOUTH KOREA ALLIANCE TO AN INDO-PACIFIC REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

By Andrew Yeo

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the U.S.-South Korea alliance in the context of Asia's evolving security architecture. At the crux of the issue is the Biden administration's desire to uphold the rules-based international order by reinforcing the network of inter-Asia alliances and multilateral institutions, on one hand, and the Moon government's relative reluctance to deepen and expand security ties linked to an Indo-Pacific strategy that counter-balances China, on the other hand. Leveraging the existing alliance relationship, the Biden administration should encourage Seoul to coordinate with other like-minded countries committed to sustaining a rules-based regional order while assisting Seoul in mitigating potential strategic vulnerabilities. Conversely, as a middle power, South Korea must not shy away from the region's security architecture, but instead actively coordinate with other actors in shaping the region's strategic environment. By working in concert with other countries in the Indo-Pacific, Seoul can reduce its geopolitical vulnerability while advancing its national and regional interests.

Key Words: *Regional architecture, Indo-Pacific, U.S.-South Korea alliance, New Southern Policy, multilateralism*

INTRODUCTION

After weathering several rough patches in their alliance relationship over the past four years, stakeholders to the U.S.-South Korea alliance have been mostly upbeat since the arrival of the Biden administration in 2021. Much of this optimism stems from the new U.S. administration's support for traditional alliance partners and multilateral institutions. Most experts anticipate a period of greater stability and support for US alliances under President Joseph Biden's leadership. However, new leadership does not automatically resolve existing and future challenges to the U.S.-South Korea alliance. This includes ongoing alliance management issues such as the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) and coordination on North Korea policy. Policymakers in Seoul and Washington must also address strategic questions relevant to Northeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. In particular, where does the U.S.-South Korea alliance fit within the region's evolving and ever-expanding security architecture?

This paper addresses the U.S.-South Korea alliance in the context of Asia's evolving security architecture. At the crux of the issue is the Biden administration's desire to uphold

Andrew Yeo is Professor of Politics and Director of Asian Studies at The Catholic University of America and a Senior Fellow at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation. He gratefully acknowledges financial support from the Korea Foundation for his research on the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organizations he is affiliated with. This paper is the 118th in KEI's Academic Paper Series. As part of this program, KEI commissions and distributes up to ten papers per year on original subjects of current interest to over 5,000 Korea watchers, government officials, think tank experts, and scholars around the United States and the world. At the end of the year, these papers are compiled and published in KEI's On Korea volume. For more information, please visit www.keia.org/aps_on_korea.

the rules-based international order by reinforcing the network of inter-Asia alliances and multilateral institutions, on one hand, and the Moon Jae-in's government's relative reluctance to deepen and expand security ties linked to an Indo-Pacific strategy that counter-balances China, on the other hand. Leveraging the existing alliance relationship, the Biden administration should encourage Seoul to coordinate with other like-minded countries committed to sustaining a rules-based regional order while assisting Seoul in mitigating potential strategic vulnerabilities. Conversely, as a middle power, South Korea must not shy away from the region's security architecture, but instead actively coordinate with other actors in shaping the region's strategic environment. By working in concert with other countries in the Indo-Pacific, Seoul can reduce its geopolitical vulnerability while advancing its national and regional interests.

This paper is organized into four sections. Section one briefly defines the concept of Asian regional architecture and its expanded scope covering the Indo-Pacific area. Section two discusses the Biden administration's outlook on the Indo-Pacific region and the U.S.-South Korea alliance in reference to Asia's existing security architecture. Section three examines the Moon government's reticence in integrating itself more deeply into the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Whereas bilateral alliance management issues may be less of an issue under the Biden administration, coordination on broader regional strategy may become more difficult. Section four suggests how South Korea and the U.S.-South Korea alliance can be better integrated into the region's evolving security architecture.

ASIAN REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE: FROM EAST ASIA TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

Regional architecture can be defined as "a set of institutions, mechanisms, and arrangements within a geographic region that facilitates the coordination, governance, and resolution of a range of policy objectives of concern to states."¹ Although there is no single institution or master plan that governs how states should behave, a region's institutional architecture should provide some semblance of order and stability.

