

Seoul's Geopolitical Code on Quad

Imperative or Elective?

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Abstract

Under the new government helmed by President Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korea (ROK) has displayed a clear tilt toward and a more open embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept. Interestingly, Yoon has also expressed the need for a review of South Korea's ties with China, strengthening the United States–South Korea alliance, and an interest in participating in the Quad forum. This article looks to explore such goals and understand the political and strategic imperatives of a Quad plus South Korea framework. The article outlines the transition in South Korea's foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific under Moon Jae-in and Yoon. It analyses South Korea's bilateral connections with the four Quad powers—India, Japan, the United States and Australia—to draw conclusions as to what capacity Quad–ROK cooperation can take a real shape—particularly considering the disconnect between their priorities vis-à-vis China and North Korea. Additionally, it examines the scope for South Korea's greater involvement in the other Indo-Pacific-oriented initiatives (like Build Back Better World, Democracy 10, and Global Gateway) and regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Globally, states are looking for renewed alignments and realignments as the war in Ukraine rages on and as the debate on autocracies versus democracies intensifies. One of the most important voices has been that of US President Joe Biden: “In the battle between democracy and autocracy, democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security.”¹

Nowhere in the Indo-Pacific is this choice more relevant—and more evident—than in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea), which not only evolved from the throes of authoritarianism to a well-rounded democracy but also faces, in the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea,) a neighbor that is still caught in the past: a totalitarian legacy that has deepened repression and continues to violate multiple United Nations (UN) resolutions.² At the same time, the ROK is faced with its other neighbor, China, whose rise has swiftly gone from being peaceful to being contentious and conflict ridden. China's rise as an economically and militarily powerful major power, as well as its ongoing (and rather intense) rivalry with the United States, has had unprecedented and long-term implications on not just the ROK's economy but also Seoul's foreign policy, which was stuck in an unending loop of balancing and hedging. This has resulted in a burgeoning power dwarfed by its own compulsions.

Against this scenario, the recent embrace of the Indo-Pacific construct by the new ROK government under President Yoon Suk-yeol has elicited several speculations and questions. Korea and Indo-Pacific watchers across the world have raised debates about the potential geostrategic and geopolitical trajectory of this yet-to-be released vision for the ROK's unfulfilled ambitions as an Asian powerhouse. Also brought to the forefront are concerns for regional and global security implications of Seoul's tilt toward the Indo-Pacific. Some of the foremost debates center on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), the mainstay of the Indo-Pacific—and by extension, Asian—security architecture today. In particular, the new South Korean government's embrace of the Indo-Pacific, and explicit interest in the Quad, has raised the following questions:

- What are South Korea's underlying reasons for seeking a role within the Quad? What is the nature of its bilateral ties with the four Quad member states? Looking at this, does South Korea merit inclusion into this much-touted forum?
- What are the potential means of Seoul's participation: as a full partner or through a quasi-association with the Quad Plus or working groups?
- What is the nature of the ROK's engagement (existing or potential) with other global multilateral (and minilateral) initiatives aimed at the region? This includes forums and frameworks such as the Build Back Better World (B3W), Democracy 10 (D10), Global Gateway, Five Eyes (FVEY), Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), and the latest US-initiated Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), as well as regional groupings like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-centered Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

This article attempts to answer such questions by first outlining South Korea's foreign policy transition in its long-awaited recognition of the existing liberal, universal values-based Indo-Pacific architecture—during the Moon Jae-in era (from ambiguous to tacit approval) and at the outset of Yoon's presidential tenure (ardent, unequivocal support). It explores Yoon's rhetoric and examines what the ROK's involvement in the Quad format would mean for his broader regional policy. Next, it attempts to analyze how far the bilateral connect between the ROK and the individual Quad states will propel its inclusion in the Quad format, and in what capacity is Quad–ROK cooperation likely to be realized while also examining Quad's North Korea focus. Finally, it scans the potential scope of the underutilized South Korean middle-power diplomacy in other Indo-Pacific-oriented initiatives (like B3W, D10, and Global Gateway) and regional organizations like ASEAN.

