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South Korea and France's Indo-Pacific Strategies: Potential Partnership and Challenges

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Abstract

South Korea is, by location, an Indo-Pacific country but has kept its distance from the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). This is an outcome of the interplay between South Korea's strategic environment and domestic politics. Firstly, South Korea has prioritized North Korea in its foreign policy and viewed the FOIP as unfavorable to inter-Korean relations. Secondly, South Korea has pursued autonomy amid US-China competition, but it cannot afford to antagonize its top trading partner, China, by adopting the FOIP. Thirdly, the FOIP could draw South Korea into the US military operation outside of the Korean Peninsula. Lastly, the US FOIP partially overlaps with President Moon's "New Southern Policy" (NSP).

During the Trump administration, South Korea accommodated the FOIP selectively where there were overlaps with the NSP, and secured autonomy within the FOIP. A noticeable shift in South Korea's stance came during the ROK-US summit held in May 2021. President Moon endorses the core elements of President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at China, though not directly referencing China. South Korea's stance on the FOIP is evolving from reluctance towards alignment. President Moon has become more receptive to the FOIP because South Korea faces the risk of isolation in the Indo-Pacific theater and anti-China sentiment is rising among the Korean population. And he has been hoping to use endorsement of the FOIP as a way of securing US cooperation on North Korea, gaining greater access to US vaccines, and turning around his approval ratings before the presidential election next year (2022).

However, it is unlikely that, in the foreseeable future, South Korea will join the US-led Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea. The result of the upcoming presidential election will determine South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy over the next five years. If a new president is elected from the conservative party, s/he is likely to revisit the stance on the FOIP. Nevertheless, due to the interplay of the factors that generated the current stance, South Korea's options would lie on the continuum of aligning with the US or China at each end and ambiguity in the middle. South Korea might shift from strategic ambiguity towards strategic autonomy, announcing its Indo-Pacific strategy officially.

France was the first European country to officially announce its Indo-Pacific strategy, which is geared towards defense and military

since it was motivated by security concerns about the rise of China. Its strategy aims at preventing inappropriate behavior by China in the Indo-Pacific. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is dubious considering the limits of France's military capability in the Indo-Pacific.

A more correct read of the French Indo-Pacific strategy would be rendered in the context of strategic autonomy. The military orientation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy is a logical outcome of fulfilling strategic autonomy – which is both the goal and the means to protect France from the destructive dynamic of US-China competition and marginalization. By being present militarily in the Indo-Pacific, even to a limited extent, France can display a commitment to strategic autonomy and solidify its position as a stakeholder that complicates China's calculus on the Indo-Pacific.

South Korea and France could consider partnering in the Indo-Pacific. An important commonality between their Indo-Pacific strategies would lie in strategic autonomy. By promoting a principles-based approach, South Korea and France could lower tensions and maintain a balance of power as well as achieving their respective national interests without worrying strategic consequences. They would face common challenges, too. Their pursuit of strategic autonomy could become a source of disagreement with the US. Also, China would dismiss the two countries' strategic autonomy, believing that it would reinforce the US position and strengthen collective deterrence against China. Second, South Korea and France have limited capabilities, which makes their Indo-Pacific strategies less effective and less credible. Lastly, their cooperation in maritime and non-traditional security might not align with reducing tensions between the US and China and thereby securing strategic autonomy for themselves.

Despite the above constraints on their Indo-Pacific strategies, South Korea and France could consider bilateral dialogues for partnership in the Indo-Pacific, leading to a high level of confidence and strategic convergence in security. Second, they could start maritime cooperation to confirm interoperability and display commitment to strategic autonomy. Lastly, they could consider jointly launching new institution-building in the Indo-Pacific aimed at reducing tensions between the great powers through regularized dialogue.

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Introduction

The “Indo-Pacific” dominates the strategic field today. The Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept was first floated more than a decade ago,¹ but it gained wide currency only after United States (US) President Donald Trump referred to the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) many times during his visit to Asia in November 2017. The *National Security Strategy of 2017* (released in December) affirmed it by replacing the “Asia-Pacific” with “Indo-Pacific” to describe the US strategic sphere across Asia. Over the next two years, US allies and partners, including Japan, Australia, India and the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN), made their Indo-Pacific strategies more pronounced.² And, at last, seemingly remote European countries such as France and Germany as well as the European Union have arrived in the Indo-Pacific theater.³

South Korea is, by location, an Indo-Pacific country and a middle power that wields influence as a strong democracy and the third largest economy in East Asia. However, it has insulated itself from the Indo-Pacific, let alone developed an official strategy, and strived to stay that way for the past four years. However, lately, South Korea has found its stance increasingly less viable due to the rapidly changing strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific. It may have to revisit its stance sooner rather than later. And when it reaches that point, the bigger challenge will be how to strategize its approach.

If South Korea comes to figure out future options regarding the Indo-Pacific, it first needs to understand what factors led it to its current stance. Those factors are a combination of South Korea’s domestic politics and strategic constraints in foreign policy-making. Changes in those factors will reveal what options are available to South Korea. And while this hinges on the degree of changes in the strategic and domestic constraints on South Korean foreign policy, emerging options for South Korea could include participation in

1. The concept “Indo-Pacific” was first formally introduced and explained in Gurpreet S. Khurana, “Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2007, pp. 139-153.