For much of the Cold War, a series of U.S. bilateral alliances defined Asia's security architecture. Established in the 1950s, the "hub-and-spokes" system included mutual defense treaties between the U.S. and Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia and New

Zealand (ANZUS), respectively. Although bilateral alliances were supplemented by multilateral institutions including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), SEATO dissolved in 1975 and ASEAN remained limited to the affairs of Southeast Asia throughout the Cold War.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not end U.S. bilateral alliances which continued to function as the core of Asia's security architecture in the post-Cold War regional order. However, it did open the door for institutional experimentation as policymakers discussed the need for greater multilateral cooperation in the wake of new and emerging threats such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Using ASEAN as an organizational template, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) emerged in 1994 as the first region-wide multilateral security institution in Asia. Additionally, the ARF, along with the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) established in 1989, expanded the scope of Asia's regional architecture to encompass the broader Asia-Pacific.²

Formal and informal institutions proliferated over the next two decades to include the ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, and a variety of security forums and dialogues such as the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus, the Shangri-la Dialogue, the Seoul Defense Dialogue, and the Xiangshan Forum, among others. Asia's regional architecture is today characterized by a complex patchwork of overlapping formal and informal institutions including bilateral alliances, trilateral dialogues, and mini-lateral and multilateral forums.³ Beyond the core U.S.-led bilateral alliance system, the U.S. has more recently established additional security or comprehensive partnerships with regional actors such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, India and, most recently, the Maldives.⁴ U.S. partnerships have been complemented by the formation of intra-alliance networks, or what former Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has called a "principled and inclusive security network."⁵

The geographic scope and expansion of Asia's regional architecture has always been somewhat fluid. For the United States, East Asia—and especially Northeast Asia—has traditionally served as a bulwark against security threats in Asia. As a legacy of Cold War priorities, a large contingent of U.S. forces continues to remain in Japan and South Korea.⁶ However, with the proliferation of multilateral institutions, the regional architecture has expanded to cover a much wider geographic scope than East Asia.

The Obama Administration's strategic rebalance to Asia looked to expand and strengthen institutional ties, whether bilaterally or multilaterally, with other actors throughout the Asia-Pacific region. This included building partnerships in Southeast Asia and elevating the importance of ASEAN by signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009. The U.S. became the first non-ASEAN country to establish a permanent diplomatic mission with a resident ambassador posted to the ASEAN Secretariat in 2010, paving the way for U.S. entry to the East Asia Summit in 2011. On the economic front, the U.S. led the mantle for the then twelve-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), making this multilateral free trade agreement the centerpiece of Asia's economic architecture. Militarily, the U.S. strengthened bilateral alliances while simultaneously encouraging the development of intra-alliance networks among U.S. partners throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

The not-so-subtle shift from Obama's "Asia pivot" to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy during the Trump administration further widened the aperture of Asia's regional architecture. The "mental map" of an Indo-Pacific region aimed to recognize and better incorporate the dynamic economic, strategic, and political linkages connecting the Indian Ocean and South Asian subcontinent with the Pacific Ocean and East Asia. As a geostrategic concept, FOIP was the U.S. answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Washington following Beijing's westward shift towards the Indian Ocean.

Of course, the modern strategic concept of the Indo-Pacific pre-dates the Trump administration. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo made reference to an Indo-Pacific region as early as 2007. Australia also developed the concept of an Indo-Pacific strategy beginning with a 2013 Defense White Paper.⁷ The concept also appeared prominently in Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and has become a part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's diplomatic lexicon. ASEAN also released its own "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in June 2019, further illustrating the resilience of the Indo-Pacific concept that extends beyond the Trump era and U.S. geopolitical interests.

Although Asia's institutional architecture still reflect the priorities of East Asia, regional actors have revived or launched new mini-laterals and forums to address traditional and non-traditional security concerns in the Indo-Pacific. Foremost is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, known as the "Quad."

