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PACIFIC ASIA:  
PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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YOON SUK-YEOL ADMINISTRATION'S  
FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY  
AND THE U.S.–ROK ALLIANCE

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**Abstract.** The article studies new foreign policy of South Korea after the administration change in Seoul in May 2022. Over the last period, the external environment for the country has become more complex. That was due to the growth of rivalry between the USA and China, COVID-19 pandemic implications as well as the Ukrainian crisis, which resulted in increased global and regional instability and disruption of previously established supply chains. Along with that, the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula has become deeper and more protracted with no way forward to break that impasse. All previous attempts to engage North Korea into the dialogue, made by the Moon Jae-in administration, have failed. Those factors affected the priorities chosen by the new administration in foreign affairs. The author concentrates on the concept of the “global pivotal state” announced by the Yoon Suk-yeol’s government. With the criticism of the previous government’s approach that was narrowly focused on Inter-Korean agendas, the new foreign policy team is going to pursue the brand of a “value diplomacy”, emphasizing South Korea’s role in promoting “liberal democracy” and “rules-based regional order”. As for North Korea, Yoon Suk-yeol has shifted his strategy to a hard-line approach which implied strengthening deterrence and raising credibility of the U.S. assurances to provide a nuclear umbrella to defend its ally. The article highlights Seoul’s new policy aimed at rebuilding and strengthening the “comprehensive global alliance” between the ROK and the USA that presupposes cooperation on a wide range of international and regional agendas beyond the Korean Peninsula. The paper explores some emerging political dimensions of South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region. It is shown that Seoul wishes to be an active participant of the U.S. – led minilateral arrangements to ensure its expanded economic and security interests in the region.

**Keywords:** Republic of Korea, USA, Japan, DPRK, Yoon Suk-yeol, Moon Jae-in, “global pivotal state”, U.S.–ROK Alliance, Indo-Pacific region.

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ВНЕШНЕПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ СТРАТЕГИЯ  
АДМИНИСТРАЦИИ ЮН СОК ЁЛЯ  
И АМЕРИКАНО-ЮЖНОКОРЕЙСКИЙ АЛЬЯНС

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**Аннотация.** В статье исследуются новые тенденции во внешней политике Южной Кореи после смены власти в Сеуле в мае 2022 г., показана роль международных факторов, оказывающих влияние на курс действующей администрации. Рассмотрены вопросы, связанные с укреплением механизмов военной координации между Республикой Корея (РК) и США в свете провала переговоров по денуклеаризации и появления новых угроз со стороны Северной Кореи. Внимание уделено тенденции к выстраиванию “глобального” американо-южнокорейского альянса. Отдельно рассмотрены вопросы,

касающиеся политики Южной Кореи в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе, включая планы интеграции страны в американоцентричные структуры в нем, а также перспективы налаживания взаимодействия в трехстороннем формате РК–США–Япония.

**Ключевые слова:** Республика Корея, США, Япония, КНДР, Юн Сок Ёль, Мун Чжэ Ин, “глобальное ведущее государство”, американо-южнокорейский альянс, Индо-Тихоокеанский регион.

## INTRODUCTION

The change of power in the Republic of Korea (ROK) as a result of the victory in the presidential elections in March 2022, of the candidate from the conservative opposition Yoon Suk-yeol, had a significant impact on the formation of Seoul's foreign policy.

Among the important international factors that predetermined these shifts, one should mention the emergence of serious global and regional crises, including the situation around Ukraine, the growing rivalry between the United States and China, and the formation of a new bipolarity in Northeast Asia, as a result. Antagonistic relations between the leading powers of the world, superimposed on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, are fraught with serious disruptions in the functioning of the key supply chains that have developed in the previous period. This brings the problem of South Korea's economic security out of the sphere of purely academic research into the field of state strategy, which determines the need for specific political decisions.

In addition, the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula is becoming deeper and more protracted, and there are no ways out of it in the foreseeable future. This is caused by the continuing efforts of the DPRK to implement large-scale military programs in the nuclear and missile field and unsuccessful attempts to involve Pyongyang in the dialogue, which were made by the previous administration of the ROK. Against this background, the prevailing opinion in Seoul is that the task in relations between South and North Korea is no longer so much to achieve reconciliation or complete denuclearization of the peninsula, but to prevent the current nuclear crisis from escalating into an acute inter-Korean conflict [1].

