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Defining the Indo-Pacific: A Region of Diverse Visions

KEI Editorial Board

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About KEI

The Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) is a U.S. policy institute and public outreach organization dedicated to helping Americans understand the breadth and importance of the relationship with the Republic of Korea. Through our publications, social media, programs, and public events, KEI seeks to advance scholarship and understanding of Korea in ways that will inform policy makers and the American public of the security, economic, and political implications of our connections to the Korean Peninsula.

For 40 years, KEI has been promoting dialogue and understanding between the United States and the Republic of Korea through accurate and in-depth analysis. KEI draws on the expertise of its resident staff; provides a platform on which leading writers, thinkers and commentators from the United States, Korea, and third countries can share their research and opinions; promotes scholarship by commissioning and publishing original articles; and hosts public and off-the-record conversations among policy makers and opinion leaders. These activities are intended to ensure that policy decisions are soundly based within the context of the Korean Peninsula's complexity and significance.

KEI maintains connections with partner think tanks and with the academic community throughout the United States. Our "Academic Paper Series," "Academic Symposium," and "University Programs" ensure that the best in research and scholarship on Korea are shared among experts and are available to students and the general public. All KEI publications are accessible free of charge.

Although most of our activities take place at our Washington, D.C. headquarters, KEI is committed to going beyond the beltway—engaging with communities across the United States to discuss how the two countries are navigating shared major challenges of our time. Programs such as the "Future of Korea," held in partnership with the World Affairs Councils of America, and the "Ambassadors' Dialogue" bring Korean and American diplomats to venues across the country to discuss current events and the overall U.S.-ROK relationship. Participating officials and audience members alike value these opportunities to connect with relevant voices from both countries beyond Washington D.C.

In an increasingly digital age, KEI is committed to expanding our virtual engagement. Through our blog, "The Peninsula;" video series, "Korea in Five;" and livestreamed and recorded events on a wide variety of Korea- and transpacific issues; we are able to connect with people from across the globe who are interested in Korea. We invite you to explore our interactive website, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

The U.S. partnership with the Republic of Korea is built on enduring values and interests, but its strength cannot be taken for granted. The bonds between the two nations are maintained through the efforts of diplomats, service members, scholars, students, artists, and everyday Americans and Koreans. KEI is dedicated to contributing to this undertaking—helping to ensure a safer and more prosperous world.

KEI is contractually affiliated with the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), a public policy research institute located in Seoul and funded by the government of the Republic of Korea.

Preface

The Korea Economic Institute (KEI) is pleased to issue the second issue of its new flagship journal, Korea Policy. Our new journal carries forward the objective and spirit of KEI's previous publications, the Academic Paper Series' (APS) On Korea publication, and the Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies publication. Like our previous publications, Korea Policy identifies and explores the array of security, economic and political issues and policy trends related to Korea and the U.S.-Korea alliance. The journal offers academically rigorous and policy-relevant research.

Korea Policy papers are written by academic scholars and policy experts from the United States, South Korea, and around the globe. The objective is to provide opportunities for recognized specialists and new voices to present fresh research and innovative thinking on Korea, the region, and related international issues. Korea Policy will be published three times a year. Each issue covers a broad, unifying theme and is arranged into two sections: One section covering various regional states' perspectives and another section of more Korea-focused articles, all organized under the same broad theme.

Before publication, the articles in the first section are presented as working papers as a part of KEI's New Academic Symposium panel series, run as hybrid events in partnership with universities around the country. The Korea-focused articles in the second section are presented individually in hybrid events at KEI's Washington, DC office.

The papers in this second issue exemplify the breadth and depth of policy issues relevant to Korea and the U.S.-Korea alliance. They are original pieces written exclusively for this issue over the last six months. KEI distributes the final publication to individuals in governments, the private sector, policy institutes, and educational communities around the world, and features the digital publication on the KEI website for the broader public.

Contributions in this second issue of Korea Policy run under the broad theme: Defining the Indo-Pacific: A Region of Diverse Visions. The first section explores various countries' approaches to the Indo-Pacific concept, including the Japanese, South Korean, and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies as well as the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook. The second section offers more Korea-centric analysis, specifically on the U.S.-ROK-DPRK strategic triangle in the Indo-Pacific; ROK-Australia relations and convergence in the Indo-Pacific; and an examination of rhetoric versus reality surrounding U.S.-ROK strategic alignment on Taiwan.

For 40 years, KEI has produced objective and informative analyses and highlighted important policy research on Korea. I hope you find this inaugural volume of Korea Policy to be a useful contribution.

Kathleen Stephens
President and CEO
Korea Economic Institute of America
February 2023

Section 1

Regional Perspectives on the Indo-Pacific Concept

Comparative Approaches to the Indo-Pacific Region in 2022-23

By Gilbert Rozman

Introduction

As the Biden administration rolls out multiple pieces in its strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, leaderships on the front lines are responding. Here we compare four critical responses in 2022-23 to the unfolding U.S. approach. We begin with Japan, the closest U.S. partner and the initial architect of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" initiative. Then we turn to South Korea, which had wavered under Moon Jae-in but grew more enthusiastic in 2022 under President Yoon Suk-yeol, announcing its own strategy in December. After taking close looks at the two U.S. allies, we shift sharply to a comparison of the clashing Chinese and U.S. strategies for the region, including an assessment of which side recently has gained the momentum. In the final article, we focus on Southeast Asia—with Indonesia in the forefront—for comparisons with the United States and receptivity to the emerging U.S. approach. Together, these articles provide a snapshot of how the Biden administration's approach to Indo-Pacific architecture is faring in the spring of 2023.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the U.S.-led response served as a catalyst for changes at the opposite end of Eurasia. The Biden administration with strong support from Japan seized the opportunity of conflict in Europe with an eye to possible conflict over Taiwan to advance a new strategy in the Indo-Pacific, building on Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" and Donald Trump's "trade war" with China. Each of the articles below explains U.S. policy shifts in the wake of the war in Europe, while detailing some responses occurring along the western shores of the Pacific.

The overall picture from the four cases is of a U.S strategy gathering support from allies with certain reservations, raising concern in China attentive to a loss in its own momentum, and drawing interest as well as skepticism across Southeast Asia, which fears polarization. If the U.S. strategy remains incomplete

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and the Chinese response is only now taking shape, new signs of coordination between Japan and South Korea with an eye to winning more support from the states of Southeast Asia are attracting interest. With the Biden administration poised to refine its approach into 2025, Yoon's term in office to 2027, Japanese resolve strong as Kishida basks in the success of the Hiroshima G7 summit, and Xi Jinping confirmed as China's leader to 2027 and beyond, the struggle over Indo-Pacific architecture is only likely to intensify in the years ahead.

Competition over Indo-Pacific visions has evolved into three distinct struggles: 1) whether the Chinese agenda for control over a unified, integrated southern tier of Asia will prevail or the U.S. response to block it, geopolitically and geo-economically as well as with values, will succeed; 2) whether ASEAN centrality will endure, finding a way to thread the needle between these two strategies, or bipolarity will overwhelm the efforts of Indonesia and others to hold their ground; and 3) whether the "Global South" will close ranks behind another strategy, for which India aims to be the leader and Japan anxiously searches for common ground. In the first months of 2023 diplomacy advanced at a furious pace. Kishida went to Washington in January, to India in March, and to Hiroshima to lead the G7 and the Quad in May. He boosted the joint U.S.-Japan "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," backed ASEAN centrality, and endorsed India's "Global South" role. Yoon went to Japan in March, the U.S. in April, and Hiroshima in May, while affirming an Indo-Pacific strategy, supporting ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateralism, and hinting at a bolder role with ASEAN and India. While ASEAN was not in the forefront in this diplomacy, it was a big focus of contention.

On the opposite side of the contestation, Xi Jinping emerged from "Zero-COVID" with greater diplomatic energy. He visited Russia in March, doubling down on his support, hosted a Central Asian plus China summit in May, and reinvigorated his attention to Asia's "Southern Tier." When India's Narendra Modi went to the Pacific Islands and Australia after attending the G7, a battle for leadership in the "Global South" was fully joined. Chinese sought to discredit the very notion of "Indo-Pacific," while India, as a member of the Quad, was key to U.S. and Japanese hopes.

Yuki Tatsumi, "Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy"

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy predates that of the U.S. Abe Shinzo envisioned it as early as 2007. After he left office in 2020, his vision of Indo-Pacific strategy had full support from his successors Suga Yoshihide and Kishida Fumio. By 2023, the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept had become the centerpiece of U.S. and allied strategic rethinking. Japan stood firmly by the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and when it revised its National Security Strategy in December 2022, the two countries' strategies showed a high level of alignment. This

article examines what drove Abe's approach, how it evolved under Suga and Kishida, and how Japanese view the Biden approach. It also offers a comparison between the Biden and Kishida approaches.

Suga and Kishida each added his own touch. Suga's biggest contribution was institutionalizing the Quad. Following the first Quad summit virtually held in March 2021, Suga visited Biden in April 2021 discussing coordination under the Quad. Kishida unveiled his own vision for Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy on March 20, 2023. Just as Abe had done, Kishida chose a visit to India to launch it, signaling the strategic importance India plays in Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy. Kishida's new strategy was driven by changes in the international security environment. First, in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the necessity to prepare for a crisis across Taiwan Strait emerged as the more pressing security concern. Second, the Biden administration began to take concrete steps to counter China, particularly in the area of economic security. Along with the Ukraine war, this provided a new context in which Japan viewed its own Indo-Pacific strategy. Third, the "shared values" component gained more prominence in the U.S. approach. Finally, as Japan deepens its engagement in multilateral diplomacy anchoring these efforts firmly with the U.S.-Japan alliance has become ever more important.

Kishida Fumio continued to place the utmost emphasis on realizing the "FOIP." Kishida led Japan's effort to situate itself as a "connective node," between the U.S. and Europe on the one hand and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond on the other. At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, he declared unambiguously his "strong sense of urgency that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," stressing that "(n)o country or region in the world can shrug this off as 'someone else's problem." He identified the four underlying elements—enhancing regional connectivity, working toward the goal of a region that values freedom, the rule of law, freedom from coercion, and diversity, inclusiveness, and openness. Kishida put forward "principles for peace and rules for prosperity," defining it as "the backbone of FOIP" and including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, no unilateral changes to the status quo by force, a free, fair and just economic order, and promotion of transparency in development finance. Kishida advocated "addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way." Also, he called for "multi-layered connectivity" among different parts of the region, essential for regional stability. Finally, he discussed the security of international maritime space and airspace.

Japanese and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies have considerable overlap. For instance, both strategies are anchored in concepts such as the rule of law, connectivity, and respect for freedom and sovereignty. There are a few areas in which the approaches show differences, however. First is the overall tone of each strategy. On the one hand, the U.S. strategy has a stronger focus on political-military strategy. It emphasizes the importance of democratic norms and institutions and promoting cooperation with U.S. allies and partners that share democratic values. It discusses issues such deterrence, North Korea's security threat, and cooperation within the Quad, NATO, and AUKUS. Furthermore, the U.S. strategy frequently mentions China.

On the other hand, Japan's strategy is more nuanced. It does not push democratic values, norms and institutions—or cooperation among the allies and partners that share these values—to the forefront. Rather, Japan's strategy places much greater emphasis on the rule of law and other international norms—such as no use of coercion, no unilateral change of the status quo, and safety of international maritime and air spaces—which countries can agree on regardless of their political and societal norms. For instance, Kishida's references to "addressing the challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way" and "three principles of the rule of law at sea" demonstrate Japan's focus on leveraging the country's willingness to look for practical cooperation.

Likewise, the two strategies show a big difference in the multinational economic frameworks that each country promotes. While the U.S. understandably promotes cooperation through the IPEF and APEC—in both of which the U.S. participates and which are not treaty-based—Japan focuses on cooperation through CPTPP and the WTO, treaty-based international agreements.

Finally, the two strategies have a very different outlook when it comes to engaging the regions outside the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. looks across the Atlantic Ocean as its primary focus for external partners to promote the "FOIP." Its strategy discusses NATO and refers to AUKUS as a potential springboard to integrate Indo-Pacific and European allies to enhance deterrence. The "Global South" is by and large left out of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. In contrast, Japan views engagement with the "Global South" as essential to promote its "FOIP" vision. Its approach offers a good complement to U.S. strategy. Heavier focus on international norms softens the ideological edge of the "FOIP" vision, making it more palatable for the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, many of which are hesitant to alienate China. In addition, reaching out to the "Global South" places Japan as a connective node between the U.S. and these regions.

Katrin Katz, "The South Korean and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategies: Seoul's Cultivation of Regional Boldness from a Foundation of U.S. Alignment"

This article takes a deep dive into examining the similarities and differences between the South Korean and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies. It argues that the ROK strategy is less U.S.-centric in its overall orientation and more aligned with the U.S. position on China than early observations suggest. South Korea's strategy mirrors Washington's positions across a broad range of issues—from regional order and North Korea to economic security and transnational challenges - while also taking steps beyond them in several areas to pursue its own, independent objectives. This approach—U.S. emulation coupled with independent supplementation—evolves from Yoon's determination to make close U.S.-ROK alignment the central axis of Seoul's foreign policy while simultaneously pursuing a bolder role for South Korea as a "global pivotal state."

Seoul takes careful steps toward a tougher line on China that aligns more closely with the United States while attempting to avoid antagonizing Beijing. These tactics flow from Seoul's economic and geopolitical constraints vis a vis Beijing. Similarities are found in the choice of "Indo-Pacific" as the identifying strategic concept, the focus on advancing a values- and rule-based order through collective efforts, the decision to embed North Korea within broader, regional security challenges, the pursuit of prosperity, economic security, and cooperation on new technologies, and the determination to build resilience to transnational challenges. Differences, however, appear in the specifics of the two approaches to China.

Yoon's willingness to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept indicates the degree to which he is both less concerned than his predecessor about the potential to upset Beijing and more eager to align with the United States. South Korea's use of the Indo-Pacific concept facilitates U.S.-ROK coordination on specific policies and initiatives insofar as both countries are able to work from the same geostrategic template. But it also achieves at least two other objectives for Seoul in its efforts to enhance its own regional stature. First, it puts South Korea in closer alignment with a number of countries within and outside of the region that have also introduced Indo-Pacific strategies. Second, centering its strategy on the Indo-Pacific concept provides economic opportunities for South Korea. This is because the Indo-Pacific has a larger footprint and greater collective economic heft than the areas that had previous ROK strategies.

The South Korean and U.S. strategies also align closely in prioritizing the advancement of liberal values and a rules-based regional order as top strategic aims, and in identifying collective efforts with countries within and beyond the region as the most effective means to achieve these aims. The shared U.S.-ROK

focus on collective action to strengthen the rules-based regional order generates new opportunities for Washington and Seoul to coordinate on a wide range of normative issues in the region. South Korea's heightened focus on liberal values, rules, and norms creates capacity for Seoul to partner with Washington on the more specific initiatives listed in the U.S. strategy, the strategy's focus on a values- and rules-based regional order provides South Korea with a unifying rationale for its engagement with a broad range of countries across numerous issues, that was lacking in the prior administration's New Southern Policy. Embedding its strategy in liberal values and principles also provides South Korea with a convenient justification for new partnerships and initiatives that are susceptible to generating domestic controversy or pushback from Beijing.

For South Korea, the downgrading of the North Korean issue likely reflects an effort to demonstrate to Washington and other countries that it is capable of focusing its attention on security issues beyond the peninsula. The supplementary mentions of the "global nature" of the problem in the South Korean strategy help Seoul to pursue additional objectives—luring new partners to collaborate on the North Korea issue, and increasing levels of international pressure on Pyongyang to denuclearize.

The U.S. and ROK strategies both include "prosperity" as a key objective and propose a number of new initiatives to bolster economic security and technological cooperation. Stances on IPEF and APEC highlight the degree of overlap and complementarity in the economic sections of the U.S. and ROK strategies. But the South Korean strategy also goes well beyond referring to these two organizations as vehicles for pursuing its regional economic aspirations. Specifically, the ROK strategy mentions its "efforts to promote free trade and address protectionism. South Korea is an export-reliant country that does not face the same degree of domestic constraints concerning international trade that the U.S. currently does. It is therefore able to match and surpass the economic initiatives listed in the U.S. strategy. The U.S. and ROK strategies similarly identify climate change, energy security, and global health as top transnational challenges.

South Korea's approach to China is one area that stands out for its degree of contrast with the U.S. strategy. South Korea's treatment of China in its strategy is considerably more muted. South Korea's cautious approach to China flows from its unique economic and geopolitical constraints and from its desire to avoid again being targeted by Chinese economic coercion—as it was in 2017. Despite Seoul's hesitation to avoid antagonizing Beijing, a reading of the strategy in its entirety reveals a willingness by South Korea to incrementally shift toward a tougher line on security issues that are sensitive to China.

Yoon's trip to the United States on April 24-29, 2023 reinforced the notion that, in the present-day context of zero-sum great power competition, South Korea faces difficulties pursuing closer ties with the U.S. without damaging relations with China. Yoon deepened alignment with Washington from defense and security to technological cooperation and business ties. Although Yoon's state visit saw the U.S. and ROK become more united in their regional and global stances —prompting Seoul and Beijing to drift further apart—areas of lingering tension in the alliance have the potential to shift these dynamics. Ongoing concerns among the South Korean public and politicians about summit outcomes could create pressure on Yoon. The success of South Korea's first Indo-Pacific strategy is far from pre-determined. Continuing to navigate close alignment with the United States, a more independent regional role, and stable relations with China will require deft maneuvering, in accord with the nuances so far expressed.

Gilbert Rozman, "How the United States Gained Momentum over China in the Indo-Pacific"

In 2020 Xi Jinping was on a roll. Donald Trump had left U.S. alliances in disarray and the home front in discord, unable even to unite against a pandemic. U.S. allies South Korea and Japan saw China (and Russia too) in ways at odds with U.S. strategy—Moon Jae-in relying on it for his obsession with North Korean diplomacy, and Abe awaiting a state visit from Xi in the hope of economic cooperation at odds with Trump's trade war. By 2023 the picture had changed. The U.S. has gained appreciably at China's expense. Competition in reshaping the Indo-Pacific order is continuing. The Chinese controlling strategy is vying against the U.S. blocking strategy.

The years 2021 to 2023 saw remarkable flux, as one initiative followed another with an eye to the geopolitical and geo-economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific. If in the 2010s the focus was on trade agreements, emphasis had shifted to military concerns and economic security. As two camps solidified under the U.S. and China, the "Global South" mostly kept hedging its bets. The U.S. is not asking states to choose a side but to prevent China from closing their options.

The United States had responded to Xi Jinping's initiatives of the 2010s cautiously but without real alarm. Chinese railed against Obama's "pivot to Asia" as if it would turn into a gamechanger blocking their regional plans, and they castigated Trump's "FOIP" plan as threatening a region-wide containment strategy, but in both cases, there was confident pushback that these initiatives were doomed. What stands apart in China's response to Biden's Quad, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, etc. is the more defensive nature of its reactions, struggling to identify a positive outcome. Biden's policies, including steps to counter China in

the Indo-Pacific, play a big part in leaving Chinese apparently bewildered on how to regain the momentum for their own regional agenda. Comparing the two regional reordering agendas shows the initiative shifted to the U.S.

What distinguishes the U.S. strategy of 2023 from earlier U.S. strategies is the overwhelming emphasis on technologies of the present and the future. Export controls, investment limits on incoming and outgoing capital flows, multilateral coordination, and anticipation of the cutting edge technologies of the next generation are prioritized. Unlike Obama's preoccupation with freedom of navigation operations or Trump's with trade deficits, Biden put semi-conductors in the forefront, following his leadership of a broad coalition that imposed sanctions on Russia for its war in Ukraine with a sustained roll-out and buy-in from others on restrictions on dual-use products. As of early 2023, the degree of buy-in and the extent of the restrictions were unclear.

In 2022-23, the U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific region takes four forms: 1) mini-lateral coalitions across the region; 2) traditional security deterrence to prepare for contingencies with tightened ties to other states; 3) value contrasts to expose the gap with China and the danger of its values for regional peace and stability; and 4) economic security steps to contain China's coercion, not a competitor's rise, preventing illicit civil-military fusion and its monopolies over technologies and supplies that could be employed to coerce other states to do China's bidding. The U.S. approach is three-fold: 1) security takes precedence, boosting alliances and pursuing the Quad with the understanding that India's alarm about Chinese aggression opens the door to a security grouping; 2) economics matter, but trade takes a back seat to economic security, as IPEF gradually is clarified; and 3) values receive attention, showcased by the December 2021 Summit for Democracy, although some partners hesitate to echo this U.S. position in light of resistance in the Global South. The Ukraine war further raised the priority on security, made the case for economic security much stronger, and reinforced the democracy-autocracy divide. The U.S.-led agenda stressed a free and open order based on the rule of law, sovereignty and territorial integrity, prohibition against the use of force, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

The fundamental source of bipolarity is China's assertive foreign policy. It left the aspirations of Russia for multipolarity in Asia unrealizable, while driving Japan and South Korea closer to the United States. India also turned closer to the U.S., but it used the Ukraine war to reaffirm in ties to Russia its wariness of bipolarity. Disappointed with China's complicating of triangularity with India and ASEAN, Russia desperately invaded Ukraine in its gambit to revive multipolarity. Such moves to brook the tide of bipolarity did not distract the U.S. and China from their overall goals.

In multiple areas, Chinese sources recognize deterioration in China's position. In writings on Japan and South Korea the change in tone is unmistakable, acknowledging the loss of further possibilities to drive a firm wedge between them and the U.S. as well as the negative impact of trilateralism. The link-up of NATO and U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific is recognized as a serious blow. Resoluteness to counter a contingency over Taiwan is worrisome to China as well. The Indo-Pacific concept, the Quad, and economic security all appear as challenges for the Chinese authors. Even Biden's ideological language is recognized as more threatening than was Trump's use of anti-communism. Chinese sources confirm U.S. successes and need for new responses.

Chinese analysis of Biden's Indo-Pacific policy reveals thinking about China's own strategy. Biden is accused of interfering with the "integration" and "unification" of the region and China's pursuit of a "common destiny." It is fragmenting the region, splitting ASEAN, and stirring up anxiety about a "China threat." Missing is any assessment of what China has done to enable these results.

The momentum shift in the early 2020s to the U.S. side over China reflected the inherent edge of a broad-based alliance network over a narrowly Sinocentric adversary as well as the success of the Biden administration's rejuvenation of U.S. strategic leadership with many new touches focused on economic security. Biden galvanized the considerable assets of Northeast Asia to launch a more comprehensive agenda for Asia's southern tier, recognizing the significance of Taiwan as a vital link between the two. In 2023 Xi Jinping was preparing a counter-strategy.

Chinese argue that two historically based ignominious ambitions drive regionalism against their country: 1) U.S. Cold War mentality to contain a rival, as occurred in the Korean War and anti-Soviet policies; and 2) Japan's prewar mentality to become the dominant power in Asia, which is carrying over to remilitarization. Omitted is any recognition of the backlash against China's expansionist and threatening behavior, leading countries predisposed to cooperate with it to join in resistance. The Quad was born not from a compulsion to contain but from defensive ties.

China's BRI and other regional plans aroused anxiety among many of its neighbors, who rallied behind a U.S. led approach to limit the potential of Chinese coercion. As BRI shifted in the face of economic doubts and recipient wariness, China lost momentum for reshaping regional architecture. After halting counter-moves by Obama and Trump, Biden crystallized a more comprehensive response centered on mini-lateral security groups and economic security restrictions, coupled with appeals for shared values. Although incomplete in specifics, the Biden plan capitalized on the Ukraine war and the prospect of China's forceful takeover of Taiwan to forge a

sustainable strategy to keep China from turning economic vulnerability in other states into regional control. Contestation over the Indo-Pacific was overshadowed by Russia's war in Europe, but neither the U.S. nor China lost focus on the primacy of the rivalry over regionalism.

Susannah Patton, "United States and Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific Approaches Compared"

The term Indo-Pacific has become the accepted way that the United States refers to the broad geographic region stretching from the western Indian Ocean, through Southeast Asia and into Northeast Asia and the Pacific. However, adoption of the concept in Southeast Asia remains mixed. At Indonesia's urging, ASEAN in 2019 adopted its "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), and Indonesia itself readily uses the term. Most other Southeast Asian countries are cautious, associating it with a confrontational approach to China that they cannot endorse. Setting out key elements of both approaches to the Indo-Pacific, this article primarily focuses on Indonesia's perspective, reflected in the AOIP. It identifies common concerns, especially an emphasis on maritime cooperation, as the driver of convergence, as well as several divergences, notably questions about the value of cooperation as a driver, rather than the product of strategic trust, and the relative importance of "inclusive" versus "exclusive" or "minilateral" cooperative mechanisms. These divergences reflect underlying disagreements over how to engage China.

As Rory Medcalf has argued, the Indo-Pacific concept reflects countries' desire for a more inclusive vision of a broad and interconnected region in which China does not dominate. In contrast to the Trump administration's goal of U.S. primacy, the Biden administration's strategy seeks a "balance of power that is maximally favourable to the United States" and its allies and partners. It seeks to articulate an "end state" or vision for the region that it hopes all countries would share, including a region that is free, open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. The Biden Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly makes linkages with partners' approaches. It endorses the AOIP, sharing the view that Southeast Asia is central to regional architecture.

IPEF negotiators are working on four pillars: trade, including digital trade; supply chains; clean energy, decarbonization, and the green economy; and tax and anti-corruption. Negotiating new free trade agreements is unpalatable for the Biden administration. However, in recognition of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, and the region's strong demand for greater U.S. economic engagement, it is seeking to negotiate IPEF as a compromise approach, complemented by other U.S. sectoral economic initiatives and broader global programs from which Indo-Pacific countries could benefit, such as the G7 Global Partnership for Infrastructure.

With the exception of Indonesia and the Philippines, many Southeast Asian countries are suspicious that the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and its allies are policies to contain China. The AOIP was ASEAN's way of articulating its own strategic vision and attempting to reclaim diplomatic space where it saw the Quad as potentially encroaching. Its adoption also reflects concern that growing polarization between the U.S. and China could squeeze Southeast Asia. The AOIP rejects rivalry and zero-sum thinking, listing as over-arching goals: a region in which ASEAN plays a central role, a region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry, and a region of development and prosperity. The AOIP is "defensive" in posture: it portrays the region in positive terms as dynamic and peaceful, with ASEAN's focus to defend against challenges to the current order. The focus is overwhelmingly on economic matters. The AOIP does not break new ground, leading analysts to critique it for bringing "old tools" to new challenges.

That Indonesia needed to extensively lobby ASEAN to adopt the AOIP suggests that other countries either did not immediately see the need to adopt a common position on the Indo-Pacific, or had reservations about the concept itself. Malaysia's stance is especially relevant, as it, like Indonesia, geographically bridges the Indian and Pacific Ocean—a choice to distance itself from an "externally constructed term" that could draw it into U.S.-China competition. Philippines President Bongbong Marcos refers to the "Asia-Pacific" rather than Indo-Pacific; however successive Philippine defense secretaries have all used Indo-Pacific. Most ASEAN countries predominantly use the term Asia or Asia-Pacific in their own statements, but appear to be flexible in using the term Indo-Pacific in joint statements or meetings with the United States. Small continental countries such as Cambodia and Laos remain wary of the term.

The United States and its allies Japan and Australia clearly see the AOIP as worth supporting. While they likely recognize that the AOIP does not equate to support for U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, they welcome its principles of inclusivity and openness. With the aim of buttressing these values within ASEAN, the United States now frames its assistance to ASEAN as falling within the four pillars of the AOIP (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic partnership). This is more a rhetorical than a substantive shift. Even China, which has long decried U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as reflecting a "cold war mentality" acknowledged the AOIP. The AOIP might qualify as a strategy for boosting ASEAN centrality, but it does not present a plan to shape the Indo-Pacific. Aside from Indonesia, Southeast Asian countries are small states with limited strategic ambition.

The IPS refers to the Indo-Pacific as one region, but also acknowledges the existence of sub-regions, including Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Pacific Island countries. By contrast, the AOIP identifies the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean as two regions, rather than as "contiguous territorial spaces," with Southeast Asia at the center. It may reflect ASEAN's anxiety that Southeast Asia's weight is diluted within an expansively defined Indo-Pacific. Whereas within the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is just one of several groups and could be seen as facing competition from other forums such as the Quad, comprising regional heavyweight powers.

While the AOIP refers to freedom of navigation and overflight, it gives comparatively greater weight to less sensitive non-traditional security maritime issues. While the AOIP is focused on boosting ASEAN's regional role, the IPS emphasizes cooperation with ASEAN and through what it calls "flexible groupings" such as the Quad. One explanation for these different approaches is that ASEAN countries tend to view practical cooperation as a building block for strategic trust, while the United States tends to take a more "top down" approach. All Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia as the document's key architect, see national economic development as far more important than regional security issues. As Evan Feigenbaum has written, "the business of Asia is still business."

IPEF has received a mixed reception in Southeast Asia. Although it includes seven out of ten ASEAN countries, which indicates strong appetite to engage the U.S. on economic issues, leaders have publicly called on the United States to negotiate on market access, in line with the region's own priorities. While IPEF negotiations are yet to play out, many analysts question why Southeast Asian countries would commit to high U.S. standards on labor and environmental issues without the quid pro quo of access to the U.S. market or large-scale programs of financial and technical assistance.

The AOIP framing tends to buttress a status quo that is under threat. The IPS, by contrast, frames China as already putting heavy pressure on countries in the Indo-Pacific and undermining human rights and international law in its pursuit of a regional sphere of influence. The U.S. goal is to arrest trends that are already underway and reverse recent changes. The AOIP was developed to respond to, rather than to endorse, competing visions of the Indo-Pacific, which explains why it diverges so greatly from U.S. approaches to the Indo-Pacific—to the extent that even China has implicitly endorsed it. It is closer to a critique than an endorsement of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Yuki Tatsumi*

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy predates that of the U.S. In fact, Abe Shinzo gets credit for envisioning it as early as 2007 during his first brief tenure as prime minister. When he returned to office in December 2012, he revitalized the effort to actualize his vision as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy and began to institutionalize it, securing support from the United States, Australia, and most critically, India. After he left office in 2020, his Indo-Pacific strategy had the full support of his successors Suga Yoshihide and Kishida Fumio, each of whom added their own touches to Abe's vision.

