

# Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Global Polarisation and Yoon's Security Strategy

by Matteo Dian

## ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the escalation in the US-China rivalry have exacerbated the existing political and strategic polarisation in Northeast Asia and in the wider Indo-Pacific region. South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol has reacted by promoting foreign and security strategies based on a peculiar, and in many respects innovative, interpretation of South Korea's foreign policy tradition he has articulated in several axis: a stronger alliance with the United States, and the adoption of the concept of "Global Pivotal State", the investment in the strategic triangle with the United States and Japan, a new Indo-Pacific Strategy as well as a more active engagement with NATO and EU member states, in particular in the defence sector.

*South Korea | Foreign policy | Military policy | USA | Japan | NATO | European Union*

**keywords**

# Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Global Polarisation and Yoon's Security Strategy

by Matteo Dian\*

## 1. Russia's war and global polarisation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the level of strategic and ideological polarisation between the West and an anti-Western bloc, mostly of authoritarian countries. This fuels the intensity of US-China competition.<sup>1</sup> This process has had significant consequences in East Asia. Despite earlier attempts to cast itself as a mediator between Russia and the West, China has increasingly provided Russia with economic and technological support. China has given diplomatic and political cover to Russian President Vladimir Putin, as attested to by the several meetings between Putin and China's President Xi Jinping since the invasion. While the EU and its member states have been supporting Ukraine, providing military and economic aid, the reactions in the wider Indo-Pacific region have ranged from economic and diplomatic support to much more pragmatic and neutralist positions. Several states have even supported Russia's war effort. Among the latter the most significant cases are, beside China, Vietnam<sup>2</sup> and North Korea. Pyongyang's cooperation with Moscow has amplified the political and security consequences of the war for the Korean peninsula and for Northeast Asia.

<sup>1</sup> Roberto S. Foa et al., *A World Divided. Russia, China and the West*, Cambridge, Centre for the Future of Democracy, October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.90281>; Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "International Order Transition and US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo Pacific", in *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2023), p. 234-260, DOI 10.1080/09512748.2022.2160789.

<sup>2</sup> Vietnam abstained on the four UN General Assembly's resolutions condemning Russia's invasion and voted against the expelling Moscow from the UN Human Rights Council. Furthermore, Hanoi has consolidated its ties with Russia in the field of defence industry and energy. See Ian Storey, "Vietnam and the Russia-Ukraine War: Hanoi's 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Pays Off but Challenges Remain", in *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 2024/13 (16 February 2024), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/?p=61829>.

\* Matteo Dian is an Associate Professor of History and International Relations of East Asia at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna. Previously he held research and teaching positions at University of Oxford, LSE, and Ca' Foscari University in Venice.

Revised version of a paper presented at the conference on "New Convergences in EU-ROK Economic Security Relations", organised in Rome on 30 January 2024 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) with the support of Korea Foundation.

## 2. The military cooperation between Russia and North Korea

Russia's war against Ukraine has led Moscow to reach out to Pyongyang, asking for military and logistical support. The newfound partnership between Russia and North Korea, emerged after the September 2023 meeting between Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un at the Vostochny cosmodrome in the Russian Far East, has had several significant consequences. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as the North is formally known, is now providing the Russian army with weapons and ammunition. North Korean equipment is generally interoperable with Soviet/Russian standards, enabling an immediate integration into the Russian arsenals. Despite being far from Western technological standards, North Korea can provide a volume of ammunition that is very hard to match for the European partners of Ukraine. Pyongyang has provided systems such as BM-21 Grad Multiple Rocket Launchers (MRL), KN-23, KN-24 and KN-25 short-range ballistic missiles,<sup>3</sup> anti-tank missiles, portable anti-air missile and Soviet-era 122mm howitzer rounds.<sup>4</sup> According to a statement of the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS), North Korea might have provided up to 1 million artillery shells to Russia in 2023 only.<sup>5</sup>

The purchase of North Korean military equipment violates several UN Security Council resolutions that forbid other states from purchasing weapons from North Korea. The newfound relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang should not be considered as a one-sided bargain, since North Korea has surely a lot to gain from the relationship. Russia can offer technology for North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programmes and more generally for the military. Secondly, Russia can contribute to breaking the political and diplomatic isolation of the regime, diminishing the capacity of the United States, South Korea and their partners to put economic and political pressure on it. Finally, Russia could assist in other non-military areas such as Covid vaccines or food supplies.

