



The Republic of Korea: Finding Its Footing in the Indo-Pacific

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Chapter 4

President Lee Jae-myung and President Xi Jinping
at the China-ROK Summit (November 2025)

(Photo: Yonhap News Agency/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

In recent years, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has deepened its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. This engagement reflects both the ROK's identity as a middle power and a regional policy paradigm distinctive to the country. The ROK's Indo-Pacific policy has continued to evolve within the strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China. It is characterized by deliberately distancing the ROK from the power politics between these two great powers and by focusing on initiatives related to nontraditional security. This stance is consistent with the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity and with its longstanding regional policy paradigm. It is therefore not one that will be readily reversed.

Introduction

The ROK has, in recent years, deepened its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. In December 2022, the ROK unveiled its own regional policy concept: the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region. Subsequently, at the August 2023 Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral summit at Camp David, the three countries articulated the fundamental position that “as Indo-Pacific nations, Japan, the [ROK], and the United States will continue to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific based on a respect for international law, shared norms, and common values.”¹ Moreover, the ROK’s engagement has gradually taken on a military dimension as well. Since June 2024, the ROK has partnered with Japan and the United States to conduct Freedom Edge, an annual joint exercise aimed primarily at maintaining “peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula.” There are also indications that the ROK’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific is beginning to extend beyond the traditional Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral framework. For example, in November 2024, when the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus was convened in Vientiane, the ROK joined a five-country defense ministers’ meeting that built on the so-called “Squad” framework comprising Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines. As an extension of this, for the first time, ROK marines, alongside the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, participated in disaster-relief training during the U.S.-Philippines marine exercise Kamandag 9 beginning in late May 2025.

The ROK’s strategic interaction in the Indo-Pacific region can be understood as part of the broader trend of competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific, which is this volume’s central theme. Furthermore, the shift in ROK regional policy, from a primary focus on the issue of North Korea to the broader question of the regional order in the Indo-Pacific, may also signal the pluralization of ROK foreign and security policy itself.

What, then, is the ROK’s Indo-Pacific policy? In a strategic environment defined by U.S.-China rivalry, how does the ROK engage others and seek to ensure its own security? What are the distinctive features of its approach when compared with those of other regional states? This chapter addresses these questions, while outlining the historical context of ROK foreign and security policy. As the abovementioned developments suggest, the ROK’s Indo-Pacific policy has much in common with the policies of other regional

1) [U.S.] White House, “Camp David Principles,” August 18, 2023.

U.S. allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. The U.S.-ROK alliance is the cornerstone of the ROK's foreign and security policy. It is therefore only natural that the ROK would take into account alliance cooperation when developing its policy toward a region in which the United States has placed considerable strategic interest. Even so, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy does not always move in lockstep with U.S. strategy. On the contrary, the ROK is far more cautious than countries such as Japan, Australia, or the Philippines about joining the chorus of criticism of China over questions of the regional order in the Indo-Pacific. In this respect, similarities can be seen with Southeast Asian states' pursuit of "hedging" within the strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry. Underlying this basic posture is the ROK's distinctive regional policy paradigm, which has been shaped by its historical experience.

The ROK's efforts to maintain balanced ties with both the United States and China, while promoting strategic coordination with the United States within that framework, have resulted in an Indo-Pacific policy centered not on traditional security (where its conduct would tie directly into great-power politics) but on nontraditional security, such as poverty, public health, climate change, and disaster relief. These efforts are also rooted in the ROK's diplomatic identity as a middle power.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section addresses the concept of the middle power in international relations, arguing that, through processes of acceptance and internalization, this has become the ROK's diplomatic identity. The country's Indo-Pacific policy has evolved in a manner consistent with that identity. The following section describes the historical development of ROK regional policy dating back to the Cold War, with the aim of identifying the policy paradigm that has been carried through to the present day. Building on this foundation, the final section examines the process by which the ROK began its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific, while drawing links to the elements analyzed in the preceding sections, in order to elucidate the layered contexts reflected in the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy.

1. The ROK's Diplomatic Identity as a Middle Power

(1) Leaving Behind Its “Small State” Self-Image

“When whales fight, the shrimp’s back is broken.” This old Korean proverb is frequently invoked in ROK diplomatic discourse as a metaphor for the country’s geopolitical predicament. In today’s context, the “whales” are the United States and China fighting over regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. They may sometimes also include Russia and Japan as great powers in geographic proximity to the Korean Peninsula. The “shrimp,” fatally injured when caught up in the conflicts among great powers, is of course the ROK. Deeply ingrained in this metaphor is the traditional self-perception in ROK diplomacy of the country as a “small state,” a passive object of great-power politics.²

By any objective measure, however, today’s ROK is no longer a “small state.” In nominal GDP, it stands alongside Mexico, Australia, and Spain, ranking just below the G7 countries and the major emerging economies of China, India, Brazil, and Russia.³ The ROK’s military expenditure surpasses that of Australia and even G7 members Canada and Italy, standing on a par with Japan.⁴ Having undergone a period of rapid economic growth during the Cold War as part of the liberal bloc and subsequently attaining political democratization at around the end of the Cold War, the ROK had quietly grown into a country that no longer fit its traditional “small state” self-image.

From the latter half of the 2000s, the international relations concept of the “middle power” became a frequent topic of debate among the

2) Even today, the term “four neighboring powers” is frequently used in the ROK to refer to Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. This hints at a deeply rooted paradigm that is distinctive to ROK diplomacy, whereby the ROK views these four countries as great powers that exceed its national strength and seeks to define its strategic position in relation to them.

3) International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, 2025.

4) Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, 2024.

ROK academic community,⁵ in large part due to the expansion of the country's national power. The ROK had also just joined the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2009, taking its place among the world's major donor nations.⁶ Now that it was no longer a "small state," what role should the ROK play in the international community? It was natural that, in their search for an answer, academics and officials would draw heavily on middle-power theory, which offered insights into the diplomatic conduct of middle powers.