President Donald Trump endorsed Abe's "FOIP," but he showed limited interest in its multilateral implications. President Joe Biden has gone much further in adding substance to it since his inauguration in January 2021. By 2023, the concept has become the centerpiece of U.S. and allied strategic rethinking of the architecture for the vast maritime area spanning Northeast Asia to South Asia. Japan stood firmly by the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and when it revised its National Security Strategy in December 2022, the two countries' strategies showed a high level of alignment, which was celebrated as "unprecedented alignment of their vision, priorities, and goals" when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met their Japanese counterparts Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and Defense Minister Hamada Yasukazu for the Security Consultative Committee on January 12, 2023.[1]

There is no question that the two countries' Indo-Pacific strategies share many goals and priorities. However, that does not mean that the two strategies are in complete alignment. This article examines what drove Abe's approach to the Indo-Pacific and how it evolved first under Suga then Kishida. It then reflects on how Japanese view the Biden approach, followed by a preliminary comparison between the Biden and Kishida approaches as of early 2023 for the similarities and differences in their thinking.

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The Drivers behind Abe's Approach to the Indo-Pacific

Abe, who had been in office for almost a year after the departure of Koizumi Junichiro, revealed the basic framework of his Indo-Pacific strategy during his visit to India in August 2007. Standing in front of the Parliament, Abe articulated the strategic importance of the vast maritime area spanning from the Pacific to Indian oceans in his speech entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas." Citing the title of a book written by a Mughal Prince in the 17th century, Abe argued that Japan and India stood together at an historic moment when these two oceans have joined in a broader maritime Asia, emerging as an important strategic region for both countries. He further argued that Japan and India could cooperate to convert this vast maritime area into "an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely."[2]

Abe articulated a clearer vision after he returned to office. In a commentary "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," he argued that "Peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean" and emphasized the importance of a deeper cooperation with India and Australia. He also explicitly encouraged European countries—namely England and France—to engage in the Indo-Pacific region more robustly, arguing "(T)he sea-faring democracies in Japan's part of the world would be much better off with their renewed presence."[3,4] Furthermore, when he spoke at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) during his visit in Washington DC in February 2013 Abe presented his vision for Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific region as a "rules-promoter, a commons' guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the U.S. and other democracies."[5] Catching more attention was his August 2016 address in Kenya, where he used the language of "free and open oceans between two continents,"[6] which stuck as the label for a regional initiative.

Two major factors drove Abe to raise this theme in 2007 and again in 2013 and 2016, and to continue to vigorously press for it until the end of his time in office in September 2020. The predominant driver was China. By 2005, Japan-China relations were already troubled by many issues. Some were related to Japan's wartime past, such as large anti-Japanese demonstrations in Chinese cities that were triggered by Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, a controversial Shinto shrine that enshrines not only the Japanese soldiers who died during World War II but also a handful of Class-A War Criminals. But others were driven by Japan's strategic competition vis-à-vis China over their respective influence in the other parts of the world, demonstrated by a diplomatic showdown over membership in a newly established East Asian Summit (EAS). Japan was

unwilling to accept a strengthened body under ASEAN leadership without adding India, Australia, and New Zealand to counterbalance China's growing power and assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition to ASEAN countries, Japan, and China, these three and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) joined the EAS when it was first launched in 2005.[7]

Despite his concerns about the trajectory of China's rise, Abe had not given up on the effort to pursue a constructive relationship with Beijing during his first tenure in office. In fact, he chose to visit China and South Korea before his visit to the U.S.—a very unusual move by a Japanese prime minister[8] —to demonstrate his commitment to restore relations with its two East Asian neighbors, both of which had considerably cooled during Koizumi's six years in office. During his visit to Beijing in October 2006, the two governments agreed to work toward a "mutually-beneficial relationship based on common strategic interest," and to make the East China Sea a "Sea of Peace, Cooperation, and Friendship."[9]

By 2012, however, Japan-China relations had sunk further with China's increasing aggressiveness around the Senkaku Islands, most notably manifested in China's response to Japanese government's decision to arrest the captain of the Chinese fishing boat that rammed into a Japanese Coast Guard cruiser. Japan also questioned China's intentions for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an attempt to flex its economic muscle by offering an alternative development aid framework for developing countries with troubling geopolitical implications.

Secondly and more importantly, Abe was concerned that China's rise was not countered by the U.S. as robustly as required. In particular, Abe was concerned that the prolonged U.S. preoccupation in the Middle East not only took U.S. attention away from China's growing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. He also suspected that Washington was wary of sustaining its leadership role in the Asia-Pacific despite the Obama administration's initial commitment to the "pivot to Asia."[10] Hoping to secure U.S. continued engagement in the region, Abe gave his full support when the Obama administration launched the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as one of the two key pillars of its Asia-Pacific strategy. Under his watch, Japan also joined the U.S. decision not to join China's BRI, even as the positions of major U.S. allies in Europe continued to evolve on this.[11]

Abe's concern about U.S. disengagement from the region continued to grow during the Trump administration. His government was shocked by Trump's announcement of U.S. withdrawal from some of the major multinational initiatives that the U.S. had led during the Obama administration, including TPP and the Paris Climate Accord. While Abe appreciated the Trump

administration pursing "a new approach" that is "grounded in fairness, reciprocity, and respect for sovereignty," and welcomed its redefinition of the relationship with China as one of strategic competition, he was still concerned that its abrasive approach to U.S. allies could alienate the other democracies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Hence, consistent with the vision he articulated in his "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," Abe made diplomatic moves to invest in further deepening Japan's relationship with India (encouraged by his personal rapport with Prime Minister Narendra Modi), Australia, and even with the Philippines. Under Abe's watch, Japan also began to institutionalize its security cooperation with major European countries including England, France, and Germany.

From Suga to Kishida—evolution of Abe's vision

After Abe left the office in September 2020, his vision of "FOIP" for Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy was picked up by his successors. The fact that both Suga and Kishida were intimately familiar with Abe's vision contributed to continuity in Japan's policy.[12] Each added his own touch to the "FOIP" strategy.

Suga's biggest contribution to the Indo-Pacific strategy was his effort in revitalizing and institutionalizing the Quad, the framework that included the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India. First articulated in 2007 by Abe, the Quad strategic dialogue was put on hold when Australia withdrew out of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's concern about antagonizing China. However, in light of China's aggressive behavior, such as coercive economic policy toward Australia's neighbors in the Pacific Islands, Australia's outlook on China began to harden. Also, India's stance toward China came to be more aligned with that of the U.S., Japan, and Australia as it also began to grow wary of China's aggressive activities in Indian Ocean. Finally, as the entire world struggled to navigate the impact of COVID-19, issues such as increased transparency in global public health, pandemic preparedness, ensuring timely vaccine development and safeguarding medical supplies emerged as a new set of global challenges that needed to be addressed.

Suga was quick to capitalize on these developments. Following the first Quad summit virtually held in March 2021, Suga visited Washington for a bilateral summit meeting with Biden in April 2021 where one of the major topics of discussion was coordination under the Quad. In September 2021, the four leaders met for the first-ever in-person Quad summit in Washington DC during which they agreed to regularize Quad meetings at the cabinet ministerial level. They also agreed to establish focused working groups on issues including

COVID-19 vaccine production and worldwide distribution, coordination on overseas infrastructure projects, and coordination on the rule-setting for emerging technologies.[13]

After succeeding Suga in October 2021, Kishida Fumio continued to place the utmost emphasis on realizing the "FOIP" as one of the pillars of his cabinet's national security and foreign policy.[14] In particular, Kishida led Japan's effort to situate itself as a "connective node," so to speak, between the U.S. and Europe on the one hand and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond on the other. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he was concerned that many countries in the region shied away from clearly articulating their support for Ukraine. At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, he declared unambiguously his "strong sense of urgency that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," stressing that "(n)o country or region in the world can shrug this off as 'someone else's problem.' It is a situation that shakes the very foundations of the international order, which every country and individual gathered here today should regard as their own affair."[15]

Kishida's effort to articulate this point preceded his Shangri-La speech. In fact, he was already making the case for his "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" argument as he revitalized in-person summit diplomacy earlier in 2022. During his visit to India and Cambodia—his first trip as prime minister—for instance, the need for the Indo-Pacific region to commit to upholding a rule-based international order was highlighted in the joint statements at each stop. In India, Kishida and Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the joint declaration following a summit meeting that repeatedly discussed "the need for all countries to seek peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law without resorting to threat or use of force or any attempt to unilaterally change status quo" and the two countries "shared vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific."[16] In Cambodia, while the primary focus was to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Japan-Cambodia diplomatic relationship, the importance of cooperation toward the "FOIP" and the two countries' shared recognition that "this aggression (by Russia against Ukraine) jeopardizes the foundation of international order which does not accept any unilateral change of the internationally recognized borders by force" were articulated.[17] He stayed on this message during his visit to Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand in May 2022, pushing them to step up support for Ukraine.[18]

As Kishida continued to make the case for his "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" argument in his engagement with Japan's partners in the Indo-Pacific region, he simultaneously accelerated Japan's engagement with Europe both on a bilateral basis and within the context of the EU and NATO. Throughout

2022, Kishida aggressively engaged Japan's European partners including Germany, England, the EU, and NATO. Finally, Kishida continued to champion the Quad and further institutionalization of Japan's security partnership with Australia, which culminated in the two countries signing the Japan Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement in January 2022.[19]

Kishida's sense of urgency over Japan's worsening security environment, which was further aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and propelled him to invest time in his role as "diplomat-in-chief" to articulate the case for why the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war should be taken seriously as one of the most serious challenge against the post-World War II international order, drove Japan to considerably update its key three strategic documents—National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Build-up Plan (DBP). Referred to as a package, the "Three National Security Documents" (Anpo San Bunsho)—represent a considerable reorientation of Japan's national security policy and address the critical question of how to protect important national security interests by considerably changing policy approaches.

First and foremost, the 2022 NSS clearly identified China as "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community, as well as in strengthening the international order based on the rule of law," which is a notable departure from Tokyo's past approach to China. Secondly, the three documents collectively focus on the areas that have long been considered "taboo" in domestic discourse on national security policy, creating a political environment in which the decision to introduce counterstrike capabilities met with very little opposition. Thirdly, the documents collectively embrace a broader definition of national security, such as economic security, and a more robust civil society-defense synergy in domains such as cyber and space and other emerging technological areas.

Kishida's vision for Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, unveiled during his trip to India on March 20, 2023, was built upon these 2022 developments. Entitled "The Future of the Indo-Pacific: Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP),'" the speech contextualized his Indo-Pacific strategy as an evolution of Abe's 2007 speech as well as Kishida's own speech "Era of the Indo-Pacific" made in 2015.[20] Kishida also argued that, as the existing international order comes under attack, the "FOIP" is gaining relevance as an organizing principle because of its ability to evolve by incorporating the perspectives from the stakeholders in the region. Referring to the FOIP as "Our FOIP," he suggested that his baseline vision of it is "simple" and identified the underlying elements—enhancing regional connectivity; working toward the

goal of a region that values freedom; the rule of law; freedom from coercion; and diversity, inclusiveness, and openness as well as prosperity.[21] Informed by the above frame of reference, Kishida laid out four key principles for his Indo-Pacific strategy.

The first principle Kishida put forward is what he calls "principles for peace and rules for prosperity." Defining it as "the backbone of FOIP," he insisted that international values and norms such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, no unilateral changes to the status quo by force, a free, fair and just economic order, and promotion of greater transparency in development finance are the core values that should underpin FOIP.

Secondly, Kishida advocated "addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way" as the new focus of cooperation for the "FOIP." Countries in the Indo-Pacific region should seek to find realistic and practical solutions based on an "equal partnership" to global challenges—such as climate change, food security, public health, natural disasters, and cybersecurity—with Kishida arguing that such an approach is essential for the resilience and sustainability of the region.

Thirdly, Kishida called for an "FOIP" that is based on "multi-layered connectivity." Specifically referring to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands, Kishida mentioned that connectivity among different parts of the Indo-Pacific region was essential for regional stability. He also discussed the importance of facilitating people-to-people exchanges as well as developing a reliable digital technology to support such connections.

Finally, Kishida discussed the security and safety of international maritime space and airspace. Pointing out that the region has historically focused on maritime security, he argued that ensuring the safe use of international airspace is equally important. Citing "three principles of the rule of law at sea"—international law-based territorial claims, no use of force or coercion to unilaterally change the status quo, and peaceful settlement of disputes—that Japan supports, Kishida discussed extensively the importance of empowering maritime law enforcement organizations and aviation authorities in the region.[22]

A comparison of the updated Indo-Pacific strategy offered by Kishida and the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy announced in February 2022 reveals that the two have many shared elements (Chart 1).

Elements	Parallels	United States	Japan
Conception of FOIP	**Both Highlight** Rule of law Connectivity Freedom/sovereignty	"Free and open Indo-Pacific that is more connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient." "[F]ree and open Indo-Pacific, where governments can make their own sovereign choices, consistent with their obligations under international law; and where seas, skies, and other shared domains are lawfully governed."	"Enhance the connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region, foster the region into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, free from force or coercion, and make it prosperous." "[T]he root of the concept of FOIP is defending "freedom" and the "rule of law."
Pillars of FOIP Strategy/ Objectives	**Both Highlight** Respecting rule of law advancing connectivity addressing non-traditional security threats bolstering regional security enhancing regional prosperity	1) Advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific 2) Build Connections Within and Beyond the Region 3) Drive Regional Prosperity 4) Bolster Indo-Pacific Security 5) Build Regional Resilience to Transnational Threats	1) Principles for Peace and Rules for Prosperity 2) Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way 3) Multi-layered Connectivity 4) Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the "Sea" to the "Air"
Scope of Indo-Pacific	**Both Include** Indian Ocean Pacific Ocean Northeast Asia Southeast Asia South Asia Oceania	**Middle East:** not included **Africa:** not included	**Middle East:** included **Africa:** included
Role in the Region		"The United States is an Indo-Pacific power"	"Japan and India should jointly lead the region and the world in the 'Era of the Indo-Pacific."

Elements	Parallels	United States	Japan
Traditional Security Challenges	**Both Highlight** Russia maritime security safe use of air/skies	**DPRK:** mentioned **Critical and emerging technologies:** mentioned **Integrated deterrence:** mentioned **Extended deterrence:** mentioned	**DPRK:** no mention **Critical and emerging technologies:** no mention **Integrated deterrence:** no mention **Extended deterrence:** no mention
Non-traditional Security Challenges	**Both Highlight** Climate change and environment COVID-19 and global public health terrorism cyberspace natural disasters	**Biological threats:** mentioned **Food security:** no mention	**Biological threats:** no mention **Food security:** mentioned
Reference to China		Frequent (5 times)	No explicit reference
Regional Allies	**Both Mention** India The Pacific Islands The Republic of Korea (ROK) Australia	**New Zealand:** seeks to strengthen relations **Philippines:** seeks to deepen/modernize relations **Thailand:** seeks to deepen/modernize relations **Indonesia:** seeks to deepen/modernize relations **Malaysia:** seeks to strengthen relations **Mongolia:** seeks to strengthen relations **Singapore:** seeks to strengthen relations **Taiwan:** seeks to strengthen relations **Vietnam:** seeks to strengthen relations **Japan-ROK:** emphasizes cooperation	**New Zealand:** no mention **Philippines:** only cites previous support **Thailand:** not explicitly mentioned **Indonesia:** not explicitly mentioned **Malaysia:** only cites existing exchange program **Mongolia:** not explicitly mentioned **Singapore:** not explicitly mentioned **Taiwan:** not explicitly mentioned **Vietnam:** not explicitly mentioned **Japan-ROK:** does not mention relations

Elements	Parallels	United States	Japan
Non-Regional Allies	**Both Mention** Europe/EU	**United Kingdom:** mentions **Canada:** no mention	**United Kingdom:** no mention **Canada:** mentions
Role of Multilateral Fora	**Both Promote** G7 and G20	**ASEAN:** highlights "ASEAN Centrality" **ASEAN+3:** no mention **Quad:** emphasizes role in non-traditional security threats **NATO:** seeks align goals **AUKUS:** integrate Indo-Pacific and European allies, and increase security deterrence **WHO:** strengthen preparedness and response to infectious diseases **UN:** coordinate with to advance "common vision" **Pacific Islands Forum:** advance our resilience efforts for infectious diseases **Asia Zero Emission Community:** no mention	**ASEAN:** endorses the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" **ASEAN+3:** food security **Quad:** no mention **NATO:** no mention **AUKUS:** no mention **WHO:** no mention **UN:** principles of the UN Charter should be adhered to in every corner of the world. **Pacific Island Forum:** no mention **Asia Zero Emission Community:** achieving both decarbonization and economic growth
Role of Economic Frameworks		**IPEF:** promoted **CPTPP:** no mention **APEC:** promoted **WTO:** no mention	**IPEF:** no mention **CPTPP:** promoted **APEC:** no mention **WTO:** promoted
Diplomacy	**Both Promote** Youth-leadership education exchange professional exchange	**Entrepreneur exchange:** no mention **Embassies:** will open new embassies in the region	**Entrepreneur exchange:** mentioned **Embassies:** no mention
Human Rights		**Human trafficking:** mentioned **Gender:** emphasizes "Gender Equity"	**Human trafficking:** not mentioned **Gender:** emphasizes "Women's Empowerment"

Compiled by Nicholas Velez, June 26-28, 2023

As Chart 1 shows, Japanese and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies have considerable overlap. For instance, both strategies are anchored in concepts such as the rule of law, connectivity, and respect for freedom and sovereignty. The objectives for the "FOIP" articulated in both strategies include addressing non-traditional security challenges; bolstering regional security; and enhancing regional prosperity. In more specific elements, ranging from the definition of "Indo-Pacific," both traditional and untraditional security identified in the respective strategies, non-regional partners, the role of multinational fora, and diplomacy, the two strategies' are extremely closely aligned with each other. There are a few areas in which the Japanese and U.S. approaches show differences, however. First is the overall tone of each strategy. On the one hand, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, even though it addresses non-traditional security issues and economic and trade issues, has a stronger focus on political-military strategy. Consistent with the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, which discussed the global security environment in the context of the strategic competition between democracy and autocracy, it emphasizes the importance of democratic norms and institutions and promoting cooperation with U.S. allies and partners that share democratic values. It discusses issues such as integrated deterrence, extended deterrence, North Korea's security threat, and cooperation within such frameworks as the Quad, NATO, and AUKUS. Furthermore, in the context of the broader U.S.-China strategic competition, U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy frequently mentions China throughout its documents.

On the other hand, Japan's strategy is more nuanced. It does not push the elements of democratic values, norms and institutions—or cooperation among the allies and partners that share these values—to the forefront of the strategy. Rather, Japan's strategy places much greater emphasis on the rule of law and other international norms—such as no use of coercion, no unilateral change of the status quo, and safety of international maritime and air spaces—which countries can agree on regardless of their political and societal norms. For instance, Kishida's references to "addressing the challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way" and "three principles of the rule of law at sea" demonstrate Japan's focus on leveraging the country's willingness to look for practical cooperation.

Likewise, the two strategies show a big difference in the multinational economic frameworks that each country promotes. While the U.S. understandably promotes cooperation through the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)—in both of which the U.S. participates and which are not treaty-based partnerships—Japan focuses more on cooperation through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement

for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), both of which are treaty-based international agreements.

Finally, the two strategies have a very different outlook when it comes to engaging the regions outside the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. looks across the Atlantic Ocean as its primary focus for external partners to promote the "FOIP." Its strategy discusses NATO as a partner with which Washington seeks to align visions of the "FOIP" and gives a nod to the European Union (EU) as a partner. It also refers to AUKUS as a potential springboard to integrate Indo-Pacific and European allies to enhance deterrence. Partners stop at North America and Europe, but the other parts of the world, including the so-called "Global South," are by and large left out of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

In contrast, Japan's views engagement with the "Global South" as essential to promote its "FOIP" vision. Its Indo-Pacific strategy identifies Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa as "important partners in achieving the FOIP." Kishida, in his Indo-Pacific strategy speech, even discussed the specific initiatives to support sustainable economic development in these regions.[23] Kishida's emphasis on engaging the "Global South" in Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy is consistent with his argument for Japan to expand its engagement with "the Global South" in the speech he delivered in Washington DC during his visit in January 2023. He identified ASEAN and India as the most critical partners in "the Global South," but also pledged Japan's commitment to deepen diplomatic engagement with the rest of South Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean.[24] Kishida also called for greater transparency in development aid to provide equal opportunity for all the development aid recipients to pursue economic independence and sustainable development, insisting that "'no country will be excluded' from the spirit of the FOIP."[25]

Tokyo's emphasis is built upon the history of its engagement with Southeast Asia and other parts of the "Global South." For instance, Japan's approach to Southeast Asia has long been anchored in the Fukuda Doctrine, the vision that Fukuda Takeo laid out during his visit to the Philippines in 1977, where he unveiled an ASEAN policy anchored in his belief that the foundation of the Japan-ASEAN relationship should be "heart-to-heart" connections among the people. Guided by this belief, Fukuda proposed three principles for Japan's engagement with ASEAN: Japan would support Southeast Asia's prosperity as a peace-loving country; Japan would develop relationships with Southeast Asia in areas ranging from politics, economy, and culture that are anchored in heart-to-heart relations among our peoples and based on mutual confidence as true friends; and Japan

would be an equal and "good partner" that would work with ASEAN toward not only a more robust economy but also toward a better, sustainable quality of life.[26] Similarly, Abe argued that Japan would stand with Africa as the region tries to rebuild itself from the decades of civil wars and strives to tap into its potential.

Conclusion

This article traces the evolution of Japan's "FOIP" vision, which originated in Abe's speech on "the confluence of the two seas" in India in 2007 and continued to evolve into the Kishida administration. It also compared Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, as articulated by Kishida in March 2023, with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy announced by the Biden Administration in February 2022.

The comparison of U.S. and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategies suggests that Japan envisions the "FOIP" as an organizing principle of the regional order that focuses on internationally agreed norms, such as the rule of law, and is open to any country and entity as long as it abides by these norms. In contrast, the U.S. strategy, while it addresses the importance of international rules and norms, heavily focuses on how the U.S. facilitates cooperation with its allies and partners in the region, which share democratic values, to develop a regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region that allows Washington to compete with China from the position of strength. In other words, Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy sees a region that is inclusive and open for any country and entity that is willing to respect the international norms Japan regards as critical rather than a region that is divided between those who have subscribed to the principles represented by democratic values and norms and those who hold alternative views.

Japan's approach to its Indo-Pacific strategy offers a good complement to U.S. strategy, which has a much stronger element of countering China's influence in the region. Japan's heavier focus on international norms softens the ideological edge of the "FOIP" vision, making it more palatable for the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, many of which are hesitant to alienate China. In addition, reaching out to the "Global South" as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy places Japan in a place where Tokyo functions as a connective node between the U.S. and these regions.

As Japan continues to promote its Indo-Pacific strategy, a few challenges lie ahead. One is the further worsening of the U.S.-China relations. Despite the Biden administration repeatedly expressing its commitment that Washington will manage its relationship with Beijing responsibly, the U.S.-China relationship continues to worsen. For instance, despite the Biden administration's effort to

resume diplomatic dialogue following unsafe encounters between the U.S. and Chinese militaries in the South and East China seas, the June 2023 trip by Secretary of State Antony Blinken seemed to have accomplished little and did not lead to a much-needed resumption of military-to-military dialogue. Further downward spiral of U.S.-China relations could make it difficult for Tokyo to maintain the current ambiguity in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Kishida's waning domestic support may also impact his ability to pursue his FOIP vision. The Mainichi Shimbun opinion poll taken in mid-June showed that Kishida's approval rating went down to 33%, a 12-point dip from May.[27] Although Kishida's low popularity is based on domestic issues, his declining support could impact his staying power as the prime minister as he eyes his own reelection as the president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in September 2024.

Endnotes

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[8] "Japan-China Joint Press Statement," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 8, 2006, MOFA: Japan-China Joint Press Statement.

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[23] For example, Kishida discussed Japan's intention to leverage the Japan-ASEAN Women Empowerment Fund to support startups in Africa. "Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)," Prime Minister's Office of Japan.

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The South Korean and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategies: Seoul's Cultivation of Regional Boldness from a Foundation of U.S. Alignment

By Katrin Katz

When South Korea released its "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region" in December 2022—marking Seoul's first-ever effort to develop a comprehensive regional strategy—early commentaries honed in on two, seemingly contradictory, observations.[1] Many took note of the degree to which the core tenets of the Republic of Korea (ROK) strategy strongly resemble those of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," which was released a few months earlier in February 2022.[2] As one Hankyoreh piece declared, South Korea's strategy "is noticeably tilted toward the US,"[3] while another regional expert went a step further in dubbing the two strategies "identical visions for the region."[4] A second set of observations stressed the ways in which references to China differ between the two strategies[5]—with the U.S. directly calling out the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a growing challenge engaged in "harmful behavior" and Seoul identifying China as a "key partner" and emphasizing inclusivity in a clear effort to not antagonize Beijing. For instance, one op-ed questioned whether the U.S. could count on President Yoon to "line up against China," noting that South Korea "treaded softly" on Beijing in its Indo-Pacific strategy.[6]

This article takes a deep dive into examining the similarities and differences between the South Korean and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies, highlighting the degree to which these initial impressions are generally accurate but incomplete. Specifically, the paper argues that the ROK strategy is less U.S.-centric in its overall orientation and more aligned with the U.S. position on China than these early observations suggest.

Regarding the strategy's general orientation, a more detailed comparison of the ROK and U.S. approaches indicates that South Korea's strategy both mirrors Washington's positions across a broad range of issues - from regional

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order and North Korea to economic security and transnational challenges—while also taking steps beyond them in several areas to pursue its own, distinctive objectives. This approach—U.S. emulation coupled with independent supplementation—evolves from Yoon's determination, first articulated during his presidential campaign, to make close U.S.-ROK alignment the central axis of Seoul's foreign policy while simultaneously pursuing a bolder, more definitive role for South Korea as a "global pivotal state."[7]

Regarding differences with the United States in its approach to China, a close examination of Seoul's explicit and implicit references to Beijing in its strategy, as well as its statements on related security issues, presents a more nuanced picture. Seoul takes careful steps toward a tougher line on China that aligns more closely with the United States while attempting to avoid antagonizing Beijing. These tactics flow from Seoul's economic and geopolitical constraints vis-a-vis Beijing, as China remains South Korea's top trading partner and a key player in efforts to denuclearize North Korea.

I begin by summarizing key areas of similarity between the U.S. and South Korean Indo-Pacific strategies, honing in on those in which South Korea emulates but also supplements U.S. positions in pursuit of a more independent (but still U.S.-aligned) regional posture. I then review differences between Washington and Seoul's approaches to China, as well as South Korea's careful efforts over the past year to nudge closer to the U.S. position. In the final section, I write about Yoon's diplomatic activity in recent months following South Korea's release of its Indo-Pacific strategy, and what this implies for the future trajectory of the strategy. I then conclude by suggesting some implications of this analysis for policymakers in South Korea and the United States.

Similarities in General Strategic Orientation

The numerous similarities between the two strategies are not surprising given Yoon's campaign pledge to make close U.S. alignment a key foreign policy goal. In format and overall content there is no question that the U.S. document served as an inspiration for South Korea's inaugural regional strategy. But a sole focus on the degree of similarity can generate the misperception that Seoul seeks merely to imitate, perhaps to placate, Washington in its strategy. Such a viewpoint fails to recognize the Yoon administration's dual-objectives in this document and in its foreign policy more broadly: to simultaneously pursue closer U.S. alignment as well as a bolder and more defined role for South Korea in the region and globally—commensurate with its status as, in Yoon's own words, "an economically dynamic, culturally rich, and resilient democracy."[8]

Similarities are found in the choice of "Indo-Pacific" as the identifying strategic concept, the focus on advancing a values- and rules-based order through collective efforts, the decision to embed North Korea within broader, regional security challenges, the pursuit of prosperity, economic security, and cooperation on new technologies, and the determination to build resilience to transnational challenges. Differences, however, appear in the approach to China.

1. Choice of "Indo Pacific" as strategic concept

The term "Indo Pacific"—a strategic concept connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans that is broadly viewed as a response to China's expanding activities and rising assertiveness in the region—was initially promoted by Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2016. The U.S. first employed the concept in its regional strategy in 2017. Yoon's decision to use "Indo-Pacific" in the title of South Korea's regional strategy marks a significant departure from the stance of President Moon Jae-in, who avoided the term due to concerns that it would upset Beijing. Moon focused instead on engaging subsets of the region (specifically, Southeast Asia and India) in his New Southern Policy (NSP). The closest Moon came to officially endorsing the Indo-Pacific concept was in the May 2021 U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement, which stated that the leaders agreed to "work to align the ROK's New Southern Policy and the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific and that our countries will cooperate to create a safe, prosperous, and dynamic region."[9]

The U.S. and South Korean regional strategies also make similar efforts to legitimize the Indo-Pacific concept by linking it directly to their own national identities and interests. The opening paragraphs of the U.S. strategy declare, "The United States is an Indo-Pacific power…[and] has long recognized the Indo-Pacific as vital to our security and prosperity." Almost identically, the first two sentences of the South Korean strategy assert, "The Republic of Korea is an Indo-Pacific nation. Our national interests are directly tied to the [stet] stability and prosperity in the region." Both sections proceed to list a number of similar statistics to demonstrate the growing importance of the region, including the fact that the Indo-Pacific is home to "more than half" (specified in the South Korean document as 65 percent) of the world's population and accounts for "nearly two-thirds" (specified in the South Korean document as 62 percent) of the world's GDP.

Yoon's willingness to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept indicates the degree to which he is both less concerned than his predecessor about the potential to upset Beijing and more eager to align with the United States. South Korea's use of the Indo-Pacific concept facilitates U.S.-ROK coordination on specific

policies and initiatives insofar as both countries are able to work from the same geostrategic template. But it also achieves at least two other objectives for Seoul in its efforts to enhance its own regional stature.

First, it puts South Korea in closer alignment with a number of countries within and outside of the region that have also introduced Indo-Pacific strategies, including Australia, India, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[10] As the opening section of South Korea's strategy asserts, "in recognition of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, countries around the globe have increased engagement with the region and are putting forth their respective strategies." South Korea's release of its own Indo-Pacific strategy therefore ensures that it is not left on the sidelines of this global strategic trend and can partner with a number of like-minded countries, including but not limited to the U.S., as it expands its role and presence in the region.

Second, centering its strategy on the Indo-Pacific concept provides economic opportunities for South Korea. This is because the Indo-Pacific has a larger footprint and greater collective economic heft than the areas that previous ROK strategies—like the New Southern Policy—covered. As the South Korean strategy notes on page 5:

> "…the growth of our open economy relies heavily on exports, as indicated by the fact that foreign trade accounted for approximately 85% of our GDP in 2021. Particularly, the Indo-Pacific represents approximately 78% and 67% of our total exports and total imports, respectively. The fact that the majority of our top 20 trading partners are located in the Indo-Pacific and that 66% of our foreign direct investment is destined for the Indo-Pacific clearly reflect our close ties with the region."

