

The United States and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific after COVID-19

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Abstract

No matter who is in the White House come January, there is a clear and pressing need to update the US approach to the Indo-Pacific region. The scope of the damage from COVID-19 has emphasized the need for the US Free and Open Pacific strategy to better encompass nontraditional security concerns, particularly global health and climate change. While sufficiently addressing these challenges will only become more difficult as the rivalry between Washington and Beijing intensifies, all signs point to South Korea as not only being a crucial actor to help substantively address these issues but also to potentially bridge the cooperation gap with China in these areas. To illustrate why South Korea should be crucial in US Indo-Pacific policy after the pandemic, this article first outlines the limitations to Seoul's participation under the current US approach and how South Korea's contributions toward the same goals as the United States are currently undervalued. It then outlines why the needed changes to the US regional approach after the coronavirus will be most effectively pursued by greater cooperation with South Korea—or at the very least better recognizing Seoul's positive role in the region.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is shaping up to be the most transformative development of our time. How the virus quickly spread across the world and brought the global economy to a sudden halt will have a lasting, sweeping impact. Though we are still in throes of the disease and its fallout, there are expectations of widespread change, as the virus exposes fundamental weaknesses in social, political, and economic systems alike.

Washington's relationships in the Indo-Pacific region are, of course, not exempted from these coronavirus-induced changes. In this regard, perhaps the most significant consequence has been the heightening of tensions in the already strained ties with Beijing. US president Donald Trump has taken to blaming the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) attempt to initially cover up the virus in Wuhan for the worldwide spread of the disease, withholding funding for the World Health Organization for its alleged complicity in the CCP's dishonesty and insisting on referring to the disease as "Chinese." Existing sources of friction in the relationship have also been heating up, with both countries ratcheting up measures against each other's media outlets and more assertive Chinese naval activity in the South China Sea. In short, great-power competition is intensifying.

Much as it is doing for nearly everything else, COVID-19 is likewise laying bare the shortcomings of existing US policy toward the region. The Trump administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy may be multifaceted, but traditional security concerns have by far received the most

attention, directed toward a rising China. However, the scope of the damage from the pandemic has emphasized the need for the FOIP agenda to better encompass nontraditional security concerns, particularly health. The current inflection point provides an opportunity to incorporate another important, hitherto underappreciated nontraditional security concern in the current strategy: climate change.

While the White House may look to the current crisis to catalyze a decoupling with China in certain areas, COVID-19 also highlights that key issues such as global health and climate change cannot be resolved with a complete severing of ties with Beijing. Thus, not only must the issues that fall under the FOIP strategy umbrella be reevaluated but so too must a wholesale competition with China.

In such a recalibrated Indo-Pacific strategy, Seoul should undoubtedly feature more prominently in Washington's approach to the region. The Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) has been reluctant to officially endorse the existing FOIP strategy over fears of incurring China's ire, potentially placing the large bilateral trading relationship and Beijing's support on North Korea at risk. The necessary adjustments to FOIP made clear by COVID-19, however, better align with South Korea's proven success in key nontraditional security areas. Furthermore, because South Korea is perceived as a more neutral actor in the Indo-Pacific and has actively taken on leadership roles in regional cooperation, Seoul could even help facilitate crucial cooperation between Washington and Beijing.



(US Air Force photo by A1C Spencer Slocum)

Figure 1. Korean assistance. US Air Force and Department of Veterans Affairs leaders speak with South Korean leadership at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, 12 May 2020. South Korea donated protective masks to the VA in support of the department's COVID-19 response.

To demonstrate why South Korea should be critical in the reformulation of US Indo-Pacific policy after COVID-19, this article will first provide a brief overview of the FOIP strategy, the limitations to Seoul's participation under this structure, and how South Korea's contributions toward goals shared with the United States are currently undervalued. The article will then outline why the needed changes to the US regional approach after the coronavirus will be most effectively pursued by greater cooperation with South Korea—or at the very least better recognizing Seoul's positive role in the region.

Before COVID-19

The Trump administration's FOIP strategy was first introduced during the November 2017 APEC summit in Vietnam.¹ It is intended to enhance cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region to uphold the values and rules of the existing regional order, to include “free, fair, and reciprocal trade, open investment environments, good governance, and freedom of the seas.”² The strategy is built on the three pillars of economics, governance, and security and is augmented by close coordination with Japan, Australia, and India—collectively known as “the Quad.” While it is officially inclusive and does not require states to choose between partners, the vision has largely been perceived as urging countries in the region to pick either Washington or Beijing.

