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## South Korea's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy: Opportunities and challenges for cooperation with the EU

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SWP Research Paper

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*Eric J. Ballbach*

# South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy

Opportunities and challenges for cooperation with the EU



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

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- South Korea has been late to embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Its strategic approach developed from initial neglect to mere tactic acknowledgment and careful engagement under the Moon administration (2017–2022), to the now clear support for a distinct Indo-Pacific strategy under the Yoon administration (since 2022).
- While South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy represents an important step in formulating its own interests in the region, its implementation will be influenced by the larger strategic environment, the dynamic relationships between a network of different actors in the region, and the coordination of its approach with like-minded partners.
- Despite the Yoon administration's closer alignment of its Indo-Pacific strategy with that of the US, there are ample opportunities to strengthen cooperation between the EU and the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) on the Indo-Pacific. This is a consequence of overlapping interests regarding the Indo-Pacific region, which are expressed through strong similarities in the respective strategy papers of South Korea and the EU.
- Building on a solid existing basis of bilateral cooperation enabled by their strategic partnership, cooperation between the EU and the ROK should now be deepened beyond their already well-developed bilateral frameworks within the economic realm to the wider field of security cooperation.
- As South Korea's and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategies highlight similar areas of action, economic security, maritime security and cyber security are the most likely issue-areas in which the two sides will expand their links.

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*Eric J. Ballbach*

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## Table of Contents

5	<b>Issues and Conclusions</b>
7	<b>South Korea's Emerging Indo-Pacific Strategy: Development and Core Characteristics</b>
7	The New Southern Policy of the Moon Jae-in Administration
14	From New Southern Policy (Plus) to the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region
19	South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Remaining Dilemmas
21	<b>Taking Stock: EU-South Korea Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific</b>
22	Trade and Economic Security
23	Green Transition
24	Digital Governance and Partnerships
25	Connectivity
27	Security and Defence
29	<b>Conclusions and Recommendations</b>
30	(I) Better Coordination of the Indo-Pacific Strategies of the EU and the ROK
31	(II) Create a Landmark EU-ROK Cooperation Project on the Indo-Pacific
31	(III) Strengthen Cooperation on Security Issues in the Indo-Pacific
32	<b>Abbreviations</b>

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### South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy: Opportunities and challenges for cooperation with the EU

On 28 December 2022, the South Korean government issued its long-awaited “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”. The move epitomises a decisive shift in Seoul’s political intent and vision as it represents a departure from the cautious strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific of the previous Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022). Compared to other states in the region, South Korea has thus been fairly late to embrace the strategic concept of the Indo-Pacific, both in terms of developing its own strategic approach to the region and in coordinating its policies with the strategies of other actors. This reluctance was rooted in the Moon government’s foreign policy being predicated on a simultaneous pursuit of an alliance with the US *and* a close economic partnership with China — South Korea’s two largest trading partners and the two major external stakeholders in the issue of peace and security on the Korean peninsula. This “strategic ambiguity”, which emphasised treading a delicate balance between the two great powers without taking obvious sides, arose from the Moon administration’s fear that openly embracing any external Indo-Pacific strategy would inherently complicate Seoul’s relations with Beijing, which perceives the very conception of the Indo-Pacific as being aimed at containing China’s rising power and regional influence. Yet, given the risks Seoul faces from geopolitical tensions and recognising the constraints of the intensifying China-US rivalry on South Korea’s foreign policy, the Moon administration adopted its own approach to the Indo-Pacific region, the New Southern Policy (NSP). Without directly adopting the language of the Indo-Pacific, the NSP aimed at carefully diversifying the ROK’s economic and strategic options, realising untapped economic opportunities while allowing South Korea to maintain some semblance of foreign policy autonomy by strictly focusing on less sensitive issues. It was only in the later years of the Moon administration that the NSP gradually shifted towards a greater alignment with the US vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP).

After taking office in May 2022, the Yoon administration heralded a strategic shift away from Moon’s



ambiguous policy, which was accompanied by a departure from the cautious strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific. Yoon consolidated his global vision for South Korea by embracing “strategic clarity”, even as the strategic dilemma between closer aligning with the US and not overtly antagonising China remains pertinent due to the ongoing China-US strategic competition. As such, the current administration is much more positively inclined towards the idea of the Indo-Pacific, signalling the country’s intent to become an active player in the region (and beyond) and to closely coordinate its approach with that of other like-minded countries.

This policy shift is expected to have significant implications for future coordination and cooperation of South Korea’s strategy with the EU’s own Indo-Pacific strategy. In fact, both Seoul and Brussels emphasise that cooperation between the two sides is essential for the implementation of their respective strategies. This is a consequence of overlapping interests regarding the Indo-Pacific region, which include the inclusive alignment of their respective strategies, which means that neither of them views the isolation of and decoupling from China as desirable or realistic. At the same time, however, both strategies emphasise the need not only for diversified economic, but also foreign and security, links and relations. Of particular importance to both strategies therefore is the intensified cooperation with “like-minded” (value) partners to secure the rules-based international order — an objective that took on new urgency during the Trump presidency and because of the intensifying conflict between the US and China as well as Russia’s war against the Ukraine. As such, the EU’s and the ROK’s increased interest in the Indo-Pacific creates a window of opportunity to further strengthen their Strategic Partnership.

In order to analyse opportunities and challenges for intensified cooperation between the EU and South Korea in the context of their Indo-Pacific strategies, a thorough understanding of Seoul’s evolving regional approach is required. Yet much less is known about South Korea’s emerging Indo-Pacific strategy than that of other countries. This raises a number of crucial questions:

- 1) How did South Korea’s strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific develop under the Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk Yeol administrations and what are the major characteristics of their respective approaches?
- 2) How did ROK-EU cooperation in the context of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies develop in the different issue-areas?

- 3) What are the opportunities and challenges to increased cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between South Korea and the EU?

It is argued that while South Korea is a natural cooperation partner for the EU in the Indo-Pacific, and in fact much has already been achieved, a number of specific challenges to deeper cooperation remain, and collaboration on specific issue-areas (such as strategic matters) has yet to reach its full potential.

First, a better, more targeted coordination between the EU and the ROK on their respective approaches and strategies to the Indo-Pacific is required. While issues related to the Indo-Pacific are touched upon in various existing dialogue channels, a specific coordination mechanism focusing exclusively on the Indo-Pacific would facilitate advanced coordination around their respective strategies by: evaluating existing and identifying further cooperation opportunities, discussing pending implementation challenges, and coordinating on opportunities for practical cooperation.

Second, the ROK and the EU should create a landmark project in their cooperation on the Indo-Pacific that streamlines cooperation in a specific issue-area. A successfully implemented landmark project, for example on economic security, not only has the potential to boost cooperation in other areas of common concern, but would also send a signal to other actors in the region that both the ROK and the EU are serious about their engagement in the region and could thus enhance the appeal of their Indo-Pacific narratives.

Third, the EU and the ROK should strengthen their cooperation on security and defence-related issues in the Indo-Pacific. While security cooperation between Seoul and Brussels significantly increased in the previous decade, cooperation in the ‘priority area security and defence’ has yet to reach its full potential. As geopolitical shifts have removed some of the barriers that have thus far hampered deeper EU-ROK security cooperation, e.g. in the sense that Russia’s aggression against the Ukraine has accelerated the need for both the EU and South Korea to take action on global security and defence policy, a high-level consultation mechanism on security and defence issues is required, as the existing annual consultations are not sufficient to manage cooperation on the manifold security issues facing both sides in the region and beyond.

# South Korea's Emerging Indo-Pacific Strategy: Development and Core Characteristics

South Korea's foreign policy has long emphasised its relations with core regional powers in Northeast Asia, namely the US, Japan, China, and Russia. This reflects Seoul's immediate interests, including Korean Peninsula affairs and most notably North Korea's nuclear program; the reality of China's geostrategic and economic significance to Seoul; difficult relations with Japan; and its security alliance with the US. However, the changing geostrategic environment in the region has successively broadened South Korea's narrow foreign political focus. South Korea's consecutive development of a strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific region must be seen in light of these and further geopolitical factors, considerations and challenges, most notably the intensifying US-China conflict as well as, more recently, the global implications of Russia's war against the Ukraine. The shift in the political and strategic balance toward China has become a key factor in this development. While China's growth certainly offers vast economic opportunities for South Korea, Beijing's ever more assertive role in the region, the challenges it poses to the rules-based international order, and the intensifying US-China conflict are a cause for concern to many countries in the region, who worry about disruption of the regional order. As this strategic competition has intensified in recent years, regional states have been forced to adjust their policies to navigate this new geopolitical reality and mitigate future uncertainties.

It was against this backdrop that South Korea broadened its geographical approach, especially to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific, in its New Southern Policy (NSP) under the government of Moon Jae-in. While the Moon administration was hesitant to develop a distinct Indo-Pacific strategy due to concerns it might anger China, the NSP was already in line with a broader conception of the Indo-Pacific,

although heavily focused on the economic aspect. The Yoon Suk Yeol administration, which released its Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region on December 28, 2022, now lends greater strategic clarity to South Korea's approach to the region.

## The New Southern Policy of the Moon Jae-in Administration

The basis on which the Moon administration built its NSP was the ROK's broader relationship to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India that had developed over the previous decades. While respective administrations' motives differed, Seoul has shown a steadily increasing commitment to co-operating with ASEAN member states and India. Starting with the establishment of a sectoral dialogue partnership in 1989, the relationship with ASEAN in particular developed considerably over time. Underpinned by robust socio-cultural exchanges, the two sides agreed on the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2009 and on the elevation of bilateral relations to a 'strategic partnership' in 2010. In October 2004, the ROK and India established a 'Long-term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity' as a channel to enhance mutual interests between the two countries, and in 2009 signed the 'Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between India and the ROK'. In 2015, they upgraded their relations to a 'special strategic partnership'.

The NSP, first announced in November 2017 in Indonesia, emanated from and aimed at intensifying South Korea's strategic partnerships with ASEAN and India under the vision of achieving a 'People-centred

Community of Peace and Prosperity'.<sup>1</sup> Institutionally, within the ROK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), ASEAN-South Korea relations were upgraded to a diplomatic level similar to Seoul's ties with the US, China, Japan, and Russia. During his five-year presidency, Moon Jae-in visited all ASEAN member states and had two summit meetings with India. In 2020, when commenting on the progress of the NSP, President Moon stated that:

"[...] the Republic of Korea maintained its position as the world's seventh largest exporter [...] New Southern Policy partner countries accounted for more than 20 percent of our exports for the first time last year, and exports to countries linked to the New Northern Policy have also witnessed double-digit increases for three years in a row — a reminder of how our country's exports have been diversified."<sup>2</sup>

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing US-China rivalry, the NSP was modified to the NSP Plus in November 2020. The revised strategy focused on overcoming the global COVID-19 pandemic and reconstructing and securing global value chains to ensure people's safety and free trade in the region and beyond. To that end, NSP Plus reflected changes in the current environment whilst promoting seven distinct initiatives. These were: 1) comprehensive healthcare cooperation, 2) sharing South Korea's education model for human resource development, 3) promotion of mutual cultural exchanges, 4) formation of mutually beneficial and sustainable trade and investment, 5) support for rural villages and urban infrastructure development, 6) cooperation in future industries for common prosperity, and 7) cooperation for safe and peaceful communities.

## Main Motives for and Aims of the NSP

The Moon Jae-in administration's NSP was inherently linked to two central motivations: to realign the administration's diplomatic priorities and to diversify its

economic and strategic partnerships to mitigate the risks posed by the great powers' rivalry.

## Recalibration of South Korea's diplomatic priorities

A central factor behind the development of the NSP and the subsequent strengthening of the ROK's relations to ASEAN and India was the realignment of Seoul's diplomatic priorities. Despite South Korea's strong ties with many countries in the region, the ASEAN countries and India had "remained secondary in Seoul's overall strategic landscape"<sup>3</sup> before the inception of the NSP. This is because South Korea had long prioritised its relations with its immediate neighbours in its overall foreign policy calculus.