As such, South Korea's adoption of the Indo-Pacific strategic concept provides not only a means to cooperate more closely with the United States, but also a way to develop new avenues for partnership with other countries and multilateral entities that have released their own Indo-Pacific strategies. It also enables South Korea to deepen economic engagement with a region that is of critical importance to its trade and investment activities.

2. *Focus on advancing a values- and rules-based order via collective efforts*

The South Korean and U.S. strategies also align closely in prioritizing the advancement of liberal values and a rules-based regional order as top strategic aims, and in identifying collective efforts with countries within and beyond the region as the most effective means to achieve these aims. Specifically, the U.S.

strategy specifies as its number one objective to "advance a free and open Indo-Pacific," while the South Korean strategy identifies "a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific" as its vision and lists "build regional order based on norms and rules" and "cooperate to promote rule of law and human rights" as its first and second core lines of effort, respectively.

Regarding collective efforts, the U.S. strategy declares in the first paragraph, "The essential feature of this approach is that it cannot be accomplished alone: changing strategic circumstances and historic challenges require unprecedented cooperation with those who share in this vision." The following paragraph goes on to list U.S. allies and partners who share stakes in the future of the international order, spanning countries across the Indo-Pacific and in Europe.

Echoing this approach, the South Korean strategy asserts in its opening section, "The future of the Indo-Pacific will be determined by our collective efforts to find common solutions to a range of complex challenges and build a sustainable and resilient regional order." A later section of the ROK strategy, entitled "Regional Scope," details the ways in which countries from the North Pacific, Southeast Asia and ASEAN, South Asia, Oceania, the African Coast of the Indian Ocean, Europe, and Latin America will be important partners for South Korea in advancing common interests in the Indo-Pacific.

The shared U.S.-ROK focus on collective action to strengthen the rules-based regional order generates new opportunities for Washington and Seoul to coordinate on a wide range of normative issues in the region. As the ROK strategy notes, South Korea "will stand with the international community in condemning and responding firmly to actions that threaten universal values and international norms" and "will also play a leading role to strengthen the rules-based international order by respecting and enforcing internationally agreed rules and establishing new rules to govern emerging domains based on universal values and norms."

Although these statements are vague, South Korea's heightened focus on liberal values, rules, and norms creates capacity for Seoul to partner with Washington on the more specific initiatives listed in the U.S. strategy. These include efforts to "bolster freedom of information and expression," advance "media literacy and pluralistic and independent media," counter corruption and "improve fiscal transparency," "build support for rules-based approaches to the maritime domain," promote "consensus-based, values-aligned technology standards," and "stand up for democracy in Burma."

In addition to increasing prospects for U.S.-ROK cooperation, South Korea's normative approach and focus on collective efforts advance a number of other objectives that are complementary to, but independent from, the alliance.

First, the strategy's focus on a values- and rules-based regional order provides South Korea with a unifying rationale for its engagement with a broad range of countries across numerous issues that was lacking in the prior administration's New Southern Policy.[11] As the ROK strategy notes in its concluding section, "In order for the Indo-Pacific region to be free, peaceful, and continuously prosperous, cooperation amongst countries in and outside the region is more keenly needed now than ever before." The strategy's normative dimension also offers a means for South Korea to link its regional and global ambitions, as the same principles can drive South Korea's initiatives at both the global and regional levels.

Second, embedding its strategy in liberal values and principles provides South Korea with a convenient justification for new partnerships and initiatives that are susceptible to generating domestic controversy or pushback from Beijing. For instance, the ROK document refers to shared values in its call for greater cooperation with Japan, an element of the strategy that is perhaps one of the most sensitive domestically due to lingering historical grievances over Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910-1945. As one reference to Japan within the strategy notes, "With our closest neighbor, Japan, we will seek a forward-looking partnership that supports our common interests and values. Improved relations with Japan is [stet] essential for fostering cooperation and solidarity among like-minded Indo-Pacific nations; we are thus continuing our diplomatic efforts to restore mutual trust and advance relations."

The strategy's focus on values also offers a rationale for South Korea to exclude China from certain initiatives, making it harder for Beijing to characterize the move as "anti-China." For instance, the ROK strategy notes in its "vision" section, "In solidarity with nations sharing…universal values, we will actively promote and strengthen a regional order that is shaped not by force or coercion but by rules and universal values." In this way, South Korea can claim to join forces with other countries "to support universal values and principles" rather than "to rally against China," even in circumstances where it may, in fact, primarily be seeking to push back against Chinese coercion.

Lastly, certain aspects of the ROK's focus on international rules and norms can be viewed as the product of South Korea's shift in perceptions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, Putin's blatant disregard for norms

like respect for territorial integrity and threats to use nuclear weapons heightened Seoul's sense of vulnerability as a nuclear weapons-free state neighboring nuclear-armed North Korea while strengthening its appreciation for the importance of upholding the rules-based international order. The ROK strategy's references to opposing any unilateral change of the status quo by force and supporting the peaceful resolution of disputes can therefore be viewed as an effort to buffer against South Korea's concern that a Ukraine-like situation could materialize in the Indo-Pacific.

3. Embedding North Korea within broader regional security challenges

The U.S. and South Korean strategies echo the basic Biden and Yoon administration positions on North Korea, which aligned closely even before the strategies were released. With minor differences, both seek the ultimate goal of denuclearization while also keeping the door open to diplomacy. Both countries also commit to working together, bilaterally as well as trilaterally with Japan, to reinforce deterrence.

The aspect of the treatment of North Korea that is unique to these strategies is the degree to which it is embedded within broader counter-proliferation and regional security efforts. Specifically, within the U.S. document, a paragraph focused on the DPRK appears within the "bolster Indo-Pacific security" section following a general discussion of integrated deterrence, regional alliances and partnerships, and Taiwan. In the South Korean document, North Korea is mentioned briefly in the introduction, "vision," and "build regional order based on norms and rules" sections and later occupies two paragraphs in a section entitled "strengthen non-proliferation and counter-terrorism efforts across the region," 26 pages deep into the strategy.

For the United States, which has dealt with a wide range of regional security challenges for several decades, bundling North Korea with other issues is not a significant move. For South Korea, however, this marks a significant downgrading of the North Korea issue, especially considering the degree to which the prior Moon administration placed North Korea-related issues far above any other items on its foreign policy priority list.

The South Korean strategy also places special emphasis on the global implications of the North Korea issue, noting in the introduction that "North Korea's advancement of its nuclear and missile capabilities is a serious threat to peace and stability, not only on the Korean Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific region, but also across the globe." Later in the section pertaining to non-

proliferation, the strategy declares that "the complete denuclearization of North Korea is critical for maintaining sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula, in East Asia, and in the world at large."

For South Korea, the downgrading of the North Korean issue likely reflects an effort to demonstrate to Washington and other countries that it is capable of focusing its attention on security issues beyond the peninsula. The supplementary mentions of the "global nature" of the problem in the South Korean strategy help Seoul to pursue additional objectives—luring new partners to collaborate on the North Korea issue, and increasing levels of international pressure on Pyongyang to denuclearize.

4. Pursuing prosperity, economic security, and cooperation on new technologies

The U.S. and ROK strategies both include "prosperity" as a key objective and propose a number of new initiatives to bolster economic security and technological cooperation. In identifying means to achieve these ends, the U.S. strategy leans heavily on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a U.S.-led multilateral initiative through which Washington aims to "promote and facilitate high-standards trade, govern the digital economy, improve supply-chain resiliency and security, catalyze investment in transparent, high-standards infrastructure, and build connectivity." The strategy also mentions work with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) "to promote free, fair, and open trade and investment," noting that the U.S. will host the next APEC gathering in 2023.

The South Korean strategy also mentions support for IPEF and APEC in its "build economic security networks" section, noting "we participated in the launching of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). We will work closely with our partners so that the framework evolves into an effective economic forum in the Indo-Pacific." Later, with reference to APEC, the ROK document asserts, "as the host of APEC 2025, we will continue cooperation with the Asia-Pacific towards free trade and investment, innovation and digital economy, as well as inclusive and sustainable growth."

These stances on IPEF and APEC highlight the degree of overlap and complementarity in the economic sections of the U.S. and ROK strategies. But the South Korean strategy also goes well beyond referring to these two organizations as vehicles for pursuing its regional economic aspirations. Specifically, the ROK strategy mentions its "efforts to promote free trade and

address protectionism through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), by taking part in discussions on the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), as well as by concluding new trade agreements."

References to these organizations, and to new trade agreements more generally, are conspicuously absent in the U.S. strategy. This is because protectionist pressures from the left and right sides of the U.S. political system in recent years have led Washington to focus more on protecting industries at home and competing with China than with joining any regional initiatives that might involve increasing market access or negotiating labor or environmental standards alongside Beijing. Negotiating new trade agreements is also very difficult for Washington in today's political environment.

South Korea, on the other hand, is an export-reliant country that does not face the same degree of domestic constraints concerning international trade that the U.S. currently does. It is therefore able to match and surpass the economic initiatives listed in the U.S. strategy. Seoul is careful to pay respect to IPEF in its strategy, but the regional economic initiatives it supports and the opportunities it seeks extend far beyond Washington's more limited and constrained list.

References to strengthening technological coordination follow a similar pattern across the two strategies. They endorse parallel objectives, but South Korea mentions support for regional initiatives, such as the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), that are absent in the U.S. strategy. South Korea also highlights its status as "an IT power that is at the forefront of digital transformation" and "a global leader in science and technology innovation," emphasizing its unique regional leadership potential and capabilities in the technological space.

5. Building resilience to transnational challenges

The U.S. and ROK strategies similarly identify climate change, energy security, and global health as top transnational challenges, as well as a number of efforts to address them. Specifically, the U.S. stresses the importance of working with the major economies in the region to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and notes that it will "incentivize clean-energy technology investment and deployment, seek to drive energy-sector decarbonization, and foster climate-aligned infrastructure development" through initiatives like Clean EDGE. It later lists a number of ways it will work with other countries and multilateral organizations to end the COVID-19 pandemic and build resilience against future global health threats.

The South Korean strategy endorses a number of complementary initiatives in the areas of climate change, energy transition, energy security, and global health, specifically through supporting the region's achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and advancing regional capacity building in a number of areas. The South Korean document also highlights initiatives in nuclear energy safety and green ODA, where it is uniquely poised to lead and contribute.

In summary, in addressing transnational challenges, South Korea seeks to cooperate with the U.S. while at the same time pursuing unique areas of deeper regional engagement that cater to its strengths.

Differences in China approach

Despite the many areas of overlap in the U.S. and ROK regional strategies, South Korea's approach to China is one area that stands out for its degree of contrast with the U.S. strategy. The U.S. strategy makes clear from the outset that it views the PRC as the central threat to the peace and stability of the region. The introductory section asserts, "The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power." It later notes, "From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behavior." The strategy also declares that the U.S. seeks "to manage competition with the PRC responsibly" and is open to cooperation with the PRC in areas like nonproliferation and climate change. Nonetheless, the general tone of the U.S. strategy on the issues pertaining to China is far more competitive than cooperative.

South Korea's treatment of China in its strategy is considerably more muted. In its sole two direct mentions of China in the document (in comparison with the U.S. strategy's 13 total mentions of the PRC), South Korea refers to China as a "key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region" and endorses trilateral cooperation among the ROK, Japan, and China focused on "green and digital transitions" to "contribute to regional peace and stability."

Other references to China in South Korea's strategy are similarly polite but more oblique. The document notes in the introductory section that "we will work towards a regional order that enables a diverse set of nations to cooperate and prosper together." It later stresses that the strategy is "inclusive" insofar as it

"neither targets nor excludes any specific nation." The same term is applied to economic initiatives, noting that South Korea aims to work with other countries to "build a collaborative, inclusive economic and technological ecosystem."

South Korea's cautious approach to China flows from its unique economic and geopolitical constraints and from its desire to avoid again being targeted by Chinese economic coercion—as it was in 2016 following Seoul's decision to deploy a U.S.-supplied Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery. As former ambassador to the United States and vice foreign minister Ahn Ho-young recently noted, "given the geopolitical and geoeconomic reality of Korea, China is 'a key partner.'"[12]

Despite Seoul's efforts to avoid antagonizing Beijing, a reading of the strategy in its entirety reveals a willingness by South Korea to incrementally shift toward a tougher line on security issues that are sensitive to China. For instance, in a section entitled "expand comprehensive security cooperation," the strategy notes that "peace, stability, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea…must be respected." It later declares that "we also reaffirm the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula and to the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific." The statement on Taiwan echoed a similar line that appeared in the May 2022 "United States-Republic of Korea Leaders' Joint Statement" issued by Yoon and Biden.[13] However, the strategy's reference marks the first time that the line has appeared in an exclusively South Korean document, indicating the degree to which South Korea is willing to internalize this position as its own, beyond the context of the alliance.

The strategy also expresses support for expanding cooperation with the Quad as well as NATO, steps that Seoul presumably took with the understanding that they could prompt backlash from China. And it contains implicit digs at Beijing—criticizing "the deepening arms race in the region, coupled with a lack of action to build transparency and trust in the military and security domains"—without mentioning China by name.

Beyond its Indo-Pacific strategy, the Yoon administration has demonstrated its willingness to gradually defy China's preferences on issues like Taiwan and semiconductor supply chains by developing stances over time that are more aligned with Washington's, even in the face of direct warnings from Beijing. In both of these issue areas, the Yoon administration has proceeded carefully, but ultimately Chinese pressure has not deterred Seoul from identifying and pursuing evolving security and economic imperatives on its own terms.

On Taiwan, Yoon did not meet with then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi when she stopped in South Korea following her trip to Taiwan in August 2022. In an interview the following month, Yoon was careful to avoid any suggestion that South Korea would become directly involved in a Taiwan contingency, stressing that, in the event of a military conflict over Taiwan, "we must deal with the North Korean threat first."[14] Yet Yoon's Foreign Minister, Park Jin, was later more direct in taking a stance against potential Chinese aggression toward Taiwan during a February 2023 interview, noting, "We are opposed to the unilateral change of status quo by force, so in that sense, we will make sure that, if something happens on the Taiwan Strait, we have to maintain peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, because it will have a direct impact on our country."[15] In response to Park, a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson noted, "The Taiwan question is China's internal affair, we do not need to be told what should or should not be done. If the ROK needs to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, it needs to respect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, follow the one-China principle and be prudent on the Taiwan question."[16]

On the issue of semiconductors, the Yoon administration hesitated for months to declare whether it would join the U.S.-led Chip-4 initiative—a group aiming to coordinate actions among the U.S., South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan to counter Beijing's influence in semiconductor supply chains—because of concerns that it would heighten tensions with China.[17] During meetings in August 2022 between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his South Korean counterpart, Park Jin, Wang reportedly conveyed to Park that "the two countries should adhere to independence and freedom from external influence" and "adhere to openness and win-win results and maintain stable and smooth production and supply chains."[18] Despite this exchange with Beijing, South Korea's Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Lee Chang-yang publicly declared in December 2022 that South Korea "really cannot miss (opportunity) in the semiconductor industry" and so "we think about (joining) the Chip 4."[19] In late February 2023, senior officials from South Korea joined counterparts from the U.S., Japan and Taiwan in a preliminary virtual meeting of the Chip-4 initiative.[20]

Collectively, South Korea's stance on China—both in its Indo-Pacific strategy and in its related statements and actions in the region—reflects the degree to which Seoul is treading a careful line—edging closer to tougher U.S. positions over time while remaining mindful of the economic and geopolitical realities that limit its sense of how far it can go.

On a side note, South Korea's position on China resembles the stance taken by Japan in its own "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy in several respects. Although Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has staked out stronger positions than Yoon over the past year on support for Ukraine and Taiwan, Yoon's stances on these matters have edged closer to Kishida's over time (particularly following the April 2023 U.S.-ROK summit, discussed below). Furthermore, both Seoul and Tokyo have articulated a similar aim of "constructive and stable relations" with Beijing for economic and geopolitical reasons, as both are close neighbors and major trading partners of China.[21] In an effort to foster cooperation with China, the South Korean and Japanese strategies similarly highlight the importance of diversity, inclusiveness, and openness as key organizing concepts for their regional initiatives.[22] Both also stress that their strategies are not directed against any particular country but rather welcome collaboration with any country, including China, that supports the rules-based order. This contrasts with the approach embedded in U.S. strategic documents, which call out China's "harmful behavior" directly. Importantly, Japan and South Korea also share the overarching priority of maintaining strong alignment with the United States.

Tokyo's position on China—generally tougher than Seoul's on key security issues but employing similar techniques to maintain stable relations with Beijing—situates its regional strategy somewhere between Seoul's and Washington's. As South Korea and Japan's relations continue to thaw (as indicated by the return of Tokyo-Seoul shuttle diplomacy this spring), South Korea may begin to view Japan as a useful point of reference and resource for consultation in navigating U.S.-China strategic competition.

Yoon's Washington visit tilts South Korea closer toward the U.S., riling China

Yoon's six-day trip to the United States from April 24-29 reinforced the notion that, in the present-day context of zero-sum great power competition, South Korea faces significant difficulties pursuing closer ties with the U.S. without damaging its relations with China.

Yoon's time in the United States deepened Seoul's alignment with Washington across several dimensions, from defense and security to technological cooperation and business ties. Biden offered Yoon the high honor of a state visit—only the second for his administration and the first in twelve years for a South Korean president—in order to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance and to show appreciation for Yoon's efforts to strengthen strategic alignment with the United States.

Significant summit outcomes included the "Washington Declaration," a document designed to reassure South Korea about the strength of U.S. extended deterrence while allaying U.S. concerns about Seoul's potential to develop its own nuclear weapons, as well as new agreements on a range of issues including economic security, cyber and space cooperation, biotechnology, and people-to-people ties.[23] In a joint statement released after the summit, Yoon and Biden affirmed the status of the relationship as a "global comprehensive strategic alliance," pledging to work together in "condemning Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine" as well as other international initiatives. At the regional level, Biden "welcomed the ROK's first Indo-Pacific strategy as a reflection of our shared regional commitment" and expressed appreciation for "President Yoon's bold steps toward improving ROK-Japan relations…which opens the door to deeper trilateral cooperation on regional and economic security."[24]

Outside the White House, Yoon took several opportunities to highlight the importance of shared liberal values and to showcase South Korea's burgeoning role as a "global pivotal state." For instance, he proclaimed in his address to a joint session of Congress: "Together with the U.S., Korea will play the role as a 'compass for freedom'" and "will safeguard and broaden the freedom of citizens of the world."[25] Members of Congress responded enthusiastically to the speech, offering frequent applause and a bipartisan standing ovation. These aspects of the visit highlighted the degree to which Yoon's efforts to align closely with the United State complement his parallel ambition to cultivate a bolder role for South Korea on the world stage.

Yoon's visit to Washington also involved the leaders' endorsement of tough positions on China-related security and economic issues that were not warmly received in Beijing. China took particular offense at the language in the U.S.-ROK joint statement focused on Taiwan, which proclaimed that the two leaders "reiterated the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the region" and "strongly opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific."[26] In response, Liu Jinsong, director of Asian Affairs at the Chinese foreign ministry, summoned South Korean embassy minister Kang Sang-wook to emphasize China's position on Taiwan and press South Korea to abide by the one-China principle (which views Taiwan as a domestic, rather than a regional or global, matter).[27] An article in China's state-run *Global Times* declared that the U.S.-ROK joint declaration signified Yoon's "overwhelming pro-U.S. policy" and cited experts noting that South Korea has "lost balance" and "will likely face retaliation from China, Russia and North Korea" if it "completely executes U.S. [sic] order for 'extended deterrence' in the region."[28]

Although Yoon's state visit to Washington saw the U.S. and ROK become more united in their regional and global stances—prompting Seoul and Beijing to drift further apart—areas of lingering tension in the alliance have the potential to shift these dynamics. In the security realm, Washington and Seoul framed summit results related to nuclear deterrence differently, with South Korean officials eager to portray the Nuclear Consultative Group (announced in the Washington Declaration) as "feeling like" nuclear sharing, and U.S. officials pushing back (as senior director for East Asia and Oceania of the White House National Security Council Edgard Kagan noted: "I don't think we see this as a de facto nuclear sharing").[29] Yoon also went beyond the text of the joint statement in claiming that the alliance had been upgraded to a "new paradigm based on nuclear weapons."[30] The perception of a gap between Seoul and Washington's interpretations of extended deterrence could increase the South Korean public's already-high level of support for an indigenous nuclear program as a means to avoid these types of disagreements in the future.[31]

The summit outcomes also drew some criticism from both ends of the political spectrum in South Korea. Progressive media outlets and even some conservative publications (which were generally positive about the visit) criticized the Washington Declaration for limiting South Korea's capacity to develop its own nuclear weapons. Other pundits argued that Yoon "inflames tensions by provoking China and Russia when discussing values-based diplomacy, taking cues from the US" and claimed that efforts to strengthen extended deterrence could aggravate tensions on the peninsula.[32] On economic matters, a number of media outlets expressed concern that the joint statement only included a pledge to continue consultations on recent U.S. legislation (specifically, the Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS and Science Act) that contains elements that South Korean companies view as discriminatory. This prompted questions regarding what tangible benefits South Korean companies have attained from committing approximately $100 billion in the U.S. market.[33]

In summary, while Yoon's visit to Washington suggested that close U.S.-ROK alignment had begun to eclipse other foreign policy priorities, ongoing concerns among the South Korean public and politicians about summit outcomes could create pressure on Yoon to take steps back from Washington in some areas. Efforts by the U.S. and South Korea to coordinate understandings and messaging on extended deterrence and to address Seoul's concerns related to U.S. protectionism and export controls on high-end technologies to China could help to alleviate this pressure.

Conclusion

This analysis rounds out some early observations on South Korea's regional strategy regarding its degree of "tilt" toward the U.S. or China. These initial impressions matter. Unamended, they have the capacity to skew domestic and external narratives regarding South Korea's orientation in the region—which can impact the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the strategy. Within South Korea, a strategy that is perceived as leaning too far toward the United States will become vulnerable to attacks from the progressive side of the political spectrum—which tends to advocate for a more autonomous foreign policy for the ROK—thereby lowering its likelihood of survival beyond the Yoon administration. On the flip side, within Washington, a perception that South Korea is "choosing Beijing over Washington" has the potential to erode support for the many important areas of close U.S.-ROK cooperation that this strategy involves.

Policymakers in Seoul aiming to broaden the domestic base of support for South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy can draw from this analysis to highlight the degree to which the strategy both aligns closely with Washington (pleasing to conservatives) and forges a path for Seoul to embark on a bolder and more independent role in the region (pleasing to progressives). This dual lens on the strategy's purpose and content might help it to gain proponents in the near term while increasing its chances of enduring under future administrations.

Policymakers in Washington aiming to rally support for the strategy—as senior Biden officials have done from the outset[34]—might find this analysis useful in pushing back on suggestions that South Korea is tilting too much toward Beijing in the strategy's China references. Highlighting the overall orientation of the strategy (on balance, clearly leaning much more heavily toward U.S. than Chinese positions) as well as South Korea's demonstrated inclination and willingness to edge closer to U.S. stances on China over time, may provide helpful material to address these types of concerns.

The success of South Korea's first Indo-Pacific strategy is far from pre-determined. Continuing to navigate close alignment with the United States, a more independent regional role, and stable relations with China will require ongoing deft maneuvering. But this strategy has several strengths, and many are in its nuances.

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How the United States Gained Momentum over China in the Indo-Pacific

By Gilbert Rozman

In 2020 Xi Jinping was on a roll. Donald Trump had left U.S. alliances in disarray and the home front in discord, unable even to unite against a pandemic. U.S. allies South Korea and Japan saw China (and Russia too) in ways at odds with U.S. strategy—Moon Jae-in depending on it for his obsession with North Korean diplomacy, and Abe Shinzo awaiting a state visit from Xi in the hope of economic cooperation at odds with Trump's trade war. The entry of India into the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), before a June 2020 Himalayan knife fight, seemed to give China the edge over Abe's appeal for a Quad, joining it with the U.S., Japan, and Australia. By 2023 the picture had changed dramatically. This article points to seven arenas where the U.S. under Joe Biden has gained appreciably in the Indo-Pacific at China's expense. Competition in reshaping the regional order is continuing; no verdict is yet possible on which side will gain the upper hand. The Chinese controlling strategy continues to vie against the U.S. blocking strategy.

The years 2021 to 2023 saw remarkable flux, as one initiative followed another with an eye to the geopolitical and geo-economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific. If in the 2010s the focus was on trade agreements, emphasis had shifted to military concerns and economic security. Biden outdid Xi Jinping in his affirmations of the new alphabet soup: the Quad,[1] AUKUS (Australia, the UK, the U.S.), IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework), and the NATO-AP4 (Asia-Pacific 4, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand) dotted Biden's playbook before Xi responded with his GSI (Global Security Initiative). Xi also had available his creations of the 2010s, such as the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and SCO. Key to the struggle to shape the Indo-Pacific is ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as well as India. As two camps solidified under the U.S. and China, the "Global South" overwhelmingly kept hedging its bets. Few are willing to take sides. Recent competition centers more on economic security and risk reduction than on public opinion.

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The nature of the competition has changed dramatically. Before 2021, Japan and Russia played a large role, afterwards the situation had polarized although Japan had joined the U.S. pursuit of a strong agenda. In the earlier period, trade took center stage, but that shifted to economic security as part of a more comprehensive approach to regional reorganization. Finally, military tensions abruptly emerged as a central focus of rival strategies, unlike the earlier situation.

The United States had responded to Xi Jinping's initiatives of the 2010s cautiously but without real alarm. The SCO started as an anti-terrorist grouping that moderated Sino-Russian tensions in Central Asia. The BRI prioritized infrastructure projects sought by countries trading heavily with China. Despite many worrisome elements, the U.S. largely limited itself to staying aloof. Its aims were mostly minimal and defensive, leaving space for its allies to explore their own goals.

In the two terms of Barak Obama, Chinese, however, railed against his "pivot to Asia" as if it would turn into a gamechanger blocking their regional plans, and in Donald Trump's presidential term, they castigated the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) plan as threatening a region-wide containment strategy, but in both cases, there was confident pushback that these initiatives were doomed. What stands apart in China's response to Joe Biden's Quad, IPEF, etc. is the more defensive nature of its reactions, struggling to identify a positive outcome. The world situation has changed, leaving China more on its backfoot as its image keeps being tarnished by domestic troubles and spillover from the war in Ukraine. Biden's policies, including new steps to counter China in the Indo-Pacific, also play a big part in leaving Chinese bewildered on how to regain the momentum for their own regional agenda. Comparing the two sides' regional reordering agendas shows the initiative had shifted to the U.S. by 2022 as the Ukraine war reverberated.

Looking back to the 2010s, we see China gaining ground in shaping regional architecture. Some moves by Obama and Trump sought to counter China's advances, but the momentum was with China. In contrast, in 2021-23, the U.S. has realized a string of successes. They reflect positive policy choices as well as China's increasingly negative image. Ironically, the Ukraine war, seen by some as likely to distract the U.S. from the Indo-Pacific, actually accelerated its commitment.

What distinguishes the U.S. strategy of 2023 from earlier U.S. strategies is the overwhelming emphasis on technologies of the present and the future. Export controls, investment limits on incoming and outgoing capital flows, multilateral

coordination, and anticipation of the cutting- edge technologies of the next generation are prioritized. Unlike Obama's preoccupation with freedom of navigation operations or Trump's with trade deficits, Biden put semi-conductors in the forefront, following his leadership of a broad coalition that imposed sanctions on Russia for its war in Ukraine with a sustained roll-out and buy-in from others on restrictions on dual-use products. As of early 2023, the degree of buy-in and the extent of the restrictions were unclear. Yet, the sweeping nature of the U.S. agenda was conspicuous as was China's strong resistance.

Strategies for Regionalism

As in the 1930s, the retreat from globalization based on "free trade" is reviving bloc economies. In a context of deepening security tensions, like-minded regional partners are deemed more reliable for supply chain security. Unlike the run-up to WWII, however, globalization and China's central role in it make decoupling next to impossible. Rather than assume two autonomous blocs, many are striving to find the right balance between benefits from globalization and economic security, desperately seeking to limit the thrust of today's separate regional initiatives for decoupling.[2]

Triangularity reigned supreme in the 2010s. Moscow insisted that multipolarity was the new configuration, as it pointed to the Grand Strategic Triangle of China-Russia-the U.S. and to the Eurasian triangle of China-Russia-India. Tokyo and Seoul did not acknowledge triangularity in light of their close alliances with Washington but operated as if they could maneuver within a triangular setting with China or Russia.[3] Yet, the Sino-Russian axis was tightening, the Trump administration's trade war with China boosted bipolarity, and the Biden administration saw the long game with China as requiring allies and partners to join together more closely in order to resist an advancing threat. Even before the Ukraine war in 2022, Tokyo and Seoul were tilting further to the U.S., and in the war's first year Tokyo gave its fulsome support as Seoul edged further in that direction.[4] Meanwhile, Washington and Beijing were bolstering their regional strategies in opposition to each other, demonstrating how bipolarity plays in the Indo-Pacific.

Superpowers expect hub-and-spokes bipolarity. When the United States savored its unipolar moment in the 1990s into the 2000s, it pursued something more, but as triangularity veered toward wedge-driving to undermine U.S. alliances or exclude the U.S., it was pushed to steer the world to bipolarity. In the 2010s that became apparent, and in the tumultuous year of 2022, the U.S. agenda for forging a coalition against a rival bloc took the spotlight. In the case

of China, biding its time in the 1990s-2000s, approval for multipolarity served to broaden its appeal, but, in the 2010s, its quest for solidarity against the U.S.-led camp grew more conspicuous. Also, by 2022, the Chinese agenda for a Sinocentric order had come into clearer view. Central to the rival U.S. and Chinese strategies for a bipolar order is the Indo-Pacific region, where Beijing is pressing for a multi-dimensional BRI while Washington counters with FOIP and IPEF, each approach acknowledging the increasingly paramount significance of economic security.

The fundamental source of bipolarity is China's assertive foreign policy. It left the aspirations of Russia for multipolarity in Asia unrealizable, while driving Japan and South Korea closer to the United States. India also turned closer to the U.S., but it used the Ukraine war to reaffirm in ties to Russia its wariness of bipolarity.[5] Disappointed with China's complicating of triangularity with India and ASEAN, Russia desperately invaded Ukraine in its gambit to revive multipolarity. Such moves to brook the tide of bipolarity did not distract the U.S. and China from their overall goals.

