

## Original Paper

# Redefining Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Strategic Shift towards Global Leadership

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### Abstract

*This paper explores South Korea's evolving foreign policy under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, highlighting its shift from a traditional middle power to a "Global Pivotal State" (GPS). The study examines the key drivers behind this transformation, particularly the enhanced U.S.-South Korea alliance, which has allowed South Korea to increase its regional and global influence. Through an analysis of the "Global Pivotal State" policy, the paper delves into how South Korea seeks to expand its leadership role in multilateral diplomacy, focusing on areas such as security, democracy, and climate change. Additionally, the study emphasizes South Korea's efforts to strengthen bilateral relations, especially with the U.S., Japan, and Europe, while expanding its diplomatic reach to new regions such as the Indo-Pacific. By leveraging its strengths in green growth, technology, and official development assistance (ODA), South Korea aims to secure leadership in key global issues. Ultimately, the Yoon administration's vision reflects South Korea's ambition to redefine its role in the international order, positioning itself as an influential actor in global governance.*

### Keywords

*Global Pivotal State, Middle Power, Foreign Policy, Yoon Suk-yeol Administration*

### 1. Introduction

On March 10, 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol, the candidate of the conservative People Power Party, was elected as the 20th president of South Korea. His administration introduced new policy directions and agendas, particularly making notable strides in foreign policy. The Yoon administration abandoned the "strategic ambiguity" approach of the Moon Jae-in government and proposed a new foreign policy centered on

the concept of a “Global Pivotal State (GPS)”. This foreign policy vision was elaborated in the “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, published in December 2022. The vision and objectives of Yoon's foreign policy emphasize achieving freedom, peace, and prosperity based on principles of inclusivity, trust, and reciprocity, while aligning closely with U.S. foreign policy. A key highlight of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy is the articulation of the country's aspiration to become a “Global Pivotal State”. According to this document, South Korea seeks to become a Global Pivotal State by “actively engaging in cooperative agendas and exerting influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond”. The strategy indicates South Korea's ambition to play a more significant leadership role in shaping the international order, building on its enhanced material capabilities, and extending its identity beyond that of a middle power. This recognition of South Korea's own capabilities reflects its belief that it possesses the material resources and strategic assets to transcend its traditional middle-power status, positioning itself as a “Global Pivotal State” with the potential to influence and lead international agendas gradually (Ryu Yongwook, 2023).

## **2. Positioning of Successive Korean Governments: From Middle Power to “Global Pivotal State”**

### *2.1 Development of South Korea's Middle Power Status*

From the Roh Tae-woo to Roh Moo-hyun administrations, South Korea gradually established the concept and identity of a middle power. President Roh Tae-woo was the first to propose the idea of a middle power, emphasizing that South Korea, as a free-market economy, should actively participate in multilateral forums to enhance its international influence. As a result, his foreign policy primarily focused on economic and security issues. Under President Kim Young-sam, South Korea began engaging in middle-power activities by joining United Nations peacekeeping operations for the first time, serving as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and playing a role in the OECD. This further expanded the scope of its foreign policy and solidified its middle power status. President Kim Dae-jung, following economic recovery, emphasized globalization, increasing South Korea's contributions to the UN, actively participating in regional cooperation, and promoting East Asian cooperation, thus reinforcing South Korea's middle power role. He also introduced the Sunshine Policy to improve relations with North Korea. Despite limitations imposed by the geopolitical environment during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, he pursued the Northeast Asia Initiative, seeking to expand South Korea's middle-power role in political and security arenas. Under the Lee Myung-bak administration, South Korea's GDP and military budget grew significantly, and the administration introduced the “Global Korea” policy and the “New Asia Initiative” to extend its diplomatic reach globally and strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries. The Park Geun-hye administration continued middle-power diplomacy, participating in the MICTA group to address global challenges and deepening foreign policy through trustpolitik. While the Moon Jae-in administration did not explicitly label South Korea as a middle power, it supported this identity in numerous speeches, with its foreign policy focusing on building a Northeast Asian community of responsibility to promote regional peace

and cooperation. Moon's policies, such as the New Southern and New Northern Policies, further enhanced South Korea's international image and influence, reflecting a continuation and deepening of its middle-power identity.

### *2.2 The Yoon Suk-yeol Administration: Building a "Global Pivotal State"*

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration introduced a policy aimed at transforming South Korea into a "Global Pivotal State". This policy seeks to enhance South Korea's leadership in key areas of multilateral diplomacy, playing a leading role in international cooperation on issues such as peace, security, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, non-proliferation, and climate change. Additionally, the policy emphasizes the strengthening of a rules-based international order while elevating South Korea's global stature to a level commensurate with its comprehensive national power, with a primary focus on the international stage. The "Global Pivotal State" policy is further elaborated in the "120 Major Government Tasks," dividing the policy focus into three parts: the Korean Peninsula, the region (East Asia, Europe), and the global sphere (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). At the Korean Peninsula level, the Yoon administration is committed to advancing denuclearization, promoting the establishment of a peace mechanism, and actively engaging in international cooperation on the peninsula's nuclear issue, seeking to establish a security dialogue channel among South Korea, North Korea, and the United States. At the same time, the government strives to normalize relations with North Korea, creating a system of exchanges and cooperation.