From Moon to Yoon: The Elusive Quest for Strategic Autonomy

The rising US–China battle for global hegemony that started escalating during the Donald Trump era spelled trouble for most middle-power economies, and South Korea was no exception. Faced with a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea, the ROK had to contend with maintaining a delicate balance with its treaty ally and main security guarantor, the United States, and its biggest trading partner (accounting for about 25 percent of ROK exports in 2019 and 2021) and crucial North–South dialogue partner, China.³

One of the hardest lessons and points of inflection for the ROK was China's punitive economic retaliation to the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2017, during the Park Geun-hye era, months before Moon assumed office.⁴ Although Moon resolved the issued by publicly accepting what are called the three “no's”—no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in US-led strategic missile defense system, and no creation of an ROK–US–Japan security trilateral.⁵ This was not only a blow to the strategic autonomy of the nation but also, in retrospect, a successful psychological manipulation attempt by China that thwarted any potential Indo-Pacific maneuvers by Moon in the near future. Thus, the delay in implementing overt and drastic foreign policy changes, which would probably have catapulted the already established economic powerhouse and a middle-power approach with considerable resources toward the Indo-Pacific, should be seen within the baggage of this context.

From 2018 onward, the continuously intensifying US–China trade war tested the Moon presidency (2017–2022) to the fullest.⁶ Although the main impetus of Moon's foreign policy was the North–South détente, there were definite strides made toward achieving greater strategic autonomy objectives within the con-

straints of the great-power balancing act. Moreover, South Korea's quest for strategic autonomy in its decision making was also aimed at deepening relationships beyond the ROK's immediate and highly tense neighborhood of Northeast Asia. A majority of South Korea's foreign policy was understandably focused on its alliance with the United States, the China–North Korea partnership, and persisting tensions with Japan;⁷ however, Moon sought to ensure that these factors did not limit Seoul's strategic autonomy. One initiative in this direction, launched in 2017, was the New Southern Policy (NSP), a landmark foreign policy initiative—unveiled at the height of the THAAD economic fallout—that aimed at trade diversification through elevated ties with Southeast Asian nations and India to the level maintained with China, Japan, Russia, and the United States, which have traditionally ranked foremost in South Korea's foreign policy.⁸

Nonetheless, even as the NSP (Plus) partially succeeded in creating a strategic space for the ROK in the regional politics, its foundational limitation not to go beyond nontraditional security agenda prevented the ROK from realizing its full strength as a middle power. Toward the latter half of his term, Moon did soften his stance on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision that was being propelled by all major stakeholders, namely the Quad states, European countries, and ASEAN. The NSP not only provided “quiet diplomatic support” to the FOIP but even publicly acknowledged an on-paper “cooperation” (via the 3Ps of prosperity, peace, and people) in the joint factsheet in 2019, which was strengthened further two years later following the ascension of the Biden administration when the US and ROK agreed to “align” the two visions.⁹

Already in 2020, COVID-19 had allowed the ROK's assimilation with the Indo-Pacific framework through the Quad, when South Korea (along with Indonesia, New Zealand, and Vietnam)—unofficially dubbed the “Quad Plus”—participated in meetings to bolster global efforts to stem the pandemic.¹⁰ However, even as the efforts pushed forward the idea of a possible extension of the Quad, it largely remained limited to vaccine and public health-related meetings, rather than a strategic or security-focused dialogue.¹¹

Yoon's election as president has hastened this Indo-Pacific convergence, which was until recently emerging under a gradual shift. Since his candidacy, Yoon has been categorical in his stance not only in favor of strengthening the US–South Korea alliance that was “forged in blood” but also pushing for the country's greater involvement in multilateral and minilateral mechanisms such as the Quad.¹² Moreover, this hardline stance—reflected in his platform of adopting a tough, non-negotiable military and dialogue stance on traditional “enemy” North Korea's denuclearization, as well as a review of China ties—was translated into action by Yoon's embracing of the US-led FOIP order soon after his inauguration; this

served to indicate how Yoon's election rhetoric will bring about a swift change in the ROK's foreign policy.¹³

