

Original Paper

South Korea's Role Recalibration as "Global Pivotal State"

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Abstract

The concept of a "Global Pivotal State" has been introduced by the Yoon Suk-yeol administration as a key element of South Korea's strategic Indo-Pacific Strategy. While it may initially appear to be a political slogan distinguishing his foreign policy from that of his predecessors, it also offers a framework for South Korea to redefine its strategic orientation and national role identity amid the escalating competition between China and the United States. Rather than focusing solely on political or military centrality, the notion of a "global pivotal state" emphasizes South Korea's intention to enhance its influence on the global stage. This will be achieved through collaboration with like-minded partners, grounded in the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Keywords

Global Pivotal State, South Korea, Role Definition, Indo-Pacific region

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, South Korea's policy priorities has primarily focused on the Korean Peninsula and its neighboring countries, guided by its strategic middle-power diplomacy. In December 2022, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration unveiled its strategic document "Indo-Pacific Strategy for Freedom, Peace and Prosperity" which articulates the diplomatic goal of establishing South Korea as a "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) in pursuit of freedom, peace and prosperity. The concept of a GPS serves not only as a political slogan that distinguishes the Yoon administration from its predecessors but also as a pathway for South Korea's strategic realignment and redefinition of its national role. This initiative encourages South Korea to assume a more proactive stance on regional and global issues, thereby enhancing its influence and strengthening bilateral relationships. While the GPS concept is rooted in middle-power diplomacy, it extends beyond the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, actively seeking opportunities in regions such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, as well as engaging more broadly with Europe and NATO.

2. The Evolution of South Korea's National Role

2.1 Post-war Recovery and Early Foreign Policy Priorities

In the latter half of the 20th century, national survival and security were paramount in South Korea's foreign policy. In the 1950s, when Korea was still in the post-war recovery period, guaranteeing national security and promoting post-war economic recovery were the primary goals of Korea, and in this regard, Korea chose to actively follow the United States and consolidate the U.S.-Korea alliance in exchange for security guarantees and international economic assistance. Given the complex dynamics on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea's national role was largely confined to that of "a secondary military ally" of the U.S., serving as an important pawn in the U.S. strategy. Consequently, national policy focused predominantly on the Korean Peninsula and consolidating the U.S.-South Korea alliance, leading to a phase of diplomacy characterized by bilateral engagements and limited autonomy. From the 1960s to the 1990s, South Korea expanded its foreign trade advantages through an export-oriented economic development model while establishing diplomatic relations with socialist countries. Roh Tae-woo's "Northern Policy" (1988) marked a significant turning point toward a more diversified national role. During Roh's presidency (1988-1993), East-West relations began to thaw, prompting South Korea to seek greater regional influence and increased engagement with socialist nations. By the early 1990s, South Korea had established diplomatic ties with several countries, including the Soviet Union in 1990 and China in 1992. Amid rapid economic growth and ongoing political democratization, South Korea aimed to assert a larger role in the region (Ryu Yongwook, 2023).

2.2 Diplomatic Pluralism and the Expansion of Regional Influence

Around the turn of the 21st century, South Korea continued to broaden its foreign policy objectives, actively constructing its identity as a "middle power". In this evolving landscape, the focus shifted toward regional influence while also considering global engagement (Zhang Qun, 2017). The Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003) introduced the "Sunshine Policy", which sought cooperation with North Korea and aimed to project an image of peace and stability on the Peninsula, positioning South Korea as a "coordinator of Northeast Asian security dialogue". The Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-2008) aimed for South Korea to emerge as a "balancer in Northeast Asia", enhancing its status by leveraging the competing interests of major powers like the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia. The Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013) introduced the concept of "Global Korea", aiming to bolster South Korea's global influence through active participation in global affairs, including UN peacekeeping and global climate governance. Concurrently, South Korea enhanced its cultural exports, allowing the "Korean Wave" to gain international prominence. The "New Asia Initiative" also represented a shift in South Korea's foreign policy, expanding cooperation from traditional relationships with the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia to broader engagements across Northeast, Southeast and Central Asia (Ling, S. L., 2015).