### The Moon administration's New Southern Policy aimed at reducing existing dependencies, securing new economic opportunities, and sustaining foreign political autonomy.

Seoul's strategic decision to give greater weight to the countries in Southeast and South Asia, both economically and strategically, must be seen in terms of its aim of reducing existing dependencies, securing new economic opportunities, and sustaining foreign political autonomy. Intensifying its relations with ASEAN and India was a comparatively safe choice to achieve those goals, given both ASEAN's and India's growing strategic and economic importance and that the already well-established ties to India and ASEAN provided a strong basis for further increasing co-operation. Also, as both India and ASEAN shared the ROK's concerns about China's increasing assertiveness in the region and being caught in the middle of the great powers' rivalry, there was an apparent convergence between the NSP and both ASEAN's and India's respective regional initiatives.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the three policy areas ASEAN emphasises directly correspond to the NSP's three pillars: political and security affairs (peace), economic engagement (prosperity), and sociocultural

1 Embassy of the ROK to Singapore, *New Southern Policy, towards 'People-Centered Community of Peace and Prosperity'*, Embassy Notice (Singapore, 8 June 2021), [https://sgp.mofa.go.kr/sg-en/brd/m\\_2435/view.do?seq=761327](https://sgp.mofa.go.kr/sg-en/brd/m_2435/view.do?seq=761327) (accessed 23 March 2022).

2 Moon Jae-in, *2020 New Year's Address*, Seoul, 7 January 2020, <https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/741> (accessed 23 March 2022).

3 Kathryn Botto, *South Korea beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572> (accessed 23 October 2022).

4 Rahmadanu Pradityo, "South Korea's Interest in ASEAN+1: New Southern Policy and Peacebuilding," *Jurnal Sosial Politik* 8, no. 11(2022): 134–49.

ties (people). There was also a great deal of complementarity between the NSP's priorities and those of India's Act East Policy, which sought to "preserve a [...] balance of power in the Indo-Pacific" by strengthening regional ties, including with ASEAN and South Korea.<sup>5</sup>

### **Diversifying foreign relations in the context of Seoul's bid for greater "strategic autonomy" and the notion of "strategic ambiguity"**

Another central motivation behind the NSP was the Moon administration's objective of increasing the country's strategic autonomy in light of the intensifying conflict between the US and China.<sup>6</sup> The NSP, not unlike other approaches to the region, was driven by an increasing need to diversify both the country's external economic relations and its strategic partnerships — and China's economic sanctions against South Korea in 2017 had a profound impact in this regard.<sup>7</sup> While South Korea's economic dependence

on China had been apparent before the crisis that followed the deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea, it was the first time China politically weaponised that economic dependency. With South Korea's vulnerability to Chinese economic coercion on full display, this reinforced the urgency for greater diversification. That urgency was additionally heightened by the fact that the US, under the Trump administration, did not openly support Seoul in this precarious situation. Rather, US President Trump aggravated the situation when he suggested that South Korea should have to cover the costs for the THAAD deployment — despite previous agreements in which it was decided otherwise.<sup>8</sup> These experiences underscored the vulnerabilities created by South Korea's economic reliance on China, but also raised questions regarding the credibility of the US as security provider.

While the NSP "is a testament to Seoul's acute awareness of this vulnerability [...], South Korea's need for strategic autonomy both motivates the policy and constrains it."<sup>9</sup> As such, the Moon administration was extremely careful in positioning South Korea in the intensifying US-China rivalry and highly cautious not to endorse any strategy that could be perceived as countering China. This strategic position, described as "strategic ambiguity," also influenced the conceptualisation, basic orientation and the primary objectives of the NSP, which mainly focused on less sensitive issues like economic cooperation, non-traditional security (NTS), and human security, while by and large neglecting the region's most pressing hard security issues such as tensions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>10</sup> While the Moon administra-

5 Botto, *South Korea beyond Northeast Asia* (see note 3).

6 Strategic autonomy is defined as "the ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through — in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone." Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes, *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests*, SWP Research Paper 4/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2019), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/european-strategic-autonomy> (accessed 12 February 2023).

7 When the Moon administration came into office in May 2017, it was faced with a crisis over the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea. While the THAAD system was deployed against the increasing threat posed by North Korea, China claimed that THAAD's X-band radar would undermine China's nuclear deterrent in certain cases, and launched an economic coercion campaign against South Korea. Among others, certain tech exports were banned and travel agencies were ordered to stop selling tours to South Korea. The sanctions especially targeted The Lotte Group, one of South Korea's large conglomerates, which provided land for THAAD's deployment. By the spring of 2017, three of every four of Lotte's roughly 100 stores in China had been closed for supposedly violating Chinese safety codes. In total, South Korean companies recorded upward of US\$7.5 billion in losses before the dispute was resolved in late 2017 with an agreement for the resumption of normal economic relations and Seoul's commitment to "three noes" — no additional deployment of THAAD batteries, no South Korean integration into a US-led regional missile defence system, and no

trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan. See: Troy Stangaron, "Did South Korea's Three Noes Matter? Not So Much," *The Diplomat*, 30 October 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/did-south-koreas-three-noes-matter-not-so-much/> (accessed 28 December 2022).

8 Kyle Ferrier, *Monetizing the Linchpin: Trump's Foreign Policy Versus the U.S.-South Korea Alliance's Value to Washington*, Special Report no. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, 5 December 2019), <https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Monetizing-the-Linchpin.pdf> (accessed 2 November 2022).

9 Botto, *South Korea beyond Northeast Asia* (see note 3).

10 Eric J. Ballbach and Laura Morazzini, *A Restrained Embrace: South Korea's Response to Germany's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, SWP Comment 13/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2021), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/>

tion upheld the position of strategic ambiguity, it also became acutely aware that adhering to an ambiguous foreign policy would become ever more difficult as the conflict between the US and China intensified.

### Three Pillars of the New Southern Policy

South Korea's NSP was based on three pillars: the prosperity pillar referring to increased economic cooperation with the region; the people pillar referring to increased socio-cultural cooperation; and the peace pillar, subsuming political and security cooperation with the Indo-Pacific partners.

#### The prosperity pillar: economic cooperation

The primary focus of the NSP was on the prosperity pillar, reflected not least by the fact that the chairmanship of the Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy was reserved for presidential economic advisers.<sup>11</sup> In light of the vulnerabilities created by its economic dependency on China, South Korea's need for economic diversification may well be seen as the most central motivation behind the NSP. Moreover, economic cooperation with the NSP countries already had significant momentum prior to the NSP's implementation. Focusing on this issue-area was not only uncontroversial, but therefore also promised quick results — and successes.

Overall, the subsequent NSP Plus focused on three initiatives under the prosperity pillar. These were: 1) to build a “foundation of mutually beneficial and sustainable trade and investment,” including by diversifying supply chains, establishing new trade agreements, supporting small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and enhancing corporate social responsibility. 2) “Supporting rural villages and urban infrastructure development,” particularly through infrastructure projects, smart city development, and sustainable development in rural communities. And 3) to foster “cooperation on future industries for common prosperity,” focusing on supporting tech start-ups and promoting cooperation in Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.<sup>12</sup>

publikation/south-koreas-response-to-germanys-indo-pacific-strategy.

11 Botto, *South Korea beyond Northeast Asia* (see note 3).

12 Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, “New Southern Policy Plus” (Seoul, 2018), [http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/policy/policy4\\_1.do](http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/policy/policy4_1.do) (accessed 6 June 2021).

#### The people pillar: sociocultural cooperation

The NSP's people pillar was a crucial channel for South Korea to build upon its soft power strengths and to increase sociocultural and people-to-people engagement with India and ASEAN members. As such, the NSP's people pillar prioritised education, cultural exchanges, tourism, and public administrative capacity building.<sup>13</sup> With the later NSP Plus, pandemic-related and public health cooperation was also subsumed under the people pillar.<sup>14</sup> Seoul therefore increased financial support for research on ASEAN and India under the NSP and established new programs at government-run research institutions, such as the Korea National Diplomatic Academy's Center for ASEAN and Indian Studies.<sup>15</sup> In addition, cooperation on public health issues also focused on increasing educational exchanges.<sup>16</sup> Another driver for increased people-to-people contact was the ever-increasing appeal of South Korean popular culture, which directly impacts tourism; a growing interest in Korean culture and language; and study programs in the ROK. Conversely, Southeast Asian countries have become popular destinations for South Korean tourists. Southeast Asians make up over 30 percent of the foreign residents in South Korea, and about 362,000 South Koreans resided in ASEAN countries as of 2019.<sup>17</sup> Students from ASEAN countries also made up the largest proportion of foreign students studying in South Korea in 2020, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the foreign students.

#### The peace pillar: political and security cooperation

The peace pillar of the NSP, which focused on political and security cooperation, certainly was the most sensitive aspect of the policy. It originally focused on five main issues, i.e. fostering diplomatic exchanges, inter-Korean cooperation, defence industry cooperation, emergency response capabilities, and joint

13 Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, “New Southern Policy Brochure” (Seoul, 2018).

14 Presidential Committee, “New Southern Policy Plus” (see note 12).

15 South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Opening Ceremony of Center for ASEAN and Indian Studies to Take Place on February 1,” 1 January 2018, <https://bit.ly/3FuFhz3> OpeningCeremony (accessed 16 March 2023).

16 Presidential Committee, “New Southern Policy Plus” (see note 12).

17 ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2019 ASEAN & Korea in Figures* (Seoul: ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2020), 138–41.



responses to terrorism, cybersecurity challenges, and maritime security threats. Under the subsequent NSP Plus, the peace pillar's objectives were subsumed under the banner "transnational cooperation for the fostering of safety and peace,"<sup>18</sup> emphasising less sensitive initiatives on climate change, disaster response, maritime pollution, and transnational crime.

Despite inherent limitations stemming from its narrow focus and the position of strategic ambiguity, some significant achievements of the NSP under the peace pillar can be identified – most notably in terms of diplomatic engagements and high-level exchanges. As noted above, Moon Jae-in was the first South Korean president to have visited all eleven NSP partner countries during his term in office.<sup>19</sup> (See Table 1, p. 12.)

Moon's active engagement with the region signalled the NSP's elevated importance in South Korea's foreign policy. Increased resources enhanced South Korea's diplomatic infrastructure, which allowed for expanded engagement with the region. For instance, a Bureau of ASEAN and Southeast Asia Affairs was established within South Korea's MoFA, putting it on an institutional footing with the China and Japan Bureaus.<sup>20</sup> The number of personnel at South Korea's mission to ASEAN tripled, and "the rank of ambassador to the ASEAN mission was upgraded to a higher level, from that of director-general."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Moon government deliberately avoided a thorough coordination of the NSP with the Indo-Pacific strategies of other regional actors.**

However, although high-level engagements with ASEAN, its member states and India evidently increased, the Moon government deliberately avoided a thorough coordination of the NSP with the Indo-

Pacific strategies of other regional actors.<sup>22</sup> For instance, a joint factsheet published by the US Department of State emphasised that the two countries "continue to work together to create a safe, prosperous, and dynamic Indo-Pacific region through cooperation between the Republic of Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy based on the principles of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for international norms, and ASEAN centrality."<sup>23</sup>

Cooperation and capacity building on NTS issues was a clear priority of the NSP, and of the NSP Plus in particular. An overlap with the main emphasis of the regional strategies of India, ASEAN, and the EU was especially apparent. Clearly, while NTS challenges such as climate change are deemed important, this focus was a consequence of the fact that Seoul had greater leeway on these less sensitive issues and was thus able to increase cooperation with the region without abandoning its policy of strategic ambiguity. At the same time, however, the almost exclusive focus on NTS raised doubts regarding the NSP's stated goal that Seoul ultimately seeks to actively contribute to the region's peace and stability.

Without being more active on regional security issues, South Korea has limited its ability to realise its full potential as a strategic actor in the region. Yet, with the Moon administration's foreign policy being bound by its primary focus on improving relations with North Korea, and its strict adherence to strategic ambiguity, the NSP was restrained on strategic and traditional security issues. One notable exception to this was South Korea's engagement on its primary foreign policy issue under Moon Jae-in: the issue of inter-Korean peace.