Naturally, Yoon's Quad overtures have also been in step with his administration's new alignment with the United States, as highlighted by the latest joint statement (released exactly a year after the Moon–Biden summit in 2021)¹⁴ and Biden's 2022 visit to the ROK coinciding with the Quad summit in Japan. Although Yoon has been accused of snubbing US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi during her visit to the region, Pelosi's visit brought to the forefront the sensitive Taiwan question and Seoul was forced to prioritize the national interest and take a more cautious approach. Nevertheless, Pelosi met with her South Korean counterpart and took a phone call with the President Yoon.¹⁵ Moreover, the fact that a majority of South Koreans (60.3 percent) found the action to be 'inappropriate' only shows the public support for the US.¹⁶ That the ROK was immediately, entirely, and enthusiastically on board with the newly minted IPEF (a US-led effort) before its launch and President Biden was encouraging of South Korea's new "Indo-Pacific initiative" reflected the urgency of Yoon's "global pivotal state" vision.¹⁷ This vision essentially entails South Korea repositioning itself as a *global pivotal nation*, which empowers it to "offer its intellectual leadership toward advancing global discussions in line with shared democratic principles and universal values."¹⁸ This goal requires a comprehensive engagement in the international arena beyond the half-hearted middle-power diplomacy the ROK has been employing—a contrasting case study is Japan's recent diplomatic efforts and its growing perception as an Indo-Pacific anchor state.

In this context, the notion of making "Quad Plus" a reality has gained significant traction again, with the possibility of a rotational membership allowing room for democratic members like the European Union (EU), Vietnam, and South Korea, which would be a boon for the ROK.¹⁹ South Korean participation would likely see more cooperation in initiatives like sustainable supply chains, 5G, development assistance, and global health, presumably through working groups initially. Herein, the SCRI of India–Australia–Japan may also find a key partner in Seoul.

Notably, it appears that Yoon's focus is on joining the core Quad—beyond Quad Plus—to engage in more direct security-based collaborations.²⁰ But, the question remains, is it an achievable goal in the near future?

Seoul: Destabilizing the Imperfect Quad Geometry?

In the aftermath of Yoon's inauguration and his administration's fast reversal of Moon's cautious stance to the US-led FOIP—by not only strengthening the deterrence measures against the DPRK but also seemingly disregarding the China

factor by siding with the US through the IPEF and unambiguous Quad desire—Quad skeptics have begun another round of speculations about the split in the grouping. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and India's decision (the so-called strategic silence) to back neither the UN resolutions nor the US-led sanctions against Moscow, the differences among the Quad states have taken on a life of their own.²¹ Although some contended that the split would be definitive, the two Quad summits in 2022 laid such rumors to rest. The ambitious agenda—including unveiling of new initiatives—underscored the commitment of the members to a united Quad, certainly in its home sphere of the Indo-Pacific.²² However, the recent diplomatic spat between the United States and India about the latter's questionable domestic stance on human rights, liberalism, and pluralism and India's equally vociferous response have not only added fuel to the existing divergence due to the Ukraine war but also rehashed the debate around the Quad, this time showcasing South Korea as an “alternative to India.”²³

Undoubtedly, the Seoul's eagerness to expand the ROK's regional outreach amid a new—albeit emerging—diplomatic clarity, not to mention its economic and military strengths as a substantial (however underutilized) middle power, bolsters South Korea's ambitions for being involved in the Quad. However, replacing India, an already established Indo-Pacific state, as a member is a far-fetched notion, not based on the ground reality. The Quad's status as an Indo-Pacific group is reinforced by New Delhi's inclusion, considering that India is the only Indian Ocean power among the four states. Replacing India with South Korea, another Pacific power, is hence not an option if the Quad wants to sustain its Indo-Pacific character. Moreover, at present, Seoul's Indo-Pacific tilt is just that—an explicit but informal inclination toward the concept. As of yet, Yoon is still navigating the early days of his leadership; he has not announced an Indo-Pacific vision for the ROK, and his policy on China and Japan remains similarly unspecified. In other words, as a security actor in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea needs greater strategic clarity and more clearly expressed positions on critical issues like the South China Sea, China in the Indian Ocean, and Taiwan.

