

# From Shrimp to Middle Power to Something More? South Korea as a Global Pivotal State

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo

75 years ago South Korea was established. Then no one would have predicted its current impressive economic, political, diplomatic, technological, security, and cultural status. Least of all, (South) Koreans themselves, who back in 1948 were still recovering from decades of colonization and the division of their country at the whim of foreign powers. Yet, the South Korea of 2023 is globally recognized and even admired in multiple areas. Regardless of whether South Koreans see their country as a powerless shrimp or a skillful dolphin navigating great power competition, the rest of the world does not see Seoul as a small player anymore.

The real question that South Korea faces today, therefore, is whether it will remain a middle power or whether it will become a middle power capable of acting as a pivotal state in particular areas of strength. For South Korea cannot aspire to become as powerful as the U.S. or China as a foreign and security player. No other actor can match today's two superpowers currently, save for the EU in the area of economics and trade. But South Korea is among a number of middle powers capable of influencing global affairs, be it Australia, India, Indonesia, or Japan among its Indo-Pacific peers, France, Germany, or the UK from Europe, or Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey from different parts of the world.

Yoon Suk-yeol's "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) is a rallying cry for South Korea to "step up" and make use of its capabilities to shape regional and global affairs when it can, rather than simply reacting to decisions taken by Washington and Beijing, as well as other capitals from Brussels to Tokyo.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that South Korea is new to trying to shape events. Lee Myung-bak's "Global Korea" had the same goal in mind, and both Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in also looked well beyond the Korean Peninsula with their foreign and security policies.<sup>2</sup> These three leaders put aside outdated and misguided notions of South Korean foreign policy being driven by foreign powers or by trade and the chaebol. As cases in point, the Moon government pursued a "New Northern

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Policy” to improve relations with North Korea with the support of Russia in spite of Washington’s misgivings. And the Yoon government has indicated that any decision on further THAAD battery deployments is South Korea’s to make, regardless of Beijing’s views.

Yet, GPS emerges from the notion that perhaps Seoul still focuses on the Korean Peninsula too often. Thus, while GPS is a clear attempt to position South Korea as a pivotal state in regional and global geopolitics—and, equally relevant, to be recognized as such—economists talk about how a large share of developing countries fall into the “middle income trap,” not being poor anymore but unable to become rich. South Korea avoided this fate. Seoul should now avoid the “middle power trap,” and act as a middle power navigating global geopolitics when it has to but also as a pivotal state shaping them when it can, for example, by continuing its military build-up until it feels safe or continuing its support for Ukraine in spite of Chinese and Russian protests if it feels that is in its interest. This way, South Korea will truly realize its foreign and security policy potential.

### **South Korea’s Rise to Middle Power Status**

South Korea could not be considered a middle power at the end of the Cold War. Park Chung-hee dreamt of South Korea becoming a developed economy following his coup in 1961. South Koreans fighting against military dictatorship throughout the 1970s and 80s wanted their country to become an advanced democracy. Foreign policy officials had high hopes for their country’s diplomatic role and status after the Koreans joined the UN in 1991. Samsung’s Lee Kun-hee dreamt of a South Korean economy powered by innovation when he introduced his New Management Initiative in 1993. And Hallyu’s pioneers from the early and mid-1990s hoped to export pop music, movies, and dramas to the rest of the world. And even though South Korea displayed some middle power characteristics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, arguably it was only following recovery from the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s that the country undoubtedly joined the ranks of the middle powers.