The middle-power concept in international relations evolved as a means of analyzing the roles of states that, while not "great powers" themselves, nevertheless have an undeniable influence on international developments. According to the conventional understanding, middle powers are neither "great powers" capable of single-handedly producing meaningful impacts

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- 5) For studies that analyze ROK diplomacy from the middle-power perspective, see Dlynn Armstrong-Williams, "South Korea as a Middle Power: The Growing Globalization of South Korean Foreign Policy in the 1990s," in *Transforming East Asian Domestic and International Politics: The Impact of Economy and Globalization*, ed. Robert W. Compton, Jr. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002); Jeffrey Robertson, "South Korea as a Middle Power: Capacity, Behavior, and Now Opportunity," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 151-174; Kim Woosang, "Korea as a Middle Power in the Northeast Asian Security Environment," in *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order*, ed. G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Choi Young Jong, "South Korea's Regional Strategy and Middle Power Activism," *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 23, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 47-67; Lee Sook-Jong, "South Korea as New Middle Power: Seeking Complex Diplomacy," EAI Asia Security Initiative, Working Paper 25 (September 2012); Jojin V. John, "Becoming and Being a Middle Power: Exploring a New Dimension of South Korea's Foreign Policy," *China Report* 50, no. 4 (2014): 325-341; Scott A. Snyder, ed., *Middle-Power Korea: Contributions to the Global Agenda* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2015); Lee Sook Jong, ed., *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Lee Seungjoo and Kim Sangbae, eds., *Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy: Between Power and Network* (Cham: Springer, 2022); Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); Sohn Yul, Kim Sangbae, and Lee Seungjoo, eds., *Hanguk ui junggyeon-guk oegyo: Yeoksa, iron, silje* [South Korea's middle-power diplomacy: History, theory, and practice] (Seoul: Myeongin Munhwasa, 2016); Kim Sangbae, Lee Seungjoo, and Chun Chaesung, eds., *Junggyeon-guk oegyo ui segye jeongchi: Geulrobeol, jijeok, guknae sanjung gujo sok ui daeeung jeonryak* [The world politics of middle-power diplomacy: Response strategies in the triple structure of global, regional, and domestic] (Seoul: Sahoe Pyeongron Academy, 2020).
 - 6) Joseph Nye also considered that the ROK was becoming "an important middle-ranking power" in 2009. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "South Korea's Growing Soft Power," *Project Syndicate*, November 10, 2009.

on international politics, nor are they resigned to being “small states” subject to the whims of great-power politics. They emphasize multilateral cooperation as the principal means of influencing international politics.⁷ Cooperation among middle powers sharing common purposes is considered to be especially effective. Typical middle-power diplomacy includes playing a leading role in mediating international disputes and shaping international rules, and contributing to the stability of the international order by promoting multilateral cooperation. Such efforts are deemed to have produced measurable results, particularly in the realm of nontraditional security, which sits outside the logic of great-power politics.⁸

Academics continue to debate how precisely to define what is and is not a middle power.⁹ Some are even critical of the analytical utility of the concept. Even so, in an ROK searching for a new national identity beyond its “small state” self-image, middle-power theory was an intriguing concept that presented a clear way forward. Before long, its perspectives came to be woven into ROK foreign policy.¹⁰

The ROK’s middle-power diplomacy is typically considered to have started under the Lee Myung-bak administration, which took office in February 2008.¹¹ Arguing that ROK diplomacy had been confined within too narrow a horizon, President Lee Myung-bak put forward the vision of a “Global Korea” and committed the country to actively investing diplomatic resources in tackling so-called “global issues” such as poverty, transnational crime, public health, and climate change. Numerous diplomatic initiatives followed under the banner of Global Korea, including the expansion of official development assistance to developing countries and the championing

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- 7) Robert O. Keohane offers a succinct definition: “a middle power is a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution.” Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 296.
 - 8) For the conventional understanding of the middle-power concept, see Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993); Andrew F. Cooper, “Niche Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview,” in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).
 - 9) Jeffrey Robertson, “Middle-power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2017): 355-370.
 - 10) Jeffrey Robertson, “South Korea and the Middle Power Revival School,” Korea Economic Institute of America, October 3, 2023.
 - 11) Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 193.

of “Green Growth,” a concept aimed at reconciling environmental protection with economic growth. What most symbolized the Lee administration’s middle-power diplomacy, however, was its hosting of major international conferences in successive years. The ROK hosted the G20 Leaders’ Summit in Seoul in 2010, co-hosted the High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness with the OECD Development Assistance Committee in Busan in 2011, and hosted the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul in 2012, leading multilateral cooperation in fields such as development assistance and nuclear nonproliferation.

These initiatives by the Lee administration were inextricably tied to the broader national objective of breaking with the traditional “small state” self-image, as clearly demonstrated by the remarks made by President Lee at a press conference on the ROK’s successful bid to host the G20 Leaders’ Summit:

During the past century, we suffered the pain of watching our destiny fall into the hands of world powers because we were too weak. [...] The Republic has now, however, become one of the leading players in the international community recognized by advanced countries. We have been satisfied with playing only a passive role in setting the international order, leaving it to other nations, but now Korea has emerged as a pacesetter in helping forge a new framework for the world order. [...] The nation is now at a historic junction. Through successfully hosting the meeting, the country will contribute to the common growth and progress of the world. And we have to take advantage of the occasion to bolster the status of the country as well. [...] As the prestige and international status of the Republic rise, its role and responsibilities will increase in the international community. It is quite natural for a major central player to support and contribute to the cause of the international community. The country is on the threshold of joining the group of advanced nations on the strength of its successful experience as a developing economy and as a newly emerging economic powerhouse. This allows the country to act as a bridge linking all the members of the G20.¹²

The subsequent Park Geun-hye administration, which took office in February 2013, continued to embed the middle-power perspective in the ROK’s foreign policy. An early indication of this was the inclusion of the