18 Presidential Committee, "New Southern Policy Plus" (see note 12).

19 Lee Chi-dong, "Moon's Regional Tour Injects Fresh Vigor into His New Southern Policy," *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 September 2019, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190906000400315> (accessed 12 June 2021).

20 Choe Wongi, "'New Southern Policy': Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy," *Asie Visions*, no. 118 (French Institute of International Relations, January 2021), [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/choe\\_new\\_southern\\_policy\\_korea\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/choe_new_southern_policy_korea_2021.pdf) (accessed 13 June 2022).

21 Ibid.

22 Ballbach and Morazzini, *A Restrained Embrace* (see note 10); Andrew Yeo, *South Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy: Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Mansfield Foundation, 22 July 2021), [https://mansfieldfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Andrew-Yeo\\_MMMF\\_NSP-Indo-Pac\\_Draft\\_7-19-21.pdf](https://mansfieldfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Andrew-Yeo_MMMF_NSP-Indo-Pac_Draft_7-19-21.pdf) (accessed 16 June 2022).

23 US Department of State, "The United States of America and the Republic of Korea on Working Together to Promote Cooperation between the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the New Southern Policy," 13 November 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-of-america-and-the-republic-of-korea-on-working-together-to-promote-cooperation-between-the-indo-pacific-strategy-and-the-new-southern-policy/> (accessed 14 January 2022).

Table 1

## ROK-ASEAN Summit Diplomacy

Summits	Deliverables
<b>ASEAN-ROK</b> ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Development Cooperation between the ROK and Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, and Vietnam</li> <li>■ Establishment of a joint ASEAN-ROK startup funds</li> <li>■ Establishment of a “New Southern Business Cooperation center” to support Korean companies expand into ASEAN and strengthen competitiveness of ASEAN-based enterprises</li> </ul>
<b>Mekong-ROK</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> Mekong-ROK Summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The Mekong-Han River Declaration for Establishing Partnership for People, Prosperity and Peace, focusing on culture and tourism, agriculture, infrastructure, IT, and sustainable development and peace</li> <li>■ The Mekong-ROK Summit to be held annually</li> </ul>
<b>Brunei-ROK</b> President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Brunei, March 2019 Brunei-ROK summit, Nov. 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Three MoUs on cooperation in investment, science and technology in Industry 4.0, and intellectual property</li> <li>■ Three MoUs on ICT, e-government, and smart cities</li> </ul>
<b>Cambodia-ROK</b> President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Cambodia, March 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Seven agreements/MoUs on soft loan of Economic Development Cooperation Fund for 2019–2023, soft loan for the University of Health Sciences hospital project, power supply project for micro-electricity grids and battery charging station in Cambodia, Korean investment facilitation, education, soft loan for rural road improvement project, and construction material and equipment</li> </ul>
<b>Indonesia-ROK</b> President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Indonesia, November 2017  Indonesia-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Upgrading relationship from strategic partnership to special strategic partnership</li> <li>■ Signing of cooperation agreements on transportation, Jakarta's Light Rail Transit project, and Indonesia's Low-Cost Housing program</li> <li>■ Conclusion of Indonesia-ROK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)</li> </ul>
<b>Laos-ROK</b> President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Laos, September 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on agriculture, ICT, start-ups and innovation, Economic Development Cooperation Fund with Korea's grant of US\$500 million from 2020–2023</li> </ul>
<b>Malaysia-ROK</b> President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Malaysia, March 2019  Malaysia-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Four MoUs on industrial cooperation relating to Industry 4.0, cooperation in transportation, development of a smart city in Malaysia, and halal industry</li> <li>■ Elevating the relationship to a strategic partnership</li> <li>■ Four MoUs on cooperation in IT, e-government, health care, water and sewage management</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continuation)

**ROK-ASEAN Summit Diplomacy**

Summits	Deliverables
<b>Myanmar-ROK</b>	
President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Myanmar, September 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on trade and industrial cooperation, establishment of the Korea Desk in Myanmar to provide support for Korean investors, shipping logistics and port, S&amp;T, and start-ups and innovation</li> <li>■ Framework Agreement on 2018 – 2022 loans from the Economic Development Cooperation Fund</li> </ul>
Myanmar-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on cooperation on fisheries, technical and vocational training, environmental issues, and development of digital economy, higher education, smart cities and connectivity</li> </ul>
<b>The Philippines-ROK</b>	
President Moon Jae-in's official visit to the Philippines, November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Five agreements on transportation, economy and trade, renewable energy, S&amp;T, and infrastructure</li> </ul>
Philippines-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Five agreements in tourism, fisheries, education, social security, and trade and investment</li> </ul>
<b>Singapore-ROK</b>	
President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Singapore, July 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Six MoUs on environment, free trade, smart grids, Industry 4.0, SMEs, and investment</li> </ul>
Singapore-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on standards and conformance, manufacturing of pharmaceuticals, smart cities collaboration, and cyber security cooperation</li> </ul>
<b>Thailand-ROK</b>	
President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Thailand, September 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on smart cities, Industry 4.0, Korean language studies, water development, transport and infrastructure, and military intelligence</li> </ul>
Thailand-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on scientific R&amp;D, business and industry development in Thailand's eastern Economic Corridor, and information exchange on illegal Thai workers in the ROK</li> </ul>
<b>Vietnam-ROK</b>	
President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Vietnam, March 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on the action program towards US\$100 billion two-way trade by 2020, supporting industry cooperation, infrastructure and transport, urban construction and development, Industry 4.0, and labor cooperation</li> </ul>
Vietnam-ROK summit, November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MoUs on prevention of double taxation, navigation and crew training, trade promotion, capacity building for Vietnam Development Bank</li> </ul>

Source: Hoang Thi Ha and Glenn Ong, *Assessing the ROK's New Southern Policy towards ASEAN*, ISEAS Perspectives, Issue 2020 No. 7 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 January 2020), 7 – 9.



As a stated priority of the NSP, the Moon administration continuously raised the issue of North Korea in its engagement with India and ASEAN, but also with the US and Europe. While limited engagement on the issue occurred in the past through the ASEAN Regional Forum, neither India nor ASEAN have the required diplomatic power or the political will and interest in playing an active role on the issue.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the EU, after changing its strategy on North Korea to one of active pressure, was also increasingly reluctant to engage in the North Korea issue beyond its sanctions-based approach.<sup>25</sup> Aside from acting as facilitators, like Singapore and Vietnam did as hosts of US-North Korea summits in 2018, and Sweden did as host of two US-North Korea working-level meetings in 2019, none of these actors will become key stakeholders on issues involving inter-Korean relations.<sup>26</sup>

Another security issue in which the Moon administration was active in the framework of the NSP was increased defence (industry) cooperation. The Moon administration considerably increased the ROK's arms exports, co-development, and co-production with several NSP countries. South Korea's efforts in recent years to reform its defence industry's competitiveness and investments in research and development made the country the world's eighth-largest arms exporter.<sup>27</sup> While recent arms exports to Poland show South Korea's ambition to expand its footprint in Europe, Southeast Asia still counts among its top export destinations — chiefly Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

<sup>24</sup> Eric J. Ballbach, "Engaging North Korea in International Institutions: The Case of the ASEAN Regional Forum", *International Journal for Korean Unification Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 35–65.

<sup>25</sup> Eric J. Ballbach, *Moving beyond Targeted Sanctions: The EU's Sanctions Regime against North Korea*, SWP Research Paper 4/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/moving-beyond-targeted-sanctions> (accessed 28 February 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Ahn Sung-mi, "Foreign Minister Requests ASEAN's Constructive Role in Korean Peace Process," *The Korea Herald*, 3 August 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210803000747> (accessed 12 August 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Bogaitsky, "South Korea Has Quietly Become One of the World's Biggest Weapons Suppliers," *Forbes*, 7 November 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeremybogaitsky/2022/11/07/south-korea-has-quietly-become-one-of-the-worlds-biggest-weapons-suppliers/?sh=78d2aa736375> (accessed 11 November 2022).

## From New Southern Policy (Plus) to the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region

By focusing on 'prosperity, people, and peace', the NSP provided the scope for greater practical and functional cooperation, which led to important tangible economic and socio-cultural gains for both ASEAN and the ROK. President Yoon, too, maintains South Korea's important economic and political engagement with ASEAN and India, which he described as particularly important in light of the intensifying US-China rivalry. However, while certain elements of the NSP are upheld in the Yoon administration's "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region" (SFPPIP), the new administration made crucial modifications to its regional approach, reflecting both strategic changes in its political agenda and a reaction to the regional and global geopolitical shifts.

## South Korea as a Global Pivotal State

In order to understand the Yoon administration's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy and evaluate the implications for the EU, it is imperative to appreciate the government's broader foreign policy vision. Central in this regard is the Yoon administration's aspiration of the ROK as a Global Pivotal State (*killobol chungch'ugukka*, GPS). This vision basically entails that South Korea's foreign policy interests lay beyond the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. South Korea would become more engaged in the Indo-Pacific region and active in global affairs. In an article written for *Foreign Affairs* in February 2022, then presidential candidate Yoon declared it was compulsory for South Korea "to take on a greater regional and international role [rather than] passively adapting and reacting to the changing international environment."<sup>28</sup> Criticising the Moon administration's narrow foreign policy focus, he noted that South Korea should "no longer be confined to the Korean Peninsula."<sup>29</sup> In his inaugural speech, Yoon stressed that South Korea would take on a greater global role befitting its stature and in response to calls from the international community, including in shar-

<sup>28</sup> Yoon Suk Yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up: Seoul Must Embrace a More Expansive Role in Asia and Beyond," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2022, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step?utm\\_medium=social](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step?utm_medium=social) (accessed 22 August 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

ing and protecting freedom, liberal democracy and the rule of law around the world.

US President Joe Biden's visit to the ROK just ten days after Yoon's inauguration was the starting point for Yoon's new diplomatic approach. The decision to upgrade the US-ROK alliance to a "global comprehensive strategic alliance beyond the Korean Peninsula" echoes Yoon's vision for South Korea's heightened role in advancing peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.<sup>30</sup> Concrete steps in the first few months of the Yoon government included: increasing support for Ukraine by contributing aid and assistance as well as the provision of weapons via Poland and the Czech Republic; a greater engagement with NATO; improved relations with Japan; and support for and engagement with US-led multilateral economic security initiatives.<sup>31</sup>

### **Despite targeted efforts to raise South Korea's global status and influence, South Korea is still faced with the same geopolitical constraints.**

Despite these endeavours to raise South Korea's global status and influence, however, South Korea is still faced with the same geopolitical constraints. Whether the Yoon administration is able to mitigate these constraints and elevate South Korea's global status remains to be seen. As Jagannath Panda correctly notes, turning the ROK into a GPS "requires a comprehensive engagement in the international arena beyond the half-hearted middle-power diplomacy the ROK has been employing" in the past.<sup>32</sup>

30 The White House, "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," 21 May 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/> (accessed 2 October 2022).

31 Andrew Yeo, *South Korean Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Era*, Policy Brief (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, November 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/south-korean-foreign-policy-in-the-indo-pacific-era/> (accessed 2 December 2022).

32 Jagannath Panda, "Seoul's Geopolitical Code on Quad: Imperative or Elective?" *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 31 October 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3212554/seouls-geopolitical-code-on-quad-imperative-or-elective/> (accessed 12 November 2022).