## NEW FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

Even during the presidential election campaign, Yoon Suk-yeol and his foreign policy team indicated their desire, in the event of election victory, to seek to raise the international status of South Korea to the

level of a “global pivotal state”. In his first interviews, the politician explained that the ROK would have to become “a more responsible and respected member of the international community, which advocates for peace, democracy, cooperation and contributes to the promotion of liberal democratic values” [2].

The idea of “globalization” of South Korean politics is by no means new – it has been put forward in different formulations in the past by conservative administrations, including President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2012), whose government included many members of the team of the current president. However, as it is now interpreted, this not only signifies a commitment to “diplomacy of values”, but also becomes an expression of dissatisfaction with the policies of the previous administration which is now believed to have been overly focused on narrow goals, such as “building bridges” with North Korea to the detriment of other, no less urgent national tasks.

The “peace process” launched by President Moon Jae-in in 2018, designed to soften Pyongyang's uncompromising position on the nuclear issue by providing it with various political and economic incentives, has produced mixed results. The past period was marked by the holding of three inter-Korean summits, and the signing of a military agreement between Seoul and Pyongyang. Despite this, there has been no real progress in reducing tension and enhancing detente on the Korean Peninsula. Since the beginning of 2022, North Korea has stepped up the testing of missiles of various classes, and after a long break, it resumed testing of inter-continental ballistic missiles. This gave grounds to officials of the new South Korean administration to assert that the policy of “appeasement” of Pyongyang pursued by the government in the previous period only allowed the North Koreans to gain time for the implementation of their dangerous military programs that pose a threat to the security of the ROK [sources 1].

Yoon Suk-yeol does not oppose the resumption of dialogue and cooperation with the DPRK but believes that the task of complete and irreversible

denuclearization should become paramount, which must be addressed in close coordination with the United States. Instead of striving for reconciliation, the emphasis is on pursuing a policy of “deterrence and reciprocity” in relationships. This involves exerting “maximum pressure” to induce Pyongyang to acquiesce and, militarily, to react proportionately and harshly to any possible provocations.

The priority and even the supporting structure of the new international course were declared to be the trajectory of building a comprehensive global alliance with the United States, which means a departure from Moon Jae-in’s policy, focused on Seoul’s foreign policy autonomy. The former policy of “strategic flexibility”, which meant maintaining a balance in relations with Beijing, the leading economic partner of the ROK, and Washington, the guarantor of the security of the ROK, was declared erroneous, which led to the weakening of the US-South Korean alliance, and growing distrust between the allies. In an interview with the Voice of America, the new head of ROK declared that there would be no room for ambiguity in the approaches of his administration: “We shall stand on the right side of history with the U.S. by making sure that those who undermine the liberal international order pay the price accordingly” [3].

The idea of a “global alliance” also has deep roots and was developed under the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. At the same time, in the past period, it dealt mainly with the issues of strengthening allied relations in the military sphere, security, and cooperation on the North Korean issue. Now it is believed that this is no longer enough: relations with the United States have entered a period of maturity and require an expansion of the area of interaction beyond the issues related to the problems of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea is becoming an influential global and regional player and has extensive international interests, but their successful implementation is thought of as a derivative of the strategies outlined by the US-South Korean alliance. Therefore, the ROK administration proceeds from the fact that today the daily coordination between the allies should extend to such areas as the economy, trade, new technologies, joint scientific developments, and the establishment of global rules of play and management.

References to the new regional order are now firmly rooted in the political lexicon of Seoul’s officials. This, in particular, is about the fact that the

country can no longer make its future dependent on spontaneously developing political and economic processes and must, together with the “leading superpower”, influence their formation. At the same time, priority attention is paid to the issues of building secure supply chains and, more broadly, to participation in the formation of an environment favorable for the ROK in the Indo-Pacific Region, which is key for the long-term interests of the country. If in the previous period, the government quite clearly distanced itself from the corresponding strategies of the United States, Japan, and a number of other countries, now Seoul sets the task of developing its own regional platform, the vision of which would echo American doctrinal guidelines.

