



Tilting to US, S Korea ends era of ‘strategic ambiguity’

Seoul’s responses to Chinese maritime actions in 2023 will show exact nature of the clear but delicate tilt

By **DAVID SCOTT**

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US President Joe Biden speaks as South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol listens during a news conference at the People’s House inside the Ministry of National Defense in Seoul’s Yongsan District, May 21, 2022. Photo: Yonhap

With the year-end release of its Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, South Korea [adopted](#) specific Indo-Pacific terminology. And it’s worth studying in some detail.

The key takeaway: The SFPIIP and President Yoon Suk-yeol have signaled an end to South Korea’s “[strategic ambiguity](#)” under the previous president, Moon Jae-in. Seoul is pivoting away from Beijing and toward Washington – delicately, but clearly.

This “Free, Peaceful Prosperous Indo-Pacific” formulation from South Korea converges with the US and Japanese “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) terminology enunciated since 2016-17.

The key shared element is the SFPPIP assertion that “in realizing the vision for a free Indo-Pacific, the Republic of Korea is committed to partnering with like-minded countries that share the values of freedom, rule of law and human rights as well as international norms.” This indicates a normative base for foreign policy.

Much of the SFPPIP is uncontroversial, such as cooperation across the Indo-Pacific on economic, environmental, counterterrorism and international crime issues.

The SFPPIP identifies ASEAN as a “key partner” for peace and prosperity and notes wider formats for economic cooperation such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Regional and Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

However, the SFPIPPR, released December 28, 2022, also displays sharpness of purpose on the security front.

First, it announces pursuit of “partnerships with minilateral groupings” – specifically, the South Korea-Japan-US trilateral, a future Australia-South Korea-US trilateral and the AP4 (Australia-Japan-New Zealand-South Korea) [NATO Partners](#) format.

Second, the SFPPIP singles out continued participation in the (US-led) RIMPAC exercises, as well as Pacific Dragon (Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, United States) naval exercises.

On the minilateral front, the SFPPIP says that South Korea will “gradually expand” cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) between Australia, India, Japan and the United States.

During 2022, Chinese state media attacked South Korea over such participation – warning in [April](#) with regard to the Quad, in [July](#) with regard to the AP4 format at NATO and trilateral cooperation with Washington and Tokyo and in [August](#) regarding the Pacific Dragon exercises in the Western Pacific.

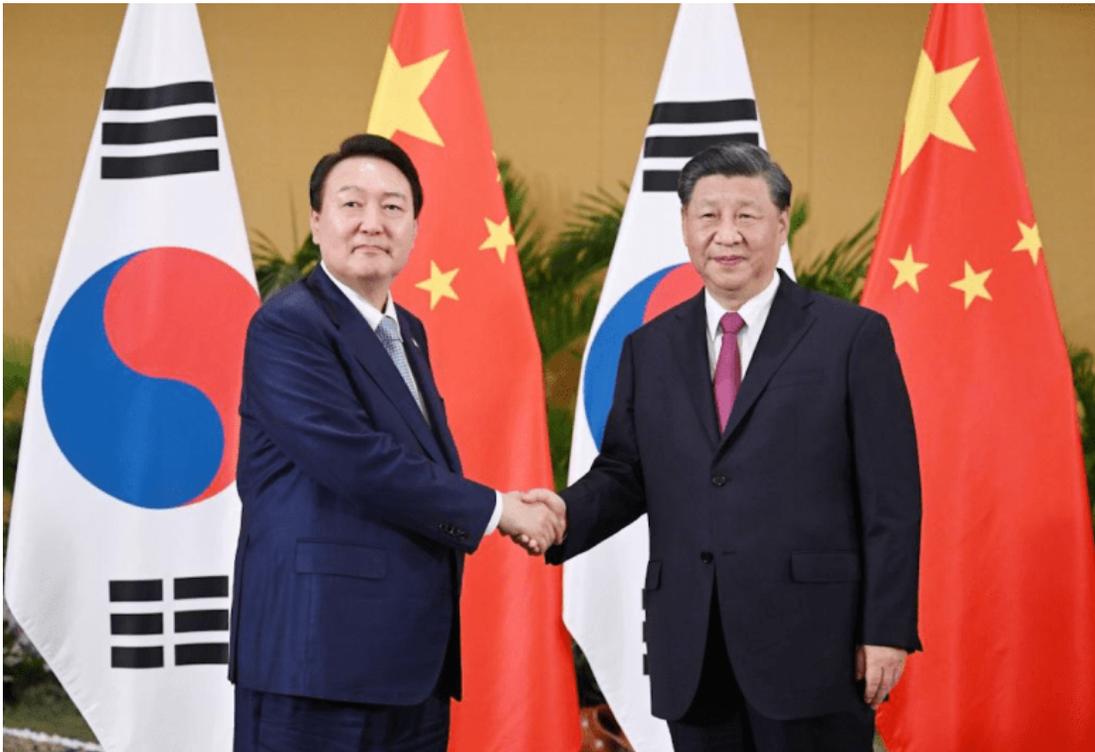
On the bilateral front, the SFPPIP is careful but revealing. It states:

Our inclusive Indo-Pacific Strategy neither targets nor excludes any specific nation. We will work with every partner that is aligned with our vision and principles of cooperation.