Both Washington and Beijing target the Indo-Pacific, in one name or another, as the arena of primary importance in the twenty-first century. Each has come to take a wholistic view of the region, relegating parts therein to sub-regional status, and accepting the long-term challenge of winning support, developing desired infrastructure, and building capacity. They seek to reach agreement on the nature of the desired order, for the U.S., a rules-based order that is secure from coercion and prosperous without undue economic vulnerability. Neither power argues that its strategy is focused on the other; instead, they call it a regional strategy with understood implications for the other power's role, defining that after solidifying ties to allies and partners. Values affirm bipolar perceptions of regionalism: for the U.S. democracy and freedom versus authoritarianism and attacks on a rule-based order; for China rallying vs. "Cold War" mentality. After long demonizing Japan's efforts at regionalism, China refocused on a new, joint challenge. Increasingly, the mutual attacks grew more acerbic, as expressed by members of the House Select Committee on China and the speeches at the National People's Congress in March 2023.[6]

U.S. Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

Overall, leadership change in 2021-22 accelerated the shift to bipolarity already under way. Biden prioritized limiting the threat from China and then was obliged to rally the world behind the defense of Ukraine against Russian aggression. He pressed allies to stand together, ending dalliances with China and Russia.

Kishida Fumio came from a less ideological wing of the LDP and did not feel the same compulsion as Abe Shinzo to strive for autonomous Asian diplomacy. He agreed to bipolarity, accepting that Europe and the Indo-Pacific are interrelated theaters with a common front against aggression. Yoon Suk-yeol had to make a sharp turnabout from Moon Jae-in's agenda, despite serious domestic opposition and Chinese pressure. By 2023 the voices behind a unified regional strategy of the three allies were resounding clearly in China.

The U.S. is determined to prevent China from gaining regional hegemony, obliging the states of the Indo-Pacific to forego security ties that could check China's coercive behavior, and ensuring that economic dependence on China would require disregard for their own economic security and deference to China on all matters of national identity. Washington is resisting Sinocentric strategies that lead to a hub-and-spokes regional architecture. It regards the incorporation of Taiwan by coercion and the demands for Chinese sovereignty over the South China Sea as signs of one-sided control over the sea lanes, which would leave other countries under great duress. It also strives to prevent both Chinese monopolies to be used for economic coercion and access to technologies that would advance China's military and security forces, putting others at risk.

Advancing IPEF and hosting APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), the U.S. in 2023 pursues dual goals. IPEF is protective of the international order, drawing on a latticework of flexible partnerships to move beyond shared goals to concrete action without forcing states to choose sides. The U.S. sees itself as a status quo power protective of peace and stability, threatened by China and Russia. A Taiwan contingency would echo the disruptive impact of the Ukraine war. It is the prime danger spot. In contrast, APEC is inclusive of China, is reviving after a lull and offers an opportunity to test China's commitment to international norms. It may be a prime opportunity.

U.S. regional strategy has changed because China's behavior has changed, not because a fearful U.S. has responded to an economic competitor. In the 2000s, China was already a serious rival of the U.S. in reshaping regional architecture and pressuring U.S. allies, but it was proceeding mostly within the bounds of acceptable competition. It was cooperating in the Six-Party Talks despite differences in strategy. It accepted ASEAN centrality while pressuring Southeast Asian states. An accommodation was reached against Taiwan pursuing de jure independence, even as the PRC and U.S. remained at odds over how to resolve the Taiwan issue. Toward the end of the decade, it was China which turned aggressive on multiple fronts in the Indo-Pacific, and under

Xi Jinping this transformation accelerated. The U.S. regards itself as a reactive power, urged by allies and partners in the region to stand up to Chinese aggressive behavior, as Biden is doing.

In 2022-23, the U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific region takes four forms: 1) mini-lateral coalitions across the region; 2) traditional security deterrence to prepare for contingencies with tightened ties to other states; 3) value contrasts to expose the gap with China and the danger of its values for regional peace and stability; and 4) economic security steps to contain China's coercion, not a competitor's rise, preventing illicit civil-military fusion and its monopolies over technologies and supplies that could be employed to coerce other states to do China's bidding. The U.S. approach is three-fold: 1) security takes precedence, boosting alliances and pursuing the Quad with the understanding that India's alarm about Chinese aggression opens the door to a security grouping; 2) economics matter, but trade takes a back seat to economic security, as IPEF gradually is clarified; and 3) values receive attention, showcased in two iterations of the Summit for Democracy, although some partners hesitate to echo this U.S. position in light of resistance in the "Global South." The Ukraine war further raised the priority on security, made the case for economic security much stronger, and reinforced the democracy-autocracy divide. The U.S.-led agenda stressed a free and open order based on the rule of law, sovereignty and territorial integrity, prohibition against the use of force, and peaceful resolution of disputes. The Ukraine war and China's response have led the U.S. to redouble its agenda to forestall any Chinese coercion. China's verbal support for the logic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn attention to the parallel with potential Chinese coercion against Taiwan. Allied dependence on the Russian economy has awakened countries to their economic vulnerability to China. A lack of preparedness for war in Europe could be duplicated in Asia. Without a NATO or EU in Asia, the U.S. has accelerated its pursuit of a robust regional framework to prepare for Chinese actions.

Whereas China's primary partner is Russia, the two have struggled to agree on a joint regional strategy, and China generally proceeds with little regard to Russia's thinking. In contrast, vital to U.S. success in the Indo-Pacific has been coordination with Japan, which saw clear convergence of thinking by 2023. If Russia in 2022 by its war in Ukraine greatly damaged its own standing, it also negatively impacted China's standing in the Indo-Pacific, creating the image that "today's Ukraine is tomorrow's Taiwan" and that the Russian disrespect for sovereignty and territorial integrity was China's attitude too. This message and Russia's war proved to be the capstone in eroding decades of China's claim that it championed these two principles. To China's great disadvantage, abruptly, the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theater became inseparably linked.

Comparing 2023 and 2020, I find seven arenas where the U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific has strengthened dramatically. The fulsome embrace with Japan, strikingly clarified in December Japanese strategic white papers and in Kishida's January 2023 summit with Biden highlighted by his announced defense budget increase to 2 percent of GDP, is a huge victory for the U.S. side as well as a defeat for China. A second major win came with Yoon Suk-yeol's announced resolution of the forced labor issue in March 2023 coupled with his strong support for security trilateralism with Japan and the United States.[7] China had long warned South Korea against military linkages to Japan, as demonstrated in the "three no's" promises it secured from Moon Jae-in in 2017. A third achievement was realized in the June 2022 Madrid NATO summit, welcoming the AP4 (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) and inserting NATO into Indo-Pacific security in unprecedented ways, as Great Britain took the lead in pursuing closer ties in the region.

Separate attention is warranted for a fourth transformation in the early 2020s of considerable consequence for the Indo-Pacific region. The Ukraine war proved to be a wake-up call for many concerned about Chinese coercion against Taiwan but undecided on how to prepare. One issue supersedes all others for Tokyo. An expected Chinese attack on Taiwan is foremost in the minds of Japanese. The subject of a "Taiwan contingency" suddenly rose to the forefront. If earlier there was some prospect that China might be dissuaded or that a wedge between China and Russia could be helpful, bipolarity is viewed as the reality now. Since Japan depends on the U.S. will to act, both to prevent an attack and to respond to it, U.S. determination in the face of the aggression by Russia was reassuring, while Ukraine's will to fight showed that Japan needed the same willpower to elicit outside support in a conflict extending beyond Taiwan into Okinawa. In 2022 Biden more clearly expressed willingness to defend Taiwan, and the turnabout in security policy in the Philippines under a new president hinted at new U.S. basing rights in the vicinity.

Further to the south, the combination of the Quad and AUKUS served U.S. interests as well. In this fifth arena, India is critical, and its position toward China changed fundamentally in 2020. Yet, its refusal to sanction or strongly oppose Russia over the Ukraine war revealed the still powerful hold of "strategic autonomy." On the whole, at the regional level, a win for Biden. If the U.S. continues to have difficulty overcoming "neutrality" in the "Global South," crowning India's as its leader at least counters China's claim to be galvanizing this area into its camp.

In two other arenas the Ukraine war sharpened what had been an evolving tendency under Biden: economic security and values. Supply chain vulnerability, civil-military dual use advanced technology, and investments in China and by

Chinese to gain access to critical technology all drew intense scrutiny. China's economic clout—often used to pressure other states—suffered a huge setback. IPEF became the vehicle for institutionalizing the restrictions imposed on China in the wake of tough economic sanctions on Russia in 2022. Moreover, the image of an autocrat going to war with no checks and balances was extrapolated from Putin to Xi Jinping, whose full control over China's politics was laid bare for all to see at the 20th Party Congress in late 2022.

The Party Congress was the second development after the Ukraine war that reinforced the U.S. effort to forge a latticework of networks behind its emerging Indo-Pacific strategy. Coming against the background of military bravado in the Taiwan Strait in August and the collapse of Xi's signature "Zero-COVID" policy in December, the congress witnessed a single leader oust all colleagues who stood in the way of his unchecked exercise of power and convey an image of impatience, arrogance, and risk-taking. Although Indo-Pacific states remained wary of economic retaliation for defying China, they increasingly conveyed their eagerness for the U.S. to boost its presence, backing parts, if not the whole, of the emerging U.S. regional strategy. China's push along with the Biden administration's pull enabled the unparalleled, recent U.S. success in Asia.

No event crystallized the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy more clearly than the Hiroshima G7 summit of May 2023. To Biden's satisfaction, it showcased alliance solidarity: led by Japan, connecting the Euro-Atlantic mobilization against the Ukraine war with the Indo-Pacific alarm about China's assault on pillars of the international order, tacking on a Quad summit in place of Biden's intent to go to Australia for that event before he had to rush home to deal with a deadline to pay U.S. debt, and reinforcing all of the elements of U.S. regional military or economic security strategy. If the "Global South," represented by states such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Brazil, failed to be persuaded on sanctions against Russia or, in most cases, China policy, this was a key step to engaging with it, while China's unrestrained anger proved that it was feeling beleaguered.[8]

China's Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

On January 20, 2023 Foreign Minister Qin Gang described the BRI as a "global enterprise to build a belt of prosperity and a road to happiness." Southeast Asia, notably Indonesia, serves as the centerpiece, whose commitment to the BRI remains solid despite public caution.[9] China takes pride in such assessments, which expose gaps in the U.S. regional strategy, short on funds for infrastructure and on trade deals. Indeed, regionalization of Southeast Asia is treated as a key mechanism to serve China's aims, feigning backing for ASEAN leadership,[10] not Sinocentrism.

Chinese sources indicate a turning point from the BRI advancing well and driving regionalism with little resistance, to China being put on the defensive and needing to change its strategy or adopt a regional strategy, since authors suggest there is none for the Indo-Pacific. Having long criticized Obama for seeking through his "pivot to Asia" to contain China, it grew more positive about his approach, as if he had prioritized working together in multilateral settings rather than excluding China. Similarly, Japan's FOIP approach looked better in retrospect in Biden's time.

In the 2010s China was competing against Japan-led regionalism as well as U.S.-Japan joint plans. Economics had a more central role for Japan, contrasting high-quality and transparent projects to China's. Ideology was pursued more subtly, even toning down the idea of a strategy to just an initiative and then a vision. States were wary of choosing sides, and Japan softened the image of competition as it raised issues of geo-economics over geostrategic competition. If China eventually sought common ground with Japan on trade and investment, the other side of Japan's regional approach, enlisting the U.S. proved anathema to a burgeoning regional agenda.

Much is written in China about Japan's leading role in advocating for an Indo-Pacific strategy. Attention focuses on maritime security, values, and economic competition in the quest for a multilateral framework. Noting significant shifts over the past few years, authors call for new Chinese countermeasures. They note that this strategy is more Japanese than American in origin and has evolved over many years.[11] Even as Abe was cooperating with Xi Jinping on BRI, has he pursued the FOIP; Chinese saw him eying an historic return to "great power" status and leadership of Asia. TPP and Indo-Pacific strategy were considered means to this larger end. As the U.S. weakened and had to retreat in Asia, Japan would replace it, using new multilateral groupings. Stress is put on values, representative of Japan's conservatives, not only close to Western views of democracy, open trade, and freedom, but distinctive in thinking on history, as on India. The prime geographical focus is Southeast Asia and India, where rivalry with BRI is planned. Abe emphasized high quality, regarded as a way to compete with China. In Southeast Asia there is trust in Japanese companies' investments, building on positive accomplishments since the postwar era. Japan uses U.S. ties in Southeast Asia. Steps toward institutionalization have quickened, including the Quad and triangularity with Australia, as well as with the U.S. It is such warnings about Japan standing in China's way that clarified unbridled regional intentions.

In 2020, Shi Yinhong and colleagues emphasized the importance of stabilizing Sino-Japanese relations against the backdrop of worsening Sino-U.S. relations, taking seizing the pandemic as an opportunity to deepen economic cooperation, support which the Suga administration will appreciate. High-level meetings and summitry would drive these ties forward, including Xi's promised state visit when conditions permit. Differences in U.S. and Japanese strategy and attention also leave an opening, e.g., on responding to the South China Sea conflict, the East China Sea problem, and the Taiwan problem. Preparations are needed to keep illusions from taking root in Japan and to preserve the foundation of Sino-Japanese relations. No doubt is left that China's ties to Japan could bypass a possible U.S. regional strategy in this 2020 appeal.[12]

As late as 2020, Chinese were still targeting Japan as the leader in pursuing a regional strategy to counter China's with the FOIP as an exclusive zone with security in the forefront, while interfering with China's economic ties. The BRI began in 2013, and the FOIP started with Abe's proposal in 2016 before Trump tried to take charge. Japan in 2017 to 2020 sought to bridge the gap, utilizing Nikai Toshiro as the "pipe" in favor of joint infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia. Largely on the basis of support for the BRI, under conditions of high-quality proposals and transparency, Japan reassured China of a "new era" in bilateral relations. Why did Japan pull away in 2021? Chinese attribute it to U.S. pressure, obscuring their responsibility. Biden pressed for a "battle of systems" with politics, human rights, and ideology involved. After Suga replaced Abe, Japan also made human rights and the Taiwan question matters for pressuring China. Thus, Japan's FOIP went through stages, first to draw the U.S. into it, then under Trump pulling back by not calling it a strategy and seeking cooperation with China, and finally, following Biden's direction losing any autonomous thrust. Putting new pressure on China, the U.S. sought to reduce its technological advance. China shifted too, taking a more confrontational view of bilateral relations with Japan.[13] Having failed to waylay Japan's regional moves, as a way to shortcut a feared U.S. regional agenda, China turned sharply against Japan as well as responded to Biden with unprecedented fervor.

If Japan was depicted as seeking leadership, limiting both China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific, it was also seen as not wanting a strategic showdown with China. Yet, mutually exclusive geopolitical strategies, trade and technology competition, and ideological differences intensified, making it less willing to rely on Chinese supply chains and more wary of the BRI. China's main concerns were that Japan would strengthen geo-economic competitiveness, further

deepen mini-lateral frameworks, and further expand the geographical scope of the "Indo-Pacific." The clearest direct impact would be on investment in China's BRI projects because the two countries' companies are competing to invest in infrastructure projects and for supply chains and market share. Debating how China should respond, one author took a positive approach: developing its own "two-ocean" Indo-Pacific strategy, building on advantages as an "economically attractive power," and increasing the competitiveness of its companies so that it could compete for infrastructure projects, and promote positive cultural exchanges to strengthen China's regional image.[14] No longer able to drive a wedge between Japan and the U.S., China was shifting to targeting Japan before 2022.

In late 2022, one article urged Biden to discard the "Indo-Pacific" and reembrace the "Asia-Pacific" concept since Asia-Pacific conveys more connotations of economic cooperation, while Indo-Pacific is more geopolitical with alliances as the focus. Obama's "rebalance to the Asia-Pacific" and TPP appeared constructive to many, the article adds, contradicting long-expressed views in China. The use of "free and open" with Indo-Pacific proves that it is really about Quad security talks, military exercises, and relations with China. It is nakedly confrontational, fragmenting the region with an anti-China alliance, rejected by most states. India is mainly responding to the Sino-Indian border tensions, not enlisting with the U.S. The article calls on the U.S. to abandon this failed strategy,[15] as if the term "Indo-Pacific" connotes containment rather than countering China's assertive agenda.

Viewed bilaterally, China's relations had deteriorated in succession with Australia, the United States, India, Japan, and South Korea without any claim of a breakthrough improvement apart from Russia, in some renderings. Pictured as triangles with the U.S., the situation is even starker: the Sino-U.S.-Japan triangle nosedived for China by 2021; the Sino-U.S.-ROK triangle had left China deeply concerned by 2022; and the Sino-U.S.-Russia triangle, despite its superficial shift in China's direction, left it much worse off after the onset of the Ukraine war, not because Moscow was less dependent on Beijing, but because it had now been severely weakened.[16]

In multiple areas, Chinese sources recognize deterioration in China's position. In writings on Japan and South Korea the change in tone is unmistakable, acknowledging the loss of further possibilities to drive a firm wedge between them and the U.S. as well as the negative impact of trilateralism. The link-up of NATO and U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific is recognized as a serious blow. Resoluteness

to counter a contingency over Taiwan is worrisome to China as well. The Indo-Pacific concept, the Quad, and economic security all appear as challenges for the Chinese authors. Even Biden's ideological language is recognized as more threatening than Trump's use of anti-communism. Chinese sources confirm the image of U.S. successes and the need for new responses by China, naturally deflecting blame from China or Russia for these outcomes.[17]

Chinese sources recognize the effectiveness of Biden's approach,[18] i.e., that in a comprehensive, competitive strategy, mini-lateral cooperation mechanisms play a key role. They undermine more inclusive regional multilateral economic mechanisms sought by China, or intensify geoeconomics, particularly in areas such as infrastructure and technology, while cutting China out of some supply chains. If internal differences among members of the mini-lateral mechanisms will eventually limit their development (India, for example, has a long-standing foreign policy of seeking to balance among great powers and South Korea has important economic and political relations with China which it will not want to damage), Chinese recognize ongoing consequences in economic security.

Chinese acknowledge a worse security environment in the Indo-Pacific than a few years earlier, but they refuse to draw a linkage with the Ukraine war or fully credit the Biden administration's successful strategy. They also cannot fault Chinese policy for any negative outcome. In addition, they are obliged to obfuscate China's strategy, feigning the absence of an agenda to transform the region apart from encouraging trade, opposing alliances, and seeking only positive relations based on mutual respect and acceptance of China's core interests. Thus, the things that matter most for deciphering China's regional strategy are left unclear in its writings. Yet, we can piece together a strategy from policy choices and criticisms of the policies of others. Notably, the U.S.

Chinese analysis of Biden's Indo-Pacific policy reveals thinking about China's own strategy. Biden is accused of interfering with the "integration" and "unification" of the region and China's pursuit of a "common destiny." It is fragmenting the region, splitting ASEAN, and stirring up anxiety about a "China threat." Missing is any assessment of what China has done to enable these results. Absent too are accusations that the U.S. is doing what Russia accuses it of doing in Europe, squeezing the lifeblood of a society, which requires it to resort to extreme measures to save its sovereignty. In the case of China, the battlefield, at least to 2023, has been mostly economic, rather than military.

China's strategy in response to Biden's initiatives centers on six targets: 1) fine-tuning the BRI at a planned 2023 third summit; 2) solidifying and expanding the SCO, which was complicated by a September 2022 summit, where the Russian war was on people's minds; 3) driving wedges between the U.S. and its allies, which many Chinese articles to 2022 urged to do more actively; 4) targeting Taiwan with a mixture of misinformation about the U.S. and threats; 5) going to Europe with economic appeals but no answer to the image of China on Russia's side; and 6) appealing for regional economic integration linked to ASEAN solidarity.[19] None of these moves was succeeding, but a new approach may be emerging at the beginning of 2023, signaled by the claim that China was offering a peace plan for the Ukraine war and redoubling on its GSI. The U.S. side had awakened to a menacing expansion of power backed by a zero-sum mentality.[20]

Chinese perceptions of Biden's "comprehensive strategy" embodied in the Indo-Pacific concept are zero-sum, more than Japan's prior advocacy of the FOIP. Now the strategy covers security, economics, technology, and ideological stressing shared values of "freedom" and "openness." The core is maritime security, next is the values framework, third is economic and technological competition, and fourth is a network of multilateral mechanisms. Abe is faulted for advancing a security-oriented Indo-Pacific with values showcased too, but it was only after Trump in 2017 reconceptualized the "Indo-Pacific" that Abe is seen as starting to endorse the more assertive U.S. approach. The Biden approach is comprehensive, putting China more on the defensive.

Economic security emerged in 2022 as the focus of Sino-U.S. competition. China's use of economic vulnerability, as with South Korea in 2016 following its decision to deploy THAAD, brought this to the fore. The pandemic led to supply chain disruptions and heightened fear of undue dependency. When Biden met Xi Jinping in Bali in November 2022, tensions over economic security ranked with the Ukraine war and Taiwan as key concerns. Xi charged that the U.S. was breaking international trade rules and weaponizing trade and technology after the U.S. had imposed tight export controls on dual-use commodities. Looking back to Xi's diplomacy in Southeast Asia that month, Yomiuri saw economic security as the main emphasis. Opposed to decoupling in advanced technology, Xi appealed to countries to not harmonize policies with the U.S. and to keep supply chains open. At the APEC summit he called what the U.S. was doing a blow to international supply networks. Xi especially revealed a growing sense of crisis over tightened restrictions on semiconductors.[21]

On what basis is a degree of optimism aired? National identity arguments supplant security ones: the U.S. is too ideological to be trusted by others; Japan's quest for autonomy in Asia is too entrenched for it to follow the U.S. closely; South Koreans are too divided over identity to swing sharply to the U.S. side;[22] India's "strategic autonomy" promises to keep the U.S. at bay. There is mention of national economic interests that favor China over the United States. Key to optimism is the argument that states do not want to damage economic ties to China due to security and that linkages between mini-lateral entities are in doubt, ASEAN states cannot accept a weakening of ASEAN centrality or opposition to China, QUAD+ expansion is unlikely, and states do not want to be dragged into great power competition, which the U.S. is doing.[23] Yet, such strands of optimism are more muted in the trying circumstances now being faced.

Chinese sources recognize the instability and uncertain continuity in the IPEF framework, given the decision not to seek congressional ratification and the absence of tariff reductions and market access appealing to other states, especially in Southeast Asia. Labor and environmental demands pose problems without countervailing trade enticements. The U.S. seeks to solidify its own competitiveness and economic leadership, but the economic interests of other states are not in accord. Integration of the region would be sacrificed, one reads. States are unwilling to become pawns of the U.S. regional strategy. Yet, Chinese acknowledge a challenge to China's regional economic influence, raise the issue of "de-sinification," and call for policies to boost its competitiveness. Already Asia lacks an effective regional instrument. States are increasingly pressed between China and the U.S. to pick a side, fragmenting the region. China needs to respond positively with cool self-confidence, put its own house in order and deepen integration with its huge market the main attraction, what is most missing in the world today.[24] This call for a positive response defies the increasingly strident tone in 2023 to tackle the U.S. head-on.

New Chinese documents—the *Concept Paper on the Global Security Initiative* (GSI) and *PRC Position on a Political Solution to the Ukraine Crisis*—in the late winter of 2023 pointed to a more assertive response to the Biden agenda. The GSI was first proposed by Xi in April 2022. How do these documents reflect Chinese thinking about the Indo-Pacific region? They both demonize the United States for not respecting the sovereignty of countries, turning the U.S. criticism of Russia and China on its head. If the U.S. security argument targeted to Southeast Asia is China's failure to respect their territorial integrity, Chinese are making the opposite case. The documents blame "Cold War mentality" for

U.S. measures to resist China, insisting that without U.S. intervention from afar the natural order in the region would proceed.[25] Sanctions and supply chain security are identified as distorting free economic exchange, not the danger of becoming vulnerable to pressure or civil-military fusion from China or Russia. The U.S. stands accused of demonizing China, not the other way around. China is taking a newly active role in forging its own security order, it seems, after long concentrating on forging an economic order.

With the U.S. and its allies far away and Russia having lost clout and trust, China in May 2023 applied its strategy to Central Asia of regional economic integration leading to greater political and military influence.[26] Feigning closer cooperation with Russia, it chose the lowest hanging fruit, knowing that Moscow was in no position to register its previous objections. Handicapped elsewhere by the U.S.-led regional strategy, Xi Jinping found an opening he was able to seize.

Conclusion

The momentum shift in the early 2020s to the U.S. side over China reflected the inherent edge of a broad-based alliance network over a narrowly Sinocentric adversary as well as the success of the Biden administration's rejuvenation of U.S. strategic leadership with many new touches focused on economic security. Biden galvanized the considerable assets of Northeast Asia to launch a more comprehensive agenda for Asia's southern tier, recognizing the significance of Taiwan as a vital link between the two. In 2023 Xi Jinping was preparing a counterstrategy.

In 2012 China targeted Japan above all, from 2018 there was little doubt that the U.S. had risen to be the prime target, and in 2023 demonization of South Korea topped China's list. Chinese anger at U.S. Indo-Pacific policy and alliances kept mounting, as the U.S. found more success in expanding its strategy to allies and putting pressure on China. The Ukraine war served as the most striking catalyst in bringing the two clashing strategies to the forefront.

Chinese argue that two historically-based ignominious ambitions drive regionalism against their country: 1) U.S. Cold War mentality to contain a rival, as occurred in the Korean War and anti-Soviet policies; and 2) Japan's prewar mentality to become the dominant power in Asia, which is carrying over to remilitarization. Omitted is any recognition of the backlash against China's

expansionist and threatening behavior, leading countries predisposed to cooperate with it to join in resistance. The Quad was born not from a compulsion to contain but from defensive ties.

China's BRI and other regional plans aroused anxiety among many of its neighbors, who rallied behind a U.S. led approach to limit the potential of Chinese coercion. As BRI shifted in the face of economic doubts and recipient wariness, China lost momentum for reshaping regional architecture. After halting countermoves by Obama and Trump, Biden crystallized a more comprehensive response centered on mini-lateral security groups and economic security restrictions, coupled with appeals for shared values. Although incomplete in specifics, the Biden plan capitalized on the Ukraine war and the prospect of China's forceful takeover of Taiwan to forge a sustainable strategy to keep China from turning economic vulnerability in other states into regional control. Contestation over the Indo-Pacific was overshadowed by Russia's war in Europe, but neither the U.S. nor China lost focus on primacy of their rivalry over regionalism.

Endnotes

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United States and Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific Approaches Compared

By Susannah Patton

While the use of the term "Indo-Pacific" is relatively new, debates about its use echo longstanding arguments about how the region should be defined: who is in, who is out, and on what terms. Under two successive U.S. administrations, the term Indo-Pacific has become the accepted way that the United States refers to the broad geographic region stretching from the western Indian Ocean, through Southeast Asia and into Northeast Asia and the Pacific. However, adoption of the concept in Southeast Asia remains mixed. At Indonesia's urging, ASEAN in 2019 adopted its "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), and Indonesia itself readily uses the term. Most other Southeast Asian countries are cautious about the term, associating it with a confrontational approach to China that they cannot endorse. However, some, such as Singapore and the Philippines, now use it pragmatically in their engagements with regional partners, particularly the United States.

This article sets out the key elements of both the U.S. approach to the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian approaches to the Indo-Pacific, primarily focusing on Indonesia's perspective, reflected in the AOIP. It identifies common concerns, especially an emphasis on maritime cooperation, as the driver of convergence, as well as several areas of divergence. Among these divergences are questions about the value of cooperation as a driver, rather than the product of strategic trust; and the relative importance of "inclusive" versus "exclusive" or "minilateral" cooperative mechanisms. In large part, these divergences reflect underlying disagreements between the United States and Southeast Asian countries about how to engage China.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

Current U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is rooted in a long history of U.S. engagement with Asia. Michael Green argues that two common strands can be found throughout this history: a desire to take advantage of economic opportunities in Asia, and the imperative of ensuring that a hostile power is never able to

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project power against the United States from Asia.[1] And although the Obama administration did not adopt the "Indo-Pacific" terminology, statements from this period, including an article in *Foreign Policy* by former U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, emphasize a key tenet of the current U.S. Indo-Pacific concept, which is to describe a region that is strategically interconnected across both the Pacific and Indian oceans.[2]

The United States first began officially using the term "Indo-Pacific" early in the Trump administration, a decade after others such as Abe Shinzo had started to popularize it. Trump's first public articulation of a vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) came during his 2017 visit to Vietnam.[3] Among the Quad countries, the development of "Indo-Pacific" rather than "Asia" strategies aligned with a more confrontational period of relations with China, and a shared desire to collectively balance China's regional influence. As Rory Medcalf has argued, the Indo-Pacific concept reflects countries' desire for a more inclusive vision of a broad and interconnected region in which China does not dominate.[4]

A declassified version of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) gives insight into the end goals that the United States sought to achieve in the region between 2017 and 2021.[5] The strategy seeks to maintain U.S. primacy in the region while promoting a liberal economic order and preventing China from establishing its own spheres of influence. The strategy identifies several "lines of effort" to advance this goal: strengthening alliances and partnerships, working with India, countering China's influence, addressing challenges on the Korean Peninsula, and partnering with Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The Biden administration sustained the Trump administration's use of the term Indo-Pacific, as well as an overall approach to China that prioritizes competition over engagement, albeit with a "more effective strategy in practice."[6] Key to the difference in approach is a more concerted effort by the Biden administration to strengthen alliances and partnerships with regional countries, in contrast to the "America First" or zero-sum approach which characterised Trump's foreign policy.

The Biden IPS highlights some of the differences between the two administrations' regional approaches, although as a publicly released document intended to reassure regional partners, it is not directly comparable with the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific guidelines.[7] Both strategies share an assumption that China's behavior cannot be changed or directly influenced through diplomatic or strategic engagement; they differ on the question of goals. In contrast to the Trump administration's goal of U.S. primacy, the Biden administration's strategy seeks a "balance of power that is maximally favourable to the United States" and its allies and partners. In line with its status as a

document intended for regional countries, the Biden administration document seeks to articulate an "end state" or vision for the region that it hopes all countries would share. These goals include a region that is free, open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.

An accompanying "action plan" identifies more practical priorities for the administration in implementing the IPS. Key measures include launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), reinforcing deterrence, working with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), supporting India's regional leadership, delivering on the Quad, and building trilateral cooperation with the ROK and Japan. Good governance and accountability, and promoting open digital technologies, are also in the frame. Many of these priorities, especially the extensive emphasis on working with a core set of allies and partners, are consistent with the approach pursued by the Trump administration in the Indo-Pacific.