2. “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI)”, Nairobi, Kenya, August 27, 2016; Australia, *2016 Defense White Paper* and *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*; “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, June 2019.

3. “France’s Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”, May 2019 and “French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific for an Inclusive Indo-Pacific”, August 2019; “Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together”, September 2020; “Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, European Union, September 2021.

coalitions with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. If such an option is presented, partnership with France would be worth consideration. France is a relevant player in the Indo-Pacific and has already put forward its strategy. Thus, it is deemed a valuable exercise to check compatibility, i.e. convergences and divergences in the two countries' strategies for the Indo-Pacific. This would allow the two countries to cooperate, collaborate and coordinate where there are convergences while mitigating or managing differences.⁴ A review of French and South Korean strategies and of their relative power and options would point to pathways towards effective partnership between them.

This report is organized as follows. First, the US Indo-Pacific strategy is examined as a parameter for other countries devising Indo-Pacific strategies. Second, South Korea's evolving stance on the Indo-Pacific and its determinants are examined. Third, France's Indo-Pacific strategy is examined for strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, based on the identified compatibility between South Korean and French strategies for the Indo-Pacific, their possible cooperation is discussed.

4. C. Paskal, "Indo-Pacific Strategies, Perceptions and Partnerships: The View from Seven Countries", *Research Paper*, Chatham House, March 2021, p. 4.

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy as a Template

The Indo-Pacific is the dominant strategic concept, but countries have applied it in a variety of ways. Indo-Pacific strategies differ in definitions, objectives, and interests, particularly with regard to China.⁵ If they have one thing in common, it is that they were shaped with the US FOIP in the backdrop. The US FOIP sets a template for molding Indo-Pacific strategies. Countries devise their Indo-Pacific strategies by adapting the US FOIP framework to their priorities, threat perceptions and capabilities.

The US FOIP is, in a nutshell, a manifestation of a hegemonic competition with China. It is a geopolitical scheme to counterbalance China, which is extending its influence over a wide region with its rising military and economic capabilities. The US views China's rise, especially its maritime rise, as building a Chinese sphere of influence from the Eastern China Sea to the Indian Ocean, thereby restricting US global power projection and leadership in the international system over the longer term.⁶ As long as China is a revisionist power intent on replacing the US-led liberal international order, the key for US national security is to counter China with the dominant military power of the US. Thus, the US has moved its strategic pivot westward from the Asia-Pacific to include India and the Indian Ocean Rim, and, in May 2018, modified its military doctrine to rename the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) as the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).

The US FOIP also introduces a security model, the so-called "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue" (Quad) composed of Australia, India, Japan, and the US. These four countries share concerns about the security threats arising from the growing assertiveness of China and the necessity to respond to the perceived security threats. The Quad is an informal security network that supplements (not supplants) the US-centric hub-and-spokes security model.⁷ And, while the Quad is an instrument focused primarily on security and

5. F. Nicolas, "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Inclusive and Principled", *East Asia Forum*, December 19, 2019.

6. S. C. Tayloe, "Crossover Point: How China's Naval Modernization Could Reverse the United States' Strategic Advantage", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2017, pp. 1-25.

7. G. Flake *et al.*, "Realising the Indo-Pacific: Tasks for India's Regional Integration", Perth USAsia Centre, 2017.

military issues, it is currently under discussion for expansion, termed “Quad Plus”, as a group of like-minded countries collaborating on a range of global and soft-security issues in line with the spirit and scope of the Quad.⁸

It is also worth noting that the FOIP is a geo-economic construct; it combines economic components with security.⁹ The US does this because it needs to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI itself is a geo-economic construct in that it potentially establishes a Chinese sphere of influence through economic ties with China and changes the political landscape of Central Asia and the Indian Ocean Rim. If the US intends to counter the Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific region, it needs to deploy economic measures similar to those of the BRI.¹⁰ Economic components make the FOIP complete, incentivizing cooperation and internalizing positive externalities from security cooperation to participating countries.¹¹

The US unveiled the economic components of the FOIP, titled “the US Indo-Pacific Economic Vision” (IPEV), in 2018.¹² The IPEV had three prongs: Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership; Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy, and Infrastructure Transactional Assistance Network. In 2021, President Biden replaced the IPEV with “Build Back Better World” (B3W). B3W is a global infrastructure initiative to help the US\$40+ trillion infrastructure needs of the developing world in four areas: climate, health security, digital technology and gender equality.¹³ B3W rivals the BRI, offering a values-driven, high-standard and transparent infrastructure partnership.

8. J. Li, “South Korea's Formal Membership in the Quad Plus: A Bridge Too Far?”, *38North*, September 30, 2021, available at: www.stimson.org.

9. S. Kang, “Goeconomics of the Indo-Pacific: Competing Economic Architectures and South Korea” in: J. P. Panda (ed.), *The Korean Peninsula and Indo-Pacific Power Politics Status Security at Stake*, London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 229-230.

10. R. D. Blackwill, “Indo-Pacific Strategy in an Era of Goeconomics”, Keynote Speech at Japan Forum on International Relations, July 31, 2018, available at: www.cfr.org.

11. D. A. Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in Its Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, pp. 49-51.

12. “Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision”, US Department of State, 2019, available at: www.state.gov.