With China, the Yoon administration's intent is to develop “qualitative and quantitative economic cooperation” without foregoing “mutual respect,” a reference to the coercion suffered by the ROK following the 2017 THAAD fiasco.²⁴ However, amid increasing Chinese fears of Quad becoming an “Asian NATO,” the ROK's deeper involvement with the grouping will be seen as a betrayal of the “hard-earned normalized relations.”²⁵ With regard to Japan, although normalization of relations has been the buzz phrase, no concrete plans have yet been revealed, apart from an agreement to enhance cooperation through the Japan–ROK–US trilateral in the May summit with Biden;²⁶ going by history, mere

rhetoric will hardly suffice in bridging the gap between both countries that has persisted since Japan's twentieth-century colonization of the Koreas.²⁷ Regarding China and Japan, there remains a lack of consensus within Seoul—and the mainstream political parties—on the direction the country should take. This extends to a lack of a consensual foreign policy approach vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific, even though Yoon's victory suggests that Seoul is looking to embrace the Indo-Pacific undercurrents.

In this situation, the inclusion of the ROK into the core Quad unit seems unlikely. Notably, Washington has also denied any expansion to include South Korea.²⁸ However, there is still ample scope for coordination through working groups, bilaterals with Quad states, minilaterals (including ASEAN as well), and obviously the Quad Plus format, which should see a more regular recurrence. If the recent Biden visit to East Asia was any indication, Yoon is likely to pursue stronger military, technological, and economic security relations with the other Quad powers, too. This comes despite such measures inducing a strain in ties with China, which the ROK already fears is siding with the DPRK—the growing domestic antagonism toward China is an added incentive.²⁹

Bilateral Bonhomie + Scope of Cooperation

The ROK has pursued an enhanced relationship with Australia, India, and the United States (excepting Japan, where relations during the Moon era saw a down-right slump) underpinned by shared values of democracy and universal human rights, as well as commitment to a rules-based regional and global order and to ASEAN centrality. These nations' respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific and the ROK's NSP Plus are aligned on paper, with initiatives covering strategic, security, economic, and technological areas, among others. On North Korea, the Quad has a unanimous stand: complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization as per the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.³⁰

Australia

Australia, the ROK's comprehensive strategic partner, is the only country (other than the United States) that holds a 2+2 ministerial meeting with South Korea; and their wide-ranging cooperation includes post-pandemic economic recovery, military training and exercises, defense science and technology, defense logistics and support, climate change, and enhancing the already robust trade relationship.³¹ Seoul and Canberra also have a memorandum of understanding on cyber and critical technology cooperation, an area where the ROK can contribute in the Quad.³²

Interestingly, the ROK's deteriorating relations with Japan were one of the reasons for Seoul's enhanced ties with Australia.³³ To achieve its greater goals in the Indo-Pacific (in turn the Quad), South Korea should allow Australia and India, which have burgeoning relations with Japan, to act as facilitators.³⁴ South Korea must make concerted efforts to woo Australia not just because of the latter's economic and geostrategic vitality in the region (CPTPP, RCEP, IPEF, Quad, and AUKUS member) but also because of its trajectory as a fellow middle power that enacted the hedging strategy and has borne the brunt of Chinese economic coercion, akin to the ROK, prior to its rather defiant allegiance with the United States.³⁵

India

Similarly, the ROK and India have a "future-oriented" special strategic partnership, where the economic aspect has benefited tremendously through the NSP (bilateral trade reached an all-time high of USD 23.7 billion in 2021). However, the strategic aspects, including the regional cooperation, did not receive due attention.³⁶ Despite New Delhi and Seoul exploring cooperation in defense technology, as well as signing a logistics support agreement, the disparity in intent has slowed the process.³⁷

With Yoon's embrace of the Indo-Pacific security architecture, India will not only be a significant strategic partner bilaterally but also via trilaterals, say, with ASEAN states, Australia, and Japan post normalization. India could be a credible partner in not only enhancing regional outreach and facilitating connection with Japan but also to garner support in multilateral bodies like the Quad and the UN to build the ROK's middle-power strength.