At the regional level, the Yoon administration focuses on East Asia, prioritizing the strengthening of the South Korea-U.S. alliance and maintaining close communication with key regional partners. Building on this foundation, South Korea pursues East Asian diplomacy based on the values of liberal democracy and shared interests, promoting the South Korea-U.S. relationship as a "global comprehensive strategic alliance." This effort extends the scope of the alliance from the Indo-Pacific region to the global stage, expanding cooperation from military security to economic security, technological collaboration, and responses to regional and global challenges. In managing relations with China, the government emphasizes developing a South Korea-China relationship based on mutual respect. In dealing with Japan, the government aims to build a future-oriented cooperative relationship grounded in common interests and values, seeking to ease tensions between the two countries.

On the global level, South Korea aims to establish a network of cooperation for shared prosperity across regions and beyond. The Yoon administration views South Korea, as the world's tenth-largest economy, as needing to diversify its partners and cooperation regions. It seeks to create and strengthen region-specific multilateral and mini-lateral networks to maximize South Korea's diplomatic influence. To this end, the Yoon administration has expanded its diplomatic reach to ASEAN, the Indo-Pacific region, Europe, as well as the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia, intensifying substantive cooperation with these regions.

### *2.3 Policy Directions for Strengthening the "Global Pivotal State" Status*

In November 2022, at the Korea-ASEAN Summit in Cambodia, the Yoon administration presented

South Korea's first comprehensive regional strategy, the "Indo-Pacific Strategy", detailing how the country aims to solidify its role as a "Global Pivotal State". The Yoon administration sees its efforts focused on five key areas. First, the government is committed to expanding multilateral diplomatic leadership, reinforcing high-level multilateral diplomacy, adhering firmly to international norms, actively participating in shaping the international order, and leading the establishment of an open and inclusive global order. Second, it proposes solutions to global issues, expanding assistance to vulnerable groups during international crises, and working to strengthen the rules-based international order. Third, the government actively engages in international discussions on climate change and the low-carbon green economy, reinforcing diplomacy in climate and carbon neutrality. Fourth, as a developed country, the government advances international development cooperation and contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Finally, the government seeks to enhance South Korea's brand image through public diplomacy, fostering a better understanding of South Korea's policies by other countries and securing South Korea's practical interests through addressing global issues.

### 3. From Middle Power to "Global Pivotal State"

#### 3.1 Definition of a "Global Pivotal State"

The definition of South Korea as a "Global Pivotal State" remains somewhat ambiguous, but its core characteristics can be distilled from government statements and academic interpretations. Former Foreign Minister Park Jin, at a roundtable hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), remarked, "South Korea is repositioning itself to contribute to global development. Just as a GPS provides valuable guidance to users, I hope South Korea can become a country that offers valuable guidance on how to navigate these turbulent times" (CSIS, 2022).

Jaeho Hwang, Director of the Global Strategy and Cooperation Institute of Korea, suggests that a "Global Pivotal State" is distinct from a major power, yet can play a central role in the international community (Jaeho Hwang, 2023). Kuyoun Chung, an associate professor at Kangwon National University, posits that, according to network theory, the network relationships between nations can both constrain actions and facilitate goal achievement. Network relationships among nations that share common interests help them collectively achieve shared goals. Countries positioned at the center of these networks play a crucial role in international affairs. Being highly interconnected with all other nations, countries at the center of the network can become sources of influence and power. South Korea's "Global Pivotal State" policy aims to closely align with countries that share values and interests with South Korea and the United States, elevating its status within the network of U.S. allies (Kuyoun Chung, 2023).

The international system is characterized by vertical and horizontal relationships that are interconnected within a "stable network of patterned interactions." In this framework, the more nodes a middle power occupies within the network, the greater its influence. A middle power that engages in

multiple interdependencies gradually increases its power within the network, a concept known as "network centrality" (Graham Astley & Paramjit S. Sachdeva, 1984). For South Korea to build itself as a "Global Pivotal State", it must achieve a certain level of network centrality to ensure its leadership position within international networks, thereby attracting and building broader connections. In this network, South Korea can use its influence to unite other middle and small powers, thereby exerting influence on major powers and gradually expanding a network centered on itself (Lee Sook-Jong, 2015). In summary, a "Global Pivotal State" should be a country that maintains a central position in the world's multilateral system network and leads global development.

