

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 strategies⁵—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

Katrin Katz is an Adjunct Fellow (non-resident), Korea Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies; the former director for Japan, Korea, and Oceanic affairs at the National Security Council; and a scholar-in-residence in the Master of Arts in International Administration (MAIA) program at the University of Miami and the Van Fleet nonresident senior fellow at the Korea Society in New York. This article was finalized in late May 2023.

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 States 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 outset³⁴—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 predetermined. 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.

Endnotes

- ¹ The full text of South Korea's "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region," as released on December 28, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133.
- ² The full text of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," as released in February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.
- ³ Lee Je-hun and Bae Ji-hyun, "Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy rolls back S. Korea's ambiguity on US-China rivalry," *Hankyoreh*, November 14, 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1067189.html.
- ⁴ Erik Mobrand, "What's Korean about South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy?" *The National Interest*, January 20, 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what%E2%80%99s-korean-about-south-korea%E2%80%99s-indo-pacific-strategy-206091>.
- ⁵ James Fretwell, "Seoul's cautious Indo-Pacific Strategy maintains balance between US and China," *KoreaPro*, December 30, 2022, <https://koreapro.org/2022/12/seouls-cautious-indo-pacific-strategy-maintains-balance-between-us-and-china/>.
- ⁶ Derek Grossman, "The U.S. cannot count on South Korea's Yoon to line up against China," *Nikkei Asia*, February 10, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/U.S.-cannot-count-on-South-Korea-s-Yoon-to-line-up-against-China>.
- ⁷ Michelle Yee Hee Lee, "South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol unveils foreign policy goals," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/14/south-korea-president-interview/>.
- ⁸ Yoon Suk-yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up," *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2002, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.
- ⁹ "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," The White House, May 21, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.
- ¹⁰ Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy maintains aspirations to deepen partnerships with ASEAN and India, which had been the sole focus of Moon's New Southern Policy (NSP), along with a broad range of countries and regions listed in the "Regional Scope" section of the strategy. Moon's NSP had laid the groundwork for these partnerships, but they were in the nascent stages and limited to trade and investment. For further details on prospects for South Korea-India cooperation, in particular, see Jagannath Panda and Choong Yong Ahn's "Where Is India in South Korea's New Indo-Pacific Strategy?" *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2003, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/where-is-india-in-south-koreas-new-indo-pacific-strategy/>.
- ¹¹ Kathryn Botto offers a similar critique of Moon's New Southern Policy in stating, "Combined with the sheer scale of this [New Southern] policy, the lack of a clear narrative can give the impression that the NSP is more so a generalized increase in attention to India and ASEAN countries rather than a unified strategy to rebalance South Korean diplomacy and advance common goals." (Kathryn Botto, "South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2021, p. 20, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572>).