Japan

With Japan, as mentioned earlier, bilateral relations are frosty. In the security arena, Seoul and Tokyo share sensitive information through the General Security of Military Information Agreement, which though not scrapped, is under strain; and in the precarious North Korean scenario at present, the situation is not sound for the ROK or Japan.³⁸ Considering the tensions between the two countries, it is worth noting that Japan might not welcome Seoul's formal involvement as an extended Quad member. Both countries continue to fiercely compete in the East Asian and Southeast Asian regions; however, Tokyo's championing of a free and open Indo-Pacific has allowed Japan to strengthen its political, economic, and security ties with regional partners. Quite ironically, in fact, some have found that Seoul's strong desire to avoid antagonizing or directly challenging China—an

attitude shared by several middle-power actors in the region, including ASEAN—has detracted from the ROK's attractiveness as a preferred strategic partner in the region.³⁹ Now, should South Korea become a member of the Quad, Tokyo could fear the threat of greater competition with a formidable power within its strategic space, which would weaken Japan's growing reputation as not only a developmental but also a security partner. In other words, the ROK's inclusion may only serve to add greater friction to the current security dilemma between Tokyo and Seoul, which would detract from the Quad's efficacy and hinder the rapid progress the bloc has achieved in recent years.

However, there is hope: the Japan–ROK–US trilateral has begun its new course with the ministerial dialogue in June 2022,⁴⁰ where a range of topics including trilateral security cooperation were discussed. Moreover, both Japan and the ROK attended the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit as invited observers.⁴¹ The Summit focused on the Ukraine crisis, and as Japan and the ROK both declared their stand against Russian aggression in the strongest possible terms, this meeting was expected to thaw in the Japan–ROK ties to some extent. However, to the contrary, the NATO Summit only demonstrated that Japan–ROK tensions are deep-seated and unlikely to be put to rest anytime soon.⁴² Until the last minute, the South Korean government maintained that Yoon was unlikely to speak to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Although Yoon emphasizes the importance of enhanced cooperation with Japan, the threat to abandon the meeting was a stark reminder of Japan–ROK frictions. Both leaders met in person (although a bilateral meeting failed to materialize) only at the urging of the Biden administration. The issues between the two states are long-standing ones with a lot at stake domestically; so, any resolution would not be a hasty affair—even so, a temporary thaw would prove beneficial for the ROK in its Quad quest.

United States

The US–ROK alliance is the most crucial for Seoul's involvement in the Quad. Their strengthening of ties—with Washington giving extended deterrence and the ROK reciprocating by joining the IPEF, agreeing to release its own Indo-Pacific vision, coordinating a united stance on Ukraine, and reaching out to Japan—has added immensely to the regional security architecture.⁴³

Today, the two are pushing toward an economic security- and technology-driven global comprehensive alliance, given that the United States is the ROK's second-largest trade partner (sixth-largest vice versa), and Korean industrial giants like Samsung and Hyundai are technology powerhouses with strong footprints in the semiconductor and electric vehicles markets (both big investors in

the United States).⁴⁴ They will also engage at the expert working level to strengthen supply chain early warning systems to prevent disruptions.

Thus, the ROK's moving beyond its North Korea preoccupation, even amid escalating tensions between the two states, shows Seoul's intent to follow through on the global pivotal state aspirations. On North Korea, Washington and Seoul have agreed to "close the loopholes in the implementation of existing sanctions" and to further tighten the sanctions regime in anticipation of a new nuclear test by the DPRK soon.⁴⁵ As North Korea declared itself a nuclear state with a first-use policy if threatened—thus drawing an irretrievable line and closing the door to any negotiations⁴⁶—US, Japan and the ROK have escalated their collaboration and prepared for all contingencies to "protect allies in the region" in face of the North Korean nuclear threat.⁴⁷ Here too, Seoul's cooperation with Japan (despite their tensions) and focus on regional security stemming from the North Korean threat shows its willingness to emerge as a more proactive regional power.

