



## Is Seoul Turning Toward the Indo-Pacific?: A Korean Perspective on the Moon-Biden Summit

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### I. Sharing the Indo-Pacific Vision

The Korea-US summit held on May 21, 2021 between President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and President Joe Biden of the United States (US) resulted in a number of significant agreements in various areas including a new approach toward North Korea that is open to diplomacy based on prior US commitments such as Singapore Joint Statement between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump in 2018. Another noticeable outcome of the Moon-Biden summit was the higher level of agreement on the bilateral cooperation for the US's Indo-Pacific initiative, which was amply described in various ways in the two official summit documents, i.e., "US-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement" and "Fact Sheet: US-Republic of Korea Partnership."<sup>1)</sup> The Joint Statement states that the two countries "share a vision of a region governed by democratic norms, human rights and the rule of law at home and abroad." In particular, the two leaders agreed to "redouble their commitment to democratic values and the promotion of human rights at home and abroad." They also pledged to maintain "freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea." ROK even mentioned "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" for the first time in its diplomatic documents with the US. Although one cannot find a direct reference to China, the documents contain core elements of Biden administration's Indo-Pacific agenda, and include a number of substantive parts that critically point to China.

What is particularly noteworthy in the documents is that the two countries agreed to expand geographical scope, role, and agenda of the ROK-US alliance to regional and global levels. The two leaders said that "the significance of U.S.-ROK relationship extends far

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1) "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," MAY 21, 2021, The White House, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>>; "Fact Sheet: United States - Republic of Korea Partnership," MAY 21, 2021, The White House, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/fact-sheet-united-states-republic-of-korea-partnership/>>.

beyond the Korean Peninsula," and that "the United States and the Republic of Korea pledge to strengthen our alliance and to broaden its focus to address issues of critical importance to the Indo-Pacific and the world." The two leaders also agreed to work together "to align the ROK's New Southern Policy and the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific" and cooperate to "create a safe, prosperous, and dynamic region."

Actually, the concept of 'alignment and cooperation' between ROK's New Southern Policy and the US Indo-Pacific initiative is not a new one, but has already been mentioned a number of times in official diplomatic documents of the US and ROK under the Trump administration. For example, at the post-summit joint press conference on June 30, 2019, held during President Trump's visit to Korea, President Moon said in his opening remarks that "we have agreed to put forth harmonious cooperation between Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy."<sup>2)</sup> What is new at this time, however, is that the US and ROK redefined and expanded the nature and scope of 'alignment and cooperation' between their respective initiatives by committing "to oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize or threaten the rule-based international order" in order to "to [maintain] an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific." This is quite a significant move on the part of the Moon administration in that Seoul pledged and acknowledged its commitments to engage with the US Indo-Pacific initiative.

## II. A New Momentum for ROK's Indo-Pacific Engagement?

It is quite surprising that the language that Washington uses in its Indo-Pacific narratives was directly applied in the Moon-Biden Summit documents without any modifications, given the fact that the Moon Jae-in government had never expressed explicit support or earnestly cooperated with the US strategy before. For instance, on August 24, 2018 when Walter Douglas, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, visited Seoul, Korea, the two allies held the first working-level consultation on Korea's New Southern Policy and the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Afterwards, a press release was issued saying that two sides "especially took note of the complementary nature of the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy... and agreed to continue efforts to find common elements between the two countries' policies."<sup>3)</sup> Although the two countries issued the first and second "Fact Sheet" on the cooperation between New Southern Policy and Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2019 and 2020 respectively, the Moon Jae-in government did not actively support the Indo-Pacific Strategy nor did it engage in full-fledged cooperation.<sup>4)</sup> Instead, the Moon government distanced itself from the US

2) The Office of President, "Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Press Conference Following Korea-U.S. Summit," June 30, 2019, Republic of Korea, <<http://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/618>>.

3) Press Release, "ROK and US Discuss New Southern Policy, and Indo-Pacific Strategy," August 24, 2018, MOFA Korea.

