



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**BEYOND AMBIGUITY: OPERATIONALIZING  
SOUTH KOREA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY**

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*The difference between a good strategy and a bad one is often the  
quality of its assumptions.*

— Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy Bad Strategy*, 2011

**Abstract**

In an era of escalating U.S.-China rivalry and the war in Ukraine, South Korea's traditional strategy of "strategic ambiguity" is facing growing challenges. This chapter examines South Korea's shift from strategic ambiguity to clarity in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, driven by these geopolitical tensions and China's increasing assertiveness. It analyzes the factors that have eroded the benefits of ambiguity and explores the opportunities and challenges associated with South Korea's new approach to regional engagement. The chapter also assesses the potential impact of domestic politics on the strategy's sustainability, highlighting the importance of public support and policy continuity for its success.

**Introduction:**

**South Korea's Strategic Dilemma in the Indo-Pacific**

The escalating rivalry between the United States and China has profoundly cast a long shadow over the Indo-Pacific, forcing nations in the region to grapple with a complex strategic dilemma. While economically intertwined with China, many countries rely on the United States for national security, leading to a widespread reluctance to explicitly choose sides. This balancing act has puzzled some observers, as prevailing theories in international relations, like Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory and Stephen Walt's

balance of threat theory, would anticipate different behaviors. Waltz's theory posits that in an anarchic international system,<sup>1</sup> states tend to form alliances to counterbalance a dominant power and maintain stability, while Walt's theory refines this, arguing that states align against the most threatening actor, considering factors like aggressive intentions, military capabilities, and geographic proximity.<sup>2</sup> In the current context, both theories would predict that nations in the Indo-Pacific might align against China, given its growing economic and military might and increasing assertiveness in territorial disputes. Yet, the reality is more nuanced. Smaller nations often opt for strategic neutrality or accommodation with a more powerful neighbor to avoid conflict, a strategy reminiscent of "Finlandization" employed during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> This approach prioritizes national survival through careful balancing, often at the expense of explicit alignment with either major power.

The chapter delves into the underpinnings and practical implications of South Korea's recent shift from strategic ambiguity toward a more explicit alignment with the United States through its Indo-Pacific Strategy. It examines the factors driving the domestic political dynamics that influence the strategy's sustainability. By analyzing this case study, we can gain valuable insights into the complexities of navigating great power competition in the 21st century.

### **South Korea's Balancing Act: A History of Strategic Ambiguity**

Under President Moon Jae-in's leadership, South Korea pursued a hedging policy or "strategic ambiguity," carefully navigating its relationships with major powers like the United States and China. This approach stemmed from the progressive desire for greater autonomy in foreign policy, emphasizing self-reliance and maintaining an "equidistant" stance between these powers. This contrasted with the conservative preference for strengthening ties primarily with the United States. For example, during the presidency

of conservative leader Park Geun-hye, relations with China deteriorated following the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea, a move met with strong opposition from China. Upon taking office, the progressive Moon administration actively sought to repair relations with China, offering assurances through the “Three Nos” policy: no additional THAAD deployments, no integration into the U.S. missile defense network, and no trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan.<sup>4</sup> This policy aimed to appease Beijing’s concerns regarding THAAD deployment and demonstrate South Korea’s commitment to maintaining a balanced relationship between the two major powers. In another conciliatory move toward China, the Moon administration, unlike some Western nations, opted not to exclude Chinese companies like Huawei from participating in the development of South Korea’s 5G network.

South Korea also maintained a cautious approach toward initiatives perceived as directly challenging China. This includes not joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and refraining from participating in military operations to counter China’s influence. These positions led some to perceive South Korea as a potential vulnerability within the U.S.-led coalition. However, proponents of strategic ambiguity argue that this approach allows South Korea to maintain crucial economic ties with China as well as elicit China’s cooperation in dealing with North Korea while preserving its security alliance with the United States.