## **The Yoon Administration's Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region**

In May 2022, President Yoon announced that his administration would formulate its own Indo-Pacific strategy, and established a task force at the MoFA to create a draft of the strategy. Notably, the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Team' was situated within the North American Affairs Bureau in the MoFA, already foreshadowing a closer alignment of Seoul's emerging strategy with that of the US. On 11 November 2022, Yoon first outlined his administration's strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific at a summit of ASEAN leaders in Phnom Penh. Given that the Moon administration had avoided the term "Indo-Pacific strategy" — in light of its associations with US efforts to curb China — this in itself is a noticeable strategic shift. Ahead of the official announcement of the strategy, the presidential office described the Indo-Pacific strategy as the last piece of a puzzle to complete the administration's diplomatic policies. Shin Kak-soo, former vice foreign minister and ambassador to Japan, described the publication of the Indo-Pacific strategy as a move to:

"... normalize what has been abnormal. [...] South Korea is a core nation in the Indo-Pacific, and it does not make sense for the country not to have a diplomatic strategy for the region when even European countries have them. [...] As an Indo-Pacific country, (introducing the regional strategy) is an opportunity for South Korea to clarify its direction and position in the region where it has great interest."<sup>33</sup>

As President Yoon unveiled the strategy, he emphasised the country's pursuit of freedom, peace and prosperity in the region based on a rules-based order under the three principles of inclusivity, trust and reciprocity. "The Indo-Pacific strategy [...] will be based on [a] mutually reciprocal approach, and suggest the direction in which we can contribute to enhance freedom, peace and prosperity in the region," a MoFA official said, noting that there are "common factors the Korean strategy may share with other

33 Jo He-rim, "What Will Korean Version of Indo-Pacific Strategy Look Like?" *The Korea Herald*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20221110000669> (accessed 16 November 2022).

friendly nations, and the government will cooperate with the countries in those areas of common pursuit.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in personal conversations with the author in August 2022, a South Korean official from the MoFA stressed that the strategy would focus heavily on values and norms, which would create new spaces for cooperation with Seoul's global partners, including the EU.

### Central Elements of the Yoon Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Yoon administration's Indo-Pacific strategy was officially published on December 28, 2022.<sup>35</sup> The 34-page document, titled “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, pursues nine core lines of effort (LOE) to fulfil its vision for a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region under the three cooperation principles of inclusiveness, trust and reciprocity. The nine LOEs are:

- building a regional order based on norms and rules;
- cooperating to promote the rule of law and human rights;
- strengthening non-proliferation and counterterrorism efforts across the region;
- expanding comprehensive security cooperation;
- building economic security networks;
- strengthening cooperation in critical domains of science and technology, and closing the digital gap;
- leading regional cooperation on climate change and energy security;
- engaging in “contributive diplomacy” through tailored development cooperation partnerships and
- promoting mutual understanding and exchanges.

### Trade dependency as a context for the framing of the Indo-Pacific strategy

A crucial background to South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy is its emphasis on the country's trade dependency as a context for framing its strategic

approach to the region. The strategy notes that the Indo-Pacific region represents 78 percent of total exports and 67 percent of total imports to South Korea, while two-thirds of South Korea's foreign investments are directed to the Indo-Pacific, and 64 percent of South Korea's inbound crude oil and 46 percent of inbound natural gas supplies pass through the South China Sea. These points, Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations notes, “provide an indirect case for the preservation of geopolitical order in the region that seeks to uphold and maintain inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity, including with the elephant in the room — China.”<sup>36</sup>

**The question of how to best deal with China will be one of the core challenges for a successful implementation of the ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy.**

At the same time, however, intensifying geopolitical risks make it imperative to reduce dependencies and strengthen resilience, especially in terms of supply chains and critical infrastructure. As will be discussed further below, the question of how to best deal with China will be one of the core challenges for a successful implementation of the ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy.

### Maintaining the centrality of ASEAN

The SFPPIP by and large maintains the Moon administration's principle of ASEAN centrality, stating that “ASEAN is Seoul's key partner in its Indo-Pacific strategy” to cooperate on issues such as conflict-prevention, preserving peace, and achieving inclusive, sustainable, and balanced economic development.<sup>37</sup> The ROK and ASEAN share similar views on the need to diversify foreign (economic) relations, promoting multilateralism and sustaining an international rules-based order. Hence, the Yoon administration aims to increase coordination with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). At the 55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in August 2022 in Phnom Penh, South

34 Jo He-rim, “What Will Korean Version of Indo-Pacific Strategy Look Like? Eyes on How South Korea Will Position Itself in the Strategic Region to Navigate between US, China”, *The Korea Herald*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20221110000669> (accessed 16 November 2022).

35 Office of the President, Republic of Korea, *Chayu, p'yonghwa, p'nyongŭi indo-t'aep'yongyang ch'ollyak* [Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region] (28 December 2022), <https://www.president.go.kr/newsroom/briefing/HC81lhZw> (accessed 28 December 2022).

36 Scott Snyder, “What South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy Says about the Development of a ‘Yoon Doctrine’,” *Korea on Point*, 29 December 2022, [https://koreaponpoint.org/view.php?page=2&topic\\_idx=38&idx=179](https://koreaponpoint.org/view.php?page=2&topic_idx=38&idx=179) (accessed 9 February 2023).

37 Choe Wongi, “The ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy under President Yoon: Key Elements and Strategic Implications,” *IFANS Focus*, 14 November 2022, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/> (accessed 20 November 2022).

Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin revealed that the ROK intended to become a comprehensive strategic partner (CSP) of ASEAN. The official application was subsequently made at the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-ROK summit in November 2022. Both the ROK and ASEAN agreed on enhancing strategic dialogue to safeguard regional peace and stability against the background of rapid changes in the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific.

The five-year plan of action between ASEAN and the ROK (2021 – 2025) is arguably the most visible testimony to the significance the ROK attaches to ASEAN. The comprehensive plan covers the whole gamut of cooperation through 110 programs under the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, namely political/security, economic and socio-cultural. At the ASEAN Post Ministerial Meeting with the ROK in August 2022, the two sides expressed “good progress” on 71 percent of the implemented areas of cooperation.<sup>38</sup> It is worth mentioning that the ROK is the only ASEAN Plus Three dialogue partner with whom ASEAN conducts a precise evaluation of the action plans.

Park reaffirmed that, together with the five-year ASEAN-ROK action plans, Seoul will broaden a new set of cooperation elements under its Indo-Pacific strategy. This will include efforts to enhance defence cooperation, prioritising capacity building in the two key areas of cyber security and maritime security, but also on counter-terrorism and peacekeeping activities as well as on connectivity and sustainable development. In addition, ROK and ASEAN see eye to eye on enhancing economic security as both are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation. Park also pledged to work closely with participating ASEAN members on developing the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to ensure it serves regional economic growth.

On 11 November 2022, the Yoon administration unveiled the “Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI),” which further outlines the plans to strengthen ties with the bloc. While the Yoon administration’s ASEAN policy shows a degree of continuity with the former Moon administration’s NSP, the KASI – as one of the core elements of Seoul’s new Indo-Pacific strategy – highlights Yoon’s intention to go beyond

the economic focus of the NSP and forge strategic ties with ASEAN. To that end, Seoul pledged to double its annual contribution to the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund. Also, the KASI proposes holding regular strategic dialogues between senior officials from both sides to discuss issues of regional peace and security, regularising the ROK-ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting, expanding Seoul’s support for ASEAN’s capacity-building in the maritime security areas, and bolstering security and defence cooperation between South Korea and ASEAN member states.<sup>39</sup>

### The end of strategic ambiguity?

For many years, South Korea has conducted a foreign policy predicated on a simultaneous pursuit of an alliance with the US *and* a strategic cooperative partnership with China. Numerous administrations in Seoul have followed this strategic line of *anmi kyōng-jung* (security with the US, economy with China). This approach “emphasizes treading a delicate balance between the two great powers, the United States and China, without taking obvious sides.”<sup>40</sup> Such double hedging, it is argued, is the best way to ensure national security, maximise economic benefits, and balance national interests and values.<sup>41</sup> While such an ambivalent approach was successful while relations between the US and China were affable, intensifying strategic rivalry between the two has clearly exposed the vulnerabilities of this policy. With China’s increasing assertiveness and US pressure on China expanding from the area of security to the economy, technology and values, “[a] moment of truth is approaching, and South Korea may have to make an agonizing choice.”<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, despite officially adhering to strategic ambiguity in its foreign policy, the process of closer alignment with the US had already started during the Moon Jae-in government, especially after the Biden

38 Kavi Chongkittavorn, “ROK’s Comprehensive Strategic Partner (CSP) and Impacts on its Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *IFANS Focus*, 14 October 2022, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/> (accessed 22 October 2022).

39 Choe, “The ROK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy under President Yoon” (see note 37).

40 Jagannath Panda and Ahn Choong Yong, “South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Quest for Clarity and Global Leadership,” *The Diplomat*, 16 January 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/south-koreas-indo-pacific-strategy-quest-for-clarity-and-global-leadership/> (accessed 22 January 2023).

41 Moon Chung-in and Lee Sung-won, “South Korea’s Geopolitics: Challenges and Strategic Choices,” *Melbourne Asia Review* (edition 9, 2022, 18 March 2022), <https://melbourne.asiareview.edu.au/south-koreas-geopolitics-challenges-and-strategic-choices/> (accessed 25 July 2022).

42 Ibid.

administration took office in 2021 and actively promoted the 'reshoring' of production to contain China and alleviate supply chain vulnerabilities. As a crucial element of this policy, the US fosters high-tech co-operation with its allies and partners – and South Korea has emerged as a key player in this strategy. However, despite expanding bilateral cooperation, the Moon government was cautious about strengthening cooperation with Washington on its regional strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

In contrast, Yoon Suk Yeol already questioned the policy of strategic ambiguity during his election campaign. Kim Sung-han, an influential foreign and security policy adviser of the Yoon campaign, stated that Seoul needed to replace the deliberately ambiguous policy with one of "strategic clarity," and that "Korea's foreign policy needs to be less ambiguous and more predictable [both in its] dealings with China, and also with North Korea."<sup>43</sup> Strategic ambiguity between the US and China was thus considered as running the risk of losing credibility on both sides. The Yoon administration's strategic clarity therefore places the ROK-US alliance at the core of Seoul's foreign policy.<sup>44</sup>

The closer alignment with the US was on full display with the launch of the IPEF, a US-led, region-wide economic negotiation mechanism to strengthen strategic cooperation among allies and partners to promote and facilitate high-standards trade, govern the digital economy, improve supply-chain resiliency and security, catalyse investment in transparent high-standards infrastructure, and build digital connectivity.<sup>45</sup> The ROK's announcement of joining the US-led IPEF even before its formal launch clearly indicates the Yoon administration's desire to align more closely with the US's economic priorities. At the core of the decision was a push to manage the risk of China's economic coercion.

In addition to IPEF, South Korea also joined the Washington-led semiconductor alliance, known as "Chip 4", despite China putting pressure on South

Korea against the move.<sup>46</sup> For example, in an 18 July 2022 editorial China's daily Global Times warned Seoul that participating in the alliance would do more harm than good for the ROK.

"Once China, the biggest market in the industry, begins to lose trust in the South Korean supply chain in the industry, South Korean semiconductor suppliers' Chinese market share will take an immediate hit."

Domestic critics in South Korea voiced concern that the decisions to join IPEF and the Chip-4 Alliance would further hamper the prospect for peace and prosperity on the Korean peninsula, and that it would ignore the harsh reality of Seoul's economic dependence on China.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, the Yoon administration will find it difficult to structurally change the nature of South Korea's relations with China due to South Korea's considerable economic dependence on Beijing.

### **The Yoon administration's "strategic clarity" does not amount to a strategic decoupling of the ROK from China.**

Hence, for the Yoon administration, strategic clarity does not amount to a strategic decoupling of the ROK from China because Beijing remains an important power that South Korea needs to cooperate with on such issues as trade, climate change, public health and nuclear non-proliferation. Moreover, the Yoon administration, too, acknowledges that the issue of Pyongyang's nuclear program requires co-operation with China. The objective is thus to create a situation in which South Korea-US relations and South Korea-China relations are not a zero-sum game, while gradually reducing dependency on China in strategic sectors. Seoul's new Indo-Pacific strategy is a clear reflection of this trend.

<sup>43</sup> Ahn Sung-mi, "Seoul Should Opt for Strategic Clarity in US-China Rivalry: Yoon's Foreign Policy Aide," *The Korea Herald*, 28 December 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211228000552> (accessed 18 November 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Yoon, "South Korea Needs to Step Up" (see note 28).