## 3. South Korea's security strategy during the Yoon presidency

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol as president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), together with the increasing polarisation of the regional and global order, has led to a significant re-orientation of South Korea's foreign policy, compared

<sup>3</sup> The KN-23 is similar to the Russian Iskander SRBM, the KN-24 is similar in function and range to the US- produced ATACTMS, the KN-25 is similar to the OTR-21, Tochka (SS-21).

<sup>4</sup> James Byrne, Joseph Byrne and Gary Somerville, "The Orient Express: North Korea's Clandestine Supply Route to Russia", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 16 October 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/report-orient-express-north-koreas-clandestine-supply-route-russia>.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Russia and North Korea: A Growing Strategic Partnership", in *38 North*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.38north.org/?p=29139>; Josh Smith, "Explainer: Where Did Russia Get Its North Korean Missiles?", in *Reuters*, 5 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/where-did-russia-get-its-north-korean-missiles-2024-01-05>.

with his predecessor Moon Jae-in.<sup>6</sup> Yoon's approach is largely coherent with the country's conservative foreign policy tradition rooted in several key principles: an uncompromising stance towards the North, based on deterrence; the centrality of the US-ROK alliance; and a diminished emphasis on the history controversies with Japan to seek a common line on security challenges.<sup>7</sup>

As attested by Yoon's state visit to Washington in April 2023, the alliance with the United States has been consolidated and deepened. The Washington Declaration adopted at the summit aimed at reassuring Seoul and dispelling fears of abandonment from the South Korean side, a fear that was reflected in Yoon's proposals regarding a NATO-style nuclear sharing agreement or the return of US tactical nuclear weapons to the South. The declaration included forms on consultation on possible use of nuclear weapons in the peninsula and the intention to intensify the visibility of joint signalling in the realm of extended deterrence towards North Korea through joint exercises.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, both Yoon and US President Joe Biden were very keen to showcase how the alliance should not be considered a mere tool to counter North Korean threat. On the contrary, they emphasised that it was a comprehensive global strategic alliance – as highlighted by the South Korean 2023 National Security Strategy.<sup>9</sup> This means incorporating within the alliance issues such as technology and defence industry, economic security and cooperation on regional and global security problems.

These developments are coherent with Yoon's concept of South Korea as a "Global Pivotal State" (GPS), namely a "middle power" able to "shape international norms, collectively enforce global rules, and bridge ties between developed and developing nations".<sup>10</sup> As Andrew Yeo has emphasised, the concept of GPS translates into three key elements that appear to be emphasised and embraced: liberal values, strategic relevance and global public goods. Overall, the GPS concept implies an active role for South Korea as a supporter of the liberal international order, beyond its immediate and more pressing security concerns related to North Korea. These developments have three main consequences. Firstly, seeking to improve the relationship between with Japan, it opens new possibilities for the development of the security triangle with Tokyo and Washington. Secondly, it leads to embrace a more active role in the Indo-Pacific. Thirdly, it envisages a potential global security role, with a special emphasis on industrial defence cooperation, as demonstrated

<sup>6</sup> Moon Jae-in, coherently with the South Korean progressive foreign policy tradition, promoted a rapprochement with North Korea, a stable relationship with China and sought some space for autonomy in the US-ROK alliance.

<sup>7</sup> Marco Milani, Antonio Fiori and Matteo Dian (eds), *The Korean Paradox. Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, London/New York, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> White House, *Washington Declaration*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2>.

