

Assessing the Alliance-Autonomy Tradeoff: A Study of the RoK-US Alliance

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## Introduction:

Dating back to the ancient Korean kingdom of Koryŏ, from which the English name of Korea is derived, the Korean peninsula has been a geopolitical crossroads in Northeast Asia for nearly a millennium.<sup>1</sup> This stems from the unique nature of Korea's geopolitical situation: it is geographically isolated in a way that induces parochial tendencies, but politically surrounded by great powers in a way that impels Korea to partake in various outward alignments. From having to rely on Ming China to provide a security guarantee against Japan in the 1500s, to repelling and ultimately succumbing to Yuan Mongol forces in 1270 AD, to being the site of the foreign battles like the 1904 Russo-Japanese War, the Korean peninsula has constantly been embattled by foreign powers vying for regional hegemony.<sup>2</sup> Korea's unique geopolitical situation has historically required Korea to balance a tradeoff between the pursuit of autonomy and sovereignty with the need to form alliances to protect its security. This difficult balancing act has often resulted in Korea acting as an epicenter of regional stability or instability.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the Korean peninsula is once again situated as an epicenter for Northeast Asian geopolitics as it is surrounded by four great powers: China, Russia, the United States, and Japan. Korea as an epicenter of Northeast Asian geopolitics can be understood given its value as a "multi-channel corridor linking the Pacific with the northern, eastern, and central segments of the Asian continent" which leads Korea to consistently be "a target of regional strategies and maneuvers".<sup>4</sup> In contradiction to this immense geopolitical value, the Republic of Korea, heretofore referred to as South Korea or the RoK, is smaller in gross domestic product, defense

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<sup>1</sup> B. S. Agarwal, "Korea as an Epicentre of Northeast Asian Power Politics : A Historical and Geopolitical Perspective." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2006, pp. 261–278. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41856213](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856213).

<sup>2</sup> B. S. Agarwal, "Korea as an Epicentre", pp. 1-5

<sup>3</sup> B. S. Agarwal, "Korea as an Epicentre", pp. 1-5

<sup>4</sup> David Shim, "A Shrimp Amongst Whales? Assessing South Korea's Regional-Power Status." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1 Aug. 2009, pp. 1–26., doi:10.2139/ssrn.1517235.

expenditures, and population size when compared to the aforementioned neighboring great powers.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, since the unofficial ending of the Korean War in 1953, the RoK has heavily relied on the US security assurance provided under the US-RoK alliance.<sup>6</sup> This reality has led some international relations scholars to characterize Korea as “a shrimp amongst whales”, as South Korea’s ability to act autonomously is hindered by the constraints of its relations with regional great powers.<sup>7</sup> This characterization is not without its merits, as even some of the most comprehensive and nuanced scholars align with this characterization. However, some scholars and recent Korean leaders have begun to envision a path forward in which South Korea can use strategic choice to free itself from its historical geopolitical quagmire and create geopolitical space for South Korea to act autonomously. For example, in a recent book by renowned South Korean foreign policy expert Scott Snyder, titled *South Korea at a Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, has outlined such a path, through the creation of a framework for South Korean strategic choice in foreign policy . Snyder utilizes this framework to explore how the tradeoff between alliance and autonomy has been a consistent constraint on South Korean foreign policy making. As the epicenter of Northeast Asia geopolitics, South Korea’s strategic choice will determine how it navigates its unique geopolitical reality.

South Korea’s ability to navigate its geopolitical destiny has been the subject of increasing attention over the last decade.<sup>8</sup> As South Korea faces a deteriorating security environment in the context of the People Republic of China’s geopolitical rise and bilateral

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<sup>5</sup> Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*. Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. 200-210.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*. Pp. 10-25.