<sup>45</sup> Kang Seonjou, "The U.S.-Led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: International Political Economic Implications and Prospects," *IFANS Focus*, 14 July 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Kim Yoo-chul, "Seoul Expected to Join Washington-led 'Chip 4' Alliance," *The Korea Herald*, 18 July 2022, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/common/printpreviews.asp?categoryCode=133&newsIdx=332901> (accessed 25 July 2022).

<sup>47</sup> Lee Seungjoo, "South Korea Ventures into Its Indo-Pacific strategy," *Asia Maritime Index*, 11 July 2022, <https://maritimeindex.org/south-korea-ventures-into-its-indo-pacific-strategy/> (accessed 26 July 2022).



### A focus on values and norms and a greater importance attached to strategic and security issues

South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy underscores the country's commitment to a values-based alignment with like-minded countries in its efforts to undergird regional security and prosperity. The emphasis on the rules-based order and promotion of the rule of law and human rights in its Indo-Pacific strategy represent central tenets of this approach. It is notable that Yoon Suk Yeol, when first introducing the Indo-Pacific strategy in November 2022, specifically emphasised that unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the region could never be accepted. To that end, the SFPPIP aims to help shore up rules-based efforts to prevent conflicts and ensure the principle of peaceful resolutions through dialogue. "Peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region," Yoon stated in opening remarks at the ASEAN summit, "is directly related to our survival and prosperity."<sup>48</sup> To contribute to peace and stability in the region, Yoon vowed to join multilateral regional cooperative initiatives, participate in trilateral security coordination with the US and Japan, and, in conjunction with other democracies in and beyond the Indo-Pacific, "maintain the freedom of navigation and over-flight in the region."<sup>49</sup> With regard to ASEAN, Yoon proposed organising a meeting between the ROK's defence ministers and ASEAN member states and creating joint exercises with the bloc, hinting at South Korea's intention of being one of the security forces in the region to maintain the freedom of navigation.<sup>50</sup> While potential areas for further cooperation with ASEAN in such fields as maritime security exist, the bloc may be cautious if the ROK shifts its focus towards 'minilateral' groupings such as the QUAD

as that would divert attention from ASEAN-led approaches.

### South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Remaining Dilemmas

With South Korea having released its Indo-Pacific strategy, a number of key dilemmas remain.

The first is whether Seoul's policy efforts, pursued in the context of the GPS and the Indo-Pacific strategy, can change perceptions of other states about its role as an active player in the region.<sup>51</sup> While there are ample opportunities to cooperate with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific, the question remains if and how other states are willing to invest in this relationship and to what extent the closer alignment of the ROK's approach to the Indo-Pacific with that of the US will be at the expense of other regional approaches.

Second, while the Yoon administration has advanced its position of strategic clarity and has undertaken tangible steps towards a closer alignment of its emerging regional strategy with that of the US, South Korea's overall geostrategic situation in Northeast Asia remains unchanged. Due to China's geographical proximity and geostrategic importance, especially in terms of Seoul's economic dependence on Beijing, the PRC will remain an omnipresent factor in and a formidable challenge to Seoul's strategic calculus. While the Yoon administration pledged to take a tougher line on China, the country still lacks a comprehensive strategy on how to deal with the country. The fact that the SFPPIP only issues a single and extremely carefully worded paragraph about ROK-PRC relations is a result of Seoul's strategic dilemma. Despite having been directly affected by Chinese punitive measures in 2017, the SFPPIP avoids a direct critique of the PRC as, for example, Canada did in its recently published Indo-Pacific strategy, which called out China as "an increasingly destructive, global power." While mentioning the significance of a peaceful South China Sea and reiterating "the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and for the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific," the strategy document also appeals to China as a "key partner" with which Seoul strives to "nurture a healthier and more mature relationship as we pursue

<sup>48</sup> Shin Hyonhee, "South Korea's Yoon Says Forced Change in Indo-Pacific Is Unacceptable," *Reuters*, 11 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-says-forced-change-indo-pacific-status-quo-cannot-be-accepted-2022-11-11/> (accessed 13 December 2022).

<sup>49</sup> "Yoon Pledges to Normalize Military Drills with U.S., Enhance Deterrence against North," *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 January 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220124006800315?section=national/politics> (accessed 22 August 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Ek Bunly, "Opinion: South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and ASEAN from Cambodian Perspective," *Cambodianess*, 2 December 2022, <https://cambodianess.com/article/opinion-south-koreas-indo-pacific-strategy-and-asean-from-cambodian-perspective> (accessed 3 December 2022).

<sup>51</sup> Yeo, *South Korean Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Era* (see note 31).

shared interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity, guided by international norms and rules.” Whether it will be possible for the Yoon administration to achieve a positive and productive relationship with China based on the principles of inclusion and reciprocity, while at the same time aligning its regional approach more closely with the US and emphasising the importance of the rule of law and liberal international order, will be a major test of the ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy. Moreover, North Korea's increased military capabilities and the prospect of further missile (and eventually nuclear) tests may also have the effect of (re-)diverting its strategic focus to the Korean peninsula, and thus limit Seoul's diplomatic capacity to stay engaged in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Ultimately, South Korea's interests, its vision for the region, and an Indo-Pacific order that supports these will determine the future of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Third, South Korea's domestic political environment will remain an obstacle to the implementation of Yoon's foreign policy. Yoon's approval rating remained well below 30 percent for much of his first year in office, threatening to undermine his positive foreign policy agenda.<sup>52</sup> Although there appears to be broad, bipartisan consensus about boosting South Korea's profile on the global stage and further intensifying cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region, issues central to South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, such as managing inter-Korean relations and improving South Korea-Japan ties, may well require political support from the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) — and, given the conflictual domestic climate, such a support is far from assured.

Fourth, the Yoon government, with the SFPPIP having been released, is now faced with the task of implementing said strategy. While the strategy is topically comprehensive, it does not include elaborated action and implementation plans. As such, necessary next steps will include “(to) finesse the LOEs outlined and to incorporate them into every step of South Korea's foreign policy and diplomatic activities.”<sup>53</sup>

To that end, “the relevant ministries of the ROK government will prepare detailed implementation plans based on this Indo-Pacific Strategy [...]” focusing on the nine LOEs.<sup>54</sup> In addition, policy initiatives for individual sub-regions and specific cooperation initiatives with the ROK's partners will have to be formulated in detail.

52 Karl Friedhoff, “Yoon Scrambles to Restore Domestic Confidence,” *East Asia Forum*, 18 September 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/18/yoons-scrambles-to-restore-domestic-confidence/> (accessed 3 October 2022).

53 Hyun Ji Rim, “The Gist of Seoul's Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (January – February 2023): 109 – 13 (111), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3285722/the-gist-of-seouls-indo-pacific-strategy/> (accessed 8 February 2023).

54 Office of the President, Republic of Korea, *Chayū, p'yonghwa, pōnyōngūi indo-t'aep'yongyang chōllyak* (see note 35).

# Taking Stock: EU-South Korea Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Despite the fact that the EU and South Korea have long prioritised “their immediate neighbourhood in the formulation of foreign policy”<sup>55</sup>, and South Korea aligning its Indo-Pacific strategy first and foremost with the US, both Seoul and Brussels emphasise that cooperation between the two sides is essential for the implementation of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. This goal of intensified mutual cooperation is not least a consequence of overlapping interests regarding the Indo-Pacific, which are expressed by key similarities in their respective strategy papers. Among others, these overlaps relate to the geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific region (as including the Eastern coast of Africa to the Americas) and the inclusive alignment of their respective strategies, which means that neither of them view the isolation of and decoupling from China as desirable or realistic. At the same time, however, both strategies emphasise the need for diversified economic, foreign and security relations. Intensified cooperation with “like-minded” (value) partners to secure the rules-based international order is therefore of particular importance to both strategies. That objective has taken on new urgency, initially during the Trump presidency and subsequently due to the intensifying conflict between the US and China as well as Russia’s war against the Ukraine.

As South Korea seeks to play a greater role beyond the Northeast Asian region, closer cooperation with Europe built on “diplomatic values” is considered crucial:

“To realize our vision for a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, we will heighten substantive

cooperation (value diplomacy partnerships) with the European Union (EU) and its member states including France and Germany, as well as the United Kingdom with whom we share the same core values of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Greater linkages and cooperation between the Indo-Pacific and Europe will not only help preserve and strengthen the rules-based international order but could also open discussions into new areas of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>56</sup>

In addition, “in a nod to the linkages between Asian and European security made impossible to ignore by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the strategy seeks to strengthen cooperation regarding rules of the road and security with NATO [...]”<sup>57</sup> When President Yoon attended the NATO summit in June 2022 as the first South Korean President to do so, he expressed the ROK’s commitment to bolstering its partnership with NATO based on the shared values of democracy and the rule of law, and contributing to safeguarding the rules-based international order. This partnership will be further developed through the recently-established ROK Mission to NATO.

**The EU’s and the ROK’s interest in the Indo-Pacific creates a window of opportunity to further strengthen their strategic partnership.**

In turn, the EU’s Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (SCIP) mentions South Korea no fewer

55 Linde Desmaele et al., *The EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Prospects for Cooperation with South Korea*, KF-VUB Korea Chair Report (30 September 2021), 9, <https://brussels-school.be/publications/other-publications/eus-indo-pacific-strategy-prospects-cooperation-south-korea> (accessed 16 June 2022).

56 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region,” 28 December 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=322133](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133) (accessed 29 December 2023).

57 Patrick M. Cronin, “South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Pivot,” *Korea on Point*, 29 December 2022, <https://koreaponpoint.org/view.php?idx=181> (accessed 11 January 2023).



than 14 times, and Seoul is explicitly mentioned as a cooperation partner in such crucial areas as trade and economic security, green transition, digital governance and partnerships, research and innovation, connectivity, and security and defence. The EU's and the ROK's increased interest in the Indo-Pacific therefore creates a window of opportunity to further strengthen their strategic partnership, as both sides have clearly expressed their interest in deepening mutual cooperation within the framework of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. Building on a solid basis of bilateral cooperation on which existing initiatives can be strengthened and new initiatives can be established, EU-ROK cooperation on the Indo-Pacific provides ample opportunities that not least "stem from a shared and strong commitment to several basic principles of global politics such as a rules-based international order, the role of multilateralism and democracy."<sup>58</sup> Priority areas for cooperation in the realm of the two sides' Indo-Pacific strategies are: economic security, digital partnership, connectivity, and green transition. However, as cooperation on these issue-areas preceded the two sides' respective Indo-Pacific strategies, clearly distinguishing whether their respective initiatives are conducted as part of bilateral EU-ROK cooperation or as specific Indo-Pacific initiatives — or both — remains difficult.

## Trade and Economic Security

In the realm of trade and economic security, the ROK and the EU focus on two points in particular: the EU-ROK FTA and resilient and diversified value chains. The EU is committed to further engagement on open, sustainable and rules-based trade with partners in the Indo-Pacific region, including on building support for the modernisation of the World Trade Organisation. Particular attention is paid to implementing and enforcing the comprehensive trade agreements with Japan, the ROK, Singapore and Vietnam, and the Economic Partnership Agreement with the Pacific States, as well as the EU investment protection agreements with Singapore and Vietnam that are expected to enter into force in the coming years. The EU-ROK FTA is generally viewed positively by both parties and provides substantial benefits for both sides. However, challenges remain in some areas. With the ROK having removed persistent obstacles to imports of EU

animal products in September 2022, the major issue between the two remains the ROK's reluctance to ratify the pending International Labour Organization convention 105 on forced labour.