- ¹² Ahn Ho-young, “Three cheers for Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Korea Times*, January 17, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2023/03/787_343673.html.
- ¹³ “United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” The White House, May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>.
- ¹⁴ Yonhap News Agency, “Yoon sees greater likelihood of N. Korean provocation in case of Taiwan conflict,” *Korea Herald*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220926000233>
- ¹⁵ “South Korea FM: We have to maintain peace and stability on the Korean peninsula,” CNN, February 22, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/02/22/fm-park-jin-intv-south-north-korea-hancocks-exclusive-vpx.cnn>.
- ¹⁶ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference on February 27, 2023,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “February 27, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202302/t20230227_11032204.html.
- ¹⁷ Kim Soo-yeon, “U.S.-led chip alliance not aimed at excluding China: S. Korean industry minister,” Yonhap News Agency, August 8, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220808008800320>.
- ¹⁸ Xinhua News Agency, “Chinese Foreign Minister calls for healthy, stable relations with ROK-Xinhua,” [english.news.cn](https://english.news.cn/20220810/6d7fe8c5cba84fab833e3cce2afba3d1/c.html), August 10, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220810/6d7fe8c5cba84fab833e3cce2afba3d1/c.html>.
- ¹⁹ Jo He-rim, “Minister confirms South Korea’s participation in US-led chip alliance,” *Korea Herald*, December 18, 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20221218000120>.
- ²⁰ Patsy Widakuswara, “US, Japan, South Korea Launch Forum to Cut Off Chips to China,” VOA News, February 28, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-japan-south-korea-launch-forum-to-cut-off-chips-to-china-/6984483.html>.
- ²¹ Kishida uses this terminology to characterize Japan’s China policy in a recent Foreign Affairs article: *Fumio Kishida*, “The New Meaning of Hiroshima,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/japan/fumio-kishida-g7-geopolitics-new-meaning-hiroshima>.
- ²² See, for instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan’s presentation detailing its “New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP),” March 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100484990.pdf>.
- ²³ For details on summit outcomes, see: “Washington Declaration,” April 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/> and “FACT SHEET: Republic of Korea State Visit to the United States,” April 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/fact-sheet-republic-of-korea-state-visit-to-the-united-states/>.
- ²⁴ “Leaders’ Joint Statement in Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Alliance between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” The White House, April 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/leaders-joint-statement-in-commemoration-of-the-70th-anniversary-of-the-alliance-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-republic-of-korea/>.

- ²⁵ “South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, April 28, 2023, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/042823-south-korean-president-yoon-suk-yeols-address-to-a-joint-session-of-u-s-congress/>.
- ²⁶ “Leaders’ Joint Statement in Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Alliance between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” The White House, April 26, 2023.
- ²⁷ Hayley Wong, “China summons South Korean diplomat over statement by Yoon Suk-yeol and Joe Biden on Taiwan, South China Sea,” *South China Morning Post*, April 28, 2023, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/china-summons-south-korean-diplomat-093000712.html>. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Mao Ning reiterated similar points in an April 27 press conference, noting, “We urge the US and the ROK to see the true nature of the Taiwan question, follow the one-China principle, be prudent when it comes to the Taiwan question, and avoid going further down the wrong and dangerous path,” (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference on April 27, 2023), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202304/t20230427_11067845.html#:~:text=We%20urge%20the%20US%20and,the%20wrong%20and%20dangerous%20path.
- ²⁸ Yang Sheng, “Yoon’s overwhelming pro-US policy could become nightmare for S. Korea, with losses to outweigh gains, experts say,” *Global Times*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289982.shtml>.
- ²⁹ Byun Duk-kun, “Washington Declaration will help deter N. Korea threat but not a ‘nuclear sharing’ agreement: U.S. official,” Yonhap News Agency, April 28, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230428003200325>.
- ³⁰ Shreyas Reddy, “US-ROK nuclear coordination group ‘more effective’ than NATO analog: Yoon,” *NK News*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/2023/05/us-rok-nuclear-coordination-group-more-effective-than-nato-analog-yoon/>.
- ³¹ A 2022 South Korean public opinion poll found that 71 percent of respondents favor South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons. (Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, “Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 21, 2022, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons>).
- ³² Justin Yeo, “Yoon Suk-yeol's summit in Washington met with lukewarm reception in Seoul,” *Korea Pro*, May 4, 2023, <https://koreapro.org/2023/05/yon-suk-yeols-summit-in-washington-met-with-lukewarm-reception-in-seoul/>.
- ³³ Kotaro Hosokawa, “Yoon-Biden summit disappoints corporate South Korea,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 29, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-s-Asia-policy/Yoon-Biden-summit-disappoints-corporate-South-Korea>; Justin Yeo, “Yoon Suk-yeol's summit in Washington met with lukewarm reception in Seoul,” *Korea Pro*, May 4, 2023, <https://koreapro.org/2023/05/yon-suk-yeols-summit-in-washington-met-with-lukewarm-reception-in-seoul/>.
- ³⁴ “Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on the Republic of Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” The White House, December 27, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/27/statement-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-the-republic-of-koreas-indo-pacific-strategy/>.