

SOUTH KOREA'S NEW SOUTHERN POLICY: CAUSES AND CONTEXT

Abstract

South Korea is compelled to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape of East Asia, which is characterized by great power rivalry and regional tensions. The 21st century has been marked by the sharp rise of North Korea's military capabilities, the intensified rivalry between China and the United States, and growing instability in regional security. The "New Southern Policy" (NSP), launched in 2017, signifies South Korea's strategic diversification of foreign policy toward South and Southeast Asia, with a focus on India and ASEAN.

Key words: South Korea, strategic diversification, New Southern Policy, hedging.

For many years, South Korea's foreign policy was constrained by its relationships with the region's major powers, their rivalries and factors such as historical grievances and political ideologies of certain political leaders. The „New Southern Policy“ launched in 2017 represented a decisive step to break free from this dynamic. To achieve this, Seoul sought to strengthen partnerships with countries like ASEAN and India.

Relations with the United States

Since the Cold War period, South Korea has become an irreplaceable partner for the United States. Through the alliance, the U.S. established a continental foothold to counter communist threats while simultaneously safeguarding its Pacific operations center in Japan (Han, Pardo&Cho 2023:615). From 1954 to 1971, around 63,000 American soldiers were stationed across 100 military bases in South Korea. Added to this was the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula from 1958 to 1991, which further strengthened South Korea's defense capabilities (Han, Pardo&Cho 2023:615).

The alliance faced its greatest turbulence during the Nixon administration. The reason was the doctrine adopted in 1969, its goal was to significantly reduce the number of American forces stationed in Asia. In response, President Park began seeking new "friends" (Snyder 2018:42) and initiated work on a nuclear program, driven by growing concerns over security and defense (Snyder 2018:44)

Nevertheless, the establishment of a democratic regime in South Korea, changes in U.S. presidential administrations, and the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan altered the dynamics of the alliance significantly, restoring trust between the two countries. This was confirmed by President Chun's decision to abandon the nuclear program.

Although the Soviet Union's presence was expected to weaken the need for the U.S. to remain in the region, suspicions about North Korea's nuclear program postponed this process. Even though tactical nuclear weapons were withdrawn from South Korea in 1991, the country remained under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, which ensured its security (Han, Pardo&Cho 2023:618).

In the following years, the positive or negative trajectory of the alliance largely depended on two factors: the ruling party's conservative/progressive stance and North Korea's activities. More progressive presidents, who pursued a conciliatory policy toward North Korea based on hopes of eventual Korean reunification (for example, Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" (Paik 2002:14), considerably strained relations with the U.S. Nevertheless, regional pressures caused by China's economic rise pushed the relationship toward rapprochement, which was reflected in the 2007 Free Trade Agreement (Ku, Lee&Woo 2017:196).

It should also be noted that during the Obama administration, the "pivot to Asia" policy further increased this pressure, while North Korea's sinking of a South Korean vessel in 2010 further reinforced conservatives' arguments for the necessity of U.S. presence in the region for security purposes.

Relations with China

When discussing South Korea–China relations, it is impossible to overlook the roles of North Korea and the United States. The alliance with the U.S. and South Korea's recognition of the government in Taiwan were the main reasons for the initial confrontation. Later, in 1978, China introduced its "Open Door Policy," which deepened economic interactions and paved the way for ties between South Korea and China. In 1992, the two sides signed a joint communiqué that reaffirmed the "One China" policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008) and launched what is often referred to as the golden age of Sino–South Korean relations. According to Dr. Kim Hyung-Kyu, one of the key reasons Beijing took this step was "the collapse of socialist regimes in the early 1990s" (Han, Pardo&Cho 2023, 632).

From this point onward, as with relations with the United States, South Korea's approach to China has been largely shaped by the president's vision and foreign policy. For example, Roh Tae-woo pursued the "Nordpolitik," which aimed at progressive engagement with Eastern Bloc states, particularly China and the former Soviet Union (Hwang 2021:224). Against this backdrop, China became one of South Korea's most important economic partners. As China joined various trade organizations, it became increasingly attractive to South Korea as a strategic partner.