It should be understood that the course towards the priority strengthening of relations with the United States remained without an alternative for many generations of South Korean politicians. To a large extent, it relied on the support of civil society. Opinion polls invariably show that at least 90% of the adult population of the country is in favor of maintaining allied ties and the presence of American military bases and US troops in the country. Nevertheless, within the framework of this course, at different times, the emphasis was placed in different ways. President Moon Jae-in, emphasizing foreign policy independence, repeated that with all the sympathy for America, he would not want his country to act as a junior partner of Washington: “I do not think that we should agree with all their requests and suggestions; sometimes you need to learn to say no” [4].

Yoon Seok-yeol demonstrates a diametrically opposite approach in these matters, placing at the forefront the task of constructing an alliance based on mutual trust and common value approaches. According to him, South Korea needs to do more than merely expressing that we agree with the U.S. or that we stand with them. “We must actually labor over global issues together with the U.S; moreover, South Korea needs to play a leading role in the areas that necessitate our part” [5]. In practice, this means intensifying interaction with the ally not only on a bilateral basis, but also within the framework of US-centric regional structures, primarily the recently launched *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity* (IPEF), and in the future – in multilaterals such as *Quad* and *Five Eyes*<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> For more on South Korean interests in these formats, see the Indo-Pacific Vector section below.

whose activities in Seoul are beginning to be looked at with attention.

In order to stop the negative trends on the Korean Peninsula, it is planned to make wider use of the trilateral format opportunities (South Korea – USA – Japan). Under Moon Jae-in, the activity of this structure stagnated due to contradictions between Seoul and Tokyo on historical and territorial issues. The new administration is going to minimize contentious issues by creating prerequisites for expanding cooperation both on Korean issues and on issues of the regional agenda.

In the new system of political coordinates that is being formed, the question of the place of China and Russia in Yoon Suk-yeol's foreign strategy remains not fully clarified. Early in his campaign, he made a number of rather scandalous remarks about the deep animosity between Chinese and Koreans, especially young people [sources 2]. In the future, such attacks were no longer allowed, and the new President invariably emphasized the importance of developing cooperation with Beijing as a leading partner in the trade and economic sphere and in matters of Korean settlement. Nevertheless, the departure from the previous policy of "equidistance" towards Beijing and Washington was clearly announced: ties with China are seen as important, but they will be built taking into account the priority of allied ties with the United States and not to the detriment of them.

Thus, in Seoul, representatives of the new administration proceed from the fact that the growth of rivalry between the US and China cannot be avoided and make their choice of a party to this conflict. However, under these conditions, the strategic vulnerability of South Korean foreign policy appears in a new perspective. On the one hand, the ROK government may be more inclined to join the American campaign of containment and pressure on China and, on the other hand, the Koreans have to be careful not to damage their own long-term national interests.

#### USA–ROK: OLD ALLIES CONCERN AND NEW CHALLENGES

In 2017–2020, a number of serious problems arose in US–South Korean relations, the resolution of which, the parties at that stage and in the subsequent period had to make a lot of efforts. Their emergence is usually associated with the activities and legacy of US President Trump (2017–2021), who

did not highly appreciate the role and significance of the alliance, treated South Korea with noticeable disdain, and even thought about the complete withdrawal of American troops. Trump, in particular, believed that South Korea should take care of its own security, and not rely on the help of the United States [6].

Many of these tensions were resolved after Biden won the US presidential election in 2020. The new American leader reaffirmed the inviolability of security guarantees to South Korea and said that the White House had no intention of reducing its military contingent in this country. Moon Jae-in's visit to Washington in May 2021 was intended to demonstrate that there were no serious disagreements between the allies on important military-political issues, in relation to which they agreed to coordinate approaches and pursue an agreed course.

However, the issue on which Seoul and Washington failed to bring their positions closer was the issue of responding to challenges from North Korea. Despite the fact that the "summit diplomacy" with the participation of Kim Jong-un reached an impasse, Moon Jae-in advocated the continuation of peace efforts and the development of cooperation with Pyongyang within the possible framework for this: from providing economic assistance to assisting in the implementation of large infrastructure projects, such as the reconstruction of railways and roads. The advancement of these undertakings would require the adoption of decisions at the level of the UN Security Council on exemptions from the regime of international sanctions against the DPRK. The United States was categorically opposed, insisting that any indulgence for North Korea is unacceptable until this country takes concrete steps to curtail its nuclear programs [7].