Quadrilateral Engagement

Considering the aforementioned bilateral relations, the ROK's Quad involvement will certainly mirror its US ties, or at least be an integral component of the US-led security architecture. Assertions of the nature of the alliance as global (along with urgent facilitation of relations with Japan) highlight that the United States will carve out a space for the ROK in its Indo-Pacific security structure, especially in the Quad. However, the possibility of the ROK joining at present as a full member is negligible for a variety of aforementioned reasons (from complexities within the Quad to unsteady relations with Japan). In fact, arguably, South Korea's engagement with the Indo-Pacific will bear more fruition if conducted via forums such as the Quad Plus rather than the Quad dialogue proper. Yet, the Quad's increased ambit that includes multiple critical yet nontraditional security areas like supply chains, semiconductors, and emerging technologies, as well as its launch of new initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package (Q-CHAMP), provide enough range for maneuver.⁴⁸

On the security front, the ROK has already been engaging with the Quad states in maritime exercises like the Indian-led Milan and Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC; the ROK's largest fleet exercise to date), which will allow greater interoperability and ensure military readiness in times of conflict.⁴⁹ Other such joint exercises could be organized, along with enhanced security cooperation among the states, bilaterally and trilaterally.⁵⁰

Regarding digital infrastructure, supply chains, 5G, and semiconductors, deep cooperation with South Korea in investment security, or cyber security, or data

security are required to cover the vulnerabilities.⁵¹ In 2021, the ROK, along with the EU and 15 like-minded countries, was part of the Biden-hosted Summit on Global Supply Chain Resilience.⁵² These track 1.5 dialogues on critical and emerging technologies could be explored to trigger better alignment, investment, and information sharing. Certainly, the ROK–Quad cooperation through the IPEF (14 countries from Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia; Oceania; and the Pacific)⁵³ with a wide ambit covering trade (including digital), supply chains, clean energy, anticorruption, and tax would be critical for current challenges such as ensuring greater market access and creating affordable, secure digital infrastructure.⁵⁴

The North Korea Facet

Notably, another gap between the Quad and South Korea, which complicates Seoul's inclusion in the Quad, pertains to North Korea. The Quad's primary focus has, until now, remained on China. Although North Korea has been mentioned in numerous Quad joint statements, indicating that it is a point of discussion at various levels of Quad meets, China ranks as a much more urgent threat for all four Quad states individually. Even though it has not yet been explicitly named in any of the Quad statements, the "China challenge" remains an undeniably important driver for the Quad.

On the other hand, for South Korea and the Yoon administration, the DPRK continues to be an equal, if not more critical threat. The difference is in the scope and perception of the two threats: while China is a global concern, North Korea is a local (and therefore more immediate) challenge. Yoon has eschewed Moon's more conciliatory approach in favor of a more hawkish stand on Pyongyang, while looking to maintain inter-Korean dialogue and humanitarian aid to North Korea.⁵⁵ Denuclearization remains the need of the hour for Yoon, which would ideally be followed with a push for an end-of-the-war declaration. Nonetheless, expanding defense and deterrence in line with the ROK–US alliance remains important, with a focus on offensive strike capabilities and enhanced missile defenses amid North Korea's ever-increasing missile testing.⁵⁶

Here, Yoon's rationale for the Quad grows clearer. Even though the grouping is focused on China and the Indo-Pacific, participation in the same could allow Seoul greater room to build "mutual respect" with Beijing. China's complete opposition to THAAD deployment in South Korea has gravely limited Seoul's deterrence and security abilities.⁵⁷ Under the aegis of the Quad—along with the ROK's growing intel-based engagements with NATO and the United States—South Korea can find broader scope to procure such defense systems, unlike in 2017, when Seoul had to sign military constraints to protect its economy.⁵⁸ South

Korea now stands better placed to build ties without dire economic consequences following the gradual decoupling from the Chinese economy.⁵⁹

Notably, at the recent Quad summits, members have vowed to focus on the denuclearization of North Korea—albeit not the entire peninsula.⁶⁰ In 2022 the representatives condemned North Korean missile launches and coercive diplomacy of states, showing that along with China, the topic of North Korea is slowly but surely finding its way actively into the Quad's agenda.⁶¹ The Quad nations all have concerns about North Korea's destabilizing impact in the Indo-Pacific, but still the brunt of the nuclear provocations currently falls on South Korea. Hence, South Korea's closer coordination with the grouping (as well as its individual members) and (limited) access into its mechanism would certainly guarantee a deeper Korean peninsular focus, with the grouping also carrying some of this burden—a “win-win cooperation.”⁶²

