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Cursed by Geopolitics? South Korea's Place in Asia's Changing Politics of Space

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Summary

- Seoul's diplomatic imperative is to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula based on the principle of self-reliance but without discrediting the strategic importance of a robust South Korea-US security alliance.
- In addition to unprecedented advancement in inter-Korean relations, the Moon Jae-In presidency also seeks to differentiate from its predecessors by pledging to extend the country's regional engagement efforts beyond Northeast Asia.
- The government vows to invest substantial diplomatic resources to its New Southern Policy (which aims to strengthen economic, political and cultural ties with ASEAN countries and India) and New Northern Policy (to capitalise on the Korean peace process to link the Peninsula to China and Eurasia by railroads and energy projects).
- With respect to the BRI and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Seoul is cautious about potential risks of co-optation and entrapment if (being seen as) bandwagoning to one side of the contentious dynamics in Asia.
- Seoul's policy think-tanks express concerns about financial sustainability of the BRI, although they stay keen to exploit potential commercial opportunities for local businesses. Government officials also approach the BRI as a possible avenue of collaboration with Central Asian states under the New Northern Policy.
- The Indo-Pacific Strategy appears to be in an exploratory phase, and its political viability seems uncertain. There is scepticism in Seoul about whether the Trump administration is sufficiently interested and committed to meaningfully develop the minilateral plan in the region.
- Furthermore, the fact that the Indo-Pacific Strategy was originally conceived by Japan's Abe administration also diminishes Seoul's appetite for collaboration. The relations between Seoul and Tokyo have been lukewarm and uneasy over their different regional perspectives and historical disputes.

• For now, the Moon government will likely follow its own regional engagement roadmaps of New Southern Policy and New Northern Policy to selectively engage – rather than closely align – with competing regional initiatives by China and the US.

1. Introduction

The Moon Jae-In government took power in May 2017 after an impeachment of conservative leader Park Geun-Hye embroiled in multiple corruption charges. As a liberal party candidate, Moon was widely expected to make serious efforts to re-engage with North Korea for dialogue despite Pyongyang's repeated nuclear provocations.¹

In 2018, starting with North Korea's participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, the two Koreas have seen an unprecedented speed of improvement in their relations. It has been a year of historic significance, marked by three inter-Korean summits, a US-North Korea summit in Singapore, and three summits between North Korea and China (as of September 2018). For the months to come, there are speculations about another inter-Korean summit, a second US-North Korea summit, and a Russia-North Korea summit.

These complex processes for Korea's peace and denuclearisation signal that the region's major stakeholders are reviewing and renegotiating the protracted problem amidst intensifying Sino-American rivalry.

For the past decades, South Korea's imagined space of strategic interest rested within the boundaries of the Peninsula and the adjacent Northeast Asia. To address its security imperatives against North Korea and pursue economic development, the country's strategic thinking has long been preoccupied with *Sa-Kang Oe-Gyo* (diplomacy with four great powers). It meant that the government spent most of its diplomatic resources on key bilateral relationships with the US, China, Japan and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Russia.

Survival logic and fears of abandonment and/or entrapment dominated domestic debates on strategic priorities as the country sits uneasily at a geopolitical juncture of the contested region. During the past couple of decades, the 'curse' of geopolitics for South Korea has often been framed in terms of a dilemma between China (no. 1 trading partner) and the US (security guarantor).²

Critically re-visiting these traditional policy preoccupations, the Moon government set out its regional engagement strategies, called "New Southern Policy" and "New Northern Policy" with an objective to re-define the geographies of its strategic interest and develop alternative diplomatic channels. It pledges to upgrade the country's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries to the level of *Sa-Kang Oe-Gyo*.

Certainly there was no shortage of policy catchphrases under different governments, calling for proactive regional engagement. But they often remained at a conceptual stage with

¹ Roughly speaking, South Korea's liberal politicians tend to be supporters of 'Sunshine Policy' of engagement towards North Korea, while conservatives are prone to maintain a more hawkish view.