<sup>7</sup> David Shim, “A Shrimp Amongst Whales?” Pp.1

<sup>8</sup> Park, S. Nathan. “South Korea Matters More to the United States Than North Korea's Nukes.” *Foreign Policy*, The FP Group, 30 Nov. 2020, [foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/south-korea-biden-priority-north-korea-nuclear-weapons-alliance/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/south-korea-biden-priority-north-korea-nuclear-weapons-alliance/).

alliance headwinds stemming from the previous US administration, the US-RoK alliance has been a frequent subject in recent geopolitical discourse. This discourse has been conducted at the governmental level as well as amongst scholars. At the governmental level, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin affirmed the significance of the alliance at a recent RoK-US bilateral defense and foreign ministerial meeting by stating that the alliance is the “linchpin for peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, scholars like Scott Snyder continue to envision ways in which South Korea can serve as a key role in shaping geopolitics of Northeast Asia. Given the ongoing geopolitical discourse on South Korea’s future role in Northeast Asia as well as recent challenges to the RoK-US alliance, a greater understanding of South Korea’s foreign policy strategy is crucial. To that end, I will conduct an assessment of the RoK-US alliance in order to answer the question: *What explains RoK-US alliance dynamics?*

To answer this question, my assessment is split into a few different components. First, I conducted a review of existing answers to this question. In this regard, the existing literature on RoK-US alliance dynamics can be sorted into three different schools, centering on power, perceptions, and interests, respectively. A well rounded understanding synthesizes the best aspects of each school into a more comprehensive framework. Snyder accomplishes this through a framework that outlines three mechanisms: South Korea’s geopolitical environment, relative capacity, and democratization of domestic politics. These mechanisms correspond with existing answers to understanding RoK-US alliance dynamics, aligning with the concepts of power, perceptions, and interests, respectively. Although Snyder argues that all three schools are important determinants of RoK-US alliance dynamics, his framework emphasizes power and perceptions over interests. To add to the geopolitical discourse surrounding South Korea’s

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<sup>9</sup> “U.S.-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial (‘2+2’).” *U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE*, 18 Mar. 2021, [www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2541299/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-and-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken-c/](https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2541299/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-and-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken-c/).

foreign policy strategy, I have sought to further develop the interests school, arguing that *South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has led it to diverge from US alliance dependence through strategies of middle power diplomacy and strategic ambiguity.*

To make this argument, I utilized Snyder's framework on South Korean strategic choice and applied to two different qualitative case studies that corresponded to the different strategies of strategic autonomy.<sup>10</sup> My case studies centered on two different South Korean foreign policies: South Korea's New Southern Policy and the decision to not partake in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, heretofore referred to as the Quad. These case studies are both relative developments that have received little scholarship and represent the different strategies South Korea has used to pursue strategic autonomy: middle power diplomacy and strategic ambiguity. Findings of these case studies have had mixed results, with the short term outlook for the US-RoK expected to be relatively stable. However, my research suggests that in the long term, South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy is likely to grow given the geopolitical uncertainty of the Northeast Asian order. Because my research relied primarily on qualitative evidence, future studies could add an empirical component to track how South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has grown or declined in relation to the other conditions affecting South Korean strategic choice. One implication that can be drawn is that South Korea's receptiveness to the US alliance will depend on the nature and scope of US diplomatic overtures. Allowing South Korea room to pursue a larger role in the rules-based order will be essential in maintaining the wellbeing of the RoK-US alliance.

### **Understanding RoK-US Alliance Dynamics: A Balancing Act**

The existing geopolitical discourse on RoK-US alliance dynamics can be sorted into three different schools, which center on power, perceptions, and interests, respectively. The *balance of*

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<sup>10</sup> Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*. Pp. 9-13.