Trilateral mechanisms such as the U.S.-Australia-Japan and Japan-India-Australia trilaterals are also included in this space. Other proposed groupings relevant to the Indo-Pacific drawing attention are the "Quad-Plus" (Quad members plus South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand) and the D10, a consortium of ten global democracies (the G-7 and South Korea, India, and Australia) that may serve as an ideological counterweight to rising authoritarianism. A web of security partnerships and dialogue are being "woven among many unlikely partners as they meet in twos and threes and more."⁸ As the scope of Asia's regional architecture expands, the structure of security cooperation and its practices will also continue to evolve. The Indo-Pacific narrative will, therefore, have a bearing on existing alliances and regional institutions including the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH TO THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

The Indo-Pacific Strategy Under the Biden Administration

From the early days of his 2020 election campaign, President Biden sharply differentiated his own liberal international worldview from President Trump's "America First" approach, by offering his unequivocal support for U.S. alliances and multilateral institutions. In his first major foreign policy speech as president, Biden stated, "America's alliances are our greatest asset, and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and key partners once again."⁹ President Biden's own foreign policy team, and key advisers such as National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, are also guided by liberal internationalism, a strand of international relations thought that advances engagement with the world by promoting democracy and strengthening the rules, norms, and institutions that sustain a free and open international order.¹⁰

At the same time, there was some uncertainty as to whether President Biden would proceed with the Trump administration's FOIP strategy, given the new administration's desire to distance itself from Trump-era policies. Although the Biden administration has not yet released full details of its Indo-Pacific strategy, the administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* has retained the Indo-Pacific concept.¹¹ President Biden also endorsed at least the idea of FOIP, if not the strategy, in an op-ed penned by the

four leaders of the Quad, stating “we are recommitting to a shared vision for an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, resilient, and inclusive.”¹² Secretary of State Blinken, in a joint meeting with the Japanese foreign minister, also mentioned the “shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.”¹³

Based on these limited statements, one can assume that the Biden administration will build on at least a few key aspects of the Trump administration’s FOIP strategy. This includes taking a strong (but perhaps more disciplined) stand against China on issues such as trade and technology, maritime disputes, and human rights and democracy, among others, even as it seeks room for cooperation on other issues such as climate change and North Korean denuclearization. However, “FOIP 2.0” will likely be reshaped to fit the Biden administration’s liberal international outlook and the Indo-Pacific strategies of its U.S. allies and partners. If the interim *National Security Strategic Guidance* offers any clues, the revitalization of democracy—a word evoked no fewer than twenty-three times in the relatively short document—remains at the forefront of Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Biden Administration and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

The Biden administration’s shift (or return) to liberal internationalism likely increases the relevance of the regional security architecture, and will have a positive impact on bilateral alliances such as the U.S.-South Korea alliance. The Biden administration moved quickly to put U.S. alliances on a firmer footing by concluding negotiations with Seoul on the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) that had remained unresolved following President Trump’s demand for a 400% increase in South Korea’s defense burden cost. The Biden administration settled for a more modest, but still significant 13.9% increase, allowing alliance stakeholders to direct their focus on substantive issues and broader strategic challenges without the distraction of the SMA.¹⁴ Biden also dispatched his top envoy and defense official to Seoul in his first 100 days of office and has kept Seoul abreast with its ongoing (as of mid-April) North Korea policy review.¹⁵ Washington and Seoul still differ on key issues including diplomatic engagement with North Korea and the pace and timing of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korea.¹⁶ However, President Biden’s commitment to and respect for alliances can reassure Seoul that mechanisms for dialogue, transparency, and trust remain in place should alliance disputes emerge.

Although Biden’s support for alliances and institutions will generally improve U.S.-South Korea alliance management, it will also put more pressure on South Korea to stretch its capacity and capabilities beyond the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asia corridor. Rather than hide behind the U.S. security umbrella, the Moon government might take advantage of its status as a “lynchpin” to regional stability while finding its place within the evolving regional architecture. The Moon government’s New Southern Policy (NSP), aimed at deeper cooperation with ASEAN countries and India, is a step in the right direction. Outside of the NSP, however, the Biden administration is keen on looping in South Korea and using the U.S.-South Korea alliance to further promote a free and open Indo-Pacific order. Seoul and Washington have begun exploring areas of mutual cooperation between their respective NSP and Indo-Pacific frameworks.¹⁷ South Korean experts are also giving the “Quad Plus” format a closer look.¹⁸ Beyond development assistance and economic cooperation, the Biden administration has made clear to South Korea that a “common approach among allies” is needed to address “Beijing’s aggressive and authoritarian behavior.”¹⁹ In other words, the U.S. would like nothing more than for South Korea to join other Quad nations to counter China’s subversion of international rules and norms. Such expectations are likely to stretch the Moon government beyond its comfort zone, especially as progressive leaders seek to reduce their reliance on the U.S.-South Korea alliance over the long term.