At the same time, China sought to strengthen its position in the region as a "responsible great power," adopting the role of mediator in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear disarmament (Han, Pardo&Cho 2023:634). An interesting dynamic unfolded during the Park administration: amid North Korea's growing provocations, South Korea tried not to damage its defense-driven relationship with the United States while also avoiding the weakening of its economic ties with China. This approach can be described as a hedging strategy, in which "all eggs were not placed in one basket" (Ku, Lee&Woo 2017:201).

In 2013, following yet another nuclear test by North Korea, discussions between South Korea and China on North Korea's denuclearization gained traction. Additionally, given their similar historical grievances with Japan, China hoped that South Korea would support its stance in various territorial disputes with Tokyo.

Relations with Japan

South Korea's historical grievances toward Japan remain strong even to this day. The issue of "comfort women" continues to have a profound impact on relations between the two countries. With U.S. support, ties between South Korea and Japan achieved a degree of stabilization, highlighted by South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan's 1984 visit to Tokyo. In reality, however, relations in the following years were far from stable, and this temporary reconciliation was likely driven by the perceived necessity of maintaining a nuclear umbrella in the region.

In the early 1990s, relations once again destabilized. This was largely due to fears—emerging after the collapse of the Soviet Union—that the U.S. might withdraw from the region and that Japan could rearm itself. Since the U.S. did not leave the region and Japan did not embark on rearmament, dynamics shifted again. In response to North Korea's increasing provocations, South Korea, Japan, and the United States conducted joint naval exercises in 1999.

The early 21st century, much like previous decades, was marked by instability, fueled by a series of controversies. These included Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine (CNN 2002), the 2005 initiative to establish "Takeshima Day" (Snyder 2018:126), Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko's 2011 statement that "the comfort women issue was legally resolved in 1965" (Snyder 2018:154), and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's 2012 visit to the Dokdo islands. Strong public backlash in both countries further complicated efforts to normalize relations.

Nevertheless, in February 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test, which prompted a response from the United States. By March 2014, Washington took a role of mediator and conciliator to ensure regional security, culminating in the Nuclear Security Summit (Snyder 2018:184). Despite these American efforts, the comfort women issue remained unresolved between the two countries. Because of this unresolved grievance during the difficult situation created by North Korea's missile tests in 2016–2017 (CBS News 2017), trilateral cooperation could not be strengthened to the extent that allies had hoped.

Relations with North Korea

Although the physical war ended in 1953, one can argue that the informational war continues to this day, accompanied by North Korea's various provocative actions. Both Koreas ultimately seek the goal of reunification, but they envision achieving it through entirely different ways.

Despite repeated attempts by South Korea to open dialogue with the North, almost every initiative designed to build a bridge between the two sides was either exploited by North Korea for its own advantage or met with violent responses. A notable example was the 1987 bombing of a civilian aircraft that was supposed to land in Seoul (Ku, Lee&Woo 2017:353).

It is also important to note that the Soviet Union's perestroika reforms and subsequent economic decline worked to South Korea's advantage, enhancing its superiority over the North and effectively depriving Pyongyang of one of its key regional partners.

Between 1998 and 2007 relations between the two Koreas experienced a period of relative thaw, largely due to progressive presidents in power in Seoul and their pursuit of the "Sunshine Policy," followed by the "Policy of Peace and Prosperity." These policies sought to decouple economics from politics in order to strengthen economic and social ties. Against this backdrop, inter-Korean trade increased nearly fivefold between 1998 and 2007 (National Committee on North Korea 2020). Nevertheless, North Korea's intentions toward the South

remained unchanged, as evidenced by its uranium enrichment program, ballistic missile tests, and repeated maritime incidents.

The 2016 Crisis

Between 2016 and 2017 North Korea conducted three nuclear tests, the most powerful of which was the sixth test in September. These were accompanied by intercontinental ballistic missile tests. These developments pushed South Korea toward the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system, effectively marking the end of the “Trustpolitik” approach toward the North (Snyder 2018:178).

These tests triggered a chain reaction that brought South Korea to one of its greatest dilemmas. On the one hand, deploying the THAAD system was essential for national survival in order to defend against the North Korean threat. On the other hand, progressives feared that such a move would destroy Seoul’s relations with Beijing (Ku, Lee and Woo 2017, 206). This concern was not unfounded, as China responded with informal sanctions, effectively banning South Korean music, films, and dramas (Lim 2019).