### *3.2 The Path from Middle Power to Global Pivotal State*

In terms of the relationship between a middle power and a Global Pivotal State, the latter is a progression of the former. If a middle power possesses significant material and non-material capabilities, exerts influence on both regional and international systems, and plays the role of a good international citizen through niche diplomacy by utilizing its expertise to address global issues—while being recognized as a middle power by both itself and others—then it can be considered a comprehensive middle power. A comprehensive middle power can establish extensive multilateral cooperation networks, occupy a central position within those networks, and actively participate in multilateral cooperation. By deploying its advantageous resources and participating in the formulation of relevant rules and orders, it can eventually gain leadership in its areas of strength and ultimately evolve into a "Global Pivotal State".

## **4. South Korea's Motivation for Constructing a "Global Pivotal State"**

### *4.1 Enhancing Influence through the U.S.-South Korea Alliance to Become a Comprehensive Middle Power*

In the latter part of Moon Jae-in's administration, the shortcomings of South Korea's policy of "strategic ambiguity" became increasingly evident. Amid escalating U.S.-China competition, the U.S.-South Korea alliance shifted from focusing on North Korea's denuclearization to countering China, thereby elevating South Korea's value and status within the U.S. global strategy. To maintain and strengthen its relationship with South Korea, the U.S. extended support to certain aspects of Moon's foreign policy, such as facilitating dialogue with North Korea, easing U.S.-North Korea relations, and enhancing cooperation with South Korea in economic and technological fields. These efforts bolstered South Korea's role in regional affairs and expanded its influence. However, the U.S. and South Korea did not achieve consensus on North Korean denuclearization. As the Trump administration adopted a strategy of continued stalemate and sanctions against North Korea, and Pyongyang dismissed Moon's proposal for an "end of war declaration" as premature, South Korea was unable to make significant progress on the Korean Peninsula issue. The growing perception of external threats, combined with domestic criticism of Moon's ambiguous stance between the U.S. and China, deepened South Korea's dependence on the U.S., accelerating the pace of U.S.-South Korea

cooperation in the latter part of Moon's presidency.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration, recognizing from Moon's experience that without U.S. support South Korea could not independently offer solutions to the Korean Peninsula problem or achieve systemic and regional influence, took swift actions upon taking office. Politically, South Korea and the U.S. held high-level consultations, reaching agreements to deepen cooperation in areas such as economics, technology, and security. South Korea unveiled its own Indo-Pacific strategy, joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework as a founding member, and aligned itself with U.S. strategy in the region, demonstrating strategic consistency. In the technology sector, South Korea joined the U.S.-led "Chip 4" alliance, seeking to enhance collaboration with the U.S. in semiconductor, cybersecurity, and space technologies. Diplomatically, South Korea has advocated for a value-based foreign policy that aligns with U.S. principles (Yang, F., & Lin, S. L., 2023). Militarily, the scale and frequency of U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises increased significantly, reflecting South Korea's growing security dependence on the U.S. By proposing to construct a "Global Pivotal State", the Yoon administration aligns its foreign policy with the U.S., aiming to enhance the global comprehensive strategic alliance between the two countries. South Korea seeks to elevate its position within the U.S. alliance network, leveraging this partnership to increase its regional and systemic influence, thus acting as a comprehensive middle power (Zhan, D. B., 2023).

#### *4.2 Strengthening Bilateral and Multilateral Relations to Elevate South Korea's Strategic Position*

Yoon's administration has placed particular emphasis on strengthening bilateral relations with the U.S., viewing it as South Korea's key ally and partner. In April 2023, Yoon visited Washington and delivered the "Washington Declaration", further solidifying U.S. security commitments to South Korea. Despite domestic opposition to reconciliation with Japan, Yoon has pushed for improved relations, including a visit to Japan in March 2023 to ease tensions between the two countries. Beyond bilateral relations, South Korea has also actively participated in new small-scale and multilateral initiatives. The Indo-Pacific Strategy articulated by the Yoon administration emphasizes: "Our strategy will be multi-dimensional and comprehensive, and we will build partnerships with small groups as well as regional and international organizations that align with our cooperation principles". Trilateral cooperation between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea has accelerated notably over the past year. In August 2023, the leaders of the three countries met at Camp David and issued a joint statement titled the "Spirit of Camp David". This statement aligns with the Yoon administration's vision for foreign policy and its goal of constructing a "Global Pivotal State", seeking to strengthen ties with like-minded countries to contribute to global public goods and enhance South Korea's strategic position.

On the global economic front, South Korea joined U.S.-led initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP). The PBP includes countries like Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Canada, aiming to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with Pacific Island nations. South Korea also joined the "Chip 4" alliance to ensure the security of the global semiconductor supply chain. Early in his tenure, Yoon expressed interest in

joining the QUAD if it decides to expand its membership, and he emphasized South Korea's willingness to cooperate with QUAD in areas such as healthcare, emerging technologies, and space.

