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## South Korea's Cautious but Delayed Response

Kuyoun Chung, Kangwon National University

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**Author:**

Kuyoun Chung, Kangwon National University

**Editors:**

Paul van Hooft and Tim Sweijts

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While European partners have increasingly launched their own Indo-Pacific strategies, South Korea is falling behind in making its own outlook on the region. Indeed, South Korea has been reluctant to embrace the term 'Indo-Pacific' as it does not want to be seen as taking a side between the US and China. Seoul has attempted to hedge the risk of the US-China competition and maintain its own foreign policy autonomy. Besides, the Moon Jae-in Administration's foreign policy priority of establishing the Peace Regime in the Korean peninsula requires a working relationship with China - one of the few benefactors of the North. As the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy was framed with anti-China connotations under the Trump administration, South Korea could not help but sustain its hedging strategy, albeit with 28,500 American troops stationed in the South, US nuclear extended deterrence assured, and close military cooperation coordinated with the US. Seoul's hedging has thus isolated itself as a weak link in the US-led alliance system in East Asia.

At the outset, the European Union also feared that strengthening alignment with the US would alienate China. However, shifting power distribution and a declining liberal order in the Indo-Pacific poses a challenge to the EU, whose economic development and geopolitical relevance is closely intertwined with the changing status quo in this region. Furthermore, China's so-called 'mask diplomacy' amid the Covid-19 pandemic and its human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong have dispelled the EU's optimism on EU-China relations, forcing it to reconfigure its approach toward China.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, considering that both the EU and South Korea hope the Indo-Pacific region will remain free, open, and prosperous without being defined by US-China competition, both can cooperate to mitigate maritime challenges and protect the global commons. Given the maritime nature of the Indo-Pacific, the EU and South Korea share a range of common interests in the region of South and Southeast Asia, as well as on the nontraditional security issues of protecting the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), combating human trafficking, conducting anti-piracy campaigns, and preserving maritime diversity and fisheries management, which can serve as focal points to both start their dialogue and further multilateralize cooperation. Given that South Korea's New Southern Policy (with its geographic reach in part of the Indo-Pacific region) is likely to survive the change of administration in 2022 with bipartisan support, this multilateralized cooperation on maritime security is expected to be resilient for the time being.

However, South Korea's hedge is less likely to transform into overt balancing against China over the short-term via multilateralizing cooperation with European partners. Seoul's cautious approach originates from its desire to forge an inclusive regional order, while multilateral balancing with its ally and partners might spell the emergence of competing blocs in the Indo-Pacific. Such a decoupling will ultimately provide an unfavorable strategic environment in which South Korea can maintain foreign policy autonomy and accomplish its foreign policy priority – reconciliation with North Korea and establishment of the Peace Regime on the peninsula. Such a cautious approach, however, might hold up the formation of a functioning alignment against the revisionist rising power, which might already be overdue.

1 Frédéric Grare and Manisha Reuter, "Moving Closer: European Views of the Indo-Pacific," European Council on Foreign Relations (September 2021).

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## Convergence and Divergence in Understanding China and the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy

South Korea understands the US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy as a balancing strategy between the US and its allies to contain China. Therefore, openly embracing the Indo-Pacific strategy would complicate Seoul's position with Beijing and Washington, two of its largest trading partners and the two stakeholders in the question of peace and security in the Korean peninsula. Furthermore, South Korea is concerned that cooperating with the US on the Indo-Pacific strategy in a multilateral manner would further intensify strategic competition between blocs led by the US and China, which might lead to another cold war. Therefore, South Korea just bilaterally synergized its own New Southern Policy with the US Indo-Pacific strategy, imposing restraint in openly discussing military affairs in this region in its attempt to avoid stirring up China's concern on encirclement. For this reason, South Korea expects a more inclusive regional order in the region, which could even include China.

Meanwhile, the EU officially released its Indo-Pacific strategy on September 16, 2021. While the twenty-seven member states of the EU do not share the same strategic imperative to engage in the Indo-Pacific region, those who individually presented their own Indo-Pacific strategies – France, Germany, and the Netherlands – commonly emphasize the inclusive aspect of the strategy that China should be regarded as a partner rather than competitor. A more genuine motive behind this emphasis on inclusivity, however, might be either their reluctance to avoid questioning China in public or their lingering expectation for China to remain a responsible stakeholder in the region.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the EU is likely to pursue more multifaceted engagement with China, encouraging Beijing to play a constructive role in maintaining peace in the region while also confronting disagreements, such as in human rights and rules-based order. At the same time, the EU attempts to diversify partnership with like-minded countries beyond China as the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy specifically makes references to Taiwan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea to achieve its own interests amid the US-China rivalry.<sup>3</sup> This shows the EU is not exactly aligned with the US approach of 'strategic competition' with China as it invests more in partnership with those middle powers than with the US.

