

Dynamic Middle Power

Exploring South Korea's Response to the Military Rise of China

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The rapid military rise of China and its contempt for the established 'rules-based system of international order' have created an atmosphere of insecurity and instability in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, the United States (US), Japan, India and Australia have been promoting the 'Indo-Pacific strategy'. Meanwhile, despite being a close military ally of the US and a 'middle power', South Korea has maintained a largely ambiguous position on the Indo-Pacific strategy. However, South Korea could adopt a more active engagement with 'like-minded' middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region for maintaining stability and solving the disputes in a peaceful manner. Being an export-oriented economy and a divided nation, South Korea would probably be the worst affected in any military confrontation between the US and China. This article endeavours to explain South Korea's response to the military rise of China, as well as explore the benefits of Seoul's more active and dynamic 'middle power diplomacy' in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: South Korea; China; United States; Indo-Pacific strategy; middle power diplomacy

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INTRODUCTION

The world is witnessing a profound geopolitical transformation as the Indo-Pacific region is emerging as the major theatre of global power and military dominance. The rapidly changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific has increased pressures and dilemmas for the 'middle power' countries in the region.¹ Some of them, such as India, Japan and Australia, have been building new partnerships to adapt to the emerging geopolitical situation in this part of the world. In recent years, South Korea has also been asserting itself as a middle power nation.² Due to its increased economic and military capabilities, as well as enhanced 'soft power' through the popularity of South Korean popular culture, called 'Korean Wave' or *Hallyu*, South Korea's influence has certainly grown to that of a middle power. As a result, South Korean diplomacy is currently gearing up to meet the new challenges thrown up by major geopolitical shifts in the region. While South Korea's continued national division and perennial threats of another major war with North Korea have been difficult diplomatic tasks to handle,³ China's 'rise' and the relative decline of the United States' (US) power have further complicated the matter. Any major conflict in the region or blocking of the shipping lanes would have a detrimental impact on the export-oriented economy of South Korea.⁴

The rapid military rise of China and its contempt for the established 'rules-based system of international order' have created an atmosphere of insecurity and instability in the Indo-Pacific region. In order to counter China's increasing hegemony in this region, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) countries, namely, the US, Japan, India and Australia, have been promoting the 'Indo-Pacific strategy'. Indeed, the term 'Indo-Pacific' is now being frequently used in official documents and speeches of leaders of the Quad. However, despite being a close military ally of the US, South Korea has maintained some sort of ambiguity on the Indo-Pacific strategy. The previous Yoon Suk Yeol administration (2022–2025) in South Korea did launch its own strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, but it was still reluctant to openly condemn China's military expansion in the region.⁵

Interestingly, some South Korean analysts consider the idea of Indo-Pacific as a 'containment of China' strategy.⁶ Moreover, the approach of the current Lee Jae Myung administration (since June 2025) in Seoul towards Beijing appears to be very cautious. This is illustrated by the fact that it tried to play down a recent comment by its own foreign minister on China's aggressive behaviour in the Northeast Asian region.⁷ Further, in

January 2026, South Korea reiterated its stand on 'One China' policy and did not support Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks that Tokyo might get involved militarily if there is an armed conflict between China and Taiwan.⁸ It is rather interesting that South Korea, a treaty ally of the US, maintains a different view over Taiwan. South Korea's dilemma on the Indo-Pacific strategy emanates from the fact that it is heavily dependent on the US for security reasons, and on China for economic reasons. Being a relatively smaller nation which has historically been an arena of contestations among the big powers in the region, Koreans have to maintain a difficult balance between these big powers for their national survival and security.