The Biden IPS explicitly makes linkages with other partners' approach to the region, including Japan, Australia and the ROK. Among these linkages, it endorses the AOIP, noting that the United States shared the view with ASEAN that Southeast Asia is central to the regional architecture.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

The approaches that the United States is pursuing through negotiations for an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), elaborate on the economic objectives set out briefly in the IPS, and are an important component of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. IPEF negotiators are working on four pillars: trade, including digital trade; supply chains; clean energy, decarbonization and the green economy; and tax and anti-corruption. Across all four pillars, the emphasis is on developing common standards on U.S. priorities such as labor and environmental regulation, to drive greater investment and business engagement across the region.

Importantly, the U.S. has signalled that negotiations will not include new market access commitments as was the case under previous U.S. economic negotiations with the region, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This choice is shaped by domestic political constraints which have made negotiating new free trade agreements unpalatable for the Biden administration. However, in recognition of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, and the region's strong demand for greater U.S. economic engagement, the administration is seeking to negotiate IPEF as a compromise approach. It is complemented by other U.S. sectoral economic initiatives and broader global programs from which Indo-Pacific countries could benefit, such as the G7 Global Partnership for Infrastructure.

Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific Strategies

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

For the past five years, the United States has enthusiastically embraced the Indo-Pacific as the framing for its approach to Asia policy. While many other countries, including Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, and Canada have also developed formal or informal Indo-Pacific strategies, the ten countries of Southeast Asia have mostly remained wary. With the exception of Indonesia and the Philippines, many Southeast Asian countries are suspicious that the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and its allies are policies to contain China. Despite this, ASEAN in June 2019 adopted the AOIP, which sets out ASEAN's perspective on this growing regional discourse.[8]

ASEAN leaders adopted the AOIP, after 18 months of wrangling, and at Indonesia's initiation. The AOIP has a curious status within ASEAN: it did not establish new mechanisms, or directly lead to new initiatives within the group. It references many principles that have been widely accepted by ASEAN for decades. A reader stumbling across the document without context might well wonder why the group adopted a document so bland and inoffensive as the AOIP at all. As Evan Laksmana has argued, a key push factor for Indonesia in 2018 and 2019 was the re-emergence of the Quad as a focal point for its members' Indo-Pacific strategies.[9] While many Southeast Asian countries worried that the Quad undermined ASEAN's role in the region, they equally recognized that they could not roll it back. The AOIP was ASEAN's way of articulating its own strategic vision and attempting to reclaim diplomatic space where it saw the Quad as potentially encroaching.

The document's adoption also reflects a parallel concern by ASEAN countries, which is that growing polarization between the U.S. and China could squeeze Southeast Asia. Over the past decades, Southeast Asia has grown wealthy thanks to an open and increasingly integrated regional economy in which the United States and China have both been key players. As China became a more assertive security actor, and the Trump administration's approach to Beijing hardened in turn, Southeast Asian countries became increasingly anxious that the "long peace" from which they had benefited was about to end. As many countries put it, they did not want to have to choose between the United States and China.[10] The AOIP reflects these concerns in its rejection of rivalry and zero-sum thinking.

The AOIP is a bureaucratic document, reflecting ASEAN's preoccupations and limitations. As such, its ambition is less sweeping than the goals set out in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies. Even so, it provides some insight into ASEAN's vision

and priorities for the region. The document identifies the following overarching goals: a region in which ASEAN plays a central role; a region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; and a region of development and prosperity. Importantly, the AOIP is "defensive" in posture: it portrays the region in positive terms as dynamic and peaceful, with ASEAN's focus being to defend against challenges to the current order.

In practical terms, the AOIP seeks to bolster ASEAN's role in three main areas: maritime cooperation, connectivity, and realizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It also contains a list of other "economic and other" possible cooperative activities, possibly reflecting the desire by a range of Southeast Asian countries to have their own specific national priorities reflected in the AOIP. Across all these areas, the focus is overwhelmingly on economic matters. The AOIP does not break new ground, leading analysts to critique it for bringing "old tools" to new challenges.[11] However, the AOIP has since given rise to diplomatic activity, led largely by Indonesia and the region's external partners, including Japan, Australia, and the United States, to develop an "implementation agenda" (see below).

The AOIP is intrinsically linked with its sponsor, Indonesia's, vision of the region. Indonesian scholar Dewi Fortuna Anwar traces Jakarta's use of the term Indo-Pacific to a speech made by former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa in 2013.[12] Indonesia's archipelagic geography, and strategic position between the Indian and Pacific oceans makes the Indo-Pacific concept a more "natural fit" for Jakarta than any other Southeast Asian country (see discussion of Singapore and Malaysia's attitudes towards the concept, below). The region's other principal archipelagic state, the Philippines, for example, lacks a sense of connection to the Indian Ocean.

Indonesia's adoption of the term Indo-Pacific is linked with two strands of foreign policy thinking: a desire to be more a more activist and influential power, and a deeper focus on the maritime domain as a national priority. Former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa drew on the Indo-Pacific concept in a major 2013 speech,[13] in which he set out Indonesia's desire to be more influential on a wider regional stage. Natalegawa acknowledged that the region was in a period of rapid change, and set out an ambitious approach to tackling challenges, including the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula; unresolved territorial claims, especially in the South China Sea; and climate change. While neither Natalegawa's level of ambition, nor his specific proposal (for an Indo-Pacific wide treaty of amity and cooperation) were taken forward by his successor as foreign minister, his early use of the term illustrates its influential position in Indonesia's foreign policy discourse.

Establishing Indonesia as a "Global Maritime Fulcrum" (GMF) was a policy Indonesian President Joko Widodo adopted in his first term in office, beginning in 2014. The policy had both domestic and international elements and was focused on improving connectivity across the Indonesian archipelago, long a barrier to economic growth. Key elements of the GMF policy included rebuilding Indonesia's maritime culture, managing maritime resources, developing maritime infrastructure, boosting regional maritime cooperation, and boosting maritime defence capabilities.[14] This approach culminated in an "Indonesian Ocean Policy" adopted in 2017.[15]

While many analysts welcomed Indonesia's more outward-looking embrace of its maritime identity,[16] Widodo did not sustain the GMF policy during his second term in office.[17] He proved more interested in boosting inward investment and connectivity than in advancing an outward looking foreign policy of the type envisaged by the Global Maritime Fulcrum, and the policy is today considered a "dead letter." However, vestiges of the policy remain in the bureaucracy, including in Indonesia's maritime security agency (BAKAMLA) and a ministry tasked with coordinating maritime affairs. Indonesia has also pursued more modest maritime cooperative initiatives with its neighbors, such as a new meeting of ASEAN coastguards.

Though the term Indo-Pacific has become widely used in Indonesia, many are clear in distinguishing Indonesia's use of the term from that of the United States. For example, Dino Patti Djalal has called for an "Indo-Pacific 2.0,"[18] expressing concerns that the Indo-Pacific policy pursued by the United States excludes China and could worsen zero-sum rivalry and the regional trust deficit. Even so, Djalal was supportive of Indonesia's push to reclaim the Indo-Pacific terminology and pursue a more inclusive approach through ASEAN. By contrast, the head of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia's leading think tank, Yose Rizal Damuri recently noted that the term "Asia-Pacific" represented a spirit of cooperation,[19] while the use of the term Indo-Pacific had at times been associated with a viewpoint of rivalry and competition.

The Indo-Pacific: other Southeast Asian perspectives

That Indonesia needed to extensively lobby ASEAN to adopt the AOIP suggests that other Southeast Asian countries either did not immediately see the need to adopt a common position on the Indo-Pacific, or had reservations about the concept itself. Among these countries, Malaysia's stance is especially relevant, as Malaysia like Indonesia geographically bridges the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Yet Malaysia was silent in the discourse ahead of ASEAN's adoption of the AOIP. Malaysian observers attribute Malaysia's silence to a deliberate choice to distance itself from an "externally constructed term" that could see it drawn into U.S.-China competition.[20]

Even so, Indo-Pacific concepts, especially the AOIP, were a clear influence on Malaysia's 2020 Defence White Paper, an important and unusual public articulation of Malaysian strategic policy,[21] which Malaysia's new government has committed to implementing.[22] The White Paper does not describe Malaysia's own region as the Indo-Pacific, but this idea is implicit in the document's description of Malaysia as a "maritime nation with continental roots" that is connected to both the Pacific and Indian oceans, a point reinforced prominently by maps. The document also embraces Malaysia's "bridging" geographical role especially as a hub for maritime security and endorses the AOIP's as a statement of ASEAN's regional importance.[23]

Singapore likewise remained aloof from Indonesia's push to adopt the AOIP,[24] perhaps reflecting a view that there was little to be gained but potential costs to be paid for endorsing an unclear concept. Singapore still does not tend to use the Indo-Pacific terminology in its own foreign policy documents, but it is pragmatic in using the preferred language of its external partners such as Japan and the United States.[25] Likewise, Philippines President Bongbong Marcos refers to "Asia-Pacific" rather than Indo-Pacific; however successive Philippine defense secretaries have all used Indo-Pacific. Notably, current DND Secretary Galvez has openly endorsed U.S. objectives of sustaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.[26] In this case, his adoption of U.S. terminology is likely intended to signal the Philippines' support for its alliance with the United States.

No Southeast Asian country has adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy like that which U.S. allies South Korea and Canada each released in 2022. However, since 2019, the use of the term Indo-Pacific has become more common, especially in the Philippines, which since 2021 has drawn closer to the United States. Most other ASEAN countries, including Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam predominantly use the term Asia or Asia-Pacific in their own statements, but appear to be flexible in using the term Indo-Pacific in joint statements or meetings with the United States. Smaller continental ASEAN countries such as Cambodia and Laos remain wary of the term.

"Implementing the AOIP": the role of external partners

Because the AOIP was a vague document that did not commit ASEAN to concrete action, Indonesia, supported by extra-regional partners, has sought to develop an agenda to "implement" the AOIP. For example, Indonesia will host an infrastructure and connectivity forum as part of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, intended to bring together ASEAN and external partners, bridging disparate regional initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S.

IPEF. Indonesia also presented a discussion paper on the AOIP at the 2021 ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting, perhaps to compensate for the AOIP's limited focus on security issues.[27]

The United States and its allies Japan and Australia clearly see the AOIP as worth supporting. While they likely recognize that the AOIP does not directly equate to support for U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, they welcome its principles of inclusivity and openness. With the aim of buttressing these values within ASEAN, the United States now frames its assistance to ASEAN as falling within the four pillars of the AOIP (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic partnership). This is more rhetorical than a substantive shift, as programs listed under support for the AOIP include many long-standing initiatives such as the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative.[28] Likewise, Japan claims to sponsor 73 cooperative projects supporting the AOIP,[29] and Australia's prime minister issued a "Joint Statement on Cooperation under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific."

Even China, which has long decried U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as "going against the trend of the times," and reflecting a "cold war mentality" belatedly acknowledged the AOIP. In a 2022 position paper China's foreign ministry stops short of welcoming the AOIP but acknowledges it as ASEAN's "independent initiative."[30] The paper notes that China is ready to work with ASEAN to advance practical cooperation in the four areas of the AOIP. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, China is yet to announce any such cooperative projects.

Are they strategies?

This article's brief survey of Southeast Asian approaches to the Indo-Pacific raises the question of whether any qualify as "strategy" at all. If strategy is an attempt to align ways and means with desired goals or end states, arguably Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific strategies do not exist. Indonesia's disparate efforts since 2017 to harness the Indo-Pacific concept for its own purposes perhaps come closest to answering as strategy. The AOIP might qualify as a strategy for boosting ASEAN centrality, but it does not present a plan to shape the Indo-Pacific. In part this may reflect that aside from Indonesia, Southeast Asian countries are small states with limited strategic ambition, more focused on responding to the actions of external powers than shaping the region around them.

Southeast Asian and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategies Compared

	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific	U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy
Level of ambition	Responsive, seeking to bolster ASEAN's own role Seeking to maintain the status quo against possible challenges	Ambitious, seeking to shape the Indo-Pacific region Seeking to reverse the trend of China's growing regional influence
Regional scope	Seeing ASEAN at the center of the Indian and Pacific Oceans	Defining the Indo-Pacific as one inclusive region, albeit with distinct sub-regions
Maritime focus	Prioritizing the maritime domain, primarily economic cooperation	Prioritizing the maritime domain, primarily security cooperation
Purpose of cooperation	Seeing cooperation as a building block to establish trust	Often seeing cooperation as the outcome of strategic trust and alignment
Institutional arrangements	Bolstering ASEAN's own role vis-à-vis other newer institutions	Pursuing cooperation both with ASEAN and newer minilateral groupings
Economic focus	Primarily focused on economic cooperation	Secondarily focused on economic cooperation

Even so, it is possible to discern where U.S. and Southeast Asian worldviews align and diverge from comparing the content of their Indo-Pacific approaches. The following observations are largely drawn from a comparison of the U.S. IPS and the AOIP.

Regional scope

The IPS defines the Indo-Pacific as stretching from the United States' own Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean. While the IPS does not specify, speeches and policies from the Biden administration appear to primarily focus on the region as far west as Pakistan, rather than a more expansive view that would also encompass Africa's Indian Ocean coast. The IPS refers to the Indo-Pacific as one region, but also acknowledges the existence of sub-regions, including

Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Island countries. By contrast, the AOIP identifies the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean as two regions, rather than as "contiguous territorial spaces," with Southeast Asia at the center.

While this difference may appear semantic, it may reflect ASEAN's anxiety that Southeast Asia's weight is diluted within an expansively defined Indo-Pacific. Within Southeast Asia, ASEAN is clearly the preeminent regional organization, and one in which Southeast Asian perspectives are elevated above those of other external partners. Whereas within the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is just one of several groups and could be seen as facing competition from other forums such as the Quad, comprising regional heavyweight powers.

Importance of the maritime domain

Both the United States IPS and the AOIP share a focus on the maritime domain. In the U.S. case, this is driven by concern about regional security flashpoints that are maritime in nature, especially in the South China Sea and East China Sea. In practical terms, the U.S. is pursuing a Quad initiative to promote regional maritime domain awareness with the aim of harnessing commercially available technologies to develop a common operating picture with countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. A Maritime Security Initiative, involving capacity building especially for the Philippines, was a hallmark of the Obama administration's Asia policy, and Washington has continued to focus on this with Manila, its key regional security partner.

While the AOIP, driven by Indonesia's interests as an archipelagic state, shares the IPS focus on the maritime domain, its prioritization within the broad field of maritime issues is different. Like the IPS, the AOIP acknowledges that geopolitical flashpoints in the region revolve around unresolved maritime disputes. And while the document refers to freedom of navigation and overflight, it gives comparatively greater weight to less sensitive non-traditional security maritime issues, such as transnational crime, resource management, marine pollution, and scientific cooperation.

Form of cooperative arrangements

Both the AOIP and IPS emphasize practical cooperation as part of their approaches to the Indo-Pacific. While the AOIP is focused on boosting ASEAN's regional role, the IPS emphasizes cooperation with ASEAN and through what it calls "flexible groupings" such as the Quad. This U.S. approach is found in other key speeches and statements from officials, such as Vice President Kamala

Harris' 2021 speech in Singapore, where she referred to U.S. support for "new, results-oriented groups" such as the Quad and U.S. Mekong Partnership.[31] U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan elaborated on the Biden administration's thinking in a late 2021 speech to the Lowy Institute, where he described the United States as seeking to establish a "flexible latticework" of minilateral institutions and groupings to complement established multilateral groups at both the global and regional levels.[32]

One explanation for these different approaches is that ASEAN countries tend to view practical cooperation as a building block for strategic trust, while the United States tends to take a more "top down" approach. Indeed, much of ASEAN's extensive cooperative agenda built up over the past five decades is premised on the belief that a regional "community" can be established incrementally by building habits of cooperation and dialogue. In this way of thinking, strategic trust is not a precondition for, but rather an outcome of, practical cooperation. The United States by contrast often takes a more "top down" approach. In this way, the United States IPS singles out India as a particular partner for cooperation, motivated by an increasing sense of strategic alignment between the two countries. By contrast, cooperation with China, a strategic competitor, will be more limited.

Importance of regional economic arrangements

While both the AOIP and IPS discuss regional economic arrangements, ASEAN's approach affords relatively higher priority to these than Washington's. While just one of the IPS five pillars is focused on Indo-Pacific prosperity, economic considerations are arguably the primary driver for all four cooperation areas in the AOIP. This is unsurprising: all Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia as the document's key architect, see national economic development as far more important than regional security issues. As Evan Feigenbaum has written, "the business of Asia is still business,"[33] and economic issues are afforded a primacy in regional affairs that challenges a U.S. approach which generally privileges the security dimension of regional strategy.

As a result of these different perspectives, IPEF has received a mixed reception in Southeast Asia. Although it includes seven out of ten ASEAN countries, which indicates strong regional appetite to engage the U.S. on economic issues, leaders and officials have publicly called on the United States to go further and negotiate on market access, in line with the region's own priorities.[34] While IPEF negotiations are yet to play out, Southeast Asian countries may be reluctant to commit to high U.S. standards, for example on labor and environmental issues, without the quid pro quo of access to the U.S. market or large-scale programs of financial and technical assistance.

Maintaining the status quo or revising the regional order?

A final point of potential difference between the U.S. and ASEAN approaches to the Indo-Pacific is on the question of whether they seek to maintain a status quo in the region, or to return to a status quo that has already been lost. Neither document is explicit about this, but the AOIP emphasises that "deepening of mistrust, miscalculation and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game" must be avoided. The Outlook is framed as reinforcing ASEAN's role and supporting "current dynamism" in the region. Overall, this framing tends to see the role of the AOIP in terms of buttressing a status quo that is under threat.

The IPS, by contrast, frames China as already putting heavy pressure on countries in the Indo-Pacific and undermining human rights and international law in its pursuit of a regional sphere of influence. The U.S. goal is to build a balance of influence that is "maximally favourable to the United States, its allies and partners and the interests and values we share." This language implies that the United States and its partners must act to arrest trends that are already underway and reverse recent changes to the extent possible. This activism is in contrast to ASEAN's more limited ambition of upholding an existing order against possible future challenges.

Conclusion

The modest goals of the AOIP, especially the ambition of maintaining an open and inclusive region, are consistent with the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and its key allies such as Japan. Yet the AOIP was developed to respond to, rather than to endorse, competing visions of the Indo-Pacific. This context explains why the AOIP diverges so greatly from U.S. approaches to the Indo-Pacific—to the extent that even China has implicitly endorsed it. In fact, this article's detailed analysis of these differences suggests that AOIP is closer to a critique than an endorsement of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

Since 2019, the Indo-Pacific has gained more widespread acceptance, including most recently from South Korea and Canada, as a framework for viewing the broad region encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Yet it is unclear whether this will lead ASEAN to further develop its own strategy for the region. For example, there has been little response from the region to the Republic of Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in December 2022, despite Southeast Asia being a key geographic focus of the strategy. The economically focussed Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative, also announced in December 2022, will be welcome in Southeast Asia. The ROK's decision to pursue this separate

initiative may suggest that Seoul appreciates the broader geopolitical framing of its Indo-Pacific strategy is unlikely to receive the same level endorsement in Southeast Asia as it has won in the United States.

As ASEAN chair in 2023, Indonesia does not appear to be pursuing an ambitious approach, such as an update or refresh of the 2019 AOIP that would focus more on security goals. Instead, Indonesia's approach to leading ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific is likely to remain cautious and incremental, focussing on the practical application of the concept in areas such as infrastructure connectivity, which are acceptable to all of its major external partners. Indonesia's planned Indo-Pacific infrastructure forum in 2023 will be a major opportunity for these partners to demonstrate the relevance of their Indo-Pacific strategies to the strategically important Southeast Asian countries.

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Section 2

The Koreas Shift Strategic Relations in the Indo-Pacific

The United States-South Korea-North Korea Strategic Triangle in the Indo-Pacific

By Scott Snyder

The development of the concept of the Indo-Pacific strategy, since its adoption by the United States in 2017, has primarily been driven by the emergence of China as an object of strategic concern and a perceived threat in the United States and South Korea. The main impacts of a rising Chinese threat are potentially to overshadow and distract from—but not abandon—the U.S.-South Korea alliance prioritization of North Korea as the primary focus and main object it has defended against. A potential secondary impact may be to heighten the inclination on the part of U.S. and South Korean policymakers to subordinate policy toward North Korea to policy toward China as an instrument designed to force China to take responsibility for managing the North Korean threat.

The rise of China as a perceived threat and its impact on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea strategic triangle can be analyzed by considering changes over three periods of time. First, there is the baseline mode of interaction among the United States, South Korea, and North Korea during the 1990s, before China made itself felt as an influence on the Korean Peninsula. At that time, the U.S.-South Korea alliance interacted with North Korea largely independent of Chinese influence, and China had a minor impact on Korean Peninsula affairs. For instance, during the Geneva Agreed Framework and the formation of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) at the time of the first North Korean nuclear crisis, China played a marginal role and had little influence on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea dynamic.

Rather, the United States-South Korea-North Korea triangle during this time was primarily influenced by the nature and fluctuation of political leadership in South Korea between progressive and conservative administrations. These leadership configurations influenced North Korean tactical efforts to drive a wedge in U.S.-South Korea policy coordination by engaging with the United States and marginalizing South Korea (*tongmi bongnam*) during South Korean conservative administrations and seeking closer cooperation with South Korea (*uri minjok kkiri*) at the expense of the United States under South Korean progressive administrations. While China played a marginal role in inter-Korean

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relations, the primary concern animating China's policies toward the Korean Peninsula during this time emanated from a desire to manage the level of tension between the United States and North Korea rather than the pursuit of a peninsular strategy itself.

In the second phase during the 2000s and 2010s, China's role evolved from being a marginal actor to becoming an active, yet still somewhat distant, influence on peninsular affairs. For instance, China participated in the Four-Party Talks in the late 1990s and led the Six-Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization in the 2000s. During this phase, China was a primary actor and influence on the U.S.-South Korea dynamic with North Korea, but rising Chinese influence had the mixed effect of allowing China to be perceived as both a potential partner in constraining North Korea and a shield that protected North Korea from the impact of alliance policies designed to enhance pressure on the North. China's primary policy objectives toward North Korea were to maintain internal stability and enhance bilateral communications, but Beijing struggled to find economic, political, and cultural exchange instruments suitable to achieve its goals.

During this period, China expected that growing tensions in the U.S.-South Korea alliance under the George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations would weaken the U.S.-South Korea alliance and strengthen China-South Korea relations. However, China failed to take into account Korean national sensitivities over the historical significance of the Goguryeo dynasty (37 BC to 668 AD) during the pursuit of its Northeast Project in the early 2000s to enhance the historical narrative of majority Han Chinese at the expense of ethnic minorities within China. As a result, China appeared surprised and dismayed by the subsequent Lee Myung-bak administration's efforts to restore the U.S.-South Korea alliance from 2008 onwards.

In the early 2010s, the initial stage of U.S.-China rivalry began to make itself felt alongside shifting political administrations in South Korea, characterized by efforts to facilitate progress in multilateral or parallel bilateral talks under progressive administrations and an emphasis on deterrence against North Korea under conservative administrations. North Korea responded by reluctantly participating in diplomacy under progressive South Korean administrations, while diplomatic talks involving North Korea broke down during South Korean conservative administrations.

During this period, the United States pursued a rebalancing strategy that drew attention to aspects of the U.S.-China strategic competition, generating Chinese concern regarding rising inter-Korean tensions and skepticism toward

the United States. In response to rising Chinese distrust of the United States and the emergence of a narrative among Chinese strategists that the U.S. global role following the Great Recession had entered into terminal decline while China was emerging as a prominent player in a multipolar global order, the prospects for U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea-related issues gradually eroded, despite pledges made by presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping at the 2013 Sunnylands summit to coordinate efforts to manage North Korea's nuclear pursuits.[1] A further barrier to South Korean efforts to secure Chinese cooperation on North Korea emerged in 2017 as a result of China's economic retaliation against South Korea for allowing the United States to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea in response to North Korea's steady development of short-range missiles capable of reaching the entire peninsula.

The emergence of the U.S. Indo-Pacific policy under the Donald Trump and particularly the Joe Biden administrations marks the third phase of development in the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship. In this phase, the primary influence of rising geostrategic rivalry on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle has been the reinforcing of the U.S.-South Korea alliance while China countered by reviving strategic ties with North Korea. To a certain extent, the reemergence of U.S.-China strategic rivalry brought the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle full circle to the Cold War days of superpower confrontation.

The initial impetus for the revival of China-North Korea ties came about ironically as a result of Trump-Kim summitry, which sparked Chinese anxieties that North Korea might move in the direction of the United States. But the deepening of the U.S.-China rivalry and the failure of U.S.-North Korean summitry provided North Korea with incentives to maximize its room for strategic maneuver as China has directly opposed U.S. policies on sanctions implementation through the UN Security Council since 2020.

Perhaps more importantly, converging shared perceptions between the United States and South Korea of China as a threat have enabled both countries to align their respective policies as well as to spend more time and attention focusing on China as the most serious long-term regional security threat. The scope of U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination has broadened and deepened to encompass China-related issues seemingly at the expense of attention to North Korea. In some quarters, especially in the United States, it appears that China has eclipsed North Korea as the focal point of coordination within the U.S.-South Korea alliance, meaning that there is less bandwidth in both governments to deal with the seemingly intractable and growing threat posed

by North Korea's nuclear and missile development. The broadened scope of U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination and the focus on China as the main strategic priority for both governments in combination with North Korea's continued unresponsiveness to U.S.-South Korea diplomatic efforts raise the temptation for policymakers to subsume policy toward North Korea as a subcomponent of policy toward China by trying to hold China responsible as an enabler of North Korean provocations.

This article outlines the evolution in perceptions of each of the three main actors in the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship, both with reference to their perceptions and approaches to each other and to the evolution and implications of their respective interactions with China. In addition, the chapter analyzes the main features and impacts of the emergence of U.S.-China rivalry on the postures and priorities of the United States, South Korea, and North Korea. Finally, I draw conclusions regarding the future of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship against the backdrop of China's rising power and U.S.-China rivalry as well as the strengthening prominence of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea and China-North Korea-Russia triangles. The U.S.-China rivalry has impinged on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship by energizing competing strategic configurations between China, North Korea, and Russia on the one hand and the United States, Japan, and South Korea on the other.

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Relationship Following the End of the Cold War

During the Cold War, there was no active triangular relationship between the United States, South Korea, and North Korea due to the absence of diplomatic interaction between the United States and North Korea and the intermittent nature of inter-Korean relations primarily characterized by mutual confrontation. The end of the Cold War-style geopolitical confrontation and emergence of nuclear nonproliferation as the top U.S. policy concern following the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the way for the initial enablement of a triangular U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship. The U.S. policy emphasis on exclusive support for South Korea and rejection of bilateral dialogue with North Korea softened at the end of the Cold War as U.S. concern over nuclear proliferation spiked following the Persian Gulf War during the early 1990s.[2]

An initial high-level dialogue between the United States and North Korea occurred in 1992 following the U.S. withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula and North Korean pledges to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear facilities. But evidence of

unreported North Korean reprocessing activities collected during IAEA inspections of the North's 5-megawatt reactor led to North Korea's announcement of its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in March 1993. To resolve the standoff, the United Nations called for the United States and North Korea to engage in dialogue to avert a crisis the following May.[3]

Eighteen months of on-again, off-again U.S.-North Korean bilateral diplomacy between June 1993 and October 1994 resulted in the Geneva Agreed Framework, consisting of North Korean pledges to denuclearize in return for the provision of South Korean model proliferation-resistant light water reactors through the establishment of KEDO, an international consortium including the United States, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea.[4] The agreement and its implementation generated constant tension between the United States and South Korea, which resented being cut out of talks on matters essential to its security, and North Korea, which resented South Korea's central role in constructing the reactors. Thus, the emergence of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle following the end of the Cold War was initially characterized by North Korean efforts to marginalize South Korea and exploit U.S.-South Korea alliance tensions. Throughout this period, China played a marginal role in diplomacy with North Korea and had no role in the establishment or implementation of KEDO.

Multilateral Diplomacy and Emergence of Chinese Influence

China's emerging influence on the Korean Peninsula was initially fueled by the establishment of a new triangular relationship among China, North Korea, and South Korea, which resulted from the normalization of China-South Korea relations in the early 1990s. China attempted to maintain its political influence with North Korea by implementing a framework that emphasized strict limits and priority on maintaining China-North Korea political relations while benefiting from enormous economic growth in the China-South Korea relationship. The triangular relationship also reflected South Korea's desire to gain strategic support or at least acquiescence from China in support of an improving inter-Korean relationship.[5]

The Four-Party Talks held in 1998 marked China's first involvement in multilateral negotiations concerning the Korean Peninsula since the armistice settlement was signed in 1953. The purpose of the talks, established in the mid-1990s as part of diplomatic efforts to promote diplomatic engagement with North Korea and provide humanitarian relief to the country in the midst of a severe famine, was to discuss measures to build confidence and bring about an end to the

Korean War. The talks made little if any progress, but they did open channels for communication between the United States and China and between China and South Korea on North Korea-related issues.[6]

China's clear motivations for engaging in talks were to manage the risks of U.S.-North Korea crisis escalation by supporting diplomacy and to prevent possible peninsular outcomes adverse to Chinese interests, including the possibilities of peninsular destabilization through military conflict or internal North Korean destabilization resulting from either the regime's collapse or its further nuclearization. At the same time, China's default position remained that the main problems rested with mistrust between the United States and North Korea and that China had little influence or ability to influence either the United States or North Korea.

Six-Party Talks: China-led Multilateral Diplomacy and U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Relations

As a result of growing Chinese concerns that U.S.-North Korea confrontation might occur under the George W. Bush administration in the wake of the war in Iraq, China cautiously took up an active convening role in North Korea-focused diplomacy at the encouragement of the Bush administration through the establishment of the Six-Party Talks, which occurred between 2003 and 2008. Held in Beijing from 2003, a primary purpose of the Six-Party Talks was to bring the United States and North Korea together for bilateral dialogue with diplomatic support from China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.[7] All parties had an interest in promoting peaceful denuclearization and building a diplomatic process though which to manage confrontation with North Korea, especially following that country's announcement of its NPT withdrawal and decision to restart its nuclear development.[8] But those common objectives were subordinated to conflicting strategic interests that stymied denuclearization diplomacy.