<sup>9</sup> South Korea Office of National Security, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, June 2023, <https://www.president.go.kr/download/648bbeff9b00b>.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Yeo, "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State", in *Brookings Articles*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=1751944>.

in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

#### 4. The strategic US-ROK-Japan strategic triangle

The United States started to promote the idea of turning the alliances with South Korean and Japan into a strategic triangle in the 1990s, with the establishment of several trilateral dialogues and meetings, up to the vice-ministerial level, to respond to the emerging North Korean nuclear crisis and overcome the lack of communication and intelligence sharing over Pyongyang's capabilities.<sup>11</sup> These initial experiments did not develop into a more substantial diplomatic in the following years. The animosity between South Korea and Japan, due to unsettled historical disputes and wartime memories originating from Japan's colonial rule in the peninsula, completely foreclose the possibility of developing the US-Japan-triangle in the following years.<sup>12</sup> During the Bush and the Obama Administrations, the United States actively embraced the logic of minilateralism, achieving significant progress primarily with the strategic triangle between Japan and Australia. The US-Japan-South Korea trilateral continued to be the most difficult piece of the emerging networked security architecture, despite the efforts of both Administrations and the mounting threat presented by North Korea and China's growing capabilities. Bilateral disputes related to historical issues as well as difference perceptions of the role and the status of China in the region continued to adversely affect the relationship between Tokyo and Seoul.<sup>13</sup>

In 2010 the three countries signed a joint statement underlining the importance of trilateral cooperation to address the threat posed by North Korea and manage global economic and strategic challenges. The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) on military intelligence sharing, signed in 2011, was later scrapped by Seoul amid popular protests against any forms of security cooperation with Japan. In 2014 then US President Barack Obama pressed Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and ROK President Park Geun-hye into a trilateral meeting on the margins of the Nuclear Security Summit and inaugurate trilateral talks at the ministerial level and a bi-annual summit. These meetings later led the signing of a trilateral information sharing agreement in 2014.<sup>14</sup> The

<sup>11</sup> John Hemmings, *Quasi-Alliances, Managing the Rise of China, and Domestic Politics: The US-Japan-Australia Trilateral 1991-2015*, PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.21953/lse.aqujxrd9w9>.

<sup>12</sup> Ji Young Kim, "Rethinking the Role of Identity Factors: The History Problem and the Japan-South Korea Security Relationship in the post-Cold War Period", in *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September 2015), p. 477-503, DOI 10.1093/irap/lcv007; Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash. East Asian Security and the United States*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Matteo Dian, "Japan, South Korea and the Rise of a Networked Security Architecture in East Asia", in *International Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2020), p. 185-207, DOI 10.1057/s41311-019-00194-8; Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash*, cit.

<sup>14</sup> Yul Sohn, "Relocating Trilateralism in a Broader Regional Architecture: A South Korean



Agreement on Comfort Women, signed in 2015 by the two governments, aimed at closing the controversy over one of the most sensitive issues in bilateral relations, namely the forced prostitution of Korean women by the Japanese armed forces before and during World War II. This seemed to be conducive to a new era of trilateral cooperation, inaugurated by the eventual approval of the GSOMIA in 2016.<sup>15</sup> However, the window of opportunity for trilateral cooperation closed with the resignation of Park and the elections of Moon Jae-in in South Korea and of Donald Trump in the United States. The Trump Administration did not make any effort to promote relations between the two US allies. The election of Yoon and Biden created another opportunity for reconciliation between Seoul and Tokyo and for significant progress for the Washington-Seoul-Tokyo strategic triangle. In March 2023, Yoon visited Tokyo, marking the first official visit of a South Korean President in 12 years. This meeting opened the way to a new shuttle diplomacy and to a partial resolution of pending trade disputes.

The development of a more cohesive and cooperative security triangle has culminated with the Camp David Summit of 15 August 2023. The summit led to a joint statement titled "The Spirit of Camp David" as well as the approval of several practical agreements in the fields of economic security, cybersecurity, information sharing and supply chain resilience. Moreover, the three countries committed to schedule a yearly leadership summit as well as joint military exercises.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, the joint statement includes commitments to consult and to align the three countries' Indo-Pacific strategies, to work to uphold the US-led rules based order, and to "oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific [...] regarding the dangerous and aggressive behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims that we have recently witnessed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the South China Sea".<sup>17</sup> Despite the significance of the progress in bilateral and trilateral relations, possible further developments are closely dependent on domestic politics in each country. Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has recently faced a steep decline in popularity. Yoon faces a public that remains at best divided on the process of reconciliation with Tokyo, due to the salience of issues related to historical memories of the Japanese colonisation and wartime exploitation. And, of course, Biden is facing again Trump in the US presidential election in November 2024.