China's rapid rise as a military and economic power has initiated a range of academic debates regarding the response of other nations in the region. According to some scholars, such as David C. Kang, China's rise would probably be peaceful as the countries of Southeast and East Asia have been trying to accommodate and not balance the rise of this Asian giant.⁹ However, other scholars are quite pessimistic about the consequences of China's rise as it may trigger a war between China and the US for dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. According to John J. Mearsheimer, China's rapid economic and military rise would lead to a Sino-American rivalry for hegemony and dominance in Asia and he asserts, 'To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully'.¹⁰ Yet, some scholars also argue that the US and China would avoid a 'Thucydides Trap' that may lead to a major military conflict between these two big powers.¹¹

Under these circumstances, South Korea's response to China's challenge to the rules-based order in the region, as well as the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, has been ambiguous, which is contrary to Seoul's claim of being a middle power nation.¹² The available literature on South Korea's 'middle power diplomacy' towards the fast-changing geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific region has largely characterised it as 'paradox', 'mismatched', 'ambivalent', 'incomplete', 'over', and there is a need to 'rethink' on Seoul's middle power behaviour.¹³ However, simultaneously, South Korea's stand on China's military expansion has also been changing. In recent years, South Korea has been increasingly facing challenges from China's aggressive behaviour and anti-China sentiment has risen among the South Korean people.¹⁴ Evidently, China has been trying to appropriate Korean history and cultural symbols, and also been encroaching into South Korean maritime sovereignty.

The emergence of the second Donald Trump administration in the US in January 2025 has also increased apprehensions in Seoul about Washington's

security commitment to its allies and partners in Asia. In particular, Trump's remark on North Korea as a 'nuclear power' has raised eyebrows in South Korea.¹⁵ The exclusion of the issue of Pyongyang's denuclearisation in the official security documents released by both the US and China in 2025 is indeed a matter of deep concern for Seoul.¹⁶ The US is also expecting South Korea for the 'modernisation' of their military alliance to not only deter North Korean threats but to also counter China's military expansion.¹⁷ Therefore, it is pertinent for South Korea to cooperate with other 'like-minded' middle power countries in the Indo-Pacific region in order to cope with the new geopolitical reality and to maintain peace in this part of the world. A robust engagement with other middle powers would also help Seoul in its quest for exercising 'strategic autonomy' in the milieu of rising Sino-American rivalry. This article is an effort to explore the possibilities and benefits of Seoul's more active and dynamic middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region in the backdrop China's military rise.

SOUTH KOREA'S ASSERTION AS A 'MIDDLE POWER' COUNTRY

The exact definition of 'middle power' remains a contested issue in international relations. However, middle powers are those countries which are in between great powers and weaker countries of the world. Although middle powers do not have the capacity to determine the rules of international politics, they do play an important role in influencing regional and global power dynamics. Middle powers act as peacebuilders and mediators for conflict resolution; advocate for a rules-based international system; work for the protection of human rights and environment; and promote increased interdependence among nations. However, despite their crucial role in international relations, discussions on middle powers have remained marginal in mainstream international relations theory. The major perspectives on world affairs largely focus on dominant powers and tend to ignore middle powers—which mostly deal with 'soft issues'.¹⁸

The emergence of South Korea on the world stage as an economic and cultural power, along with substantial military and technological superiority, has increased the pride of the nation, which now considers itself as a middle power. Although the concept of 'middle power' is still mired in controversies and there is no universally accepted definition for it, South Korea can still be categorised as a middle power nation on the basis of its economic and military capabilities. The geographical and population size of South Korea limits its rise as a global power. However, it can be regarded as a country

sharing some commonalities with several middle-ranking states, like Canada, Germany, Australia, Turkey, Mexico, Japan and Indonesia. In recent decades, South Koreans have become more confident in dealing with foreign nations and expect their country to be treated with respect and honour in the international community.