SOUTH KOREA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

South Korea’s Place in Asia’s Regional Architecture

South Korea is no slouch when it comes to providing regional public goods. In the late 1990s and 2000s, South Korea under President Kim Dae-jung (and to a lesser extent Roh Moo-hyun) contributed to the vision of East Asian regionalism by joining the ASEAN +3 and advancing its own proposals for building a broader East Asian community.²⁰ By 2010, Lee Myung-bak’s “Global Korea” agenda endeavored to boost South Korea’s diplomatic profile, with Seoul becoming a net provider of regional and global public goods ranging from hosting summits to providing development aid and assistance. Such actions reflected South Korea’s status as a middle power. More than possessing sufficient material capabilities, middle power leadership means “acting

cooperatively with others in solving international problems” and contributing to global public goods.²¹ Middle powers should, therefore, exhibit greater “network centrality,” serving as a broker or bridge between actors within a regional system.²² To this end, South Korea participates in dozens of formal and informal regional institutions, summits, and forums. Seoul has also been keen on proposing different peace mechanisms (to varying degrees of success) covering Northeast and Central Asia in support of Korean unification. This includes the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperative Initiative (NAPCI) and the Eurasia Initiative under Park Geun-hye, and the New Northern Policy under President Moon that includes Russia, Mongolia, and other Eurasian states. South Korea has also joined Chinese led-institutions such as the AIIB, and regional institutions including the China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, that fall outside of the U.S. domain.

Outside of Northeast Asia, the centerpiece of the Moon government’s Asia policy has been the New Southern Policy (NSP). Launched in 2017, the NSP aims to develop a “people- centered community of peace and prosperity,” boosting ties with ASEAN’s ten member countries and India. In November 2019, President Moon hosted the ASEAN-Republic of Korea commemorative summit in Busan, celebrating thirty years of ASEAN-ROK relations with all ten ASEAN heads of state. Moon and Indian President Narendra Modi have also discussed ways to connect the NSP with India’s Act East Policy, and they have committed to boosting the two countries’ trade, investment, and people-to-people relations.

Seoul’s participation in multilateral institutions has not diminished the relevance of the U.S.-South Korea alliance which remains at the core of South Korean defense and national security policy. In fact, the mission and purpose of the alliance has also expanded in conjunction with South Korea’s integration into the region’s broader institutional architecture and now extends beyond the Korean Peninsula. The 2009 U.S.-South Korea Joint Vision Statement helped recalibrate the alliance to the 21st century to “ensure a peaceful, secure and prosperous future for the Korean Peninsula, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world.”²³

Connecting to the Indo-Pacific Framework

During the Moon-Trump era, the U.S.-South Korean alliance remained relatively robust as both countries faced increasing tensions with China and hostility from North Korea. However, a disconnect between the two governments

emerged as the Trump administration rolled out its Indo-Pacific strategy. Meanwhile, the Moon government turned inward to hone in on inter-Korea relations. Some degree of geopolitical disconnect has always been present in U.S.-South Korea relations given the interests and responsibilities of the U.S. as a global power and South Korea’s narrower and more limited subset of concerns as a regional middle power. These differences became more pronounced as the U.S. widened its traditional strategic focus on East Asia and in the Pacific to cover the Indian Ocean region.²⁴ Moreover, by declaring a free and open Indo-Pacific region as an area of principal strategic interest, the Trump (and now Biden) administration intensified its rivalry with China, prompting South Korea to distance itself from FOIP.