### **The Weakening Case for Strategic Ambiguity**

While strategic ambiguity has historically been a pragmatic approach for South Korea to navigate complex geopolitical realities, its efficacy is increasingly under scrutiny. Several key factors are contributing to the erosion of its advantages, prompting a reevaluation of its long-term viability.

*Bifurcating Global Environment:  
A Catalyst for Strategic Realignment*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the great power competition between the United States and China amplified global ideological divisions, intensifying pressure on South Korea to align with the West. The Moon administration's initial hesitancy to impose sanctions on Russia, a notable outlier among U.S. allies, drew criticism from the United States and Europe.<sup>5</sup> This reluctance highlighted the limitations of neutrality in an increasingly polarized global landscape. The United States subsequently excluded South Korea from a list of 32 countries exempt from licensing regulations aimed at preventing technology transfers to Russia.<sup>6</sup> This move further emphasized the consequences of not taking a clear stance. Additionally, the U.S. invitation for South Korea to join the "Chip-4 alliance"—an initiative aimed at curbing China's microchip industry and hindering its overall economic and military growth—compelled Seoul to make a definitive choice,<sup>7</sup> eliminating the option for neutrality. The increasing geopolitical divide thus served as a catalyst, forcing South Korea to reevaluate its approach to navigating geopolitical tensions and consider the potential costs of maintaining strategic ambiguity.

*China's Diminishing Role in Addressing North Korea Issues*

China's increasing unwillingness to cooperate on North Korean issues raises skepticism about its role in alleviating instability on the Korean Peninsula. Recent actions by Beijing, including high-level visits to Pyongyang by officials like Vice Premier Liu Guozhong,<sup>8</sup> and its reluctance to condemn North Korea's missile launches, which violate United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions, signal strengthening ties between the two countries. Furthermore, China has actively obstructed efforts to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, effectively vetoing a U.S.-proposed resolution at the Security Council.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, reports from the UN Panel of Experts have also revealed evidence of China's complicity in

helping North Korea circumvent existing sanctions, including through illicit oil transfers and the employment of North Korean workers.<sup>10</sup>

Even with China's cooperation, denuclearizing North Korea seems increasingly unlikely, especially given North Korea's deepening relationship with Russia. Russia's veto of the Panel of Experts renewal,<sup>11</sup> and a reported mutual defense agreement between the two countries in June 2024 underscore this growing alliance.<sup>12</sup> Against this backdrop, Seoul must reevaluate the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity in alleviating the growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

*Economic Considerations:  
A Shifting Landscape*

While China's economic importance to South Korea remains undeniable, having been its largest trading partner since 2003,<sup>13</sup> the economic rationale for supporting strategic ambiguity is transforming. China's increasing willingness to leverage its economic clout for political gain, as seen in cases involving nations like Australia, Norway, and the Philippines, has prompted countries, including South Korea, to actively diversify their export markets to mitigate the risks associated with over-reliance on China. The economic fallout from China's sanctions on South Korea following the THAAD deployment, estimated at \$7.5 billion to \$15.6 billion,<sup>14</sup> was a stark reminder of these risks. This experience accelerated South Korea's pursuit of market diversification through initiatives like the New Southern Policy, which focuses on strengthening economic ties with Southeast Asia and India.

Furthermore, China's market is no longer as lucrative for South Korea as it once was, evidenced by the first trade deficit with China since 1992, recorded between September 2022 and January 2024.<sup>15</sup> In December 2023, South Korean exports to the United States surpassed those to China for the first time in two decades,<sup>16</sup> a trend

that has continued into 2024.<sup>17</sup> This shift is attributed to China's internal economic challenges, increased domestic production, and the impact of U.S. restrictions on Chinese imports, creating opportunities for South Korean exporters.<sup>18</sup>

These converging factors challenge the traditional notion that strategic clarity invariably harms South Korea's economy while ambiguity benefits it. Although China remains a significant economic partner, the potential financial consequences of adopting a more apparent stance toward the United States are likely less severe than previously assumed. As South Korea's trade relationships diversify and China's economic landscape deteriorates, the cost-benefit analysis of maintaining strategic ambiguity is shifting, prompting a reassessment of its long-term viability.