4) Media Note, "U.S. & ROK Issue a Joint Factsheet on their Regional Cooperation Efforts," Office of the Spokesperson, November 2, 2019, US Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, <<https://kr.usembassy.gov/110219-joint-fact-sheet-by-the-united-states-and-the-republic-of-korea-on-cooperation-between-the-new-southern-policy-and-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>>; "Fact Sheet by the USA and the Republic of Korea on Cooperation between the Indo-Pacific Strategy & the New Southern Policy," November 13,

Indo-Pacific initiative and maintained a passive, if not negative, stance.<sup>5)</sup> In view of such a history of the Moon administration's reticent posture on the US Indo-Pacific agenda, the level of agreement reached by the two governments this time was surprisingly high.

Then one must ask: has the Moon Jae-in government finally made a strategic decision to join the US Indo-Pacific strategy? Did the Moon government change its existing China strategy, which aims to maintain a strategic balance between Washington and Beijing? My answer to these questions is "not necessarily so." This is so simply because there is no observable indication of a fundamental shift in the Moon Jae-in government's existing China policy. Rather, the Moon Jae-in government appears to have aimed at a limited goal of strengthening the ROK-US alliance while keeping its overall strategic stance of maintaining a balance between the US and China.

Before the ROK-US summit in May, the Moon Jae-in government was actually in need of dispelling Washington's perception of Korea's "China bias" as well as making sure that the newly inaugurated Biden administration supports its engagement policy toward North Korea. Seoul might have felt that a best way to achieve these goals would be to lend an appropriate level of support and sympathy for the Biden administration's top priority, i.e., the Indo-Pacific agenda. By doing so, the Moon government aimed to restore the US-ROK alliance, which had weakened during the Trump administration, and establish a close working relationship with the newly inaugurated Biden administration on the issue of North Korea. Against this backdrop, it appears that the Moon Jae-in government agreed to a higher-level agreement on the Indo-Pacific initiative that the Biden administration is currently pursuing as its key foreign policy agenda. At the same time, however, it appears that in order to maintain a strategic balance, the Moon Jae-in government tried to limit its support for the US Indo-Pacific agenda at a level that would be tolerable to China.

Evidence in support of my view is found in various places throughout the summit documents. First of all, the US was quite considerate of Moon government's concern over China by carefully controlling the language when referring to Taiwan and the South China Sea issue. Most notably, the Joint Statement did not specifically mention "China," which is quite a contrast to the US-Japan Leaders' Joint Statement from the Biden-Suga summit in last April. This indicates US's consideration of the Moon government's onerous position when it comes to joining efforts to "criticizing China." Also, unlike the US-Japan Joint Statement that triggered a strong response from China, the US-ROK Joint Statement touched upon the issue of human rights without mentioning 'Xinjiang and Hong Kong,' which is something the Biden administration always mentions when it comes to the human rights issue. The reason is presumably because Moon government specifically requested to drop them out of the documents during the text negotiations. This explains why China's reaction to the Moon-Biden summit was quite moderate; Beijing kept its response at a level of "restrained objection" without making any strong complaints.<sup>6)</sup>

2020, U.S. Embassy in Cambodia,  
<<https://kh.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-by-the-usa-and-the-republic-of-korea-on-cooperation-between-the-indo-pacific-strategy-the-new-southern-policy/>>.

5) Andrew Yeo, "South Korea and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," CSIS, July 20, 2020.  
<<https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-korea-and-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy>>.

6) Yonhap News Agency, "Chinese ambassador calls S. Korea-U.S. summit statement 'a bit discouraging'," May 26, 2021.