² For an analysis of different geographical and strategic concepts surrounding Korea's diplomatic posture, see Sung-Mi Kim (2016), "South Korea's middle power diplomacy: changes and challenges", Research Paper, June 2016, Chatham House: London.

little political energy and feasibility. A five-year single-term presidential system also limits long-term policy consistency. As a result, broader regional/global diplomacy beyond the purview of the Peninsula and its adjacencies has often been treated secondary, subordinated as a means to seek international support to deal with North Korea issues to Seoul's advantage.

Given these policy track records, will Moon's new regional diplomacy be business as usual? Or will it have sufficient political drive for a sustained and meaningful expansion of Seoul's diplomatic toolkit? In this context, how does the Moon government assess the utility of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US-backed Indo-Pacific Strategy?

This essay investigates these questions based on the review of government documents, news reports, academic publications, and policy analyses by government-affiliated research institutes and private think-tanks. A small number of interviews with foreign ministry officials complemented the findings.

2. Moon's geopolitical roadmap for Asia and beyond

(1) New Southern Policy (Shin Nam-Bang Jeong-Chaek)

The government expresses its commitment to strengthen ties with ASEAN member countries and India as major economic, cultural and security partners under its New Southern Policy. Together with the New Northern Policy, the initiative makes a central component in the government's regional vision to draw a "New Economic Map of Asia" of peace and prosperity.

South Korea's growing interest in the ASEAN and India has been spurred by a series of economic retaliations by Beijing in 2016 and 2017, following deployment of the US-operated THAAD missile defence system in South Korea. The tourism industry was hit hard by the Chinese government's travel ban, and Korean businesses suffered Chinese consumer boycott and punitive public investigations.

The Moon government aims to facilitate economic cooperation with the ASEAN and India, with a target to raise its trading volume with ASEAN economies to USD 200 billion by 2020, up from USD 118 billion in 2016.³ The combined ASEAN economy already makes the second largest trading partner for South Korea, only after China but ahead of the US and Japan.

Experts say that the government needs to go beyond mercantilist approaches to the ASEAN, and should invest more energy in political and security cooperation. The private sector can largely contribute to cultural and economic cooperation, but political and security cooperation is only possible between the governments.⁴

³ 2018 Annual Policy Plan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4175/list.do (in Korean)

⁴ Jae-Hyon Lee (2017), "Proposals for the Moon Jae-In government's future-oriented ASEAN diplomacy", Asan Issue Brief, Asan Institute for Policy Studies: Seoul, 12 June 2017 (in Korean).

Indeed, the conceptual framework of the New Southern Policy appreciates and reaffirms the centrality of the ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms in constructing a rule-based regional order in Asia.⁵ Furthermore, there is an expectation that the politically neutral ASEAN can be an impartial advisor to North Korea mulling over economic development and denuclearisation.⁶ It is known that the North Korean leader may be particularly interested in the 'Vietnam model' of economic transition.⁷

On the security front, South Korea hopes to discuss non-traditional security issues with the ASEAN, focusing on counterterrorism and cyber security. North Korea's denuclearisation is also a top dialogue agenda for Seoul.⁸ North Korea joined the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2000 in response to the group's engagement efforts. There, the two Koreas often got into a 'diplomatic war' to pitch their respective viewpoints in the ASEAN Chairman's Statements on pertinent issues.⁹

The Philippines has become an important buyer of South Korean jet fighters and helicopters, and there are prospects for more procurement contracts.¹⁰ At the Seoul Defence Dialogue (SDD) in September 2018 – an annual multilateral security forum at the vice defence minister level – the defence ministry had separate talks with its ASEAN counterparts for the second year in a row¹¹ and signed a new defence agreement with Brunei.¹²

To spearhead the growing number of economic and political initiatives under the New Southern Policy, increased diplomatic overtures are noticeable. Following his presidential inauguration, Moon sent special envoys to the country's key partners, namely the four regional powers, the European Union, Germany and, for the first time, the ASEAN.