12) Lee Myung-bak, “Remarks at a Special Press Conference on the Successful Bid to Host the G20 Summit in Korea,” September 30, 2009.

commitment to “becoming a responsible middle-power country contributing to world peace and development” in the new administration’s list of priority policies.¹³ About six months into the administration, in September 2013, it succeeded in launching MIKTA, an informal intergovernmental consultative framework comprising Mexico, Indonesia, the ROK, Turkey, and Australia. At the time, the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs described MIKTA as “a mechanism for cooperation between key middle-power countries” that would help “resolve issues facing the international community and maintain world peace.”¹⁴

The driving figure behind middle-power diplomatic initiatives under the Park Geun-hye administration, including the launch of MIKTA, was Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se. In a newspaper essay published in October 2013, Foreign Minister Yun provided the following explanation to the public regarding the significance of middle-power diplomacy for the ROK. The aspiration he expressed—of leaving the ROK’s “small state” status behind, moving on from having its destiny dictated by others, and actively shaping the international order—echoes the remarks by President Lee Myung-bak quoted above:

Middle-power diplomacy, in light of the ROK’s position in the international community, is a means of opening new horizons for ROK diplomacy. [...] Middle-power diplomacy seeks to move us beyond our former passive position of accepting the existing international order and to take on the role of regime architect, good-faith mediator, and bridge for shaping new orders. Middle-power diplomacy is, as it were, a land-reclamation project under ROK diplomacy that reshapes the landscape of the international stage.¹⁵

That said, the perspective of a middle-power diplomacy focused on global issues was not the only defining aspect of the Park Geun-hye administration’s foreign policy. Rather, the president’s principal interest in diplomatic and security matters concerned regional policy, that is, the

13) [ROK] Gwangye bucheo hapdong [Jointly by relevant ministries], “Bak Geunhye jeongbu gukjeong gwaje” [Park Geun-hye government’s national policy tasks], May 28, 2013.

14) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Launch of MIKTA, a Mechanism for Cooperation between Key Middle-Power Countries,” September 26, 2013.

15) Yun Byung-se, “Junggyeon-guk oegyo ro gukje sahoe wisang nopinda” [Middle-power diplomacy as a means to raise the ROK’s standing in the international community], *The Korea Economic Daily*, October 7, 2013.

ROK's engagement in the surrounding region.¹⁶ Behind this lay not only tensions in Japan-China relations and North Korea's military activities at the time, but also the emergence of a rivalry between the United States and China. The growing prominence of great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific was already beginning to cast a shadow over the ROK's still-nascent middle-power diplomacy.

(2) Middle-Power Activism amid Great-Power Competition

In November 2012, a month before the presidential election, Park Geun-hye laid out her vision of foreign policy in an essay titled "A Plan for Peace in North Asia," published in the *Wall Street Journal*. The essay's central thrust was to advocate that the ROK, China, and Japan should overcome disputes relating to the understanding of history and build relationships of trust in order to advance regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. The passage that bears citing here, however, is one in which President Park argued that "a forward-looking U.S.-China relationship" was essential for peace and stability in East Asia. It vividly encapsulates the anxiety that had taken hold in the ROK as signs of U.S.-China rivalry began to emerge:

I do not believe that a rising China and America's pivot to Asia are mutually exclusive. Rather, more transparent actions will serve as building blocks for a more secure and prosperous Northeast Asia. Both Korea and Japan maintain critical alliances with the United States while simultaneously sustaining closer cooperative partnerships with China. Our ties with these two powers are not premised on choosing one over the other.¹⁷

What is expressed here is a sense of crisis—that the ROK's position, dependent on the United States for security and on China economically, would be untenable if U.S.-China rivalry deepened. The point that this was a challenge shared by Japan and the ROK hints at an expectation that the two countries might cooperate in addressing it. This view of U.S.-China rivalry as a serious constraint on ROK diplomacy was not confined to Park

16) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 171.

17) Park Geun-hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia: Cooperation among Korea, China and Japan Needs a Correct Understanding of History," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2012.

Geun-hye personally; it was widely shared across the ROK.¹⁸

If the ROK were to refuse to “choose one over the other” between the United States and China, it would first need a diplomatic concept that could avert a scenario of U.S.-China confrontation. In fact, the Park Geun-hye administration’s flagship foreign-policy concept, “trustpolitik,” which framed mutual trust among states as indispensable for regional peace and stability, carried just such an implication. Yet as the very fact that the ROK had to fall back on concepts such as “transparency” and “trust” plainly indicates, the influence the ROK could bring to bear in averting U.S.-China confrontation was inherently limited. As a result, the ROK directed its diplomatic energies toward avoiding entanglement in U.S.-China rivalry as much as possible and toward balanced relations with both.

There was scope for such diplomacy to bear fruit, at least on issues in which the United States and China had shared interests. The Park administration’s efforts to secure cooperation from both the United States and China for the denuclearization of North Korea, for example, might be rational under the international circumstances of the time. When it came to issues, such as the South China Sea, on which U.S. and Chinese positions sharply diverged, however, balancing relations with the two was not an easy task. Although the Park administration adopted a policy of avoiding public statements on the South China Sea issue to the greatest extent possible,¹⁹ maintaining such a stance entailed considerable difficulty in relations with the United States. At the joint press conference following the U.S.-ROK summit in October 2015, President Barack Obama issued the following pointed remarks about the Park administration’s stance, an episode that symbolized the challenges for ROK diplomacy under a strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry:

18) For example, when it was reported that, at a meeting of ROK foreign missions’ chiefs held in Seoul, Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se remarked that “[I]t could not be a headache or dilemma to receive love calls from both the U.S. and China. It could be, so to speak, a blessing,” it provoked sharp public criticism in the ROK, after which discussion of this kind largely subsided. “S. Korea Not in Dilemma over Rivalry between U.S., China: FM,” Yonhap News Agency, March 30, 2015; Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 217.

