



**STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY REMAINS IN
SOUTH KOREA'S INDO-PACIFIC
SURVIVAL STRATEGY**

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Breaking the long-standing diplomatic practice of strategic ambiguity between two major powers, South Korea took a step towards clarity concerning strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. The timing and context surrounding the release of the first Indo-Pacific strategy are noteworthy, but how are national interests and values pursued?

South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, "[Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region](#)", released in December 2022, presents President Yoon's vision of making South Korea a "global pivotal State" and developing corresponding diplomatic strategy with like-minded countries. Recently, in order to cope with various strategic and geopolitical challenges, Indo-Pacific strategies and new policies have been developed and advocated for by many countries around the world, including the Quad, the EU, and ASEAN.

In March 2021, Japan released the document Japan's Efforts for a "[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#)" based on

former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and concept. The US announced its new [Indo-Pacific](#) strategy in February 2022, and subsequently launched the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity" later in May of that same year. Finally, shortly after trilateral talks in Phnom Penh and the adoption of a [joint statement on US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership](#) in November 2022, where the leaders resolved with an "unprecedented level of trilateral coordination" to conduct an inclusive, resilient, and secure Indo-Pacific, South Korea finalized its first Indo-Pacific strategy document.

Despite the recently increasing importance of the concept of Indo-Pacific regional strategy, the term itself is not new. Countries such as Japan and Australia have officially used the idea for more than a decade. South Korea, by contrast, was defensive about publicly acknowledging its Indo-Pacific related stance, notwithstanding extensive cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries. The term 'Asia-Pacific' was more commonly used than 'Indo-Pacific,' and the previous administration's foreign policy strengthened relationships with ASEAN and India, but was limited to cooperation for economic prosperity, cultural and people-to-people exchanges, and non-traditional security. With its New Southern Policy and New Northern Policy, South Korea has kept a distance from both the US' Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Strategic ambiguity was, and still is, a longstanding diplomatic strategy of South Korea seeking security with the US and trade with China since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1992. For South Korea, it seems to be against its national interest to side explicitly with either its security ally or its major trading partner. In 2016 when South Korea agreed to deploy a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system, China imposed a wide range of [coercive measures](#) which resulted in a significant economic impact on tourism, cosmetics and retail operation. Accordingly, a worsening relationship and confrontation with either country is what South Korea wants to avoid. While

Australia also faced [retaliation](#) for raising security concerns about Huawei and demanding investigation into the origins of COVID-19, China's economic coercion practices on the country were not nearly as [dramatic or effective](#) as the ones South Korea had experienced. However, due to the lack of diversification of export markets as well as South Korea's and China's proximity and economic ties, South Korean industries are [highly dependent](#) on China for semiconductors, raw material, intermediate goods, and batteries — hence the greater importance of South Korea's relationship with China.

South Korea's first Indo-Pacific strategy contains implications for the US and China and strategic concerns about emerging geopolitical challenges. In 2022, the Korean Peninsula witnessed a new round of tension escalation as the leaders of both the US and China secured their positions. Two trilateral dialogues were held in five years in Madrid and Phnom Penh. In order to enhance economic security and strengthen deterrence, and also to align with the global framework of the Indo-Pacific region, the release of its Indo-Pacific strategy was timely and significant for South Korea.

The strategy seems to synchronize with that of the US and Japan in terms of pursuing a free and open Indo-Pacific in accordance with the rules-based international order and universal values, but there is a fundamental difference when it comes to curbing China's growing assertiveness and influence over the Indo-Pacific region. In its strategy document, the US harshly criticized China for “combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might,” seeking “to become the world's most influential power,” and “undermining human rights and international law.” Japan did not specifically mention China in its strategy released in 2021, but the [2022 National Security Strategy](#) identifies China's recent activities as “a matter of serious concern” and “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge,” and clearly states that “Japan will strongly oppose China's growing attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force.” In contrast, South Korea is more cautious and conciliatory, leaving room to cooperate

with China. The strategy emphasizes inclusiveness as one of the three principles of the strategy, defining China as a “key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific.”

Continuous strategic ambiguity is also found in South Korea's stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Compared to the previous administration, President Yoon [supports a stronger South Korea-US alliance](#) and [deepening of ties to NATO](#). Nevertheless, South Korea is still criticized for [its lukewarm attitude](#). Despite increasing pressure from NATO and appeals from Ukraine, South Korea maintains its policy not to directly supply weapons to Ukraine but to only provide humanitarian aid. Interestingly, South Korea sold [arms or related material to Poland](#) and [ammunition to the US](#) which was then used to provide military aid to Ukraine. This indirect supply was never acknowledged by South Korea.

The Yoon administration sends a [clear message](#) that South Korea will cooperate with all countries sharing its vision and principles and complying with international norms and universal values, strengthen a rules-based regional order, and embrace the institutional framework built among like-minded countries. This strategic intention undoubtedly demonstrates more clarity than the previous Moon administration's strategic ambiguity, but a certain ambiguity remains as the main principle of inclusiveness. Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific strategy was pursued in order to respond more actively to newly-raised strategic and geopolitical challenges, rather than to convey a mere strategy of containment against China.

For now, the new strategy has been endorsed by the [US](#) and taken less aggressively by [China](#), but as US-China rivalry intensifies, diplomatic pressure from both sides will get stronger, and a carefully balanced approach even with some clarity might not be enough. As the Koreas are in the geopolitical center of US-China rivalry, China demands that South Korea should be neutral with regard to the US, and the US wants South Korea to become an assertive ally and help to pressure China.

Regardless of strategic ambiguity or strategic clarity, South Korea should understand that the current priorities are to achieve stability and prosperity and to defend the country against North Korea's threats. Overarching importance lies in promoting solidarity with like-minded countries and expanding trilateral cooperation. South Korea's release of the strategy should be followed by reinforcing its own clear and independent vision on Indo-Pacific issues and demonstrating its willingness to implement them.

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