

Comment on the Yoon Suk-yeol's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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1. News Highlights

In an interview with Reuters on November 29, 2022, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol expressed his views on the North Korean nuclear and Taiwan Strait issues.¹ Yoon first warned North Korea that South Korea would unite with its allies to take countermeasures if the North's seventh nuclear test were to be conducted. He also stated that China should play a more important role in the North Korean nuclear issue by jointly responding to the North's military provocations, discouraging the North from advancing its nuclear and missile programs. He also emphasized that Northeast Asian countries, including South Korea, Japan, and the US, should

cooperate in sharing North Korean missile information, adopt a common response strategy, and resume joint military exercises. On the situation in the Taiwan Strait, Yoon said, "any conflict should be resolved according to international rules" and "we oppose any attempt to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait." As for the role of the South Korean military and the US forces in Korea, Yoon said, "it is of the highest priority to handle the dangerous situation that occurs in our vicinity on the Korean Peninsula."²

Yoon's comments on the Taiwan Strait situation and the North Korean nuclear issue can be seen as part of the "Korean version of the Indo-Pacific strategy." Yoon first proposed the South

1. "Exclusive: South Korea's Yoon Warns of Unprecedented Response to North Korea Nuclear Test, Calls on China to Do More," *Reuters*, November 30, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/336Z2X>.

2. "尹 「北핵실험 어리석은 결정될 것」 …전례없는 공동대응 예고 (종합 3 보) ," 연합뉴스, November 29, <https://reurl.cc/aaR981>.

Korean version of the Indo-Pacific strategy at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on November 11; it has also been mentioned several times at the Korea-US-Japan and Korea-China summits.

2. Security Implications

2-1. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes "status quo" and "multilateral dialogue"

South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes "three visions" (freedom, peace, and prosperity) and "three principles" (tolerance, trust, and reciprocity). The main contents are as follows: First, to advocate a comprehensive regional strategy that presupposes peace and stability. Second, to maintain regional order and strengthen the universal values of democracy and freedom as the core objectives. It is Korea's basic principle to oppose the unilateral, disagreed use of force to

change the status quo. Third, to build an open, fair economic order. It's South Korea's major foreign economic policy to promote a rational, prosperous economic and technological system. Fourth, to fulfill the international responsibility and role of an advanced country. South Korea will actively contribute to the diplomacy areas such as climate change, health care, and digital development. Fifth, to include ASEAN as a key partner in South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. The country will support and endorse the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and continue strengthening exchanges with ASEAN member countries.³

In short, "to realize a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region" and "to prevent armed conflicts or disputes on the basis of the existing rules (with agreements or in accordance with the current situation) in the Indo-Pacific region." As for the US-China competition, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes "not to exclude or isolate specific countries, but to jointly pursue

3. 최원기, "윤석열 정부의 인도태평양 전략: 주요내용과 전략적 함의," *IFANS FOCUS (IF2022-29K)*, November 14, 2022, pp.1, <https://reurl.cc/OEmYoD>.

4. "윤 대통령 「자유·평화·번영 3대 비전으로 인도-태평양 전략 이행」," 대한민국정책브리핑, November 11, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/OEz0DR>.

synergy and coexistence in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁴ The statements on the Taiwan Strait situation actually echoed a significant part of the aforementioned content: opposing the use of force to change the current situation in the region.

2.2 South Korea tries expanding the room for maneuvering between the US and China

In the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and Japan, the main direction is to “contain” China and strengthen military security cooperation in the face of China’s military expansion. In contrast, South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes that it “does not target any particular country,”⁵ and it is a unified regional strategy to reduce the overtone of “containment.”⁶ The strategy keeps a certain distance from China while maintaining a strategic dialogue with China to retain the “economic security” relationship between the two countries, thereby improving the trading supply

chain between Korea and China for mutual prosperity in the technology and science fields. Regarding security, South Korea will continue to communicate with China on issues such as North Korean nuclear weapons and military provocations, urging the North to return to the negotiating table for the South to maintain effective ambiguity under the US-China competition.