19) Terence Roehrig, “Caught in the Middle: South Korea and the South China Sea Arbitration Decision,” in *Asian Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 21, ed. Lee Seokwoo and Lee Hee Eun (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 57.

[T]here's no contradiction between the Republic of Korea having good relations with us, being a central part of our alliance, and having good [relations] with China. I think as I communicated to President Park, the only thing that we're going to continue to insist on is that we want China to abide by international norms and rules. And where they fail to do so, we expect the Republic of Korea to speak out on that, just as we do.²⁰

From a theoretical perspective, the growing rivalry between the great powers could pose a fundamental constraint on the ROK's still-nascent middle-power diplomacy. In fact, as noted above, President Park focused her attention on the realm of regional policy in light of the surrounding strategic environment. Even so, this did not cause middle-power discourse to fade in the ROK; rather, the opposite occurred. Driven by an urgent sense that the country must by all means avoid once again being subject to the whims of great-power politics, discussion of the role of the middle power in shaping the regional order grew all the more impassioned.²¹ A representative argument can be found in a contemporary essay analyzing the South China Sea issue from an ROK perspective. The piece sketched a picture in which regional states were connected to the United States as the security hub and to China as the economic hub in a hub-and-spoke pattern, and argued for the necessity of middle-power cooperation, on the grounds that linkages among the spoke countries could open up a path for them to lead the shaping of the regional order:

Indonesia, Australia and Korea can develop and deepen spoke-spoke networks and raise their common voice on regional affairs. In turn, this development will decrease the leeway for hub countries [the United States and China]. They will have less chance to unilaterally shape the regional order, potentially disregarding the strategic interests of regional medium and small countries. This is an important pre-condition for middle powers' role in the region.²²

20) [U.S.] White House, "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of the Republic of Korea in Joint Press Conference," October 16, 2015.

21) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 194.

22) Lee Jaehyon and Bong Youngshik Daniel, "South Korea's Strategic Distance from the South China Sea," in *The South China Sea: Middle Power Perspectives* (Australian National University, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, September 2016), 15.

After being adopted as an official policy term under the Park administration, the middle power concept gradually disappeared from ROK policy documents over the course of subsequent administrations. This should not, however, be read as a decline in the utility of middle-power theory for ROK diplomacy. Rather, it is better understood as a reflection of the fact that its essence has become so internalized as part of ROK diplomatic identity that there is no longer any need to invoke the concept explicitly.²³ The address by Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, a member of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, at the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024, reads as a textbook expression of middle-power thinking. Sounding the alarm over the global trends of resurgent great-power politics and retreating multilateralism, Foreign Minister Cho declared the ROK's commitment to being a "champion" of the multilateral system and passionately argued that under the Yoon administration's vision of being a "Global Pivotal State," the ROK would play the roles of "facilitator" for peacebuilding around the world, "supporter" of the economic development of the Global South, and "initiator" in shaping international norms and governance arrangements for emerging technologies.²⁴

As discussed below, it was under the Moon Jae-in administration, which followed the Park administration, that the ROK began its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Put another way, the broad area now encompassed by the term "Indo-Pacific," which includes Southeast Asia and Oceania, had originally been conceived of in ROK diplomacy as being part of the global domain and not directly tied to issues specific to the Korean Peninsula; that is to say, the area was viewed as being the target of the ROK's middle-power diplomacy. In that sense, today's ROK Indo-Pacific policy was built on a foundation of middle-power diplomatic efforts. These contextual factors explain why the ROK has anchored its Indo-Pacific policy in nontraditional security and occasionally signals interest in cooperation with fellow middle powers such as Australia and Indonesia.

The ROK's Indo-Pacific policy, however, reflects not only the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity but also a distinctive regional policy

23) Monica S. Jeong, "Rethinking Middle Power as Identity: The Case of South Korea," *Journal of East Asia Security* 1, no. 1 (May 2025): 13-17.

24) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks by H.E. Cho Tae-yul, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea: General Debate, 79th Session of the UN General Assembly," September 27, 2024.

paradigm shaped by historical experience. The next section therefore charts the development of ROK regional policy over time and illustrates the substance of that paradigm.

2. The Structure of the ROK's Regional Policy Paradigm

(1) The Security Bond of the Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral: The Framework of Deterrence against North Korea

Since the Cold War, ROK regional policy has been organized primarily around responding to the threat posed by North Korea. The principal instrument has, of course, been the U.S.-ROK alliance. When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, the United States, determined to defend the ROK, organized a UN command and intervened militarily, saving the country from an existential crisis. After an armistice agreement was concluded in July 1953, the United States maintained the United Nations Command to monitor the armistice and entered into the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, continuing to commit itself to the ROK's defense. Even today, the presence of 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in the ROK and the United States' enduring commitment to deploy sufficient forces to complete the defense of the ROK in a contingency provide the foundation of deterrence against North Korea.

For the U.S.-ROK alliance to fully perform its function of deterring North Korea in peacetime and responding effectively to it in a contingency, Japan in fact plays a critically important role.²⁵ The ROK government has itself spoken plainly about this circumstance, as illustrated by the following passage in President Yoon Suk-yeol's address at the August 2023 Liberation Day commemoration. Speaking on the eve of the Camp David Japan-U.S.-ROK summit, President Yoon urged the public to understand the importance of cooperation with Japan, drawing attention to the fact that UN Command bases located in Japan are deeply tied to the ROK's security:

25) For more on this, see Ishida Tomonori, "Beigun kichi ga tsunagu Nihon to Kankoku: Chosen hanto yuji to 'Nichi-Bei-Kan' anpo renkei" [Japan and the ROK as connected by U.S. military bases: Japan-U.S.-ROK security ties in a Korean contingency], in *Kankoku to tsunagaru* [How does Japan redefine what Korea means?], ed. Asaba Yuki (Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 2024).