Starting with South Korea’s economic power, Seoul joined the OECD in 1996, thus formally becoming part of the “rich countries club.”<sup>73</sup> Yet, only a year later the IMF provided South Korea with its biggest bailout package hitherto when the country was hit by the Asian Financial Crisis. South Korea, however, recovered from the crisis relatively quickly and repaid the IMF’s package ahead of schedule. And it was throughout the 2000s that South Korea fully cemented its developed country status. The South Korean government and the country’s firms started to invest heavily in R&D, and South Korea became one of the top two largest spenders in innovation among OECD countries,

along with Israel.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the South Korean economy is now driven by innovation at the frontier and the country's firms are amongst the world leaders in sectors including semiconductors, electric batteries and cars, biotech, green shipping, or robotics. Thus, South Korea became one of the ten largest exporters of merchandise goods in the world, a position that it still retained at the end of 2021.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this period of time, South Korea also became more sophisticated in its trade strategy. Successive South Korean governments prioritized FTAs with the country's key economic partners as a way for its firms to gain a comparative advantage. Therefore, South Korea is one of the few countries in the world and one of only two in Asia—along with Singapore—to have signed FTAs with the “Big 3” global economies of China, the EU, and the U.S..<sup>6</sup> In fact, the FTA with South Korea was the EU's first with an Asian country as well as its first “new generation” FTA going well beyond tariffs. Given Brussels's regulatory power, this FTA thus later served as a template for others that the EU and other countries signed. Meanwhile, FTAs with Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Singapore, or Vietnam and membership of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) have further embedded South Korea in regional supply chains as well as boosted links with key trade partners.<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted that South Korea also is one of the three largest Asian aid donors,<sup>8</sup> and in 2010 became the first former aid recipient to join the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of donor countries.<sup>9</sup>

As for politico-diplomatic power, UN membership in 1991 opened the door for Seoul to become a more active player in global affairs, particularly since it coincided with the end of Cold War divisions into two antagonistic blocs. Therefore, South Korea has become a keen supporter of the UN system, most notably with Ban Ki-moon's tenure as the organization's seventh secretary general in 2007-16.<sup>10</sup> From the late 2000s, South Korea also found a niche area in sustainable development and green growth. As three cases in point, the UN opened its Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) in Incheon in 2011,<sup>11</sup> the Green Global Growth Institute (GGGI) was launched in Seoul in 2012,<sup>12</sup> and South Korea was one of the founding partners of Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 (P4G) in 2017.<sup>13</sup> Another area in which South Korea has also found a niche is peacekeeping. Seoul is one of ten largest contributors to the UN's peacekeeping budget,<sup>14</sup> one of the five largest peacekeeper contributors among OECD members,<sup>15</sup> and in 2021 hosted the Seoul UN Peacekeeping Ministerial.<sup>16</sup> These are two examples of issue-areas in which South Korea has become an authoritative voice and player in recent years.

Beyond the UN framework, South Korea is a member of the G20 group of leading economies working to promote financial stability, has been invited to partake in G7 summits, and in 2013 launched MIKTA—a coalition of middle powers also involving Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, and Australia.<sup>17</sup> At the regional level, Seoul hosts the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), the organization launched in 2011 to promote peace and cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, South Korea is one of the four Asia-Pacific countries with which NATO is strengthening links within the NATO-AP4 framework—along with Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, whose leaders attended the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid together with Yoon Seok-yul.<sup>19</sup> In short, South Korea has embraced the shift towards minilateralism that has come hand-in-hand with Sino-American rivalry and the declining influence of multilateral organizations. Being part of smaller institutions is a conscious choice, and enhances South Korea's voice rather than taking an implausible middle ground or not even sitting at the table.

Arguably, it is South Korea's growing security and military clout that has seen a greater shift in recent years. Due to the threat coming from North Korea and partly thanks to its 70-year old alliance with the U.S., South Korea has developed a formidable arsenal including missiles, tanks, howitzers, submarines, vessels, or, more recently, jet fighters and even rockets. As a result, South Korea has become one of the ten largest weapons exporters in the world.<sup>20</sup> As a case in point, South Korea is the only Asian country providing NATO members including Estonia, Norway, or Poland with weapons being used to replace those that they themselves are sending to Ukraine to repel Russia's invasion—with some South Korean weapons making their way to Ukraine as well. Furthermore, the ROK Navy has become a regular participant in U.S.-led joint maritime exercises across the Indo-Pacific,<sup>21</sup> and has been part of the international Combined Maritime Forces fighting against piracy in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>22</sup> Plus, the South Korean armed forces joined U.S.-led coalitions in countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq.