In this regard, multilateralizing cooperation might theoretically reduce the risk of escalating competition between the US and China as long as it intends to implement an inclusive regional cooperation that can accommodate China. In reality, however, China perceives attempts of multilateralization as hostile to its national interests and counter to China's rise. Indeed, China's understanding of multilateralism is different from that of the rest of the world. As much as China advocates the existing global norms only to the extent that they do not interfere with China's interests,<sup>4</sup> China would not accommodate any emerging multilateralization as long as it intends to project a liberal rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, in his remarks at the 16th G20 Leaders' Summit in October 2021, Xi Jinping mentioned "forming exclusive blocs and even drawing ideological lines will only cause division and create more obstacles",<sup>5</sup>

2 Frédéric Grare and Manisha Reuter.

3 See: Paul Van Hoof, Benedetta Girardi, and Tim Sweijts, "Guarding the Maritime Commons: What Role for Europe?" (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), February 2022).

4 Hung Tran, "Xi Jinping at the Virtual Davos: Multilateralism with Chinese Characteristics" Atlantic Council (January 26, 2021)

5 Jinping Xi, "Acting in Solidarity for a Shared Future" Remarks at Session I of the 16<sup>th</sup> G-20 Leaders' Summit (October 30, 2021).

South Korea is concerned that cooperating with the US on the Indo-Pacific strategy in a multilateral manner would further intensify strategic competition between blocs led by the US and China, which might lead to another cold war.

which reveals China's antagonism against evolving coalition-building trends in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the currently emerging coalition took a flexible form between NATO and a coalition of the willing during the 2003 Iraq war, it is likely to be perceived by China as a collective defense rather than collective security since the common denominator of those coalitions is their commitment to human rights, democracy, multilateralism, and liberal rules-based order, which prevent the spread of China's revisionism and authoritarian practices.<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, any attempt of multilateralizing cooperation is likely to intensify US-China competition, polarize the domains in which they compete, and increase the risk of escalation.

For instance, preparation for future warfare in the Western Pacific might require countries to coordinate with one another more tightly. The US is preparing a new warfighting concept as the increasing A2/AD capability of China seems to be bringing an end to the US command of global commons. Furthermore, joint all-domain command and control – the US Department of Defense's vision to connect its weapons platform and communication system in a seamless fashion, which will require all the stakeholders – will have both residents and non-residents in the Indo-Pacific region join its information and data-sharing network, cooperate on redistributing global force posture, and conduct joint exercises under a new warfighting concept. In this context, coordinating with the US on the deterrence and engagement vis-à-vis China would make it difficult for the regional countries to send a coherent signal to China that they would prefer an inclusive order. As the long-term US-China strategic competition is expected to bring neither US nor Chinese dominance, but rather a future of competing spheres of influence in the system, it will likely force regional countries to choose between the system operationalized by either side.

## Role of Multilateralization in the Maritime Domain

Multilateralizing cooperation allows participants to pool their capacity and capability to address a common pursued goal, as well as to further strengthen the legitimacy of their cooperation. Given the maritime nature of the Indo-Pacific region, maintaining physical maritime security is a precondition for addressing any regional issues. The security of the sea lanes of communication for safe passage of commercial vessels, energy resources, freedom of navigation, safety of the exclusive economic zones of each sovereign state, maritime biodiversity and fisheries management, anti-piracy, and undersea cable and digital connectivity are all important elements of the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific to sustain economic prosperity and stability. Neither the EU nor South Korea want this region to be securitized by a great power competition, but instead hope the region is sustained by a rules-based order that accommodates their interests. Hence, it is plausible to cooperate and multilateralize their shared interests.

However, given the limited capability and capacity of both, it is necessary to optimize their choice of domains and invite other partners. To date, existing maritime cooperation in the region has become both bilateral and multilateral, and encompasses only limited domains, as displayed in Table 1. Among the existing maritime cooperation, strategic dialogue allows participants to share a broader vision with which they can shape the rules-based order in the

6 Linde Desmaele, Maximilian Ernst, Tonfi Kim, Ramon Pancheco Pardo, and Michale Reiterer. "The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Prospects for Cooperation with South Korea," KF-VUB Korea Chair Report, Brussels School of Governance, Center for security, Diplomacy and Strategy (September 2021).

maritime domain. However, current strategic dialogues mainly revolve around US leadership, as represented by the Quad. Additionally, joint exercises between countries can strengthen the interoperability and development of shared practices in the maritime environment. This actual maritime security cooperation takes place on the field to gauge the real capacity they can direct to multilateral cooperation. They can also anticipate which element of capability is needed to enhance cooperation in the future.