In addition, in September 2021, Moon Jae-in proposed the adoption of a declaration to end the war in Korea, which came as a big surprise to Washington. The plan involved negotiations with the participation of the ROK, the DPRK, the United States, and, possibly, China in order to reach an agreement on the termination of the state of armistice, which has been in force since 1953, and the establishment of peace on the peninsula. This idea contained a clear contradiction, since, in addition to the formal declaration of peace, it did not provide for any systemic measures of a military, political, or legal nature leading to peace establishment in Korea. Even the armistice agreement itself, despite its

formal end, was supposed to remain in force. Nevertheless, Seoul argued that the implementation of the initiative would allow a return to dialogue, establish an atmosphere of trust between the North and the South, and as a result encourage Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear programs [8].

The US-South Korean talks held at the end of 2021 in connection with this initiative ended in vain: Washington believed that denuclearization should remain the main goal in relations with the DPRK. In addition, there were quite legitimate fears that excessive haste in declaring peace could lead to a loosening of the existing system of truce, jeopardizing among other things, the future of the UN Command in Korea headed by an American general.

Another knot of contradictions was the question of the possibility of transferring the right of command of its armed forces to the ROK in wartime. Since its inception, it has been associated with the tasks of increasing the role and responsibility of the South Korean component in the ROK-US Combined Forces Command and its adaptation to the new realities in the region. Back in 2014, under the administration of Pak Geun-hye, the allies agreed that progress in this direction would depend on the fulfillment of a number of conditions related to increasing the equipment and level of combat power and training of the South Korean armed forces. It was understood that in the new command structure, headed by a South Korean general, Seoul would be able to play a major role in matters of strategic planning and organization of the country's defense, and the Americans would provide support for joint military activities.

From the very beginning, Moon Jae-in set out to speed up this process in order to complete it by the time of the expiration of his presidential term in May 2022. One of the goals of the large-scale rearmament program of the Korean Armed Forces, launched in late 2017, was to increase their autonomous role, strengthen defense capabilities and pursue a multi-vector military policy in order to properly prepare in case of a reduction in the American military presence in Korea or even a complete withdrawal of US troops [9]. These plans did not meet the expectations of Washington, which was only interested in those changes in which American control would remain unshakable, and the alliance itself could become part of the security network architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.

After that, problems only accumulated. Since 2018, the parties, at the initiative of Seoul, have actually curtailed the program of joint military maneuvers, confining themselves to conducting primarily virtual table-top exercises. In matters of military planning, the South Koreans proceeded from the priority of the peace process on the Korean Peninsula and the creation of conditions for the development of inter-Korean dialogue. For the first time in many years, the Defense White Paper published in early 2019 did not mention that North Korea was a "military adversary" of the ROK [sources 3, pp. 22-35]. The conclusions about the reduction of the threat from the DPRK were based on the fact that South Korea received a qualitative military advantage over its northern neighbor [10]. In addition, in the same document, the status of Japan, in the past – a partner in matters of interaction on Korean affairs, was reduced to the faceless level of a neighbor. This reversal was also an unpleasant surprise for the United States, which was striving to establish trilateral coordination in the field of defense and security.

During the nuclear missile crisis provoked by the DPRK at the end of 2017, close coordination was established between the three capitals to counter such activity. It included conducting joint military exercises, escorting American strategic bombers by Japanese and South Korean fighters as they approached the Korean Peninsula, practicing operations to evacuate non-combatants, and expanding the exchange of intelligence information on North Korea. However, with the beginning of the "negotiation phase" with the participation of Kim Jong-un, this interaction was terminated. Moreover, against the background of the aggravation of old contradictions between Seoul and Tokyo on territorial and historical issues, the administration of Moon Jae-in announced the decision to scrap the bilateral agreement on the exchange of classified information (GSOMIA). Although the South Koreans were subsequently forced to suspend the implementation of this decision under pressure from the United States, confidential cooperation between South Korea and Japan on the Korean Peninsula was effectively frozen.

