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South Korean Foreign Policy in a Polarized World: Passing the Baton to South Korea's New Political Leadership

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On May 29, 2025, in what will likely be his last public speech as a government official, South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul reviewed the accomplishments of and challenges faced by the Yoon Suk Yeol administration. Cho noted the challenges of navigating deepening international conflict and geopolitical rivalry. In addition, as a cabinet member in the Yoon administration who vocally opposed Yoon's declaration of martial law, Cho steered South Korea's foreign policy amid political paralysis at home. His speech at the Jeju Peace Forum both underscored major themes of South Korea's foreign policy under the Yoon administration and provided a picture of the legacy that South Korea's next government will inherit.

Cho asserted that in today's world, international order cannot be upheld by great powers alone. He portrayed "fractures" in the international order as opportunities the Yoon administration was able to take advantage of for middle powers like Korea to step up and "shoulder greater responsibilities befitting their international stature."

To achieve these objectives, Cho pointed to three main developments in South Korea's foreign policy. First, he argued that the U.S.-South Korea alliance is being recalibrated to encompass not only economic security and cooperation on critical technologies but also enhanced trilateral cooperation with Japan to address the North Korean threat—both of which will be active issues for the next South Korean government. Most urgently, South Korea's next president and his national economic and security team face an early deadline

to conclude tariff negotiations with the Donald Trump administration, which will include “win-win” cooperation on shipbuilding and LNG as well as the need to balance trade between the United States and South Korea.

Cho also highlighted progress in developing the U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral relationship, which he noted depends on strong bilateral relations among all three partners, including between South Korea and Japan. As evidence of momentum in trilateral cooperation under the second Trump administration, Cho pointed to his two recent meetings with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya.

But Cho also argued that upholding strong South Korea-Japan relations, especially on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the normalization of bilateral ties, is “not a matter of choice, but a necessity.” He stated, “I sincerely believe that the best way to shape a brighter future is to move first to free my own thinking and behavior from the shackles of the past, rather than wait for the other side to do so, as this will no doubt prompt the other side to follow suit.” This statement provides a powerful marker for Cho’s successor and his Japanese counterpart to continue strengthening both the bilateral South Korea-Japan relationship and the trilateral U.S.-South Korea-Japan relationship.

The second major development Cho highlighted is the challenge of managing the fallout from deepening strategic rivalries. On this point, Cho described the United States as South Korea’s irreplaceable ally and China as South Korea’s largest trading partner, noting that even China does not contest that “an ally is an ally, and a partner is a partner.” Yet, the challenge of managing “unintended repercussions” from rivalry directly impinges on South Korean interests, and the ability of South Korea to do so rests on both having frequent communication and “speak[ing] with candor” on areas of disagreement such as the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Regarding relations with Russia, Cho described the delicate task of maintaining a relationship with Russia while addressing its military cooperation with North Korea. Here, Cho laid down a marker for the Russian leadership regarding the dangers of “providing North Korea with cutting-edge military technology that enable Pyongyang to directly threaten the United States,” stating that “negotiations to end the war in Ukraine must ensure that North Korea is not rewarded for its unlawful military cooperation with Russia.”

The final area Cho addressed was South Korea’s efforts to strengthen “multi-layered networks” with “likeminded partners” in the Indo-Pacific, the Group of Seven (G7), and NATO, as well as with the Global South. South Korea’s next president will benefit from progress made by the government during the past three years in regularly joining G7 and NATO partners to address global issues by thinking and acting like a major power. Cho pointed to the launch of a security and defense partnership with the European Union, the deepening of the South Korea-India strategic partnership, the establishment of collective meetings with Pacific Island countries, and the inaugural Korea-Africa Summit as benefits of a South Korea that “thinks and acts big.”

Foreign Minister Cho has made a compelling case that South Korea has made significant advancements in projecting its influence and contributions on the global stage over the past three years. Now, the question is whether or not South Korea’s future political

leadership is ready to build on the foundation of these recent accomplishments and persist in consolidating efforts commensurate with the country's international reputation and influence.

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