13. “Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership”, The White House, June 12, 2021, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

South Korea's Unspoken Indo-Pacific Strategy

Strategic and Domestic Interplay in South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Indo-Pacific, as both a geopolitical unit and a strategic field, is significant for South Korea. As a trading nation, about 99.7 percent of South Korea's energy resources and cargoes use sea-borne transportation, including the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. South Korea's economic prosperity depends on freedom of navigation, the open market system, and the upholding in the Indo-Pacific of the Rules-Based International Order (R BIO).

South Korea has compelling interests in that part of the world. However, it has chosen to keep a distance from the US FOIP. This choice is the outcome of an interplay between South Korea's strategic environment and its domestic politics. At least since 1945, South Korean foreign policy has fluctuated due to tensions between the aspiration for autonomy and the necessity of alliance, as well as the domestic political divide between conservatives and progressives regarding the direction of its foreign policy.¹⁴ Democratization and economic development have allowed divergent and often polarized views on foreign policies to be expressed, and have promoted South Korean nationalism.¹⁵ Although security concerns are still dominant in South Korean society, democratization has spurred demands that South Korea improve relations with North Korea and redefine its position between the US and China. South Korea's hesitance to join the US FOIP can be seen in this light.

First, South Korea's hesitation about the US FOIP stems from its foreign policy priority: North Korea. South Korean foreign policy has long prioritized North Korea, in conjunction with bilateral relations with Northeast Asia's four major powers, including the US, Japan, China and Russia, and paid less attention to broader regional strategic and security issues. Such a tendency has been particularly strong with

14. S. A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 10-14.

15. W. Hwang, *South Korea's Changing Foreign Policy: The Impact of Democratization and Globalization*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018.

progressive governments like President Moon's, which put far more emphasis on improving inter-Korean relations. As a result, when the US FOIP first surfaced in late 2017, South Korea was reluctant to join it, especially because it was viewed as unfavorable to inter-Korean relations.

Second, South Korea has tried to achieve autonomy amid the rivalry between the US and China.¹⁶ The US FOIP is, at its core, aimed at countering China's rising power and regional influence; therefore, following the US FOIP would complicate South Korea's relations with China. China is South Korea's top trading partner, accounting for 25.8 percent of South Korea's total exports in 2020.¹⁷ In addition, regardless of South Korea's wishes, China has been a stakeholder in inter-Korean relations since the end of the Korean War. Any hope of unifying the two Koreas would require support from China, North Korea's main benefactor and essential for enforcing international sanctions on North Korea so that it gives up nuclear programs. As long as South Korea's foreign policy revolves around North Korea, South Korea cannot afford to antagonize China.

Third, the US FOIP raises sensitive strategic issues for South Korea with regard to the role of the US-ROK alliance.¹⁸ Although South Korea has agreed with the US over the years to adopt strategic flexibility and expand the role of the alliance to regional issues, South Korea's progressive leaders prefer limiting that role to the Korean Peninsula. Since the US FOIP assumes security threats from China, adopting the FOIP framework could get South Korea involved in US military operations outside the Korean Peninsula. In addition, joining the FOIP could destabilize the Korean Peninsula as North Korea might use increased military activities in the Indo-Pacific region as an excuse to take provocative action against South Korea.

Lastly, on taking office in 2017, President Moon embarked on a new diplomatic initiative called the "New Southern Policy" (NSP), which partially overlaps with the Indo-Pacific region. His NSP has two objectives. One is to expand Korea's economic horizons. In the wake of the 2016 decision to install a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea learned the hard way the risks of concentrating trade relations on China amid rising geopolitical sensitivity in Asia and felt the need to diversify them.¹⁹ ASEAN is an ideal partner for South

16. K. Chung, "South Korea's Perspective on Quad Plus and Evolving Indo-Pacific Security Architecture", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* Special Issue, 2020, p. 132.

17. Available at: unipass.customs.go.kr.

18. J. Li, 2021.

19. J. Lee, "Korea's New Southern Policy: Motivations of 'Peace Cooperation' and Implications for the Korean Peninsula", The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, 2019, available at: en.asaninst.org.

Korea's economic diversification. As of 2020, ASEAN as a combined economy was Korea's second-largest trading partner (14.7%) and Korean investment into ASEAN has doubled since 2011.²⁰ The other objective of the NSP is to build solidarity among middle powers in Asia to cope with the US-China competition. The US-China rivalry undermines the regional order that has been conducive to peace as well as prosperity in Asia.²¹ Small and medium-sized countries in the region have been uncomfortably pressed to choose between the two rivals. In this competitive environment, it is not only strategic but also prudent for South Korea to strengthen diplomacy with similarly situated ASEAN countries, to secure autonomy.

Reflecting its two-fold objectives, the NSP includes a range of cooperation with ASEAN in the security, economic and socio-cultural realms. Under the "Three Ps" of People, Prosperity and Peace, the NSP broadens Korea-ASEAN relations from trade to partnership in technology, culture, and humanity.²² Also, South Korea is translating economic and socio-cultural connectivity into a peaceful community with ASEAN, centered on re-establishing multilateralism in order to alleviate tensions and restore confidence in the regional order. Over the past three decades, ASEAN has played a bridging role in providing institutional mechanisms for addressing regional issues; it remains a relevant multilateral platform. South Korea would support ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific under the principle of ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, and respect for international norms. And South Korea extended the NSP to Oceania and Southwest Asian countries by joining the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a dialogue partner in November 2018. Key players in the Indo-Pacific such as Australia, China, France, India, Japan, and the US participate in the IORA as full members or dialogue partners. Participation in the IORA enables South Korea to strengthen Indo-Pacific orientation in the NSP.

