

South Korea as a Middle Power in the Emerging Dynamics of Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

As many of the world leaders sat pondering over the politics of the Indo-Pacific and how to neutralise the exponentially increasing power struggle of China and the USA, North Korea, in frenzy, conducted six rounds of short-range missile testing since the beginning of the year 2022. In this complex power struggle dynamics for control of the newly constructed Indo-Pacific Region, South Korea and India have been playing a vital role to strategically avoid any hegemonic control of the region. With their national interest in their minds, these two countries have been prioritising strategic autonomy, in turn building foundation for a safer and hegemon free Asian Region. With a mix of diplomacy, trade relations, and soft power, they have been challenging the world view of hard power being the only answer to traditional security issues. With more than one aligning factors, these two countries can work together to neutralise the power struggle and bring peace to the region while keeping their national interest at the focal point.

Introduction

For a decade now, South Korea has been pushed to take a stance vis-à-vis traditional security issues arising in the Asian maritime region. The pressure started since the disputes of the South China Sea and now gradually moved on to the Indo-Pacific. South Korea, however, has tried to maintain a neutral stance and has so far chosen to not be on any 'side'. With the growing great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, every middle and small powers have been adjusting their stance to conjoin their national interest

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to the politics of the maritime domain. Seoul needs to extrapolate its strategy as an important middle power in the region. Although a late joiner, its role as a middle power has considerably grown post 'Indo-Pacific era'. Oscillating between Quad, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, AUKUS and various other organisations which have the capacity to escalate tension at any given point of time in the strategically contested theatre of Indo-Pacific Region, Seoul has, so far, tried to keep its balancing act intact.

Indo-Pacific is a geo-strategic supra region which encompasses the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and has become a hub of trade within the last decade. With no defined border, this region is accountable for almost two-third of the world trade. The gradual eastward shift of the 'economic centre of gravity' will lead to the Indo-Pacific amounting to almost 56% of the total world growth.¹ The current state and the projections have unfailingly made the world economies, and the major players in this region, accept the newly developed construct while fighting to secure their seat. However, the biggest drama is unfolded by the power tussle that has been ensuing due to the clash of the US and the Chinese interests in the region. In this conundrum, the regional players have been trying to recalibrate their position so that they are not caught in the crossfire between the heavyweights.

The tension ensues from the economic rise of the 'revisionist state', the structural difference between the political system of the US and China, and from the basic understanding of co-operation. Any attempt to resolve the issue gets stuck between 'trust before co-operation' and 'confidence building measures as an end to trust building'.² From the South China Sea issue to the freedom to collect military intelligence within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the differences see no end. The denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula is another issue that has loomed for far too long. While the US expects Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) of Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK, also known as North Korea) nuclear program, Pyongyang has forever maintained the stance of phased denuclearisation. Pyongyang maintains that denuclearisation of Korean peninsula means the removal of American nuclear umbrella from in and around the Korean peninsula lest it creates an imbalance of power structure.³ DPRK feels that suspension of

nuclear program will leave it vulnerable like Israel or Libya.⁴ For Kim Jong-un it becomes a question of economic hardships versus threat to life. In such a hostile situation, Seoul's involvement in any traditional security initiative that threatens Beijing's position can be considered provocative.

The Indo-Pacific strategy on part of any country cannot emphasise confrontation but co-operation. Any conflict with China, which is a leading military power and trading partner of majority of the countries of the world, will lead to an economic devastation which no nation might be prepared for. Moreover, the Covid-era has specifically reiterated that the world cannot function while exerting alienation, dissociation, non-cooperation, all or any of the mentioned, with an economic, military, and sizeable giant like China. It is the need of the hour to induce China into the world order to tackle various global issues like climate change, health issues, piracy et al.

Despite being a part of the Indo-Pacific, Seoul has so far trodden very cautiously on the FOIP strategy of Washington, although assuring collaboration between important aspects of FOIP and New Southern Policy (NSP) in 2019. Middle powers like South Korea know that any rhetoric or action on their part may initiate retaliation from China, an arms race or even a direct war. The middle powers want strategic autonomy and being able to not choose sides. Moon Hee-sang, the speaker of the National Assembly of Republic of Korea (ROK) said that choosing between the US and China is like choosing between economy and security.⁵

China considers the Indo-Pacific as a construct created by the US to counter the influence of China in the Asian Region. The translation of Abe's FOIP idea into a strategy by the US has made China sceptical about the US's intentions of increasing its presence in the Indo-Pacific. The bellicose approach of FOIP of 2017 has gradually transformed into the change of the undertone in 2019 by including phrases like 'promotion of networked region', 'peaceful resolution of disputes'.⁶