The “Global Pivotal State” policy demonstrates the Yoon administration's intention to expand the geographical scope of international cooperation. South Korea's extensive involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, including parts of Latin America, Europe, and the African Indian Ocean rim, reflects this ambition. In Yoon's two years in office, South Korea's relations with Europe have gained prominence. For example, Yoon visited the UK, France, and the Netherlands and attended the NATO summit for the first time in 2022, with South Korea participating again in 2023 as part of the “Asia-Pacific Four” (AP4), alongside Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Yoon also participated as an observer in the 2023 G7 Summit in Hiroshima, sparking discussions among experts about the potential expansion of the G7 and South Korea's possible inclusion. In 2023, Yoon held a summit in Seoul with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel, calling for enhanced security cooperation and describing South Korea and the EU as “key partners sharing universal values such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law”.

By establishing deeper connections beyond the U.S. in bilateral and multilateral settings, South Korea has integrated itself into a network of partnerships based on shared interests, while diversifying its foreign policy strategies. The Yoon administration has elevated South Korea's strategic position by strengthening relations with the U.S. and leveraging opportunities to connect with other U.S. allies.

#### *4.3 Leveraging Strengths to Attain International Leadership*

International leadership refers to a country's ability to influence and manage global affairs and key issues within the international system. Although hegemonic states often play the role of leaders across various fields, international leadership differs from hegemony, as it is characterized by its more decentralized nature. Multiple countries can exert leadership on specific issues, ensuring authority in certain domains while guiding others to collectively address global problems and challenges. International leadership is shared among states and is realized through multilateral mechanisms. Countries can achieve leadership by initiating multilateral initiatives, conducting international negotiations, setting agendas, fostering consensus, promoting cooperation, and implementing actions (Dai, W. L., 2016).

Amid accelerated globalization and growing power shifts, middle powers, as an emerging force in the international community, often assume leadership roles in areas neglected or overlooked by major powers. On the one hand, middle powers can fulfill international responsibilities, positioning themselves as pivotal states in specific domains, thereby gaining a favorable international reputation and enhancing their global status. On the other hand, this increases their bargaining power in major power competition, and in some cases, major powers may follow the leadership of middle powers in specific fields. As Robert Keohane noted, a leader in one issue may have to be a follower in another.

In the context of international leadership, there is systemic leadership exercised by hegemonic states, regional leadership, and leadership in specific issues or fields. South Korea, as a “skills-based

leadership state”, has accumulated substantial expertise in nuclear security, green development, international development aid, advanced technology, and economic cooperation. In these areas, South Korea has proposed credible solutions. For example, South Korea spearheaded the establishment of the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) to promote green technologies and disseminate green development models globally, positioning itself as a leader in this field. This leadership has been recognized by other countries, who seek to collaborate with South Korea to address green growth challenges, thus enhancing South Korea’s international leadership in climate change and green growth. The Yoon administration's vision of constructing a “Global Pivotal State” emphasizes tackling global climate change, pursuing carbon-neutral diplomacy, and increasing official development assistance (ODA). These efforts aim to combine global challenges with South Korea’s strengths, achieving leadership in environmental protection and development aid, thereby highlighting its role as a pivotal state. On environmental issues, the Yoon administration has strengthened cooperation with active partners such as the EU and Canada, establishing bilateral channels to meet the 2050 carbon neutrality goal. Furthermore, South Korea has increased its financial support for the GGGI, enhancing the institute’s capabilities and effectiveness to assist developing countries in addressing climate change, pursuing green transitions, and expanding green investments. In development aid, the Yoon administration proposed the “New Government’s Direction for International Development Cooperation”, aiming to scale up ODA to match South Korea’s position as a top 10 global economy. In 2023, South Korea’s ODA increased by approximately 21% from the previous year, including humanitarian assistance.

## 5. Conclusion

South Korea’s pursuit of a “Global Pivotal State” status under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration reflects a strategic shift aimed at expanding its influence both regionally and globally. The policy is rooted in three core objectives: enhancing its role within the U.S.-South Korea alliance, strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations, and leveraging its capabilities to exercise leadership in specific global issues. By aligning more closely with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and increasing cooperation in security, technology, and economic domains, South Korea seeks to redefine its position as a comprehensive middle power. Additionally, through active engagement in multilateral initiatives and fostering partnerships with key actors like the U.S., Japan, Europe, and emerging groups such as the AP4, South Korea is diversifying its diplomatic strategies. Its leadership in areas such as green growth and development aid, exemplified by initiatives like the Global Green Growth Institute, further underscores its ability to contribute to global governance. Ultimately, the Yoon administration's vision positions South Korea not only as a regional actor but as an indispensable partner in addressing global challenges, reflecting its ambitions to enhance its status within the evolving international order.



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