The fast economic development in South Korea since the 1960s, and 'democratic consolidation' in the country since the late 1980s, has led to Seoul becoming more assertive in its foreign policy goals.¹⁹ This new-found confidence in South Korea has been instrumental in its contribution in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations. Also, Seoul has been providing official development assistance (ODA) to several developing countries across the world. Indeed, as a middle power, South Korea not only sees itself as a peacebuilder in Northeast Asia but also an arena of cooperation among the major powers in this region. Further, South Korea has been at the forefront of efforts to counter nuclear weapons development by the North Korean regime. Seoul has also been promoting the idea that reunification of the Korean Peninsula would bring peace and prosperity to the entire region. It believes that this would not only end eight decades of ideological and military conflict on the Korean Peninsula but would also help to build trust among the major powers in Northeast Asia.

In recent years, South Korea has hosted several multilateral forums. It has also been at the forefront to promote sustainable development and 'green technologies'. Environment has emerged as an important agenda for South Korea. As a country which lacks most of the natural resources which are crucial for industrial development, South Korea has been investing in research on alternative sources of energy, recycling of resources and environmental protection. South Korea has also been disseminating its experience of economic development to other developing countries of the world through its Knowledge Sharing Programme, which has contributed to its rise as a role model for poor and developing economies. Moreover, South Korea has been focusing on non-traditional security threats in the region, including the rise in international terrorism, cybercrimes and threats from religious fundamentalism.

CHANGING POWER DYNAMICS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND SOUTH KOREAN DIPLOMACY

As mentioned earlier, historically, the Korean Peninsula's unique geostrategic location made it an arena of rivalry between various powers in the region.

Being surrounded by big powers, Korea often became a victim of big power rivalry and was sarcastically called 'a shrimp surrounded by the whales'. In historical times, Korea was a Chinese vassal state and was engaged in a 'tributary relationship' with this 'Middle Kingdom'. In return for having a subordinate position in this Sino-centric regional order, Korea was able to maintain its independence and cultural identity. However, the rise of Japan as an imperialist power and its forcible opening up of Korea in 1876 through the 'Treaty of Ganghwa', and later the defeat of China in Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), brought the Korean Peninsula under the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945).

The defeat of Japan in World War II also could not bring peace and self-rule to the Koreans as their country, again, became an arena of contestation between the Allied Powers for ideological and regional domination. Subsequently, the country was divided into North and South Korea along the 38th parallel by the erstwhile Soviet Union and the US in 1945. Later, during the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1953), another world war could have been triggered as the big powers confronted each other indirectly and through proxies for the control of the Korean Peninsula. While China and Soviet Union supported Pyongyang, the US and other Western countries sent their troops to defend Seoul during this armed conflict between the two Korean states. The Korean War came to a halt through an armistice agreement, which did not lead to a peace treaty and has kept the two Koreas technically at war with each other. The constant threat of a new confrontation on the Korean Peninsula has led to heavy militarisation on both sides of the demilitarised zone (DMZ), which now separates the two Korean states.

In recent years, the rapid economic and military rise of China is threatening the status quo established in the post-World War II period. In the backdrop of China's '(re)rise', the Korean Peninsula is again emerging as an arena of contestation among the big powers in the Indo-Pacific region. To some scholars, confrontation between the US and China seems inevitable as both powers aspire to dominate the region. According to John J. Mearsheimer, the re-occurrence of any military conflict between North and South Korea could drag China and the US in a war against each other, similar to what happened during the Korean War in the 1950s.²⁰ As a result, the conflict on the Korean Peninsula may trigger a new competition for power and dominance among the big powers. As a middle power which is located at the epicentre of continental and maritime boundary in the Indo-Pacific region, South Koreans are indeed very sensitive about the fact that their country sits on the fault line of fast-changing geopolitical configuration in this part of

the world.²¹ Under these circumstances, South Korea's response to any new military alliance or regional geostrategic architecture is very calculated and measured. Therefore, South Korea has largely refrained from taking sides and has remained largely silent on the controversial issues in the Indo-Pacific region. This is also evident from the fact that South Korea has not taken any concrete stand on the newly emerging Indo-Pacific strategy.