Perspective", in Daniel Sneider, Yul Sohn and Yoshihide Soeya, *US-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*, NBR Special Report No. 59 (2016), p. 13-21.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Sneider, "Advancing US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: A US Perspective", in Daniel Sneider, Yul Sohn and Yoshihide Soeya, *US-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*, NBR Special Report No. 59 (2016), p. 1-7.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Sneider, "Japan-South Korea-US Relations Thawed, But Not Warm Enough", in *East Asia Forum*, 31 August 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/?p=2100185>.

<sup>17</sup> Japan, Republic of Korea and United States, *The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States*, 18 August 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

## 5. Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy

Before 2022, South Korea was reluctant to promote an active Indo-Pacific strategy. Here it is important to distinguish between strategic concepts and actual policies and practices. While several powers today have adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy, the political and normative content of those strategies vary widely.<sup>18</sup> The concept of Indo-Pacific remains something of a difficult subject for the ROK. The idea of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is the product of a long geopolitical and strategic elaboration of thinkers and leaders closely associated with Abe Shinzo and the Japanese conservative leadership. The idea of FOIP is the successor of previous concepts dear to the late Abe, such as "the confluence of the Two Seas" and the "Security Diamond".<sup>19</sup> Only in 2018 was the concept adopted by the Trump Administration and it has since found substantial popularity in many capitals in the region and in the West. The Japanese origin of the concept probably induced some reluctance in the Korean foreign policy community towards the adoption of an Indo-Pacific Strategy. Ultimately, the official adoption of a South Korean Indo-Pacific strategy has happened contextually with the improvement of the relationship with Tokyo, promoted by Yoon Administration.

The second relevant element of the concept of Indo-Pacific is China's place in it. Both the Japanese and the American versions of FOIP design a model of regional order in which regional maritime democracies assume a role of strategic and normative bastions, by virtue not only of their power and capabilities, but especially as a consequence to their commitment to universal liberal values. Therefore, FOIP relegates China to the role of rival great power, which is endowed with the capabilities but not the political features to taken on the role of legitimate order maker.<sup>20</sup> Up to the Moon Administration, South Korea perceived China's role differently. Since the early 1990s Beijing was seen as a legitimate great power, an essential partner and a necessary protagonist of any possible negotiated solution to the North Korea problem.<sup>21</sup> Consistently with these premises, Seoul refrained from adopting an explicit Indo-Pacific strategy until 2022. The Moon Administration promoted the "New Southern Policy" (NSP), that sought to provide a framework for the country's relations with the Southeast Asia and India, emphasising economic

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Wilkins and Jiye Kim, "Adoption, Accommodation or Opposition? Regional Powers Respond to American-led Indo-Pacific Strategy", in *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2020), p. 415-445, DOI 10.1080/09512748.2020.1825516.

<sup>19</sup> Yuichi Hosoya, "FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy", in *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2019), p. 18-28, DOI 10.1080/13439006.2019.1622868; Shinichi Kitaoka, "Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific", in *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2019), p. 7-17, DOI 10.1080/13439006.2019.1618592; Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN", in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (August 2019), p. 286-313.

<sup>20</sup> Matteo Dian, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Features and Limits of a Model of Regional Order", in *Il Politico*, Vol. 257, No. 2 (2022), p. 43-58, <https://doi.org/10.4081/ilpolitico.2022.765>.

<sup>21</sup> Matteo Dian, "Japan, South Korea and the Rise of a Networked Security Architecture in East Asia", cit.

cooperation, development, trade, infrastructures.<sup>22</sup> The NSP maintained a low profile in the political and security spheres, with the aim at avoiding positions that could deteriorate relations with Beijing. For this reason, the security pillar was mostly about non-traditional challenges such as terrorism, eschewing strong alignment with the United States and other regional partners on maritime disputes and freedom of navigation. In this context, cooperation in defence industry with South East Asian countries represented a partial exception and a significant instrument to upgrade bilateral relations. Indonesia emerged as a key buyer of South Korean defence equipment (including 18 FA fighter jets and 3 Nagapasa attack submarines), followed by Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>23</sup>