Seoul is keen to pursue leaders' dialogues to generate political impact and policy trickledown effect across sectors. So far Moon has sat down with leaders of Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore and India, and he plans to hold summits with all ten ASEAN member countries during his term.¹³ The government hopes that its ties with the so-called "V.I.P." countries (Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines) will be the footholds for its southward diplomacy.

As part of institutional support measures, more money and more diplomatic staff are being allocated to embassies in Southeast Asia and to the relevant department in the foreign

http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/economy/economy_general/857040.html#csidx8b48ef2a69e96f1b076c6bb79b a210f

⁷ Maeil Economic Daily (2018), "Exclusive: Kim Jong-Un mentioned 'Vietnam Model' during the Panmunjeom Bridge talk, said no objection to US troops in the South", 3 May 2018 (in Korean).

⁸ 2018 Policy Roadmap, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁹ Jae-Hyon Lee (2017), "ASEAN and North Korea: a two-track approach is needed", Asan Blog, Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 8 2017 (in Korean).

¹⁰ The Philippine Star (2018), "Duterte wants to buy more South Korea fighter jets", 8 June 2018. ¹¹ https://www.gov.kr/portal/ntnadmNews/1587852 (in Korean).

¹² Prashanth Parameswaran (2018), "ASEAN-South Korea Security Ties in the Spotlight at 2018 Seoul Defense Dialogue", September 21, 2018, The Diplomat, https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/asean-south-korea-security-ties-in-the-spotlight-at-2018-seoul-defense-dialogue/

¹³ 2018 Policy Roadmap, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁵ Mely Caballero-Anthony (2014), "Understanding ASEAN's centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture", *The Pacific Review*, 27:4, 563-584

⁶ Hankyoreh News (2018), "The true nature of New Southern Policy under Moon government as a preparatory step towards the era of peace over the Korean Peninsula: interview with Sung-Il Kwak of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP)", 10 August 2018 (in Korean)

ministry's Seoul headquarters.¹⁴ In August 2018 a special presidential committee was set up, comprising over 30 officials from 14 ministries, to coordinate activities by different government ministries, agencies and government-affiliated research institutes.

(2) New Northern Policy (Shin Buk-Bang Jeong-Chaek)

The New Northern Policy represents the Moon government's regional vision for connectivity and energy resources development projects in cooperation with North Korea, Russia, China and former Soviet states in Central Asia. The policy envisions a peaceful Korean Peninsula to become a 'bridge' linking Asia's Southern and Northern territories.

Sectoral focus is placed in the so-called "9-bridge" areas: gas, railways, ports, power generation, North Pole Route (to tap into the economic potential of the Arctic region), shipbuilding, agriculture, fisheries and industrial complex. South Korea also expresses interest in developing synergetic projects with China's BRI (more below).¹⁵

The success – and the start – of this northward strategy primarily hinges on a significant advancement in North Korea's denuclearisation to lift existing economic sanctions on Pyongyang. Despite extant geopolitical contingencies, the government regards the New Northern Policy as an important measure to prepare for the post-conflict Korean Peninsula.¹⁶



Currently, the leaders of South and North Korea are pushing forward with a joint railroad project. Their commitment to link the divided nation by railway was included in the Panmunjeom Declaration in April 2018, and re-iterated in their third summit in Pyongyang in September 2018.

Seoul officials have already conducted an on-site review of railway connection points in the South, and are discussing with the United Nations Command to visit North Korea in

- ¹⁴ Interview with a Korean diplomat in an ASEAN embassy (September 2018).
- ¹⁵ 2018 Policy Roadmap, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- ¹⁶ Hankyoreh News (2018), "The true nature of New Southern Policy under Moon government".
- ¹⁷ http://www.bukbang.go.kr/bukbang_en/vision_policy/9-bridge/

October to examine Northern linking points. They aim to hold a ground-breaking ceremony for railway re-connection by the end of 2018.