However, it should be noted that not all Quad member states may necessarily want to refocus or expand the focus of the Quad framework. While North Korea is a concern for the United States, for Australia and India, it is a more distant issue. New Delhi faces China directly at its border, and for Canberra, China's economic retaliation and influence operations have threatened to undermine Australia's democracy and sovereignty. Thus, both would like to see China as the prime focus of the Quad grouping. While Japan too has a direct stake in the challenge posed by North Korea in East Asia and would not be entirely opposed to expanding the Quad's scope to include (and perhaps even emphasize) North Korea, China remains a more urgent and complex problem for Tokyo. At the least, all four countries will be concerned that any expansion of the Quad's focus could negatively affect their aim to become an impactful, action-oriented forum. In this context, South Korea's involvement with the Quad would be more effective via a Quad Plus forum, whereby Seoul can gain the support of the Quad nations vis-à-vis DPRK while enabling the Quad to sustain its core China focus. Although South Korea's inclusion might strengthen the Quad's umbrella, it would take time and effort to build the level of convergence of interests and values that the Quad states presently enjoy.

Networks Beyond the Quad?

Despite its emergence as the eleventh-largest economy in the world, a global innovative leader in information and communication technologies, a strong and vibrant democracy, and an extremely capable military power, South Korea has not exerted its full middle-power influence in the regional security architecture.⁶³ As such, there are multiple avenues of cooperation where Seoul's interests align with like-minded global partners: semiconductors, supply chains, maritime security,

economic security, emerging technologies, digital trade, defense, secure sea lines of communication, capacity building, and so forth. Beyond the Quad, South Korea would be looking to rebuild its engagement in other existing international forums aimed at the Indo-Pacific, as Seoul unveils its ambitions to find a greater role in the geostrategic and geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

Already South Korea has officially applied, despite opposition from the agriculture and fisheries sector, to join the CPTPP, a free trade agreement (FTA) that does not include either the United States or China.⁶⁴ The ROK would be looking to join the CPTPP before China, as that would provide Seoul negotiating leverage; South Korea's resolve to apply to the pact was also solidified only after China and Taiwan joined the fray.⁶⁵ Another important pact is the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), which sidesteps conventional FTA agenda in favor of the digital trade aspect covering identities, e-payments, data protection, and cross-border data flows.⁶⁶ South Korea, having completed the domestic requirements, has officially started negotiations with DEPA members and is awaiting approval by their joint committee.⁶⁷ The CPTPP and DEPA together with the IPEF, which is still in the developing stages, and the RCEP, which includes all three major Northeast Asian states and could revive the long-pending China–Japan–ROK FTA, could provide the Yoon government the impetus to build a pivotal role in creating fertile (inclusive, comprehensive, and transparent) trade conditions for the Indo-Pacific region.⁶⁸

As a long-standing member of the Group of Twenty (G20), the “premier body for global economic coordination”—but one that has not filled its expectations either—South Korea should find ways to coalesce with other member nations (including several Indo-Pacific states) to ensure that the G20 finds greater resonance as the world faces unprecedented nontraditional security challenges. The G20 seems an apt forum for such issues.⁶⁹

In 2020 and 2021, the ROK was invited as a G7 plus member, an important moment for the country's foreign policy. The guest role, however, was not fully exploited, as the ROK did not come on board the joint statement—in view of the balancing act by Moon—that expressed concerns about the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait but did not name China, and stuck to non-offensive (important but ultimately inconsequential to global ambitions) topics on post-pandemic recovery, vaccines, and value of open societies.⁷⁰ There is enough scope in participating in the G7's quality infrastructure initiative B3W, which is seen as a rival endeavor to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at narrowing the “\$40+ trillion infrastructure need in the developing world,” and complements the Quad's extended goals as well.⁷¹