CHINA'S MILITARY RISE AND SOUTH KOREA

In the historical period, the Korean Peninsula shared a unique association with China, often referred to as the 'lips and teeth' relationship. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, tens of thousands of Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) fought in support of the North Korean communist regime. During the Cold War period, Seoul and Beijing were in different ideological camps and did not have diplomatic relations. However, after the end of the Cold War, Sino-South Korean relations normalised in 1992. Within years, South Korea–China bilateral trade relations witnessed dramatic changes and increased by leaps and bounds. Hundreds of big and small South Korean companies moved to China, benefitting from the vast Chinese market, cheap labour and natural resources. Currently, tens of thousands of tourists from China visit South Korea every year and contribute to the development of South Korean economy. China has also emerged as an important market for South Korean cultural products as the popularity of *Hallyu* has spread into the world's second-most populated country. In addition, a large number of South Korean students are enrolled in Chinese universities.

This deepening engagement of South Korea with China has raised serious apprehensions in the US. According to Ellen Kim and Victor Cha, 'South Korea is a key U.S. ally in Asia, yet Seoul's growing closeness to Beijing amid emerging tensions and competition between the United States and China complicates U.S. strategy as it rebalances to the region'.²² Domestic political factors, such as leadership change in South Korea, coupled with the increased economic interdependence between China and South Korea have played a positive role in the strengthening of Seoul–Beijing relationship.²³ In recent years, political leaders of both the countries have expressed a deep desire to improve bilateral relations. The former South Korean President Moon Jae-in, during his visit to China in 2017, even said: 'South Korea is a small country but will join China's dreams as a responsible mid-sized nation'.²⁴ South Korea has also been supportive of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is compatible with Seoul's own vision of increased connectivity between the

Eurasian region and the Korean Peninsula.²⁵ Therefore, it is argued that Seoul does not have similar anxieties as compared to other Asian nations regarding China's military rise.²⁶

However, South Korea has also been facing problems with the rising Chinese assertiveness. The Chinese claims on the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo (37 BC–668 AD), for instance, sparked widespread protests in South Korea two decades ago.²⁷ Similarly, the issue of Chinese fishermen entering into the South Korean territorial waters and violently attacking South Korean coast guards generated negative views about China in South Korea.²⁸ China's knee-jerk reaction against installation of the US-built Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea in 2017, and subsequent backlash against *Hallyu* and South Korean artists, also raised anti-China sentiment in this Northeast Asian nation. Furthermore, China's rising hegemony in the region has triggered intense debates and has profoundly impacted the domestic politics in South Korea.²⁹ China's aggressive behaviour and its claims on Korean cultural symbols, national folk song, ethnic clothes and traditional food have also raised concerns in South Korea. Moreover, the recent construction of large steel structures by Beijing in the South Korea–China Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ) of the Yellow Sea has caused massive resentment in Seoul.³⁰ China's close alliance with the Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea and Pyongyang's regular threats to South Korea and the US has also aggravated the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, despite these setbacks, South Korea–China relations have remained normal and overall trade relations have been robust between the two countries.³¹

SOUTH KOREA'S POSSIBLE 'MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY' IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

The most difficult task for the South Korean middle power diplomacy is to accommodate the contesting interests of the US and China and maintain a balance between them.³² Also, the relative weakness of power capabilities of South Korea would make it difficult for Seoul to deter Beijing's rising hegemony. In this regard, South Korea can make a partnership with other like-minded middle power countries in the Indo-Pacific region and play an active and dynamic role for ensuring freedom of navigation in international shipping lanes and freedom of flight in international airspaces, thereby maintaining peace in this part of the world. After all, one of the characteristics of being a middle power is that it should partner with other middle powers

for promoting stability in the region. In fact, with the rising Sino-American hegemonic competition, 'middle power cooperation' has gained significance in the Indo-Pacific region.³³ Therefore, South Korea should cooperate with other like-minded middle powers to maintain status quo in the region and resist China's belligerent behaviour.³⁴ Young Jong Choi has also argued that 'South Korea's regional strategy should be founded on solid cooperation with the US, commitment to binding multilateralism, and close cooperation with other countries, both middle and small powers, in the region'.³⁵ In addition, South Korea needs to develop its foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region, which could better serve Seoul's 'practical interests'.³⁶