#### *South Korea's Vulnerability to Chinese Pressure*

South Korea's position as a perceived "weakest link" in the U.S.-led coalition, stemming from its historical reliance on strategic ambiguity, makes it a prime target for China's coercive tactics. Beijing has consistently demonstrated a harsher stance toward Seoul than other allies like Japan and Australia, especially when South Korea deepens its ties with Washington. However, despite their clear alignment with the United States, Beijing's recent efforts to mend relations with both Tokyo and Canberra signal a strategic recalibration. President Xi Jinping met with Prime Minister Kishida in November 2023, and the subsequent pledge to hold high-level talks on economic and other issues indicates a potential warming of relations with Japan.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, China-Australia relations have seen a marked improvement in 2023,<sup>20</sup> with the resumption of high-level dialogue, despite previous tensions over Australia's participation in the AUKUS security pact and its rejection of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

This strategic shift by Beijing suggests a calculated approach. By focusing coercive efforts on countries perceived as more susceptible to changing their alliance stances, China aims to maximize its influence while minimizing potential backlash. In this context, South Korea's perceived vulnerability could be seen as an opportunity for Beijing to exert pressure and sway its policy decisions.

However, this also presents an opportunity for South Korea. By adopting a more resolute stance and demonstrating a willingness to withstand Chinese pressure, Seoul could deter further coercion. This would safeguard its national interests and contribute to a more balanced and stable regional dynamic, where all actors are incentivized to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation rather than resorting to coercive tactics.

### **Strategic Clarity and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Promising Start, but Challenges Remain**

President Yoon Seok-yeol's inauguration in May 2022 marked a notable shift in South Korea's foreign policy, transitioning from strategic ambiguity to clarity. Yoon envisioned transforming the nation into a "global pivotal state," championing freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values and international cooperation.<sup>21</sup> This vision swiftly translated into policy, with early commitments to strengthen the South Korea-U.S. alliance and contribute to addressing global challenges, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Yoon's historic participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in June 2022 further solidified his commitment.<sup>22</sup>

In December 2022, South Korea unveiled its inaugural "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" (Indo-Pacific Strategy),<sup>23</sup> aligning closely with U.S. objectives in the region. The strategy encompasses shared goals such as opposing unilateral changes to the status quo, advocating for a rules-based maritime

order, promoting peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and ensuring freedom of navigation. The explicit adoption of the term “Indo-Pacific Strategy” itself signaled a significant policy shift toward strategic clarity, earning a positive reception from the United States and like-minded countries.

A year later, a progress report highlighted initial achievements, including participation in the NATO Summit, strengthened trilateral ties with the United States and Japan, deepened regional connections, increased Official Development Assistance (ODA), and a consistent message on the importance of rules-based international order.<sup>24</sup> The government also unveiled a 52-point action plan to implement the strategy further, focusing on ODA, capacity building, information sharing, maritime security, and strategic consultative frameworks.<sup>25</sup> Announcing these plans, Jang Ho-jin, the First Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, affirmed, “The Republic of Korea’s dedication to enhancing freedom in the Indo-Pacific region remains steadfast.”<sup>26</sup> The March 2024 creation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy Officer, tasked with managing and evaluating the strategy’s implementation, and the appointment of an Indo-Pacific Strategy Ambassador further underscored this commitment.<sup>27</sup>

However, challenges remain in translating this vision into concrete action. While the strategy articulates ambitious goals, it needs more specificity regarding the methods and resources required to achieve them. The action plan, though a step forward, needs detailed security measures. Seoul’s achievements thus far primarily focus on diplomatic engagement, which, while necessary, should ultimately lead to measurable outcomes. For instance, despite stating opposition to changes in the status quo in the Taiwan Strait,<sup>28</sup> the strategy lacks a clear plan to achieve this objective, raising questions about South Korea’s potential military support for the United States in a Taiwan contingency.<sup>29</sup>



The world is closely observing how South Korea will fulfill its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and its role as a “global pivotal state.” This is a critical juncture for South Korea to translate its strategic vision into concrete actions and demonstrate its resolve on the global stage.