Lastly, Hallyu has made of South Korea Asia's top exporter of cultural products and one of the countries with the strongest soft power credentials at the global level. Regardless of one's views about the extent to which soft power can be used to influence the policy of third countries, it is undeniable that Hallyu has made South Korea better known across Asia and globally. This has helped to improve perceptions of South Korea overseas.<sup>23</sup> And successive South Korean governments have made use of the success of Hallyu to help boost the sales of South Korean products, promote the study of Korean language, organize festivals and concerts to promote South Korea's image, or support large-scale event bids (e.g., BTS and the Busan 2030 World Expo), among others.

Considering all of the above, there is little doubt that the South Korea of 2023 is a middle power with formidable economic, diplomatic, military, and cultural capabilities, a far cry from the “shrimp” of the Cold War or even the emerging power of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The stage is now set for South Korea to make use of its assets to yield influence in global affairs in a way that it could not hitherto.

### **Beyond Middle Power Status? Yoon Suk-yeol’s Global Pivotal State**

South Korea’s GPS needs to be understood in the context of the decades-old quest among the country’s political, business, and thought leaders to make their country more central to global affairs. In this respect, the focus of GPS is on committing Seoul to use its resources to project global leadership in as many areas as possible.<sup>24</sup> This may seem ambitious. But then, back in the 1960s it was also ambitious for South Koreans to think that theirs would become one of the biggest and most developed economies in the world. And it was similarly ambitious back in the 1990s to think that South Korean culture could become Asia’s most recognized globally. In this sense, GPS builds on an ingrained South Korean ingenuity to think big and in new ways.

GPS and South Korea’s push to become a pivotal power in as many areas as possible, however, needs to confront the reality of today’s international system. And this reality is that U.S.-China economic, technological, diplomatic, and military competition is the defining framework underpinning international relations, leading, above all, to the decline in the importance of multilateral institutions, an (apparent) division of countries into two separate blocs based on values, a growing interconnectedness of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific geopolitical theaters, and, more generally, a more unstable international environment when compared to the aftermath of World War II. In fact, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine shortly after Moscow and Beijing declared their “no limits” friendship would seem to confirm this state of affairs.<sup>25</sup> Thus, South Korea needs to consider its options in an environment in which multilateral institutions are no longer the arbiters of conflict. Seoul’s decision to move closer towards the U.S. and its partners, while emphasizing unilateral institutions, suggests that policy-makers are fully aware of this environment.

A South Korea that aspires to be more than a middle power, therefore, should not feel despondent and powerless when faced with this international environment. Instead, Seoul should seek to gain influence according to its own interests and to utilize the environment to achieve its goals. Indeed, the idea that South Korea is irrevocably doomed to suffer in the confrontation between its

main trade partner, China, and its long-standing ally, the U.S., is misleading. For one, South Korea and China are economically interdependent—even if Beijing is the largest of the two economies. Plus, the U.S. is the stronger partner in the ROK-U.S. alliance but its strength is greater when South Korea offers military, diplomatic, or economic support to its foreign policy and security initiatives. As former Foreign Minister Kang Kung-wha and current Foreign Minister Park Jin have suggested, South Korea has cards to play in the great power game.

