

Time for Stronger India-South Korea Strategic and Defence Alliance

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Summary

The economic and security order in the Asian region is going through fundamental structural changes. At this historical juncture, the foreign policy changes advocated by the new Yoon Seok-Yeol administration are bound to bring India and South Korea closer together like never before. Working together, they have the potential to shape a new security and economic architecture to maintain peace and prosperity in the region.

Changing Strategic Environment in the Region

President Yoon Seok-Yeol is taking to office in Seoul when the geopolitical environment in the Asian region is going through a fundamental transformation. The United States (US)-led security order that has maintained peace and stability in the last 75 years is under stress due to multiple forces. The rise of China is altering the existing power equations in the region.

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine is expected to have severe implications for the Korean peninsula. Any chance for the peaceful denuclearisation of North Korea has become dimmer. It seems unlikely that North Korea will be persuaded to give up its nuclear weapons after seeing what happened to Ukraine, which gave up its nuclear weapons under a deal guaranteed by London, Washington and Moscow.¹

The war in Ukraine has also brought China and Russia closer together. This emerging partnership will have serious implications for South Korea. It will become more difficult for Seoul to balance off the united might of these two countries on security and economic issues facing the region.²

During the election campaign, Yoon advocated decoupling South Korea from China. However, it is easier said than done. South Korea's relations with China are more complex now than they were 30 years ago. Almost one-fourth of South Korea's foreign trade is with China. Chinese cultural and social organisations have deeply penetrated the peninsula and are spread throughout Korean society.

Further, the growing might of the Chinese military is shifting the balance of power in the region. Thus, despite the stronger alliance with the US, there is a limit to which South Korea can count on the protection of its core security and economic interests. This complexity of

¹ Murtaza Hussain, "Lesson From Ukraine: Breaking Promises to Small Countries Means They'll Never Give Up Nukes", *The Intercept*, 27 February 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/02/27/ukraine-nuclear-weapons-russia-invasion/>.

² Christian Shepherd, "China and Russia's military relationship is growing and Ukraine war is likely to deepen it", *The Washington Post*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/21/china-russia-military-arms-drones/>.

regional power equations is bound to force Seoul to look for new partners. Moreover, given the growing profile of India in the region, it could emerge as a natural choice for the Yoon administration.

The US' deep involvement in eastern Europe is expected to encourage China to increase its push in the Indo-Pacific.³ In recent years, Beijing has been building new military infrastructure and claiming more territory in the Indo-Pacific. Given the importance of free and open navigation in the South China Sea for South Korea, the country can ill afford Chinese dominance. Here, again, the Yoon administration will have no choice but to work with other regional countries to deter Chinese expansion. Given the expanding profile of the Indian navy in the Indo Pacific, the Yoon administration is expected to coordinate its response to Chinese expansion with the Indian navy.

Reinvigorated Foreign Policy for South Korea

South Korea's rise from a poor third world country to a democratic developed country in a short period has increased its profile and status in the international arena multiple times. Today, both Washington and Beijing compete to win Seoul over to their side. As a result, the increased Korean naval power and its global engagement make it a serious stakeholder in the emerging new security and economic architecture within the Indo-Pacific.

In the coming days, Yoon's presidency is expected to spend much time cleaning up the mess left behind by the previous administration under President Moon Jae-in. Under Moon, Seoul appeared to be tilting towards Beijing, which caused worries in the US and its regional allies. Moon's lopsided approach to developing closer ties with North Korea also failed. Meanwhile, South Korea's traditional security ties with other regional countries were damaged. The Moon administration was unable to get the full support of Washington in its peace initiative with North Korea as well.