Although the Moon government has also invested in diplomatic, economic, and human capital in the Indian Ocean region through the NSP, President Moon’s foreign policy priority has always been on North Korea and inter-Korea relations. This is both understandable and inevitable; any North Korean provocation or potential instability on the Korean Peninsula directly affects South Korea more than any other nation. However, in its desire to make progress on inter-Korea relations despite being constantly rebuffed by Pyongyang, the Moon government risks becoming disengaged, if not marginalized, in discussions pertaining to the Indo-Pacific security landscape. Although Seoul has consulted closely with Washington on North Korea policy, it has mostly avoided associating itself with the Indo-Pacific strategies of other countries, including that of the U.S., in deference to Beijing, its largest trading partner and a major stakeholder behind Korean reunification.²⁵

While South Korea supports Asia’s existing institutional architecture as demonstrated by its commitment to the U.S.-South Korea alliance, its membership in regional organizations, and its recent launching of the NSP, the Moon government has taken a more passive than active role in shaping the region’s strategic environment. On the economic front, South Korea neither played a leading role in discussions framing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), nor did it join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). On the security front, South Korea has remained peripheral to the Quad. And despite its status as a fully consolidated democracy, the Moon government has scaled back South Korean advocacy for North Korean human rights and remained relatively low key on rights violations taking place in Hong Kong and in Xinjiang province. South Korea’s open support for democracy in Myanmar, however, has been a welcoming sign.

Setting aside its ambitiousness and ambiguity, not to mention the risk of spreading U.S. resources too thin across a vast region, the Indo-Pacific framing is likely to stay. As Australian strategist Rory Medcalf notes, “The Indo-Pacific is now the standard American lens for the region.”²⁶ At the same time, it is an “authentically regional approach to diplomacy, security, and economics.”²⁷ The Indo-Pacific narrative originated from the region, but it is now embraced by countries within and outside of Asia. Regional cooperation around the Indo-Pacific strategy is moving forward and South Korea should not fall behind.

U.S.-SOUTH KOREA COOPERATION IN AN INDO-PACIFIC REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

The Biden administration’s support for multilateralism not only provides opportunities for the U.S.-ROK alliance and South Korean participation in building an expanded regional architecture, but it also brings challenges to the Moon government’s existing foreign policy agenda. The Biden administration may mobilize multilateral coalitions, but its allies and partners are expected to do more of the rowing. The Moon government is already facing increased diplomatic (as well as domestic) pressure to engage in the Quad and strengthen Korea-Japan relations to bolster U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral cooperation. The British proposal for a “D10” meeting of ten leading global democracies, which includes South Korea, may also put pressure on Seoul to join a multilateral grouping perceived by Beijing as anti-China.

Progressive foreign policy voices in South Korea have called on Seoul to maintain a more independent posture by not becoming too reliant on the U.S. alliance or joining coalitions (presumably the Quad) that exclude other countries (i.e. China).²⁸ However, foreign policy autonomy and hedging behavior are no guarantee for regional stability, much less Korean security, given the “thickening web” of security ties.²⁹ Nor will the adoption of a more neutral position in the Indo-Pacific prevent China from bullying Korea or from undercutting Seoul’s regional economic interest. For instance, Chinese economic coercion leveraged against a third country may still indirectly impact Seoul. Additionally, the Moon government’s deference to Xi Jinping has not stopped Chinese fisherman from violating South Korea’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Yellow Sea, or from breaching its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).³⁰

Without Washington calling on Seoul to “choose sides,” South Korea can leverage the U.S.-South Korea alliance and its middle power status to play a more constructive role in shaping its strategic environment. Avoiding potential fall-out with Beijing should not be the primary factor driving the Moon government’s strategic decisions in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, to protect its own maritime interests, including exports that accounted for 40% of Korea’s GDP in 2019, Seoul must continue to cultivate bilateral and multilateral partnerships with “like-minded” regional actors. By remaining fully engaged in Asia’s regional architecture, the Moon government can signal to China and other nations South Korea’s support for rules, norms, and laws that enhance, not undermine, regional governance. Such an approach need not exclude China and can include acceptance of legitimate Chinese interests that do not violate existing international laws.

Downplaying the Indo-Pacific narrative at this point would only marginalize South Korea’s position in the making of an Indo-Pacific regional architecture. As Rory Medcalf argues, “...moderation of Chinese power will likely fail if middle powers do not seek solidarity but instead are cowed by the observation that there is little each can do to influence China on its own. Much will depend on how nations choose to use the current window of pan-regional awareness”³¹ South Korea has not exactly been on the forefront of multilateral defense diplomacy. However, it has quietly developed bilateral ties with several other regional actors. South Korea holds a biyearly 2+2 meeting with Australia.³² Seoul has also developed security partnerships with India since 2015³³ and with Vietnam since 2018.³⁴ On weapons sales and arms procurement, South Korea has recently supplied naval ships to the Philippines³⁵ and submarines and fighter jets to Indonesia.³⁶