**Strategic Opportunities:  
Advancing the Indo-Pacific Agenda**

Fortunately, numerous opportunities exist for Seoul to actively engage in this strategy, thereby bolstering regional security and its own position as a “global pivotal state.” These opportunities span various domains, from military capacity-building and defense technology collaboration to safeguarding infrastructure and upholding rules-based maritime order.

*Military Capacity-Building Support:  
A Strategic Pivot*

South Korea’s arms industry, ranked among the world’s top ten,<sup>30</sup> presents a unique avenue for enhancing regional security through military capacity-building support. With ambitions to significantly increase defense exports from \$14 billion to \$20 billion by 2024 and become one of the top four arms exporters by 2027,<sup>31</sup> Seoul is well-positioned to expand its influence.

South Korea’s defense sector, honed by its continuous state of “technical war” with North Korea, is renowned for producing high-quality, cost-effective weaponry more efficiently than its Western counterparts. Recent agreements, such as the significant arms deal with Poland,<sup>32</sup> highlight the potential for further growth. This stands in stark contrast to the United States, which faces challenges in its own defense industrial base, and to China, which can rapidly supply arms but often produces lower-quality products.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the low geopolitical risk associated with sourcing arms from South

Korea makes it an attractive alternative for nations hesitant to engage with the United States, China, or Russia.

To maximize this advantage, South Korea should reorient its arms export strategy toward a geopolitical focus, utilizing arms transfers to strengthen regional partnerships and security. This could involve donating or selling older but still effective systems and comprehensive training and maintenance support to regional partners in need. The promise of resupply during crises would further enhance these partnerships. This approach caters to the growing demand for military hardware amidst global insecurity, especially as nations seek to diversify away from Russian arms.

Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) program, launched under its 2022 National Security Strategy, serves as a model for South Korea. Japan demonstrates the strategic value of such initiatives by providing defense equipment and technology to enhance maritime awareness and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.<sup>34</sup> South Korea could adopt a similar approach, potentially coordinating with Japan to optimize resource allocation and avoid duplication of efforts.

Beyond hardware, South Korea can also enhance regional military capacity by offering software support to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island nations. These regions grapple with challenges like counterterrorism, piracy, and illegal fishing, necessitating enhanced military capabilities. South Korea's expertise in these areas, combined with increased engagement through joint exercises, training, and advisory support, would significantly bolster the collective defense of like-minded countries in the region.

*Upholding a Rules-Based Maritime Order:  
Freedom of Navigation Operations*

South Korea's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific necessitates a proactive stance in upholding a rules-based maritime order. This includes fulfilling its promise to conduct freedom of

navigation operations (FONOP) in the East and South China Seas, where China's ambitions to alter the status quo pose a significant challenge. Beijing's gray zone tactics, employing its Coast Guard and maritime militia to gradually encroach upon the sovereign territories of other countries, threaten to normalize China's claims if left unchecked. The United States and its allies have consistently conducted FONOPs to counter these tactics, with expanding participation of extra-regional partners like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the European Union.<sup>35</sup> This collective effort has been further strengthened by multilateral joint naval exercises, such as those conducted by Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the United States in April 2024, emphasizing the importance of maintaining open sea lanes and airspace.<sup>36</sup>

South Korea's active participation in these endeavors would be a logical extension of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, demonstrating its commitment to a rules-based maritime order. While China may raise objections, the growing coalition of nations engaged in FONOPs would mitigate any potential pressure on South Korea. By joining these efforts, Seoul would contribute to regional stability and reinforce its standing as a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific.