**Table 1. Major Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific<sup>7</sup>**



Types	Title of Activities	Participants
<b>Joint Exercises</b>	Nichi-Gou/Trident Haedoli/Wallaby Malabar RIMPAC Jeanne D'arc Balikatan/Shoulder-to-Shoulder Talisman Sabre Cobra Gold	Japan-Australia South Korea-Australia India, US, Japan Multilateral US, Japan, France, Australia US-Philippines Multilateral Multilateral
<b>Strategic Dialogue</b>	Quad Trilateral Security Dialogue Shangri-la Dialogue	US, Japan, Australia, India Japan, Australia, US Multilateral
<b>Maritime Surveillance</b>	Prevention of Ship-to-ship Transfers with North Korean-flagged Vessels	Japan, Canada, New Zealand, France, Australia
<b>Capacity Building</b>	Capacity Building Assistance	Japan, ASEAN, US

Having maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region does not indicate that the current status of cooperation is complete. As exemplified by the Quad, it intends to spur collective action within members and between other regional countries in various domains that need to be addressed. Hence, both South Korea and the EU need to identify the specific domains of cooperation and strike a balance in eliciting cooperation from China, while at the same time displaying a unified attitude against violation of rules-based order in the region.

## Potential Areas of Cooperation

Given the existence of twenty-seven member states that do not share either a common interest or threat perception of China, it would be much more effective for EU member states to operate minilaterally based on their specific goals. For instance, those who do not possess the naval capacity to operate with freedom of navigation, for instance, may not be inclined to join such a hard security issue in the region. However, a broader vision of building free, open, and rules-based order in the region should be shared in advance.

<sup>7</sup> Maritime cooperation occurred in 2021, as updated by the author. Nicholas Millward, Caitlin Doornbos, and John Bradford, "Maritime Issues in the Indo-Pacific: Building a Shared Vision of 'Free and Open'" (Pacific Forum, March 2020), 4, [https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/issuesinsights\\_Vol20WP1-1.pdf](https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/issuesinsights_Vol20WP1-1.pdf).

Both the EU and South Korea prioritize maintaining the stability of the region for its economic security, and acknowledge the significance of sea routes through the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean. While South Korea is reluctant to make an explicit reference to freedom of navigation and its adherence to UN convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) amid US-China competition, South Korea's New Southern Policy emphasizes the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes, sustainable management of maritime resources, and protection of the ocean environment, which demonstrates Seoul's allegiance to the international legal maritime regime. Considering this preference, it would be instrumental to hold a multilateralized maritime legal dialogue on the sustainable management of the Indo-Pacific region for each of those issues, share the best practices among regional stakeholders, and internalize rules-based management of maritime security issues.

Another related area of cooperation would be information sharing and maritime awareness. As many experts already suggested, the Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) project could be a good platform in which the EU and South Korea could cooperate multilaterally. As the main goal of this project is to improve information sharing and maritime awareness among participants and to prepare crisis management in a maritime domain, this precondition should be addressed by the EU and South Korea before implementing their own regional strategies. This year's mutual experience in the SEACAT exercise serves as a good example for conducting multilateral maritime security operations in the region. Not only does such information sharing serve as an opportunity to narrow down the perception gap on the changing regional security landscape in peacetime, but it also functions as a basis of effective coordination among participants during regional crises.

In short, neither South Korea nor their European partners want to antagonize China in the short-term; instead, they want to build a more inclusive regional order that is not defined by strategic competition between the US and China. Hence, those suggested areas of multilateralized cooperation that initiate a maritime legal dialogue and increase maritime awareness would be an ideal point for both to better understand the current maritime environment and be prepared for peaceful conflict resolution. However, both also share a vision that the Indo-Pacific region should be under liberal rules-based order, which has been undermined by China's revisionist behaviors. In this context, South Korea's own foreign policy priority – North Korea – and its drive to maintain foreign policy autonomy will not only delay the formation of viable coalitions that prevent the decline of the liberal order, but will also isolate itself from the coalition-building process that constitutes a long-term regional architecture. Seoul needs to broaden its strategic outlook in the Indo-Pacific region and understand that its strategic relevance and economic development are mostly nested within the liberal rules-based order, of which decline cannot be defensible without multilateral effort.



The Hague Centre  
for Strategic Studies

**HCSS**

Lange Voorhout 1  
2514 EA Hague

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