Starting with the intertwined areas of trade, supply chains, and technology, the dismantlement of WTO-led multilateralism and economics-first-driven manufacturing processes seems to be here to stay. In this context, South Korea needs to be part of the agreements and frameworks replacing the WTO scaffolding. This is particularly the case as economic nationalism and industrial policy are becoming more common, including in the U.S. and Europe, and digital trade or investment rules are not adequately covered by existing arrangements. To this end, membership in the RCEP was and is a no-brainer for Seoul, considering that both China and Japan are part of the agreement. Likewise, joining Joe Biden's Chip-4 alliance and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) from the outset were necessary for South Korea, which otherwise would have been excluded from bodies that may end up setting regional or global standards and regulations. At the same time, South Korea can play an important role in all of these bodies given the know-how of its trade officials and other policy-makers and experts, the importance of chaebol such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG, or SK to the global economy, and its economic size. In this sense, it makes more sense to join groups in which it can have a say and shape decisions and events, rather than having no say by insisting on equidistance between Washington and Beijing.

In fact, these factors explain why it would also make sense for South Korea to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA). Neither agreement is particularly relevant now, given that CPTPP only includes two of the ten biggest economies in the world—and three of Asia's four largest economies are not part of it—and DEPA only includes three fairly small economies. But these agreements cover new areas such as digital trade, include countries in the Americas with which South Korea wants to boost economic links, and could end up including China, which has applied for membership in both, or even the U.S. were it to rethink its opposition to new free trade agreements in the future. For Seoul, it is far better to be in and have a voice while becoming one of several rule-makers, than being out and risk others joining first, by which time South Korea would become a rule-taker.

Leaving inter-governmental agreements aside, the strength of South Korean firms in multiple high-tech sectors is a strength that Seoul needs to build upon. The *chaebol* continue to enjoy fairly good relations with government. This can sometimes bring problems.<sup>26</sup> But it is also a source of strength in the era of economic nationalism, friend-shoring, and onshoring. Most notably, Europe, Southeast Asia, and the U.S. compete to attract South Korean factories in sectors from semiconductors to cars, while China is not resigned to losing the factories that remain there. This boosts economic links between South Korea and a host of countries, raises Seoul's value as a supply chain partner, and makes the South Korean government and its firms necessary interlocutors regarding the present and future of a tech-, innovation-, and green-driven economy. It thus makes sense for the South Korean government and firms to work closely with each other for their mutual benefit.

One last aspect in the area of economics in which South Korea needs to elevate its game is aid provision. Even though South Korea has a shorter history as a donor compared to other developed countries, sitting towards the bottom of the OECD's ODA as a share of GDP table is not a good look.<sup>27</sup> It is natural for South Korea to destine most of its aid towards Southeast and South Asia. For most donors, geographical proximity and cultural affinity remain major drivers behind their decisions regarding aid provision. Yet, even if South Korea were not to significantly modify the main destinations of its aid, boosting its ODA would help with the development of countries which are amongst the poorest in the world, particularly in South Asia. Since South Korea benefited from Western aid for decades, it has a moral obligation to repay the international community with aid of its own, particularly considering that many countries look to South Korea as a development model.

Security is another area in which unilateralism and cooperation among partners, in particular of the "like-minded" variety, is burgeoning. And South Korea ought to seize the opportunities that this presents. Certainly, closer security cooperation with the U.S. and U.S.-centric frameworks will create some political and diplomatic frictions with China. But Seoul should be aware that these are inevitable, unless Beijing changes its behavior. South Korea of course has first-hand experience of this, dating back to Park Geun-hye's decision to allow the U.S. to deploy THAAD on South Korean territory, which led to economic retaliation from China.<sup>28</sup> Plus, South Korea has seen the incursion of Chinese and Russian jet fighters into its ADIZ and even airspace, regularly has to deal with Chinese vessels moving into its EEZ and even territorial waters, and is on the receiving end of cyberattacks involving China, North Korea, and/or Russia. In other words, participation in U.S.-centric security frameworks attends to the reality of ongoing tensions with China. The

implications could be that tensions with China become a permanent feature of Sino-South Korean relations, at least in the coming years. Beijing could also engage in a new round of (unofficial) economic sanctions. So, there are potential downsides to this approach.