The South Korean Indo-Pacific strategy published by the Yoon Administration marks a clear policy change in this respect. It stresses the ROK's role as supporter of the rules based regional order and in particular of human rights, democracy and non-proliferation. The document seeks not to antagonise China, despite the emphasis on norms and values. The strategy states that China is a "key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific" and that South Korea promotes an "inclusive initiative that neither targets nor excludes any particular country".<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the document states that Seoul promotes "an Indo-Pacific where nations that represent diverse political systems can move forward together peacefully through competition and cooperation based on rules".<sup>25</sup> The South Korean strategy nevertheless seeks to achieve a degree of strategic clarity on issues such as coercion in the South China Sea, freedom of navigation and trade dependency, and economic security. This represents a significant step away from the idea of *anmi kyōng-jung* (security with the United States, economy with China).<sup>26</sup> Seoul has finally embraced a degree of coordination with the United States and its allies and partners, joining the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Chip 4 Alliance. Nevertheless, a participation to groupings with a more evident security profile, such as the Quad, remain unlikely.

<sup>22</sup> Sera Yun and Jan Vincent Galas, "The Evolution of South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP-K): The Moon and Yoon Administrations", in *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2023), p. 250-263, DOI 10.1080/03068374.2023.2213113.

<sup>23</sup> Max Broad and Evan A. Laksmana, "South Korea's Defence Relations in Southeast Asia", in *IISS Online Analyses*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/09/south-koreas-defence-relations-in-southeast-asia>.

<sup>24</sup> South Korea Government, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, December 2022, p. 14 and 12, [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=322133](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Eric J. Ballbach, "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy. Opportunities and Challenges for Cooperation with the EU", in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 2/2023 (March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2023RP02>.



## 6. New avenues for cooperation between Europe and South Korea

The South Korean support to Ukraine and the newfound role as provider of weapons to EU countries such as Poland is perhaps the most innovative element of Yoon's security policy. South Korea finds itself in the position of being able to supply advanced weapons system, compatible with US and NATO standards. This is largely due to the efforts of previous administrations and particularly Moon's, which considered technological military autonomy (or at least reducing dependence) from the United States as a key policy objective for the country. In September 2022, South Korea and Poland signed an unprecedented arms deal, including K2 tanks (980), Thunder K9 howitzers (650), training and combat FA-50 fighter jets (48) and K239 Chunmoo rocket artillery systems (288). The deal is estimated to be worth around 13 billion US dollars. While the relationship with Warsaw is the most significant economically, the South Korean defence industry has signed contracts also with Estonia (36 K-9 howitzers), Finland (up to 100 K-9 howitzers in different instalments) and Norway (K-9 howitzers and K-2 main battle tanks).<sup>27</sup>

As stressed by Ramon Pacheco Pardo, the strategy of promoting the country's role as a key player in the defence industry is not only about economic gains. On the contrary, it serves many key interests. Firstly, it is a relevant pillar of the Global Pivotal State. South Korea realises its ambition "to be seen as an independent and reliable geopolitical partner that plays a key role in the political, security, and economic affairs of different regions of the world".<sup>28</sup> Cooperation in the realm of defence industry is considered also functional to promoting the country's global status and prestige as well as contributing to foster its level of technological self-reliance in the military realm, while maintaining a high degree of interoperability with the United States and its allies. South Korea has not provided weapons directly to Ukraine. However, the fact that South Korea is selling weapons to other EU member states, and in particular Poland, enables to them to transfer their own weapons to Ukraine. Yoon's government has given Kyiv full diplomatic backing, supporting all UN resolutions that have condemned Russia's invasion and participating in the US-led sanctions against Russia. This support was made even more visible with President Yoon's visit to Kyiv in July 2023.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the ROK has pledged 2 billion US dollars over the next years (300 million only for 2024) in assistance to the reconstruction. In the words of President Yoon: "This

<sup>27</sup> Eunwoo Lee, "President Moon's Legacy: Boosted Arms Exports for South Korea", in *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/president-moons-legacy-boosted-arms-exports-for-south-korea>.

<sup>28</sup> Ramon Pacheco Pardo, "South Korea Is Sidestepping the Hub", in *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/03/south-korea-seoul-united-states-arms-weapons-sales-military-alliance-diplomacy>.