ROK is in a perpetual state of quandary when it comes to taking a hard stance against China. There are multiple factors that influences Seoul's stance on traditional security. South Korea's policies are framed keeping in mind the issue of North Korea at the focal point. DPRK is not just a security threat; its compliance

to the world order is a key to Korean reunification. China's cooperation is of utmost importance in keeping DPRK under check as well as facilitates the unification process. After Kim Jong-un's advent to power, the lip to teeth relationship has not been as smooth, but not enough to break the tide either. Seoul cannot irk Beijing lest it dampens any hope of reunification. Security threats from such a Brobdingnagian power, and economic arms twisting incidences of China like the 'garlic standoff' of 2000⁷ and the 'THAAD retaliation' of 2017⁸ has also made South Korea wary of disturbing the turbid waters. South Korea is so far trying to not lose its strategic agency as it did during the division of the Korean peninsula. There is a Korean saying-“*고래 싸움에 새우등 터진다*” (*gole ssaume saeudeung teojinda*) which translates to 'When there is a clash of two whales, the back of a shrimp is broken'. Like every middle and small power, ROK too feels that it is caught in the clash between the 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' and the 'jackal diplomacy'. Therefore, Seoul either opts for the balancing role or tries to not make it a zero-sum game.⁹ Not making the two alliances mutually exclusive provides ROK a lot of manoeuvring space.

The Asian Region has already been in conflict since Asia-Pacific Region gained traction. However, with the shift of attention to the newer Indo-Pacific construct, the centre of the region also somewhat changed from China to India. While the power tussle in the region ensued, India was no less in dilemma than South Korea. India, in fact, remains at par in vulnerability to South Korea if not more. It shares a disputed land border with China. China has been a close strategic ally of Pakistan providing it with economic, military and technical assistance. Pakistan in turn has been a security nightmare for India. So, any traditional security measures taken by India which even remotely irks China, expectedly results in a matter of national security crisis. In a situation where all the major players of the region like the US, Australia, Japan, the UK and the ASEAN nations expect India to play a more proactive role in the Indo-Pacific, India needs to evaluate its move so as not to raise a war like situation. With the Neo-Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) policies of alignment which suits its national interest to the best, India has been trying to use the mix of hard power and soft power or as it has been termed as smart power.

The Limitations in Conducting Soft Power Diplomacy

The soft power diplomacy of South Korea has been questioned and various limitations have been defined to conclude that it will fail in the long run. Soft power cannot be a replacement for hard power, is an undeniable fact. South Korea is not a naïve state to have missed the point. However, the soft power diplomacy has provided Seoul to develop deeper ties with its neighbours as well as Western nations. Moreover, a demand to “take a stand” seems more like a lecture when it is not followed by a solution to the brunt that South Korea will evidently face in case of a Chinese retaliation. The logical corollary between rhetoric and reaction is often conveniently overlooked. The demand for a firm stance also carries a façade of ‘the right to choose’ while the ambiguity carries the undertone of ‘stance against China’.

Of course, the soft power diplomacy comes with its own limitations. However, all the problems with the current diplomatic stance of Seoul flourish on the question of ‘what ifs’. It needs to be acknowledged that diplomacy can take various forms, can have various levels of impact, and can work in various time frames. Underplaying South Korean soft power diplomacy is being unaccepting to any other form of diplomacy the US does not subscribe to. Moreover, the soft power diplomacy is helping Seoul inch closer to build strategic security ties with various states. The ‘balancing act’ diplomacy of ROK, is seen in the light of only the restricting factors that binds Seoul’s hand. A deeper analysis is required to explore the deliberate engagement and hedging policy of ROK.

Historical linkages of South Korea to China and North Korea are also overlooked denying the role of any perceptual factors in framing of the nation’s policies. While North Korea remains a disgruntled brother than an enemy state, the Declaration of Independence of Korea exemplifies their historical view of China as the protector of the East.¹⁰

The Korean peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel by the US and the USSR on ideological lines, without the participation of any Korean representatives. Although these two Koreas have ideological differences now, but they are more like disgruntled brothers than enemies. ROK’s foreign policy has always been designed with DPRK and the issue of unification of the Korean

peninsula at its epicentre. ROK detests from taking any step that would jeopardise its year's long effort of unification.

On the other hand, historically Korean peninsula was a vassal state of China for a long time. So, whatever the state of diplomacy or the public opinion right now, it needs to be agreed upon that ROK is less likely to see China in the same light, as the rest of the world does, despite its belligerence. The Declaration of Independence of Korea exemplifies their historical view of China as the protector of the East.¹¹ In the above context, it is, therefore, important that we understand the role of ROK on contested issues with China and DPRK on the parameters of the perceptual linkages as well.

