

# Recasting South Korea's Indo-Pacific Engagement



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As South Korea (hereafter Korea) heads toward its presidential election on June 3, there is growing attention—both at home and abroad—to how the next administration will chart the country's foreign policy. The strategic landscape has become increasingly volatile, shaped by President Donald Trump's unilateral approach to alliances, intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, and the erosion of multilateral norms. The next president will confront an unprecedentedly complex set of foreign policy challenges. While it is too early to predict the contours of the new administration's approach, one thing seems certain: the Indo-Pacific will remain central to Korea's external engagement.

Over the past two administrations, Korea has steadily deepened its engagement in the Indo-Pacific. President Moon Jae-in laid the foundation by expanding outreach to ASEAN and India through the New Southern Policy (NSP). President Yoon Suk Yeol's Indo-Pacific Strategy sought to further broaden Korea's regional presence to encompass the wider Indo-Pacific. This evolving trajectory is likely to continue regardless of who takes office in the upcoming presidential election. The key question is how the next administration will define the scope and strategic orientation of that engagement.

*\* The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of KIEP.*

The NSP expanded Korea's strategic engagement beyond Northeast Asia, but its scope remained relatively narrow. It focused exclusively on Southeast Asia and India, with an emphasis on diversifying economic partnerships. It lacked a clear strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific, particularly regarding the regional order Korea aimed to support and the means by which it would contribute. President Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy, by contrast, articulated a more defined and principled vision—emphasizing Korea's proactive role in advancing a rules-based order and providing global public goods across the region. It also broadened the geographic scope to include South Asia, Oceania, and the African coast of the Indian Ocean. However, the strategy has often been perceived as reinforcing a U.S.-led security framework, largely due to President Yoon's strong emphasis on the U.S.-ROK alliance. While this perception is not without basis, it tends to overshadow the strategy's broader regional objectives—including initiatives such as the Korea–ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) and Korea's outreach to the Pacific Islands and Africa, which have received comparatively less attention.

The next administration should build on the legacies of both the NSP and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, pursuing a complementary approach to regional engagement. While the U.S.-ROK alliance remains the cornerstone of Korea's foreign policy, it will be equally important to advance a more integrated and multidimensional Indo-Pacific engagement. This includes strengthening multilateral cooperation, deepening ties with ASEAN and other regional partners, and positioning itself as a provider of global public goods.

First, Korea should further deepen its strategic partnership with ASEAN. As a central hub of regional multilateralism and a key economic partner, ASEAN warrants sustained engagement through dedicated policy initiatives such as the NSP and KASI. By aligning closely with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), Korea can support ASEAN's efforts to reinvigorate multilateral cooperation and uphold regional stability through ASEAN-led platforms. On the economic front, Korea needs to strengthen supply chain networks and resilience by upgrading the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA) and ensuring effective implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Korea should also expand non-traditional security cooperation within ASEAN-led mechanisms by advancing confidence-building measures and addressing emerging threats, including cybersecurity risks, transnational crime, and maritime insecurity. As people-to-people ties deepen and the number of Southeast Asian migrant workers in Korea continues to grow, expanding youth exchanges and educational cooperation would help foster stronger societal connections between both sides.

Second, Korea should continue to enhance its partnership with like-minded middle power countries in preserving a rules-based multilateral order. Japan is a key partner in revitalizing regional trade architecture, particularly in response to shifting U.S. trade policies. As advanced export-oriented economies, Korea and Japan share common interests in defending WTO norms, advancing high-standard trade agreements, and securing supply chains for strategic resources. Closer coordination in these areas would not only enhance economic resilience but also bolster regional competitiveness. The institutionalization of U.S.–ROK–Japan trilateral cooperation under the Yoon administration has also laid the foundation for more stable and future-oriented bilateral relations, serving as a strategic buffer against potential frictions. Australia, too, is a highly complementary partner. As a trusted regional actor and advocate of open trade, Australia shares Korea's interest in a free and rules-based economic order. It also offers significant potential for strategic cooperation in areas such as critical minerals and clean energy. Trilateral cooperation among Korea, Japan, and Australia can play a pivotal role in rebuilding a multilateral architecture in the Indo-Pacific, while also addressing regional public goods gaps left by the retrenchment of U.S. assistance.

Lastly, Korea needs to broaden its Indo-Pacific engagement by strengthening ties with key Global South partners, as part of a more inclusive and multilateral regional approach. Among them, India is a critical player with which Korea should strengthen its partnership. As a country with growing economic weight and diplomatic influence, India represents not only a promising production base for regional supply chain diversification, but also a vital strategic partner in navigating a more multipolar world shaped by the rise of the Global South. While the NSP elevated India as a key partner, the Indo-Pacific Strategy under President Yoon has yet to carry this momentum forward. The next administration needs to reverse this trend by upgrading bilateral ties and more fully integrating India into Korea's regional strategies. Korea's partnership with the Pacific Islands also deserves greater attention—particularly on climate adaptation—as a demonstration of Seoul's commitment to delivering global public goods. The 2023 Korea–Pacific Islands Summit set the stage for deeper cooperation, but consistent follow-through will be essential. Climate change is an area where Korea can deliver tangible, high-impact outcomes, especially as Pacific Island states face existential environmental threats.

The Indo-Pacific is no longer peripheral to Korea's foreign policy. Amid growing strategic uncertainty, the next Korean administration must take on a more proactive role in defending the free trade system and the multilateral frameworks that have underpinned regional prosperity. Building on past initiatives, Korea should position itself as a credible and constructive partner in shaping the region's future order. **KIEP**