China shepherded the establishment of a statement of principles regarding North Korea's denuclearization in which the parties agreed to a broad roadmap of actions intended to exchange concrete North Korean steps toward denuclearization for pledges to support North Korea's economic integration with the regional economy and to achieve normalization of relations with the United States and Japan.[9] But the implementation process faced setbacks resulting from U.S. financial measures that targeted North Korean access to international banks, North Korea's decision to hold its first nuclear test, and disagreements over how to structure a declaration and verification process for the shutdown of North Korea's nuclear program.[10]

With the Six-Party Talks as an umbrella that facilitated multilateral diplomacy, various triangular interactions coexisted and interacted with each other. But the Six-Party Talks primarily served as a framework designed to facilitate bilateral U.S.-North Korean negotiations that remained at the heart of the process. For instance, China hosted a Six-Party dialogue in December 2006 following North Korea's first nuclear test that ended in a stalemate that was only broken following U.S.-North Korea bilateral talks in Berlin the following January.[11] A U.S.-North Korea bilateral agreement in Berlin paved the way for a return to Beijing and the announcement of tangible steps by North Korea toward denuclearization in exchange for the return of North Korean funds that had been frozen by a U.S. advisory at the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia.[12]

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle was active as part of Beijing-led multilateral diplomacy, but it proceeded alongside other triangular diplomatic configurations, including the U.S.-China-South Korea and U.S.-China-North Korea triangular interactions. Under the Bush and Roh administrations, lead negotiator Chris Hill closely consulted with South Korean representatives who supported the development of a U.S. diplomatic strategy and contributed vital suggestions for North Korea's denuclearization process as part of the Six-Party Talks.[13] However, the Roh administration consulted closely with the United States and also sought to maximize its agency and flexibility through close consultations with Chinese counterparts. In addition, U.S.-Japan-South Korea and China-North Korea-Russia triangular diplomacy was present but did not contribute significantly to multilateral diplomacy under the Six-Party Talks.

Beijing's role as convener of the Six-Party Talks provided China with a foothold to assert diplomatic influence on the Korean Peninsula. As host of the talks, Beijing had a role to play as a potential channel between Seoul and Pyongyang, and also could take advantage of the Roh administration's desire for a more "independent" diplomatic role vis-à-vis the United States to promote stronger relations with South Korea.[14] During the Roh administration, China's favorability in South Korea was quite high because of a rapidly expanding bilateral trade relationship, and South Korean investments in China designed to incorporate China's low wages and production costs as part of a South Korean supply chain to the United States and other industrialized countries. Moreover, many South Koreans anticipated at the time that China would replace the United States as the strongest power in Asia, making the idea of maintaining close relations with Beijing more attractive. In addition, the progressive Roh administration highly valued China's potential support for inter-Korean reconciliation.[15]

In fact, the Roh administration's objectives and preferred approach to North Korea at times seemed to align more closely with China's objectives than with those of the Bush administration. The Roh administration was skeptical regarding the efficacy of sanctions and actively sought to expand inter-Korean economic relations, through both the Mount Kumgang project and the expansion of the Kaesong economic zone. The Roh and Bush administrations maintained regular consultations on North Korea, but the relationship appeared to be hobbled by divergent preferences over sanctions versus economic engagement with the North. The combination of alliance management tensions between the two administrations and the rapid growth of China-South Korea bilateral ties generated an environment in which the China-North Korea-South Korea triangle appeared poised to supersede the relevance of U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relations.[16]

At the same time, China's economic interests in North Korea also clashed with the Roh administration's focus on inter-Korean economic integration, causing some anxiety among South Korean progressives that China's economic involvement with North Korea's mining sector might disadvantage South Korean influence in the North. Nonetheless, the end of the Six-Party Talks, South Korea's political transition from Roh Moo-hyun to Lee Myung-bak, renewed inter-Korean tensions, and Lee's restoration of prioritizing U.S.-South Korea alliance ties with the Obama administration led to a cooling of both China-North Korea-South Korea and U.S.-South Korea-North Korea trilateral interactions. At that time, China's spokesperson expressed disappointment in South Korea's focus on the United States by referring to the alliance as a "relic" of the Cold War.[17]

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Triangle Under Conservative South Korean Leadership

Under the conservative leaderships of the Lee and Park Geun-hye administrations, the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle was defined by U.S.-South Korea coordination on responses to North Korean nuclear tests and management of crises in response to North Korean provocations, punctuated by sporadic and short-lived U.S.-North Korean and inter-Korean diplomacy. North Korean missile and nuclear tests challenged the Obama administration in its initial phase, causing a delay in the resumption of U.S.-North Korean dialogue. The murder of a South Korean tourist at Mount Gumgang similarly short-circuited the Lee administration's offers of diplomacy with North Korea.

The subsequent sinking of the Korean naval ship Cheonan and North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 generated crisis management challenges for the United States and South Korea over how vigorously to respond to North Korean provocations and reduced prospects for a return to diplomacy.[18]

The Obama administration reopened a dialogue in the summer of 2011 that was stalled by Kim Jong-il's death and Kim Jong-un's transition to power in December 2011. The ill-fated U.S. and North Korean announcement of parallel denuclearization pledges on February 29, 2012, what came to be known as the Leap Day Deal, fell apart within weeks as North Korea announced the resumption of missile testing.[19]

Inter-Korean efforts to resume dialogue only became possible under the Park administration in the summer of 2015 as a vehicle for managing the escalation of casualties and spiraling tensions at the DMZ resulting from North Korean landmines placed at a South Korean guard post.[20] The talks succeeded in calming the immediate crisis, but North Korea's January 2016 nuclear test led the Park administration to order the withdrawal of personnel from the Kaesong Industrial Zone, closing the last remaining venue for ongoing inter-Korean exchange and cooperation. The test also provided a rude awakening for Park, who was disappointed that Xi failed to reach out to South Korea following North Korea's nuclear test despite the extensive personal investment she had made in improving relations with Xi Jinping.[21]

Trump-Kim Summitry, South Korea's Role, and Prospects for a U.S.-China-North Korea Triangle

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship reemerged as an important node of trilateral interactions under the Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in administrations, with the Moon administration playing the role of intermediary in an effort to bound the escalation of U.S.-North Korean tensions and reopen a pathway that ideally would lead to peaceful denuclearization in 2017. Initial prospects for the development of a triangular relationship between the United States, South Korea, and North Korea looked bleak against the backdrop of a steady drumbeat of North Korean nuclear and missile tests and the rising decibel level of Trump's threats regarding whose nuclear button was bigger, his threat to rain down "fire and fury like the world has never seen" on North Korea, and apocalyptic denigration of Kim Jong-un as "Rocketman" and threats to annihilate North Korea in his September 2017 speech at the UN General Assembly.[22]

In the face of this escalation, the Moon administration actively pursued efforts to restore diplomatic communication between the United States and North Korea. Following Kim Jong-un's announcement of a pause in North Korean

testing in November 2017 and his subsequent expression of interest in joining the Pyeongchang Olympic Games, the Moon administration jumped at the opportunity to include North Korea and to use Olympics diplomacy to establish direct channels of communication between the United States and North Korea. Moon tried to engineer diplomatic encounters between high-level Trump administration officials and North Korean delegations at the opening and closing ceremonies, but failed on both occasions. Following the conclusion of the Olympic Games, Moon sent two special envoys to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong-un. Moon then sent both envoys to the White House with an invitation from Kim to Trump to hold a historic bilateral summit. Following a successful inter-Korean summit at Panmunjom, Moon again intervened to hold a secret meeting with Kim in May in an effort to put the U.S.-North Korea summit back on track after Trump announced that he would not go to Singapore. Throughout the spring of 2018, the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea trilateral relationship showed unprecedented vitality in an effort to realize the Singapore summit between Trump and Kim.[23]

But once the U.S.-North Korea bilateral relationship was established, South Korea went from intermediary to marginal actor. South Korean efforts to pursue an end-of-war declaration, beyond brief mention of the goal in the Singapore Declaration, did not generate follow-up due to apparent disinterest from the United States and North Korea. North Korean efforts to persuade South Korea to turn on the spigot of economic assistance to North Korea that had existed during the Roh administration were blocked by UN sanctions, and the Moon administration had neither the leverage to reverse sanctions nor the ability to circumvent them without U.S. cooperation.[24]

The reopening of inter-Korean economic cooperation that Kim had envisioned following the September 2018 Pyongyang Summit did not materialize, leading Kim to abandon his commitment to "complete denuclearization" made in Singapore and instead requesting partial sanctions relief in return for partial denuclearization when he met Trump for the second U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi in February 2019. But Trump rejected the proposal and the summit failed despite South Korea's likely assurances behind the scenes to North Korea that the United States would take the "small deal." The drama of the reversal in fortunes for inter-Korean relations was nowhere more apparent than in Trump's third meeting with Kim at the DMZ in June 2019, with Moon standing as an awkward third wheel who was excluded from the meeting. Behind the scenes, the revival of Xi-Kim summitry during 2018-2019 supported and may have shaped the limits of Kim's appetite for concessions to the United States.[25]

Rather than exploiting the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea trilateral relationship to achieve its objectives, it became apparent that North Korea's objective was the establishment of a very different strategic triangle between the United States, China, and North Korea. This triangle was one in which a nuclear North Korea would finally be able to occupy the pivot position as a beneficiary of the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China. Rather than following the Moon administration's hopes for an alignment in which North Korea might leave China's sphere of influence to join the United States and South Korea, North Korea envisioned itself at the center of a strategic rivalry between the United States and China in which North Korea would be the main beneficiary. But the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry inevitably resulted in China asserting its own strategic interest of using North Korea as a buffer, thereby increasing North Korea's dependency on China rather than enabling Kim Jong-un's dream of strategic autonomy and leverage vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing.

The Emergence of the U.S.-China Rivalry and U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Triangular Relations

Arguably, the high point of U.S.-China coordination to pressure North Korea in the direction of denuclearization came in 2017 with the UN Security Council's passage of an increasingly stringent series of resolutions that capped North Korean exports of critical materials and curbed North Korean export of labor as a means of capturing valuable foreign exchange that primarily went to state coffers. Alongside its backing for an increasingly stringent series of resolutions in response to North Korea's September 2017 nuclear test and a series of North Korean IRBM and ICBM tests, China imposed its own sanctions on bilateral trade with North Korea as an expression of displeasure with North Korea's expanding nuclear capabilities.[26]

But Trump's announcement of a sudden shift from sanctions to summitry with Kim in March 2018 caused a sudden about-face in Chinese policy toward North Korea as Xi held a series of summits with Kim prior to and after the Trump-Kim summit meetings in Singapore and Hanoi.[27] China's reversal of its approach to North Korea coincided with the deterioration of U.S.-China relations under Trump and revealed China's distrust of U.S. strategic motives for pursuing direct summit diplomacy with North Korea.

The emergence of U.S.-China rivalry during the Trump administration has had the effect of removing the U.S.-China-North Korea triangle as a salient influence on U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular interactions, but in a form that

provides North Korea with greater latitude and freedom of action to the extent that it can exploit China's magnified regional influence in combination with the U.S.-China competition. To the extent that U.S.-China rivalry has had the indirect effect of lessening the likelihood of North Korean diplomatic activity with either the United States or South Korea, it has also reduced the salience of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship, bringing things full circle to a situation that carries the same restraints on diplomatic interaction that characterized most of the Cold War period, during which the diplomatic chasm between the United States and South Korea on the one hand and North Korea on the other hand appeared to be unbridgeable.

In the context of U.S.-China rivalry, North Korea has been able to gain greater freedom to maneuver vis-à-vis the United States and South Korea by using China as a shield against sanctions implementation and as a source of support that immunizes North Korea from U.S.-South Korean efforts, although ostensibly at some cost to North Korean autonomy because of Pyongyang's greater dependency on Beijing.

U.S.-South Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Implications for the U.S.-South Korea-North Korean Triangular Relations

The Biden administration has successfully encouraged the adoption of the Indo-Pacific strategic framework as the primary point of departure for like-minded countries to announce their respective strategies toward China, deepening the impact of U.S.-China rivalry on the Korean Peninsula.[28] Regardless of whether China is named as the object of these strategies, it is clear that the framework is designed to strengthen coordination among like-minded countries and generate pushback against Chinese efforts to reframe regional relations in exclusively Sino-centric terms. South Korea's adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy also carries another connotation: the relative priority of U.S.-South Korea policy coordination; going forward may shift from an exclusive focus on deterrence against North Korea to one in which China becomes the main focal point for strategic coordination between the United States and South Korea.[29]

Given decades of almost exclusive focus within the U.S.-South Korea alliance on deterring North Korea, a reframing of the Indo-Pacific as the main framework for U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination holds significant implications for the way in which the two countries work together to achieve alliance objectives. The first implication is that China may supersede North Korea as the main priority for alliance coordination or that the two allies may have differences in relative

priority as they manage the task of simultaneously pursuing defense and deterrence objectives against China and North Korea. To the extent that China supersedes North Korea as the preeminent "pacing challenge" for the alliance, the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship will be pushed aside in favor of a focus on the U.S.-China-South Korea triangle.[30]

Another more likely implication is that the United States and South Korea must manage potential prioritization differences that may arise as the United States focuses on China as the preeminent challenge while failing to give sufficient priority to managing North Korea, and South Korea remains fixed on the imminent dangers from North Korea's expanded arsenal at the same time that it acknowledges a more distant and potentially consequential threat from China. The management of different priorities within the alliance is hardly new, but it is a challenge that will require time, effort, and possibly the adoption of new organizational structures to manage effectively.

A third implication of the adoption of parallel Indo-Pacific frameworks is that both allies must develop new coordination mechanisms designed to ensure that respective China policies are aligned while maintaining close policy coordination in response to North Korea. For instance, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is the military institution that has the lead responsibility for coordinating potential military responses to China-related contingencies, but South Korea's Ministry of National Defense has much more frequent contact with U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) on North Korea. As a practical matter, finding the right nodes of interaction between counterparts that have assumed shared responsibilities will be essential to enhancing inter-governmental coordination on the Indo-Pacific.

The Future of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Triangular Relationship in the Context of U.S.-China Rivalry

The deepening U.S.-China rivalry has been accompanied by the rise in salience of competitive triangular relations between the U.S.-Japan-South Korea triangle on the one hand and the China-North Korea-Russia triangle on the other, overshadowing and decreasing the likely salience of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle. As was the case during the Cold War, an overarching framework of bipolar strategic competition around the peninsula is likely to have the effect of cutting off avenues of communication across lines of rivalry, isolating and containing the prospect of meaningful interactions between the two Koreas or between the United States and North Korea. In this respect, the rise of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and accompanying deepening of U.S.-China rivalry returns the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle to square one as an inactive triad constrained by a hostile geopolitical context.

As suggested earlier, the rise of U.S.-China rivalry offers benefits to North Korea to the extent that it is able to take advantage of the space opened up by growing U.S.-China distrust, but it also carries with it some constraints to the extent that North Korea's dependency on China as a primary patron has deepened. This circumstance explains in part the active North Korean diplomatic outreach to Russia, as part of its familiar Cold War strategy of playing off differences between Beijing and Moscow as a primary instrument by which to assert its independence.[31] At the same time, the risk remains that North Korea, as a low priority actor in the context of deepening global strategic competition, may pursue opportunistic strategies to advance its aims despite the constraints imposed by its economic dependency on China.

There is also a risk that North Korea might view the shift in alliance focus and priorities in the direction of China as signifying that North Korea is getting less attention within the alliance. Such a perception might catalyze North Korea to probe for weaknesses that result from the shifting of attention toward China and away from North Korea as part of a risk-acceptant strategy of opportunism that takes advantage of the strategic distraction of major powers consumed with competing geopolitical priorities.

Finally, there is the risk that the prioritization of China as the main challenge facing the alliance will bring with it temptations to subordinate the North Korea issue to the China issue or to think of North Korea as a subcomponent of the China challenge. Already, frustration with North Korea's non-response and lack of accountability has generated recommendations that the United States and South Korea should hold China responsible for continuing to enable North Korea as a threat to the U.S.-South Korea alliance.[32]

The respective Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and South Korea certainly provide a blueprint for understanding the extent of U.S.-South Korean coordination necessary to achieve new policy goals in response to a rising China. The introduction of such a strategy broadens and deepens the focus of the alliance and opens a wide array of expanded opportunities to build close coordination between governments in new areas. But it will be important for such coordination efforts to build on rather than displace the foundation provided by decades of close coordination on policy toward North Korea. The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship that has been central to understanding the peninsular security dynamic for so long is now being supplemented, not yet supplanted, by an equally grave and essential focus on managing the China threat.

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Free, Peaceful and Prosperous: South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Middle Power Convergence with Australia

By Rory Medcalf

Over the past decade, a concept called the "Indo-Pacific" has replaced the late 20th century "Asia-Pacific" as a central frame of reference for strategy and external policy. Definitions vary. Some cast the Indo-Pacific as a neutral term for the connectivity of a two-ocean region.[1] Others depict it more as loaded code for balancing or even allegedly containing Chinese power through coalition building across a larger regional canvas.[2] In any case, many nations and international institutions have adopted variants of the Indo-Pacific as a framing concept for strategy and external policy. This pattern has extended beyond early advocates such as Quad partners Australia, Japan, India, and the United States to include the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union. Although the Indo-Pacific is often associated particularly with Japan and its influential prime minister, the late Abe Shinzo, in fact Australia was the first country to formally recognize the Indo-Pacific as its regional security environment.[3] As a fellow middle power and independent-minded U.S. ally, with its own geopolitical complexities to navigate, Australia provides an illuminating example for South Korea as it operationalizes Indo-Pacific strategy.

Until the early 2020s, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was conspicuously missing in the list of Indo-Pacific converts. This was despite some obvious structural reasons for Seoul to come to terms with the Indo-Pacific concept, including economic dependence on Indian Ocean sea lines of communication, status as a U.S. ally, and membership in ASEAN-centric regional institutions. Under the New Southern Policy of the Moon Jae-in administration, there were tentative steps towards greater engagement with Southeast Asia, India, and Australia, but hesitancy to identify with Indo-Pacific strategy and its connotations of challenging China.[4] Seoul's reluctance to join the Indo-Pacific tide dissipated, however, with the election of Yoon Suk-yeol in May 2022. His administration soon set about developing a formal "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific," released in December 2022.[5] The Indo-Pacific

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context also featured in Seoul's subsequent national security strategy in June 2023, and the historic statements emerging from the Camp David trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan summit in August 2023.[6]

A document is one thing, genuine strategic commitment is another. Questions remain about how far the ROK will go in fulfilling the promise of its Indo-Pacific declaration. What is the logic and motivation for Seoul's Indo-Pacific policy? How distinct is it from the outlooks of others, including fellow U.S. allies as well as middle powers? How will the China factor influence Seoul's choices? Will the constant threat from—and inextricable connection with—North Korea inevitably constrain South Korea's resourcing and attention of broader regional involvement? What are conceivable next steps in developing the ROK strategy, in terms of practical measures and ties with Indo-Pacific champions and groupings, including the Quad? Will the ROK's Indo-Pacific pivot prove ephemeral, only to be undone by the next leftward change of government in Seoul—or indeed the next "America First" administration in Washington? And how does the Australian experience—and the opportunities from the evolving Australia-ROK relationship—inform these prospects?

This essay does not answer all these questions in depth. Rather, it provides material to inform more comprehensive answers by examining two points of particular focus: the insights ROK policymakers can draw from Australia's Indo-Pacific story; and a consideration of how Australia (along with other Indo-Pacific partners) can support South Korea's sustained engagement across the two-ocean region, for the benefit of region-wide stability, prosperity, and openness.

Rise or Revival of the Indo-Pacific

The rapid emergence of the Indo-Pacific to become an orthodox way of framing the Asian strategic environment warrants explanation. It is not immediately obvious why a term compounding two oceans should be a logical shorthand to supplant "Asia-Pacific" in describing an Asia-centric region. There remains healthy debate about what the Indo-Pacific actually means and why so many governments have embraced it. Some of this can be simplified to contrasting notions of an "inclusive" Indo-Pacific—focused on connectivity and multilateralism—and a more "exclusive" version characterized by the balancing or even containment of China by the United States and some of its closest democratic friends.[7] However, what is clear is that the Indo-Pacific is no longer some kind of intellectual oddity or insurgency, as it may have seemed to be just a decade or so ago, but an accepted organizing principle for much of the world's diplomacy. This relates to its utility, flexibility, and relevance to the challenges of the time, particularly as they relate to how to come to terms with Chinese power.

At its core, the Indo-Pacific is a super-region, a strategic system, defined by connectivity and contestation across two oceans, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.[8] It emphasizes the multipolar and maritime nature of this system. It recognizes that, while such a region is Asia-centric, it is not exclusively comprised of Asian countries, but instead acknowledges substantial and growing links between Asia and the world—global stakeholders—through the maritime space. Globally, the Indo-Pacific matters because it is the emerging center of gravity economically, demographically, and strategically, and is anticipated to remain so well into the 21st century.

The geographic boundaries of the Indo-Pacific are contested. Like all regional constructs in geopolitics, of course there is something artificial and contingent about the Indo-Pacific; after all, seemingly settled terms such as "Asia" and "Europe" have also shifted in meaning throughout history. For example, do the east coast of Africa and the west coast of South America really figure as part of the Indo-Pacific strategic system? Where is the invisible line in the ocean that marks the outer rim of the Indo-Pacific? At the same time, it is worth emphasizing what binds the Indo-Pacific: the sea lines of communication, on which so many large regional economies depend. Moreover, while the boundaries may be fluid – this is, after all, a maritime setting—the geographic core of the Indo-Pacific is quite evident: the sea lanes of Southeast Asia. These congested maritime highways for trade, energy, navies, coast guards, and fishing fleets are the connective tissue at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, and include straits and chokepoints, the archipelagic waters of Indonesia, and critically the South China Sea: not China's lake but every trading nation's business.[9] This centrality of Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific also adds to the diplomatic relevance of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) and the various ASEAN-centric regional diplomatic institutions.[10]

Although the term Indo-Pacific only became commonplace in diplomatic discourse over the past decade, the structural drivers of this contemporary regional order were becoming apparent in the 1990s. A critical factor was the spectacular growth of China as a trading economy, including its sudden dependence on the Middle East and Africa for oil imports, requiring a focus on the Indian Ocean and the "Malacca Dilemma"—a perceived risk of a U.S.-led blockade in some future crisis.[11] The rise of India and the blossoming of U.S.-India security relations in the early 2000s was another element. Japan became one early driver of Indo-Pacific thinking, under the banner of the "confluence of the two seas" and a recognition that Japan's interest in balancing China's growing power required closer alignment with India and Australia as well as the United States.[12] The origins of the Quad, in mobilization for disaster relief after

the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami dovetailed with the growth of Indo-Pacific awareness.[13] The establishment in 2005 of the East Asia Summit—to include India and Australia—reflected a conscious effort by ASEAN to widen its own regional vision, including to dilute Chinese influence.[14] From 2008, piracy in the Gulf of Aden drew in navies from all over the world—including China, Japan, and the ROK—to protect their interests in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean.[15] All of these developments were building blocks of today's Indo-Pacific consciousness.

A key reason for the adoption of the modern Indo-Pacific as a diplomatic frame of reference is its utility, and much of that rests with the duality of the concept. It is inclusive, focused on regionwide connectivity and engaging China when Beijing plays by international rules, yet simultaneously exclusive: a code for balancing against China when it fails to respect the rights of others.[16] It is about regional order yet also reflects the engagement of global stakeholders. It is maritime, yet also acknowledges that the most vital nodes of regional connectivity are where the land meets the sea: ports and undersea cables, making it a complement rather than an alternative to continental Eurasian frameworks.

Finally, another reason the Indo-Pacific is likely to endure is that it is not entirely new. The Asia-Pacific moment of the late 20th century—a privileging of the economic and security links of East Asia, America, and Australasia – was an anomaly in its exclusion of the Indian Ocean. For much of history, there have been active patterns of civilizational engagement between the Indian and Pacific oceans: trade, religion, culture and power relations too.[17] Much of these preceded the period of European colonialism—consider the spread of Buddhism from India to China, Korea, and Japan—although Indo-Pacific interaction also intensified due to colonial connections and the pan-Asian character of movements for self-determination. For decades after the Second World War, the inward-looking character of China and India—the region's two great economic engines—delayed the return of Indo-Pacific regionalism. But it was only a matter of time.

Indo-Pacific Strategies

In 2013, Australia was the first country in the world to formally declare its region of strategic interest as the Indo-Pacific. This was not an explicit act of China-balancing—in the way that later American and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategies were interpreted—but rather a recognition of growing connectivity across the two oceans, Australia's dependence on a complex regional economy, Australia's proximity to the Southeast Asia sea lanes, and a pragmatic effort to redefine

the region in a way that automatically dealt Canberra in.[18] Indonesia also made its own bid around this time to leverage its geographic centrality to expound ASEAN principles of amity and cooperation across this larger regional system, partly to preempt gathering strategic rivalry.[19] America's Indo-Pacific diplomacy at this point, the second term of the Obama administration, was still uneven. The half-hearted "pivot to Asia" involved a recognition of the Australia-U.S. alliance and U.S.-India ties as having an Indo-Pacific character. But this was tempered by a lingering attachment to Asia-Pacific frameworks focused on East Asia and the hope that globalization would further the constructive engagement of a reforming China.[20]

In the 2010s, the regional strategic outlook darkened, with Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea, worsening China-India and China-Australia relations, the deepening of U.S.-China strategic rivalry and North Korea's nuclear intransigence. Many of these developments were affected by Xi Jinping's hardening authoritarianism, combining extreme control domestically with military modernization and ambition abroad.[21] Correspondingly, even as more governments began to recognize the objective realities of an Indo-Pacific strategic system, they crafted Indo-Pacific strategies as way of expanding their options to resist Chinese power, discourage confrontation, or both.

Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy of 2016 and the Trump Administration's strategy of 2017 (reflecting a classified plan that came to light in 2021) are often identified as the more confrontational and exclusive policies of this era.[22] That is not the whole picture: these documents also reflected some of the unifying principles evident in the more inclusive visions of others, notably Australia, India, Indonesia, ASEAN, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the European Union, Britain, Canada, and South Korea. Second iterations of American Indo-Pacific strategy under Biden, and Japanese under Kishida, took a further leaf from the inclusivity book, with a greater emphasis on development, connectivity, and consultation.[23]

Indeed, one striking feature of all declared Indo-Pacific policies is their commonality of principles. The 2019 ASEAN Outlook lists more than 14 principles including ASEAN centrality, openness, inclusivity, rules, mutual respect, and rejection of the threat or use of force.[24] If one conducted the diplomatic equivalent of a blind taste test, superimposing the ASEAN Outlook on recent Quad communiques or EU statements or indeed the South Korean Indo-Pacific strategy, it would be hard to tell them apart. Nations and institutions have tended to accumulate adjectives to frame their Indo-Pacific policies, to

demonstrate that realistic policy is not a simple choice of either balancing or engaging: it is possible and necessary to do both. The South Korean approach typifies this trend, which is apparent also in multilateral consensus-building such as through the May 2023 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: "free, open, fair, inclusive, interconnected, resilient, secure and prosperous."[25]

Australia: Southern Star

The Australian experience is particularly useful to analyze, including because Australia is a middle power U.S. ally, a pioneer of Indo-Pacific thought, and, significantly for the ROK, it is not Japan. On the one hand, Australia's international posture is sometimes stereotyped largely through the lens of the nation's status as a U.S. ally, an "Anglosphere" nation and part of the democratic "West."[26] This is misleading, as Australia's independent foreign policy has always synthesized at least three distinct dimensions: to be sure, reliance on a powerful ally (initially Britain and since the mid-20th century the United States); but also engagement with Australia's region; and support for a rules-based global order.[27] All three objectives are integrated in Canberra's efforts to forge a tacit and practical Indo-Pacific strategy.

Even through Australia, at the time of writing in 2023, still lacks a single public-facing document titled "Indo-Pacific strategy," the elements of such a policy are woven through multiple published policies, declarations, and plans, including Defence White Papers in 2013 and 2016, a Defence Strategic Update in 2020, a Defence Strategic Review in 2023, and a Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017.[28] Each of these refers to the Indo-Pacific dozens of times, sometimes with precise definitional language and explanations of how the Indo-Pacific shapes policy and capability decisions. For much of the time since 2013, Australian diplomacy has steadily advocated Indo-Pacific framing of the regional security environment. This means that the proliferation of Indo-Pacific thinking in other countries can be credited as something of a quiet "strategic shaping" success for this middle power.[29] For instance, the defining features and principles enunciated in Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper can be found in Indonesian policy and the subsequent 2019 ASEAN Outlook.

Critics of Australia's Indo-Pacific settings have simplistically characterized them as crude alignment with American "containment" strategy (itself a debatable definition).[30] In reality, there has consistently been a sophistication and duality at work. Consider the vocabulary used to define Australian Indo-Pacific policies: never a cut-and-paste of the Japanese or American "Free and Open" formulation. Even conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who

advocated a "world order that favors freedom" also called for an "open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific" with "ASEAN at its core."[31] Australia's Indo-Pacific policies have always involved pro-alliance military balancing as well as more subtle diplomatic hedging, even if the relative weight of each element has shifted from government to government. It is notable that there has been continuity across multiple Australian governments of both major political persuasions, from the Labor administration of Prime Minister Julia Gillard (which redefined the region as the Indo-Pacific in 2013) through the conservative governments of Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull, and Scott Morrison, to the return of Labor under Anthony Albanese in 2022. This is reflected in their many speeches and policy pronouncements, as well as more tangible actions their governments have taken, from accepting U.S. military force rotations in Australia's north and west to fundamentally strengthening ties with India.

The continuity can be credited to several factors, including traditions of bipartisanship in Australian foreign and security policy, consistency of advice from an apolitical civil service and intelligence community, the recursive influence of Indo-Pacific policies proliferating among allies and partners (that is, Australia's earlier Indo-Pacific advocacy reflecting back), and the basic reality that an Indo-Pacific posture matches Australia's geography. No nation other than Indonesia is so literally Indo-Pacific in terms of its place in the world. For Australia, the Indo-Pacific is home.

Crucially, Australia's Indo-Pacific policies are not merely declaratory. Indeed, this is more about deeds than words. Canberra may lack a public-facing strategy document, but over the past decade it has lived Indo-Pacific policy every day. This is apparent across multiple dimensions of external policy, from which Seoul can draw inspiration.