The seven rear bases provided to the United Nations Command by the government of Japan serve as the greatest deterrent which keeps the North from invading the South. A renewed North Korean invasion will trigger an automatic and immediate intervention and retaliation by the UN Command, and the UN Command-rear in Japan is sufficiently equipped with necessary land, sea and air capabilities. The UN Command is a great example of international solidarity that has played a key role in firmly safeguarding the Republic of Korea's freedom "under one flag."²⁶

President Yoon was thus referring to the military arrangement, dating back to the Cold War, by which a portion of U.S. bases in Japan serve as rear support hubs for UN Command forces engaged in defensive operations on the Korean Peninsula in a contingency.²⁷ To put it another way, the ROK's foreign and security policy, which is anchored in the U.S.-ROK alliance and focused primarily on the threat posed by North Korea, has fundamentally depended on Japan's cooperation in a contingency. Today, with the security environment around the ROK growing ever more severe, there is all the more reason for the ROK to maintain this framework of deterrence against North Korea, without letting it weaken. These dynamics emanating from the U.S.-ROK alliance form the backdrop to the ROK's deepening Indo-Pacific engagement, its advancement of trilateral Japan-U.S.-ROK security cooperation, and its gradual embrace of military cooperation with select countries such as Australia and the Philippines.

That being said, the dynamics of the U.S.-ROK alliance do not place unlimited constraints on the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy. As noted earlier, they largely function within the ROK's broader strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China. This is borne out by the fact that the ROK remains extremely cautious on issues on which U.S. and Chinese positions sharply diverge, such as the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. On such matters, it hesitates to go beyond statements of principled positions on the rule of law, such as the importance

26) Yoon Suk-yeol, "Je78juneon gwangbokjeol gyeongchuksa" [Address commemorating the 78th Liberation Day], August 15, 2023.

27) The seven U.S. military bases in Japan designated as UN bases are Camp Zama, Yokosuka Naval Base, Sasebo Naval Base, Yokota Air Base, Kadena Air Base, Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, and White Beach Naval Facility (as of December 2025).

of freedom of navigation, peace and stability in the region, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.²⁸

(2) The Evolution of Nordpolitik in the Post-Cold War Period: The Framework of Engagement with North Korea

Throughout the Cold War, the ROK's regional policy was fundamentally defined by the paradigm of deterrence against North Korea. With the end of the Cold War, however, it came to be characterized by a new paradigm. The fundamental transformation of the international environment afforded ROK diplomacy room to construct a framework of engagement with North Korea.

Seizing on the international momentum toward détente, the ROK established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 and with China in 1992. The driving force behind these changes was the “Nordpolitik” (Northern Policy) put forward by the Roh Tae-woo administration. In July 1988, President Roh issued a special declaration with a view to ending North-South antagonism, calling for opening channels between North and South, supporting the improvement of North Korean relations with Japan and the United States, and announcing the ROK's intent to normalize diplomatic relations with socialist states. This served as the catalyst for active diplomatic contact among the six countries: the two Koreas plus Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. As part of these developments, North and South Korea were simultaneously admitted to the United Nations in 1991, and at the end of that year, the “Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North” was signed.

The ROK carried forward the successful experience of Nordpolitik into subsequent diplomatic efforts. Engagement with China and Russia with the aim of bringing the North to the diplomatic table became the ROK's standard

28) Adam P. Liff, “Beyond Territorial Defense...? The U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK Alliances and a ‘Taiwan Strait Contingency,’” *Pacific Review* 38, no. 3 (2025): 443-472. In recent years, former senior ROK military officials, among others, have argued that the ROK should accommodate U.S. requests to permit U.S. Forces Korea to deploy outside the Korean Peninsula, taking into consideration a potential Taiwan contingency scenario. “U.S. Seeks Strategic Flexibility against Rising China,” *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 6, 2025. However, the ROK has shown little inclination to view a Taiwan contingency scenario as a matter of its own immediate concern, as evidenced, for example, by Lee Jae-myung's reiteration during the May 2025 presidential campaign of his personal view that the ROK should not be involved in Taiwan Strait issues. “U.S. Experts Voice Concerns over Lee Jae-myung's Foreign Policy Stance,” *Chosun Daily*, May 16, 2025.

approach. Notwithstanding different emphases between conservative and progressive parties, in the post-Cold War period, the ROK can generally be said to have developed a regional policy that was based on a creative combination of elements of the Cold War-era framework of deterrence against North Korea and the post-Cold War framework of engagement with it. The same logic applied to the Park Geun-hye administration's announcement of the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), which was aimed at reinitiating inter-Korean relations after the collapse of the Six-Party Talks framework among the two Koreas, Japan, the United States, China, and Russia.

Park Geun-hye had referred to NAPCI even before her election to the presidency.²⁹ Its substance, however, was fleshed out in detail only around the time of her inauguration in February 2013.³⁰ The specifics are set out in an April 2013 essay by First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kyou-hyun in the ROK domestic journal *Oegyo* [Foreign Relations].³¹ As suggested by Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se's later contribution to *Global Asia*, an English-language essay apparently based on Kim's piece,³² the Kim essay served in effect as a quasi-official document explaining the Park administration's foreign policy.

In an essay titled "The Park Geun-hye Government's Foreign Policy," Vice Minister Kim Kyou-hyun pointed out that "issues of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia are intimately interrelated" and argued that, in order to create an international environment that would push North Korea toward denuclearization, the ROK "must formulate a common strategy with relevant countries, especially major regional actors like the United States and China, and build trust among the two Koreas and surrounding stakeholders." He set as an objective "wisely overcoming the various conflicts that exist among the surrounding core stakeholder countries, such as the

29) Park Geun-hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia."

30) Lee Jong-won, "Kankoku Paku Kune seiken no Hokuto Ajia heiwa kyoryoku koso (NAPCI): Kankoku no midoru pawa ron to chiikishugi gaiko no bunmyaku o chushin ni" [Analysis of Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) by the Park Geun-hye administration: From the perspective of middle power theory and regionalist diplomacy in the ROK], *Ajia Taiheiyō Tokyū* [Journal of Asia-Pacific studies], no. 28 (March 2017): 15.

