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Global Pivotal State: What Type of Geopolitical Actor is South Korea Becoming?

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Key issues

- President Yoon Suk-yeol's ambition to make South Korea a "Global Pivotal State" is changing South Korea's foreign and security policy.
- For South Korea, it is no longer an option to take a balanced position among great powers or not to intervene in global foreign policy and security matters.
- South Korea can become a Geopolitical Global Pivotal State with clout beyond East Asia if it consistently pursues a proactive foreign and security policy.

Introduction

President Yoon Suk-yeol's ambition to make South Korea a "Global Pivotal State" continues to be the main driving force behind his government's foreign and security policy. Yet, Seoul

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increasingly finds that being a Global Pivotal State means tough choices – whether to warn China of the implications of a potential invasion of Taiwan, to provide NATO members with ammunition and offensive weapons as they support Ukraine against Russia’s invasion or to express a position in relation to the confrontation between Israel and Hamas. In the past, Seoul may have been accused of trying to take a middle or balanced position when dealing with pressing global issues. Whether warranted or not, this was the perception of many observers and some policymakers. That is certainly not the case anymore.

In this sense, South Korea is trying to become a geopolitical Global Pivotal State. That is, a country that uses the full spectrum of its resources in an active fashion to impact global dynamics. For example, it has sent a military aircraft to Israel to bring home South Korean, Japanese and Singaporean nationals. It has agreed a Free Trade Agreement with a Gulf country – the UAE – for the first time ever to boost economic relations with the region. South Korea has even used K-Pop and movie stars to try to bring the 2030 World Expo to Busan, South Korea. The country has become unafraid to become proactive in defence of its national interest, which includes very public diplomatic and political spats with the likes of China and Russia, even when these may have consequences.

Over the summer, this author had the opportunity to spend over five weeks in South Korea, which led to talks with over 100 decisionmakers and experts on the country’s foreign affairs. They ranged from policymakers from the government and the opposition, South Korean and foreign diplomats, Seoul-based academics and think tankers and local and foreign journalists. Together with other private discussions over the past few months, including during the 2023 Brussels Korea Forum (<https://csds.vub.be/brussels-korea-forum-partners-in-global-challenges-and-60th-anniversary-of-eu-rok-diplomatic>) and multiple events in the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States (US) and across Europe, these conversations inform the two inter-linked questions posed in this Policy Brief: 1) has South Korea become a geopolitical actor?; and 2) regardless of whether it has become one or not, what are the consequences of its quest to do so?

A Geopolitical Global Pivot State

As I explain in my recent book *South Korea’s Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny* (<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/south-koreas-grand-strategy/9780231203234>), South Korea has sought to have independence of foreign policy action since at least its final transition to democracy in 1988. In other words, to be able to take its own decisions. It is, of course, constrained by factors such as the ROK-US alliance, its position next to a great power such as China or the North Korea threat. But, nonetheless, it is

able to operate in a way that these constraints do not come to define what South Korea is and how it behaves as a foreign policy actor.

There continues to be a debate among South Korean elites about whether Seoul can operate in this manner or not. But what is clear is that there is a shared wish to ensure that South Korea can at least strive to become an independent foreign policy actor. In this sense, Seoul wants to become a more geopolitical actor with global ambitions and not only regional ones, while being unafraid to make choices that may antagonise certain countries. Arguably, Yoon's constant reference to the importance of principles and values such as freedom and democracy as a driver of South Korean foreign policy are an expression of this. The point is not whether South Korea can make principles and values as the sole or even main driver of its foreign policy. Instead, the point is that South Korea should strive to make these as important as interests whenever possible.

Analysts may agree or disagree on whether South Korea is truly geopolitical in its thinking or not. But South Korean decisionmakers, and certainly those close to the Yoon government, believe that South Korea today is becoming a geopolitical actor on the global stage. Cases they refer to in order to make this point include South Korea's close alignment and constant exchanges with the G7, the reinvigoration of South Korea-Japan-US cooperation to levels not seen before, the reinforcement of cooperation with NATO bilaterally and within the "Asia-Pacific 4" framework or calls for South Korea-China-Japan trilateral exchanges to make Northeast Asia more stable.

The case of the G7 is particularly instructive. After Moon Jae-in was invited to the Cornwall summit in 2021, and Yoon attended this year's Hiroshima summit, many South Korean policymakers see a validation of Seoul's growing power and global outlook. The Yoon government is making close alignment with the G7 on issues ranging from sanctions on Russia to the development of China-free supply chains an important component of its global strategy. In a sense, South Korea is "choosing sides" between its ally the US and its other allies and partners, on the one hand, and China and other autocracies, on the other. This does not mean that South Korea is going to stop engagement or economic exchanges with China. But it does mean that this engagement needs to consider Seoul's prioritisation of ties with the G7.

Another important aspect of the Yoon government's more geopolitical outlook is South Korea-Japan-US trilateralism. Yoon has made this a centrepiece of his foreign policy, underpinned by a rapprochement towards Japan - even at the risk of domestic criticism. And the Camp David joint statement was a very ambitious document, going well beyond deterrence of North Korea and China and focusing on all sorts of issues including new technologies, energy or trade. South Korean decisionmakers want to make this trilateralism an "AUKUS rather than a Quad".