At the December 2021 Security Consultative Meeting, the US and ROK defense secretaries decided to update the Strategic Planning Guidelines and Joint Operational Plans to reflect changes in the regional situation. However, in relation to the key

goals and objectives of this activity, some discrepancies were revealed between them. The American party proceeded from the fact that the alliance, in addition to the main mission of countering and deterring the North Korean threat, should contribute to maintaining peace and stability not only in Korea but also beyond its borders. The joint communiqué confirmed the desire to strengthen the “future-oriented alliance”, which is mutually recognized as “a pillar of peace and stability in both the Korean Peninsula and the Indo-Pacific region” [sources 4]. In practice, however, Seoul has shown little willingness to discuss a new regional role for the national military due to fears that the country will be embroiled in an intensifying rivalry between the US and China.

Against this background, consideration of the issue of restoring Seoul's full control over its armed forces and certification of the readiness of the Korean party to head the Combined Forces Command was postponed indefinitely. Pentagon representatives, both at the official level and informally made it clear that the Korean ally, despite the growth of its military potential, is not yet able to play an independent role in the joint defense system and, without US support, is not able to repel aggression in the event of an invasion by the DPRK [11].

An important topic that came to the fore in the dialogue with the United States after the change of power in Seoul was the issue of increasing the effectiveness of American security guarantees to South Korea. This was facilitated by another confrontational cycle of development of the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

A new round of escalation of tension was largely caused by the activity of the DPRK to promote its nuclear and missile programs, accompanied by the growth of belligerent rhetoric. The worriers of the South Koreans were associated not only with plans for the development of strategic offensive weapons in the North but also with ongoing tests of short-range missiles – hypersonic, as well as prototypes that can be used to equip tactical nuclear warheads. Whether the DPRK has succeeded in creating such a weapon or it is a bluff of North Korean propaganda is a debatable issue, but the official establishment of the ROK tends to take the situation seriously. Military experts and the media claim that the country is, in fact, put in a desperate position since the flight time of a hypersonic missile to Seoul can be no more than one or two minutes [12].

Another cause for concern is the new conceptual settings of the leadership of the DPRK on the use of nuclear weapons. Kim Jong-un and his associates made a number of public statements, the meaning of which was that for Pyongyang this weapon is not only a tool of deterrence but under certain circumstances can also be considered as a means of warfare [sources 5, 6].

An analysis of the above doctrinal guidelines led American and South Korean experts to the conclusion that the risks of using nuclear weapons increase in the event of a crisis on the peninsula. A probable local conflict between Pyongyang and Seoul can quickly acquire a large-scale character, for example, if North Korea decides to launch a preventive strike using tactical nuclear weapons on the enemy's territory. Under these conditions, all joint operational plans previously prepared by the allies and currently in force, as well as the various military scenarios envisaged by them, lose their relevance.

The implementation of American security guarantees to South Korea is mainly determined by the strategy of extended deterrence. In particular, this refers to the determination of the United States in the event of an attack on the ally to use the full range of its defense capabilities, including nuclear, conventional weapons, missile defense systems, as well as such new elements as cyber and space military potentials. Until recently, these guarantees seemed to the parties absolutely reliable and unshakable. At the same time, the South Koreans have certain doubts about this, especially in light of information about the success of North Korea in developing its strategic nuclear potential, as well as ICBMs that are believed to be capable of reaching the United States mainland. It is suspected that the White House may not come to the aid of Seoul in the event of an attack by the DPRK due to fears of a missile “retaliation strike” against the United States [13].

President Yoon Suk-yeol directs the command of his armed forces to “immediate and decisive rebuff” in case of provocations from the DPRK. Over the past few years, a three-axis strategic defense system has been developed in South Korea. Along with the missile defense and “massive retaliation” components, it includes the Kill Chain platform, designed for preemptive attacks against strategic targets under the “inevitable threat” of an attack by the North Koreans. However, according to experts, Seoul cannot yet fully use this platform, since the military department does not have the entire range

of surveillance and reconnaissance equipment and, from the point of view of obtaining comprehensive, reliable, and true information, has to rely mainly on the American ally.

Under these circumstances, the idea of returning American tactical nuclear weapons (withdrawn in the early 1990s) to the Korean Peninsula or, in an even more radical version, the creation of South Korea's own nuclear arsenal is gaining new relevance. This once peripheral political topic is now becoming an integral part of the public discourse in the ROK on the issues of national security. Recent polls show that more than 70% of citizens are in favor of developing and creating their own nuclear weapons, while more than half are in favor of deploying tactical nuclear weapons from the United States in South Korea on a permanent basis. Influential politicians, leaders of the ruling party, and the military are more and more often speaking in favor of obtaining a nuclear status [14].