In the technology arena, the Future Tech Forum, an initiative rolled out during the G7's 2021 United Kingdom presidency, could help further South Korea's tech prowess by coalescing like-minded partners in building digital regulatory framework and enhancing emerging technology ecosystems.⁷² Another initiative with potential for cooperation on cost-effective high-tech 5G networks and supply chains to counter Chinese developments was the Boris Johnson–promulgated Democracy 10 (D10), the group of G7 plus countries included in the Carbis Bay summit in 2021 (namely Australia, India, and the ROK), which was aimed to give an Asia-Pacific impetus to the West-heavy forum.⁷³ The D10 construct is not a new one, dating to a US Department of State initiative launched in 2008, which aimed for a strategic coalition of democracies across the Atlantic and Pacific to advance Washington's rules-based order.⁷⁴ However, the status of the D10 as of 2022 is unknown; in any case, Japan had reservations against including South Korea, which is an area that the new ROK government is looking to overcome by normalizing relations so that such opposition is a thing of the past.⁷⁵ For example, if the ROK intends to meaningfully participate in global forums like the Blue Dot Network (BDN)⁷⁶ and SCRI, Seoul will need Tokyo's support.

In the regional domain, the connection with ASEAN, which is already strong thanks to the NSP, needs to be reinvigorated by analyzing and covering NSP's limitations.⁷⁷ Apart from working on bilaterals with the ASEAN states, building trilaterals such as with India and Japan is important to expanding the ROK's outreach and to moving beyond trade and investment goals. Innovative technology, sustainable infrastructure, and maritime security are potential areas of synergy. The US–ROK statement has already made all the correct references to increasing ASEAN cooperation,⁷⁸ but the devil lies in the details.

Some initiatives like the defense pact AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States)⁷⁹ and the intelligence-sharing Anglosphere network FVEY are significant military deterrents, but the expansion of these pacts is more a matter of speculation at present, and directly joining these blocs may invite trouble from China, which at the moment is neither feasible nor advisable for Yoon. South Korea could, however, build strong links with the individual states on areas of complementary interests such as security and defense, technology transfers, and supply chains via its Quad involvement.⁸⁰

Among the European initiatives to the Indo-Pacific, there is immense potential for collaboration with the recently launched Global Gateway and Strategic Compass, which are aiming at a comprehensive, integrated policy for the Indo-Pacific. South Korea is already a NATO partner state, and the ROK's National Intelligence Service (NIS) is the first Asian spy agency to join NATO's Cyber Defense Group, which has already drawn a tense reaction in China: a former edi-

tor of the Chinese state-owned *Global Times* warned the ROK that such “hostile” steps could lead to a “Ukraine.”⁸¹ Notwithstanding such a chilling and an incommensurate reaction, at the NATO summit in June, Yoon focused on strengthening ties with the NATO members. In total, Yoon participated in 16 diplomatic events along the sidelines of the NATO Summit, including 10 bilateral meetings, with other attending Asia-Pacific states to discuss security issues in the region.⁸² Through such meetings, Yoon also promoted South Korean defense industry, nuclear energy, and advanced technologies. Overall, Yoon’s actions at the Summit demonstrated the new South Korean government’s commitment to play a more active and larger role in international (and Indo-Pacific) affairs.

The growing uncertainty about the US–China rivalry amid the escalating situation in Europe has allowed Yoon to strengthen the alliance with the United States. However, as the Washington and Beijing are both mediation partners in resolving the ROK’s most pressing threat, North Korea, Yoon will be best served by diversifying Seoul’s outreach to multiple engagements with other stakeholders, including the Quad members, ASEAN states, and European powers. Yoon has recognized that to rebuild focus on the Korean peninsula, South Korea must emerge as a more regional player. China–North Korea ties have continued to grow, so much so that after the latest intercontinental ballistic missile tests in May, Beijing was responsible (along with Moscow) for vetoing new UN sanctions against the DPRK, not only highlighting the wide-open split in the UNSC but also confirming the ROK’s fears vis-à-vis China and justifying Seoul’s renewed US alignment.⁸³

Thus, Seoul must not only actively strengthen the ROK–US alliance (which has received a big boost already) but also pursue an integrated policy that includes consolidating efforts in the economic sphere (like applying to the CPTPP and DEPA, as well as joining IPEF) with deeper multiple defense and security engagements toward realizing Yoon’s local and global ambitions. ✪

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