Against this backdrop, resentment grew in South Korea toward both China and the United States. Seoul felt that Washington had not provided adequate support during this crisis. This experience revealed the necessity of diversifying South Korea’s foreign policy and hedging against future risks. It was precisely in this context that the “New Southern Policy” (NSP) was launched.

U.S.–China Rivalry

The rivalry between China and the United States has its roots in the ideological differences of the 20th century. In 1949, the communists emerged victorious in China’s civil war, but the U.S. continued to recognize the government that had retreated to Taiwan as legitimate. In the 1970s, this stance shifted somewhat with the Nixon administration, and Sino-American relations warmed. Nevertheless, as China’s economy advanced and its military capabilities strengthened, tensions increasingly intensified.

One of the most critical issues remains Taiwan, which is among the United States’ most vital partners due to its semiconductor production capacity and geostrategic location (Maizland&Fong 2025). If Beijing were to succeed in gaining control over Taiwan, U.S. influence and position in the region would be significantly weakened (Sacks 2023), and the chances of confrontation would grow.

Another central point of contention is China’s claims in the South China Sea, which it has sought to consolidate by constructing artificial islands. These claims have also brought Beijing into conflict with several U.S. partners, such as the Philippines, over the Scarborough Shoal dispute in 2012 (Petty 2023). The militarization of these artificial islands and China’s maritime claims pose a threat to freedom of navigation. “Since the end of 2015, U.S. naval vessels have regularly operated in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait near disputed areas” as part of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) (RFA staff 2025). Such operations have further escalated tensions.

Adding to this rivalry is China’s rapid economic growth, much of which has been channeled into strengthening its military. In response, the Obama administration sought to reinforce U.S. alliances and counterbalance China’s economic dominance through the “Trans-Pacific Partnership” (TPP). China countered with its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), thereby strengthening its regional influence (Cai 2017).

This rivalry has profound implications not only for regional security and stability but also for South Korea's foreign policy. Seoul has an intermediary position: since the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, it has been closely tied to the U.S. for security, yet economically it has developed deep ties with China. By 2016, China had become South Korea's largest trading partner (World Integrated Trade Solution 2022).

The New Southern Policy

The New Southern Policy (NSP), launched in 2017 by President Moon Jae-in, became a cornerstone of South Korea's foreign policy. It sought to deepen ties with Southeast Asia (ASEAN member states) and India in order to diversify Seoul's strategic and economic partnerships. The NSP functioned as a hedging strategy to reduce risks stemming from U.S.–China rivalry and broader regional security threats. According to Professor Park, “through the NSP, the Moon administration aimed to protect South Korea from China's weaponization of trade” (Park 2023:22) and to reduce dependence on great powers such as the U.S. and China. By promoting closer ties with ASEAN and India, Moon sought to strengthen South Korea's strategic autonomy and economic resilience in an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment. A Chatham House report notes that Moon's initiative was designed to free South Korea from the old model of “great power politics” that has long dominated East Asia (Nilsson-Wright and Jie 2021:26).

Structurally, the NSP was built around the “3P” framework: People, Prosperity, and Peace. According to an official document published by the Presidential Committee, its ultimate aim was that by the end of implementation, “South Korea's relations with ASEAN and India would reach a level politically, economically, socially, and culturally comparable to those with its four major partners” (Presidential Committee 2017).

Conclusion

The South Korean case provides a compelling example of how much influence geography, historical grievances, geopolitical fluctuations, foreign policy strategies of external actors, and public sentiment have on shaping a country's foreign policy trajectory. The New Southern Policy was implemented as a defensive strategy aimed at protecting South Korea from future systemic geopolitical shocks, stemming both from the regional power structure and from persistent rivalries among major powers. The 2016 crisis clearly demonstrated the necessity of diversifying South Korea's partnerships. Faced with the possibility of disagreement or conflict among its vital partners, Seoul needed to minimize risks and potential losses. Hence, it turned to a hedging strategy, insuring itself against vulnerabilities by strengthening relations with South and Southeast Asian countries.

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