- *Diplomatic institution-building (bilateral, minilateral and multilateral):* Australia has been active in developing and leveraging the full range of regional institutions. The U.S. alliance remains core, reimagined to take advantage of Australia's pivotal location, but this is augmented by strengthened bilateral partnerships with Japan and India, the Australia-India-Japan trilateral and the Quad. At the same time, Australian governments have been at pains to invest in dialogue with ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum, and even the (somewhat underwhelming) Indian Ocean institutions, not only for the intrinsic value of such comprehensive regional engagement but to offset perceptions that Australia is deprivileging relations with its immediate neighborhood or making all its diplomatic bets on the United States and hard balancing strategies.[32]

- *Defence capabilities and engagement:* The trend in Australian military modernization in the Indo-Pacific era has been to prioritize maritime forces and power projection over earlier traditions of sustaining a balanced force or focusing on small expeditionary or stabilization operations far from home. The apotheosis of this was the audacious decision in 2021 to seek nuclear-power submarines under the AUKUS arrangement with the United Kingdom and United States.[33] Critics will say that progress towards Australia's maritime military ambition has been and will continue to be slow and uneven, but nonetheless the Australia of the 2020s is developing a force posture capable of strike and long-range maritime operations (albeit with a concentration of firepower in the continent's northern approaches, which also happen conveniently to be the central waterways of the Indo-Pacific).[34] Although Canberra continues to emphasize a degree of self-reliance in combat and logistical capability, the reality is that major warfighting by its forces would be difficult to imagine—and impossible to execute—outside an alliance context. Australia matches its regional capability quest with defense diplomacy aimed at building wide coalitions of interests across the region, for example the annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour deployment, which takes an Australian naval task group alternatingly to the Indian Ocean/Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, to conduct humanitarian and combat exercises with diverse partners.[35]

- *Development assistance and capacity-building:* As Australia has begun to recognize the challenge of growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, it has become more instrumental in using its development assistance for geopolitical ends. Australia aid and capacity-building is no longer dissipated with little regard to strategic purpose. Instead, even where the effect at one level is humanitarian and developmental, there is also a focus on building the capability, resilience, and sovereignty of states and societies in Australia's neighborhood, especially Southeast Asia and the Pacific.[36] This reinforces acceptance of Australia as a security partner and helps to dilute or minimize the influence of China in ways that could become contrary to Australian interests—for example, Chinese security presence in Australia's proximity.

- *Economic policy, including trade and investment diversification:* As a resources exporter, Australia has long been a champion of free trade, and a reluctant (and only partial) convert to 21st century geo-economics, the use of economics for state advantage in international power politics. This change has occurred through defensive responses to China's behavior, including espionage, foreign interference, and economic

sanctions against Australia in recent years. Australian policymakers have also become concerned about geo-economic risk as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and corresponding impacts on supply and infrastructure vulnerabilities. Accordingly, Australia now pursues a more sophisticated, layered, and risk-informed range of policies in relation to trade, investment, infrastructure, and technology. This includes diversifying trade partners, exploring technology cooperation with a focus on standards and trust, and ensuring that national infrastructure (such as 5G networks) and regional connectivity (such as undersea cables) cannot be dominated by a coercive power.[37] At the same time, Australia's trade dependence on China—notably in iron ore exports—remains significant.

The Australian story does not provide a perfect template for South Korea in navigating its own Indo-Pacific path. There are distinct differences in national experience, endowments, geography, and strategic culture. Even so, some obvious lessons arise. In particular, as a middle power Australia has sought to maintain a certain flexibility and freedom of maneuver, which its close alliance with the United States—and character as a liberal democracy—can sometimes obscure. Notably, at the time of writing in mid 2023, Australia under a center-left (Labor Party) government is attempting a "stabilization" of relations with China—somewhat in the style of the diplomacy of certain Asian countries, including South Korea—in which provocative rhetoric is avoided, pragmatic dialogue is pursued, but defensive capabilities are quietly strengthened. In this regard, the contemporary regional vision of Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, termed "strategic equilibrium," is a combination of deterrence and diplomacy: seeking to support the balancing of Chinese power and the dissuasion of aggression, while reassuring other middle players that confrontation and conflict are not the intention, and that dialogue and confidence-building measures should be urged on every side.[38]

Korea's Indo-Pacific Voyage

For its part, South Korea is a puzzling piece of the Indo-Pacific mosaic. In recent times, it has developed deep economic interests and reliance across the region. Moreover, despite its peninsular position in Northeast Asia, Korea was not as isolated from the mental map of the wider region as one might presume. From the 1500s to the 1900s, with remarkable consistency, European maps entitled "Asia" encompassed an Indo-Pacific arc from the Indian Ocean rim to China, Korea, and Japan. Such an integrated cartographic vision of Asia was not solely a Western invention. Indeed, one of the first Asian perspectives

on the broader region was the Korean Kangnido map of the known world, dated to 1402.[39] This renders a coherent and broadly accurate map of a region encompassing East Asia, Southeast Asia, India, Eurasia, and even the edge of Africa. It would have been informed by contact with Chinese, Mongol, Muslim, and European maps and knowledge. Even six centuries ago, Korean civilization was no hermit.

Yet as the Indo-Pacific has become a prominent frame of reference in regional diplomacy over the past decade or more, Seoul has been something of a laggard—or a skeptic—in getting on the bandwagon. That is understandable at one level: like any middle power, the ROK has limited resources and attention, while quite uniquely it faces the immediate challenge of a heavily armed, totalitarian, and volatile neighbor, which also happens to be its estranged kin. Although a U.S. treaty ally, Seoul has long been determined to keep the alliance focused on North Korea rather than wider regional risks and the China challenges.

On the other hand, the ROK has substantial interests across the Indo-Pacific strategic environment. As a nation heavily reliant on resource and energy imports, it has one of the most acute dependencies on Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian sea lanes of any country. Its trade and investment patterns span the region, and extend not only to East Asian neighbors, but the United States, Southeast Asia, Australia, India, and beyond. As a middle power and a democracy, its diplomacy relies on regional institutions and partnerships and adheres to rules, norms, and international law. South Korea has maritime interests, through trade, a globally significant shipbuilding industry, and stewardship of its own sea resources and territories (some of them contested).[41] It also has large and growing maritime capabilities, including a "blue water" or ocean-going navy with advanced firepower.[42] Now, in the 2020s, the ROK is also becoming a major exporter of armaments and military equipment, including to Indo-Pacific partners, such as Indonesia, thus combining the economic and security dimensions of its regional engagement.[43]

Thus, one might say that, even if some governments in Seoul, especially on the left, have previously sought to evade the Indo-Pacific, the region has found South Korea. Not that it is fair to say that the ROK has not contributed to Indo-Pacific regionalism. Indeed, Seoul had a guiding hand, sometimes forgotten by much of the region. The establishment of the East Asia Summit in 2005 was the culmination of a long effort to create a leaders'-level regional body with ASEAN at the core.[44] Much of the original intellectual impetus arose from a process of experts and eminent persons known as the East Asia Vision Group, and subsequent East Asia Study Group, both established under the ASEAN+3

mechanism on the initiative of President Kim Dae-Jung.[45] Between Kim's inspiration and the able co-chairing by former foreign minister Han Sung-Joo, the South Korean fingerprints on what became the preeminent institution of Indo-Pacific multilateralism—such as it is—are undeniable.

In implementing its recent Indo-Pacific strategy, Seoul has made a reasonable start in 2022-23. For instance, it has initiated a summit-level dialogue with all Pacific Island leaders, and advanced security dialogue with Japan bilaterally and the United States and Japan trilaterally.[46] The full logic and extent of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, however, remain to be seen. Much more challenging than mere declaratory policy will be the series of difficult choices and trade-offs yet to be made: signals that demonstrate commitment. These could include allocating forces to engage with Indo-Pacific partners, expanding development assistance in Southeast Asia, the Pacific and/or Indian oceans, joining clear statements of solidarity in response to emerging regional risks beyond the peninsula, and genuinely preparing for those contingencies in consultation with others.

After all, the strategic picture in the region is dynamic and fraught with risk. The Indo-Pacific concept involves a recognition that sustaining security and prosperity demands a willingness to defend the predictability and connectivity underpinning regional order. In other words, no nation is truly an island in this region. In Korean terms, the security of the peninsula cannot be insular, not that it ever really was. For middle powers to protect and advance their interests across a region of connectivity and contestation, the external balance of partnership-building is vital, alongside the internal balancing of building their own capabilities.

As Seoul's Indo-Pacific and national security strategies recognize, risks to ROK interests can originate from many sources, and can intersect and interplay with cascading consequences. Threats from North Korea remain present and profound. But China is increasingly acknowledged as a source of coercion and assertiveness against South Korean interests. Seoul now openly underscores the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, as affirmed in a mid-2023 defense ministers' communique with the United States and Japan.[47] Effectively managing these risks requires maintenance and intensification of the ROK-U.S. alliance, but also highly credible national military capabilities and a wider web of partners.

Seoul and Canberra: prospects for middle power partnership

Against this disturbing geopolitical backdrop, a closer security partnership between the ROK and Australia is a logical objective. For many years, this relationship was underdone.[48] To be sure, the two countries had some convergences of interests and history. For example, Australia was a substantial contributor of forces under the UN unified commander during the Korean War.[49] The two are among key U.S. treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific. The two have become major trade partners, with Australian energy and resources vital pillars of South Korea's economic development and continued prosperity, and a recognition in Australia that South Korea can be vital in diversified supply chains for critical technologies.

Moreover, there have been some commendable earlier attempts at tightening bilateral security relations, including during the "Global Korea" push of the Lee Myung-bank administration, and the introduction of reasonably regular '2+2' (combined foreign and defense ministers') dialogue in the 2010s. In 2021, the relationship was elevated to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," bringing together the unlikely ideological pairing of the Morrison conservative government in Australia and the left-wing administration of Moon Jae-in: even then, despite Seoul's wariness on the Indo-Pacific or overt China-balancing, there were ambitions for defense industry, joint military exercises, training, science and technology.[50] The lack of a formal Indo-Pacific strategy and diplomatic caution about explicit China-balancing did not prevent Seoul from sending a destroyer to participate in the large-scale Australia-U.S. Talisman Sabre amphibious warfare exercise in 2021.[51]

Yet a fully-fledged strategic partnership has not been a front-rank priority for either country, at least until recently. Seoul's defense alignment has been overwhelmingly focused on bilateralism with the United States. Australia, on the other hand, has actively pursued new partnerships and the "mini-lateral" cooperation of small groups. In this, Canberra has prioritized Japan and India well ahead of South Korea.

What form could or should an enhanced Australia-ROK security relationship assume? One starting point would simply be more seriousness in bilateral dialogue and intelligence sharing, an opportunity to improve situational awareness and help frame greater diplomatic activism by Seoul. For instance, Australian guidance on the complicated situation in the South Pacific—where China's influence is growing yet small island states wish to minimize exposure

to strategic rivalry—could be useful as South Korea steps up its development assistance and diplomatic presence there. Australian coordination and advice could help ensure South Korean aid complements rather than duplicates the existing efforts of others. Meanwhile, South Korean expertise can assist Australia, not only in understanding Northeast Asian geopolitics but also in specialized areas like technology competition. All this improved awareness and trust-building could inform an expanded suite of practical bilateral cooperation, including exercises and training, a survey of opportunities for defense industry partnership, and the early conclusion of military reciprocal access arrangements and a status-of-forces agreement.

In parallel, Canberra should encourage and enable Seoul's new openness to mini-lateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation. This is in Australia's interests for multiple reasons, not least the amplification that South Korean advocacy can bring to Australia's own diplomacy in favor of strategic equilibrium. Large-scale South Korean participation should become a regular part of major international defense exercises hosted by Australia: Talisman Sabre, Kakudu, and Pitch Black. South Korea forces should also have an opportunity to train in Australia, bilaterally, trilaterally with the United States, and even quadrilaterally with Japan. Australia should be an advocate of including South Korea – at least occasionally, and on the basis of shared interests and complementary capabilities—in Australia-U.S.-Japan activities. South Korea should be considered a strong candidate for "Quad Plus" activity in non-military areas like regional capacity-building, cooperation on critical technologies, and maritime domain awareness. Australia and the ROK could also consider forming a closer bilateral partnership into a core for new ad hoc coalitions or mini-lateral dialogues, for example with fellow middle power Indonesia, as a way of further socializing South Korea into region-wide arrangements and bolstering a third way in regional architecture which depends neither on the United States nor China.

Furthermore, the status of South Korea and Australia as two of the "AP4" (Asia-Pacific Four) partner states of NATO provides scope for these two middle powers to coordinate on how to manage mutual expectations with NATO and Europe, at a time when the impacts of the invasion of Ukraine are demonstrating linkages between Russia-centric Euro-Atlantic and China-centric Indo-Pacific strategic challenges.[52] Increasingly forthright South Korea concern that Russia's aggressive challenge to global order also undermines stability in the Indo-Pacific is a sign of mature strategic policy that recognizes the connectedness of regions.

The AUKUS technology-sharing arrangement among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States is principally about sharing highly sensitive nuclear propulsion for Australia's submarine fleet, however it also boasts a "Pillar 2" of pooling industrial and research strengths of new technologies such as cyber, quantum computing, undersea detection, and hypersonics.[53] And AUKUS Pillar 2 is explicitly open to case-by-case involvement of fourth countries. In time, and as collaboration and trust evolve, South Korea could well be one such country.

Conclusion

South Korea has much to offer as an Indo-Pacific partner. Its emerging regional strategy is in the ROK national interest while also contributing to the interests of others and the collective good regionally: a virtuous circle. However, a realistic attitude is warranted, in managing expectations on all sides and in ensuring that ROK regional policy is future-proofed against changes in government. The Australian experience is instructive in this regard: a fellow middle power that has managed to ensure bipartisanship in external policy, and moreover one that, presently with a progressive government, is maintaining a balanced approach to the Indo-Pacific under the mantle of strategic equilibrium. Notably, in August 2023, the Australian Labor Party overcame internal differences at a landmark national conference to formally support AUKUS and its nuclear-powered submarine program—a development the Australian Left would once have considered unimaginable.[54] This Australian bipartisanship is informed by a strategic equilibrium concept—deterrence without destabilization—that should make sense for South Korean governments of right and left alike.

If any partner government in the Indo-Pacific has a chance of convincing both sides of ROK politics that a way can be found between capitulation to authoritarianism and an excess of confrontation, it may turn out to be Australia. After all, here is a center-left government with strategic policies with which a right-leaning South Korean government can concur. One way to cement the advantages of the Australian way for the ROK is for both governments now to move briskly to strengthen their bilateral strategic engagement, perhaps as a core for new middle power coalitions.

Endnotes

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Rhetoric vs. Reality: Seoul & Washington's Strategic Alignment on Taiwan

By Clint Work

U.S.-China relations turned decidedly negative over the last decade, a trend that picked up speed in the last five years. Russia's war in Ukraine only accelerated it. In this context, the United States and its allies and partners regularly reaffirm the importance of a rules-based international order, emphasize the sovereign inviolability and territorial integrity of states, condemn the unilateral use of force to change the status quo, and link events in Europe with the Indo-Pacific and the risk of conflict over Taiwan in particular. Following Washington's lead, U.S. allies and partners increasingly have emphasized—individually and collectively—the importance of upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. South Korea, too, has followed suit.

Seoul's clearer strategic messaging and more pronounced lean toward Washington amidst U.S.-China strategic competition, although initiated under former President Moon Jae In, gained considerable momentum under President Yoon Suk Yeol. In the process, Seoul gradually adopted a more outspoken position regarding the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait in ROK strategy documents, U.S.-ROK bilateral alliance statements, and in U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral settings. Adopting a clearer rhetorical position on Taiwan in multiple formats and framing it in increasingly expansive terms—as a regional and global issue yet also directly linked to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula – are unprecedented steps for the ROK. It represents a sea change in Seoul's strategic signaling.

Nevertheless, there remain significant challenges in turning rhetoric into reality. Such signaling may help socialize the Korean public—which has shown increasingly negative views towards China—to the strategic shift underway. However, Seoul faces hurdles regarding the lack of domestic political consensus around such messaging, strategic limits in leaning too far towards the United States at the cost of its relationship with China, and risks in subordinating its fundamental national security priority of addressing a

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worsening North Korean threat to U.S.-China strategic competition. Moreover, the U.S.-ROK alliance faces a gap between such rhetoric and its political, military, and operational preparedness to navigate an actual conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan and the attendant risk of a simultaneous conflict in Korea. There is a lack of planning or consensus within the alliance regarding the strategic flexibility of United States Forces Korea (USFK) as well as South Korea and the alliance's potential role and responsibilities during such an event. These challenges are made even more urgent due to North Korea's own advancements.

This paper examines the issues above in several sections. The first section provides context by briefly reviewing a 2006 U.S.-ROK understanding regarding the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula. While deliberately vague, the understanding and the debates surrounding it catalyzed a broader joint vision study and strategic reconceptualization of the alliance. The second section focuses on the reemergence in the late 2010s of discussions about USFK's potential regional use and pressure by Washington on Seoul to embrace a wider role for the alliance amidst worsening U.S.-China relations. This section examines the Moon administration's subtle but real rhetorical shift in strategic signaling regarding China and Taiwan specifically, which picked up momentum once President Biden was elected but was tempered by Seoul's desire to maintain a degree of strategic ambiguity.

The third section shows how, in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine and growing tensions surrounding Taiwan, U.S. officials continued to discuss the potential use of USFK in regional contingencies. At the same time, the section traces how the Yoon administration gradually aligned its strategic signaling regarding the importance of peace and stability surrounding Taiwan with Washington's own and embraced the Indo-Pacific concept, doing so in unilateral, bilateral, and trilateral statements. The fourth section concludes with several interconnected risks related to the shift in strategic signaling examined here and highlights reasons for Seoul and Washington to enhance communication about the complex challenges they face and proceed with caution.

Section I: Contestation Leads to Alliance Transformation

In the early and mid-2000s, U.S. officials attempted to reshape and reconceptualize the U.S. force posture in Korea as part of the U.S. Global Defense Posture Review driven by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. During this period, officials in both the George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations—if for disparate reasons—sought to transform the alliance, contentiously debated a shifting division of labor on the peninsula, and USFK's strategic flexibility in regional

contingencies. Their clashing perspectives would test the institutional moorings of the alliance and prompt a joint study and reassessment of its overall strategic vision. It marked a contentious and transformative period, ultimately resulting in the maturation of the U.S.-ROK alliance.[1]

1) An Agreement to Disagree on "Strategic Flexibility"

While U.S. and ROK officials eventually came to an understanding in 2006 regarding the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces, they deliberately kept its wording vague given the politically and strategically fraught nature of the issue. The understanding was included in the Joint Statement of the Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership (SCAP) on January 19, 2006. SCAP was a newly inaugurated ministerial-level consultative process, which signified "the growing reach and ambitions of the partnership between the United States and the Republic of Korea." The salient portion of the statement read:

> Regarding the issue of strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in the ROK, Secretary Rice and Foreign Minister Ban confirmed the understanding of both governments as follows: The ROK, as an ally, fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces in the ROK. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, the U.S. respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.[2]

The statement accurately reflected both allies' positions as announced in prior public statements and closed-door discussions and did not include any specific rules or guidelines, leaving such details to be addressed as situations arose. South Korea's main concerns were USFK's potential deployment to a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan, South Korea being entrapped in such a conflict, and security on the peninsula being degraded as a result. According to various accounts, the Defense Department's push for strategic flexibility envisioned USFK's potential involvement in a Taiwan conflict. Despite the 2006 understanding, there was no guarantee Seoul could, in fact, prevent USFK's deployment to such a conflict. There was little doubt, though, that if USFK were used that way it would, to one degree or another, involve South Korea.[3]

2) From Joint Vision Study to Comprehensive Strategic Alliance

New bilateral consultative bodies, like the Future of the Alliance initiative (FOTA), the Strategic Policy Initiative (SPI), and SCAP helped U.S. and ROK officials work through bilateral issues and sparked a joint vision study to

develop a future-oriented strategic framework for the alliance. While intense debates persisted within South Korea about strategic flexibility following the January 2006 understanding, alliance relations stabilized over the last two years of the Roh Moo-hyun administration. And, before the end of President Bush's second term, during which he overlapped with the newly inaugurated conservative administration of Lee Myung Bak, the leaders further stabilized relations. In April 2008, both presidents committed to develop the alliance into a strategic and future-oriented structure to better address the security environment of the 21st century.[4]

The Obama administration inherited these efforts, culminating in the June 2009 Joint Vision statement, which reaffirmed historical U.S.-ROK security ties yet nested them within a wider array of political, economic, social connections. Presidents Obama and Lee aspired to build "a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust." While alliance restructuring would continue and the ROK eventually aimed to take a lead role in the combined defense of Korea, the U.S. side reemphasized the U.S. force presence in South Korea remained essential without mentioning its extra-peninsular strategic flexibility.[5]

Instead, the 2009 Joint Vision statement focused on reassurance. It included the first ever public, U.S. presidential-level mention of the extended deterrence commitment to the ROK, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, and a commitment that ROK security would be "supported by an enduring and capable U.S. military force presence on the Korean Peninsula, in the region, and beyond." Rather than an insistence on expanding the scope of USFK's operations beyond Korea, the emphasis shifted to how the larger U.S. force posture in the region and globally would uphold Korea's security.

The successful effort to reconceptualize the U.S.-ROK alliance within a new joint vision helped to mature the alliance and softened debates about core military and security issues. Nevertheless, it also created a strategic alliance framework premised on increasing roles and responsibilities for both allies. Ironically, this would become more salient as U.S.-China strategic rivalry grew more intense, once again reawakening earlier discussions about the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea and a more expansive role for Seoul and the alliance as a whole.

Section II: U.S.-China Competition Increases, Seoul Subtly Shifts

In the late 2010s, discussions remerged about USFK's potential use beyond the peninsula alongside pressure from the Trump administration on Seoul to embrace a wider role for the alliance amidst worsening U.S.-China relations. Although

hedging its position, the Moon administration initiated a subtle yet significant shift in Seoul's strategic signaling regarding China and Taiwan specifically, which was increasingly evident following President Biden's inauguration.

1) Strategic Flexibility as a Concept Reemerges

In June 2018, USFK opened its new headquarters at U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys in Pyeongtaek roughly 37 miles south of Seoul. It marked the completion of a southernly realignment originally envisioned in the early 1990s (if not much earlier) and initiated in 2003. With it came speculation that USFK and the alliance's military operations would expand beyond deterring North Korea to a broader regional security role.[6] Such speculation made sense given developments over the previous decade and conditions in mid-2018.

Since the 2009 Joint Vision statement, which established a new strategic alliance framework but was still largely aspirational, U.S. and ROK leaders had made several concrete achievements. The U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) added a new economic pillar to the alliance, complementing its traditional political-military cornerstone embodied in the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. Meanwhile, Seoul had continued to adopt a greater burden in the alliance, improved and expanded its diplomatic relations with major and middle powers alike, and increased contributions to U.S. and multilateral security cooperation efforts. Moreover, after several delays, by mid-2018, the alliance once again was moving forward with the transition of the wartime OPCON from a U.S. to a ROK commander of the Combined Forces Command (CFC).

As before, the prospect for the ROK taking the lead in the alliance's combined command architecture, meant Seoul would have to expand its own capabilities and strategic vision. Moreover, further changes in the U.S. force posture could follow. Additionally, ongoing engagement with North Korea, which in the summer of 2018 was at its height, also opened the possibility for future changes both in the U.S. force presence and the alliance's purpose, depending on the course of negotiations with Pyongyang. Theoretically, if a new political relationship developed with Pyongyang and it were considered less of a threat, U.S. and ROK forces and the alliance itself could gradually be reconceptualized.

Yet a paradoxical aspect of the strategic alliance construct was that as Seoul took on a more robust role and expanded its capabilities on and off the peninsula—becoming a more attractive ally for Washington and widening the scope of the alliance—it also became more willing and able to limit Washington's ability to impose its strategic preferences. So, on the one hand, as USFK

opened its new headquarters at Camp Humphreys, ROK Minister of National Defense, Song Young-moo, observed that USFK's "new mission will be an important one to contribute not only to peace on the peninsula but also to world peace as a stabilizer in Northeast Asia." On the other hand, the Moon administration did not understand this to mean subsuming the alliance within a burgeoning U.S.-China strategic competition or agreeing to unrestrained strategic flexibility for USFK.[7]

The Moon administration's central priority was engaging Pyongyang, and Chinese involvement was critical in moving toward a more peaceful Korean Peninsula, particularly in fashioning a new political framework beyond the Korean Armistice. Furthermore, Seoul was already navigating Chinese economic coercion following deployment of a U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile-defense battery to South Korea.[8] Consequently, for inter-Korean purposes and to prevent further economic loss, Moon administration officials focused on maintaining and even improving relations with Beijing and balancing between their U.S. ally and China.

In fact, one could observe elements of Roh Moo-hyun's earlier "balancer" concept in the Moon administration's "Three Nos" announcement in the fall of 2017. Ostensibly meant to normalize relations with Beijing after it had imposed various retaliatory economic measures, the Three Nos—no additional deployment of THAAD batteries, no South Korean integration into the U.S.-led regional missile defense system, and no trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan – was more of a signal to Washington that Seoul would not be pushed into a corner amidst a return to "Great Power Competition," as stated in the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy.[9]

As engagement with Pyongyang stalemated by mid-2019, differences between the allies became more apparent. For example, while Trump administration officials exerted pressure on Seoul to significantly increase financial contributions for the stationing of U.S. forces in Korea, they suggested revising the alliance's crisis management manual to expand the concept of crises warranting a joint response to include not only contingencies on the Korean Peninsula but also U.S. contingencies in the South China Sea and beyond. ROK officials reportedly opposed the revision.[10] It was clear that despite having been repeatedly touted by U.S. and ROK officials, the strategic alliance construct had its limits. In 2020, as COVID shut down diplomatic engagement with North Korea and U.S.-China relations sharply deteriorated, U.S. officials critiqued such limits and pushed U.S. strategic preferences.

A rather public disagreement occurred when the ROK Ambassador to the United States, Lee Soo-hyuck, said he felt pride in South Korea being able to "choose" between Washington and Beijing without being forced. In response, David Stilwell, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said "Korea made a choice back in the '80s," when it chose democracy over authoritarianism.[11] Other U.S. officials, like Randall Shriver, formerly Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, observed a "donut hole" in the strategic alliance concept insofar as the alliance went global before going regional. Left unaddressed, he cautioned, that trend would "threaten the relevancy" of the alliance.[12] Similarly, Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun told lawmakers during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on competition with China that the alliance would have to hold a "strategic discussion" about its long-term future.[13]

Looking back a decade, the Joint Vision statement had been critical to advancing the alliance beyond the growing pains of the early- to mid-2000s by establishing a strategic alliance concept. That concept tempered geostrategic differences by nesting them within broader and deeper areas of cooperation but did not obviate them. Ironically, the very terms of the strategic alliance concept required the allies to confront these differences. And, as the international environment quickly evolved amid worsening U.S.-China relations, such differences were bound to reemerge, particularly regarding an expanded role for USFK and the alliance in regional contingencies.

For instance, a special report produced by the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) in mid-2020 stated U.S. forces in Korea were far too concentrated and "grossly inadequate for either hypercompetition or armed hostilities" with China. However, over time, South Korea—like Japan—would provide the United States with "a potential strongpoint with myriad options for a widely distributed Joint Force enabling grid," the report noted. South Korea, it continued: "provides for US presence on the Asian mainland, and it is well within the PRC's anti-access/area-denial umbrella. South Korea has enormous potential for affecting outcomes on the Asian mainland and well outside of the Korean peninsula in the wider Indo-Pacific." Although produced by a U.S. Army think tank and not official U.S. policy, the report raised concerns in Seoul that it reflected U.S. thinking.[14]

Days later, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said he wanted to pursue more rotational force deployments into different theaters, as it would give the U.S. "greater strategic flexibility in terms of responding to challenges around the globe." Korean observers quickly speculated such changes would apply to USFK, either resulting in force reductions (given differences over cost-sharing)

or its transformation into a rapid deployment force taking on broader missions beyond defending the host country.[15] Reinforcing Esper's message, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific affairs David Helvey stated in early September 2020 that U.S. forces were "heavily concentrated in Northeast Asia" and Washington would "like to be able to make our presence more geographically distributed, more operationally resilient," in the face of threats from China and elsewhere. Consciously or not, Helvey echoed themes from the SSI report: "Maybe, the future is going to be less about bases and more about places—being able to operate across a multiplicity of locations, which give us the flexibility and the agility to respond to a variety of different threats and challenges." Helvey and others envisioned a networked array of alliances interconnected both in concept and operations.[16]

Much like Rumsfeld's earlier vision from the mid-2000s, these ideas remained aspirational. Nonetheless, conditions had evolved to make the vision more likely. The strategic environment was more fluid and there were more urgent questions about the adequacy of and need to rethink the U.S. regional force posture. Additionally, the completion of U.S. realignments in Korea and steady advance of U.S. and ROK capabilities opened new possibilities that had not existed before. Still, there remained very limited public mention of deploying of U.S. forces in Korea to a crisis over Taiwan and no alliance joint statements included any specific mention of Taiwan. The implication was there, but significant short and long-term political obstacles remained. With the 2020 presidential election in full swing, the alliance bogged down in various disagreements, and the Moon administration very clear in its stance, initiating a significant strategic realignment was not viable.

2) *Strengthening the Alliance & Leaning Away from Strategic Ambiguity*

Biden came into office intent to stabilize and strengthen U.S. alliances after four tumultuous years yet also more systematically implement the Trump administration's China policy. Although the Biden administration shied away from mentioning U.S. "strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region" and browbeating allies regarding their lack of burden-sharing and strategic buy-in, it was no less intent on confronting China as the "only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."[17] In the process, it worked to align allies like Tokyo and Seoul more tightly with U.S. strategic objectives and gain greater fidelity from them in upholding the so-called rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific, including through collective signaling over Taiwan.

Japanese officials were increasingly concerned and outspoken about Chinese assertiveness toward Taiwan and the need to better understand U.S. thinking regarding a Taiwan contingency.[18] And Biden administration officials, like other U.S. administrations before them, prioritized establishing alignment with Tokyo. As a result, the March 16, 2021, Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2), provided a long list of Chinese behaviors concerning both governments and "underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."[19] More importantly, in the April 16 U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement, President Biden and then Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide underscored "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues."[20] These statements were, in a way, an outgrowth of the broader, decade-plus evolution in Japan's foreign and national security policy and the U.S.-Japan alliance, driven in part by growing concern regarding China's rise and assertive behavior in the region.

Still, Taiwan's inclusion in the April 16 leader-level statement – the first time in 52 years that Japan had mentioned Taiwan in a joint statement with the United States – meant Japan "had crossed the Rubicon," according to former Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Yukio Takeuchi.[21] However, joint statement or not, U.S. bases and forces in Japan would almost certainly be involved in a military contingency between the United States and China over Taiwan. Consequently, there was growing discussion about Japan's need to better prepare and develop options around which bases and facilities would be available to U.S. forces; how Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) would provide support for U.S. operations or jointly participate therein; and how the SDF would best defend Japanese territory under such circumstances.[22] The joint statement was a notable move to socialize the idea that the U.S.-Japan alliance had a stake in Taiwan, at least on a topline, strategic level, but it left much to be done. The same considerations applied to USFK, the ROK military, and the U.S.-ROK alliance. And similar signals soon followed, with U.S. officials speaking openly and more specifically about the interconnections between USFK, the alliance, and regional contingencies.