The critics of South Korean diplomatic stance emphasise that the nation has been too preoccupied with its internal matters. However, the merit of the New Southern Policy (NSP) has been overlooked which focuses on diversifying trade by developing relations with the ASEAN, India, and other nations. The Moon administration launched its NSP in 2017 making peace, prosperity, and peoples its three main pillars. In 2020, the policy was restructured into NSP Plus. Furthermore, South Korea is relocating the manufacturing segment out of China due to the arms twisting it has endured in the past. In such a scenario, India poses as a viable option, apart from Vietnam, due to its low labour cost. The trade and investment with India have maintained a somewhat flat graph in last few years, providing a tremendous scope for growth. The 64 per cent growth in trade with ASEAN nations, apart from Vietnam, between 2020-21 is also addressing the concern of disproportionate mechanism of distribution towards Vietnam.¹²

The critique that South Korea should focus on developing security alliances have overlooked the fact that Seoul has been involved in minilateral, bilateral and multilateral security architecture with Indo-Pacific states for more than two decades.¹³ South Korea's Official Development Assistance has also shown maximum growth amongst the entire Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members. It plans to double its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) for the ASEAN nations till 2023.

South Korea can find a common ground to work on connectivity and infrastructure development through Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in which India has been an active

participant. South Korea is also making efforts to work with India on forums like East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).¹⁴ India has been engaging with East Asian nations and beyond on multiple levels in an effort to bolster relations. The 'Act East Policy' of the Modi government has been a big step to promote economic, cultural, and strategic ties with Asia-Pacific nations. Multilateral, bilateral, and regional ties to enhance continuous engagement have been the primary motive of the policy. Under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue too India has been engaged in various important initiatives.

India has actively engaged in Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with countries like South Korea, Japan, Singapore and very recently with UAE to promote bilateral trade between two countries. India has also been participating in joint defence exercises on bilateral and multilateral levels. Australia's Pitch Black, SITMEX with Thailand and Singapore, Passex 2020 with Russia, the US, Australia and Vietnam on multilateral level and VINBAX with Vietnam, Dustlik with Uzbekistan, Za'ir Al Bahar with Qatar, Imbex with Myanmar, Harimau Shakti with Malaysia, et al on bilateral levels are some of the recent collaborative defence exercises that are helping India strengthen its ties with big as well as small players in the region. India is also going to host the foreign ministers of 10 ASEAN nations from 16 June 2022, primarily with the motive to discuss the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).¹⁵ Although underused, India has been trying to build people to people connect and faith through the use of the non-coercive and intangible methods of soft power. India has been trying to promote its composite heritage, art and culture, yoga et al across the world so as to create goodwill and trust.

Conclusion

Till about a decade ago, South Korea's role as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific Region has been either undermined or miscalculated. However, in the new geo-strategic power play, Seoul prefers more strategic autonomy. Despite its close ties to Washington, Seoul realises that any wrong moves on its part will disturb the peace in the region. Its policy in the region, therefore, seems to be very calculated and though unpopular with many states, Seoul is showing the world a different strategic approach in dealing with traditional security issues.

However, the usage of soft power by India remains highly underutilised. Despite its considerably smaller size the number of Korean Cultural Centre stands at 42¹⁶ while there are only 38 Indian Cultural Centres across the world¹⁷. South Korea has been planning to support its cultural promotion with a staggering sum of 5.5 billion USD for the year 2022. While India has allocated just 0.34 billion for the year 2022. On the Global Soft Power Index, India stands at 29th position.¹⁸ Although they have climbed up from the 36th position they held last year, they still have a long way to go. The dismal rank of India on the Human Freedom Index¹⁹ and depleting people to people trust amongst foreigners in regard to India makes it much more important for India to accelerate soft power diplomacy so as to give a boost to its global image. India needs to strategically increase the budget to promote culture if it plans on increasing its soft power influence. Bollywood can also be used to spread the Indian culture as many actors and actresses from the industry have tremendous fan following in foreign lands.

India and South Korea align not just on their threats but also their policies towards the containment of the Indo-Pacific from any hegemonic overtake, their approach towards North Korea and, peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula. Their alignment of NSP and Act East Policy (AEP) is first amongst many steps to power tussle in the Indo-Pacific in general and Asia in particular. With a mythological connect and historical goodwill, these two countries can play a pivotal role in balance of power and be the keepers of peace in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Endnotes

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