Deepening Economic and Strategic Cooperation with the Middle Powers

Developing economic and strategic cooperation with the middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region should be a major priority for South Korea. Notably, South Korea's relations with Japan significantly improved during the tenure of former President Yoon Suk Yeol (2022–2025), and this trend appears to be continuing under the current President Lee Jae Myung.³⁷ Although Seoul's relationship with Tokyo has often been marred by historical and territorial disputes, a pragmatic shift for better relations with Japan by South Korea could indeed be a game-changer. In 1965, despite serious domestic opposition, the then Park Chung-hee administration normalised bilateral relations with Tokyo. The cooperation between South Korea and Japan helped Seoul to receive the much-needed support for its Heavy and Chemical Industrialisation (HCI) drive in the 1970s.³⁸ A similar approach is needed to deepen South Korea–Japan strategic cooperation. Likewise, South Korea sent soldiers to participate in the Vietnam War and fight against the Vietnamese communists. However, now Seoul and Hanoi are close economic and strategic partners. There is also a possibility for further deepening their strategic partnership by enhancing maritime cooperation between the South Korean and Vietnamese navies in the South China Sea region.³⁹

South Korea's approach towards India remained largely indifferent during the Cold War period as New Delhi pursued a 'non-aligned' foreign policy and was often considered as 'pro-communist' by Seoul. This perspective has significantly changed after the end of the Cold War and South Korea–India relations have increased many folds. Seoul and New Delhi have forged a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and have pledged to deepen their 'special strategic partnership' in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁰ Similarly, South Korea's relations with Indonesia and Australia have been

deepening. All these middle powers have common concerns regarding the emerging geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific region and can protect their national interests through cooperation with each other.⁴¹ Further, in order to overcome the negative fallouts of rising trade conflict between the US and China, South Korea requires to enhance cooperation with other middle powers in the region.⁴²

Cooperation in Arms Production with the Middle Powers

In recent years, South Korea has emerged as a major producer and exporter of weapons in the world.⁴³ The arms manufactured by South Korean companies have gained popularity in the international market due to their reasonable quality and competitive price. As a result, the trade of South Korea-made howitzers, rocket launchers, fighter jets, tanks, submarines, etc., has emerged as a 'new engine of economic growth' for this export-oriented country. South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has also pledged to support the defence industry and the export of weapons from the country.⁴⁴ Notably, the outbreak of Ukraine war in 2022 has hugely benefitted the South Korean defence industry as several European countries have placed orders for import of weapons from South Korea. Remarkably, Poland has emerged as one of the largest buyers of South Korean arms. The interest in the purchase of South Korean weapon systems by a middle power of Europe, such as Poland, signifies the importance of middle power cooperation in arms production.⁴⁵

The middle power countries of the Indo-Pacific region have also emerged as markets for South Korean defence equipment. In this regard, South Korea could collaborate with regional middle powers, such as India and Indonesia, to jointly produce arms and also export them to developing countries which are anxious about the rising military dominance of China in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁶ Cooperation in defence production between the middle powers would help them to reduce their dependence on traditional suppliers of arms, which are mostly the big powers.

Korean National Reunification and Middle Powers

Another factor important for South Korea's active middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region could be with regards to the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. The issue of national reunification is one of the most cherished dreams of a large number of the Korean people in both North and South Korea. Notably, Korea remains the only divided country in the world and the Korean Peninsula remains a Cold War zone even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union more than three decades ago. The DMZ

divides North and South Korea and the two Koreas are still officially at war with each other. However, several middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region maintain diplomatic relationship with both Seoul and Pyongyang. A close cooperation with these middle powers could help South Korea to overcome its dependence on major powers in the region for the reunification of the country.

