



## SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN CHANGING TIMES: REVERSING COURSE?

*Sang-yoon Ma*

The tragedy currently unfolding in Ukraine may be a symptom of new dynamics in global geopolitics. The changing balance of power epitomized by the rise of China and the shrinking American interest and resolve in asserting its traditional global role has emboldened Putin's ambition to restore the past glory of the Russian empire. The same dynamics have also made geopolitics acuter in East Asia, from which South Korea can never be free. The COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 has only accelerated the competitive nature of international power dynamics.

Faced with the broader shift in world order, how will South Korea's foreign policy under the new government unfold? This policy brief attempts to explain the main objectives of the incoming government's foreign policy and how these might be implemented. In so doing, it evaluates the new government's view of the past five years of South Korean foreign policy under outgoing President Moon Jae-in – a policy which it seeks in part to reverse.

### Changing Times

We are living in a time of great uncertainty. Many practices and norms in international affairs prevalent since the end of the Cold War are no longer certain at all. The notion that countries benefit from free trade, for instance, is being increasingly replaced by rising protectionism and tariff wars.

The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has shocked

the world, marking the end of the post-Cold War era. Russia's use of brute force in an attempt to bring a sovereign nation to its knees and acquire territory violates the widely accepted international norm of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Such a war has not been seen for at least three decades. Most conflicts in the post-Cold War era have been internal (un)civil wars in nature rather than frontal military attacks of one nation by another.

The Russian invasion also causes serious disruptions in the global supply chain that has already been strained because of the COVID-19 pandemic and fallouts from the deepening Sino-US competition. The shortage of oil and gas supplies, for example, has raised energy prices, threatening economic stability in major economies. Food crises in less-developed economies are also expected because Russian wheat and Ukrainian corn are no longer in supply.

The tragedy currently unfolding in Ukraine may be a symptom of new dynamics in global geopolitics. The changing balance of power epitomized by the rise of China and the shrinking American interest and resolve in asserting its traditional global role has emboldened Putin's ambition to restore the past glory of the Russian empire. The same dynamics have also made geopolitics acuter in East Asia, from which South Korea can never be free. The COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 has only accelerated the competitive nature of international power dynamics.

***“At the same time, the aspiration to become a global pivotal state may also be seen as a reaction to the Moon Jae-in government’s foreign policy.”***

Against this changing and fluid international backdrop, South Koreans voted in the presidential election on March 9 this year. The result was a victory for the opposition candidate of the conservative People Power Party, Mr. Yoon Suk-yeol, over the governing Democratic Party's candidate, Mr. Lee Jae Myeong, a former governor of Gyeonggi Province. However, the margin of victory was razor-thin, raising concern over the new government's effective control of the government. In addition to the lack of broad popular support for the president-elect Yoon, the Democratic Party maintains a dominant majority in the National Assembly.

Faced with the broader shift in world order, how

will South Korea's foreign policy under the new government unfold? This policy brief attempts to explain the main objectives of the incoming government's foreign policy and how these might be implemented. In so doing, it evaluates the new government's view of the past five years of South Korean foreign policy under outgoing President Moon Jae-in – a policy which it seeks in part to reverse.

### **Towards a “Global Pivotal State”**

During the campaign, Mr. Yoon and his foreign policy team indicated their aspiration to elevate the country to a “global pivotal state (글로벌 중추국가).” According to a piece contributed to Foreign Affairs magazine under Yoon's name, they believe that South Korea should rise to be an “even more responsible and respected member of the international community” that “advances freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values and substantial cooperation.”

This seems to equate to a revival of “global Korea,” the catchword of the previous Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2012). Because many of the key figures expected to lead the new government's foreign policy worked for the Lee government, it is unsurprising that their worldview and Korea's place in it should feature prominently. All three senior members of the Transition Committee's foreign policy division are former senior officials of the Lee government.

At the same time, the aspiration to become a global pivotal state may also be seen as a reaction to the Moon Jae-in government's foreign policy. People around the president-elect have a critical view of the previous government's legacy: namely, that it was too narrowly focused on improving ties with North Korea.

For instance, according to this view, the Moon government wrongly avoided co-sponsoring the UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning North Korea's human rights violations for the fourth consecutive. Furthermore, the government was at fault for failing to join international efforts to

put pressure on China for human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, fearing China's refusal to assist in promoting dialogue with North Korea.