## Economic Security: Resilient and Diversified Value Chains

Economic security is an issue of crucial importance to both parties and an area in which expanded cooperation between South Korea and the EU is to be expected. Supply chain resilience and joint science and technology projects are two areas of special relevance. The leading position of South Korean firms in sectors such as semiconductors, electric batteries, and green shipping, as well as its focus on 6G, AI, robotics, and space rockets create ample opportunities for cooperation with the EU and its member states. This includes investment by European companies in South Korea, European countries seeking to attract South Korean factories and R&D facilities, and joint R&D projects involving the public and/or private sectors — particularly via the EU's flagship research and innovation project Horizon Europe.<sup>59</sup> One of the EU's priority objectives is to work with its Indo-Pacific partners to reinforce value chains by strengthening and diversifying trade relations, implementing existing trade agreements, finalising ongoing trade negotiations and developing cooperation in strategic sectors, including to address strategic dependencies in supply chains. In regards to semiconductors, for example, South Korea, along with Taiwan and Japan, is explicitly mentioned in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy as one of the countries with which Brussels seeks closer coordination and cooperation. South Korea, on the other hand, also seeks to enhance partnerships with like-minded countries to make semiconductor supply chains more resilient.<sup>60</sup> The European Chips Act, once launched, could also serve to boost economic security links.<sup>61</sup> As such, despite Seoul's closer alignment with US-led initiatives, there is ample room for intensifying cooperation between the EU and the ROK. Thus far,

<sup>58</sup> Desmaele et al., *The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (see note 55).

<sup>59</sup> Ramon Pacheco Pardo, "South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The European Dimension," (Brussels School of Governance, 24 January 2023), <https://csds.vub.be/south-koreas-indo-pacific-strategy-the-european-dimension> (accessed 2 February 2023).

<sup>60</sup> Yeo, "South Korean Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Era" (see note 31).

<sup>61</sup> Pacheco Pardo, "South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy" (see note 59).

however, the commonly shared focus on economic security has not led to a more tangible cooperation on the issue in the context of the two sides' Indo-Pacific strategies aside from rather vague announcements that the two sides have “identified avenues to cooperate closer on economic security, notably on the resilience of supply chains” in their latest Joint Committee meeting.<sup>62</sup>

## Green Transition

EU-South Korea cooperation on environmental matters is enshrined in and promoted by the EU-ROK FTA. In particular, under article 13.5 of the FTA, both parties have committed to cooperating on (trade-related) environmental issues of mutual interest as well as on the development of the international climate change framework. Article 13.6 states that the parties promote trade and foreign direct investment in environmental goods and services, including environmental technologies, sustainable renewable energy, energy efficient products and services and eco-labelled goods as well as promoting trade in goods that contribute to sustainable development. Exchanges on these matters mainly take place at the FTA's Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development.

In recent years, both the EU and the ROK have adopted active measures for low-carbon and sustainable development to deal with climate change. As noted in the Framework Agreement between the EU and the ROK, a common response to fight climate change has constituted a major pillar of cooperation both at the government and non-state actor levels. In an effort to curb climate change, both the ROK (Green New Deal, 2020) and the EU (European Green Deal, 2019) committed to accelerating a low-carbon transition. In this context, the two sides launched the “Green Deal Dialogue”, a specific policy dialogue session held in July and October 2020 on different elements of the respective Green Deals. Seoul and Brussels pledged to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 as a proactive response, and South Korea enhanced

the 2030 Nationally Determined Contribution goal. It also affirmed its strong commitment to cutting methane emissions by joining the Global Methane Pledge launched by the EU and the US.

The ROK and the EU already cooperate on enhancing the emissions trading system and promoting eco-friendly industries. An EU-Korea Climate Action Project was established in 2018, which was aimed at strengthening climate actions in South Korea and the EU. The two sides take advantage of specific dialogue channels such as the “Working Group on Environment, Energy and Climate Change” (WGEECC). Established in 2017 under the Framework Agreement, the working group, which held its first meeting in 2018, provides a

“framework for reflection and concrete cooperation on the transition to clean energy and low carbon and resource-efficient economies [...] with the double aim of generating added value in terms of policy-making and of translating it in practical cooperation activities, including on technological synergies and identification of trade opportunities.”<sup>63</sup>

This working group significantly enhances coordination between the two sides “in view of the urgent need to take ambitious climate action, the clean energy transition, and a more circular economy.”<sup>64</sup> On the agenda are such issues as cooperation on clean energy transition and energy security, progress in domestic implementation of their commitments under the Paris Agreement, and examining new opportunities to scale up their bilateral dialogues on climate change and energy. In addition, the two sides discussed ways to step up cooperation in the areas of circular economy, air pollution, offshore wind energy plans, cooperation in liquefied natural gas and gas markets, energy efficiency, hydrogen energy and negotiations regarding the response to climate change. The 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of the WGEECC in January

<sup>62</sup> Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Korea, “The European Union and the Republic of Korea Advance Their Strategic Partnership at Annual Joint Committee Meeting,” press release, 30 June 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/south-korea/european-union-and-republic-korea-advance-their-strategic-partnership\\_en?s=179](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/south-korea/european-union-and-republic-korea-advance-their-strategic-partnership_en?s=179) (accessed 16 September 2022).

<sup>63</sup> ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Press Release: 1st Meeting of the ROK-EU Specialised Working Group on Energy, Environment, Climate Change”, Seoul, 2 October 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Korea, *Republic of Korea: 5th Working Group on Energy, Environment and Climate Takes Place with the European Union*, 30 January 2023, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/republic-korea-5th-working-group-energy-environment-and-climate-takes-place-european-union\\_en?s=179](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/republic-korea-5th-working-group-energy-environment-and-climate-takes-place-european-union_en?s=179) (accessed 4 February 2023).

2022 discussed the prospects for a further upgrading of bilateral cooperation in the areas covered by the working group.

While debates regarding the establishment of a formal Green Partnership are still at an early stage, the results of the 7<sup>th</sup> ROK-EU Joint Scientific and Technological Cooperation Committee Meeting held in February 2022 suggest an acceleration in both sides' commitment to developing such a partnership. At the 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the annual Joint Committee between the EU and the ROK held on 28 June 2022, they further explored the prospect of establishing an EU-ROK Green Partnership.<sup>65</sup> In late November 2022, the Commission decided on financing for an "EU-Korea Green Partnership Action" to facilitate the operationalisation of the Partnership. The focus activities and expected outcomes reveal the issue-areas on which the Partnership will focus: supporting policy dialogues and practical cooperation on shared policy priorities; strengthening EU/Member State green diplomacy and outreach in South Korea; supporting Korea's just and clean energy transition; enhancing EU-Korea industry cooperation on circular economy approaches; supporting cooperation and exchanges on best practices of green smart city innovations as well as promoting bilateral cooperation on international efforts to fight pollution, protect biodiversity and promote sustainable production, trade and consumption patterns. A Green Partnership could fast-track ongoing cooperation on R&D in areas like clean energy technology, including renewable hydrogen as a priority area. It would also be useful to help align legal and regulatory frameworks for carbon neutrality and green growth, launch joint S&T research projects, conduct joint development of green hydrogen production facilities and technology for new modes of transport for overseas production, and support capacity building and implementation capacity in third countries, focusing particularly on the Indo-Pacific region.

**The area of green transition leaves many opportunities for further cooperation between the ROK and the EU thus far untapped.**

With neither the envisioned high-level dialogue nor the Green Partnership having (yet) been established, the area of green transition leaves many op-

portunities for further cooperation between the ROK and the EU thus far untapped. Given that the two sides already held two policy dialogue sessions on different elements of their respective Green Deals, a regular high-level policy dialogue on climate change and energy seems like a logical next step. This is all the more pressing given that Russia's war against the Ukraine and the resulting global disruptions to the energy market have had dramatic implications for both countries. For example, the EU's taxonomy on energy sources acknowledged nuclear power as a low-carbon energy source, while the Yoon administration plans to increase the target for nuclear power's share to 30 percent of the country's energy mix by 2030, also adding nuclear energy in a revised draft of the Korean Green Taxonomy.<sup>66</sup>

## Digital Governance and Partnerships

At the June 2020 EU-ROK leaders' summit that marked the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strategic partnership, digital matters were at the forefront. European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and then-ROK President Moon Jae-in emphasised the need for enhanced digital cooperation, including establishing a High-Level Dialogue on the digital economy.

On the issue of digital governance and partnerships, the EU's SCIP emphasised that it would seek to formalise partnerships through Digital Partnership Agreements to be negotiated with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. Such agreements, it is hoped, will expand bilateral trade and investment relationships by enhancing cooperation on and interoperability of standards for emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), based on democratic principles and fundamental rights, building more resilient technology supply chains, supporting values-based innovation and facilitating business opportunities for start-ups and SMEs.<sup>67</sup> The partnership agree-

<sup>66</sup> Kim Juhern, "Assessing South Korea's Transition to Net Zero," in *How South Korea Is Honing a Competitive Edge*, ed. Lee Chung Min (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 November 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/22/how-south-korea-is-honing-competitive-edge-pub-88419> (accessed 23 November 2022).

<sup>67</sup> European Commission, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (Brussels, 16 September 2021), [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf) (accessed 23 November 2021).

<sup>65</sup> Delegation of the EU to the ROK, "The European Union and the Republic of Korea" (see note 62).

ments and the subsequent cooperation initiatives aim to both enable deepened cooperation on data governance, trusted flows and data-based innovation and complement ongoing negotiations on e-commerce within the World Trade Organisation on specific issues that are relevant for the facilitation of digital trade. The EU also strives to continue its engagement in the region to promote convergence between data protection regimes to ensure safe and free data flows, both within the region and beyond, including with the EU. This includes actively engaging with key partners to reach an “adequacy finding” where the conditions are met. This has already yielded results, such as the creation of the world’s largest area of free and safe data flows between the EU and Japan in 2019 and the conclusion of adequacy talks with the Republic of Korea in 2021. In December 2021, the European Commission announced that it had adopted its adequacy decision on the ROK, which allows for the free flow of personal data between the EU and South Korea.<sup>68</sup> The effects of this decision are significant, as it confirms the importance both partners attach to furthering individual privacy and online transparency and freedom as digital values. Furthermore, the shared understanding of data protection facilitates the launch of a dialogue on the digital economy. Convergence on data protection therefore paves the way for practical cooperation in the field of R&D, innovation and the e-economy — domains that heavily depend on data. What’s more, the increased data transfer possibilities will provide European and South Korean tech companies with the necessary data to grow and gain commercial leverage against Chinese and US Big Tech companies.<sup>69</sup>

As the EU’s SCIP proposed exploring the launch of negotiations with the ROK (as well as with Japan and Singapore), respective discussions on the establishment of a digital partnership between the ROK and the EU began in earnest in September 2021, when the European Commission proposed a digital partnership to the ROK’s Ministry of Science. Subsequently, both

sides discussed the establishment of a ministerial-level annual consultative body and the formation of various working groups to support it. Digital partnerships are an instrument of the EU to boost digital and cyber cooperation and connectivity with partners in a flexible way and with concrete deliverables in mind, moving beyond dialogue but without the formal obligations and enforcement mechanisms that a trade agreement entails. From the perspective of the EU, digital partnerships are a tool for boosting ties with key partners in a context in which sufficient multi-lateral cooperation in this domain seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. From the perspective of South Korea, digital partnerships offer stronger links with EU economies, potentially boosting bilateral digital trade as well.

With the aim of finalising discussions on a digital partnership agreement by late 2022, the two sides established a ministerial-level annual consultative body for the implementation of cooperation. In addition, through this system, it was decided to proceed with preferential cooperation in 10 areas including AI and semiconductors.<sup>70</sup> On 28 November 2022, the Digital Partnership between the EU and the ROK was officially launched. Key to the partnership are joint R&D and projects in high-tech sectors such as semiconductors, 5G and 6G, cloud computing, data quantum, AI, High-Performance Computing, standard setting in the digital and cyber domains, and cyber security cooperation.

## Connectivity

The issue of connectivity has emerged as a particularly crucial one for both the EU and the ROK. Connectivity is a multi-layered concept, combining aspects of cooperation and geopolitical competition as well as tremendous economic and strategic opportunities and challenges.<sup>71</sup> Essentially, connectivity may be con-

<sup>68</sup> European Commission, *Decision on the Adequate Protection of Personal Data by the Republic of Korea with Annexes* (Brussels, 17 December 2021), [https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/decision-adequate-protection-personal-data-republic-korea-annexes\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/decision-adequate-protection-personal-data-republic-korea-annexes_en) (accessed 23 November 2022).

