

The Significance of Security in the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report

Chih-Hao Lin
Assistant Research Fellow

Division of National Security Research

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Park Jin, Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs, released the final version of the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, titled *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* on December 28, 2022. The report illustrates the ROK's status and issues in the global situation and proposes its future direction. This is the ROK's first development strategy regarding the Indo-Pacific Region.

The ROK is going to facilitate international cooperation and exchanges as a Global Pivotal State

The Korean version of the report¹ released this time consists of 33 pages and is divided into four chapters. The

first chapter is the introduction, narrating the ROK's strategic status in the world, and the significance and the challenge of the Indo-Pacific region to the ROK. The second chapter narrates the ROK's vision and principles when formulating its Indo-Pacific strategies, and proposes its cooperation plans and vision with major areas of the world as a Global Pivotal State. The third chapter focuses on national security, the economy, counter-terrorism, and anti-nuclearism, proposing the ROK's perspective and possible areas for future cooperation with other major countries. The fourth chapter gives the conclusion and stresses the importance of maintaining global order and stability, and the ROK is going to play a key role

1. “자유, 평화, 번영의 인도 - 태평양전략,” 외교부, December 28, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/zrkYXk>.

in the Indo-Pacific region as a Global Pivotal State and will prepare detailed plans for future cooperation step by step. The report also believes the ROK can adopt concepts similar to the “Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative” to establish regional cooperation policies, increase the consistency of the ROK’s diplomatic policies, and expands joint cooperation in the region.

The phrase “Global Pivotal State” appears five times in this report, stressing the ROK is going to start cooperation on the 9 Core Lines of Effort. The 9 Core Lines of Effort in order are: build regional order based on norms and rules, cooperate to promote rule of law and human rights, strengthen non-proliferation and counter-terrorism efforts across the region, expand comprehensive security cooperation, build economic security networks, strengthen cooperation in critical domains of science and technology and close digital gap, lead regional cooperation on climate change and energy security, engage in “contributive diplomacy” through tailored development cooperation partnerships, and promote mutual understanding and exchanges.

As mentioned in the report’s conclusion, policy initiatives of the 9 Core

Lines of Effort will be formulated in detail and adjusted according to the situation. The ROK has been implementing some of the foreign policies mentioned in the report for a long time, such as aid diplomacy, human rights cooperation, and reducing regional inequality and the resource gap. The key point of this Indo-Pacific Strategy Report lies in the ROK’s strategic perspective on the region and its aim to serve as a hub for cooperation networks in the Indo-Pacific.

Also, the report has stressed the importance of security multiple times and proposed focuses such as national security, economic security, non-traditional security, cyber security, multilateral security, health security, and regional security.

It is worth noticing that in the security section, it is said that apart from addressing North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats, expanding the current Japan-ROK-U.S. Security Agreement, and developing to safeguard peace, the ROK is also going to partner up with the U.S. and Australia to address supply chain disruptions, cyber-security issues, key minerals, and emerging technologies for shared values, and strengthen NATO’s cooperation with the four partners (The

ROK, Japan, Australia, New Zealand) in the Asia-Pacific region, and shows high hopes for multilateral and regional security between the ROK and ASEAN.

Regional cooperation based on the ROK-U.S. Alliance

The ROK believes a diverse approach is needed when addressing the complicated security challenge. First, it is crucial to strengthen maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, protect sea routes and fight against pirates to ensure the security and prosperity of the South China Sea. The report also reaffirms the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, which is closely connected to the security of the Korean Peninsula and the prosperity of the Indo-Pacific.