<sup>29</sup> Felipe Dana and Hyung-Jin Kim, "South Korean President Yoon Makes Surprise Visit to Ukraine, Pledges to Expand Support", in *PBS News Hour*, 15 July 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/south-korean-president-yoon-makes-surprise-visit-to-ukraine-pledges-to-expand-support>.

will demonstrate our responsible role as a global pivotal state in leading assistance for the restoration of peace in Ukraine and lay the foundation for our full-fledged participation in Ukraine's future reconstruction."<sup>30</sup>

Yoon's attendance to the NATO summits in Madrid in 2022 and Vilnius in 2023 was another important element of this strategy.<sup>31</sup> Firstly, Seoul further signalled its positioning on the Ukraine and linked it to a foreign and security policy orientated towards convergence with the West in the name of common security and values such as democracy, human rights, territorial integrity and democratic self-determination. This entails also that South Korea does not fear alienating China. After all, Beijing has been labelled as a systemic challenge by NATO and has supported economically and technologically Russia in its war against Ukraine. The 2023 NATO summit has provided the occasion to expand cooperation with NATO in the context of the "Individually Tailored Partnership Programme" (ITPP) that upgrades the level of cooperation in eleven sectors including non-proliferation, cybersecurity and emerging technologies.<sup>32</sup> The ITPP is functional to creating regular channels of communication and increasing the level of interoperability of weapons system, which in turn is essential to Seoul's objective of consolidating its role in the European defence market.

South Korea has also joined NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence and has started to participate in the large-scale cyber exercise Locked Shields.<sup>33</sup> Cooperation in the realm of cybersecurity is considered very important by Seoul, since North Korea resorts to cybertheft and cryptocurrency to fund its military spending. South Korea will also take part in the NATO Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation System (BICES). The BICES will enable the South Korean armed forces to get access to intelligence shared by NATO member states on battlefield experience and exercises and open the possibility for South Korea to participate in a set of NATO-led exercises.<sup>34</sup> This cooperation has produced a formal condemnation by NATO members of North Korea's nuclear proliferation and missile tests. This is particularly significant in a moment in which the UN Security Council is deadlocked by the ongoing polarisation between the P5, with Russia and China refusing to condemn, if not supporting, Pyongyang's actions.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Asami Terajima, "South Korea Pledges \$2.3 Billion in Aid for Ukraine", in *The Kyiv Independent*, 10 September 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/south-korea-pledges-2-3-billion-in-aid-for-ukraine>.

<sup>31</sup> NATO, *Secretary General Welcomes NATO's Deepening Partnership with South Korea*, 11 July 2013, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_217034.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217034.htm); Tunchinmang Langel, "Strengthening and Expansion of Japan and ROK Partnership with NATO", in *ICWA Issue Briefs*, 31 July 2023, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=9799&lid=6270](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9799&lid=6270).

<sup>32</sup> South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, '*Tailored Partnership' with NATO to Boost Security Cooperation*, 13 July 2023, [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5674/view.do?seq=320840](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320840).

<sup>33</sup> South Korea Presidency, *President Yoon Pledges to Share More Military Intel with NATO*, 13 July 2023, <https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/TRFjL5Qx>.

<sup>34</sup> Hae-Won Jun, "NATO and Its Indo-Pacific Partners Choose Practice over Rhetoric in 2023", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 5 December 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nato-and-its-indo-pacific-partners-choose-practice-over-rhetoric-2023>.

<sup>35</sup> Ellen Kim, "What Is Yoon's NATO Strategy?", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 19 July 2023, <https://www>.