Conscious of the importance of improving ties with countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia, the Moon administration launched the 'New Southern Policy'. However, like the North Korean policy, this policy faltered due to the lack of clarity and timidity; Moon could not stand up to human rights violations and democratic norms in the region, and Seoul essentially remained a moot spectator. Under Yoon's leadership, South Korea is expected to pursue a bolder engagement with the region and jointly promote democratic values. This new approach will bring Seoul closer to Delhi, which has been prompting a rules-based order in the region for quite some time now.⁴

As a developed country, South Korea has set up diplomatic assets worldwide. However, due to the narrow foreign policy vision opted by the Moon administration, the government did not utilise these assets to the full extent. Diplomatic assets were mainly used to promote economic and business interests; their security and strategic interests were pushed back or

³ Maria Siow, "Ukraine war adds complication to US-China rivalry in Indo-Pacific region", *South China Morning Post*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/article/3173799/ukraine-war-adds-complication-us-china-rivalry-indo-pacific-region>.

⁴ Yoon Suk-yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

entirely ignored. As a result, South Korea became increasingly isolated on international forums. Under the coming administration, South Korean diplomatic assets are expected to become active again. Notably, the country has established significant diplomatic assets in India and, as a result, we can expect a stronger push for the deepening of the India-South Korea partnership.

Seoul's new reinvigorated foreign policy is expected to restore its status as a regional powerhouse. However, it will no longer focus on merely building peace and unification of the Korean peninsula. This new engagement is bound to lead to a more active role in the emerging security and economic architecture in the region. India, which is also actively engaged in the region under its 'Act East' policy, will naturally be an ally of South Korea.

The new president's decision to support the US in the ongoing war in Ukraine is bound to agitate China and Russia. This will factor into China's approach toward South Korea with serious economic and security repercussions in the coming years. In turn, it can prompt the Yoon administration to look for new partners to avoid economic blackmail and military pressure by Beijing. Given the size of the Indian market and potential for future growth, the administration can be expected to bring a new shift in economic policy toward India. However, South Korea has been reluctant to accept some of the demands from India, especially those relating to the services sector despite reducing the ever-growing trade deficit. Now, it is expected to be more inclined to accept the Indian demands under the Yoon administration in the effort to reduce dependence on China. In addition, Seoul will likely reorient its new foreign policy stance to tilt toward the US. A golden opportunity is emerging for Seoul and Delhi to strengthen their economic and business partnership.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is expected to deepen superpower competition in the region. This will have serious implications for the Korean peninsula and the region. India has been working closely with the US to keep regional security order. Previously, the Moon administration refused to join the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and endorse the Indo-Pacific construct. This will change under the Yoon presidency as he is expected to join the Quad and support the Indo-Pacific construct. This will have a profound impact on the geopolitical environment of the region. As new battle lines are drawn, both Seoul and Delhi find themselves on the same side.

China reacted angrily when South Korea decided to deploy the US-manufactured Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system against the growing North Korean missile threat. To placate Beijing, the Moon administration adopted the 'Three-Nos' policy, where Seoul agreed neither to participate in an American missile defence network nor establish a trilateral military alliance with the US or Japan. Yoon has vowed to reverse the policy and seek active engagement with Washington. He is already in the discussions to bring nuclear bombers and submarines back to the Korean peninsula. Thus, we can expect major policy confrontation with North Korea and China soon. Correspondingly, the budding regional confrontation in the peninsula will have profound security implications for India. Delhi will be propelled to engage South Korea and its partners in the region more actively.⁵

⁵ Sang Hyun Lee, "What to Expect for US-ROK and Inter-Korean Relations Under Yoon Suk-yeol", *38th North*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.38north.org/2022/03/what-to-expect-for-us-rok-relations-and-inter-korean-relations-under-yoon-suk-yeol/>.

Earlier, each administration in South Korea had a different policy regarding North Korea, and now Seoul's policy towards Beijing is fluctuating too. It is difficult to foresee the long-term consequences of its fluctuating policy on China. However, in the short term, it is bound to bring Seoul closer to Delhi as the former will need stable friends during these unstable times.