South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy

2017–19: Reluctant Engagement with the US FOIP

From the beginning, the US sought to persuade South Korea to join the FOIP framework, but South Korea refrained from officially

20. "Key Updates of the 2020 ASEAN & Korea in Figures", ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2021, available at : www.aseankorea.org.

21. W. Choe, "New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy", *Asie. Visions*, No. 118, Ifri, 2021, available at: www.ifri.org.

22. J. Lee, 2019.

adopting it, instead accommodating it selectively where there were overlaps with the NSP.²³ In so doing, South Korea capitalized on the IPEV. The emphasis of the IPEV on infrastructure, digital economy and energy cooperation was similar to that of the NSP and could have synergic effects. The IPEV also supports multilateral approaches and regional institutions. ASEAN was literally at the center of the IPEV.

South Korea's selective accommodation of the FOIP in the economic realm resulted in cooperation projects in energy, infrastructure, and the digital economy.²⁴ The NSP was also fused with the IPEV's good governance and support for civil society. South Korea agreed with the US – specifically, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – in September 2019 to strengthen development cooperation in sectors such as democracy and government accountability, women's empowerment, health and education. It was agreed that South Korea and the US, through humanitarian assistance and development cooperation, would work together to increase resilience and deal with non-traditional security challenges in the region, particularly the Pacific Island countries' climate-change response, government transparency, law enforcement, marine environment monitoring, and public health threats.²⁵

South Korea's accommodation of the FOIP during the Trump administration had notable characteristics; overall, it managed to secure autonomy and non-military engagement only with the FOIP. First, it kept the core elements of the NSP within the accommodation of the FOIP. Its compromise with the FOIP was defined along the 3Ps of the NSP. The US recognized South Korea's NSP and worked to coordinate the IPEV with the NSP as a step towards promoting US policies in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁶

Second, South Korea's FOIP compromise avoided strategic issues. While bilateral alliances with the US play a prominent role in the FOIP, the US-ROK alliance was an exception. In a sense, this is not surprising because of the NSP's three pillars, the peace pillar was least developed and security issues were outside the NSP's scope.²⁷

23. S. Kang, 2020.

24. While South Korea-US cooperation in energy, infrastructure and the digital economy largely remains at the explorative stage, the two countries have made progress in development and non-traditional security such as law enforcement and water resource/disaster management for Mekong countries. See "US-ROK Joint Fact Sheet, Working Together to Promote Cooperation between the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy", U.S. Department of State, January 2021, available at: www.state.gov.

25. South Korea committed \$1.8 million to build resilience to natural disasters in the Pacific Island countries through 2021, and the US obligated, in concert, about \$8.3 million in fiscal year 2020 (Joint Fact Sheet, 2021).

26. Joint Fact Sheet, 2021.

27. A. Yeo, "South Korea and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy", Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 20, 2020, available at: www.csis.org.

Given the underdevelopment of the peace pillar, then, the NSP's accommodation of the FOIP would be confined to non-traditional security issues such as transnational crime and disaster response. By excluding military elements from compromise with the FOIP, South Korea maintained its autonomy over Indo-Pacific matters.

2020–21: Emergent Alignment with the US FOIP

South Korea's stance on the Indo-Pacific started to change from 2020. In March 2020, it participated in the first Quad Plus meeting along with New Zealand and Vietnam. While Quad Plus was not formalized and the agenda was limited to coordinating Covid-19 approaches, South Korea's participation could be seen as a sign that it would be open to nuanced approaches towards the Indo-Pacific.

A more noticeable shift in South Korea's stance came during the ROK-US summit (President Moon and President Biden) in May 2021. In the Leaders' Joint Statement, the two leaders declared that they shared a vision of a region governed by democratic norms, human rights, and the rule of law at home and abroad.²⁸ They pledged to maintain freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, to align South Korea's NSP and the US vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and to cooperate to create a safe, prosperous, and dynamic region. They even mentioned the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

What is striking about this summit is that President Moon endorsed the FOIP framework while not officially formulating South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. The Leaders' Statement contains the core elements of President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at China, though not directly referencing China. President Moon commits South Korea to opposing all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the RBIO in the Indo-Pacific, and extending the operation of the ROK-US alliance to wider regional security such as the South China Sea and Taiwan. The nature and scope of the ROK-US alliance is redefined within the FOIP framework.²⁹

The outcome of the May summit indicates that South Korea's stance on the Indo-Pacific is evolving from reluctance towards alignment. From the US perspective, South Korea was the weak link in building a united front to withstand Chinese expansionism.³⁰ Its

28. "US-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement", The White House, May 21, 2021, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

29. W. Choe, "Potential Cooperation within the FOIP Framework: Outcomes of ROK-US Summit", *IFANS Review*, November 2021 (in Korean).

30. A. V. Rinna, "Where Does the South Korea-US Alliance Fit in a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'?" *East Asia Forum*, March 26, 2021, available at: eastasiaforum.org.

reluctance to adopt the FOIP framework even led to friction, as shown by President Trump's exorbitant request for defense cost-sharing. But, during the May summit, President Moon presented alignment with the US FOIP by all means.