That a rising China is the impetus for the FOIP strategy is no secret. Though some official documents refer to the China challenge indirectly, using references such as *freedom from coercion* and *freedom of navigation* in the South China Sea, others are more direct in calling out Beijing as a revisionist power.³ To be sure, many countries in the region, including South Korea, share the same concerns shaping the FOIP strategy, but there are added complications that make the picture less clear-cut.

Constraints

South Korea knows the drawbacks of a more assertive China all too well. In July 2017, Washington and Seoul announced the decision to deploy a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense battery to South Korea. Concerned that the system was intended to defend against threats from China rather than North Korea as the allies stated, Beijing took a series of retaliatory economic measures against South Korea intended to compel the government to reverse its decision. Starting in fall 2016, China

took aim at South Korean consumer and entertainment exports, tourism, and Lotte—the company that sold the land to base the THAAD battery to the government.⁴ The collective damage to the South Korean economy was substantial, with some industries and firms never fully recovering even after the “three noes” agreement between Seoul and Beijing was signed in October 2017 to ostensibly end the dispute. Some estimates put the financial losses as high as 25 billion USD.⁵ Still, Seoul cannot completely abandon the pursuit of close ties with Beijing for two reasons in particular.

The first is South Korea’s economic dependence on China through trade. South Korea’s exports represent around 45 percent of GDP, making it second only to Germany in terms of export dependence among the world’s 20 largest economies.⁶ In 2019, South Korea’s 136.2 billion USD in merchandise exports to China—by far the largest destination of goods—represented a quarter of all exports.⁷ So, in effect, exports to China last year represented over 8 percent of South Korea’s total GDP—a remarkably high amount. This dependence not only presents economic risks to South Korea as COVID-19 and the trade war between the US and China in recent years has made clear but also provides Beijing significant leverage over Seoul as demonstrated by the THAAD incident.

There are, however, several mitigating factors to this dependence. A significant portion of South Korean exports to China are intermediary goods, meaning that final demand for a product comes from outside China, and thus lowering the ceiling for Beijing’s direct interference in bilateral trade. Additionally, COVID-19 is causing many multinational firms to rethink their reliance on supply chains running through China, which could catalyze Seoul’s ongoing efforts to diversify its trade partners. Nonetheless, South Korea’s economic prospects will likely continue to be closely tied to China, at least in the near-term, with the knowledge that getting on Beijing’s bad side could prove costly.

The second reason Seoul is not looking to rock the boat with Beijing is because of China’s close ties with North Korea. China is North Korea’s closest ally and by far its largest trading partner according to official statistics. Despite the limits of transforming this influence into changed policy direction, China’s sway with North Korea has been on clear display in recent years, as diplomatic activity between Pyongyang and Washington has increased. Between March 2018 and June 2019, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Chinese president Xi Jinping met five times.⁸ These summits and other senior-level meetings coinciding with the broader effort by South Korea and the United States to engage with North Korea is reflective of Beijing’s importance in making diplomatic—and ultimately political, economic, and security—progress with Pyongyang. For South Korea, faced with the brunt of the North Korean security issue and whose ultimate goal is reunification of the peninsula, China can either be a competitor or

collaborator for influence in Pyongyang. Posing a direct challenge to Beijing elsewhere possibly risks critical support north of the border.

Consequently, the ROK has been hesitant to formally endorse the FOIP strategy. Seoul has been especially reluctant to get more involved in the security areas where the disagreement between Washington and Beijing is more overt, such as the South China Sea. South Korea has keenly avoided freedom-of-navigation operations through the disputed waters that the United States and several key allies have been conducting. This is highlighted by a September 2018 incident in which a South Korean naval destroyer entered waters claimed by China to avoid a typhoon, sparking a minor incident with Beijing in which Seoul adamantly denied the action was part of a larger political maneuver.⁹ Even for areas where there are clear overlapping interests—such as the Blue Dot Network launched in November 2019 by the United States, Japan, and Australia to advance high-quality infrastructure projects—Seoul has kept away from initiatives that could be perceived as containing China.¹⁰