Although alliances and coalitions are often associated with defense cooperation, Indo-Pacific principles such as respect for sovereignty and a rules-based order can be harnessed through non-military means to resist Chinese coercion. Defending a free and open Indo-Pacific involves setting new norms and standards that cover issues ranging from technological innovation, cybersecurity, climate change, infrastructure development, and pandemics. U.S. and South Korean officials have discussed some of these issues in the context of the Indo-Pacific Strategy-New Southern

Policy Dialogue.³⁷ While this is a good start, the Moon and Biden governments should adhere to the following five recommendations:

1. Seoul should boost the “peace pillar” of the NSP by addressing common issues such as protection against illegal fishing and encroachment of EEZs, and support for freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. Doing so would strengthen South Korean credibility as a reliable strategic partner in the region. Although the NSP has bolstered diplomatic ties, economic trade, foreign investment, and development cooperation with ASEAN members, security cooperation continues to lag behind other areas.³⁸ Washington and Seoul should try to leverage their alliance relationship in order to boost South Korea’s strategic position in the region. Participation in meetings such as the Quad Plus provides an efficient mechanism for Seoul to integrate NSP objectives with the Indo-Pacific strategies of other actors beyond the U.S.

2. Seoul and Washington can support forums and institutions that advance human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific. The elevated status of human rights and democracy under President Biden suggests that the U.S. will be seeking greater cooperation from allies and partners in this area. Seoul and Washington should speak out and put pressure on governments where gross human rights violations are taking place, even as the issue of North Korean human rights in South Korea will likely remain unresolved during President Moon’s tenure. The Moon government’s response to the Myanmar crisis, and Korean steelmaker POSCO’s recent decision to end a joint venture with the Myanmar military, are positive steps.³⁹ To maintain their credibility and commitment to a rules-based regional order that respects democratic values, U.S. allies and partners (including not only the United States and South Korea, but also countries experiencing more severe rights violations, such as India and the Philippines) should hold each other accountable.

3. Washington must continue to encourage trilateral cooperation between Japan and South Korea, its two closest partners in Northeast Asia, particularly in regards to the sharing of information and intelligence on North

Korea’s missile and nuclear program. A breakthrough in Korea-Japan relations appears distant during Moon’s final year in office given the heavy domestic capital the ruling party must expend to make this happen. Nevertheless, such cooperation is crucial for all three countries. Although Japan is often seen as peripheral to a Korean peace regime, Japan’s geographic proximity and economic links to the Korean Peninsula mean that Korea-Japan relations (and not just Sino-Korea relations) will be integral to any permanent Korean peace regime. The U.S. is still in the best position to encourage and facilitate such reconciliation. Secretary of State Blinken, who championed U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral relations during his tenure as deputy secretary of state during the Obama administration, may prove to be a persuasive interlocutor in drawing Seoul and Tokyo towards a truce.⁴⁰

4. Navigating relations between Beijing and Washington need not be seen as a “choice.” Washington should first recognize and appreciate South Korea’s unique historical and geopolitical concerns that inform the Moon government’s foreign policy objectives. Meanwhile, rather than hedge between the U.S. and China, Seoul should play more of a bridging role between the two great powers. While Seoul understandably prefers staying on the sidelines of maritime disputes in the South China Sea, it can prod Beijing to adhere to international norms and standards on issues ranging from intellectual property, cybersecurity, and financial technology. Should U.S.-North Korea diplomacy resume, Seoul can also encourage Beijing to play a constructive role regarding Korean peace.

5. South Korea’s increased defense spending should be welcomed by the United States. Under Moon, South Korea has increased defense spending on average close to 7% annually with the military set to spend \$48 billion in 2021.⁴¹ The push from Moon’s Democratic Party to expand its own capabilities is partially driven by the progressive government’s desire to reduce their dependence on the U.S. Strengthened South Korean defense capabilities should not be associated with possible alliance decoupling, but instead should be seen as a boost to the U.S.-South Korea alliance and the region’s security architecture. It also tampers the critique that U.S. allies are not doing enough to provide for their own security.