The biggest debate in South Korea, understandably, is about South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateralism. This is the U.S.'s strongest minilateral in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, involving regular diplomatic, military, and intelligence exchanges and exercises, and surviving even periods of political tension between Tokyo and Seoul. In fact, there are policy-makers in the EU and Canada, for example, who quietly would be very pleased with new quadrilateral frameworks involving Seoul, Washington, Tokyo and themselves, respectively.<sup>29</sup> This shows that there are strong incentives for South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateralism to strengthen, including common threat perceptions, similar interests, and shared values. Realistically, Japan-South Korea tensions are not going to go away any time soon, even after Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio have embarked on a top-level effort to mend ties and prevent historical problems from affecting bilateral relations. After all, tensions between former colonizers and colonies are common across the world. But they can be managed, and should not prevent practical cooperation regardless of the state of political relations. This is the position of the Yoon government.

NATO-AP4 cooperation should be a priority for South Korea. The complementarities between the transatlantic organization and South Korea in areas ranging from cybersecurity to non-proliferation activities to weapons technology development make cooperation a no brainer. Furthermore, South Korea's arms transfers to NATO members supporting Ukraine has significantly boosted the credentials of Seoul as a reliable and willing security partner.<sup>30</sup> In fact, arms transfers are also strengthening links with countries across the Middle East or South and Southeast Asia. Plus, maritime and cybersecurity concerns are further boosting cooperation with these regions, as well as with countries and actors such as Australia, Canada, and the EU. These are areas that South Korea should exploit, given that demands for weapons need to be met, while maritime and cybersecurity risks are here to stay. A big question for South Korea is the extent to which it should engage with Quad/Quad+. It is fair to say that the slow progress of military cooperation among Quad members within this framework, together with the division among them regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine have shown the limits of the grouping as a security framework of consequence. Engagement with Quad, thus, should be seen as supplementing rather than replacing more reliable and important minilaterals and bilaterals that better serve South Korean interests.

Diplomacy and politics are another area being transformed by Sino-American competition and the demise of multilateralism, for which South Korea needs to change its way of thinking and the way it acts. Certainly, South Korea should continue to support the UN system and groups that bring different voices together, such as the G20. After all, South Korea has benefited from the Liberal International Order (LIO) and it should not shy away from it at a moment of crisis, such as the current one. The LIO also gives an equal voice to all its participants, at least formally, which is beneficial for middle powers such as South Korea.

Yet, the so-called G7+/D10 is emerging as an important group giving voice to “like-minded” countries in the transatlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. The G7 in its original composition became obsolete at least two decades ago, given that it is a Western-centric organization. But incorporating Australia, India, and South Korea would help to revitalize it. The UK understands this, and so does the U.S., which after all is the key player in the organization.<sup>31</sup> But it remains to be seen whether other G7 members also understand this. Germany, for example, did not invite Australia or South Korea to the summit it hosted in 2022. Seoul should work together with Australia, India, and G7 members more attuned to 21st century geopolitics to expand the format of the grouping on a more sustainable basis. This would strengthen South Korea’s voice when issuing messages and declarations as part of a group of fellow democracies. The 2021 Open Societies Statement that South Korea signed during the G7 summit held in the UK is a case in point.<sup>32</sup>

More difficult to ascertain is whether middle power groupings can retain relevance in an era of Sino-American competition. When launched in 2013, MIKTA made sense. Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia were middle powers seeking to present a vision of global governance separate from that of the superpowers or that of fellow middle powers with a seat at the UN Security Council—namely France, Russia, and the UK. Yet, over time and especially during the latter part of the Moon Jae-in government and now during the Yoon Suk-yeol government, South Korea has been boosting its ties with fellow democratic countries in economics, security, and diplomacy. It may be that MIKTA members can sometimes work together in areas such as peacekeeping or sustainable development, or perhaps issue joint statements as in the past. But considering the current international environment, it is unlikely that this or other middle power groupings bringing together a disparate group of countries can work well and serve Seoul’s interests as well as others.