31) Kim Kyou-hyun, "Bak Geunhye jeongbu ui daeoe jeongchaek" [The Park Geun-hye government's foreign policy], *Oegyo* [Foreign Relations], no. 105 (April 2013).

32) Yun Byung-se, "Park Geun-hye's Trustpolitik: A New Framework for South Korea's Foreign Policy," *Global Asia* 8, no. 3 (September 2013).

United States, China, Japan, and Russia, in order to construct a cooperative Northeast Asian order.” As the means to that end, he laid out the concept of “expanding multilateral cooperation among Northeast Asian states and creating venues for dialogue and cooperation that can alleviate conflicts,” proposing an approach of “accumulating small but meaningful habits of cooperation in nontraditional security fields beneficial to all parties: energy, logistics, the environment, nuclear safety, counter-terrorism, narcotics, and disaster relief” as a first step toward building trust. It was, in effect, a vision of multilateral regional cooperation that combined Nordpolitik with the logic of middle-power diplomacy.

Beginning with President Park’s visits to the United States in May 2013 and to China the following month, the ROK government devoted considerable diplomatic effort to securing the support of relevant countries for NAPCI. Despite this, the initiative failed to gain the momentum needed to come to fruition and produced no notable results. One reason was that the United States was wary of an initiative that included China as a partner.³³ Once Japan-ROK relations became deadlocked over disputes around the understanding of history and Russia unilaterally declared the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the initiative effectively ceased to have any viable basis.

As its initial vision of multilateral regional cooperation reached an impasse, the Park administration shifted its regional policy toward bilateral approaches, while keeping the management of the North Korean problem at its core. The first focus was diplomacy aimed at advancing relations with China. The highlight came in September 2015, when President Park accepted China’s invitation to attend the commemoration of victory in the war against Japan held in Tiananmen Square and stood alongside President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin to view the military parade. Behind such efforts lay the expectation that China would exercise its influence to constrain North Korea, which continued to engage in military provocations. That expectation, however, soon turned to disappointment. In response to North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016, the ROK pressed China for a UN Security Council sanctions resolution, but China’s response was tepid throughout.³⁴

As the Park administration’s hopes for Chinese engagement on the North Korea problem rapidly faded, it tilted toward strengthening the

33) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 179; Lee, “Kankoku Paku Kune seiken no Hokuto Ajia heiwa kyoryoku koso (NAPCI),” 19.

34) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 182.

U.S.-ROK alliance, agreeing with the United States in July 2016 to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, long sought by the U.S. side, with U.S. Forces Korea.³⁵ China, meanwhile, viewed the THAAD deployment in the ROK as part of a U.S. containment strategy and responded with a series of retaliatory economic measures against the ROK. China-ROK relations rapidly chilled as a result.³⁶

The cumulative experience of the Park administration thus revealed the difficulty, in a strategic environment of accelerating U.S.-China rivalry, of pursuing a regional policy that was based on traditional paradigmatic lines with an exclusive focus on Northeast Asia. The sense of impasse this generated would in turn produce greater dynamism in ROK diplomacy, with the search for new strategic horizons.

3. The ROK's Venture of Expanding Its Strategic Horizon to the Indo-Pacific

(1) The New Southern Policy: A Major Turning Point

As evidenced by the launch of the New Northern Policy as one of its central diplomatic initiatives, President Moon Jae-in was quite eager to pursue an engagement policy toward North Korea from the outset of his inauguration in May 2017. According to the Moon Jae-in Government's Five-Year Plan of State Affairs, a compilation of the administration's policy directions, the New Northern Policy was a "continental strategy" aimed at "strengthening cooperation across Eurasia," with concrete content including the promotion of "South Korea-North Korea-Russia trilateral cooperation" and "participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative."³⁷

The Moon administration's diplomatic initiative of note here, however, is the New Southern Policy, advanced as the "maritime strategy" paired with

35) Roehrig, "Caught in the Middle," 106; Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 182-184. For an analysis of the significance of the THAAD deployment within the U.S.-ROK alliance, see Choi Yong Sub, "Keeping the Americans in: The THAAD Deployment on the Korean Peninsula in the Context of Sino-American Rivalry," *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 4 (2020): 632-652.

36) Jung H. Pak, "Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China's Approach to South Korea," Brookings Institution, July 2020.

37) [ROK] Gukjeong gihoek jamun wiwonhoe [State affairs planning advisory committee], *Mun Ja-in jeongbu gukjeong unyeong 5gaenyeon gyeheok* [Moon Jae-in government's five-year plan of state affairs], July 2017, 140.

the New Northern Policy.³⁸ It was, in effect, the genesis of the ROK's policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region today. ROK regional policy, hitherto built around the North Korea issue, opened up a markedly new strategic horizon at this point: the Indo-Pacific.

The essence of the New Southern Policy is captured succinctly in the electoral pledges put forward by the Democratic Party for the presidential election. Among its foreign-policy commitments was a pledge to "elevate diplomacy with ASEAN and India to the same level as the four neighboring powers in economic, political, and strategic terms."³⁹ This was the first time that anything other than the so-called "four neighboring powers" (Japan, the United States, China, and Russia) was presented as principal targets of ROK foreign policy.⁴⁰ It is also notable that Oceania was excluded from the New Southern Policy's geographic scope. In light of the substance of the ROK's bilateral relationships, it would have been natural for Australia and New Zealand to fall within the policy's scope.⁴¹ One possibility, albeit a purely speculative one, is that the ROK was concerned that inclusion of these countries as cooperation partners might have strategic implications with regard to China.⁴²

38) Ibid., 140. In the same document, alongside the New Northern Policy and the New Southern Policy, the Moon administration also set out a "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation" concept aimed at "institutionalizing minilateral cooperation among major Northeast Asian states." Its specific aims include "strengthening ROK-China-Japan trilateral cooperation," "the sustained promotion and reinforcement of MIKTA," and "exploration of various forms of middle-power cooperation within East Asia."

