



SOUTH KOREA'S INDO-PACIFIC PIVOT STRATEGY

BY DAVID SCOTT

David Scott (davidscott366@outlook.com) is member of the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC) and is a prolific writer on Indo-Pacific geopolitics (www.d-scott.com/publications).

2022 ended with South Korea [adopting](#) specific Indo-Pacific terminology with the Dec. 28 release of its *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (SFPPIP). The key takeaway: The SFPPIP, and President Yoon Suk Yeol, signal an end to South Korea's "[strategic ambiguity](#)" under the previous president, Moon Jae-in. Seoul 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) formulation(s) 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 was uncontroversial, such as cooperation across the Indo-Pacific on economic, environmental, counterterrorism, and international crime issues. The SFPPIP identified ASEAN as a “key partner” for peace and prosperity and noted wider formats for economic cooperation like Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Regional and Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

However, the SFPIPPR also displayed sharpness of purpose on the security front. First, it announced that it would “pursue 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 singled out continued participation in (the US-led) RIMPAC, and Pacific Dragon (Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, United States) naval exercises. On the minilateral front, the SFPPIP announced South Korea would “gradually expand” cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

In 2022 Chinese state media had 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 was careful but revealing. It stated that:

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 was 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 whom South Korea further “deepen[s] our ties by identifying new cooperation agenda in the areas of national defense.” It made 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.

In the wake of a [strained](#) Yoon-Xi Summit in November, the SFPPIP’s China section was one sentence. It proposed 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 was 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” was strained given that the SFPPIP’s “peace” section pinpointed 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” pointed to potential economic cooperation; for which the SFPPIP advocated 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 contained no reference to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which South Korea has [distanced](#) itself from. On the other hand, the SFPPIP announced South Korean participation in the launching of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022 as “building economic security networks...in support of open and free trade,” an initiative [denounced](#) in China. The SFPPIP outlined that “to stabilize supply chains of strategic resources, we will seek cooperation with partners with whom we share values.” This values-driven rationale pointed 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 was another China-related issue arising in the SFPPIP.

Very different responses ensued from Washington and Beijing to the SFPPIP. 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 its 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.

Regarding the South China Sea, Seoul is unlikely to carry out freedom of navigation exercises, though 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 like Japan, Australia, and Canada could also be extended into the South China Sea. Seoul calling for observance (i.e., by China) 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. Side-stepping the still-uncomfortable US-China confrontation, Seoul could quietly strengthen the maritime capabilities of South China Sea littoral states like Vietnam and the Philippines most under threat from China.

Regarding the Taiwan Strait, it is again unlikely for Seoul to deploy its naval units on transit operations there, though South Korea could consider giving public verbal support to such US transit operations. South Korea could strengthen some links with Taiwan, though. Military-to-military links are probably too much to expect, given the furor from China. However,

they could maintain political-economic links, including supporting Taiwan's application for membership of 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 up the exact nature of South Korea's delicate tilt signaled in its new Indo-Pacific strategy.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.