*Technological Collaboration:  
A Cornerstone of Collective Security*

The rapid advancement of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), 5G/6G mobile technology, cyber capabilities, and autonomous weapons has significant implications for economic development and military operations. The fierce competition between the United States and China in these domains underscores the importance of maintaining a technological edge for national security and global influence. While the United States is leading in certain areas, China possesses notable advantages, including vast access to data, advanced technologies developed under the "Military-Civil Fusion" initiative, and a highly competitive tech

sector. To maintain its competitiveness, the United States must leverage its comparative advantage by collaborating with allies and partners.

With its established capabilities in AI, 5G infrastructure, and memory chip manufacturing,<sup>37</sup> South Korea can play a crucial role in strengthening the U.S.-led coalition's technological edge. Seoul has already engaged in discussions and agreements with the United States and other partners, including the trilateral summit at Camp David in 2023 and talks with AUKUS security partners (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) regarding defense technology collaboration.<sup>38</sup> Expanding upon these existing efforts, South Korea should actively pursue joint development of innovative technologies with the United States and like-minded countries in the region. Additionally, collaborating on developing operational concepts for utilizing these new technologies and integrating them into the armed forces would enhance overall military effectiveness and interoperability.

*Countering China's Grip in Critical Infrastructure:  
A Strategic Partnership*

China's growing dominance in critical infrastructure sectors like 5G and nuclear energy presents a strategic concern. Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE control a significant chunk of the global 5G market share.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, China's competitive pricing and financing packages make them a tempting option for nuclear energy projects.<sup>40</sup> However, this dependency creates vulnerabilities for other nations, potentially leaving them susceptible to China's assertive tactics and economic coercion. Historically, China has leveraged its economic clout to further political objectives. Concerns surrounding 5G technology center on alleged "backdoors" in network equipment, potentially facilitating espionage and data surveillance.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, reliance on China for nuclear energy could expose countries to economic pressure.

Here is where South Korea emerges as a pivotal player with the potential to disrupt China's hold:

- *A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE*: South Korea boasts a robust 5G infrastructure industry, with companies like Samsung leading the charge. In the nuclear sector, South Korea possesses expertise in constructing power plants efficiently and cost-effectively.
- *COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTHS*: South Korea's strengths can be strategically combined with those of the United States. Collaboration on joint export initiatives in 5G and nuclear energy can create a formidable force against Chinese dominance. The United States excels in areas like microchip design and nuclear safety protocols, further solidifying this partnership.
- *STANDARD AND NORM SETTING*: The United States and South Korea can work together to establish and uphold international standards for the safe and secure use of these critical technologies. This ensures they serve their intended purpose and are not exploited for malicious purposes.

By proactively mitigating China's influence in the critical infrastructure sector, South Korea strengthens its position as a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific. This approach fosters regional security and stability while promoting a more balanced and secure global landscape. Consequently, South Korea can position itself as a key player in shaping the future of global critical infrastructure development.

*Bolstering South Korea's Military Might:  
A Cornerstone of Regional Security*

Last but not least, a robust defense posture, particularly the ability to project power beyond the Korean Peninsula, is pivotal for South Korea's contribution to a secure Indo-Pacific. The development of

intermediate-range missiles, capable of reaching targets across Northeast Asia, marks a significant step in this advancement. While officially aimed at deterring threats from North Korea, these dual-capable missiles implicitly address broader regional challenges, including those posed by China, though the South Korean government discreetly avoids emphasizing this aspect to maintain diplomatic equilibrium with Beijing.