Opportunities

Where there has been more room for direct cooperation in the region is on issues not as directly aimed at China, such as those that fall under the governance and economics umbrellas of the FOIP strategy. Under South Korean president Moon Jae-in's "New Southern Policy" (NSP), Seoul has been pursuing deepened ties in South and Southeast Asia along the lines of the "Three Ps"—peace, prosperity, and people—mirroring US efforts in many ways.¹¹ During the June 2019 Moon–Trump summit, President Moon stated, "Under the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness and transparency, we have agreed to put forth harmonious cooperation between Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy."¹²

As one would expect, this cooperation has mainly come outside of the military realm. Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, both countries agreed to expand development cooperation in the region through a September 2019 memorandum of understanding between their respective development agencies.¹³ A November 2019 joint statement resulting from a senior bilateral economic dialogue outlined areas for further cooperation in the region, including development, infrastructure, science and technology, digital connectivity, energy, and smart cities.¹⁴ Additionally, both the joint statement and a joint fact sheet issued earlier that month specifically mention examples of cooperation on climate change and the environment, such as working with Pacific Island nations to secure climate financing, as well as on health, including capacity-building in Cambodia through the Global Health Security Agenda.¹⁵

Even when the two countries are not in direct cooperation with one another, South Korea can still be seen as a “values multiplier” for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁶ As one of the countries that has benefited the most from the rules-based order, South Korea has a vested interest in its continued success, shaping the country’s outreach beyond the peninsula. Though the impetus for the NSP is to make new inroads into South and Southeast Asia while simultaneously weaning the economy off of China, the values underpinning the agenda generally align with those the United States is seeking to promote. This is embodied in the joint statement produced from the 2019 ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit, which reads similarly to what one might expect from the United States when referencing the FOIP strategy. This includes lines such as “[we] agreed to continue working closely together in support of global peace, security, prosperity, and sustainable development.”¹⁷

In practical terms, this augments US efforts in the region. South Korea’s cooperation with smaller, less developed economies that are potentially more susceptible to coercion from Beijing—offering expertise in areas such digital infrastructure as well as financial assistance—represents material resources being directed toward the same ends that Washington is pursuing. Though both the ROK and the United States have been slow to ramp up funding to meet the massive development needs of the region, Seoul has been ambitious in its outlook, planning to double its grant aid to ASEAN members by 2022.¹⁸

The benefits from Seoul working with other regional partners outside of coordination with Washington also extends into the defense realm. As a 2019 RAND report concludes, “South Korea’s growing regional defense cooperation has been and is commensurate with US interests in the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁹ The report particularly emphasizes how South Korea’s arms exports to partners such as Indonesia and the Philippines help limit the spread of Russian and Chinese influence²⁰—both countries that the Pentagon has referred to as revisionist powers. South Korea’s participation in multilateral exercises, such as the Rim of the Pacific, that include regional partners as well as military hardware transfers like the donation of a Pohang-class corvette to the Philippines, which has been deemed “the most powerful ship” in the Philippine Navy, also furthers US goals in the region.²¹

In short, despite the clear limitations, South Korea has been an important player for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. The tragedy of the pandemic and the corresponding changes it has highlighted as necessary for the US approach toward the region, however, suggest Seoul will need to feature more prominently in Washington’s regional outlook in the near future.

After COVID-19

The Need for Change

The novel coronavirus was far from a black swan event as some have argued. To use the parlance of former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, it was a “known unknown” that was underestimated. In the short time since COVID-19 has become a pandemic, there have been widespread calls to rebalance US national security priorities and trepidation about using the virus to heighten the rivalry with China.

A prevailing narrative among notable foreign policy pundits and former senior US government officials alike is public spending will need to be shifted from the military to health and other nontraditional security areas. Former US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power encapsulated this sentiment in a 14 April *Time* article, stating, “the shared enemy of a future pandemic must bring about a redefinition of national security and generate long overdue increases of federal investments in domestic and global health security preparedness.”²² Others have elaborated on this funding claim, pointing out that the Trump administration’s proposed increase of the war-related budget for next year to 1.2 trillion USD while cutting from the Department of Health and Human Services was “spectacularly ill-timed.”²³

Another warning that has emerged is a widening rift between the United States and China, supported by former top officials in Beijing and Washington. In April, former US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson wrote in the *Financial Times*, “Strategic competitors and adversaries struggle to find common ground even when it is in their self interest. But there will be no lasting recovery if the largest economies, especially the US and China, cannot find a workable strategic framework.”²⁴ Fu Ying, former vice foreign minister for China, expressed similar sentiments in the *Economist* only a few weeks later.²⁵