<sup>69</sup> Brigitte Dekker and Maaike Okano-Heijmans, *EU-Republic of Korea Digital Connectivity: United, We Must Stand* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 27 October 2020), <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-republic-korea-digital-connectivity-unitedwe-must-stand> (accessed 16 June 2022).

<sup>70</sup> Delegation of the EU to the ROK, “The European Union and the Republic of Korea” (see note 62).

<sup>71</sup> Shada Islam, Amanda Rohde, and Rahul Chawla, *Connectivity Needs a Strong Rules-Based Multilateral Framework – For Everyone’s Sake* (Brussels: Friends of Europe, 2019), <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/connectivity-needs-a-strongrules-based-multilateral-framework-for-everyones-sake> (accessed 13 May 2022).

sidered as a way of shaping the “flows of globalisation through strategic investments in infrastructure.”<sup>72</sup>

For the EU, connectivity is primarily about the networks that bring people, places and opportunities closer together, with a particular focus on transport, energy, digital and human-to-human connectivity.<sup>73</sup> In September 2018, the EU published the Joint Communication “Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy” in which South Korea was listed among many other countries with which the “EU should expand the dialogue on sustainable connectivity.”<sup>74</sup> Respective connectivity agreements have since been established with Japan in September 2019, ASEAN in December 2020, and India in May 2021. In the Global Gateway strategy, unveiled by the European Commission on December 1, 2021, South Korea is described as a like-minded partner with which the EU will seek further collaboration on connectivity, along with the US as well as Canada.<sup>75</sup>

While the EU’s SCIP names Japan and India as the EU’s first two “Connectivity Partners”, also pointing to the particular role played by ASEAN as a crucial connectivity partner, the strategy seeks increased collaboration with other regional partners such as the ROK and with international actors such as the US and Canada, both multilaterally (G7/G20) and bilaterally. The strategy also states that the EU will further strengthen relations at the highest technical level through its Transport Dialogues with partners in the region, such as ASEAN, Singapore and Japan, and shortly with the ROK and Australia.

Although a connectivity partnership between the ROK and the EU has not yet been finalised, important intermediate steps towards that end have already been taken. Following the attendance of former Deputy

Minister for Economic Affairs Yun Kang-hyeon of the ROK’s MoFA at the EU-Asia Connectivity Forum held in Brussels in September 2019, the two sides held a first EU-ROK High Level Policy Dialogue on the digital economy in November 2020 and began exploratory exchanges on a potential connectivity partnership.<sup>76</sup> To successfully realise an EU-ROK connectivity partnership it will be essential to develop viable ideas for activities that can create real added value. Among such fields, digital connectivity, connectivity-related aspects of green growth and climate action, as well as cooperation on the multilateral level to support quality, fair and inclusive international infrastructure schemes seem particularly promising.<sup>77</sup> However, it is crucial that any potential connectivity agreement between the EU and the ROK clearly sketches out a path towards its implementation. Given that international connectivity projects are notoriously complex, often involving many partners from several countries, both private and public, sustained and targeted EU-ROK connectivity dialogues on multiple levels will have to be implemented.

A potential EU-ROK Connectivity Agreement would most certainly be based on common values, multilateral commitments, and already existing initiatives and frameworks. In order to ensure successful implementation, such an agreement should focus on certain regions and specific fields of cooperation. “Bilateral cooperation and coordination on the multilateral level to support quality, fair and inclusive international infrastructure schemes would be a substantive contribution to further strengthening an orderly framework for concrete projects on the level of G7, G20, OECD or elsewhere.”<sup>78</sup>

Because both the ROK and the EU, at least so far, do not have sizable international connectivity budgets, it is important that joint efforts are linked up with the respective budgets’ existing aims and focus. On that basis, two fields stand out for further engagement: digital connectivity and green- or climate-related cooperation. Incidentally, digital and green cooperation

<sup>72</sup> Grzegorz Stec and Jakub Jakóbowski, *Geopolitics of Connectivity Competition – The Curious Case of Central and Eastern Europe* (24 September 2020), <https://www.grzegorzstec.com/podcasts/jakub-jakobowski-geopolitics-of-connectivity-competition-in-central-and-eastern-europe-cee> (accessed 27 July 2022).

<sup>73</sup> European Commission, *Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy* (Brussels, 19 September 2018), 7, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_connecting\\_europe\\_and\\_asia\\_-\\_building\\_blocks\\_for\\_an\\_eu\\_strategy\\_2018-09-19.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf) (accessed 7 July 2022).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> European Commission, *The Global Gateway* (Brussels, 1 December 2021), [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_global\\_gateway.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/joint_communication_global_gateway.pdf) (accessed 7 July 2022).

<sup>76</sup> European Parliament, *Report on Connectivity and EU-Asia Relations* (Brussels, 17 December 2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0269\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0269_EN.html) (accessed 28 February 2023).

<sup>77</sup> Werner Pascha, “The Republic of Korea’s New Northern Policy and New Southern Policy in the Context of International Connectivity Initiatives: Between Hedging and Alignment,” *Korea Europe Review* 1, no. 1 (December 2021): 1–20 (15).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 15.



were also a focal point of interest in the bilateral talks between President Moon Jae-in and EU Commission President von der Leyen during the 2021 G7 meeting.

In terms of digitalisation, the ROK has created a major policy initiative — the Digital New Deal — in such fields as 5G, big data, and AI. As for the EU, the new Commission announced a vision for Europe's digital transformation by 2030 ("Digital Decade") as one of its key projects in late 2019. High-level discussions will be necessary to identify viable projects. A first EU-ROK High Level Policy Dialogue on the digital economy actually took place in November 2020, and this dialogue forum could become an important component of a wider bilateral connectivity agreement. During their consultations, the two parties emphasised "a common vision for 6G and for connectivity in data infrastructures."<sup>79</sup> Other possible fields of cooperation for a more intensive digital cooperation, according to the recent literature, include the commercialisation of innovation and digital official development assistance.<sup>80</sup>

An example of EU-ROK connectivity cooperation in action was the establishment of a consortium in September 2022 composed of South Korean and European firms that was awarded an \$11 billion airport project in the Philippines — a project that was previously granted to a Chinese state-owned firm.<sup>81</sup>

## Security and Defence

Security and defence cooperation, while having successively increased in the context of the two sides' strategic partnership in such areas as non-proliferation and disarmament, cyber security, and preventive diplomacy and crisis management, is arguably among those areas in which coordination in the context of the two sides' Indo-Pacific strategies is least advanced. However, judging from their respective Indo-Pacific

strategies, it seems that cooperation in the field of maritime security merits particular attention. Both South Korea and European countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK want to expand their presence in the waters of the Indo-Pacific region, including through cooperation and joint activities with "like-minded" partners.

In fact, the EU has already begun to increase its presence in the Indo-Pacific, reflected, among others, by the deployment of the German frigate *Bayern* in the Indo-Pacific from August 2021 to February 2022, also making a port call in Busan in December 2021. A heavy-transport aircraft from the German Luftwaffe also visited South Korea in September 2022.

"The political signaling accompanying these visits showed that German and Korean Indo-Pacific policies aim at mitigating the instability caused by the intensifying Sino-US contest for primacy in the region. Both governments also seek to counter China's attempts at (re)shaping the norms and institutions of the international order."<sup>82</sup>

Thus, we should expect a growing number of joint naval exercises together with the navies of the US, Australia, Canada, or Japan; table top exercises; port calls by European navies in Busan or Incheon; and capacity building with countries in Southeast and South Asia.

Moreover, the EU and the ROK have been holding annual consultations on security and defence since 2017. Among others, the discussions encompass general exchanges on regional and global security issues, maritime security issues such as the situation in the Gulf of Guinea where the EU has launched a pilot project for its Coordinated Maritime Presences Concept, and more recently including the security and defence aspects of the EU's SCIP, too. At the 2021 ROK-EU consultation on security and defence, the two sides agreed to enhance their cooperation and share experience on maritime security and on crisis management through joint initiatives under the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA)

<sup>79</sup> Roberto Viola and Jang Seok Young, "EU-Republic of Korea High Level Policy Dialogue," *Blog post*, 4 December 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/blogposts/eu-republic-korea-high-level-policy-dialogue> (accessed 12 February 2022).

<sup>80</sup> Dekker and Okano-Heijmans, *EU-Republic of Korea Digital Connectivity* (see note 69).

<sup>81</sup> Aldgra Fredly, "Europe, South Korea-Backed Consortium Wins Philippines Airport Project Formerly Pursued by China," *The Epoch Times*, 19 September 2022, [https://www.theepochtimes.com/europe-south-korea-backed-consortium-wins-philippines-airport-project-formerly-pursued-by-china\\_4739037.html?welcomeuser=1](https://www.theepochtimes.com/europe-south-korea-backed-consortium-wins-philippines-airport-project-formerly-pursued-by-china_4739037.html?welcomeuser=1) (accessed 13 October 2022).

<sup>82</sup> Patrick Köllner, Johannes Plagemann, and Christian Wirth, *Towards Closer European Union and German Cooperation with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific*, GIGA Focus Asia, no. 5 (Hamburg, November 2022), <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/towards-closer-european-union-and-german-cooperation-with-south-korea-in-the-indo-pacific> (accessed 30 November 2022).

project. ESIWA was launched in 2020, with South Korea, along with India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and Vietnam, being among the six pilot countries for the implementation of the project. ESIWA seeks to enhance security-related cooperation with the countries in four priority areas: counter-terrorism, cyber security, maritime security, and crisis management. While ESIWA provides an important platform to strengthen the EU's security dialogue with its Indo-Pacific partners, it has not reached its full potential and is not often mentioned by partner countries as a tangible future opportunity. In fact, the project reflects a broader challenge for intensifying security cooperation between the ROK and the EU. As aptly noted by Jun and Reiterer, while the two sides have shared values in international relations and agree in principle on a wide range of security issues, "[s]ecurity cooperation by dialogue instead of concrete actions signals a limitation."<sup>83</sup> In fact, this problem is noted by the EU itself. After all, one of the self-proclaimed objectives of ESIWA is to help make the EU's security engagement "more concrete and operational to increase [the EU's] value as a trusted security partner in Asia" and to support "the EU's Security and Defence Dialogues with pilot countries in Asia through *practical* cooperation."<sup>84</sup> It aims to extend and complement what the EU already realises through ongoing political action.

Against this background, the EU-ROK Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), the first of the EU with an Asian country, certainly was a crucial step forward. The Agreement, which entered into force in December 2016, offers the ROK the possibility of participating in EU missions. In March 2017, the first act of implementing the FPA took place when the ROK warship *Choi Young* joined the EU Naval Force Somalia (Operation Atalanta) to deter, prevent and repress acts of piracy and armed robbery in the Horn of Africa. While the FPA was a significant step towards a more practical and operational form of security cooperation between the EU and the ROK, the two parties now have to "find common interests and develop a practical approach to implement the

agreement" — as the FPA is to be implemented by a mostly voluntary initiative from both parties and pursues 'selective' cooperation.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the prompt implementation of the FPA in military crisis management activities, the EU and South Korea have not yet cooperated in any civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission.<sup>86</sup>

Cybersecurity is another area of ROK-EU cooperation. With South Korea and the EU having signed their Digital Partnership in November 2022 and Seoul boosting ties in the cyber domain with countries such as the Netherlands, cybersecurity is an area ripe for stronger cooperation. The NATO dimension could become particularly relevant here. In 2022, Seoul joined NATO's Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence and the Yoon government's Indo-Pacific strategy highlights the importance that Seoul ascribes to its ties to NATO. Information and intelligence sharing, joint tabletop exercises, and capacity building in the Indo-Pacific are some of the areas in which we should expect Seoul and its European counterparts to work together more closely.