## Conclusion

During the Yoon Administration South Korea seems clearly geared towards a more radical interpretation of its traditional foreign and security policy. Yoon has decided to “lean on one side”, choosing the alliance with the United States, liberal values, and the primacy of deterrence over engagement with North Korea. Under the rubric of the “Global Pivotal State” the ROK has embraced a more active, even if not necessarily well-defined, role, as co-enforcer of the “Indo-Pacific” order. However, some key constraints remain. Firstly, Yoon’s strategy does not have a wide consensus among the Korean public opinion, which does not appear as ready as the president to overlook historical grievances involving Japan. Secondly, a value-based Western-oriented strategy does not solve, and possibly makes even more intense, South Korea’s key geopolitical dilemma: how to deal with China in the context of great power competition. South Korea faces, in a more acute way, the same dilemma of most EU member states. It needs to craft a China strategy aimed at avoiding both de-coupling and economic dependence. Third, global polarisation and great power competition has a significant impact on policies towards North Korea. On the one hand, the new relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang has helped North Korea break its isolation, evade sanctions and receive economic and technological support. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine, together with recent developments in the Middle East, captures the attention and the resources of the United States, generating fears of abandonment among Asia allies. All these factors, while complicating Seoul’s security calculus, are favourable to a higher level of cooperation among the EU and its members and South Korea. The defence industrial sector seems to be the sector that can benefit more in the short term. The two sides, however, can coordinate policies to face common challenges such as cybersecurity, supply chain resilience and technological cooperation in key industries.

*Updated 11 June 2024*

## References

Eric J. Ballbach, "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy. Opportunities and Challenges for Cooperation with the EU", in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 2/2023 (March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2023RP02>

Max Broad and Evan A. Laksmana, "South Korea's Defence Relations in Southeast Asia", in *IISS Online Analyses*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/09/south-koreas-defence-relations-in-southeast-asia>

James Byrne, Joseph Byrne and Gary Somerville, "The Orient Express: North Korea's Clandestine Supply Route to Russia", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 16 October 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/report-orient-express-north-koreas-clandestine-supply-route-russia>

Felipe Dana and Hyung-Jin Kim, "South Korean President Yoon Makes Surprise Visit to Ukraine, Pledges to Expand Support", in *PBS News Hour*, 15 July 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/south-korean-president-yoon-makes-surprise-visit-to-ukraine-pledges-to-expand-support>

Matteo Dian, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Features and Limits of a Model of Regional Order", in *Il Politico*, Vol. 257, No. 2 (2022), p. 43-58, <https://doi.org/10.4081/ilpolitico.2022.765>

Matteo Dian, "Japan, South Korea and the Rise of a Networked Security Architecture in East Asia", in *International Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2020), p. 185-207, DOI 10.1057/s41311-019-00194-8

Roberto S. Foa et al., *A World Divided. Russia, China and the West*, Cambridge, Centre for the Future of Democracy, October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.90281>

Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan–South Korea Identity Clash. East Asian Security and the United States*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015

Hae-Won Jun, "NATO and Its Indo-Pacific Partners Choose Practice over Rhetoric in 2023", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 5 December 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nato-and-its-indo-pacific-partners-choose-practice-over-rhetoric-2023>

Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "International Order Transition and US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo Pacific", in *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2023), p. 234-260, DOI 10.1080/09512748.2022.2160789



John Hemmings, *Quasi-Alliances, Managing the Rise of China, and Domestic Politics: The US-Japan-Australia Trilateral 1991-2015*, PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.21953/lse.aqjuqxrd9w9>

Yuichi Hosoya, "FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy", in *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2019), p. 18-28, DOI 10.1080/13439006.2019.1622868

Japan, Republic of Korea and United States, *The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States*, 18 August 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>

Ellen Kim, "What Is Yoon's NATO Strategy?", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 19 July 2023, <https://www.csis.org/node/106410>

Ji Young Kim, "Rethinking the Role of Identity Factors: The History Problem and the Japan-South Korea Security Relationship in the post-Cold War Period", in *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September 2015), p. 477-503, DOI 10.1093/irap/lcv007

Shinichi Kitaoka, "Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific", in *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2019), p. 7-17, DOI 10.1080/13439006.2019.1618592

Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN", in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (August 2019), p. 286-313

Tunchinmang Langel, "Strengthening and Expansion of Japan and ROK Partnership with NATO", in *ICWA Issue Briefs*, 31 July 2023, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=9799&lid=6270](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9799&lid=6270)

Eunwoo Lee, "President Moon's Legacy: Boosted Arms Exports for South Korea", in *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/president-moons-legacy-boosted-arms-exports-for-south-korea>

Marco Milani, Antonio Fiori and Matteo Dian (eds), *The Korean Paradox. Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, London/New York, Routledge, 2019

