



JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA'S ALTERNATIVE PATHS IN THE INDO- PACIFIC

BY ANDREW YEO AND KEI KOGA

Andrew Yeo (YEO@cua.edu) is Professor of Politics and Director of Asian Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington DC. He is the author of [*Asia's Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century*](#).

Kei Koga (kkei@ntu.edu.sg) is Assistant Professor at the Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). His recent publications include Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' question: countering China or shaping a new regional order? (*International Affairs*, 2020).

Following the first ever Quad Summit Meeting held virtually on March 12, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III travelled to Tokyo and Seoul to hold 2+2 meetings with their Japanese and South Korean counterparts. Although the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliance function as the “cornerstone” and “linchpin” behind US strategy in Northeast Asia, the two allies have significantly differed in their response to Washington’s call for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Nor have Tokyo and Seoul restored their fraught relationship since [hitting a low point in 2019](#), as historical tensions triggered Japanese export controls and South Korean threats to pull out of an intelligence sharing agreement. As the Biden administration seeks to strengthen Indo-Pacific cooperation in light of growing competition with China, the gap between Japan and South Korea’s regional strategy opens the US and its allies to strategic vulnerability in a corridor of Asia that has traditionally represented the “[core of US power and influence in Asia](#).”

Differing Indo-Pacific Pathways

When the Trump administration first unrolled the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy in 2017, Tokyo and Seoul offered contrasting responses. Japan had adopted its own Indo-Pacific strategy even before the US. As one of the originators of the concept, Japan readily embraced and aligned its Indo-Pacific strategy with the US.

As part of the 3+1 principles guiding FOIP, Trump and Abe reached an [agreement](#) in 2017 that would (1) promote and establish fundamental values, (2) pursue economic prosperity, and (3) work toward peace and stability. In addition, both leaders emphasized non-exclusivity—their willingness to work with any country sharing the same vision of FOIP. Tokyo and Washington thus coordinated their [policies and projects](#) over maritime security, energy, infrastructure, and digital connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. Enhancing a rules-based regional order has thus become the shared objective to address challenges emanating from China.

In contrast to Tokyo, Seoul showed little initial interest in FOIP. Only when it became diplomatically untenable did South Korea begin to acknowledge the Indo-Pacific narrative adopted by other regional players. Meanwhile, the Moon Jae-in government emphasized its own [New Southern Policy](#) (NSP), a strategy readily compatible with FOIP given its focus on deepening diplomatic and economic ties with ASEAN and India, but absent any robust defense or security commitments.

South Korea and Washington have since moved to [explore synergies between the NSP and FOIP](#). The Biden administration also [continues to endorse](#) the principle of a free and open Pacific region. However, Seoul remains cautious in recognizing the strategic elements of FOIP. Most notably, despite its status as a consolidated democracy with a modernized military and advanced economy, South Korea has kept the Quad, a grouping former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo once described as “[Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond](#),” at arm’s length. Seoul’s involvement has been limited to “[Quad-plus](#)” dialogues addressing cybersecurity and COVID-19 issues.

Perceptions that the Indo-Pacific concept originated from Japan may have contributed to the Moon government's lukewarm response to FOIP, especially during a period of escalating Korea-Japan tensions. More likely, however, Seoul has treaded lightly over FOIP and the Quad to avoid antagonizing China. South Korean businesses had already suffered from heavy financial loss as a direct result of Chinese [economic coercion](#) after Seoul accepted the deployment of a US missile defense system.

All regional actors, including Japan and South Korea, have at some point hedged vis-a-vis the two regional superpowers. Since Abe, however, Japan's strategic posture of balancing has become more clear, even as it has diversified its foreign policy toolkit. Recognizing that the US influence in the region is in [relative decline](#), Japan has adopted a two-pronged strategy to address its security needs against the backdrop of a more assertive China: beefing up the US-Japan alliance, and building security networks with "likeminded" countries in the region such as the Quad framework.

For historical and geopolitical reasons, however, Seoul perceives vulnerabilities from US-Sino competition much more acutely than Tokyo. Geopolitical rivalry between Russia, China, and Japan in the 19th century eventually resulted in Korea's colonization by Japan. In the 20th century, Korea fell victim to superpower rivalry and the brewing Cold War that led to national division, and later the outbreak of a devastating war. Now, in the 21st century, South Korea seeks to avoid becoming collateral damage again as US-Sino rivalry intensifies.

While Tokyo has doubled down on US leadership and the US-Japan alliance, South Korea has tried its best to avoid getting entangled in US-Sino competition. The Moon government believes it can best navigate geopolitical tensions by standing firm on the US-South Korea alliance, but minimizing its participation in FOIP to maintain cordial relations with its largest trading partner and a major stakeholder in establishing inter-Korea peace. So far, the strategy seems to be working. US-South Korea relations remain robust. Meanwhile, Seoul and Beijing last November announced their own "2+2" dialogue covering

security and diplomatic issues as part of their [10-point consensus](#). However, it is unclear if Seoul's strategy is tenable if Beijing continues to challenge the existing regional order, ultimately undermining even South Korea's long term regional interests.

Greater Indo-Pacific Convergence on the Horizon

Although Tokyo and Seoul have yet to move towards rapprochement, recent signs since President Biden has taken office suggest that the two US allies may at least be inching towards some convergence in their Indo-Pacific approach. President Moon shared his [willingness to improve ties](#) with Japan earlier this month. South Korea experts are also [warming up to the idea of the Quad](#).

While Washington's immediate goal is strengthening trilateral cooperation, a boost in South Korea-Japan relations will also enhance the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific order. Secretary of State Blinken, who [championed](#) US-Japan-Korea trilateral relations during his tenure as deputy secretary of state in the Obama White House, may also prove to be a persuasive interlocutor in drawing Seoul and Tokyo towards a truce. The US is particularly eager to take advantage of trilateral relations with respect to addressing Korean peace and denuclearization, and also strengthening Indo-Pacific initiatives such as cybersecurity, infrastructure development, climate change, and most recently, COVID-19 vaccination strategies. Through Japan's FOIP and South Korea's NSP, both countries also have an interest in supporting economic development, sustainable growth, and human capacity-building in Southeast Asia, a region that has grown in importance in the Indo-Pacific era.

Conclusion: Seize the Opportunity

Of course, any convergence in Indo-Pacific strategies brings us back to the question of regional order. At the tactical level, it may be tempting to equate the success of the Indo-Pacific strategy with the degree of policy coordination among US allies and partners. Drawing South Korea more tightly into FOIP and improving US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation would certainly count as a win for the Biden administration. However, the success of FOIP will ultimately depend on how well it can protect and promote the rule of law,

democratic values, free trade, regional governance, and maritime security—the public goods that South Korea and Japan both desire and benefit from. The Biden administration has opened an opportunity for allies and partners to collaborate toward that goal. Japan and South Korea should seize that moment to work together.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.