On November 24, 2022, South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup participated in the 9th ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and discussed with Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the cooperative military exchanges between Korea and China. The discussion has reached the following consensus: First, to recommence the exchange of defense ministerial visits and strategic defense dialogues between South Korea and China interrupted by the COVID-19 epidemic. Second, to better

5. “尹, 6개월 준비해 한국형 ‘인태 전략’ 내놨다…미·일과 다른 이것,” 중앙일보, November 12, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/91xrxv>.

6. “대통령실 「인태 전략, 최초의 포괄적 지역 전략」 …중국 겨냥 해석엔 거듭 선그어, 서울경제. November 13, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/yMoEWI>; “외교부 「한국의 인태전략, 특정국 겨냥 아니다」, ” 연합뉴스, October 25, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/LXVbe9>.

utilize the South Korea-China military direct telephone and liaison system.⁷ Third, to resume military communication channels, such as visits of officials, training, and cadet exchanges between South Korea and China. Fourth, to better use the military dialogue channels between the two countries to prevent accidental conflicts.⁸

As seen from the speeches of the Chinese representative in the recent meetings with South Korea, the ongoing tensions on the Korean peninsula are not in China's geopolitical interest, while South Korea has also repeatedly stressed that China should play a "constructive role" in the North Korean nuclear issue.

The meeting between the Korean and Chinese defense ministers was actually a realization of Yoon's version of the South Korean Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to avoid falling into the suspicion of "restraining China" and to maintain the stability of the Korean Peninsula.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. Changes that may affect the South Korea-US-China strategic triangle in the future

In the meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin in Seoul on Nov. 30, 2022, John J. Hamre,

7. There are five military hotlines between South Korea and China set up according to the "Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the South Korea-China Navy and Air Force Direct Lines" (한중 해공 간간 직통전화 설치 및 운영에 관한 양해각서) signed and amended by the Ministries of National Defense of South Korea and China in 2008 and 2021 respectively. The South Korean units in charge of the lines are the Ministry of National Defense, the 2nd Fleet of the Navy, and the Air Force's 2nd Central Air Defense Control Department. The five direct military lines are set up between: 1. the Ministry of National Defense of Korea and the Ministry of National Defense of China. 2. The South Korean Navy and the Northern Theater of China's PLA Navy. 3. The South Korean Air Force and the Northern Theater of China's PLA Air Force. 4. The South Korean Navy and the Eastern Theater of China's PLA Navy. 5. The South Korean Air Force and the Eastern Theater of China's PLA Air Force. South Korea has also established military hotlines with Japan's Western Air Guard Control Corps, the Maritime Staff Supervision Department, and the Russian Pacific Fleet Command. Reference: 이권표, 황재호, "「한중 해 / 공군 간 직통전화 설치 및 운영에 관한 양해각서」 체결의 의미," 주간국방논단 (제 1240 호), January 26, 2009, pp.2-3; "한-중, 해공군간 직통전화 개통," 대한민국 정책브리핑, November 25, <https://reurl.cc/qZaAK0>;" 한중군사당국 간 직통전화 추가 개설 합의...3 → 5 개로 증가," KBS NEWS, March 2, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/NGOdOn>.

8. "이종섭 국방부장관, 제 9 차 아세안 확대 국방장관회의 본회의 참석," 국방부, November 24, <https://reurl.cc/910abj>.

president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), expressed high praise for South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. Hamre said, "The South Korea-US alliance is one of the most successful US foreign relationships. To meet today's geopolitical challenges and contribute to regional peace and prosperity, the potential of the alliance must be maximized," he said. South Korea's Foreign Minister Park Jin said, "Under the Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance agreed at the May 2022 summit between South Korea and the US, the two countries will deepen their collaborative relationship and continue to maintain a joint defense posture in response to the North Korean missile problem."⁹

In short, although South Korea continues to emphasize that its Indo-Pacific strategy will not target specific countries, it is still, in essence, based on the security alliance between South Korea and the US. With this strategy, South Korea has a considerable degree of participation in the US strategy to contain China and has been supported by the US

and Japan.