With this criticism in mind, President-elect Yoon and his foreign policy team are likely to pursue a brand of "value diplomacy," emphasizing South Korea's role in promoting liberal values and democracy.

## How to Meet the North Korean Challenge

The Moon government almost single-mindedly pursued the so-called Korean peninsula peace process in efforts to engage Pyongyang. Diplomacy appeared to be proceeding well when two inter-Korean summits and another two U.S.-DPRK summits were held between April 2018 and February 2019. The first-ever summit between the leaders of the US and DPRK in Singapore was full of symbolism as Donald Trump, and Kim Jong Un shook hands in front of their respective national flags, even raising the prospect (however faint) of a new age in which deep-held enmities would make way for peaceful and cooperative relationships.

Yet, the resulting Singapore declaration was void of real substance beyond the reconfirmation of four rather abstract principles. When the two leaders met again in Hanoi, Vietnam, in February 2019 to broker a deal, they failed to narrow down the big gap between their expectations. Kim demanded the lifting of most UN Security Council sanctions while offering dismantlement of the Yongbyon nuclear complex. As Trump wanted more than Yongbyon, however, the summit broke down.

After the failure of the Hanoi summit, North Korea refused to return to the dialogue table with either South Korea or the United States. A US-DPRK meeting in Stockholm in October 2019 was a partial exception. Even in it, North Korea was not serious about negotiating and unilaterally declared a failure of the talk. The Moon government tried to continually restart dialogue by offering humanitarian assistance to North Korea. In particular, it tried to take advantage of the apparent spread of COVID-19 in North Korea as an opportunity to engage it by

offering vaccines and other medical supplies. Pyongyang cold-shouldered these offers.

The Moon government also proposed an infrastructure project to connect railways between the North and the South. However, such a project required sanction exemptions, and Washington was not willing to agree on measures that would potentially weaken the sanctions regime on North Korea unless the country took corresponding steps towards denuclearization.

In addition, until recently, the Moon government pursued the idea of an "end of war declaration" to create a favorable political environment whereby North Korea would find it easier to return to dialogue. This effort, however, failed to achieve any meaningful improvement in inter-Korean and U.S.-DPRK relations. On the contrary, North Korea recently broke its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests by firing an ICBM-level rocket on March 24.

***“Yet, the resulting Singapore declaration was void of real substance beyond the reconfirmation of four rather abstract principles.”***

It would appear that the incoming Yoon government will shift North Korea policy back to a rather hardline approach. Yoon's foreign policy advisors doubt Pyongyang's commitment to denuclearization. On the contrary, they consider that its intentions are to weaken the ROK-US alliance and remove the American military presence in South Korea. They believe that by completing its ICBM capability of delivering nuclear warheads to North America, Pyongyang intends to start nuclear disarmament negotiations with the United States, excluding South Korea.

In this vein, Yoon's foreign policy team emphasizes deterrence and reciprocity. It wants to strengthen nuclear deterrence by raising the credibility of American commitment to provide a nuclear

umbrella. Given North Korea's possession of several dozen weaponized nuclear warheads, South Korea cannot safeguard its security without such deterrence. By reciprocity, it means that the new government would pursue economic cooperation with Pyongyang only in proportion to advancement in North Korea's denuclearization.

The Yoon government does not exclude dialogue. The designation of Mr. Kwon Young Se, an influential lawmaker and the Vice-Chairman of the Transition Committee, as the candidate for Minister of National Unification indicates the president-elect's interest in improving inter-Korean relations. Mr. Kwon is known for his belief that Korea should learn lessons from West Germany's Ostpolitik towards the Eastern bloc during the Cold War.

***“The Moon government's obsession with engagement policy toward North Korea and a “subservient attitude towards China” estranged itself from the United States.”***

However, it is unclear how the new government would jumpstart talks with North Korea. It is highly likely that Pyongyang will return to a pattern of provocations to accelerate its nuclear weapon development and so as to increase its leverage vis-à-vis Washington and Seoul. If Pyongyang continues to refuse to return to the negotiation table, there is scarcely any good option the South Korean government has at its disposal. The unification ministry has put forward the idea to the Transition Committee of pursuing inter-Korean cooperation in environmental affairs such as combating climate change and fine dust pollution. It remains to be seen if such initiatives can materialize.

