South Korea’s Approach to the Indo-Pacific

ABSTRACT

South Korea, along with Japan has been a traditional US ally in East Asia since 1945. The alliance grew even stronger with the Korean War. South Korea is still one of those nations where we can see a deep imprint and influence of the US mixed with their Japanese colonial past and their rich heritage. There are a few more important things to note about South Korea today. South Korea is highly dependent on the USA in terms of its security, even though its defence sector is highly developed and advanced. Its biggest security threat is the nuclear rogue state of North Korea. In recent decades, China and South Korea have been increasingly engaging in trade relations. China has always been the closest ally of North Korea, and with Seoul being disproportionately dependent on Beijing has made it prudent for Seoul to have friendly ties with China, which can come in handy in the process of denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

Keywords - Missiles, Nuclear, South Korea, Sunshine policy

Introduction

When it comes to South Korea’s engagement and role in the Indo-Pacific, it has been much more passive than many, especially the US would want it to be. There are reasons for this. First is the evergreen security threat of North Korea. Second, which is interrelated, is the increasing US-China rivalry, and Seoul is being sandwiched between them, unable to choose one side. Third, is its historical discords with Japan. Until the ascend of Yoon Suk-yeol as the new South Korean President in May 2022, Japan – South Korea relations were at an all-time low. They were so bad that when Fumio Kishida became the Prime Minister of Japan, there was negligible communication between the leaders of South Korea and Japan until the coming of Yoon.

So first, we will discuss the role the US has expected South Korea to play in the Indo-Pacific, and then we will dive into these three reasons mentioned before. Then we will
analyse the New Southern Policy, that came up in 2017. This is the policy South Korea has been following to increase its engagement with ASEAN nations and India on the political, economic, and socio-cultural front. In the end, we will look into the approach of the Moon Jae-in government and link it with the new government under Yoon Suk-yeol. We would probe into the possibility of whether Korea can now have a more tilt toward the US over China and embrace the idea of Indo-Pacific and participating more actively.

**Expectant Role of South Korea in the Indo – Pacific and its Passive Approach**

In 2011, the Obama administration in the US introduced the policy of ‘Rebalance of Asia’. The focus was on the Asia – Pacific region and there was this projection of the US, who had neglected the region completely, as a key player in the region. This came in the wake of the alarming rise of China, at least economically, and its aggression in the South China Sea. As a result, in terms of geopolitics, China was the new threat to the US and it could not ignore the Asia – Pacific, which was later expanded to the Indo – Pacific anymore.

One major aspect of that policy and subsequent efforts of both the Obama and Trump administrations has been this – to encourage connectivity among its traditional allies and partners. It also focuses on modernising its traditional alliances and encouraging the regional partners to take greater responsibility for their security and defence policy. The main targets of this are Japan and South Korea which have been dependent on the US for their security since 1945. This is something we can currently see Joe Biden, trying to achieve as well. This is critical for the USA to be able to have an East Asian front against China.

In the East Asia region, what the USA has been envisioning and aiming to achieve, is that South Korea and Japan cooperate closely with one another. Also, they, along with the USA can engage actively as a trilateral front, to counter Chinese dominance in the region. To be able to achieve this, the US assumed and expected that both South Korea and Japan will step up and take a more pro-active anti-China stance and engage in a US-led institutional structure for the Indo – Pacific (earlier Asia – Pacific). While Japan was able to step up to USA’s expectations and is now one of the most active countries in terms of engagement with the Indo – Pacific, South Korea has taken a much more passive stance. The reasons for the same are as follows – the focus of Korean foreign policy on North Korea, to mitigate the seemingly permanent threat Seoul faces; Seoul’s attempts to balance the Chinese and USA influence to appease them both; and Seoul and Tokyo’s historical discords.
Before discussing these reasons, we have to keep some things in mind - most of South Korea’s engagement with the region has been bilateral in nature – beyond the US’s framework of multilateral institutionalisation. Which is something the USA does not like. But, with the coming of Yoon Suk-yeol, there is seemingly room for South Korea’s engagement in multilateral forums of the Indo – Pacific. This became evident with Joe Biden’s proactive communication with Yoon hours after he got elected and visited him, just days after he took the oath as the President.

**North Korea**

North Korea has always been a security and existential threat to South Korea. Since the 1990s and early 2000s, with the coming of the Sunshine Policy, South Korea has aimed to have active and consistent communication with North Korea. It is not an exaggeration to say ever since its existence, the foreign policy of South Korea is fixated on North Korea and the region of East Asia – China, Japan, and Russia. The US has been an all-season ally for South Korea.

Despite this, North Korea, especially after acquiring nuclear weapons, is the main threat to South Korea. And China is the only country in the world, which can reach out to the North Korean leader. Therefore, this is a major reason why Seoul does not want to have holistic ties with China. It needs amicable relations with China so that China can step up and help Seoul to stop Pyongyang from possibly attacking Seoul.

To not give North Korea any possible reasons to attack, South Korean governments, especially the Moon Jae-in government have walked on a tight rope when it comes to approaching their foreign policy. This is thus the primary reason for Seoul’s passive approach towards the Indo – Pacific, not to irk North Korea and to avoid a very possible attack on Seoul. If Seoul goes completely against Beijing, as the US wants, China will not be up for the idea of mediating between the two Koreas. Not until they have taken their sweet revenge and “punish” Seoul for going against its interests. South Korea got a taste of this in 2016 and 2017 when China was aggressively opposing the deployment of THAAD in South Korea by the USA. As a reaction, China did not release an official statement of condemnation, but it was successful in rallying the public in such a way that the people in China were boycotting Korean brands and products. This led to a major economic loss for South Korea.