During his May 2021 testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee, USFK Commander General Paul LaCamera stated the alliance was "squarely focused on the immediate threat from North Korea," but "constantly updates its posture and plans as the security environment evolves." He continued: "Given the global role of the U.S. military and, increasingly, the international reach of the South Korean military, opportunities are emerging for Alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula. United States Forces Korea forces are uniquely

positioned to provide the Commander USINDOPACOM a range of capabilities that create options for supporting out-of-area contingencies and responses to regional threats."[23] Although he did not specifically mention Taiwan in this instance, it came up during the back and forth with various senators, particularly regarding the potential for simultaneous conflict in Taiwan and Korea.[24]

Days later, in their May 21 U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement, Presidents Biden and Moon crossed their own discursive Rubicon when they emphasized "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." Taiwan's inclusion, like that in the previous month's U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement, was a significant development for the U.S-ROK alliance.[25] It also tracked with a subtle but noticeable tilt by the Moon administration from equidistance in U.S.-China relations back toward Washington, which had begun late in the Trump years but picked up momentum with Biden in office.[26] Nonetheless, the limits of Seoul's tilt – particularly as it applied to Taiwan – became clear soon after the statement's release. ROK officials quickly downplayed its significance.

Korean officials told their Taiwanese counterparts, who publicly expressed gratitude for the May 21 statement and privately inquired about it, not to overinterpret it. It was, ROK officials counseled, merely a "diplomatic statement," and "peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" was an expression that Beijing itself regularly used. The ROK foreign minister echoed the sentiment, saying the statement's language included "very general expressions," with his vice foreign minister reiterating Beijing "will highly appreciate the fact that South Korea did not directly mention China."[27] Unlike Japan, which had begun to regularly include mention of specific Chinese actions in their documents and U.S.-Japan joint statements, Seoul's position was defined more by what it would not openly say.

This contrast became more apparent as Japanese officials became outspoken – in various multilateral, bilateral, and unliteral statements – that China should not unilaterally change the status quo by force in the region and should resolve cross-Strait differences by peaceful means; democracies like Japan and the United States should stand up to China and back Taiwan; and even that Japan should join the United States in defending Taiwan. In July, Japan's Ministry of Defense referenced stability around Taiwan for the first time in its annual defense report, the contents of which are closely watched for indications of the broadening of Japan's military and security role in the region. And in August, representatives from the LDP and Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party held security talks online for the first time.[28] On the contrary, like officials in his administration, President Moon maintained a studied distance from the issue.

During a press conference alongside Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in December 2021, a reporter asked Moon about the Australian Defense Minister's recent comment that it would be inconceivable for Australia not to join the United States in some kind of operation to defend Taiwan and if, as a U.S. ally, it would also be inconceivable for South Korea not to join in some kind of defense of Taiwan. Moon did not answer the question directly, instead reading from prepared notes and stressing the importance of "a peaceful management of the cross-Strait issues" and that Seoul wanted "a [harmonized] relationship" between Washington and Beijing.[29]

Alongside conflict on the Korean Peninsula, a possible conflict over Taiwan represented the apogee of a regional crisis. Seoul, regardless of the political stripe of the administration in power, prioritized preventing the former. Shifting too much emphasis onto the latter would detract from Seoul's ability to focus on its main priority. Furthermore, Seoul and Washington's regional visions were not in complete alignment. Overly emphasizing a crisis scenario related to Beijing's core interest in Taiwan obfuscated this critical fact and could undermine efforts to build connections between respective U.S. and ROK visions in other areas.

For example, Moon's New Southern Policy was simultaneously meant to alleviate Seoul's economic dependence upon Beijing yet also chart a regional course not wholly subsumed by Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Nonetheless, U.S. and ROK working-level officials had been working to better align their regional perspectives by framing cooperation around a commitment to common principles and shared positive values rather than outright confrontation with China's assertiveness and illiberal approach. Key manifestations of this effort were the 2019 Future Defense Vision of the Republic of Korea (ROK)–U.S. Alliance and the U.S.–ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy New Southern Policy Dialogue, initiated in August 2020 and released as a joint fact sheet on the Trump administration's final day in office.[30]

These efforts continued once Biden was in office, with language from those earlier documents appearing in the May 21 U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement and in other alliance documents, including reference to common principles like: respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with internationally established laws and norms; and adherence to international rules and norms, including those of free access, navigation, and overflight, including in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Although these principles had clear implications for China's assertiveness in the region and toward Taiwan specifically, they remained on a

general level. Additionally, the allies continued to highlight in more concrete terms a diverse array of other non-traditional security challenges around which they aimed to strengthen and expand cooperation in conjunction with other multilateral partners.

Yet, despite these common principles and expanded areas of cooperation, full strategic alignment eluded U.S. and ROK officials for political reasons as well as Korea's unique geopolitical vulnerabilities. Moon's hopes for historic inter-Korean rapprochement were dashed following the failure of the Hanoi Summit. Yet his administration kept alive the prospect for a return to engagement with Pyongyang, whether by dogged pursuit of an end-of-war declaration (which frayed nerves in Washington and received little uptake in Pyongyang) or by seeking the Biden administration's reaffirmation of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and Singapore Joint Statement as a basis for diplomacy and dialogue. In fact, receiving such reaffirmation in the May 2021 joint statement likely contributed to Moon's willingness to include mention of Taiwan, not as a fundamental strategic realignment on Seoul's part but as an instrumental rhetorical tradeoff.

As he approached the end of his term, Moon held firm as a matter of legacy and for a progressive successor—were they to prevail in the 2022 South Korean presidential election—to pursue a similar agenda. Preventing further degradation of the security environment in Korea was a primary objective and leaving the door open for engagement was considered the means to do so.

Section III: From Ambiguity to Alignment in Strategic Signaling

Moving into 2022, however, the political and strategic environment shifted considerably due to several key factors, sharpening the strategic calculus around where the U.S.-ROK alliance, U.S. forces in Korea, and Seoul itself stood in relation to worsening U.S.-China relations and Taiwan. In this context, the newly inaugurated Yoon Suk Yeol Administration leaned considerably into the U.S.-ROK alliance and improved Seoul-Tokyo ties, and progressively if fitfully aligned its strategic messaging on China and Taiwan in ROK unilateral, U.S.-ROK bilateral, and U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral statements.

1) A Shifting Political & Strategic Environment

One key factor moving into 2022 was that Yoon Suk Yeol of the conservative People Power Party narrowly defeated the progressive Democratic Party's candidate Lee Jae-myung in the ROK presidential election. President Yoon entered office in May 2022 with several national security and foreign policy

priorities. He stressed "peace through strength," which emphasized deterrence before dialogue in inter-Korean relations. He committed to strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance, participating in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and reinforcing U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation. Yoon abjured Moon's strategic ambiguity for greater strategic clarity regarding where the ROK stood amid U.S.-China competition and aimed to broaden the aperture of ROK foreign relations and national security beyond North Korea by adopting a more robust role for South Korea as a so-called global pivotal state.[31] Yoon and his administration would also progressively adopt a more outspoken position regarding Taiwan than any previous ROK leadership.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was another critical factor. Following the invasion, the United States hastened its effort to build connective tissue between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, and U.S. allies and partners—individually and collectively—increasingly began to link the two regions.[32] Not only did U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific begin to show fidelity toward NATO and European security, but NATO as a body and its individual member states showed greater interest in the Indo-Pacific. The acceleration of geopolitical and strategic linkages between the two regions manifested in more robust messaging regarding the sovereign inviolability and territorial integrity of states, the condemnation of the unilateral use of force or coercion to change the status quo, and discourse about the importance of upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Actual Russian revanchism in Ukraine pointed to potential Chinese revanchism regarding Taiwan.[33]

Another important factor in 2022 sharpening the strategic calculus around where the U.S.-ROK alliance stood in relation to broader U.S.-China relations and Taiwan specifically was North Korea's unprecedented number of missile tests and new nuclear policy law.[34] Whereas Yoon's shift in the trajectory of the ROK's foreign and national security policy and Russia's war in Ukraine tightened strategic messaging between Washington and Seoul, Pyongyang's advancing capabilities had a chastening effect. North Korea's development of tactical nuclear weapons and apparent willingness to use or threaten use of nuclear weapons severely heightened concerns in Seoul about alliance decoupling and the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment. Consequently, the Yoon administration doggedly sought additional reassurances from Washington and sparked more overt public debate about South Korea's own nuclear armament than ever before.[35] Most importantly, North Korea's advancements highlighted that no matter how much Seoul looked to expand its strategic vision, its immediate priority remained on the peninsula.

Seoul had to grapple with the fact that North Korea's advancing capabilities made the U.S. security guarantee less credible or effective on its own terms. Simultaneously, Washington's growing focus on China and a potential conflict over Taiwan could subordinate Seoul's priorities to wider U.S. imperatives and further reduce Washington's capacity to fulfill its commitments to the ROK, particularly if a simultaneous conflict broke out on the peninsula. Not only could U.S. resources, slated for Korea, be drawn to a crisis elsewhere, but U.S. forces or assets already in Korea might be pulled away. At the same time, Seoul might be pressured to provide support for off-peninsular operations – based upon its own discursive alignment with Washington – while having to bear an even greater burden at home. The dynamics surrounding these various factors have played out over the last 18 months.

2) The Taiwan-Korea Linkage & Yoon's Studied (if Fitful) Strategic Alignment

Shortly after his inauguration, Yoon held his first summit with Biden on May 21. In their joint statement, both leaders reframed the alliance as a "global comprehensive strategic alliance," adding a new rhetorical rung to the comprehensive strategic alliance concept established in 2009. And both leaders reiterated "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as an essential element in security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region."[36] By linking peace and stability surrounding Taiwan to the entire Indo-Pacific, Yoon took a step beyond Moon's earlier position, showing a willingness to nest the issue within a larger strategic aperture. Nonetheless, showing Seoul's caution, the U.S.-ROK statement did not mention China by name nor any specific Chinese actions, unlike the Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders' Statement released two days later.

However, Seoul and the alliance's evolving messaging was soon reiterated in other forums. Notably, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, ROK defense officials said they would "normalize" relations with Tokyo and the South Korean, Japanese and U.S. defense chiefs together announced they would strengthen trilateral security cooperation, including publicly conducting missile defense exercises to send a message to North Korea.[37] Moreover, in their joint press statement, the three chiefs "emphasized the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," marking the first time such rhetoric was included in an official trilateral statement.[38]

Similarly, in July, Gen. LaCamera emphasized that while North Korea remained the alliance's primary concern, he saw "opportunity for the alliance to extend its reach and become a global comprehensive strategic alliance, beyond the

Korean Peninsula," and that the alliance provided "strategic depth" and "legitimacy" to deal with any global challenges. Gen. LaCamera underscored a need to expand the bilateral alliance into a "multinational" and "multidimensional coalition," that would "enable us to better deter DPRK and maintain a rules-based international order with an eye on China and Russia."[39] U.S. and ROK officials had long grappled with the fact that the peninsular environment was a very crowded battle space, which lacked strategic depth; a key challenge when planning for how to deter an evolving North Korean threat or operate in a conflict on the peninsula. LaCamera's rhetoric inverted the logic because the alliance itself was being reframed for broader purposes. As much as Yoon, too, had begun to embrace a more expansive role for the ROK, the rhetoric surrounding that effort also risked subsuming South Korea's immediate security concerns. Indeed, the tensions inherent in the alliance and Seoul's strategic realignment became more apparent surrounding Nancy Pelosi's controversial visit to Taipei in August.

In the run up to and after Pelosi's visit, the PRC conducted extensive military tests and exercises surrounding Taiwan and beyond and sent strong diplomatic signals expressing its displeasure.[40] With tensions high, Pelosi visited Seoul following her time in Taipei. Instead of meeting her in person, Yoon opted to speak with Pelosi over the phone. The decision was based, his spokesperson said, "on a thorough consideration of our country's national interest," leading many to speculate he was trying to avoid angering Beijing.[41]

When asked what the implications of a conflict over Taiwan would have for the peninsula and South Korea, Gen. LaCamera remarked that "what starts locally becomes regional and global pretty quickly" and could have second and third-order effects elsewhere. Although he avoided detail and stressed his primary function was to defend the Korean Peninsula, his remarks were picked up and amplified in Korea.[42] Though a seemingly obvious geopolitical observation, LaCamera's remarks added a new angle to how U.S. commanders usually spoke about conflict in Korea. Historically, they spoke of how conflict in Korea likely would spillover elsewhere. Indeed, LaCamera himself noted as much. However, in observing that a conflict over Taiwan would reverberate elsewhere and required U.S. commanders to do contingency planning, it suggested the opposite: conflict elsewhere would pull in the peninsula and U.S. and potentially alliance forces. Putting it more explicitly, Gen. (Ret.) Robert Abrams, who had led USFK from 2018-21, told Radio Free Asia the United States would preserve "all options" in deciding what forces to use in the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan, "including those assigned to the USFK."[43] Biden's

statement and the current and former U.S. commanders' observations caused concerns and harried commentary within South Korea and efforts by ROK officials and President Yoon himself to tamp it down.

In the wake of these statements, President Yoon, like President Moon in December 2021, did not directly answer a question about whether South Korea would help the United States if China attacked Taiwan. Rather, he stressed Seoul's central concern under such circumstances would be possible North Korean aggression either in coordination with or independent of Chinese actions. In other words, Yoon highlighted the potential for a simultaneous conflict scenario, a subject of increasing focus within the U.S. foreign policy establishment and think tank community. In an obvious sense, Yoon's comments affirmed that a conflict over Taiwan would indeed directly affect South Korea. Yet his emphasis remained on how it would reinforce Seoul's need to keep its focus at home, not look elsewhere.[44]

To assuage public concerns, ROK Vice Defense Minister Shin Beom-chul, too, reiterated USFK's "top priority" remained North Korea. He noted that while the alliance had consultative mechanism in place to communicate about regional contingencies, no such communication had yet occurred, and he could assure ROK "citizens that we will ensure consultations would not move in a direction that undermines security on the Korean Peninsula."[45] Shin was correct the alliance had consultative mechanisms, some of which originated during the earlier debate over strategic flexibility in the mid-2000s. However, there was no guarantee consultations would prevent a degradation of security in Korea. The regional contingency itself would have that effect.

Nonetheless, despite a lack of in-depth operational discussions or planning within the alliance for a Taiwan contingency and the sudden uptick in public concern whenever the issue arose, the allies continued to align their topline strategic messaging. Importantly, this increasingly occurred in a trilateral context. In October, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, ROK First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyundong, and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Mori confirmed the importance of the peace and stability of Taiwan Strait. Although not supporting Taiwan's independence, Sherman stressed they would ensure there was peace, adding, "we will be doing whatever we can to support Taiwan and to work with Japan and with the Republic of Korea to ensure that Taiwan can defend itself."[46] Such messaging became more pronounced during the ASEAN and East Asian Summits in November.

On November 13, Yoon, President Biden, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida released their Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific, pledging to "align our collective efforts in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific, that is inclusive, resilient, and secure." The free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) phrasing marked a new normative layer to Seoul's messaging. Furthermore, the statement emphasized the three leaders' "basic positions on Taiwan remain unchanged" and reiterated "the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community."[47] Though elements of the phrasing were consistent with previous statements, it was the first-ever reaffirmation of the ROK's position on Taiwan in a trilateral leader-level statement. Moreover, linking Taiwan to the security and prosperity of the international community (beyond just the Indo-Pacific) indicated one more step in Seoul's willingness to move more clearly toward the United States in the hardening of geopolitical lines by framing it as a global issue.

3) Seoul Embraces & Annunciates the Indo-Pacific Concept

Around the Phnom Penh meeting, Yoon and other high-level ROK officials previewed Seoul's own forthcoming and much anticipated Indo-Pacific Strategy, with rhetoric marking a more assertive ROK. Yoon noted: "Peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region is directly connected to our survival and prosperity." Historically, ROK presidents expressed a more inward linkage, framing security and stability on the Korean Peninsula as central to regional peace and stability. Yoon's remark inverted the connection, consistent with how U.S. officials had increasingly framed it. Without mentioning China or Taiwan directly, Yoon also reiterated that "unilateral change of the status quo by force should never be tolerated."[48]

Nonetheless, some U.S. observers still felt Seoul did not embrace strongly enough that China's assertive behavior in the region was a shared problem rather than just a U.S. problem.[49] Yet, with the formal release of the ROK's Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region in December, the Yoon administration's gradual but pointedly evolving messaging regarding Taiwan, the Indo-Pacific, and South Korea's place therein came into starker relief. The strategy laid out nine core lines of effort, including expanding comprehensive security cooperation in the region, the opening portion of which stated:

> First, we will deepen maritime security cooperation in the region. The Indo-Pacific is a region inter-connected by oceans, thus rendering it essential that nations work closely together to protect sea lanes, counter piracy, and secure safety of navigation. In this regard, peace, stability,

> and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, which constitutes strategically important sea lines of communication, must be respected. We also reaffirm the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and for the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific.[50]

The phrasing built upon yet marked a critical evolution of Seoul's diplomatic signaling over the previous year. It also echoed what U.S. defense and military officials had been saying with greater frequency and specificity about the interconnectedness of security within and between regions. By directly linking peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait to the peace and stability of Korea and of the entire Indo-Pacific, Seoul was now framing security in similarly indivisible terms.

Even so, Seoul's new strategy tried to achieve balance vis-a-vis China. Although Seoul sought "a sounder and more mature relationship" with Beijing—diplomatic language signaling the ROK would not give in to Chinese demands—China was "a key partner for achieving peace and prosperity" in the region. The strategy went on to stress the importance of trilateral cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing, noting it sought "to contribute to regional peace and stability by harmoniously developing ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation and ROK-Japan-China cooperation."[51] Nonetheless, despite trying to maintain such a balance, Yoon's priorities in the spring of 2023 centered on the first of those two triangles. In March, he announced Seoul would no longer demand Japanese companies compensate Korean victims of forced labor, leading to the first bilateral meeting between Korean and Japanese leaders in a dozen years and paving the way for improvements in U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relations.[52] ROK and U.S. officials, meanwhile, focused on strengthening the U.S. extended deterrence commitment and Yoon's upcoming state visit to Washington. And, the week before the ROK and U.S. presidents released the Washington Declaration and established the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), Yoon stated explicitly what ROK, alliance and trilateral documents had been steadily signaling over the previous year regarding Taiwan.

When asked about increased Chinese pressure on Taiwan, Yoon told a reporter that "these tensions occurred because of the attempts to change the status quo by force, and we together with the international community absolutely oppose such a change." He continued: "The Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue."[53] Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, immediately responded to Yoon's remarks, saying the blame for the recent tensions fell on

separatist activities by Taiwanese independence elements aided by outside forces and dismissed the comparison between Taiwan and North Korea. Taiwan, he said, was not a sovereign state or United Nations member like the two Koreas but solely a matter of China's own affairs and Seoul should respect the "One China" principle.[54]

Unsurprisingly, Yoon's remarks were welcome in Washington and Taipei, with speaker of Taiwan's parliament and strong proponent of Taiwanese independence, You Si-Kun, praising ROK and Japanese leaders for calling Taiwan a global issue and opposing a change to the status quo by force. "The crescent of defense formed by Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines will, with American support, be a key stabilizer of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region," You stated.[55] Nonetheless, the diplomatic spat between Seoul and Beijing only grew worse.

In June, at meeting with Lee Jae-myung, leader of the main opposition Democratic Party, China's ambassador to South Korea, Xing Haiming, voiced what many saw as the strongest criticism yet of Seoul's effort to tighten relations with Washington. Lee himself used the meeting at the ambassador's residence to say South Korea actively supported the "One China" principle and further criticize Yoon's foreign policy not only for pushing improved ties with Tokyo but also, he suggested, for worsening relations with Beijing. Xing followed Lee by saying "China isn't to blame for strained Seoul-Beijing relations." Rather, "external factors," like the changing international landscape, and U.S. pressure against China were challenging Seoul-Beijing relations. He continued: "Some are betting that the US will win, and China will lose, but this is clearly a misjudgment. I can confirm that those who bet on China's defeat at this moment will surely regret it."[56] The ROK foreign ministry and presidential office firmly criticized Xing for meddling in South Korea's domestic affairs.[57]

Even though Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy and ROK officials' statements indicated Seoul wanted stable relations with Beijing, such diplomatic quarrels and the Yoon administration's overall strategic messaging and China's reaction to it revealed a growing gap. Amid deteriorating relations, the Yoon administration released its new national security strategy, which reinforced signaling that Seoul sought stronger alignment with Washington and Tokyo and emphasized cooperation with them on multiple levels within the Indo-Pacific. Unlike the previous three ROK administrations' strategies, it did not refer to Beijing as a "strategic cooperation partner."[58] And, if actions spoke louder than words, Yoon's several bilateral and trilateral meetings with both President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida, compared to his one meeting with Xi Jinping in November 2022 on the sidelines of the G20 summit, reinforced the point.

At the time of writing, the trilateral Camp David summit on August 18 represents the latest stage of the developments examined here. As the first ever stand-alone summit between U.S., ROK, and Japanese leaders, the summit was historic, with the three sides establishing significant new understandings and commitments. Yet these commitments represented an effort to try to institutionalize existing trend lines. In addition to regularizing and institutionalizing annual leader-level meetings, the three sides committed to do the same with their respective foreign ministers, defense ministers, commerce and industry ministers, and national security advisors. Such consultations already occur, but institutionalizing regular meetings like these would mark a new level of coordination and commitment to the trilateral relationship. Similarly, as a counter to North Korea's nuclear and missile advancements, the three sides committed to establishing a multi-year trilateral exercise framework, including annual, named, multi-domain exercises and improved cooperation on ballistic missile defense through enhanced, real-time data sharing. Like consultations, such exercises have already occurred, but if they are implemented and deepened as laid out at Camp David, it would mark a notable development.[59]

More notable, however, was the apparent attempt to further align broader strategic messaging regarding the Indo-Pacific in general but also signaling toward China and Taiwan specifically. The three sides committed to initiating a trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to focus on coordinating the implementation of their respective approaches to the region, with emphasis on Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island nations. The leaders' joint statement at Camp David, like various trilateral statement released over the previous year, also reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community. Yet preceding that now-common phrasing—but unlike all such previous trilateral statements—the Camp David joint statement included explicit mention of China's "dangerous and aggressive behavior" in the maritime domain.[60] Although bilateral U.S.-Japan statements had included such language before, it was the first time Seoul agreed to it. Finally, in their "Commitment to Consult," the three leaders committed their governments to trilaterally consult with in an expeditious manner, to coordinate their responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting our collective interests and security.[61]

Unsurprisingly, China and North Korea – and the opposition party in South Korea—quickly characterized the move as the creation of a *de facto* alliance or Asian NATO. However, this grossly overstated reality. Surely the commitment to consult represented the latest, noteworthy stage in Washington's

longstanding effort to connect its respective alliances and encourage Tokyo and Seoul to recognize and increase their role in addressing mutual security interdependencies. Indeed, this effort went back to a short-lived discussion in 1954 about creating a Northeast Asian Treaty Organization (NEATO), consisting of Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei.[62] Nevertheless, the commitment made at Camp David was far from establishing a trilateral alliance. Half of the commitment to consult document stated what it was not, namely, a replacement for each respective bilateral mutual defense treaty.[63]

Still, critics in Beijing, Pyongyang, and Seoul were right to see the writing between the lines. While the commitment to consult did not explicitly mention China or Taiwan, the implication was clear. There are numerous regional challenges, provocations, and threats the three countries face. A potential conflict over Taiwan is chief among them. And, as the above analysis shows, Seoul and the U.S.-ROK alliance have increasingly and with growing specificity, signaled rhetorical alignment regarding China as a strategic threat as well as the interconnection between events surrounding Taiwan and their own interests and security. However, rhetoric and strategic signaling is one thing. Genuine strategic commitment and institutionalized operational planning is quite another.

Section IV: Concluding with Caveats & Caution

Despite the notable and increasing alignment in strategic signaling examined here, there are several interconnected reasons for Seoul and Washington and the U.S.-ROK alliance to proceed with caution.

First, Seoul and Washington have increasingly aligned their strategic messaging but do not share the same vulnerabilities, beginning with economic issues. The Biden administration's China policy is posing distinct challenges for Seoul, particularly its blurred fusion of economic and national security. The Biden administration has adopted an industrial policy and significant public investments to improve the U.S. economy at home and strengthen America's ability to compete with China and other autocratic nations abroad. It has crafted a narrative about its economic statecraft that is inclusive of U.S. allies and partners and supports democratic values. Nevertheless, its targeted and strict export controls, national security guardrails connected to U.S. subsidies, and drive to form various mini-lateral groupings around the concept of economic security, which lack the same tangible benefits and binding commitments of traditional trade agreements, have resulted in misunderstanding and difficult choices for allies like Seoul.

While South Korea is well-situated to benefit—potentially handsomely—from some of these measures, it remains unclear how they will play out. Depending on the course of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the policy could be upended or take on an even more restrictive and America-first slant. Seoul has been dogged in public and private forums expressing its concerns and, in its Indo-Pacific strategy notes it "will also work with others to prevent the overwhelming dominance of security concerns over economic issues."[64] Such messaging could apply to Beijing's outright economic coercion as well as Washington's "de-risking" measures. As is well known, South Korea is far more dependent on China economically and therefore faces different challenges regarding the pace and extent to which it can reduce such dependence. Furthermore, recently Washington has eagerly sought to put a floor under the deterioration of its relationship with Beijing.[65] The Yoon administration, too, must place limits on the strains in its relationship with Beijing.[66]

Second, South Korea must be careful its own core national security interests do not become overly subordinated to growing U.S.-China strategic rivalry. The Moon administration was more outspoken in seeking to maximize its autonomy, improve inter-Korean relations, and oppose being forced to choose one side or the other. Still, it faced growing pressure from the Trump administration to align its broader strategic vision with Washington's and, on the terms of its own ambitious effort to carve a more robust international profile, began to lean toward a more U.S.-oriented strategic alignment by the end of Moon's term. For its part, the Yoon administration has gone about systematically undoing Moon's security policy, opting to strongly emphasize deterrence—and confrontational rhetoric—toward North Korea rather than engagement and diplomacy. Simultaneously, it has sought to broaden the aperture of ROK foreign relations and national security beyond North Korea, by adopting a more robust role for South Korea as a global pivotal state based upon a strong U.S.-ROK alliance.

To address its central national security concern, the Yoon administration fervently pushed for and received the most notable advancement yet in the U.S. extended deterrence commitment with the Washington Declaration and establishment of the NCG. In the process, however, it increasingly embraced an Indo-Pacific concept, which tracks closely though not entirely with Washington's own, including in its strategic signaling toward China and Taiwan. U.S. policymakers may see the establishment of the NCG as allowing the alliance to shift more of its focus and priorities in the direction of China and have increased expectations on South Korea to do the same, again, based on Seoul's own rhetoric and signaling. As Scott Snyder argues, overly prioritizing China as the main challenge for the alliance may bring with it the temptation to

subordinate the North Korean issue to the China issue or situate North Korea itself as a subcomponent of the China challenge, holding China as overly responsible for enabling North Korea and starkly limiting other avenues for dealing with Pyongyang.[67]

Moreover, North Korea itself may perceive the alliance's apparent shift in focus to China issues as a chance to opportunistically test it through a lower-level act of aggression in the shadow of its more advanced nuclear and missile capabilities and offensive nuclear policy. If Washington's focus in that moment centers more on restraining Seoul than taking punitive measures against Pyongyang—as it has before[68]—the newly strengthened U.S. extended deterrence commitment and fledgling NCG may appear ineffective before being institutionalized. This could spark fissures in the alliance, reawaken fears in South Korea regarding U.S. credibility and increase its need to redirect its attention closer to home, and lessen its appetite for leaning too far toward addressing broader regional threats.

Third, U.S. commanders state that USFK would likely play some sort of support role for regional contingencies and the ROK explicitly linked its own peace and stability to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. However, the alliance faces a stark gap between such rhetoric and its preparedness to navigate a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan and the attendant risk of a simultaneous conflict in Korea. There remains a lack of planning or consensus within the alliance (and within each country) regarding the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea as well as over South Korea's potential role and responsibilities during such a scenario. It is unclear what, if any role U.S. forces based in Korea would or could play during a Taiwan conflict. The alliance has, to be fair, gradually expanded the scope of exercises beyond the Korean Peninsula, and U.S. and ROK officials have pledged to collaborate to ensure their respective strategies and postures promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific through bilateral exercises and training and trilateral and multilateral cooperation with partners throughout the region, including with U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation advancing on several fronts. Nevertheless, the alliance can and should focus greater attention on the potential for a conflict over Taiwan occurring alongside one on the peninsula.

The alliance cannot operate as though Korea exists in a strategic vacuum. The war in Ukraine—lessons from which have been used in combined exercises on the peninsula—shows the difficulty of military support and resupply and is already leading to reported drawdowns in U.S. stocks in Korea, and pressure on Seoul to provide more of its own munitions has grown. In the case of a

conflict over Taiwan, with the attendant risk of a simultaneous one in Korea, far more intense pressures would occur, which raise numerous difficult questions for policymakers and defense planners alike. It is apparent the United States itself is not prepared for a conflict over Taiwan.[69] U.S. officials say that often the maps used for table-top exercises involving a conflict over Taiwan do not even include the Korean Peninsula.[70] Furthermore, according to analysts who have closely examined a possible Taiwan conflict, the belief among some is that not much overt allied support would be provided.[71] Having more transparent and regular discussions and consultations about such a Taiwan conflict or simultaneous conflict scenario would shed greater light on the types of support the U.S. could and could not bring to bear, reinforce the degree to which Seoul needs to take a more robust role, but also highlight the critical role of multilateral partners, including Tokyo and key UN Sending States that have shown increased interest and presence in the United Nations Command (UNC).

However, it must be acknowledged this is an exceedingly delicate issue to be approached in a cautious manner. It has caused fissures in the alliance before and raises multiple concerns whenever it is discussed. To a degree, it would be important to demonstrate that certain consultations and preparation were occurring, which could have a deterrent effect all its own and socialize alliance officials and the broader public to communicate in a measured way about such difficult issues. Washington, Seoul, and the alliance should not continue to increase strategic signaling about Taiwan without being prepared to answer the call in an actual contingency. But they also must not allow such preparations to catalyze the very security dilemmas they aim to preclude. In fact, when one begins to think through the manifold complexities, costs, and enormous escalatory risks posed by a conflict over Taiwan or a simultaneous conflict over Taiwan and in Korea, it makes clear how much more emphasis needs to be placed on diplomacy and reducing tensions.

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