What led President Moon to be more receptive to the FOIP? The same factors that motivated South Korea's reluctance about the FOIP were at work, but only in the opposite direction. First, lately the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific has turned unfavorably to South Korea's ambiguity. President Biden's foreign policy is single-mindedly focused on maintaining US dominance over China and transforming the Quad into a broader grouping based on shared values.³¹ The US and European countries started to coordinate their responses to Chinese assertiveness, as with AUKUS. Hence, South Korea's prolonged insulation from the FOIP would lead to its isolation in the Indo-Pacific theater. If South Korea is isolated, it faces the risk of damaging its initiatives on inter-Korean relations and denuclearization of North Korea amid US indifference to South Korea's policy.³²

Second, alignment with the FOIP was needed for President Moon's North Korea agenda. Nearing the end of his term in office, he could have hoped to use the endorsement of the FOIP as a way of securing US cooperation for a joint strategy on North Korea.³³ After a review of North Korea policy, the Biden administration appears to be pursuing the complete denuclearization of North Korea while re-engaging it in negotiations through a calibrated approach, which is not completely in sync with President Moon's approach to North Korea.³⁴ Therefore, President Moon appears to be endorsing the FOIP framework as a *quid pro quo* to draw more US engagement with North Korea. President Biden has consented to recognizing earlier agreements with North Korea as the basis of future discussions, specifically the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration between Moon and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the Singapore Joint Statement between Trump and Kim.

Third, with rising anti-China sentiment, South Korea's autonomy between the US and China – which, so far, has amounted to ambiguity – has become unsustainable domestically. Between China's economic retaliation against South Korea for the THAAD deployment in 2016, repression of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and the incidents of cultural

31. R. Pacheco Pardo, "South Korea would benefit from joining a Quad+", Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 26, 2021, available at: www.csis.org.

32. J. Li, 2021.

33. S. Yoon, "How the Biden-Moon Summit Reset the South Korea-US Alliance", *The Diplomat*, May 28, 2021, available at: thediplomat.com.

34. S. Yoon, 2021.

imperialism in 2021, South Koreans have become alert about China's blatant attempts to incorporate South Korea into its sphere of influence.³⁵ The majority of South Koreans perceive China as an economic and military threat. In the past, they viewed China positively because of trade and economic relations; this gave cover for President Moon to exercise ambiguity between the US and China while South Korea is allied with the US. Now, with a major shift in South Korean popular sentiment about China, it has become harder for him to stay ambivalent about the FOIP.

Lastly, President Moon's endorsement of the FOIP suited his domestic agenda. Up to the May summit, he faced strong criticism over slow Covid-19 vaccination and skyrocketing house prices. By shifting his stance closer to the FOIP, he may have hoped to gain greater access to US vaccines and turn around his approval rating. This is particularly important if he wants to help his party hold on to power in the next presidential election. Since 2019, support for his party has steadily declined and the upcoming presidential election hangs in the balance.

Uncertainty in South Korea's Commitment to the Indo-Pacific

How firm is President Moon's evolution on the Indo-Pacific and how likely is South Korea to deploy concrete actions? President Moon seems to have opened the door for South Korea to join the FOIP and coordinate China policy more closely with the US than before.

Nevertheless, this may not be sufficient to convince that South Korea fully embraces the FOIP. President Moon has made the minimum changes necessary to satisfy the South Korean public and the US.³⁶ First, the Leaders' Statement evades explicit reference to China, although it uses expressions such as commitment to an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific region, as well as RBIO and democratic values. In the Statement, it is also admitted that, although there is a significant overlap, US and South Korean interests do not fully coincide. This might be the result of President Moon's desire to avoid explicitly linking his endorsement of the FOIP to an anti-China stance. He might have been willing to endorse the FOIP only under the condition that South Korea does not appear explicitly anti-China. Thus, it is unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future, that South Korea will join the US-led Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea or in other regional crises.

35. T. Chan and S. Hyeon Choi, "Anti-China Sentiment and South Korea's Presidential Race", *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2021, available at: thediplomat.com.

36. S. Yoon, 2021.

Second, South Korea will hold a presidential election in less than a year and President Moon is not running for re-election due to a constitutional term-limit. The result of the upcoming presidential election will determine how South Korea strategizes towards the Indo-Pacific in the next five years. Strong and effective presidential leadership is the most important prerequisite for South Korea to sustain and project an effective foreign policy abroad.³⁷ And its foreign policy tends to swing widely from right to left in line with the ideological orientation of the president. With a new president from May 2022, particularly if elected from the conservative People Power Party, which appreciates alliance with the US more than does the current ruling party, South Korea is likely to revisit its stance on the FOIP and the Quad Plus in a more supportive manner.

37. S. A. Snyder, 2018.

France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Overview of France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

France was the first European country to officially announce its Indo-Pacific strategy. Its moves reflect the undeniable reality of France as an Indo-Pacific country. From its historical engagement, France has inherited vast maritime territories with a 9 million km² EEZ, 1.6 million overseas nationals, economic interests, and five military missions in the Indo-Pacific region. All this justifies a coherent national strategy.

France's Indo-Pacific strategy is two-pronged, involving defense and diplomacy. It applies a geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific that stretches from the western Indian to the eastern Pacific oceans. Such a definition of the Indo-Pacific is wider than that of the US but comparable to those of India and Japan.