As some have pointed out, this pivotal moment of reevaluating priorities and the US–Sino relationship is also an opportunity to direct more attention toward another “known unknown”: climate change. Much like the pandemic, climate change has the potential to destabilize the existing rules-based order, especially if not addressed more seriously in the near future. As China is the world’s largest emitter of carbon dioxide, sufficiently tackling this issue will not be possible without cooperation from Beijing.²⁶

To be certain, both the pandemic and climate change have been on the US government’s radar—including the Department of Defense.²⁷ But, given the impact of the current coronavirus outbreak and what it portends about the potential scope of future shocks to the system from nontraditional security issues, now is the time to critically rethink US foreign policy and defense priorities. This particularly holds true for the Indo-Pacific region, which will clearly play a major part in shaping the twenty-first century.

In increasing attention to nontraditional security areas like health and climate as well as dialing back a blanket zero-sum approach toward Beijing, Washington would, in effect, be opening the door for more regional cooperation with Seoul. This would not be cooperation for its own sake; rather it would tangibly buttress US interests in the region, due to South Korea's proven expertise and capability in these areas as well as its ability to facilitate and even lead discussion among regional partners.

South Korea on Global Health

How South Korea went from being the global epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in mid-February to zero locally transmitted cases by the beginning of May is one of the most significant bright spots of the global pandemic. The government's fast and broad efforts to contain the virus through testing and contact tracing helped to curb the spread of the virus after an explosion of new cases linked to a religious community in Daegu. Although there are concerns of a second outbreak after initial measures to reopen the country saw a jump in new cases, containment efforts do not seem to be losing steam. The ROK's success, however, has far reaching implications beyond the peninsula.

Seoul's handling of COVID-19 has become one of the key models for countries around the world to follow, made all the more significant by how it is most often contrasted with Beijing's efforts. Both countries have been able to dramatically limit new infections but have pursued very different paths. After initial measures to cover up the virus, the CCP's enforced quarantines and quick buildup of health infrastructure has been touted as a triumph of the authoritarian system.²⁸ Though there are clear holes in this narrative, it nonetheless raised questions about the efficacy of democratic political systems over authoritarian ones against the backdrop of retrenching democracy and pluralism around the world.²⁹

The Moon administration's response to the virus—emphasizing openness, transparency, and civic engagement—has been credited with limiting the impact of COVID-19 and held up as a model for effectively combating pandemics.³⁰ As *New York Times* columnists Max Fisher and Choe Sang Hun summarized, there are four key takeaways from South Korea's pandemic response: intervene fast, before it is a crisis; test early, often and safely; contract tracing isolation and surveillance; and enlist the public's help.³¹ Additionally, South Korea's accountable, competent bureaucracy, and transparent daily disclosure of COVID-19 cases further highlight how key democratic institutions can help successfully contain the virus. While it may already be too late for many countries to apply this model to the ongoing crisis, South Korea is taking an active leadership role to help others with COVID-19, both within the region and around the world.

As South Korea's experience has proven the importance of testing for the disease in ultimately containing it, Seoul is actively working to send its diagnostic tests abroad. Faced with mounting demand from foreign governments, the Moon administration has actively engaged with private local producers of COVID-19 testing kits to help support exports.³² These efforts have largely been fruitful. In March, South Korea sent around 24 million USD worth of test kits overseas, expanding to just over 200 million USD in exports in April.³³ Tests have so far been exported to 117 countries, including those in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Vietnam, China, Australia, and Thailand.³⁴ More than just through commercial sales, Seoul is also striving to donate tests to important partner countries with less domestic capacity to handle the virus. Within the region, this has notably included the donation of 50,000 kits to Jakarta through the South Korean conglomerate LG and its manufacturing operations in Indonesia.³⁵

Beyond bilateral cooperation, South Korea has also played an active role in helping to coordinate multilateral responses to the virus in light of limited leadership elsewhere. Whereas the G-20 served as the main focus of multilateral cooperation during the global financial crisis, the institution has been slow to muster a strong, collective response in the face of COVID-19—at least in part due to the China–US rivalry.³⁶ For its part, South Korea has been actively working with other international institutions to stem the growth of the disease. In early May, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Park Han-ki spoke with NATO leadership to discuss cooperation on the pandemic.³⁷ Around the same time, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa spoke with the South Korean envoys to major international organizations, such as the UN and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, emphasizing the importance of multilateralism and asking them to utilize the country's success in managing the virus to help build on this cooperation.³⁸