In this regard, South Korea should be more proactive in gathering support from the international community and reducing dependence on Beijing and Washington. According to Euikon Kim: 'The US–China rivalry will render Korean peace and unification even more difficult and precarious'.⁴⁷ As a result, engagement with other middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region which have cordial relations with both North and South Korea would be crucial in the Korean national reunification efforts. This would bring peace and stability in the Northeast Asian region, and could also become a precedent for amicable solution of other disputes in the Indo-Pacific. The success of territorial and maritime connectivity projects in the Eurasian and Indo-Pacific region would be positively affected by the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Non-traditional Security Threats and Cooperation with the Middle Powers

The rising non-traditional security threats in the Indo-Pacific region have also made it essential for South Korea to cooperate with other middle powers. The issues of environmental protection and sustainable economic development are important for several middle power countries in the region which are heavily dependent on exports for their economic development. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 did highlight the need for cooperation between the middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region as it is home to the largest percentage of population of the world. Therefore, human security could be an important aspect of South Korea's middle power diplomacy.⁴⁸

Located at the centre of the Indo-Pacific region and a connecting link between the continental and maritime powers, South Korea can indeed play a significant role in raising and mediating on non-traditional security threat issues. Presently, South Korea has emerged as a venue for several regional and global events. It could also become a key player in promoting non-military issues, such as mass education, green technologies, rural development, health infrastructure, sports, tourism and entertainment sector, in the Indo-Pacific countries. The popularity of the South Korean cultural products through *Hallyu* in Asia, and other parts of the world, has indeed increased the 'soft power' potential of South Korea. Seoul has also initiated a Knowledge

Sharing Programme to share its experiences of economic development with other developing countries of the world. Furthermore, to counter the cyber threats emerging from China, there is a requirement of more cooperation among the middle powers. South Korea can use its enhanced regional influence to become a moderator of regional conflicts and counter emerging non-traditional security challenges in association with other middle powers.

CONCLUSION

The fast-changing power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region have created new challenges and opportunities. As a result, new coalitions are emerging to maintain regional stability and status quo in this part of the world. The idea of the Indo-Pacific strategy is to create a new partnership of nations that believe in freedom of navigation and international institutions based on the rule of law. The rules of international commerce and navigation built in the post-World War II period have come under strain due to China's aggressive behaviour and territorial claims in the South China Sea. Any major military conflict in the Indo-Pacific region would seriously jeopardise trade and commerce and would be detrimental to one of the most economically dynamic regions of the world. For an export-oriented economy such as South Korea, international trade is crucial for sustainable economic development. Being a divided country, South Korea would probably be the worst affected in any military confrontation between the big powers in this region. However, South Korea has been reluctant to take a firm position on the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Nevertheless, there is also a possibility for South Korea's more active and dynamic middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region, as discussed in the article. South Korea needs to deepen its economic and strategic cooperation with the middle powers in the region to counter emerging security threats and solve the conflicts in a peaceful manner. Also, cooperation in arms production with other middle powers would help Seoul to expand market for the South Korean arms industry. Moreover, Seoul can benefit from new opportunities emerging in the region and seek active support for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula by associating with other middle powers. The reunification of the Korean Peninsula would also end the geographical disconnect of South Korea from mainland Asia and give Seoul access through land routes to the vast markets and resources of the Eurasian mega-continent. As a resource-poor country and export-oriented economy, South Korea is heavily reliant on foreign trade, which mostly happens through the sea routes. Therefore,

reunification of the Korean Peninsula would provide alternative trade routes to Seoul and would be beneficial for the region. The emerging non-traditional security threats in the Indo-Pacific also make it imperative for South Korea to cooperate with other middle powers.

NOTES

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