In the defense realm, France's strategy has four objectives:

- Defend and ensure the integrity of French sovereignty, French nationals, territories and EEZ, and military missions,
- Contribute to the security of regional environments surrounding French overseas territories through military and security cooperation,
- Maintain free and open access to the commons and ensure the security of SLOCs through cooperation with French partners, and
- Assist in maintaining strategic stability through multilateralism in order to protect European interests.³⁸

These objectives are executed via maritime activities such as:

- Open and free access to international passages,
- Cooperation with France's partners on maritime security, and
- Participation in regional maritime security forums and fusion centers based in the Indo-Pacific.

Those maritime activities will mobilize the 'forces of sovereignty' installed in the region.

³⁸. "France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", June 2020.

France's diplomatic strategy in the Indo-Pacific covers a broad field of environment, economic, scientific, and cultural exchange.³⁹ Characteristically, France emphasizes inclusiveness and seeks to connect the countries on the Pacific side to those on the Indian side, which helps its strategy not to appear anti-China.⁴⁰ France's diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific also stresses multilateralism and the central role of ASEAN in building a political, economic and security architecture in the region. Lastly, France calls for EU engagement in the Indo-Pacific with a view to protecting the interests of the continent.

France's Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Service of Strategic Autonomy

It is clear that France's Indo-Pacific strategy is strongly geared towards defense and military, although not over-militarized as is the US'. In comparison, the diplomatic strategy for the Indo-Pacific is underdeveloped. It takes a comprehensive approach towards the Indo-Pacific region, ranging from economy, culture, education, and science, but it is more or less conventional and lacks concrete action plans.⁴¹

The strong military orientation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy indicates that the Ministry of Defense was in charge of drawing up the strategy motivated by security concerns given the rise of China.⁴² In 2019 the French Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific described the expansion of China as a destabilizing factor, shifting the balance of power, challenging democratic values, and triggering strong security concerns.⁴³ Thus, the military orientation of the French Indo-Pacific strategy is aimed at preventing inappropriate behavior by China and upholding international norms in the Indo-Pacific. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is dubious since France's military capability in the Indo-Pacific is modest. It is hard to believe that France will achieve the security goals vis-à-vis China with the forces designed to protect the French archipelagoes. The military orientation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy is further questionable if one takes into account that France's military capability in the Indo-Pacific is not

39. "French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific for an Inclusive Indo-Pacific", August 2019.

40. N. Regaud, "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Overseas Territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans", *Strategy*, June 2021, p. 13.

41. Hae-Won Jun, "European Indo-Pacific Strategy: France and Germany", *IFANS Review*, Vol. 44, 2020 (in Korean).

42. C. Pajon, "France: The Leading European Power in the Indo-Pacific", in: *Europe's Indo-Pacific Embrace: Global Partnerships for Regional Resilience*, Perth USAsia Centre, 2020, p. 10.

43. "France's Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", 2019, p. 8.

likely to strengthen quickly due to weak economic growth and budgetary pressures on defense.

A more correct read of the French Indo-Pacific strategy would be rendered in the context of strategic autonomy. The military orientation of the strategy, despite the modesty of military capability, is a logical outcome, because the strategy is to serve a bigger policy goal, strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy directs France's Indo-Pacific strategy and its mode of implementation. France adheres to strategic autonomy because it sees the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific as serving their national interests at the expense of others and undermining the international order.⁴⁴ France sees strategic autonomy as the only credible "path for defending French interests and values around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region".⁴⁵ Strategic autonomy is both the goal and means to protect France from the destructive dynamic of US-China competition and the transformation of international order that would otherwise risk France being marginalized.⁴⁶

The goal of strategic autonomy renders France a stakeholder, but not a competitor, in the Indo-Pacific. France's interest in the Indo-Pacific lies in mitigating tensions between the US and China and fostering a multipolar and multilateral region governed by the rule of law. The goal of its Indo-Pacific strategy necessitates its military presence in the region, while the modesty of its military capability becomes less of a constraint on France's strategy. By being present militarily in the Indo-Pacific, France can display commitment to strategic autonomy and solidify its position as a stakeholder that complicates China's Indo-Pacific calculus. The defense network that France has built in the Indo-Pacific can be explained in the same light. Since its capacity to mobilize military in the region is limited, France relies on defense and security ties with Indo-Pacific partners.⁴⁷ Through its strategic partnerships, France would not only strengthen its strategic autonomy but also reshape the regional balance of power.

The military orientation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy has an additional advantage in the context of Europe, i.e. encouraging the EU to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy. France has incentives to promote an EU-wide Indo-Pacific strategy because the whole-of-EU approach to the Indo-Pacific would enhance the credibility of French strategic autonomy. Military coordination with European partners

44. "France Indo-Pacific Strategy", 2019, p. 10.

45. "Joint communiqué issued by Jean-Yves Le Drian and Florence Parly", September 16, 2021, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

46. F. Grare, "France, the Other Indo-Pacific Power", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, available at: carnegieendowment.org.

47. C. Pajon, 2020, p. 11.

would increase France's strategic weight vis-à-vis the US and China.⁴⁸ And France's military-oriented Indo-Pacific strategy could be complemented by the EU's more holistic and geo-economics-based Indo-Pacific strategy. In addition, the EU has substantial capacity to support non-military engagement in the region. In the end, France's effort has paid off, as the EU adopted its official Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021.