This is conditional inclusivity; China falls short in specific normative values enunciated in the SFPPIP vision and principles. Mounting [distrust](#) of China in South Korea cuts across the SFPPIP linkage that “our partnerships will be based on strong mutual trust.”

In bilateral relations, the SFPPIP focus is to “continue to strengthen our alliance with the United States.” It identifies Canada as “a comprehensive strategic partner with common values” and Australia as “a comprehensive strategic partner” with which South Korea further “deepen[s] our ties by identifying new cooperation agenda in the areas of national defense.”

It makes a similar pledge to “advance our special strategic partnership with India, a leading regional partner with shared values.” Concerning Japan, despite previous frictions, it aspires to “seek a forward-looking partnership that supports our common interests and values.” Security convergence with those countries is predicated by their shared values; namely democracy, the rule of international law, and norms embedded in the “free” component within the SFPPIP formulation.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol in Bali, Indonesia, November 15, 2022. Photo: Xinhua / Zhang Ling

In the wake of a [strained](#) Yoon-Xi Summit in November, the SFPPIP’s China section came out as one sentence. It proposes that with China,

a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region, we will nurture a sounder and more mature relationship as we pursue shared interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity, guided by international norms and rules.

This language is limited and revealing. To hope for a sounder and more mature relationship in the future implies the current relationship is rather unsound. A “partner for peace” is strained given that the SFPPIP’s “peace” section pinpoints the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait as (China-related) flash points threatening peace, with freedom of navigation specifically called for. Talk of guidance via international norms and rules raises the question of a China not guided by universal norms and rules.

“A partner in prosperity” points to potential economic cooperation – for which the SFPPIP advocates resuming the China-Japan-South Korea Summit, which last met in 2019, and reinforcing the CJSK Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, to focus on green and digital transitions. This reflects the weakness and marginality of the CJSK mechanism.

Some China-related barbs are discernible in the SFPPIP. On the one hand, the SFPPIP contains no reference to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, from which South Korea has [distanced](#) itself. On the other hand, the SFPPIP describes South Korean participation in the launching of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022 – an initiative [denounced](#) in China – as “building economic security networks ... in support of open and free trade.”

The SFPPIP states that, “to stabilize supply chains of strategic resources, we will seek cooperation with partners with whom we share values.” This values-driven rationale points to the Indo-Pacific supply chain initiatives developed by the Quad countries and, again, [denounced](#) by China. Trilateral cyber-security cooperation with the United States and Australia is another China-related issue arising in the SFPPIP.

Very different responses to the SFPPIP have come from Washington and Beijing. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [immediately](#) welcomed the whole SFPPIP and its focus on shared “universal values” underpinning cooperation.

In contrast, China’s foreign ministry merely “noted” the SFPPIP while [warning](#) about Korea being involved in “exclusive coteries,” leaving the Chinese state media to [criticize](#) the SFPPIP as South Korea “pivoting towards the US.”

The biggest areas of ambiguity in the SFPPIP rest with South Korea’s reiteration of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. South Korea

could, like Washington, consider raising those two issues at regional platforms like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.



Naval forces of South Korea, the United States, Japan and Australia engaged in a joint maritime exercise in the Pacific waters near Guam in September 2020. Photo: US Navy

Regarding the South China Sea, Seoul is unlikely to carry out freedom of navigation exercises, although it could consider giving verbal public support to such US operations. Seoul's increasing deployments and exercises in the West Pacific with the United States and like-minded states such as Japan, Australia and Canada could also be extended into the South China Sea.

Calls by Seoul for observance (meaning China's observance) of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea could advance the SFPPIP call for the rule of law in the South China Sea.

Sidestepping the still-uncomfortable US-China confrontation, Seoul could quietly strengthen the maritime capabilities of South China Sea littoral states such as Vietnam and the Philippines which are most under threat from China.

Regarding the Taiwan Strait, although it is unlikely Seoul will deploy its naval units on transit operations there, South Korea could consider giving public verbal support to such US transit operations.

South Korea could strengthen some links with Taiwan. Military-to-military links are probably too much to expect, given the furor that would arise from China. However, the two could maintain political-economic links, including supporting Taiwan's application for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Seoul's responses to Chinese actions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait during 2023 will show the exact nature of the delicate tilt signaled in South Korea's new Indo-Pacific strategy.

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