However, in recent years, from 2017 and especially this year, North Korea has increased its ballistic missile tests at an alarming rate. This puts the security of both South Korea and Japan at a major risk. Therefore, the new government under Yoon Suk-yeol is getting more and more confrontational over passive towards North Korea and aligning more with US’s viewpoints about North Korea and East Asia in general.
US-China Rivalry and South Korea’s Dependence

South Korea is dependent on both the US and China. It is dependent on the USA mainly in the security sector and China for its trade relations (China is South Korea’s largest trading partner). Therefore, when Sino-American relations started turning sour during the Trump administration, South Korea increasingly found itself sandwiched between the two. It cannot take one’s side completely, against the other. Therefore, a lot of its efforts were not only focused on deterring a nuclear attack from North Korea, but also on appeasing both the major powers.

This is also the reason behind South Korean reluctance for joining Quad Plus, for that would essentially place Seoul against Beijing. At least that is what Beijing would think. If it thinks that South Korea is a threat like it perceives India, then it would not hesitate to be aggressive towards South Korea directly or use the North Korea card. Or both. After its experience with the retaliation of deployment of THAAD and the Communist Party’s campaign to ban BTS in China, South Korea is more conscious of this than ever. For China, US-South Korean relations are the weakest link in the US security front against China. Therefore, Seoul’s strategic decisions are something that China has been particularly paying close attention to in recent years.

The US has also always enjoyed a significant sway in South Korean foreign policy. This significantly reduces the room for Korean policymakers to navigate their interests. The Moon Jae-in government, especially, was trying to make a more independent space for South Korea to pursue its foreign policy on its terms. The new government is likely going to pursue the same direction, but while engaging more actively in multilateral arrangements. It is likely to reduce its dependence on both China and the US while using one to balance the other. In this case, as of now, it seems that the Yoon government will tilt towards the US to balance China.

South Korean-Japanese Historical Discords and Tensed Relations

South Korea and Japan have tense relations with one another. The reason is because of their colonial past. South Korea was a colony of Japan. Due to a lot of atrocities committed by Imperial Japan, South Korean people have been scarred for generations and due to a seeming lack of Japanese will of owning up to their mistakes and properly apologise, it is an evergreen issue in domestic politics of South Korea and Japan, which does impact their relations significantly.

If one did not know better, it would look like since South Korea and Japan are both key allies of the US, they must be sharing great relations. That is not the truth in the slightest. They clash on a lot of issues like the comfort women issue (Japan had forcibly deployed many Korean women as comfort women to serve the Japanese Army during World War 2); Yasukuni Shrine (this Shinto shrine honours the people who have been
convicted as war criminals); Japanese history textbooks, Dokdo/Takeshima islands (territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan); and naming of the Sea of Japan.

In 2015, the US tried to negotiate and solve the comfort women issue between South Korea and Japan, but the efforts were in vain. In 2020 and 2021, Seoul’s relations with Tokyo reached an all-time low, due to South Korea’s Supreme Court ruling in 2018, which ordered Japanese companies to compensate the forced labourers during the Japanese colonial period. This was followed by Japan removing South Korea from the list of its favoured trading partners in 2019. The situation kept deteriorating from there as South Korea threatened the resumption of the process of termination of the intelligence pact it has with Japan. This was followed by both governments revoking the visa-waiver programme for visitors from the other nation. This was projected as the response to COVID-19, but it looked more like a battle of tit-for-tat between the governments. When Fumio Kishida came to power, he did not engage in much communication with Seoul. It is only when Yoon Suk-yeol came to power, that there is a glimmer of hope for restoring relations. But that is going to be a difficult journey.

**South Korea’s New Southern Policy: Outreach to Indo-Pacific**

As we have noted before, South Korean foreign policy has traditionally been focused on the immediate neighbours of South Korea – North Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the US. However, due to the US-China rivalry, South Korea realised that if it wants to pursue a more independent foreign policy, it must lower its vulnerabilities, especially its economic dependence on China. The same can be done by diversifying South Korea’s strategic and economic partnerships.

The New Southern Policy of South Korea, launched in 2017, talks about strengthening Seoul’s ties with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India. The goal is to advance ties with these nations to the same level as with Japan, China, Russia, and the US. The policy has three main pillars: peace, prosperity, and people. Peace signifies strategic and political cooperation; prosperity signifies economic cooperation and people signifies socio-cultural cooperation. This is the first diplomatic framework Seoul has formulated for improving ties with Southeast Asia and India, although it has enjoyed strong relations in the region for many years. Some of the examples are defence deals with India in 2021 and the shifting of the Samsung factory from China to India.

This can be seen as Seoul’s attempt to reach out to the Indo-Pacific region and navigate it on its terms, beyond the trade frameworks and regional organisations led by either the US or China. In the long run, it can provide substantial results and it converges with the American and Japanese ideas of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

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South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Approach under Yoon Administration and Conclusion

South Korea under President Yoon brings forth hope for both the US and Japan. Yoon is ruling a South Korea which is increasingly becoming anti-China and wants to take a more assertive stance against North Korea. It also wants improved ties with the US and Japan and wants to proceed further with its New Southern Policy. Judging from his proactive approach towards his interactions with Joe Biden and Seoul’s signing of the Indo – Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), it seems like South Korea will be edging closer to joining the Quad Plus framework, but it will be very tactful in dealing with China without compromising with Korean interests. If South Korea ramps up its engagement under the New Southern Policy, its outreach and engagement with the Indo – Pacific is going to become more active and significant.

BIBLIOGRAPHY