CONCLUSION

Given the rapidly changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, Asia's security architecture is also likely to evolve. South Koreans may feel less compelled to stretch their strategic outlook beyond the immediate Northeast Asia corridor. However, South Korea's own strategic and commercial interests will become increasingly dependent on Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The U.S.-ROK alliance can still serve as the anchor behind South

Korean national defense, but its maritime strategy may require deeper engagement with the Indo-Pacific strategies of the U.S. and others. Meanwhile, deeper integration of the U.S.-ROK alliance to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy will add to the legitimacy of liberal internationalism and provide the Biden Administration with additional leverage when engaging Beijing on the military, economic, and diplomatic front.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Andrew Yeo, *Asia's Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019), 8.
- ² Amitav Acharya, "Ideas, Identity and Institution-Building: From the 'ASEAN Way' to the 'Asia-Pacific Way,'" *Pacific Review* 10, no. 3 (1997): 319.
- ³ Victor Cha, "Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia's Regional Architecture," *Asia Policy* 11, no. 1 (January 2011): 27-50.
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, "The Maldives and U.S. Sign Defense Agreement," September 11, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2344512/the-maldives-and-us-sign-defense-agreement/>.
- ⁵ Ash Carter, "The Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security: Building a Principled Security Network," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2016).
- ⁶ Approximately 54,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Japan, and 28,500 in South Korea.
- ⁷ Rory Medcalf, "Breaking Down Australia's Defense White Paper 2013," *The Diplomat*, May 7, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/05/breaking-down-australias-defense-white-paper-2013/>.
- ⁸ Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World's Pivotal Region* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021), 9.
- ⁹ White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.
- ¹⁰ G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (2009): 71-87.
- ¹¹ White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.
- ¹² Joe Biden, Narendra Modi, Scott Morrison and Yoshihide Suga, "Our four nations are committed to a free, open, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region," *Washington Post*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/13/biden-modi-morrison-suga-quad-nations-indo-pacific/>.
- ¹³ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi Before Their Meeting," March 16, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-japanese-foreign-minister-toshimitsu-motegi-before-their-meeting/>.
- ¹⁴ Robert Burns, "Biden's deal with Seoul points to a swift shift on alliances," *Associated Press*, March 11, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-seoul-diplomacy-south-korea-d95485e8ed9901f035233f1d6a7a8b03>.
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Blinken's Travel to Tokyo and Seoul," March 10, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-tokyo-and-seoul/>.
- ¹⁶ Je-he Do, "Moon, Biden urged to narrow differences on North Korea," *Korea Times*, February 4, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/02/120_303610.html?go.

- ¹⁷ U.S. Embassy of Korea, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy-Republic of Korea New Southern Policy Joint Fact Sheet," November 13, 2020, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/111320-release-of-the-u-s-indo-pacific-strategy-republic-of-korea-new-southern-policy-joint-fact-sheet/>.
- ¹⁸ Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Jihwan Hwang, "Seoul sees hope in Biden's North Korea approach," *The Hill*, March 8, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/541610-seoul-sees-hope-in-bidens-north-korea-approach>.
- ¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Secretary of State Antony Blinken Conduct Press Conference With Their Counterparts After a U.S.-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial ("2+2"), Hosted by the ROK's Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Minister of Defense Suh Wook," March 18, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2541299/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-and-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken-c/>.
- ²⁰ Il Hyun Cho and Seo-Hyun Park, "Domestic Legitimacy Politics and Varieties of Regionalism in East Asia," *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 582.
- ²¹ John G. Ikenberry and Jongryn Mo, *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and Liberal International Order*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 3.
- ²² Miles Kahler, "Middle Powers, Network Power, and Soft Power," Unpublished Paper for CSIS Project on "Study of South Korea as a Global Power," October 14, 2014.
- ²³ White House, "Joint vision for the alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," June 16, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/joint-vision-alliance-united-states-america-and-republic-korea>.
- ²⁴ U.S. Pacific Command's area of coverage included the Indian Ocean even prior to changing its name to Indo-Pacific Command. However, South Asia as a region has traditionally been treated as distinct from East Asia.
- ²⁵ China launched an economic boycott on South Korean tourism and products after Seoul permitted the deployment of a battery of a U.S. missile defense system on its soil in 2017.
- ²⁶ Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire*, 10.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 10.
- ²⁸ Yun-hyun Gil, "Can S. Korea transcend US-China rivalry?" *Hankyoreh*, April 13, 2021, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/990840.html; Jang-won Lim, "KNDA chancellor casts critical eye on Korea-US alliance in new book," *Korean Herald*, April 3, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210401000949>.
- ²⁹ Scott Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey Hornung, Gregory B. Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2019).
- ³⁰ Ian Urbana, "The deadly secret of China's invisible armada," *NBC News*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/china-illegal-fishing-fleet>; Young-kil Park, "The Role of Fishing Disputes in China-South Korea Relations," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-role-of-fishing-disputes-in-china-south-korea-relations/>.
- ³¹ Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire*, 23.
- ³² Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Statement: Australia-Republic of Korea Foreign and Defence Ministers' 2+2 Meeting 2019," December 10, 2019, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/republic-of-korea/Pages/joint-statement-republic-of-korea-australia-foreign-and-defence-ministers-2-2-meeting-2019>.
- ³³ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Suh Wook's India Trip: Boost to India-South Korea Defense Ties," *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/suh-wooks-india-trip-boost-to-india-south-korea-defense-ties/>. India and South Korea were also set to hold their first 2+2 dialogue in line with the NSP and India's Act East Policy, but this meeting did not seem to materialize. See: Huma Siddiqui, "Act East Policy: First India-South Korea 2+2 dialogue expected to take place next month," *Financial Express*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/act-east-policy-first-india-south-korea-22-dialogue-expected-to-take-place-next-month/1565762/>.
- ³⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, "South Korea-Vietnam Military Ties in Focus with Defense Dialogue," *The Diplomat*, December 18, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/south-korea-vietnam-military-ties-in-focus-with-defense-dialogue/>.