*power school* argues that shifting geopolitics and changes in the balance of power between the US and China is the primary determinant of South Korean alliance decision-making and strategic thought. This line of thought purports that South Korea will accommodate China's rising power and that this accommodation will lead to tension between Seoul and Washington on regional security matters.<sup>11</sup> The *balance of perceptions* school argues that South Korea's alliance decision-making towards the US is a product of two different perceptions: the relative usefulness of China and the level of threat from North Korea. This school argues that South Korea will balance its alliance with the US with the need of China's assistance with Korean unification efforts.<sup>12</sup> The *balance of interests* school argues that South Korea strategic thought on the RoK-US alliance is a product of South Korea's pursuit of elements of its national interest. This school rejects the determinism of the balance of power school and predicts South Korea will maintain its alliance with the United States while accommodating China's rise.<sup>13</sup> To better understand these schools and their merits, it is important to delve deeper and explore how they situate in Snyder's framework.

### **Understanding RoK-US Alliance Dynamics: The Balance of Power**

The balance of power school is primarily one of realist adherents, given its focus on power primacy. Realists like Robert S. Ross posit that the balance of power in Northeast Asia is the primary determinant of state behavior and alignment.<sup>14</sup> Within this school, there are a couple different views on how smaller states like South Korea approach alliances. A structural realist like Kenneth Waltz would expect South Korea to try to align with China as the balance of power

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<sup>11</sup> Ross, Robert S. "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia." *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2006, pp. 355–395., doi:10.1080/09636410601028206.

<sup>12</sup> Yoo, Hyon Joo. "The China Factor in the US–South Korea Alliance: the Perceived Usefulness of China in the Korean Peninsula." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2013, pp. 85–104., doi:10.1080/10357718.2013.840556.

<sup>13</sup> Kang, David C. "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning: South Korea's Response to China." *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–28., doi:10.1017/s1598240800002794.

<sup>14</sup> Ross, Robert S. "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China."

shifts away from the United States.<sup>15</sup> Waltz's view is that states tend to band together to balance against hegemony. However, this perspective runs counter to the reality of strong US relations with South Korea, despite the power capabilities of the countries being imbalanced. Other realists like Jack Levy might expect South Korea to accommodate China's rising capabilities while not explicitly abandoning its alliance with the US.<sup>16</sup> While this expectation has been relatively accurate so far, Levy's view lacks explanatory power in outlining the mechanisms that shape South Korea's alliance dynamics. This shortcoming is a common criticism of realists, as critics argue that realist predictions are overly deterministic, failing to take into account other factors contributing to alliance dynamics.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the balance of power school does little to examine how domestic perceptions and interests affect a state's strategic choices.

Applied to the RoK-US alliance, the balance of power school falls short in providing sufficient answers regarding the nature of RoK-US alliance dynamics. For one, it fails to take into account South Korea's long-standing geopolitical significance as the epicenter of Northeast Asian geopolitics. Furthermore, it does not consider the strategic balancing of alliance and autonomy that South Korea has typically employed. While the power does impact South Korea's strategic thought, it is only one of several explanatory factors. Thus, the balance of power school does not provide a comprehensive explanation of RoK-US alliance dynamics.

### **Understanding RoK-US Alliance Dynamics: The Balance of Perceptions**

The balance of perceptions school is primarily a liberalist viewpoint. Adherents to this viewpoint take a more nuanced approach to South Korea's alliance dynamics, with less emphasis on power and more on domestic, economic, and institutional considerations. The balance of perceptions school has a wide range of viewpoints, however one noteworthy position is the one

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<sup>15</sup> Ross, Robert S. "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China."

<sup>16</sup> Ross, Robert S. "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China."

<sup>17</sup> Yoo, Hyon Joo. "The China Factor in the US-South Korea Alliance."

put forth by Hyon Joo Yoo. Yoo argues that the “constant North Korean threat and the perceived usefulness of China have led to bifurcated alliance strategies in South Korea”.<sup>18</sup> A liberalist viewpoint thus would predict South Korea to strengthen its alliance with the US while balancing its foreign policy to push China for support against North Korea. This viewpoint explains why the RoK has in many ways strengthened its alliance with the US despite the shifting balance of power towards China, which is a development that balance of power adherents fail to explain.