Considering South Korea's soft power credentials, it is necessary to discuss the extent to which Seoul can mobilize its resources in this area to pursue its foreign policy goals towards becoming a pivotal power. Certainly, there are doubts about the extent to which soft power can help to advance one's foreign policy goals. The popularity of Hallyu in China, for example, did not prevent Xi Jinping from imposing sweeping economic sanctions against South Korea following the announcement of THAAD's deployment in 2016. And no amount of soft power prevented South Korean firms from being affected by Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which hit Hyundai in particular. That is, soft power will not help South Korea to achieve its goals when a superpower's core objectives are at stake.

Yet, it is undeniable that South Korean soft power confers benefits to its government when pursuing its foreign policy. While in the case of South Korea soft power is more commonly linked to Hallyu these days, the country's development history and model, high-tech economy, and, in the case of some countries and civil societies, strong democratic credentials also matter. All of them have created a positive perception of South Korea, and led more policy-makers, business leaders, and civil societies at large to learn more about the country, including its history, culture, and language. This is beneficial insofar as South Korea has an attractive story to tell, certainly with negative aspects but mainly with positive ones. While it is difficult to quantify and determine the influence of soft power, it should help in winning infrastructure building or arms sales contracts, being asked to join groupings of "like-minded" partners, or getting invitations to attend or even host forums.

South Korea should therefore strive to do more in its foreign and security policy. This helps pursue its own interests, allows Seoul to fill gaps that otherwise others will, and is a demand from third parties that cannot be ignored. Economic growth certainly is one of these core interests. Without joining economic multilaterals and new supply chain configurations, it would be difficult for South Korea to become a pivotal economic player. Managing China's rise is another key interest for South Korea. Becoming part of security multilaterals, particularly with "like-minded" partners, as well as multilateral diplomatic groupings should be part of pivotal South Korea's strategy to deal with its more powerful yet sometimes antagonistic neighbor. Dealing with North Korea is another key interest for South Korea. And whereas most of the work in this area falls on the shoulders of the U.S. and South Korea itself, intensifying cooperation with "like-minded" partners or organizations such as NATO—also concerned by North Korean actions—would help strengthen South Korea's case to be at the driving wheel of Korean Peninsula security developments. Finally, global

recognition matters for South Korea. Yet, ascribing to the LIO, currently in decline, cannot be the only way for South Korea to try to achieve this. Seoul needs to insert itself in as many relevant groupings as possible and make use of its full range of assets to truly become a GPS.

## **A Global Pivotal State in the Age of U.S.-China Rivalry**

As South Korea moves closer to the U.S. as part of its GPS, there is a question as to how China may react to this shift in foreign policy. There are clear indications that China is taking South Korea's approach to foreign policy badly. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs engaged in a spat with its South Korean counterpart last August, after it argued that the Yoon government had agreed not to deploy new THAAD missile batteries, which Seoul denied.<sup>33</sup> And Beijing criticized the Yoon government's Indo-Pacific strategy upon its publication last December, arguing that South Korea was joining U.S.-led coalitions in the region.<sup>34</sup> Even during the latter part of the Moon government, relations between Seoul and Beijing soured as South Korea joined criticism of China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Seoul drew closer to the Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy via Moon's New Southern Policy, and China became wary of South Korea's military build-up.<sup>35</sup> Since South Korea is likely to continue to draw closer to the U.S. and its partners, including via South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateralism, it is likely that Sino-South Korean relations will continue to deteriorate

In the past, South Korea may have decided to pursue a middle way in between Beijing and Washington. However, this is not the case anymore, as Seoul has become more willing to stand up to Beijing. It is precisely South Korea's decision to defend its position as part of U.S.-led and other minilateral frameworks that will help Seoul prevent the worst effects of any potential backlash from China. Furthermore, South Korea is not thinking about breaking economic links with China not only due to the economic benefits, but also because economic interdependence gives Seoul a modicum of leverage over Beijing—particularly in high-tech sectors in which it maintains a comparative advantage. In a sense, this has been Japan's position. Tokyo sees minilateral frameworks and economic interdependence with China as means to strengthen its position vis-à-vis Beijing, rather than simply weaknesses and threats.