48. C. Pajon, 2020, p. 12.

South Korea-France Potential Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

South Korea's New Indo-Pacific Strategy from 2022

The strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific is changing fast. For South Korea to participate in shaping a new order in the Indo-Pacific, it needs to establish its own strategy internalizing the Indo-Pacific as an organizing framework. It may be able to do so when a new president takes office in 2022.

If so, what could be expected of South Korea's stance towards the Indo-Pacific? When it revisits its policy, the most critical part would be setting its goals and selecting the mode of implementation. Its new policy towards the Indo-Pacific would be determined by the same factors that produced the current stance of ambiguity. Therefore, its options would lie on the continuum of aligning with the US or China at each end, and ambiguity in the middle. The interplay of the strategic environments and domestic politics would not likely allow South Korea to move much away from the current middle. Its strategic goal for the Indo-Pacific would be to stay more or less with strategic ambiguity, even if the newly sworn-in government reduces the weight of inter-Korean relations in its foreign policy.

South Korea's new stance on the Indo-Pacific might look similar to that of the Moon government in not making an explicit choice between the US and China, while staying allied with the US. However, it might differ from the Moon government's if it opts to officially announce its strategy; this would signify that South Korea was stepping from strategic ambiguity towards strategic autonomy. Also, South Korea's conduct in the Indo-Pacific would become better principled in that South Korea would be acting in line with the established multilateral norms to reduce tensions and maintain openness in the Indo-Pacific, while not being predisposed towards either great power in the ongoing rivalry. Such moves by South Korea would constitute, in and of themselves, a big change, considering that it has rejected using the Indo-Pacific as an organizing framework for foreign policy.

South Korea's new Indo-Pacific strategy, potentially aiming at strategic autonomy, would need to build inner strength and credibility if it is to bring the intended outcomes. South Korea's stance would be strengthened if it engages in partnership for strategic autonomy. For that purpose, it would consider partnering with countries, including France, that are capable of exercising strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific. South Korea and France share the bases for partnership in strategic autonomy, such as democratic values, protecting RBIO and multilateralism, and workable capacity.

Prospects for South Korea and France Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

Common Interest in Strategic Autonomy

First, South Korea appears to use the same definition of the Indo-Pacific as France. The “Indo-Pacific” is an obscure signifier in the geographical sense,⁴⁹ but it is unnecessary for South Korea to define the Indo-Pacific precisely in order to establish an Indo-Pacific strategy. South Korea has already been operating in the Indo-Pacific defined as from the eastern Pacific to the western Indian oceans. It has long used the SLOCs located within the Indo-Pacific so defined, joined the IORA, and conducted military operations. In 2009 South Korea dispatched the Somali Sea Escort Task Group (“Cheonghae” Unit) under Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) to respond to piracy attacks in the Gulf of Aden and off the eastern coast of Somalia. South Korea also participated in the EU's counter-piracy operation (Atalanta) off the Horn of Africa and in the western Indian Ocean. Thus, South Korea would gain no additional benefit from delineating the Indo-Pacific in a narrower manner.

A more important commonality between South Korea and France's Indo-Pacific strategies would lie in the goal of strategic autonomy amid the US-China competition. By promoting a principles-based approach in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea and France intend to lessen tensions and maintain a balance of power, as well as achieving respective national interests without worrying strategic consequences. To fulfill strategic autonomy, both South Korea and France support multilateralism. South Korea believes that multilateralism is essential to protect the interests of small and medium-sized countries and to adjust the RBIO to changes in international relations. South Korea and France also stress their attachment to interacting within the framework of regional

49. M. Beeson, “Institutionalizing the Indo-Pacific: The Challenges of Regional Cooperation”, *East Asia*, Vol. 35, 2018, pp. 85–98.

architecture like ASEAN in order to alleviate tensions and restore confidence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Common Constraint on Credibility

To ensure the success of their Indo-Pacific strategies, South Korea and France would face common challenges to overcome. First, their pursuit of strategic autonomy should address credibility problems. In other words, for both, the question would remain: How should they position themselves vis-à-vis the US? Alliance with the US has provided security for South Korea and France, but pursuit of strategic autonomy might well become a source of disagreement with the US. From the US perspective, their pursuit of strategic autonomy could be viewed as a sign of wavering commitment to the alliance. They would need, therefore, to coordinate their strategic autonomy posture with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

South Korea and France's strategic autonomy would raise problems with China as well. From China's viewpoint, they would appear to be supporting US interests in the Indo-Pacific no matter how hard they claim autonomy, simply because they are both allied with the US. China would thus dismiss their pursuit of strategic autonomy, believing that their principled exercise of strategic autonomy would reinforce the US position and strengthen a collective deterrence against China in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, despite the political rhetoric behind strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea and France have limited capacity to support it. This would render their Indo-Pacific strategies less effective and less credible. Their posture of strategic autonomy would be strengthened if they spread it beyond themselves. They should be able to provide other regional countries with incentives to join their cause. However, although many countries in the region wish to avoid choosing between the US and China, the South Korean and French capabilities would limit the attractiveness of their claimed strategic autonomy,

Lastly, given the purpose of their Indo-Pacific strategies and capacity to implement them, cooperation between South Korea and France would likely focus on maritime and non-traditional security. This would have the risk of disconnection from the strategic reality in the Indo-Pacific, where geopolitics dominates. While non-traditional maritime threats such as climate change and piracy have implications for traditional security, it would still be questioned whether maritime cooperation between South Korea and France fits the fundamental purpose of Indo-Pacific strategies. Their maritime cooperation might have limited or even no effect on reducing tensions between the US

and China and thereby securing strategic autonomy for themselves. It would be better for South Korea and France to direct their cooperation to something relevant to geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific.