Applied to RoK-US alliance dynamics, the balance of perceptions school takes into account the need for power in deterring North Korean while acknowledging how changing perceptions of China by South Korean foreign policy makers can lead to adjustments in RoK-US alliance policies. Furthermore, liberalists believe the foundational glue that holds the RoK-US alliance together is deep economic and institutional integration between the two countries.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the balance of perceptions school provides a more multifaceted view of RoK-US alliance dynamics. However, critics of the balance of perceptions school might point to tensions between South Korea and the US that don’t align with this viewpoint.<sup>20</sup> For example, South Korea has sought greater control over the RoK-US alliance joint command known as the Combined Forces Command.<sup>21</sup> This is despite the fact that in recent years, the North Korean threat has declined while China’s perceived usefulness has arguably increased to South Korea. Therefore, the balance of perceptions school also fails to provide a complete understanding of RoK-US alliance dynamics.

### **Understanding RoK-US Alliance Dynamics: The Balance of Interest**

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<sup>18</sup> Yoo, Hyon Joo. “The China Factor in the US–South Korea Alliance.”

<sup>19</sup> “Excerpt: The US–South Korea Alliance.” Edited by Scott Snyder, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Lynn Rienner Publishers, Feb. 2012, [www.cfr.org/excerpt-us-south-korea-alliance](http://www.cfr.org/excerpt-us-south-korea-alliance).

<sup>20</sup> Yoo, Hyon Joo. “The China Factor in the US–South Korea Alliance.”

<sup>21</sup> Jeong, Jeff. “The Joint Command for US, South Korean Forces Is Moving. Will This Jeopardize Defense?” *Defense News*, Defense News, 5 June 2019, [www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2019/06/05/the-joint-command-for-us-south-korean-forces-is-moving-will-this-jeopardize-defense/](http://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2019/06/05/the-joint-command-for-us-south-korean-forces-is-moving-will-this-jeopardize-defense/).

The balance of interests school is arguably the least developed of the three schools. The balance of interests school eschews the deterministic nature of the balance of power school, arguing that interests are the key determinant in a state's alliance policies.<sup>22</sup> This school is less well-defined than the other two, containing aspects of both liberalism and constructivism. The balance of interests school posits that a country's national identity informs its perceptions of threat and interests, which work in tandem to determine a country's alliance policies. Furthermore, the school emphasizes the variability of foreign policy, arguing that prescriptive frameworks rarely hold up to historical scrutiny. As David Kang notes, studying how "South Korea might behave in the future when beliefs and circumstances are fundamentally different is an open question and an exercise with limited intellectual utility."<sup>23</sup> Rather, the best understanding of a state's current alliance policies comes from analyzing its self-formulated interests given its current geopolitical environment.

Applied to the RoK-US alliance, one can understand RoK-US alliance dynamics as a product of the congruence of national interests between the two countries.<sup>24</sup> If US foreign policy is aligned with South Korea's national interests, it is likely that South Korea will increase cooperation under the RoK alliance. Conversely, if US foreign policy is in disharmony with South Korea's national interests, it is likely that South Korea will either decrease cooperation under the RoK-US alliance or seek alternative paths to security assurance. Thus, the balance of interests school captures the core dilemma affecting South Korean strategic choice: the alliance-autonomy tradeoff. Although the balance of interests school captures the essence of South Korean strategic choice, it does not specify the exact interests of South Korea that affect

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<sup>22</sup> David C. Kang, "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning"

<sup>23</sup> David C. Kang, "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning"

<sup>24</sup> "CSIS Commission on the Korean Peninsula: Recommendations for the U.S.-Korea Alliance." *CSIS*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 Mar. 2021, [www.csis.org/analysis/csis-commission-korean-peninsula-recommendations-us-korea-alliance-0](http://www.csis.org/analysis/csis-commission-korean-peninsula-recommendations-us-korea-alliance-0).

the RoK-US alliance dynamics. Thus, the balance of interests school needs further research to understand the key interest(s) that affects South Korea's foreign policy today.