The position of the current administration on this point has not been fully determined. Yoon Suk-yeol at first admitted the possibility of the return of American tactical nuclear weapons to the country but subsequently abandoned these ideas. Apparently, Seoul has to reckon with the official point of view of Washington, which does not want to deploy these weapons in South Korea. Such a move is not in the interests of the United States, since it contributes to the aggravation of relations with China and may spur a regional arms race. As for the prospect of Seoul creating its own military nuclear potential, at this stage, it seems practically unrealistic. Of course, the country has all the scientific and technical capabilities and material resources necessary for this. At the same time, one should take into account the strong opposition of the United States to such an option, as well as the significant political, economic, and reputational costs that the ROK will inevitably incur if it starts moving along this path.

Seoul would like to find a way out of such a difficult situation by adopting, in agreement with the United States, several military and strategic decisions.

First, it is to ensure the presence in the country on a regular basis of "strategic asset" of the United States within the triad: strategic bombers, nuclear submarines, and aircraft carriers, which could indicate the practical determination of Washington to use the entire arsenal of means for defense of the ally. This issue was discussed during President Biden's

visit to South Korea in May 2022, but the parties could not reach an agreement on this. In the final joint statement, only the possibility of deploying these assets in the ROK in the future, "if the need arises", has been fixed [sources 7].

Second, the South Koreans intend to achieve a substantive discussion with the ally on the procedure for applying American security guarantees, including the use of the "nuclear umbrella", in the event of "extraordinary circumstances" on the Korean Peninsula and threats to the security of South Korea. At the same time, the emphasis is on the tasks of strengthening the mechanisms of military interaction and improving political coordination. In particular, the parties agreed to resume and regularize the work of the bilateral consultative group on security and extended deterrence. The group was created in 2016 to discuss the military response in the event of provocations by the DPRK, but soon its activities were curtailed since at that time the allies were counting on a dialogue with Pyongyang.

Summing up some statements of South Korean politicians and military experts, one can come to the conclusion that Seoul would like to achieve such agreements with the United States that would ensure wider and equal participation of the ROK in the development and implementation of important military decisions affecting the interests of the country. In principle, this should also include the possibility of influencing the planning of US nuclear policy on the hypothetical use of nuclear weapons in the event of external aggression. In the past, influential members of Yoon Suk-yeol's team have hinted quite transparently at the desirability of concluding an agreement with the United States on their sharing. This would not only make it possible to more successfully counter the North Korean nuclear threat but would also become an additional guarantee that, in the event of an acute crisis, the United States would properly fulfill its commitments to defend its ally [15].

It should be said that all these considerations are still expressed in the ROK mainly in a discussion manner and, apparently, have not yet become the subject of a serious discussion with the United States at the official level. For Washington, this topic remains extremely sensitive. The American counterpart is clearly not ready to include its ambitious ally in military planning processes on such a sensitive issue. On the other hand, it has to take into account the concerns of the Koreans and their desire to strengthen their weight in the alliance, which is

becoming an important instrument of US policy not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in the entire region.

### INDO-PACIFIC VECTOR

The conceptual approaches and views of the South Korean elites on regional policy issues in the Asia-Pacific region have evolved significantly over the past few years. At the current stage, two significant and interrelated factors have emerged that determined the actions of Seoul: the desire to use the country's growing economic weight to strengthen its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and the balancing of the negative trends caused by the growing confrontation between the US and China.

The concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” put forward by President Trump at the end of 2017, given its obvious anti-Chinese orientation, was perceived by Moon Jae-in's administration with great restraint. The involvement of the ROK in the implementation of this strategy, which was sought in Washington, could, on the one hand, divert Seoul's attention from solving the priority task – dialogue and reconciliation with Pyongyang, and on the other hand, complicate relations with China, the country's leading trade and economic partner.

The way out of this difficult situation was found on the path of formation in South Korea of its own Asian doctrine. In fact, in opposition to the American Indo-Pacific strategy, Moon Jae-in put forward a “new southern policy” aimed at the comprehensive development of relations with the countries of Southeast and South Asia with an emphasis on economic cooperation, the implementation of joint infrastructure projects and promotion in these regions of Korean development experience and cultural content. In accordance with this, the ASEAN countries, as well as India, received the de facto status of the “fifth partner” of the ROK after the USA, China, Japan, and Russia.