Despite these aspirations, South Korea's defined role in the geopolitical landscape did not align with its actual capabilities, leading to difficulties in gaining recognition from major powers in Northeast Asia. The country struggled to create a Northeast Asian security mechanism independently and found it challenging to represent Asian interests on the global stage. In response to these role conflicts, adjustments were necessary. During the Park Geun-hye administration (2013-2017), the "Northeast Asia Cooperation and Peace Initiative" (NAPCI) aimed to position South Korea as a "coordinator for establishing a trust platform among regional actors", collaborating with intermediary countries. The "Eurasian Initiative" proposed a trans-regional approach, seeking to uphold global norms through multilateral mechanisms and establish South Korea as a "responsible and constructive middle power" (Xing Liju & An Bo, 2020). Under the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), the dual approach of the "New Southern Policy" and "New Northern Policy" further diversified South Korea's foreign relations, though the primary focus remained on the Korean Peninsula, particularly in enhancing U.S.-North Korea and inter-Korean relations. South Korea also expanded economic aid and trade relations in Southeast Asia to bolster its influence over ASEAN countries, with both administrations aiming to balance relations between the U.S. and China.

3. The Role of "Global Pivotal State"

When the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" was initially introduced, the Moon Jae-in government cautiously refrained from defining the "Indo-Pacific" as a geopolitical concept. However, in the later years of his administration, South Korea engaged within the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific framework in a limited capacity, navigating system pressure while avoiding a close association with the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific alliance. In contrast, the Yoon Suk-yeol government, which took office in May 2022, actively aligned with U.S. foreign policy and introduced a South Korean version of the Indo-Pacific strategy, characterized by a shift toward "strategic clarity". This new framework positions South Korea as a "Global Pivotal State".

3.1 What Is "Pivot"?

From a geopolitical perspective, the concept of a "pivot" can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. British geographer Halford Mackinder referred to the central region of the Eurasian continent as the "pivot area", suggesting that countries within this region would leverage continental resources to expand their influence toward the periphery, ultimately becoming powerful land and maritime states (H.J. Mackinder, 1904).

After the Cold War, the concept of a "pivot" evolved to encompass specific certain countries rather than remaining a geographically ambiguous area. Scholars at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies argue that a "pivot state" is not confined to the geographical location of the "pivot zone", but may also include neighboring countries valued by great powers for their strategic military, economic, and ideological resources (Tim Sweijjs, 2014). These states can act as leverage points for great powers

vying for control over the “pivot zone”, and may be large countries in certain regions or smaller states in critical positions, playing either a supportive or proactive role in shaping policies that create favorable security environments (Liu Z., 2020). Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997), in his book “The Grand Chessboard”, identified South Korea as a significant “geopolitical pivot”, emphasizing that such countries do not necessarily need to possess great power or strong motivations. Instead, their significance lies in their sensitive geographic locations and potential vulnerabilities, which can influence access to key regions and resources. They may serve as defensive barriers for major nations, exerting considerable political and cultural influence on more active geopolitical players nearby. After the events of September 11, the British Blair government adopted a “pivot diplomacy”, leveraging Britain’s unique connections with the U.S., EU, and Commonwealth, as well as its special status within NATO and the UN. This strategy aimed to maximize its historical, geographic, and linguistic advantages, frequently mediating among various governments to assume an active “hub” or “pivot” role on the international stage. In the notion of “not as a superpower, but as a pivot state”, parallels can be drawn between Yoon Suk-yeol’s vision of South Korea as a “Global Pivotal State” and Blair’s concept of a “pivotal state”.

3.2 Aiming for the “Global”

The concept of a “Global Pivotal State” (글로벌 중추국가) is officially defined by South Korea as a nation that promotes freedom, peace, and prosperity through the values of liberal democracy and substantial cooperation. Jeffrey Robertson (2023), an associate professor of diplomatic studies at Yonsei University, argues that the term is primarily a diplomatic slogan created by the Yoon administration to differentiate itself from its predecessors. This ambiguity allows for various interpretations based on current realities, historical contexts, or future aspirations.

Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that South Korea’s foreign policy exhibits continuity, particularly in its commitment to national and citizen security, maintaining economic prosperity, and pursuing independence and autonomy. Since taking office, President Yoon has downplayed the “middle power diplomacy” framework that has characterized South Korea’s approach since the 21st century. Yet, its core identity as a “middle power” remains, emphasizing international rules and norms while leveraging institutions to regulate the behavior of great powers. In discussing the functionality of a “Global Pivotal State”, Hwang Jae-ho, the director of the Korea Global Strategy and Cooperation Institute, contends that it should not be equated with a great power but viewed as a nation playing a core role in the international community based on a clear understanding of its global position. He emphasizes that within the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea should prioritize prosperity alongside freedom, suggesting that interpreting the “Global Pivotal State” from an economic development perspective may be more appropriate. Andrew Yeo (2023), a senior researcher at the Asia Policy Center of Foreign Policy, points that South Korea’s aspiration to fulfill the role of a Global Pivotal State by shaping international norms, jointly implementing global rules, and bridging the gap

between developed and developing countries represents a promising approach.

However, in light of South Korea's geopolitical environment and national capabilities, Chinese scholar Lee Kaesung (2022) contends it functions more as a frontline state in the regional political security struggle with larger powers. He argues that due to the strategic constraints of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the intensifying competition between the U.S. and China, it is difficult to view the concept of "Global Pivotal State" purely through the lens of power dynamics. On June 8, 2023, the Yoon administration's report on the 2023 National Security Strategy repeatedly mentioned "Global Pivotal State". Park Jong-soo (2024), former chairman of the Northern Economic Cooperation Committee, remarked that security is a necessary but not sufficient condition for peace. The consolidation of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the pursuit of trilateral security cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have accelerated the formation of a socialist bloc led by China, Russia, and North Korea. He warned that if tensions among the four major powers surrounding South Korea intensify, the Korean Peninsula will inevitably be affected. Park argues that a "Global Pivotal State" should not be a spot that provokes conflict but rather lead efforts to resolve contradictions. For sustainable peace, South Korea should become a pivot for military deterrence and diplomatic wisdom, pursuing a non-zero-sum, geopolitically balanced approach that prioritizes national interests.

During the Lee Myung-bak administration, the strategic vision of "Global Korea" was proposed, and the foreign and security policies of the Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in administrations expanded well beyond the Korean Peninsula. In this sense, the concept of "Global Pivotal State" emerges as a new orientation, embedded in South Korea's historical experience but adapted to contemporary circumstances. South Korea's international leadership has largely been shaped by its middle power diplomacy, supported by economic growth and enhanced by the rapid rise of its cultural industries, which has increased its visibility in the global cultural sphere (Heike Hermanns, 2013).

The key to constructing a "Global Pivotal State" lies in implementing specific policies that enable South Korea to play a more central role in global affairs. In a challenging and sensitive geopolitical environment, the South Korean government has worked to build a national brand and project it onto the international stage, transforming economic strength into political influence while actively participating in regional and international issues. Given its limited natural resources, sensitive geographic location, and the ongoing tension on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea faces challenges in becoming a diplomatic and security player on par with the United States or China, or in replacing the European Union's core role in global economic and trade matters. Thus, the "Global Pivotal State" that South Korea seeks to build should not be understood as a "center" or "core" on a global or regional level. Instead, it should be seen as a global model that operates within a network of regional relations, transcending traditional regional boundaries.

3.3 Core Elements of the “Global Pivotal State”

South Korea’s international leadership has primarily been shaped through the conduct of middle power diplomacy, underpinned by economic growth and supported by the rapid development of its cultural industries, which have enhanced South Korea’s global visibility in the cultural sphere (Xing Liju & An Bo, 2020). The core element in building a “Global Pivotal State” lies in the implementation of concrete policies that enable South Korea to play a more central role in global affairs. For instance, within an unfavorable and sensitive geopolitical environment, the South Korean government has aimed to build a national brand and promote it on the international stage, transforming economic strength into political influence and actively engaging in regional and international affairs.

Given the limitations posed by its natural resources and geographical location, the “Global Pivotal State” South Korea envisions should not be understood as a “center” or “core” in the global or regional sense. Rather, it should be seen as a global model positioned within a network of regional relations yet transcending traditional regional boundaries. This vision implies that the “Global Pivotal State” concept proposed by the Yoon Suk-yeol administration is best understood as a nation that wields influence globally, serves as a model for other countries, and, in the long term, plays a leadership role and possesses discourse power in a particular region or stands as a key state in specific fields that are difficult to replace. It is clear that South Korea’s “Global Pivotal State” vision remains an ongoing project facing substantial obstacles.