Potential South Korea-France Cooperation Projects

Despite the identified constraints on their Indo-Pacific strategies, South Korea and France could consider cooperation in the following areas, capitalizing on the convergence in their strategic goals. First, they would need to increase the frequency and intensity of bilateral dialogues for partnership in the Indo-Pacific. Increased contact would lead to the greater confidence and strategic convergence required for major concrete cooperation in the field of defense and security.

Second, despite the aforementioned risks, South Korea and France could start maritime cooperation as a step towards security partnership in the Indo-Pacific. Maritime cooperation would provide the two countries with an opportunity to check interoperability and display commitment to strategic autonomy. Further, South Korea could consider participating in the maritime exercises that France has developed with Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia, India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Also, South Korea and France could cooperate for regional maritime security in the sub-regions of the Indian and Pacific oceans. The sub-regions of both oceans suffer from climate change and illicit activities such as overfishing and maritime piracy. South Korea and France's regional maritime cooperation would improve their maritime domain awareness and contribute to suppressing illegal activities. To that effect, South Korea and France would be able to use existing resources such as regional marine information centers. On the Pacific side, the Pacific Islands Forum, in which both South Korea and France are dialogue partners, would provide a platform for them to support the Pacific Island countries' needs for resilience and climate change. In so doing, they could model the cooperation between the US and South Korea focused on high-quality infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific. On the Indian side, South Korea and France could seek similar opportunities at the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center of the Eastern, Southern Africa and Indian Ocean Region (RMIFC), located in Madagascar.

Lastly, South Korea and France could consider jointly launching institution-building in the Indo-Pacific. They could put this on the agenda for their bilateral dialogues. Institution-building in the Indo-Pacific would purportedly be about reducing tensions between the great powers through regular dialogue. A regularized dialogue body

would provide an institutional space that facilitates consultation, builds trust, and mitigates geopolitical tensions. An example of managing tensions through institution-building is APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). Until recently, APEC has ensured a cooperative relationship between the US and China, which might, in the absence of economic interdependence, otherwise be security rivals.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Indo-Pacific region would need an institution where dialogue on diverse issues at diverse levels, including summits, can take place.

What type of institution would be appropriate for the Indo-Pacific and how can it be built? Among other things, institution-building for the Indo-Pacific would be best to start from scratch, meaning that it would not be a legacy institution. A potential legacy institution in the Indo-Pacific would be Quad Plus, which expands the Quad. Considering that the US leads the Quad, Quad Plus might not involve all the stakeholders, particularly China, nor contribute to reducing tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Further, building a new, non-legacy institution would indicate the will and consensus of the concerned parties to manage geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. And a dialogue body in the Indo-Pacific could follow a G20-style. The realistic institutional goal of a dialogue body in the Indo-Pacific would be to manage geopolitical competition, but not to eliminate it or impose binding rules. It would be a forum for leader-led strategic dialogue, where the full range of political, security and economic issues can be discussed.

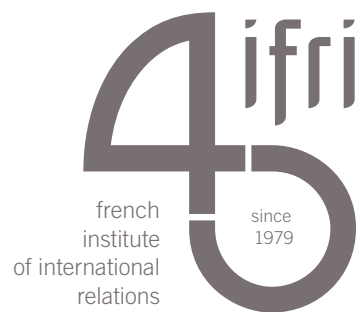
50. J. D. Wilson, *Investing in the Economic Architecture of the Indo-Pacific*, Perth USAsia Centre, 2017.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is a center of geopolitical gravity fraught with major great-power competition, and the intensity of great-power competition has been ratcheting up. What occurs in the Indo-Pacific is likely to affect countries near and far in the years to come. Though to varying degrees of urgency and stake, countries face similar challenges in the Indo-Pacific. They need to cope with the potential dangers that the US-China rivalry poses to their interests and, at the same time, figure out ways to shape an Indo-Pacific order that will deliver stability and economic prosperity.

Having said that, both South Korea and France as Indo-Pacific countries have compelling vested interests in the state of the Indo-Pacific. Their interests stem from their geographical location and their status and role in global affairs. France has already positioned itself as a stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, while South Korea is on the verge of emerging from ambiguity. Over the years, South Korea has been subject to growing demands for it to participate actively in the Indo-Pacific theater. It is now time for it to strategize more explicitly its approach towards the Indo-Pacific. South Korea will have an opportunity to embark on that task from 2022, and it is more likely than not to include partnership with like-minded countries in its Indo-Pacific strategy in order to conduct its principles-based strategy more effectively.

In that light, this review of France and South Korea's (future) Indo-Pacific strategies and their capabilities points to their partnership in the Indo-Pacific. In so far as they share the goal of strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific, their common goal would more likely be fulfilled if they support each other as like-minded countries. If so, their common challenge would be how to translate their potentially shared vision of the Indo-Pacific into workable plans and carry them out within and beyond their capabilities.



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