### **Restoring Alliance Confidence**

During the campaign, Yoon emphasized the goal of

“rebuilding” and “strengthening” the comprehensive strategic alliance with the United States. Such a goal presupposes that the ROK-US alliance was weakened under the Moon government; this despite the Moon-Biden summit in May 2021 concluding a vision to develop a comprehensive alliance. Yoon and his foreign policy team argue that the Moon government's obsession with engagement policy toward North Korea and a “subservient attitude towards China” estranged itself from the United States.

There are a number of wide-ranging alliance-related issues, of which some are specific and others strategic. First, given the urgent necessity to enhance the credibility of the American provision of extended deterrence, the new government will likely try to revive the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) formed in 2016. The group had two meetings among high-level foreign and defense affairs officials of the two countries but has been almost dormant since 2018.

Second, the Yoon government will also seek to restore ROK-U.S. joint military exercises. In the past few years, the joint exercises were conducted only as tabletop exercises based on computer simulation, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and also because the Moon government wanted to avoid irritating North Korea.

Third, the Yoon government will try to consolidate the American THAAD base in Seongju. Although the THAAD anti-missile system was deployed in 2016, the base still has only temporary status because the evaluation of its environmental impacts, a legal requirement, has been long-delayed until now.

Fourth, the new foreign policy team will seek cooperation with the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Despite its initial reluctance, the Moon government began exploring coordination of its New Southern Policy with the US Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in the field of infrastructure and development projects in Southeast Asia. When it comes to the question of responding to China's strategic challenge, however, the Moon government erred on the side of ambiguity.

The new foreign policy team has indicated that it would double down on development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Arguing for strategic clarity, it has also advocated for an expansion of regional security cooperation, although the specifics are not publicly known. A related issue is that of Quad, a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. President-elect Yoon and his advisors have suggested South Korea should seek practical cooperation with the Quad working groups on vaccines, climate change, and emerging technologies and consider joining the Quad only at a later time.

Last but not least, the Yoon government would seek to cooperate closely with the United States with regard to emerging technologies and economic security matters. Because technological innovation in an era of the so-called 4th industrial revolution lies at the heart of economic security, access to US-led science and technology innovation is essential in order to maintain South Korea's technological advancement and economic vitality.

On the other hand, given the importance of China in South Korea's trade relations, the US drive to reorganize the global supply chain, and especially the US push to decouple China from the supply chain could cause short-to-medium term disruptions to the Korean economy. For instance, given South Korea's heavy reliance on China's rare-earth materials, abrupt changes in the supply chain could damage its own semi-conductor and battery manufacturing industries.

### **Cooperation with China and Japan in Question**

President-elect Yoon and his advisors want to reestablish South Korea's relationship with China on an equal footing and based on mutual respect. They have been critical of what they see as China's overbearing manner and the Moon government's submissive attitude. A case in point was the Moon government's response to China's retaliation to the THAAD anti-missile system. Known as the "Three Nos," in October 2017, the South Korean government promised China no additional THAAD

deployments, no participation in the US's missile defense network, and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan. In Korean conservative circles, such promises were criticized as China's issuing of undue demands and South Korea's relinquishing of its sovereign rights.

During his election campaign, Mr. Yoon argued for the acquisition of the THAAD system to protect the country from the growing North Korean missile threat. The proposed additional THAAD system was meant to be operated by the ROK military. Still, the additional introduction of THAAD batteries to South Korea remains an extremely sensitive issue for China, which is suspicious that, theoretically, the THAAD system on South Korean soil could assist the US military in monitoring Chinese missile activities. In early April, China's ambassador to Seoul stated that: "THAAD has become a taboo word in China-South Korea relations."

***“In the global context of deepening U.S-China strategic competition, however, South Korea's room for maneuver is shrinking fast.”***

In contradiction to the commonly held view that President-elect Yoon is anti-Chinese, Yoon's foreign policy team has repeatedly signaled that the new government would pursue practical cooperation with China. In the global context of deepening U.S-China strategic competition, however, South Korea's room for maneuver is shrinking fast. China admits South Korea's alliance with the United States as a given fact. However, if the new government moves closer to the United States clumsily and hastily, practical cooperation with China will be restrained.

The relationship with Japan is another thorny issue. The new Korean government will have to find a way out of the current stalemate in its bilateral relationship with Japan at the earliest possible time.