If successful, it will be the first step towards Moon's vision of "East Asian Rail Community," encompassing six Northeast Asian countries and the US, with an aim to nurture a peacebased and peace-safeguarding economic community.

In a presidential speech in August 2018, Moon suggested the precedent of the European Coal and Steel Community, which gave birth to the EU. "Peace is the economy: peace and the economy are synonymous", Moon said. The government estimates economic benefits generated from inter-Korean economic cooperation over the next three decades to reach KRW 170 trillion (about USD 150 billion).¹⁸

The Northern strategy has yet to be explored and developed more fully, subject to the progress in denuclearisation negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington. However, the Moon government has an unprecedented opportunity to lay the groundwork for the country's desire to lead regional connectivity. For instance, the previous Park Geun-Hye government's "Eurasia Initiative" envisaged a similar geoeconomic blueprint but merely at a rhetorical stage due to worsening military tensions with North Korea.

3. South Korean perceptions of Asia's competing geopolitics

(1) China's BRI projects

South Korea considers the BRI as a potential source for collaborative projects in line with its New Northern Policy, to reach out to China, Russia and Central Asia. There has been continued interest for years among trade and economy ministries to identify appropriate timings and opportunities for Korean construction companies to obtain contracts from BRI projects.

According to a 2015 Korea Development Institute (KDI) report, South Korean construction and engineering firms have a competitive business profile with relevant experience, advanced technology and track records. It expected that BRI projects can help firms expand their client base from the Middle East to Central Asia.¹⁹

More recently, however, there are calls for caution about financial sustainability of BRI initiatives. In a 340-page comprehensive review of the performance of BRI projects led by the central and local governments in China, Korea Institute for Economic Policy (KIEP) researchers pointed out several internal and external challenges involving the BRI.²⁰ They said that many BRI partner states are developing countries that are politically and economically unstable, with limited market potential due to low income levels and small population. Lack of project transparency was also a major concern. Most BRI infrastructure

¹⁸ Moon Jae-In (2018), "Address by President Moon Jae-in on Korea's 73rd Liberation Day", 15 August 2018 http://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/61

 ¹⁹ Su-Young Choi (2015) "One-Belt-One-Road" Strategy and Korea's Cooperative Measures with China", KDI North Korea Economy Review, Korea Development Institute, December 2015 (in Korean).
²⁰ Seungshin Lee, Hyuntae Lee, Sangbaek Hyun, Suyeob Na, Youngsun Kim, Gowoon Cho and Yunmi Oh (2017), "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Implications for the Korean Economy", KIEP Policy Analysis, Korea Institute for Economic Policy, August 2017 (in Korean).

projects are established with the Chinese government backing, which can potentially result in a substantial financial burden to Beijing. For the success of the BRI, it is imperative that the Chinese economy maintains stable growth, they said.

"Therefore, at the current stage, it will be necessary to discover new business opportunities by monitoring changes in China with regard to the Belt and Road Initiative", the KIEP report concluded. It also noted that infrastructure cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan has been relatively active and there has been some progress in constructing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Relatedly, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – a mechanism to provide capital lines to BRI projects – is seen as having mixed characteristics as China's geoeconomic policy instrument and as a multilateral development bank, according to the South Korean foreign ministry's Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS).²¹ The AIIB is unlikely to develop to become a viable alternative to the Asia Development Bank or Bretton Woods institutions, it said. If sufficient future progress is made in denuclearisation and UN economic sanctions are removed to allow inter-Korean economic cooperation, South Korea may consider advising North Korea to apply for AIIB membership.²²

(2) US-backed Indo-Pacific Strategy

Korean policy circles find it questionable whether the QUAD countries (the US, Japan, Australia and India) are willing to make substantial contributions to the Indo-Pacific Strategy in the context of deepening Sino-American contestations.