New Emerging Strategic Alignment between India and Korea

A stronger military alliance with the US and the adoption of an American-centred foreign policy is expected to expand South Korea's reach into the international area. The country will be able to play a more active role in constructing new regional and global economic and security architecture. India is already working closely with the US in checkmating the expansion of China and in the construction of a new order in the Indo-Pacific. With Yoon taking office at this critical juncture, the possibility of a new trilateral alliance among Washington, Seoul and Delhi has emerged. If this materialises, it will impact both the region and the world in multiple ways. Working in unison, the three countries could promote a liberal economic growth model in opposition to the state-controlled Chinese growth model and jointly promote a common democratic way of life that is currently under threat by totalitarian states in the region.

With the changing nature of war, economic retaliation or technological assaults have become an important part of the new warfare system. With Yoon taking office, there are new opportunities to diversify the cooperation portfolio between India and Korea. The alliances based on solely economic and military cooperation no longer have a future; it is the creation of complex cooperation networks in diverse areas that are crucial to protect the vital national interests of both countries. Through a new network of cooperation, India and Korea can exploit opportunities available in emerging areas, such as developing cutting-edge semiconductors, batteries, cyber and space security and green and wind energy. With a pro-US Yoon administration, it should be easier to synchronise the regulatory policies of two democratic countries in these high-tech areas.⁶

Going beyond bilateral cooperation, India can be expected to play a bigger role in multilateral issues such as emerging new challenges in public health, environmental degradation, green energy and climate change. With South Korea adopting a new North Korea policy where the role and involvement of China is reduced to a minimum, an opportunity might open for India to toss a hat into the arena of peacebuilding and unification of Korea as well.

Given the declaration to participate in the Quad and play a more prominent role in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific, India has a strong partner in Yoon for its new 'Act East' policy.⁷ For some time, India has attempted to build a stronger trilateral cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo and Delhi, but policy rifts between South Korea and Japan hampered

⁶ Lakhvinder Singh, "President Yoon Seok-yeol will be good for India-Korea ties", *The Sunday Guardian*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/president-yoon-seok-yeol-will-good-india-korea-ties>.

⁷ Jeong-Soo Hong, "President-elect Yoon completes phone talks to all four Quad leaders", *The Dong A Ilbo*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20220318/3257320/1>.

the development. The time has come to build a stronger trilateral partnership to protect and promote their common economic and security interests.

Despite the enormous opportunity created, things may not go smoothly between the two countries due to structural problems. India occupies still a tiny place in South Korea's strategic space. Korean strategic thinkers rarely include India in their strategic calculus and there is no urgency to boost economic ties. The role of India in the region is rarely discussed in security seminars and conferences in Seoul. Despite repeated attempts to upgrade the dysfunctional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, Seoul has been reluctant to accommodate Indian concerns and demands. Bilateral trade has been stuck at US\$22 billion (S\$30.3 billion) per year; a trade target of US\$50 billion (S\$69.18 billion) by 2030 is intended for public consumption only.

Similarly, India has failed to develop robust diplomatic and cultural resources in South Korea despite the Indian government following the 'Act East' policy to deepen its regional engagement for a long time now. The Indian Culture Centre, which has been in existence for years now, has ended up as an empty talk shop. Its penetration into the Korean society is only skin deep. There is still an acute lack of expertise in the Indian foreign policy establishment on the Korean peninsula. Most Indian officials deployed to South Korea display a serious lack of understanding of the geopolitical environment. As such, they end up causing more harm than good to core Indian national interests in the peninsula. It is feared that the Indian foreign policy establishment may not fully comprehend the strategic significance of the Yoon presidency for India and the region. It is high time that India starts taking South Korea's stake and role in constructing new security and economic architecture seriously and invest some essential resources in raising the quality of India's diplomatic force. However, half-baked resources can only help one that much, and the damage in the last four years remains irreversible.

Too many opportunities to build a stronger partnership with Seoul have been lost due to miscomprehension and misrepresentation of the prevailing strategic environment in the Korean peninsula by Indian policymakers. India cannot afford to waste another four years. Therefore, it is time to reset India's approach toward South Korea. The time to build a powerful defence and strategic alliance with Korea has come!

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