39) Democratic Party of Korea, *Je19dae daetongryeong seongeo jeongchaek gongyakjip: Nara reul nara dapge* [19th presidential election policy pledge collection: A nation worthy of being called a nation], April 2017, 235.

40) Lee Jong-won, "Kankoku Mun Je-in seiken no chiikishugi gaiko to 'shin Nanpo seisaku': 'Indo Taiheiyo senryaku' to 'Ittai Ichiro' no hazama no midoru pawa gaiko" [Moon Jae-in's regionalist diplomacy and the New Southern Policy: An attempt for middle power diplomacy between FOIP and BRI], *Ajia Taiheiyo Tokyu* [Journal of Asia-Pacific studies], no. 39 (March 2020): 63.

41) Kim Joon-hyung, a Moon foreign-policy adviser and Handong Global University professor (at the time) who served on the State Affairs Planning Advisory Committee that drafted the "Five-Year Plan for the Administration of State Affairs," explained the Moon administration's foreign-policy concept in a November 2017 essay. While noting the importance of securing the ROK's "strategic position amid the U.S.-China conflict," he candidly stated that "Korea should strengthen its cooperation with Australia and New Zealand as much as possible," in addition to ASEAN and India. Kim Joon-hyung, "The Moon Administration's Multilateral Regional Diplomacy: An Initiative of Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility," *ROK Angle*, no. 165 (November 2, 2017).

42) For a similar observation, see Peter J. Dean, *The South Korea-Australia Partnership: State of Play* (United States Studies Centre, October 2024).

It was President Moon himself who drove the New Southern Policy. He chose his November 2017 state visit to Indonesia as the venue for unveiling the policy. In his speech, President Moon emphasized that the policy rested on three pillars of “people,” “peace,” and “prosperity,” and stressed that elevating relations with ASEAN was the policy’s principal focus.⁴³ Immediately after Indonesia, President Moon paid state visits to Vietnam and the Philippines. He also paid further state visits to Vietnam and Singapore in 2018 and to Brunei, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos in 2019 ahead of the November 2019 ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit, thereby visiting all (then) ASEAN member states. During this period, he also paid a state visit to India in 2018. Thus, President Moon had personally enacted the New Southern Policy’s commitment to substantially elevate ROK relations with ASEAN and India.

A key factor behind the Moon administration’s adoption of the New Southern Policy is the shock of China’s harsh economic retaliation against the deployment of THAAD in the ROK. The Democratic Party’s abovementioned electoral platform sets out a policy direction of “actively developing ASEAN and India as our country’s trade and investment markets, on a par with Japan and China, in order to address protectionism and to escape excessive economic dependence on China.”⁴⁴ To put it another way, when the ROK perceived the risks of “excessive” economic dependence on China and looked for new economic partners, the first names that came to mind were ASEAN and India. As this suggests, the New Southern Policy was fundamentally an initiative driven by economic considerations. At least at its starting point, security considerations were comparatively thin.

A second background factor is wariness about being asked to align with other countries’ policy concepts for the Indo-Pacific. Particularly in mind was Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept. On November 9, 2017, the day before the announcement of the New Southern Policy, Adviser to the President for Economic Affairs Kim Hyun-chul, who was the policy’s lead architect and accompanied President Moon on his state visit to Indonesia, gave a press briefing in Jakarta in which he explained the aim of the New Southern Policy. This came in the wake of the November 6 U.S.-Japan summit, at a time when the Trump administration was gradually

43) [ROK] Blue House, “Han-Inni bijeuniseu poreom gijo yeonseol” [Keynote speech at the Korea-Indonesia Business Forum], November 10, 2017.

44) Democratic Party of Korea, *Je19dae daetongryeong seongeo jeongchaek gongyakjip*, 236.

leaning toward supporting the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept. The explanation was as follows:

ASEAN is a strategic crossroads through which one-third of global maritime traffic passes. It is where continental and maritime forces meet. For this reason, Japan is attempting to construct a kind of diplomatic line called the Indo-Pacific line, connecting Japan, Australia, India, and the United States, but we do not need to be incorporated into it. We should not be part of such an adversarial structure. Instead, we must make strategic use of this strategic crossroads. As a middle power and as a bridging state, there is much we can contribute.⁴⁵

Adviser Kim's remarks make clear that an essential foundation of the New Southern Policy was the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity. To put it another way, the New Southern Policy was the ROK's own way of practicing middle-power diplomacy, developed as part of its efforts to seek "strategic" engagement in the Indo-Pacific while distancing itself from competition among the great powers. In that sense, it was only natural that, as a body of concrete initiatives, the New Southern Policy should have focused exclusively on cooperation in the field of nontraditional security.⁴⁶

(2) Prudent Coordination with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

As the Trump administration began to articulate its own Indo-Pacific strategy, alignment between the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the ROK's New Southern Policy became an issue between the two governments. At the joint press conference following the U.S.-ROK summit in late June 2019, President Moon stated, "Under the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness and transparency, we have agreed to put forth harmonious cooperation between Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy."⁴⁷

45) [ROK] Blue House, "Gim Hyeoncheol gyeongje bojwagwan beuriping" [Briefing by adviser to the president for economic affairs Kim Hyun-chul], November 9, 2017.

46) Oh Yoon Ah, "Change or Continuity? Seoul's Approach to Southeast Asia under the New Southern Policy," *Korea Observer* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 103-126.

47) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Press Conference Following Korea-U.S. Summit," June 30, 2019.