By late 2017, the concept of American-led Indo-Pacific strategy remained vague and changeable.²³ By the summer of 2018, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is still underwhelming, only gradually developing from a conceptual stage into a policy programme, backed with some budgetary support and better clarified objectives with economic, governance and security elements.²⁴ However Trump's Indo-Pacific plan to provide USD 113.5 million in seed funding is insufficient to match the scale of China's investment in the region. ²⁵

Political cohesion among the key participants of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is also problematic. India may hold itself back from playing an active role in order not to destabilize its relations with China. India's foreign policy is still, to some extent, affected by the traditional non-alignment commitments.²⁶ US hostility against Iran and Russia also provokes concern

²¹ Seonjou Kang (2017), "Assessment of the First Two years of AIIB: China's Economic Diplomacy v. Multilateral Development Bank", July 2017, IFANS: Seoul (in Korean).

 ²² Currently North Korea does not satisfy the AIIB's formal accession condition (of having a membership of either the World Bank or the ADB). See Seonjou Kang (2017), "Assessment of the First Two years of the AIIB".
²³ Bae Geung-chan (2017), "Analysis on 2017 ASEAN-related Summits: focused on ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN-Korea", IFANS Focus, 7 December 2017, IFANS: Seoul.

²⁴ Won-Ki Choi (2018), "Latest developments in the Indo-Pacific Strategy and its implications to Korea's New Southern Policy", IFANS Focus, 4 September 2018, IFANS: Seoul (in Korean).

²⁵ Jamie Fly (2018), "Squaring Trump's Indo-Pacific plan with India's ties to Iran and Russia", Axios, 2 August 2018: https://www.axios.com/squaring-trumps-indo-pacific-plan-with-indias-ties-to-iran-and-russia-d1f41634-f4b8-4b77-9777-59aff1acdc2a.html

²⁶ Seonjou Kang (2018), "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Geoeconomics", IFANS Focus, 26 April 2018, IFANS: Seoul.

in India. Recently India has signed a deal with Russia to acquire the S-400 air defence missile system (in view of a possible two-front conflict with Pakistan and China) despite the possibility that such a move could trigger US sanctions.²⁷

It remains to be seen whether the US will invest in the Indo-Pacific Strategy in a systematic and coherent manner given the Trump administration's other fiscal priorities and strong preference for bilateralism and American nationalism.

Seoul's analysts advise the government to avoid 'rhetorical bandwagoning' to the Indo-Pacific Strategy in order not to cause unnecessary tensions with other neighbouring countries that are not invited to the American initiative (especially China).²⁸ Since Korea has already established diverse dialogue channels with the QUAD countries, the country can utilize those bilateral relationships to identify common interests and develop connections between its New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy.²⁹

If the Indo-Pacific Strategy develops to focus on maritime security rather than expanding economic cooperation, it will be a disincentive for South Korea's collaboration.³⁰ The country's interest in Washington's Asia plan is primarily in the economic realms, and Korea does not consider joining a defence alliance with Japan as a counterpart. The fact that the Indo-Pacific idea was originally conceived by Japan's Abe government also diminishes the South Korean appetite for collaboration.³¹

Such tensions and uneasy feelings are shared between the two US allies in Asia. Despite their overlapping strategic interests regarding North Korea's denuclearisation, the biggest sticking point in their strained relations is a lack of a common approach to China. Seoul does not share the same 'threat' perception towards China as Japan does. The intensifying rivalry between the US and China complicated the relationship between Tokyo and Seoul since 2011.³²

There is not yet the pressure on Korea to make a strategic decision whether to commit to or participate in the plan. "Instead of declaring a definitive Korean role, Korea needs to stay prudent, watchful about further developments (of the Indo-Pacific Strategy)," Professor Sung-Ho Shin of Seoul National University said.³³ Even though the Trump administration is trying to revitalise the Indo-Pacific concept, there is much uncertainty about its credibility and long-term outlook.³⁴

 ²⁷ BBC News (2018), "S-400: India missile defence purchase in US-Russia crosshairs", 5 October 2018.
²⁸ Won-Ki Choi (2018), "Latest developments in the Indo-Pacific Strategy".