The first summit between Yoon and Biden may be held right before President Biden's visit to Tokyo to attend a Quad summit in late May. In the Yoon-Biden meeting, bilateral (Korea-Japan) and trilateral (Korea-U.S.-Japan) cooperation may well be top of the priority agenda, with the Biden administration eager to see better relations between South Korea and Japan.

President-elect Yoon himself is optimistic about South Korea-Japan relations. In a recent interview with the Washington Post, he stated, "When I am president, South Korea-Japan relations will go well. I am sure of it." He also acknowledges the importance of future-oriented cooperation with Japan in times of great uncertainty. Fortunately, Japan's new prime minister, Kishida Fumio, is more moderate in his stance towards South Korea than his immediate predecessors have been, including the still politically influential Abe Shinzo in particular.

***If the current trend of US-China strategic competition continues to deepen, South Korea will have no real choice but to move closer to its ally."***

In both South Korea and Japan, however, domestic public opinion vis-a-vis each other has continuously deteriorated for a decade or so, not least over contentious historical legacies. Before the leaders of the two governments agree to improve bilateral ties and promote future-oriented cooperation, domestic public support will first need to be garnered. Without such support, diplomatic efforts may easily fail. The "comfort women" agreement of December 2015 is a case in point. Although South Korea and Japan reached the agreement after tortuous negotiations, it was soon de facto nullified due to a fierce backlash among the South Korean public.

### **Charting an Uncharted Course**

On May 10, the Yoon Suk-yeol government will

formally assume power. As sketched out above, the general directions of the Yoon government's foreign policy on key issues appear to be a reversal of the Moon government's policy. The emphasis is shifting from an engagement to a principled approach to North Korea, from hedging to strategic clarity on Sino-American competition, and from history disputes to future-oriented cooperation in relations with Japan.

However, one cannot be sure if such a "reversal" will be the right answer to increasingly complex foreign policy questions. Although the Moon government failed to achieve its single-most crucial foreign policy objective, that is, the lasting improvement of inter-Korean relations and denuclearization of North Korea, past pressure campaigns on North Korea under conservative governments did not realize the same goal either.

There is no doubt that the ROK-US alliance is the backbone of South Korea's foreign and security policy. If the current trend of US-China strategic competition continues to deepen, South Korea will have no real choice but to move closer to its ally. Such a move would need to be well-calibrated and carefully prepared, however. The diversification of its trade and supply chain, which is currently concentrated on China, would need to precede any diplomatic move away from China.

Foreign policy is not a binary choice. Careful and nuanced positioning is necessary. More so in this time of unprecedented uncertainty. Even if the current COVID-19 pandemic will soon be over, another one may be around the corner. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shaken global geopolitics and geoeconomics but could yet have more unexpected ramifications on the global order. Against all these difficulties and uncertainties, the South Korean government has to chart a new course with due caution. The new president, a former public prosecutor, has little experience in foreign affairs. This makes it all the more critical for him to listen to a diversity of voices and perspectives in leading the country cautiously but unwaveringly in what are increasingly stormy waters. ■

**Authors** - Dr. Ma Sang-yoon is Professor of International Relations at the Catholic University of Korea. Formerly, he was Director-General for Strategy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea. Professor Ma studied at Seoul National University and University of Oxford. His doctoral thesis at Oxford analyzed U.S. policy toward Korea during the 1960s focusing on the question of democracy. His main areas of research are East Asian international politics, U.S. foreign policy, Korea-U.S. relations and Cold War history..

*The opinions expressed in this Issue Brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2022. This Issue Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

#### ABOUT ISDP

*The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the inter-relationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.*

[www.isdp.eu](http://www.isdp.eu)

## Endnotes

1. Yoon Suk-yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up: The Country's Next President on His Foreign Policy Vision," Foreign Affairs, February 8, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.
2. "U.N. adopts resolution on human rights abuses in North Korea," Yonhap News Agency, April 1, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220401009400315>.
3. "Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit," June 12, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit>.
4. "인수위, '대북정책 기조, 강경정책 아냐', 통일부 업무보고," 연합뉴스 2022 3 23, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220323161151001>.
5. "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," May 21, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement>.
6. "Chinese envoy says S. Korea, China can overcome differences over THAAD," Yonhap News Agency, April 07, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220407008900325>.
7. "South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol unveils foreign policy goals," The Washington Post, April 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/14/south-korea-president-interview>.