Although South Korea’s global influence is currently limited, its regional impact, bolstered by economic prosperity, and its increased political engagement through participation in both multilateral and mini-lateral frameworks, leveraging the power of its alliance with the United States, provide a path and possibilities for realizing the “Global Pivotal State” ambition. South Korea has adopted a functionally oriented strategy on both global and regional levels, seeking leadership in multilateral security cooperation by utilizing its material resource advantages (Zhang Qun, 2016). Economic advantages are a crucial entry point.

South Korea is one of the few countries in the world to have signed Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with all three major global economies: China, the European Union, and the United States, positioning it as a highly advantageous player in Asia. Additionally, South Korea has signed FTAs with Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, and has obtained membership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), further integrating itself into the regional supply chain and strengthening ties with its trade partners. Since the early 21st century, the South Korean government and businesses have made substantial investments in research and development (R&D). Driven by cutting-edge innovative technologies, South Korean companies now lead globally in fields such as semiconductors, batteries, automobiles, biotechnology, green shipping, and robotics. Major corporations like Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and Lotte hold significant positions in the global economic chain and exert considerable influence within their respective industries (Xing Liju & An Bo, 2020).

South Korea's defense industry exports have grown rapidly in recent years. In 2024, South Korea plans to invest 400 billion won (approximately USD 289 million) in the development of advanced materials and components for defense products to strengthen its competitiveness in the defense sector. Since the Ministry of National Defense set the goal of making South Korea the world's fourth-largest arms exporter by 2027, President Yoon Suk-yeol has reiterated and specified this goal on multiple occasions. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, South Korea ranked ninth globally in total arms exports from 2018 to 2022, setting a record in 2022 with arms exports totaling USD 17.3 billion. Although South Korea accounted for only 2.4% of the global arms export market over the past five years, it achieved a 74% growth compared to the previous five-year period, marking the highest growth rate among the top ten global arms exporters.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has downplayed the traditional middle power diplomacy framework, choosing instead to build a comprehensive South Korea-U.S. global alliance as a cornerstone while actively joining U.S.-led multilateral and mini-lateral frameworks to reinforce South Korea's middle power leadership. In May 2022, South Korea formally became a member of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE), becoming the first Asian country to join this organization (Liu Z., 2022). That same month, South Korea joined the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) as a founding member. In August 2022, South Korea joined the Chip4/Fab4 semiconductor alliance. While these mini-lateral engagements may signal alignment with U.S. efforts to counter China, South Korea's participation has undoubtedly garnered international attention, enhancing its global influence. Moreover, South Korea is one of the four designated Asia-Pacific partner countries in NATO's "2030 Agenda"—alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. By participating in smaller organizations, South Korea has consciously strengthened its international voice rather than adopting an inconceivable middle-ground stance or avoiding negotiation altogether (Pacheco Pardo, 2023). In March 2023, South Korea co-hosted the second "Summit for Democracy" as a representative of Indo-Pacific democracies. In May of the same year, South Korea invited leaders from the 18 member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum to the inaugural Korea-Pacific Islands Summit. In June 2023, South Korea was once again elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2024-2025 term, following an eleven-year hiatus.

4. Motivation behind the “Global Pivotal State”

4.1 Threat Perception among National Decision-Makers

Yoon Suk-yeol, aligned with South Korea’s conservative faction, exhibits a pro-U.S. stance, and adopts a hardline approach toward North Korea. In the National Security Strategy report, Yoon identifies North Korea as a “primary security threat”. Economically, the Yoon administration’s perception of China is that its “technological upgrades have inevitably led to structural competition in China-South Korea trade”. Under high economic interdependence between China and South Korea, and amid narrowing strategic hedging space due to China-U.S. rivalry, the Yoon administration posits that South Korea’s “Western alignment” could yield national interests sufficient to compensate for the losses from the Chinese trade market while yielding greater relative gains. Based on this judgment, Yoon proactively oriented South Korean policy towards the U.S. and the West (Ramon Pacheco Pardo, 2023).

This approach emphasizes South Korea’s national interests by enhancing its traditional middle-power diplomacy framework and incorporating or establishing multilateral and mini-lateral mechanisms to counter China’s rise. The Yoon administration believes that prior diplomatic policies had undermined South Korea’s national interests and failed to showcase South Korea’s characteristics as a prominent Northeast Asian nation. Thus, the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” shifts focus from the Korean Peninsula to Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, aiming to build a “Global Pivotal State of freedom, peace, and prosperity”. This vision seeks to explore new drivers of growth and potential to reduce dependence on China, break away from traditional peninsula-centric thinking, and pursue broader global influence.