### **Understanding RoK-US Alliance Dynamics: Evaluation**

Using Snyder's framework, each school can be mapped to a core element of South Korean strategic choice. Snyder's framework consists of three elements that affect South Korea's alliance policies: the current geopolitical environment, South Korea's relative capacity and capabilities, and the democratization of domestic politics.<sup>25</sup> The balance of power school aligns with South Korea's geopolitical environment, as it is a measure of the relative balance of power between South Korea's great power neighborhoods. The balance of perceptions school corresponds with South Korea's relative capacity, as the perception of South Korea's capacity drives foreign policy makers decision-making, especially when it comes to the willingness to accept risk in strategic choices. The balance of interests school aligns with the democratization of South Korea's domestic politics, because as South Korea has democratized, national interest has played an increasingly large role in South Korea's strategic choice calculus.<sup>26</sup> As one scholar aptly stated, "the process of democratic consolidation ... [has] created new opportunities for South Koreans at the local and national level to contest US-South Korea alliance-related issues".<sup>27</sup> Given the underdeveloped nature of the balance of interests school and its connection to the alliance-autonomy tradeoff, this paper will seek to develop this school by exploring South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy. Thus, I argue that *South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has led it to diverge from US alliance dependence through strategies of middle power diplomacy and strategic ambiguity.*

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<sup>25</sup> Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*. Pp. 9-13

<sup>26</sup> Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*. Pp. 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Yeo, "Protesting America: Democracy and the U.S.-Korea Alliance by Katherine H. S. Moon." *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2014, pp. 219-221., doi:10.1353/jks.2014.0004.

## Solving the Puzzle: Research Design and Methodology

To understand RoK-US alliance dynamics, it's useful to study the mechanisms through which South Korea makes its strategic choice between alliance and autonomy. These mechanisms are power, perspectives, and interests. This paper focuses on the mechanism that has received the least attention in the geopolitical discourse: the role of South Korea's national interest. The *thesis* posits that the desire for strategic autonomy is a key element of this national interest, which can be seen through South Korea's use of strategies of middle power diplomacy and strategic ambiguity. To test this, I conducted qualitative case studies on two different aspects of South Korean foreign policy: South Korea's New Southern Policy and the decision to not join the Quad. These policies are significant because they both are intended to preserve South Korea's strategic autonomy in the Pacific, and appear to show a divergence from reliance on the RoK-US alliance.<sup>28</sup>

I utilized these specific studies for two primary reasons. For one, the foreign policies I selected are both relatively new developments in South Korea's foreign policy and thus indicative of South Korean strategic thought as it stands today. In addition, both case studies are indicative of the strategies South Korea employs to improve its strategic autonomy. The strategy of middle power diplomacy is evident in South Korea's New Southern Diplomacy, which aims to elevate the geopolitical importance of ASEAN countries and India to the same level of foreign policy consideration typically received by Korea's four great power neighbors.<sup>29</sup> The strategy of strategic ambiguity is demonstrated by South Korea's decision to not join the Quad, which is an informal geopolitical group of four Indo-Pacific powers: the United States, Japan, India, and

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<sup>28</sup> Lindsey W. Ford, "South Korea and Indo-Pacific Security: Building New Networks beyond the 'Quad.'" *Brookings*, Brookings Institution, 14 Jan. 2021, [www.brookings.edu/research/south-korea-and-indo-pacific-security-building-new-networks-beyond-the-quad/](http://www.brookings.edu/research/south-korea-and-indo-pacific-security-building-new-networks-beyond-the-quad/).

<sup>29</sup> Choe Wongi, "New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy." *Asie. Visions*, No. 118, Jan. 2021.