Yet the ROK's New Southern Policy never came to be assimilated into the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Fact Sheet published in November 2020 as the outcome of working-level consultations between the Moon and Trump administrations enumerates a cooperation agenda in nontraditional security fields, such as development cooperation, energy security, climate change, public health, counternarcotics, cybersecurity, and disaster response, that are aligned with the New Southern Policy's framework of "people," "peace," and "prosperity."⁴⁸ Evident throughout is the ROK's deep-seated reluctance to engage in traditional security matters in the Indo-Pacific. As an instrument through which the ROK, as a middle power, could maintain its distinctive position between the United States and China, the New Southern Policy did indeed perform its function.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration, which took office in May 2022, built on the previous administration's achievements under the New Southern Policy, while explicitly shifting the center of gravity of its North Korea policy from engagement to deterrence and clearly articulating a posture of close coordination with the United States on its Indo-Pacific policy. In its Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, announced in December 2022, the Yoon administration declared its determination to "uphold international norms and strengthen a rules-based order built on the universal values including freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights," and set out a clear position of promoting "solidarity with nations sharing these universal values" and of opposing "unilateral change of status quo by force,"⁴⁹ thus demonstrating a distinct shift in diplomatic stance from the previous administration.

At the same time, the Yoon administration maintained the previous administration's emphasis on relations with ASEAN, as illustrated by President Yoon's introduction of the outline of his Indo-Pacific Strategy at the November 2022 ASEAN-ROK Summit, prior to its formal release, and the concurrent launch of the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative.⁵⁰ The upgrading of ASEAN-ROK relations to a Comprehensive Strategic

48) [U.S.] Department of State, "Fact Sheet: The United States of America and The Republic of Korea on Working Together to Promote Cooperation between the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the New Southern Policy," November 13, 2020.

49) [ROK] Government, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, December 2022, 8-9.

50) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI)," April 11, 2023.

Partnership at the October 2024 ASEAN-ROK Summit was the fruit of cumulative efforts originating in the New Southern Policy.

The Yoon administration also explicitly broadened the geographic scope of the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy and announced its intention to strengthen relations not only with Australia and New Zealand but also with Pacific Island countries. Emblematic of these efforts were the ROK's holding of the inaugural Korea-Pacific Islands Summit in May 2023, as well as its continuous engagement with the framework of NATO Indo-Pacific Partners (IP4) comprising Japan, the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand, beginning with the inaugural summit in late June 2022.

That said, it would be wrong to conclude that the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy underwent an irreversible qualitative change under the Yoon administration. Rather, even with the Yoon administration's hard shift toward U.S. alliance cooperation, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy continued to evolve within the strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China, underscoring the continued salience of the ROK's traditional regional policy paradigm. It is telling that in the description of the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, the Yoon administration positioned China as "a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region" and explicitly stated that "our inclusive Indo-Pacific Strategy neither targets nor excludes any specific nation."⁵¹ On issues that China designates as "core interests," such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, even the Yoon administration remained extremely cautious about going beyond statements of principled positions on the rule of law.⁵²

It is premature to conclude that, under the Yoon administration, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy extended into the realm of traditional security. A more accurate reading is that the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy continues to evolve within the framework of middle-power diplomacy.

51) [ROK] Government, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, 11, 14.

52) Liff, "Beyond Territorial Defense..."

Conclusion

Notwithstanding different emphases between conservative and progressive parties, in the post-Cold War period, the ROK can generally be said to have developed a regional policy that was based on a creative combination of elements of the Cold War-era framework of deterrence against North Korea and the post-Cold War framework of engagement with it. To put it another way, the evolution of the ROK's regional policy in this period was premised on maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and with China and was focused above all on addressing the problem of North Korea. This was made possible by the relative stability of great-power relations around the Korean Peninsula in the post-Cold War period.

Today, far from receding, the threat from North Korea has only grown more serious. From the ROK's perspective at least, the policy frameworks of deterrence and engagement with North Korea remain meaningful. Yet under the strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry, sustaining a traditional regional policy that combines these two frameworks has become increasingly difficult. As a U.S. ally, moreover, the ROK is constantly called upon to engage with the Indo-Pacific in ways that meet U.S. strategic requirements.

The ROK, however, does not have the option of stepping into the same arena as the two great powers and basing its engagement in the Indo-Pacific around power politics. Attempting to do so would expose it to the frontlines of U.S.-China rivalry and would clearly accelerate Chinese support for North Korea.⁵³ In short, participating in power politics under the strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry is beyond the ROK's current national capacity.

For this reason, it was natural that, when the ROK sought to expand its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific while carefully avoiding entanglement in U.S.-China rivalry, it concentrated on initiatives in nontraditional security fields. Such a positioning suited the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity and was deemed to be compatible with its post-Cold War regional policy paradigm based on a combination of elements from its frameworks of deterrence against North Korea and engagement with it.

In sum, it has not been long since the ROK began its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and the country is still in the process of finding its footing in the region. Looking ahead, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy is likely to continue to fluctuate in response to partisan divisions at home and

53) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 220.

developments in U.S.-ROK and China-ROK relations abroad.⁵⁴ Still, there is little prospect of the ROK leading the United States' regional allies in deciding to militarily confront China and orienting its engagement in the Indo-Pacific around power politics. The conclusion of this chapter, rather, is that, circumstances permitting, the ROK will continue to develop its Indo-Pacific policy as an extension of middle-power diplomacy.

54) For example, the impeachment motion submitted by opposition parties following President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law in December 2024 initially included the following language, which foreshadows the possibility of such fluctuation: "[President Yoon Suk-yeol], under the guise of so-called values diplomacy, has disregarded the geopolitical balance, treated North Korea, China, and Russia as adversaries, clung to a peculiar Japan-centered foreign policy, appointed individuals inclined toward Japan to key government posts, and, through such policies, has invited isolation in Northeast Asia, triggered the risk of war, and abandoned national security and the duty to protect the people." "Ya 6dang baluihan 'Yun Seokyeol daetongryeong tanhaek sochu an' (jeonmun)" [Six opposition parties' 'impeachment motion against President Yoon Suk-yeol' (full text)], *The Chosun Ilbo*, December 5, 2024.