Seoul's leadership has also been clear at the regional level through ASEAN+3—consisting of ASEAN members, China, Japan, and South Korea. In a special ASEAN+3 summit on 14 April, Moon expressed South Korea's full support for ASEAN and that his government would be looking to utilize the ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Fund—totaling over 110 million USD—to help combat COVID-19.³⁹ Moon also stressed the importance of keeping the flow of economic and people-to-people exchanges open.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most noteworthy acclaim for the South Korean government's response has come from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. During a press conference in late April, Guterres praised South Korea for not only its handling of COVID-19 but also its continued emphasis on climate change—stating the country is a “remarkable example” of how

“the two things can be put together.”⁴¹ Indeed, South Korea’s approach to climate change—both prior to the pandemic and its plans for after—suggests that it will have an important role to play on the regional and global stages in the near future.

South Korea on Climate Change

South Korean leaders from both ends of the political spectrum have pursued policies to limit the country’s carbon footprint in recent decades. Former president Lee Myung-bak was one of the first world leaders to embrace “green growth” as a development strategy, when he was elected in 2008. During the 2008 global financial crisis, 80 percent of the government’s fiscal stimulus plan went to green growth projects. The Lee administration also initiated a Five-Year Plan in 2009, committing 2 percent of annual GDP to strengthening the use of sustainable technologies, such as goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent through 2020.⁴² These climate-conscious efforts were not just limited to the peninsula. Lee’s Global Green Growth Institute was launched in 2010 and, only two years later, was transformed into an international treaty-based organization.⁴³

The current Moon administration has taken a similar path on climate. The cornerstone of Moon’s efforts is his Renewable Energy 3020 Plan, intended to increase the renewable energy portion of the country’s energy consumption from where it currently stands—nearly 8 percent—to 20 percent by 2030.⁴⁴ Of course, this is not without its challenges, as South Korea faces an uphill battle in moving away from coal.⁴⁵ But, there is some early evidence to suggest that the general public is willing to accept the trade-off of higher prices in exchange for the benefits of renewables.⁴⁶

The outcome of the National Assembly election in April stands to make the country’s turn toward fighting climate change all the sharper. The big victory for Moon’s Democratic Party, winning a majority of seats, has provided them with the political space to pursue their platform of enacting a “Green New Deal.”⁴⁷ Released in the leadup to the election, the plan aspires to make South Korea carbon neutral by 2050, the first pledge of its kind in East Asia. To meet its ambitious goals, the plan includes large investments in renewable energy, the creation of a carbon tax, and the establishment of a center to help workers transition to green jobs.⁴⁸

Though there is still much work ahead in terms of implementation, that South Korea could be the first country in Asia to enact sweeping climate-oriented policies amid the pandemic is certainly noteworthy. Much as Lee proved over a decade ago, South Korea would be showing other leaders in the region that it is possible to still incorporate climate into efforts designed to fight the current crisis. More than just a model, however, the current

inflection point provides an opportunity to build on South Korea's existing cooperation within the Indo-Pacific on climate change.⁴⁹

It is not just the ROK's values, expertise, and emphasis on diplomacy that make it an attractive partner for countries in the region and, therefore, an indispensable actor for Washington. South Korea's position in the Indo-Pacific allows it to be seen as a more impartial player, which comes with its own set of advantages.

South Korea as a More Neutral Regional Middle Power and Facilitator

The structural limitations South Korea faces can also be seen to provide key structural benefits. While the regional balance of power places clear boundaries on Seoul's ability to more openly engage in efforts to counter Beijing, these same dynamics endow South Korea with less political baggage for partners in the Indo-Pacific. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the enduring Sino-Japanese rivalry in the region tint cooperation with Beijing and Tokyo in a way that does not affect Seoul. Additionally, South Korea's efforts to shape itself as a middle power, both on the global and regional stages, has cemented its position as an effective diplomatic convenor.