- ³⁵ Priam Nepomuceno, "PH, S. Korea to deepen maritime security ties," *Philippine News Agency*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1134805>.
- ³⁶ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Indonesia-South Korea Defense Ties in the Headlines with Fighter Jet Rollout," *The Diplomat*, April 16, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/indonesia-south-korea-defense-ties-in-the-headlines-with-fighter-jet-rollout/>.
- ³⁷ U.S. Embassy of Korea, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy-Republic of Korea New Southern Policy Joint Fact Sheet," November 13, 2020, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/111320-the-u-s-and-rok-on-working-together-to-promote-cooperation-between-the-indo-pacific-strategy-and-the-new-southern-policy/>.
- ³⁸ As one Korean expert quipped on a public panel, the NSP stands for New Southern Policy, not New Strategic Policy.
- ³⁹ John Reed, Edward White, and Jung-a Song, "Korean steelmaker to cut ties with Myanmar junta after investor pressure," *Financial Times*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/cc20f766-9e39-4b4d-9c4f-c793f9ab09bb>.
- ⁴⁰ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "As Biden seeks to restore alliances, a souring Japan-South Korea relationship presents a challenge," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-japan-korea-allies-blinken/2021/03/01/a3604258-76e4-11eb-9537-496158cc5fd9_story.html.
- ⁴¹ Kohtarō Ito, "What to Make of South Korea's Growing Defense Spending." *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, March 12, 2020, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/ito_02.html; Jon Grevatt & Andrew MacDonald, "South Korea increases defence budget for 2021," *Janes Defence News*, December 3, 2020, https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-increases-defence-budget-for-2021_14039.

KEI EDITORIAL BOARD

KEI Editor: Kyle Ferrier | Contract Editor: Gimga Group | Design: Gimga Group

The Korea Economic Institute of America is registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the Government of the Republic of Korea. This material is filed with the Department of Justice, where the required registration statement is available for public inspection. Registration does not indicate U.S. government approval of the contents of this document.

KEI is not engaged in the practice of law, does not render legal services, and is not a lobbying organization.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. While this monograph is part of the overall program of the Korea Economic Institute of America endorsed by its Officers, Board of Directors, and Advisory Council, its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of individual members of the Board or of the Advisory Council.

Copyright © 2021 Korea Economic Institute of America

Printed in the United States of America.

 **KEI** Promoting Dialogue and Understanding
Between Korea and the United States | 1800 K St. NW, Suite 300 | Washington, DC 20006
T.202.464.1982 | F.202.464.1987 | www.keia.org