In the latter half of Chapter 3, the report dives into the narration of North Korea's nuclear threats, non-proliferation, and denuclearization. The term "ROK-U.S. Alliance" is mentioned three times, "America" three times, "Japan" three times, and "North Korea" ten times. The

ROK believes the ROK-U.S. Alliance is the linchpin for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula over the last 70 years and will continue to strengthen its alliance with the United States, not just on military defense but also on the economy and supply chains. The ROK and the U.S. will continue to work together to address North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and potential military provocation. From some parts of the report, its core values echo the "ROK-U.S. comprehensive strategic alliance"² mentioned at the Biden-Yoon summit in May 2022, and the "linchpin for stability and prosperity" in the ROK-U.S. Leaders' Joint Statement published at that time, supporting common values and strengthening the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation.³ Apart from the ROK-U.S. cooperation, the ROK also seeks to improve relations with Japan. The report mentions, "With our closest neighbor, Japan, we will seek a forward-looking partnership that supports our common interests and values", and the ROK will continue its diplomatic

2. 이상현, "한미 정상회담 성과와 '글로벌 포괄적 전략동맹' 발전을 위한 협력과제," *ROK Angle* (제 251 호), June 3, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/VRov86>; "미한 정상 '글로벌 포괄적 전략동맹' 선언 ... 인터넷 자유, 사이버 범죄 대응은 북한도 적용 대상," *미국의 소리*, May 21, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/ROolk6>.

3. "[전문] 한·미 정상 공동성명," *대한민국 정책브리핑*, May 21, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/EXvdbR>.

efforts to restore mutual trust and advance relations. This section is probably based on the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation led by the U.S., which aims to resolve tensions between South Korea and Japan and address the current regional security issues.

Attempts to improve ROK-China relations with “harmony in diversity”

The ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report stresses “regional cooperation with partners pursuing common values”. The report first talks about the universal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and the importance of regional cooperation. The report specifically points out that the ROK will continue its efforts to maintain regional peace, prevent disputes and armed conflicts, and develop relations with nations that represent diverse political systems through competition and cooperation in a peaceful way.

The ROK believes China is a main partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region and it will nurture a sounder and more mature relationship as it pursues shared interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity,

guided by international norms and rules.

This section involves the position difference between the ROK and China in economic cooperation and the North Korean issue. While the ROK-U.S. relations mainly determine the ROK's policies to address the North Korean issue, according to the past situations encountered by successive Korean governments, the ROK-China relations will eventually be an unavoidable key player and involve the ROK-DPRK-China relations. Even though North Korea and South Korea have become two parallel lines, South Korea must continue to maintain a high degree of cooperation and partnership with China due to its geopolitical influence. In the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, “China” and “ROK-China relations” are only mentioned once, showing the ROK's discretion on this matter. Considering the evolution of ROK-China relations from “seeking common ground” to the current “harmony in diversity” and the overall content of the report, the essence of the ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy is probably taking a middle course between the two powers, and this “Pro-US, but not Anti-China” approach has indeed received positive responses from the U.S. and

China.⁴

However, there is growing anti-China sentiment in South Korea. Nearly 81% of South Koreans, especially the MZ Generation (20 to 30-year-olds),⁵ view China unfavorably. The recent, alleged presence of a secret Chinese police station in Seoul only compounds this sentiment. It seems the negative impression is not going to change in a short time.⁶ Besides, China's passive attitude towards the North Korean nuclear issue, interference with the THAAD missile system using the Korean restriction order, and the long-term, unresolved historical, cultural, and environmental disputes all add more uncertainties to the future of ROK-China relations.

The Korean version of the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report avoids sensitive wording, and many policies may be adjusted in detail. For example, *the Defense White Paper*, expected to be published at the beginning of 2023, and

the White Paper on Korean Unification are still waiting for the Yoon administration's release. However, considering the current situation of the peninsula, the 2023 national defense budget and items, the U.S. army drills, the development of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and the U.S.-China standoff, it is still fairly uncertain if the ROK can succeed as a Global Pivotal State.

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4. “美, 韓 인태전략에 ‘평화 · 안보 증진 환영’... 中 ‘한중관계 촉진 기대’,” 뉴스핌, December 29, 2022, <https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20221229000299>.

5. “‘한국인 81%가 중국에 부정적 ...56개국중 반중정서 가장 강해’,” 연합뉴스, December 27, 2022, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20221227147600009>.

6. “‘비밀경찰서’ 의혹 중식당 대표 "사망 · 부상 중국인 귀국 지원" (종합),” 연합뉴스, December 31, 2022, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20221231034251004>.