In other words, a minilateral format that delivers tangible benefits as opposed to one without a clear purpose and short of concrete deliverables. Certainly, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington now have to deliver on August's joint statement (<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/>). But the level of ambition displayed by South Korea symbolises the extent to which Yoon government officials believe that the time has come for South Korea to “step up”, as they are fond of saying.

On the other hand, South Korea still strives to maintain good relations with China. From Seoul's perspective, this is a mark of the country's independence of action. Critics will point out that even the US and the European Union (EU) seek to maintain a top-level dialogue with China, so this is not particularly indicative of independent behaviour or innovative. But perhaps what is innovative from a South Korean perspective is that it is seeking a dialogue and relationship with China as an equal and based on mutual respect, which includes cooperation when possible but also criticism when necessary. And this is a position that South Korea arguably was more wary of explicitly taking in the past.

The consequences of being a Global Pivot State

Pushing for a more geopolitical position at the global level comes with potential positives, but also negatives. The Yoon government seems to be keenly aware of this. This includes being mindful that some foreign policy and security goals may be more difficult to achieve. Take the case of an improvement in inter-Korean relations. Critics of the Yoon government believe that the president has simply given up on trying to resolve tensions in the Korean Peninsula and is satisfied with merely managing them, mainly via deterrence of Pyongyang. If South Korea still maintains its goal of reunification or at least peaceful coexistence, this approach would seem counterproductive. Thus, taking a more global outlook would distract from what remains a fundamental goal for the South Korean state.

Another negative effect of the Yoon government's approach to foreign affairs is that tensions with countries such as China and Russia will inevitably increase. And certainly, Seoul and Beijing have had their share of public disagreements since Yoon took office. As many in South Korea's power circles argue, the position of ambassador to Beijing has become a hazardous posting with little advantages. In the case of Russia, Vladimir Putin's government has designated South Korea an “unfriendly country (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-adopts-list-of-enemy-countries-to-which-it-will-pay-its-debts-in-rubles/>)” due to its staunch support for Ukraine. These are two countries with which Seoul would like to have amicable relations. Yet, this seems unlikely in the short run.

There is also the risk of overstretch. Other than the US and China, no other country has the necessary capabilities to truly project power on a global scale. As a middle power, South Korea needs to pick and choose which global issues to focus on and become an active player in. At the moment, it is unclear whether South Korean foreign policymakers have settled on a core number of issues to prioritise. There is a high level of ambition, which is commendable. But critics argue that this is not sustainable in the long run.

Yet, the Yoon government clearly believes that having geopolitical ambitions has tangible benefits that outweigh the potential drawbacks. Above all, South Korea believes that taking a proactive approach to strengthening ties and working together with the likes of the G7, NATO and other 'like-minded' partners makes for greater power projection. South Korean policymakers have long believed that a strong ROK-US alliance has benefits beyond the Korean Peninsula. They now also think that extending this cooperation to other middle powers with similar goals, interests and values is equally beneficial. Incidentally, benefits include managing relations with the US if Donald Trump or a Trump-like president wins the November 2024 election. This line of thought is not new to the Yoon government – Moon advisors thought the same. But the Yoon government has been more open about it and, it should be said, has benefited from a Biden administration keen to work with partners.

Another tangible benefit relates to supporting South Korea's own core interests. The Yoon government wants a nuclear deterrent against North Korea and, whisper it, potentially China. To this end, stronger relations with NATO to learn from its experience with extended nuclear deterrence umbrella is helpful, with a view at seeing whether the US could lead the launching of a similar umbrella to protect Seoul. South Korean firms, meanwhile, want to remain competitive and world-leading, including in promising new sectors such as Artificial Intelligence, quantum computing or green shipping. In order to achieve this, they need to work together with counterparts and set up shop in the US, Canada, Europe or Japan. Meanwhile, cybersecurity is now a top concern for South Korea. The country's different government agencies and military can learn from the experience of the EU, NATO or the US in this area. That is, South Korea has very clear reasons to work together with partners to protect its national interest.

And it should also be noted that a more geopolitical South Korea also makes it a more attractive partner for others. Yoon was invited to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last July in Kiev because his government appreciates South Korea's support. Quietly, a growing number of Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, the Philippines or Vietnam are boosting defence ties with Seoul and acquiring military capabilities from the likes of Hanwha as a means to deter China. And heads of government from the likes of the Netherlands or

Spain have visited South Korea, among others, because they have their eyes on a potential Samsung or SK Hynix semiconductor factory in their countries. For investment and exports by South Korean private firms have become part of Yoon's sales pitch, who self-describes as his country's "no. 1 salesman (<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230118009551315>)".

In short, the South Korea of 2023 has high ambitions and the resources to try to match them. This is why the Yoon government wants to make his country a "Geopolitical Global Pivot State". That is, an active player at the global level with enough room for manoeuvre to behave in an independent way, to try to affect global affairs and not only Korean Peninsula or Northeast Asia dynamics. The jury is still out as to whether this will become possible or not. But word inside and outside South Korea certainly is that this push will continue throughout the rest of Yoon's presidency.

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