In addition, the Moon Jae-in government seems to have carefully coordinated with the US so that the contents of the Joint Statement would not be interpreted as direct criticism against China. For example, the Joint Statement gives no impression that Korea is directly participating in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy or Quad. At the same time, however, it does describe - in appropriate terms - that the two countries hold a common view of the strategic situations in the Indo-Pacific region and that the two countries share the values that need to be pursued in this region. In fact, there is no direct mention of Korea's "participation" in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Joint Statement. Instead, it is stated that the ROK-US bilateral cooperation "anchors our respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific region." These words clearly indicate that South Korea is pursuing its own regional initiative, i.e., New Southern Policy independent from, and without directly participating in, the US's Indo-Pacific strategy. Furthermore, the Joint Statement utilizes the familiar diplomatic language of 'alignment and cooperation' between the ROK's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific vision.' This appears to be an attempt to tone down the wording of Seoul's support for the US strategy. In addition, Seoul's positive turn toward the Quad, which China has criticized as the "Asian NATO" that aims to contain China, was also toned down into muted expressions such as "The United States and the ROK acknowledge the importance of open, transparent, and inclusive regional multilateralism including the Quad."

Given that the Moon Jae-in government has been wary of the Quad all along until the summit, Seoul's subtle shift in its stance toward the Quad at the summit comes as a little surprise. It seems that this change was possible because the US's approach toward the Quad has significantly changed. Unlike the previous Trump administration which characterized Quad as something of a military and security mechanism, the Biden administration has made it clear that the Quad is not a multilateral security organization, i.e., an "Asian NATO." Rather, Quad is now defined as an open and transparent platform for functional cooperation among like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific region. In this respect, the Biden administration has chosen to promote Quad as a kind of problem-solving mechanism in multiple sectors to deal with the challenges in the region. It seems that Washington wants to leverage Quad as a cooperative mechanism that can effectuate results in practical areas such as response to COVID-19 and vaccine supply, climate change, and supply chains in advanced technologies, etc. Since ROK also has keen interests in these areas of cooperation among the Quad members, the Moon government appears to have shared this positive view of Quad as a multilateral cooperative mechanism and kept the possibility of future engagement with Quad open.

Another salient feature of the recent Moon-Biden summit is that ROK and the US agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation in key manufacturing sectors and high-tech fields such as semiconductors, EV batteries, strategic and critical materials and pharmaceuticals, etc. Perhaps this agreement could be interpreted as Seoul taking side with the Washington vis-à-vis China because the strategic objective of the Biden administration's supply chain strategy is to decouple from the existing supply chains that are heavily dependent upon China, and to build a resilient network of new supply chains in these key manufacturing sectors by collaborating with allies and partners.

However, the Moon Jae-in government does not regard the agreement on the advanced

technologies as a matter requiring ROK to choose sides between the US and China. Rather, Seoul perceives it as a new opportunity to expand its role and contribution to revamping the weakened global supply chains in the key manufacturing sectors, and thereby stabilizing the global public goods in the international markets. In fact, the main players involved in rebuilding supply chains in these sectors will be mostly private companies. At the summit, major Korean manufacturing companies such as Samsung, LG, SK, and Hyundai Kia announced their plans to invest approximately USD40 billion in the US. These were independent, commercial decisions made by private firms, not Korean government, which will enable them to pave bigger inroads into the US markets. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the Moon administration chose to join forces with the Biden administration whose strategic priority is to secure US-centered supply chains in key manufacturing sectors at the expense of China.

In short, it can be said that the Moon Jae-in government has taken a step forward with regard to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, it did so within a limited scope that would be tolerable to China and thus not disrupt the strategic balance that the Moon government wishes to maintain between the US and China. This way, the Moon Jae-in government was accommodating US demands without provoking China and was able to keep the balance. However, the true barometer for judging the Moon Jae-in government's shift toward the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy will be how these commitments and pledges are translated into concrete actions and tangible outcomes during the remaining term of the outgoing Moon government as well as by the incoming government in Korea that will be inaugurated in May 2022.