Seoul's diversification of its foreign policy and security links should also help it mitigate the effects of any potential backlash from Beijing. Certainly, South Korea is not the only country doing this. Australia and Japan are also expanding ties with NATO. Along with Seoul, Tokyo has become the EU's main security and

diplomatic partner in Asia and the Indo-Pacific—a move that has coincided with Brussels becoming warier of close links with China. Yoon’s push for stronger ties with Japan will be helpful if a new U.S. president challenges the value of Washington’s alliances, as Trump did, and not only to deter China’s aggressiveness. So would be Seoul’s moves to strengthen links with Australia, India, and multiple Southeast Asian countries. This is the same policy that Japan, as well as Australia, is pursuing. In short, Asian and Indo-Pacific middle power are boosting ties among themselves and with outside partners as means to address their concerns about China, and to navigate Sino-American rivalry.

## Conclusion

Having attained middle power status over two decades ago, South Korea is now getting ready to move to the next level. Can it become a GPS or pivotal power? The answer is yes. South Korea certainly has the capabilities, know-how, and, crucially, intention to be a more proactive actor in global affairs. While Yoon Suk-yeol is not the first president to set South Korea down the path of greater focus on global issues at the expense of Korean Peninsula or regional affairs, South Korea’s ever-growing capabilities coupled with an international system defined by Sino-American competition, leading to growing cooperation among “like-minded” partners,” should, arguably, help him bring Seoul closer to its goal.

To this end, South Korea should ensure that it becomes part of agreements and groupings that increasingly are replacing global governance institutions as the primary arena where consequential decisions are being made. This does not mean leaving aside its role in multilateral organizations, which it has been building up for decades. But it does mean taking a proactive approach towards new institutions and frameworks, many of which are being led by the U.S.. The Yoon government’s decision to join IPEF and the Chip-4 alliance from the outset are cases in point. So is Yoon’s and, previously, Moon’s embrace of NATO-AP4 cooperation. And sometimes South Korea will need to knock on the door of existing frameworks, most notably that of the G7.

This does not mean “choosing sides” between China and the U.S., at least in the Cold War sense of joining one bloc and essentially cutting ties with the other. No U.S. partner is ready to do so, not even Japan that maintains strong economic ties and is setting up a military hotline with China. But Seoul will find it easier to cooperate with the U.S. and other “like-minded” partners with which it shares interests and, crucially, values. Unless Beijing shifts its generally assertive behavior and Washington starts to see its relationship with China

differently, Sino-American competition will continue. And South Korea will find itself in the U.S.-led camp more often than not. But that is inevitable for a country that wants to be a pivotal power, and wants to have a voice in regional and global affairs that, today, neutrality does not allow for.

South Korea can and should try to become one of the small foreign policy whales that can have great influence in global affairs. After all, the South Korea of 2023 possesses strong economic, diplomatic, military, and soft power capabilities. The way it uses them will determine whether it achieves pivotal, or small whale, status.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Yoon Suk-yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up," Foreign Affairs, February 8, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>
- <sup>2</sup> I develop this point in more detail in my book *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023), which analyses the country's grand strategy and foreign policy from the inauguration of the Sixth Republic in 1988 until the present.
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<sup>30</sup> This point is based on multiple private conversations and interviews with policy-makers from NATO and NATO members throughout 2022-23.

<sup>31</sup> The U.S. invited South Korea to join the G7 summit that it was due to host in 2021, before it was cancelled, and the UK also sent an invitation, which led to Moon Jae-in attending the summit held in Southwest England.

<sup>32</sup> 2021 Open Societies Statement, June 13, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Hyonhee Shin, "South Korea, China Clash Over U.S. Missile Shield, Complicating Conciliation," Reuters, August 11, 2022.

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