Australia.<sup>30</sup> These case studies are significant in regards to South Korean strategic choice as the New Southern Diplomacy has been hallmarked as a priority for South Korea's President Moon Jae-in's foreign policy agenda, while the Quad has grown in geopolitical significance as geopolitical tensions rise in the Pacific.<sup>31</sup> By analyzing South Korea's strategic choice on these crucial foreign policy developments, one can better understand the ways in which South Korea pursues autonomy despite the alliance-autonomy tradeoff. Understanding South Korea's pursuit of autonomy is important in determining how South Korea balances its alliance with the United States with its national interest in strategic autonomy. South Korea's strategic thought regarding its national interest of strategic autonomy can thus be used to discern the overall alliance dynamic. Therefore, my research utilizes South Korea's strategic thought on other issues related to this national interest to generate insight into the dynamics of the RoK-US alliance in light of South Korea's alliance-autonomy tradeoff.

To qualitatively analyze my case studies, I utilized works from the existing scholarly discourse on South Korea's New Southern Policy and decision to not join the Quad as well as related RoK official public statements to judge how well these policies align with the national interest of autonomy. A limit to my analysis is that it relies on the assumption that South Korea's national interest is the most important factor affecting its alliance dynamics with the US. Thus, this study does not intend to quantitatively analyze power or perceptions to understand RoK-US alliance dynamics. However, this decision makes sense in that national interest is an underdeveloped school of thought regarding RoK-US alliance dynamics. For a more comprehensive approach to explain RoK-US alliance dynamics, future studies should incorporate each of the three factors affecting South Korea's strategic thought. Thus, the present

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<sup>30</sup> Yang Moo-jin, "Balancing Diplomacy, Strategic Ambiguity." *TheKoreaTimes*, Donghwa Group, 28 Apr. 2021, [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/05/790\\_307938.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/05/790_307938.html).

<sup>31</sup> Lindsey W. Ford, "South Korea and Indo-Pacific Security."

study should be viewed as an addition to Snyder's existing framework rather than a contradiction. However, by considering the role of South Korea's national interest in regards to two signature foreign policies, my research adds to Snyder's work by illuminating how South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has demonstrably affected RoK-US alliance dynamics.

### **Assessment: Summary**

Analysis of South Korea's alliance dynamics with the United States has produced mixed results. In the short term, South Korea's use of middle power diplomacy and strategic ambiguity have not led to a divergence from dependence on the RoK-US alliance. Thus, South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has not been enough to overcome the power and perceptions that influence the RoK-US alliance. In the long term, South Korea's embrace of foreign policies that enable it to have a greater degree of autonomy is likely to continue as a result of regional geopolitical uncertainty. If South Korea's geopolitical quagmire unexpectedly changes, for example if the Korean peninsula achieves unification or if relations between the US and China suddenly improve, South Korea will likely utilize the resulting geopolitical shifts to create a more autonomous foreign policy.

### **Assessment: The New Southern Policy**

President Moon Jae-in's New Southern Policy is an ambitious attempt at reorienting South Korea's foreign policy to account for ASEAN and India's rising role in maintaining the Pacific order.<sup>32</sup> As a foreign policy initiative, the NSP exemplifies South Korea's embrace of middle power diplomacy. The NSP has three pillars, peace, prosperity, and people, that correspond to security cooperation, economic exchanges, and diplomatic cooperation,

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<sup>32</sup> Choe Wongi, "New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition"

respectively.<sup>33</sup> Within these pillars, the NSP outlines an impressive 16 areas of cooperation for RoK and its partners of ASEAN and India.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the NSP is an expansive foreign policy objective that aims to generate mutual trust and cooperation between South Korea and ASEAN and India. However, this expansive scope is also one of the weaknesses of the NSP. As one IR scholar, Yoon Ah Oh, observed:

The strengths of NSP are also its weaknesses. Its pursuit of comprehensiveness and all-inclusive engagement makes it difficult to set priorities or decide on trade-offs between areas of cooperation. The lack of a clear priority or a framework leads to a lack of strategic planning and execution. This creates risks of simply reclassifying already-existing programs or projects under the banner of the NSP without new directions or realignment.<sup>35</sup>