Lastly, defence cooperation will most likely become another area of importance in ROK-EU relations. South Korea is already racking up multibillion-dollar defence deals in Europe as Seoul pushes to become a bigger player in international weapons sales. The contracts for tanks, fighter planes and rocket launchers come as European capitals look to restock after months of sending their own equipment to Ukraine. And Eastern Europe, which normally turns to the US for new weapons, is increasingly considering buying from South Korea instead, which says it can deliver them faster and cheaper. Aside from the US\$ 5.8 billion contract Poland signed with two South Korean companies in July 2022, Estonia as well as Norway are also turning to Seoul to restock their weaponry. As South Korea allows the purchasing countries' local defence firms to take part in manufacturing, this will naturally lead to closer coordination in this area. Yet as South Korea competes with the US for contracts around the globe, as well as with others including France, it remains to be seen if Europe's turn to South Korea will bring the EU and the ROK closer together or if it will be a source of friction.

<sup>83</sup> Jun Hae-Won and Michael Reiterer, "Preventive Diplomacy and Crisis Management in EU-Korea security Relations," in *EU-Korea Security Relations*, ed. Nicola Casarini (New York: Routledge, 2021), 98–119.

<sup>84</sup> GIZ, *Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia*, Project description, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/87412.html> (accessed 12 June 2022).

<sup>85</sup> Jun and Reiterer, "Preventive Diplomacy and Crisis Management in EU-Korea Security Relations" (see note 83).

<sup>86</sup> Jun Hae-Won, "EU-Korea in Crisis Management," in *The Routledge Handbook of Europe-Korea Relations*, ed. Nicola Casarini et al. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 408–22 (416).

# Conclusions and Recommendations

South Korea already is an indispensable partner of the EU in the Indo-Pacific. Tellingly, the EU's SCIP mentions the ROK no fewer than 14 times – more often, indeed, than other middle powers such as Australia and Indonesia.<sup>87</sup> Seoul is explicitly declared as a cooperation partner in most of the EU's priority areas for cooperation, i.e. trade and economic security, green transition, digital governance and partnerships, research and innovation, connectivity, as well as security and defence. As such, South Korea is in many ways a particularly suitable partner for the EU when it comes to advancing its interests in the Indo-Pacific.

First, South Korea – together with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and Taiwan – is one of the few liberal democracies in this strategic geographic space. Especially as the EU seeks to strengthen its value-based partnerships and works towards upholding a rules-based Indo-Pacific, the significance of South Korea, which shares this view with Brussels, will most likely increase further.

Second, targeted cooperation in the context of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies builds upon a solid base of cooperation in EU-ROK relations that developed over the last decades. In 2010, the EU and the ROK upgraded their relationship to strategic partnership, which is now governed by three key agreements: a Political Framework Agreement, an FTA, and a Framework Participation Agreement. As mentioned, South Korea is the only country with which the EU has all of these three agreements in place.

Third, South Korea's strategic significance to the EU will, in all likelihood, increase further in the future. The ROK, according to data from the World Bank, represented the tenth-largest national economy in 2021. In the Indo-Pacific (excluding the US), only

China, India, and Japan boast larger economies. Specifically, South Korea's business conglomerates (*chaebŏl*) are at the forefront of a number of global industries, manufacturing high-tech goods such as semiconductors and batteries for electric vehicles. The country's assets in this regard make South Korea a critical partner for the EU's quest to build more resilient supply chains.

Fourth, South Korea's and the EU's respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific share many commonalities and overlaps, for example on the need to diversify foreign and especially foreign-economic relations away from an over-dependence on China – and consequently to strengthen relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Fifth, South Korea's geopolitical and geographical position along the fault lines of regional and international politics, including through its multifaceted relations with China, make South Korea a particularly interesting dialogue partner on matters of regional security. While economic cooperation with South Korea is at the heart of EU-ROK relations, it is important to acknowledge the increasing cooperation between the EU and South Korea in terms of security in the past decade. The ROK is one of the EU's priority partners in Asia for enhanced security cooperation, and both sides are working more closely on issues such as non-proliferation and disarmament, preventive diplomacy and crisis management (operations), maritime security, cyber security, space policy and technology, and the fight against terrorism.

Despite this, however, tangible obstacles and challenges to deeper cooperation exist and, in some issue-areas, cooperation between the two sides falls short of expectations. Overcoming these challenges and exploiting the full potential of EU-ROK cooperation in light of their respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific requires distinct actions.

<sup>87</sup> Köllner, Plagemann, and Wirth, *Towards Closer European Union and German Cooperation with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific* (see note 82).



## (I) Better Coordination of the Indo-Pacific Strategies of the EU and the ROK

The Moon administration's NSP was a largely independent, and comparatively narrowly focused policy that was not thoroughly coordinated with the more comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategies of Australia, France, Germany, India, Japan, and ASEAN nations. While Washington sought to “align [South Korea's] New Southern Policy and the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific”,<sup>88</sup> coordination between Seoul's NSP Plus and the US' FOIP strategy certainly wasn't comprehensive. Individual coordination measures such as the 2020 bilateral US-ROK fact sheet and the 2021 joint statement remained vague and in many ways did in fact reflect the differences between the two sides' respective approaches to the region, especially on security issues.<sup>89</sup> At Seoul's request, both documents avoided criticising Beijing for its human rights violations and threats to regional sovereign territorial integrity.<sup>90</sup> While Seoul committed to “maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific” in the US-ROK joint statement, it did so without further explaining how to achieve this objective and without a broader strategic vision for South Korea's role in the region. In contrast, the Yoon administration adopted a more proactive role in coordinating its Indo-Pacific strategy with that of other actors, most notably the US. Despite this closer alignment with the US, however, the Yoon administration's approach to the region also provides an opportunity – and in fact the pressing need – for a closer coordination of the Indo-Pacific strategies of the EU and the ROK.

Discussions on the Indo-Pacific between Brussels and Seoul are held in the context of various existing dialogue structures such as the annual Joint Committee meetings, various economic communication channels, and the consultations on security and defence. For instance, during the 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Joint Committee between the ROK and the EU in January

2020 the two sides already “exchanged views on ways to step up cooperation between respective regional strategies, namely, the ROK's *New Southern Policy* and *New Northern Policy* and the EU-Asia Connectivity strategy.”<sup>91</sup> However, aside from the Indo-Pacific being a recurring topic in policy discussions, no deeper coordination, let alone strategic cooperation, occurred between the two sides. The Yoon administration expressed great interest in coordinating its Indo-Pacific strategy more closely with other regional and extra-regional actors, and described the EU as an important partner in this regard.<sup>92</sup> During the latest meeting of the Joint Committee in June 2022, the EU and the ROK “explored commonalities between their respective Indo-Pacific strategic approaches and agreed to cooperate in their implementation.”<sup>93</sup> The current situation in fact creates a window of opportunity for increasing EU-ROK coordination on the Indo-Pacific.

In order to streamline bilateral discussions on the Indo-Pacific, a permanent consultative body should be established between the two sides. This body could, for instance, be structured as a working group of the Joint Committee, comparable to the existing working groups on energy, climate change, and environment as well as counterterrorism. Going forward, establishing a permanent consultation mechanism between the EU and the ROK focused solely on the two sides' cooperation in and on the Indo-Pacific would also serve to alleviate one of the key challenges for ROK-EU cooperation in the context of the two sides' Indo-Pacific strategies, i.e. identifying opportunities for (practical) cooperation, assessing the impacts of that cooperation, and discussing implementation challenges related to cooperation in the context of their Indo-Pacific strategies, among others. The consultation mechanism should be tasked with, for example: evaluating ongoing cooperation initiatives in the region, identifying the potential for novel cooperation initiatives but also implementation chal-

<sup>88</sup> The White House, “U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement,” 21 May 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/> (accessed 2 October 2022).

<sup>89</sup> Bruce Klingner, *South Korea Needs to Embrace a More Expansive Role in Asia*, Backgrounder no. 3728 (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 12 October 2022), 10, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/south-korea-needs-embrace-more-expansive-role-asia> (accessed 22 October 2022).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “16th ROK-EU Joint Committee Meeting Takes Place,” press release (Seoul, 22 January 2020), <https://bit.ly/3ZVp5io16thMeeting> (accessed 16 March 2023).

<sup>92</sup> Interview with an official of the ROK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Seoul, 29 August 2022.

<sup>93</sup> European Union External Action Service, “The European Union and the Republic of Korea Advance Their Strategic Partnership at Annual Joint Committee Meeting” (Brussels, 28 June 2022), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-and-republic-korea-advance-their-strategic-partnership-annual-joint-committee\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-and-republic-korea-advance-their-strategic-partnership-annual-joint-committee_en) (accessed 22 July 2022).

allenges, and explicating how to manage the overlaps between the different initiatives. Assessing the policy impacts of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy would require an examination of different factors, e.g. whether the outcome would not have happened in the absence of the new strategy.

In order to better coordinate their respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific, the two sides should also begin working towards the publication of a "Joint Factsheet" that clearly identifies the most promising areas of cooperation, and which promotes further cooperation between their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. As South Korea has done with the US through specific Memoranda of Understanding, Seoul and Brussels could agree to coordinate regional projects in areas such as infrastructure development, digital transformation and connectivity, fair and sustainable trade, economic security, cyber, and people-to-people exchanges. In so doing, however, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy must clearly identify the added value for its core partners in the region.

## **(II) Create a Landmark EU-ROK Cooperation Project on the Indo-Pacific**

In order to boost cooperation in the context of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, the two sides should consider establishing a landmark cooperation project. A successfully implemented landmark project not only has the potential to boost cooperation in other areas, but could also enhance the appeal of the ROK's and the EU's narratives on the Indo-Pacific while sending a clear signal to other actors that both parties are serious about their engagement in the region. Preferably, such a landmark project would be situated in an issue-area which is of immediate significance to both parties, where a certain level of cooperation has already been established and to which both can make a valuable contribution. A multi-faceted landmark project could, for example, be situated in the realm of economic security, covering aspects of cyber security, supply chains, and economic resilience, among others. It could entail both targeted high-level dialogues, Track 1.5 dialogues and expert dialogues, as well as practical initiatives. For instance, respective initiatives could entail the sharing of cyber threat intelligence both on the classified and unclassified level and conducting joint cyber exercises between both the central governmental agencies and ministries and the critical infrastructure companies.

## **(III) Strengthen Cooperation on Security Issues in the Indo-Pacific**

While security cooperation between Seoul and Brussels significantly increased in the previous decade, in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies both sides focus primarily on NTS without engaging directly in hard security issues. Yet, Russia's invasion in Ukraine and China's growing assertiveness, especially regarding Taiwan, has accelerated the need for both the EU and the ROK to take action on global security and defence policy. In fact, the geopolitical shifts have removed, or raised the importance of removing, several of the barriers that have thus far restricted progress on deeper EU-ROK security cooperation and may have hampered increased security cooperation in the past, e.g. different security situations in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region, different strategic priorities and different strategic cultures between the EU and the ROK, but also the lack of a coherent strategic culture among EU member states.<sup>94</sup> Given the ever-greater importance for both Seoul and Brussels of diversifying foreign, economic and security relations, and especially given the increasing importance both sides give to enhanced partnerships with value partners in a time of global disruptions, the Indo-Pacific provides the opportunity (and necessity) for both sides to finally position themselves in — and more actively contribute to the diffusion of — the major conflicts in the region. However, while the EU and South Korea concur on critical issues of international and regional security, coordination and cooperation on strategic matters has yet to reach its full potential. In a first step, this requires a better, and more high-level coordination mechanism on security and defence issues. The existing annual consultations on security and defence are not sufficient to manage cooperation on the manifold issues facing both sides in the region and beyond.

<sup>94</sup> Köllner, Plagemann, and Wirth, *Towards Closer European Union and German Cooperation with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific* (see note 82).

## Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AOIP	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
ESIWA	Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia
EU	European Union
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FPA	Framework Participation Agreement
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GPS	Global Pivotal State
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework
KASI	Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative
LOE	Lines of Effort
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NSP	New Southern Policy
NSP Plus	New Southern Policy Plus
NTS	Non-Traditional Security
PRC	People's Republic of China
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
ROK	Republic of Korea
SCIP	Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific
SFPPIP	Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region
SMEs	Small & Medium-Sized Enterprises
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defence
US	United States
WGEECC	Working Group on Environment, Energy and Climate Change