In fact, many parts of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy proposed by Yoon are quite different from the "New South Policy" proposed by Moon Jae-in in November 2017. Although both focus on Southeast Asia, the Moon administration emphasizes maintaining an "equidistant relationship" between the US and China, attempting to align with the US Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road at the same time to avoid involvement in regional disputes. In contrast, Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy breaks this "distance" and replaces it with a clear statement of South Korea's position on the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea dispute. It also indicates that South Korea will actively participate in future joint military exercises organized by the ASEAN. Such signs indicate that South Korea is indeed leaning heavily on the US in security, making the strategic triangle among South Korea, the US, and China gradually develop into a "romantic" relationship. Therefore, some Korean media have criticized Yoon's South Korean Indo-

9. "박진, 美 CSIS 만나 "우리 인태 전략에 지지 보내달라," 뉴시스, November 30, <https://reurl.cc/mZ7LYG>.

Pacific strategy as “a strategy eyeing only the US and Japan, but not Asia.”¹⁰

The known information about South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy can be concluded that it coincides with the “multilateral dialogue,” “economic order,” and “maritime security” epitomized in Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy,¹¹ and it should be able to open an opportunity for future security dialogue between Korea and Japan. In addition to the strategic competition between the US and China, the possible future cooperation dynamics among South Korea, the US, and Japan should be continuously paid attention to. Similarly, North Korea's interaction with China and Russia will also be a key issue for South Korea, the US, and Japan.¹² To avoid an irreversible dilemma with China and Russia, South Korea may continue to revise its Indo-Pacific strategy to eventually separate from the US and Japan's versions and become unique to its

own.¹³

3-2. South Korea's internal problems may be an uncertainty

Although Yoon proposed South Korea's version of the Indo-Pacific strategy at the East Asia Summit, details and specifics are still lacking; this needs to be studied and discussed by the Korean government think tanks and domestic scholars. According to the available information, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy should be based on the “Korea-US alliance,” “Korea-US-Japan cooperation,” and “economic security” with a “multilateral cooperation” approach to focus on the North Korean nuclear issue, the Taiwan Strait situation, and the security of the South China Sea, and pay attention to the security of Northeast and Southeast Asia to maintain the existing order and strengthen the supply chain operations.

10. “윤 대통령 「인도·태평양 전략」엔 미·일만 있고 아시아가 없다,” 한겨레, November 14, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/EXWnVa>.

11. “自由で開かれたインド太平洋,” *Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, May 16, <https://reurl.cc/GXQmn3>.

12. 김도희, “미중 전략경쟁 시대, 한미동맹의 방향과 과제,” 이슈와 논점 (제 1977호, 국회입법조사처), August 8, 2022, pp.4, <https://reurl.cc/28QeEn>.

13. “[fn 광장] 한국판 아닌 한국형 인태전략 필요,” 파이낸셜뉴스, December 7, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/NGOMEq>.

However, South Korea's foreign trade has been in deficit for seven consecutive months,¹⁴ and its economic and trade exports to ASEAN member countries have been declining as well.¹⁵ In addition, South Korea's domestic politics has become a full-scale confrontation between the ruling and opposition parties. The recent "Itaewon stampede accident" has caused the Korean parliament to pass a resolution and propose a "dismissal proposal" of Lee Sang-min, Minister of the Interior and Safety, to the Presidential Residence. It is likely to be escalated to impeachment in the future. Although the impeachment should be difficult to succeed,¹⁶ it has aggravated the antagonistic relationship between the Korean government and the parliament. The Yoon administration is seeing gradual improvements in support,¹⁷ but the opposition party may

still constrain it anytime soon. Suppose the confrontations within South Korea continue to deteriorate from political to social levels, it may become one of the uncertainties for Yoon's government to promote South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy.

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14. "7개월째 무역수지 적자 ...연간 적자, 14년만에 현실로," 매일경제, November 1, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/EXWnQA>.

15. "한국, 아세안 수출 두달 연속 급감...2위 무역시장도 흔들," 중앙일보, December 6, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/zroeKe>.

16. "야, 이상민 탄핵카드 만지작...실현되기까지는 「3대 장벽」 넘어야," 서울신문, December 5, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/06Qjak>.

17. "윤대통령 지지율 41.5%...5개월 만에 40% 넘어" [여론조사공정], 연합뉴스, December 8, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/EXWnbA>.