Over the past two decades, each South Korean president has undertaken their own respective approaches to building the country's middle-power image. Starting in the early 2000s, Roh Moo-hyun conceptualized South Korea as a regional balancer between China and Japan, also serving as a hub for security and economic cooperation. President Lee's agenda looked beyond the region under the "Global Korea" slogan and operationalized South Korea's middle-power role through international institutions, most notably the G20.⁵⁰ Though the country's middle-power branding faltered under Park Geun-hye's agenda of "Trustpolitik," Moon's NSP can be seen as an extension of previous middle-power pursuits in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵¹

One of the clearest examples of the efficacy of South Korea's middle-power diplomacy is enshrined in the regional financial governance. When ASEAN+3 countries were in talks to create a new multilateral currency swap arrangement after the 2008 financial crisis proved the existing Chiang Mai Initiative ineffectual, the rivalry between Beijing and Tokyo proved a considerable obstacle. With both sides vying for greater voting power than the other in the new organization, Seoul broke the deadlock by proposing a quota system that now forms the structure of the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization.⁵² China and Japan are on equal footing with the largest voting shares as the biggest would-be donors, South Korea's quota amounts to half of what is allotted to each of its larger neighbors, and ASEAN members have various smaller quotas.

South Korea's commitment to mutually beneficial cooperation and serving as an honest broker in the region shows no signs of letting up in the face of the pandemic. If anything, the country's successes in managing the virus appears to be redoubling these commitments as previously highlighted. In the face of a worsening US–China rivalry, South Korea's continued ability to fulfill this role is all the more important in light of diminishing goodwill and the need for coordination on key transborder issues like health and climate.

For Washington, this is crucial—not only because it ensures progress in these areas while its efforts may be concentrated elsewhere but also because South Korea could help serve as a bridge with China on these important, potentially less contentious issues. How difficult this appears to be in the current geopolitical environment only underscores how critical this role would be when thinking about the potential costs of a disjointed response in these areas.

Conclusion

No matter who is in the White House come January, there is now a clear and pressing need to update the US approach to the Indo-Pacific region. The scale of the impact of COVID-19 so far seems to only be outdone by the implications for how it will shape the future. The most obvious necessary changes to the current FOIP strategy—namely greater emphases on global health and climate change—also require the reevaluation of an agenda toward the comprehensive containment of and decoupling with China. In light of these needs, Washington's path forward with the region after the pandemic naturally runs more through Seoul than it has in recent years.

Moving forward, the first step for Washington's post-COVID-19 Indo-Pacific policy should be to amplify efforts on global health and climate change to include China where possible. There are clear limitations to what this would entail in terms of tangible outcomes as the US government continues to try to stop the spread of the virus at home and great-power competition intensifies, but effectively communicating this shift would engender its own benefits. While the United States should still look to make advancements with South Korea in these areas as a natural partner, voicing the importance of these issues carries its own weight, as it will effectively reaffirm the work Seoul is already doing.

In the short- to medium-term, differing priorities on traditional security concerns in the region will likely continue to prevent the ROK from officially joining a US regional approach that is perceived to be geared toward containing China. Even within a policy agenda consisting of mixed efforts to push back against Beijing in some areas and engage with it in others that this article advocates for, Seoul's endorsement would still not likely be forthcoming, due to existing concerns over its reliance on China for trade and influencing North Korea. However, there should be broader recognition of

how Seoul's outreach in the Indo-Pacific region furthers the same values the United States is pursuing in the region, whether it is working directly with Washington or not—especially when it comes to formulating policy at the bilateral level.

US military strength in the region is a means to an end, not an end in itself. As the “free and open” modifiers of the current US strategy suggest, the promotion of values is its chief goal. In this sense, South Korea's diplomacy should not only be viewed as upholding shared values in the region but also as a values multiplier. This is ultimately worth just as much toward US goals as military cooperation and will likely be more so given the major nontraditional security challenges that lie ahead.

Consequently, Washington's second step in building a post-pandemic regional approach should be a shift from a piecemeal to more comprehensive view of the ROK in the Indo-Pacific. The effective lack of support for Seoul in the face of Chinese economic retaliation over THAAD and recurrent demands for South Korea to dramatically increase its financial commitments in military burden-sharing negotiations suggest there is a disconnect between how South Korea is viewed at the regional and bilateral levels and what Washington's stated regional objectives are.⁵³ In practice, this would involve little more than reassessing the value of South Korea's existing work in the region to the United States that may be more intangible as well as fall outside the realm of direct cooperation with Washington. However, doing so will help better realize Seoul's existing contributions to US regional interests and make the most of opportunities to further shared regional interests in the face of major new challenges.

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