4.2 Increasing Systemic Pressures

With changes in administration, South Korean policy has exhibited periodic adjustments, tending towards conservatism during periods of economic stagnation (Wang Sheng & Li You, 2023). The Yoon administration governs in a post-pandemic era, facing several realities: a sluggish global economy, intensifying rivalry China-U.S., the Ukraine crisis, the Israel-Palestine conflict, escalating tensions in Northeast Asia, and a security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula. For instance, amid spiraling “hostility” and an apparent arms race between North and South Korea, security cooperation among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea continues to strengthen, while North Korea escalates its nuclear and missile tests. In 2024, North Korea nullified all agreements and laws related to economic cooperation with South Korea, and South Korea suspended the 919 Military Agreement in its entirety, with both sides exchanging provocations by launching “trash balloons” across the border. On October 15, 2024, South Korea released video footage showing North Korea’s destruction of sections of inter-Korean routes, further heightening tensions on the Peninsula.

The Yoon administration has chosen to shift its focus to the global stage, frequently undertaking diplomatic visits during its two-year tenure in an effort to enhance South Korea’s international standing to constrain North Korea. Furthermore, aside from the Lee Myung-bak administration, South Korea’s

successive governments have accorded significant attention to the role of “Northeast Asian security coordinator”. However, there is a mismatch between this role and the influence that South Korea’s “middle power” status can wield. Persistent historical tensions with Japan, and unresolved relations with China due to the “THAAD” deployment, have made Northeast Asian integration prospects bleak, with regional cooperation nearly at a standstill. Combined pressures from international and domestic factors have compelled South Korea to shift its national role from a regional to a global focus.

4.3 Rising Nationalistic Sentiment within South Korea

South Korean public perception regarding the nation’s identity has also driven South Korea to pursue higher global influence. Although South Korea leads the world in economic growth, it has yet to effectively address long-standing security challenges and political conflicts. For South Koreans, the nation’s enhanced status is indeed a source of pride; however, increased national power has not led to fair and equitable treatment regarding historical issues, or amid trade protectionism from the United States, among other challenges. Heightened nationalist sentiment has fueled a popular desire for South Korea to enjoy a more prestigious international standing and to play a greater role on the world stage (Iain Watson, 2016). Yoon Suk-yeol’s vision on the global level, to some extent, aligns with domestic public expectations. Yoon asserts that the identity of a “middle power” no longer satisfies South Korea’s developmental aspirations, calling on South Korea to “stand up” and engage in “upright diplomacy” with neighboring countries, while leveraging its capabilities to influence regional and global affairs. Rather than merely reacting to the decisions of major or middle powers like China, the United States, Japan, or Belgium, he argues that South Korea should contribute proactively to the maintenance of international order.

As a result, the long-standing “middle power diplomacy strategy” that has guided South Korean foreign policy for over a decade was downplayed upon Yoon’s ascent to power. He made it clear that South Korea must transform from a “country affected by” to a “country with influence”, and in doing so, strive to build the role of a “Global Pivotal State of freedom, peace, and prosperity”.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines South Korea’s introduction and implementation of the “Global Pivotal State” (GPS) concept. The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has positioned GPS as a cornerstone of South Korea’s foreign policy, aimed at enhancing its influence in global affairs while recalibrating its strategic posture amid China-U.S. competition. By expanding cooperation with like-minded countries, South Korea seeks to transcend its traditional role as a “middle power” and move toward a more globally influential role. Although South Korea faces challenges due to its limited resources and sensitive geopolitical environment, its economic and security influence in regional affairs forms a foundational basis for the GPS vision.

Whether South Korea can fully realize its GPS ambitions will largely depend on the continuity of policy implementation and the depth of its cooperation with allies such as the United States and Japan. Given the complexities of the international landscape, South Korea will need to strike a careful balance between security and economic priorities, actively engaging in multilateral cooperation and promoting regional stability to progressively enhance its voice in global affairs. In sum, South Korea's journey toward becoming a GPS will be a gradual process. While the challenges are considerable, sustained economic growth and diplomatic innovation provide tangible prospects for achieving this ambitious goal.

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