### **III. Looking Ahead**

First and foremost, Seoul needs to expand and substantiate its cooperation with Washington regarding the US Indo-Pacific agenda as agreed at the summit. It is in Seoul's strategic interests to expand its role in regional peace and stability by strengthening Indo-Pacific cooperation with the US. In addition, Seoul's greater Indo-Pacific engagement with the US, and other like-minded countries in the region, will serve as a useful strategic asset in building a more constructive partnership with China in the coming future.

Secondly, it is important to follow up with the agreement that the two countries pledged to develop the ROK-US alliance into a comprehensive strategic alliance that is not just confined to the Korean Peninsula but expands toward the Indo-Pacific region. In this respect, Seoul is expected to play a greater regional role for the peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. However, this will be a challenging task for Korea because, unlike other US allies in the region such as Japan or Australia, up until now Korea has hardly participated in Indo-Pacific coordination. For example, Seoul might be expected to take a clearer diplomatic position on regional security issues such as the South China Sea, or on the promotion of human rights and democracy, as in the case of the Myanmar situation, or to share a deeper strategic understanding with the US on major regional security issues.



The New Southern Policy, a key regional initiative of the Moon Jae-in government, has been successfully implemented over the past four years, and received full support from ASEAN members and other countries such as India. Nevertheless, Seoul has strategically left sensitive security and strategic issues out of the scope of the New Southern Policy in order to minimize the geopolitical risks. On the contrary, Seoul chose deliberately to prioritize development cooperation, trade and investment as the central venue of its engagement in Southeast Asia.<sup>7)</sup> The Moon Jae-in government focused efforts on non-traditional security cooperation such as climate change, environment, counter-terrorism, marine pollution, and disaster relief, but remained passive on security issues that were sensitive to China, such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea or issues pertaining to international law and order in the region. In this respect, the Moon-Biden summit could serve as a turning point for Korea's Indo-Pacific engagement in the years to come: Seoul needs to take a more active stance on peace and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thirdly, Seoul needs to seek ways to implement its pledges and commitments for the Indo-Pacific cooperation with the US. At the summit, the two countries shared a vision for basic values such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, respect for international law, human rights, and democracy. Yet, the true challenge for Seoul is how to operationalize these shared values into concrete actions and tangible outcomes. In particular, Korea pledged to promote democracy and human rights at the regional and global levels, including maintaining pressure on Myanmar. Seoul needs to implement such commitments as specific components of its new value diplomacy in the coming future.

Fourthly, Korea will have to engage in practical and functional cooperation with like-minded countries participating in the Quad. At the summit, Korea and the US agreed to form a working group and closely work together in the areas of climate change, advanced technologies, and the vaccine supplies, etc. Since the Quad members also agreed at the Quad Summit on March 12 to form working groups on these areas, Korea will be effectively participating in Quad cooperation through Korea-US cooperation. As it is clear by now that the Quad is set to work as a functional platform for practical cooperation among its members, there is no reason for Korea not to engage with Quad in exploring collaborations in areas where Korea has keen interests as well as competitive strengths.

Finally, Korea should actively participate in the US' strategy of securing resilient global supply chains in key manufacturing sectors. The US is expected to implement domestic-oriented industrial and trade policies in the four critical product areas (semiconductors, batteries, and critical minerals and strategic materials, including rare earth elements, pharmaceuticals/pharmaceutical ingredients) which were identified for a 100-day review and six sectors (defense, public health, information & communication technology (ICT), energy, transportation, agricultural products and food) which were selected for one-year policy review. The Biden administration plans to take the lead and establish a manufacturing base in the US for these essential products, by securing stable supply chains through international cooperation with allies and partner countries. Given

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7) Wongi Choe, "New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy," *Asie.Visions*, No. 118, Ifri, January 2021, <[https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/choe\\_new\\_southern\\_policy\\_korea\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/choe_new_southern_policy_korea_2021.pdf)>.

the fact that the combined GDP of the US, its allies, and partners is estimated to account for 66% of global GDP, continued participation in the US markets is very important for the future of the Korean economy.

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