Regardless of the relative strength and weakness of the NSP, scholars acknowledge that “the NSP represents Seoul’s middle power ambition in search of greater strategic autonomy by taking on greater international responsibilities and roles that are deemed commensurate with its status and capabilities in global society”.<sup>36</sup>

The New Southern Policy represents a shift in South Korean strategic choice towards autonomy over alliancesship by trying to internationalize South Korean security to be more multilateral oriented. The effectiveness of this shift is still being debated. On one hand, the NSP has been well received by the governments of ASEAN nations and India and has produced noteworthy deliverables since its inception in 2017.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the NSP has yet to

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<sup>33</sup> Oh, Yoon Ah, “Korea’s New Southern Policy: Progress, Problems, and Prospects.” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 513, East-West Center, 16 July 2020, [www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb513.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=37906](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb513.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=37906).

<sup>34</sup> “Policy: Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy.” *Policy | Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy*, [www.nsp.go.kr/eng/policy/policy02Page.do](http://www.nsp.go.kr/eng/policy/policy02Page.do).

<sup>35</sup> Oh, Yoon Ah, “Korea’s New Southern Policy”

<sup>36</sup> Choe Wongi, “New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition”

<sup>37</sup> Choe Wongi, “New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition”

fundamentally alter South Korea's economic and security environments. This is significant, as it is South Korea's economic reliance on China and security reliance on the United States that engenders the need for strategic autonomy. More time is needed to determine if the NSP is successful in its use of middle power diplomacy to help South Korea attain more strategic autonomy. If the NSP fails to change South Korea's security or economic environment, South Korea is likely to prioritize its alliance with the United States over its pursuit of greater autonomy.

### **Assessment: Not Joining the Quad**

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, colloquially known as the Quad, is a multilateral initiative between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia that seeks to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific<sup>38</sup>. Although the Quad is pitched by its leaders as an interest-based grouping, it is widely perceived as a coalition to contain and counter China.<sup>39</sup> Despite being touted as a broad, interest-based dialogue between some of the Indo-Pacific's most vibrant democracies, South Korea has remained absent and adamant about not joining such dialogues. By refusing to join this anti-China coalition, South Korea is maintaining its strategic ambiguity. South Korea purports that it has no interest in joining a multilateral grouping that is inherently exclusionary by nature.<sup>40</sup> Through strategic ambiguity, South Korea avoids damaging its relations with China while still providing itself room to cooperate bilaterally with the members of the Quad. If South Korea is successful in its use of strategic ambiguity to achieve greater strategic autonomy, it can be argued that the rules-based order in the Pacific is successfully adapting to its changing geopolitical environment. However, if tensions between the US and China continue to rise, it is

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<sup>38</sup> Lindsey W. Ford, "South Korea and Indo-Pacific Security."

<sup>39</sup> Rasheed, Zaheena. "What Is the Quad and Can It Counter China's Rise?" *Business and Economy News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 25 Nov. 2020, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/25/what-is-the-quad-can-us-india-japan-and-australia-deter-china](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/25/what-is-the-quad-can-us-india-japan-and-australia-deter-china).

<sup>40</sup> Yang Moo-jin, "Balancing Diplomacy, Strategic Ambiguity."

likely that South Korea will be unable to maintain its strategic ambiguity, thus devolving South Korea of some of its strategic autonomy.