This strategic approach likely played a role in the United States' May 2021 decision to lift restrictions on the range and payload of South Korean missiles. These restrictions, initially imposed in 1979 to prevent South Korea from developing nuclear-capable delivery systems, limited ballistic missile ranges to 800 kilometers.<sup>42</sup> By enhancing its missile capabilities, South Korea alleviates pressure on the United States to deploy its own intermediate-range missiles in the region, a move that faced resistance from countries like Japan and the Philippines due to concerns about becoming potential targets in a U.S.-China conflict.<sup>43</sup> This development not only bolsters South Korea's defense autonomy but also contributes to a more balanced security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, South Korea's growing space program, with successful launches of surveillance satellites in December 2023 and 2024 and plans to launch three more by 2025, strengthens its ISR and precision-strike capabilities. These advancements enhance South Korea's national security and deepen its cooperation with the United States in the space domain.<sup>44</sup>

As such, South Korea has numerous avenues to actively implement its Indo-Pacific Strategy and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, realizing these ambitious goals requires sustained commitment and policy continuity across multiple administrations, a challenge in South Korea's polarized political landscape. The question remains: can Seoul overcome this domestic hurdle to fulfill its regional and global aspirations?

### **Domestic Politics and Sustainability of the Indo-Pacific Strategy: Public Opinion as a Stabilizing Force**

While concerns exist about the sustainability of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, particularly given President Yoon's low popularity and the Democratic Party's recent landslide victory in the April 2024 General Election,<sup>45</sup> a shift in leadership does not necessarily equate to a policy reversal. Despite the Democratic Party's traditional preferences for strategic ambiguity, several factors suggest the Indo-Pacific Strategy may endure even under a new administration.

Firstly, public opinion overwhelmingly favors a more proactive role for South Korea in international affairs, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This aligns with Yoon's vision of South Korea as a "global pivotal state." A 2023 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) survey revealed that 87.9% of respondents advocate active participation in international issues, with 52.8% supporting broader involvement beyond Northeast Asia.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, South Korean society has a pervasive sense of unease and skepticism toward China. A 2021 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found that 56% of respondents identified China as the greatest threat in the coming decade, surpassing North Korea (22%).<sup>47</sup> This sentiment is corroborated by a 2021 KINU survey, where 71.8% of respondents viewed China as the primary security threat, a perception consistent across the political spectrum.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the 2023 KINU survey also showed that 53.4% of respondents prefer the United States to maintain leadership in the region over China.

This overwhelming public support for active engagement in the Indo-Pacific, combined with concerns about China's growing assertiveness and a preference for U.S. leadership, suggests that domestic politics are unlikely to derail the Indo-Pacific Strategy. As the strategy gains further traction and demonstrates tangible benefits for South Korea, its continuation becomes increasingly likely, even under a different administration.

In essence, while a change in leadership may bring about nuanced adjustments, the underlying public sentiment and geopolitical realities point toward the enduring relevance and potential longevity of an Indo-Pacific Strategy.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Toward a More Active Role in the Indo-Pacific**

The United States and like-minded nations have enthusiastically welcomed South Korea's recent shift toward strategic clarity and unveiling of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. This pivot raises expectations for South Korea's expanded role in promoting regional peace, stability, and a rules-based international order. However, the strategy is still in its nascent stages and requires further refinement, particularly in outlining concrete steps for implementation.

South Korea, uniquely positioned as a rising provider of arms, nuclear energy, and 5G infrastructure, presents significant opportunities to strengthen regional partners and counterbalance China's influence. By actively participating in capacity-building initiatives, FONOPs, and defense technology collaboration, South Korea can contribute to a more secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Moreover, enhancing its military capabilities bolsters South Korea's national defense and reinforces the collective security of the United States and its allies. This collective strength is crucial for addressing the evolving landscape and countering potential threats from China.

As South Korea moves forward, translating its strategic vision into tangible actions is imperative. The successful implementation of its Indo-Pacific Strategy will solidify its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and pave the way for its emergence as an actual "global pivotal state." This is a critical juncture for South Korea to demonstrate its resolve and play a leading role in shaping the region's future.

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