²⁹ Seonjou Kang (2018), "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy"; Won-Ki Choi (2018), "Latest developments in the Indo-Pacific Strategy".

³⁰ Seonjou Kang (2018), "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy".

³¹ Japan has been actively investing in its own version of southern strategy to enhance its security and economic resilience by strengthening ties with Southeast Asian states. For more on this, see Corey Wallace (2018), "Leaving (north-east) Asia? Japan's southern strategy", *International Affairs* 94: 4, 883–904; doi: 10.1093/ia/iiy027

³² Alexandra Sakaki and Junya Nishino (2018), "Japan's South Korea predicament", *International Affairs* 94:4. doi: 10.1093/ia/iiy029

³³ Kyunghyang Shinmun (2018), "Korea needs to be watchful of Japanese-originated Indo-Pacific Strategy: Association of Military Studies Seminar", 8 June 2018 (in Korean)

³⁴ William T. Tow (2018), "Minilateral security's relevance to US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: challenges and prospects", *The Pacific Review*, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2018.1465457

4. Concluding remarks: beyond the narratives of 'dilemma'

Under the Moon Jae-In presidency, South Korea's regional diplomacy will follow its own strategic roadmap of New Southern Policy and New Northern Policy. The government's engagement with external geopolitical initiatives will be selective, wherever pertinent economically and strategically. Policy documents and public think-tank reports suggest seeking synergies between New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and between New Northern Policy and the BRI.

At the same time, experts advise the government to refrain from making a position between the two competing proposals led by the US and China. There is sufficient policy latitude for the Korean government as long as it maintains strategic ambiguity and avoids framing the different initiatives in the oppositional and conflictual terms, they say.³⁵

During the past couple of decades, diplomatic orientations of different Korean presidencies were often labelled as either 'pro-Chinese' or 'pro-American'. Those problematic tags actually amplified controversies at home and abroad, confusing pragmatic choices and constraining Korea's diplomatic latitude and flexibility. Seoul's preference for 'strategic ambiguity' and 'equidistance diplomacy' between China and the US is different from Japan's stance, which closely aligns with the US leadership. Under the Abe administration, Japan's "greatest fear is abandonment, not entrapment."³⁶

There are questions concerning the extent to which South Korea can remain disengaged towards sensitive regional security problems. For instance, if the country deepens its strategic relations with the ASEAN, South China Sea disputes would be a potential diplomatic predicament for the government. The so-called "V.I.P." ASEAN countries – selected as key partners of the Moon government's New Southern Policy – are all implicated in the maritime disputes with China. If Seoul's 'strategic ambiguity' is seen as an opportunist approach, this would not help the government in developing security cooperation with its Southeast Asian partners, for example. More candid discussion with its partners is necessary for Seoul in order to exchange views about different security concerns.³⁷

³⁵ JoongAng Ilbo Daily (2017), "Moon's diplomacy grappling to find 'balance' between Indo-Pacific and BRI", 14 November 2017, https://news.joins.com/article/22111498 (in Korean); Yonhap News TV (2017), "Indo-Pacific Strategy v. BRI: test of Moon's 'equidistance diplomacy'", 12 November 2017, http://www.yonhapnewstv.co.kr/MYH20171112011400038/ (in Korean).

³⁶ Policy roundtable under the Chatham House Rule with Dr Michael Green, "Does Donald Trump have an Asia Strategy?" 5 July 2018, University of Cambridge.

³⁷ Jae-Hyon Lee (2017), "Proposals for the Moon Jae-In government's future-oriented ASEAN diplomacy".

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