As an alternative to joining the Quad, South Korea seeks to create its own multilateral framework for regional cooperation to create the geopolitical conditions needed for South Korea to have strategic autonomy. South Korea envisions its involvements with multilateral groupings to be focused on “capacity, openness, and transparency”.<sup>41</sup> This type of vision is common in South Korea’s strategic thought, as one advisor to President Moon Jae-in stated in a recent interview, “in the longer term, I personally hope that we can make a transformation from an alliance system into some form of a multilateral security cooperation regime. Why should we treat each other as quasi or potential enemies?”.<sup>42</sup> Statements like this clearly depict South Korea’s national interest in strategic autonomy. The decision to not join the Quad similarly depicts South Korea’s national interest in autonomy. South Korea’s strategic ambiguity in the short term has provided small benefits but has done little to alter South Korea’s geopolitical environment. In the long term, strategic ambiguity is likely to continue being South Korea’s de-facto strategic choice when it comes to issues between the US and China. This strategic choice is the most viable option to maximize strategic autonomy in South Korea’s foreign policy. South Korea is unlikely to utilize strategic ambiguity in situations that are more directly threatening to South Korea, like North Korean nuclearization. Therefore, it is likely that strategic ambiguity does not affect the RoK-US alliance dynamics. In this respect, RoK-US alliance dynamics are more contingent on the relative harmony between the United States and China than South Korea’s national interest in interest.

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<sup>41</sup> Yang Moo-jin, “Balancing Diplomacy, Strategic Ambiguity.”

<sup>42</sup> Friedman, Uri. “A Top Adviser to the South Korean President Questions the U.S. Alliance.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 18 May 2018, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/moon-south-korea-us-alliance/560501/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/moon-south-korea-us-alliance/560501/).

## Assessment: Key Results

An assessment of the two case studies has yielded mixed results regarding the interest in strategic autonomy as an element of RoK-US alliance dynamics. Although both case studies demonstrate South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy, the strategies South Korea has used to pursue this interest have been limited in their success. Middle power diplomacy has been a noteworthy strategy in trying to change South Korea's position in its geopolitical environment via the New Southern Policy.<sup>43</sup> However, the NSP and middle power diplomacy have ultimately not led to a divergence in the RoK-US alliance. Likewise, strategic ambiguity, seen in South Korea's decision to not join the Quad, has not trumped the dynamics of power and perception between the US and China that affect South Korea's strategic choice. In this regard, South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has not resulted in a divergence in the RoK-US alliance. Thus, the role of South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy is limited in its effect on RoK-US alliance dynamics.

## Conclusion

This paper studied national interest as a mechanism of South Korean strategic thought to gain insight into RoK-US alliance dynamics. By utilizing Snyder's framework on South Korean strategic thought, I aimed to develop a better understanding of how South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy affects the RoK-US alliance. Specifically, I argued that *South Korea's national interest in strategic autonomy has led it to diverge from US alliance dependence through strategies of middle power diplomacy and strategic ambiguity*. As the geopolitical discourse on South Korean strategic choice has grown in recent years, I aimed to provide an alternative explanation of RoK-US alliance dynamics rather than the existing power and perceptions based answers. Given the tradeoff between alliance and autonomy that South Korea

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<sup>43</sup> Choe Wongi, "New Southern Policy: Korea's Newfound Ambition"

faces as a result of its complex geopolitical environment, I aimed to study developments in South Korea's foreign policy that indicate a greater pursuit of strategic autonomy. Although my results have shown that the RoK-US alliance outlook is relatively consistent, there are some intriguing implications from my research's focus on strategic autonomy in explaining RoK-US alliance dynamics. South Korea's national interest of strategic autonomy is evident in some of the most significant RoK foreign policies today. South Korea's desire for greater strategic autonomy should thus be taken into consideration when considering what affects RoK-US alliance dynamics. If leaders in the United States hope to improve the dynamics of the RoK-US alliance, the US will need to heed this consideration when determining the nature and scope of future diplomatic overtures. As a linchpin for regional stability, South Korea's alignment plays an important role in determining the future of the US-led rules based order in the Pacific. Given the geopolitical uncertainty of South Korea's environment, it is likely that South Korea will continue to pursue strategies that enable it to conduct a more independent foreign policy. Future research would benefit from a more comprehensive analysis of RoK-US alliance dynamics, exploring South Korea's power and perceptions in addition to its interests.

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