NATO, *Secretary General Welcomes NATO's Deepening Partnership with South Korea*, 11 July 2013, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_217034.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217034.htm)

Ramon Pacheco Pardo, "South Korea Is Sidestepping the Hub", in *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/03/south-korea-seoul-united-states-arms-weapons-sales-military-alliance-diplomacy>

Samuel Ramani, "Russia and North Korea: A Growing Strategic Partnership", in *38 North*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.38north.org/?p=29139>

Josh Smith, "Explainer: Where Did Russia Get Its North Korean Missiles?", in *Reuters*, 5 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/where-did-russia-get-its-north-korean-missiles-2024-01-05>

Daniel Sneider, "Advancing US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: A US Perspective", in Daniel Sneider, Yul Sohn and Yoshihide Soeya, *US-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*, NBR Special Report No. 59 (2016), p. 1-7

Daniel Sneider, "Japan–South Korea–US Relations Thawed, But Not Warm Enough", in *East Asia Forum*, 31 August 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/?p=2100185>

Yul Sohn, "Relocating Trilateralism in a Broader Regional Architecture: A South Korean Perspective", in Daniel Sneider, Yul Sohn and Yoshihide Soeya, *US-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation*, NBR Special Report No. 59 (2016), p. 13-21

South Korea Government, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, December 2022, [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=322133](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133)

South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Tailored Partnership' with NATO to Boost Security Cooperation, 13 July 2023, [https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5674/view.do?seq=320840](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320840)

South Korea Office of National Security, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, June 2023, <https://www.president.go.kr/download/648bbeff9b00b>

South Korea Presidency, *President Yoon Pledges to Share More Military Intel with NATO*, 13 July 2023, <https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/TRFjL5Qx>

Ian Storey, "Vietnam and the Russia-Ukraine War: Hanoi's 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Pays Off but Challenges Remain", in *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 2024/13 (16 February 2024), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/?p=61829>

Asami Terajima, "South Korea Pledges \$2.3 Billion in Aid for Ukraine", in *The Kyiv Independent*, 10 September 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/south-korea-pledges-2-3-billion-in-aid-for-ukraine>

White House, *Washington Declaration*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2>

Thomas Wilkins and Jiye Kim, "Adoption, Accommodation or Opposition? Regional Powers Respond to American-led Indo-Pacific Strategy", in *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2020), p. 415-445, DOI 10.1080/09512748.2020.1825516

Andrew Yeo, "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State", in *Brookings Articles*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=1751944>

Sera Yun and Jan Vincent Galas, "The Evolution of South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP-K): The Moon and Yoon Administrations", in *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2023), p. 250-263, DOI 10.1080/03068374.2023.2213113

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 6976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI PAPERS

Director: Riccardo Alcaro ([r.alcaro@iai.it](mailto:r.alcaro@iai.it))

- 24 | 18 Matteo Dian, *Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Global Polarisation and Yoon's Security Strategy*
- 24 | 17 Virginia Volpi, *To Have or Not to Have Competence: EU Integration by Stealth through Permacrisis*
- 24 | 16 Francesco Giumelli, *How Targeted Measures Are Changing the Global Economy: Three Scenarios for the Future*
- 24 | 15 Mark Bromley and Kolja Brockmann, *A Tale of Two Systems: Alignment, Divergence and Coordination in EU and US Dual-use Export Controls*
- 24 | 14 Federica Marconi, *Foreign Direct Investment and National Security: Perspectives from the EU and the US*
- 24 | 13 Fabio Bulfone, Donato Di Carlo, Filippo Bontadini and Valentina Meliciani, *Adjusting to New Geopolitical Realities Semiconductors Industrial Policy in the US and EU*
- 24 | 12 Giuseppe Travaglini, *The US-Italy Economic Relation over the Last Decades*
- 24 | 11 Nicola Bilotta, *Technological Sovereignty: Italy, the EU and the US*
- 24 | 10 Julia Vassileva, *Dirty Warfare? The Application of International Law to Attacks on Nuclear Power Plants in the Conduct of Hostilities*
- 24 | 09 Natthanan Kunnamas and Bernardo Venturi, *Normative Power Europe at a Crossroads? The Normative Dimensions of the EU's Relations with ASEAN and ECOWAS*