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Assessing Progress: President Yoon's Global Pivotal State Strategy

After Two Years

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Halfway through his tenure, President Yoon Suk Yeol seems proud of his efforts to realize his foreign policy vision. "The global pivotal state diplomacy that we have put into practice since the launch of this government has become the government's signature policy," he told chiefs of missions during a banquet, [according](#) to the Yonhap News Agency. In recent years, Korea has increased its participation in multilateral groups, befitting its status as a middle power. But there remains some hesitation within Korea, and the recent overwhelming win by the opposition Democratic Party in National Assembly elections raises concerns about the longevity of the Yoon initiative.

Korea has stepped up its engagement with Europe, particularly under the aegis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In early April, Seoul participated in a summit with other NATO partners from the Indo-Pacific. "I welcome also the fact that I have now invited for the third time...New Zealand, Australia, Japan and South Korea, our partners in the Asia Pacific, to attend the summit in Washington in July," said Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a [press conference](#) ahead of the meeting. "Our security is interlinked," he also said during another [press conference](#) after the summit. "What happens in the Indo-Pacific matters for Europe and what happens in Europe matters for the Indo-Pacific." Secretary General Stoltenberg pointed out that North Korea and China have been integral to Russia's continued invasion of Ukraine, and that territorial revisionism in Europe may encourage

such behavior in the Indo-Pacific. "The idea that we have one kind of security in Europe and another security in Asia doesn't work," he said. "Our security is not regional security. Our security is global."

In April, Korea announced it would contribute to European security in several ways. After meeting with NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners, Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul announced another financial aid to Ukraine. According to a report by Yonhap, Kyiv will receive \$2.3 billion in aid, in addition to a \$12 million contribution to a NATO fund to support medical treatment for Ukrainian soldiers. Later in April, the Korean National Intelligence Service announced that members from the agency and ministries like the Unification Ministry and armed forces would participate in the Locked Shields cyber-defense exercise with NATO. It will be the fourth time representatives from Korea will participate in the annual event that includes 39 members of the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence within NATO. Disinformation online is an emerging threat facing open societies, so it is notable that Korea is expanding its partnerships on this issue. And given the continuing onslaught of Russian troops into Ukrainian territory, the aid provided by Seoul is desperately welcome.

The Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) cluster is another multilateral group that Korea may join in the future. In a joint statement, defense ministers from the three states indicated they were interested in cooperation with other states in defense industrial development under "Pillar II" of the grouping. Although they specifically mentioned Japan as a partner, American officials indicate there are other partners for consideration. "The AUKUS partners are considering a range of additional partners who may bring unique strengths to Pillar II, including the ROK, Canada and New Zealand, in addition to Japan," said a senior American official in a statement to Yonhap. In recent years, Korea has become an important player in the development of arms and other capabilities. When Hanwha Ocean delivered a submarine to Indonesia in 2011, Korea became the fifth country to export the craft and the first in Asia. Rival HD Hyundai Heavy Industries also recently delivered a diesel-powered submarine to the Republic of Korea Navy in April. While focused on the development of a variety capabilities, Korea's expertise in shipbuilding and related industries should be seriously considered by the AUKUS leadership.

Outside of government, American experts say there are many other multilateral groups Korea should consider looking into. "An early agreement to make South Korea a full member of the Asian Security "Quad" alongside Japan, India, Australia and the US, would be a major step forward," said former Trump National Security Advisor John Bolton, in an op-ed published in The Wall Street Journal. Meanwhile, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a report in April that called for expanding membership of the G7. It noted that Korea and Australia are large democracies that can play an important role in addressing international political and economic challenges. "This is not charity," write Richard L. Armitage and Dr. Joseph Nye. "Given the challenges facing today's international environment, it is time to bring additional voices with meaningful capacity and aligned views to the table."

Despite this optimism outside Korea, there are less positive feelings within Korea. For example, Professor Wang Son-taek from Sogang University criticized the president for his alignment with the West on the issue of Ukraine. "[President Yoon's] statement of solidarity with Ukraine with the courage not to fear death was also a severe slip of the tongue as it could sound like defining Russia as an enemy of Korea, given that Ukraine is at war with

Russia,” he wrote in The Korea Herald. He argued that the growing cooperation between Russia and North Korea, a critical challenge to South Korean security, means Seoul must be more equivocal when handling Moscow. “The geopolitical situation in Korea requires us to use different language when we express support for Ukraine,” Professor Wang added. Former national security advisor to President Moon Jae-in, Professor Moon Chung-in from Yonsei University writes similarly in the Hankyoreh newspaper. “South Koreans’ security concerns have been compounded by the high-pressure, aggressive tactics of the Yoon administration,” he said, “which has been emphasizing its willingness to go to war as opposed to making diplomatic efforts to prevent war.” While many issues may have influenced the recent National Assembly elections, the blowout by the president’s party suggests Korean society may have similar feelings of dissatisfaction with the administration.

Despite these criticisms, Korea’s participation in multilateral groupings are in its national interest. It is true that involvement in international security arrangements could drag Korea into a conflict that it does not want. But at the same time, inclusion is also a chance to influence decision-making. In a project hosted by the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and the European Leadership Network, officials and subject matter experts from Korea, Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom were found to have widely different views on the possibility of nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula. By increasing its opportunities for engagement, Korean policymakers will have more chances to raise their concerns with their allies and partners before a contingency actually arises.

Going forward, President Yoon will need to find a better way of making his case to the Korean people that multilateral groups positively advance Korean national security. “Reinforcing the Korea-US alliance and cooperation among Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo is OK,” says Dr. Wang in his op-ed. “However, that does not necessarily mean South Korea should declare the North, China, and Russia enemies.” He is right that Korea’s geography requires it to take a more nuanced approach to foreign policy. But Korea is also economically well developed, with strong capabilities across several critical industries. Rather than a passive wallflower, Korea should look for ways it can proactively contribute to international security and be the “global pivotal state” that President Yoon envisions.

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