At that time, the establishment of cooperation between the United States and the ROK on the problems of the Indo-Pacific region faced some difficulties. On the one hand, an agreement was reached on coordination between the two regional strategies and interaction in such areas as the economy, non-traditional challenges and threats to security, cooperation, and assistance to developing countries. On the other hand, Seoul has staunchly shied away from including China containment or regional security

partnerships in the joint agenda and has shown a reluctance to join US-sponsored mechanisms such as Quad. The experience of cooperation with this structure was limited when South Korea, along with several other countries, took part in a virtual meeting on combating the COVID-19 pandemic. At the official level, the administration of Moon Jae-in spoke in favor of the participation of the ROK in broader regional institutions operating on the basis of the principles of “openness, inclusiveness and transparency” provided that their activities are not directed against third countries [16].

Under the Biden administration, the established model of cooperation between the United States and the ROK on regional issues changed little at first, although Seoul was relieved by the White House's intentions to somewhat weaken the overly harsh anti-Chinese attacks typical of Trump's rhetoric. In addition, *Quad's* shift in agenda to topics such as health care, decarbonization, new forms of energy, and technology now made its activities more attractive to South Koreans.

In recent studies by American experts, South Korea is seen as a potentially important but underestimated resource of American policy in the Indo-Pacific. This country, it is believed, could become a kind of “power multiplier” if patient, consistent work is carried out in order to carefully channel Seoul's growing foreign policy activity in a beneficial direction for the United States [17].

In contrast to Trump's rather straightforward course, which unsuccessfully pressed Seoul to join American efforts to counter “Chinese expansion”, Biden managed to demonstrate a more flexible approach. Its meaning is not to require much at first, to take into account the interests and concerns of the partner, to gradually involve it in the security architecture network created under the auspices of the United States, to help establish joint work and coordinate actions with other US allies, primarily with Japan, in the name of common goals and objectives [18].

This work has borne fruit but after the change of administration in Seoul. The past year has drawn a line under a long period of relatively stable development when the government of the ROK could focus on domestic affairs and problems of inter-Korean relations. For Yoon Suk-yeol's administration, along with old problems, one of the main challenges that have emerged recently has been the threat of destabilization of the global and regional economy due to



a series of international crises and the destruction of critical supply chains. If Moon Jae-in was looking for palliative ways out of this situation by diversifying economic ties, then the current President relies on cooperation with the United States and other “like-minded countries” in order to manage strategic risks. The ideas of a “global pivotal state” put forward in Seoul imply, in particular, that South Korea, relying on its increased economic and military potential, will initiate the formation of universal norms and rules in the region based on “common values” [19].

Given these points, the concept of national security of the country as a whole is also undergoing significant changes. First, the actual rejection of the “new southern policy” was proclaimed, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the ROK characterized as ineffective and inconsistent with the emerging international situation. Second, the administration is now beginning to see the need for a broader, more comprehensive approach to security issues.

The spectrum of threats, which in the recent past amounted to the containment of military challenges from the DPRK, is gradually expanding. Now the United States and the ROK are actively discussing the issue of interaction in connection with the assertive policy of China in the region, the situation in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, as well as the Ukrainian crisis and its possible consequences for both countries. Another topic is “economic security”, which is connected with the intensifying competition in the Asian markets for integrated circuits and semiconductors, the pursuit of advantages in the field of high tech.

An integrated approach assumes that the military-political alliance with the United States remains the foundation for ensuring the security of South Korea. However, along with this, Seoul is demonstrating an interest in expanding the network of partnerships with “world democracies” and its participation in organizations and multilateral consultative mechanisms of “like-minded countries”, not only in the Indo-Pacific but also in Europe. An example of the implementation of the new approach was the participation of Yoon Suk-yeol in the NATO Summit in Madrid in June 2022, where agreements were reached on the coordination of political and military issues, joining South Korea to the center of the bloc on cybersecurity issues. Although the administration of the ROK does not seem to have a well-adjusted course regarding further cooperation with NATO on

regional issues, the stake is being placed on “fixing” this direction in the long term.

Earlier, Seoul decided to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework as a co-founder country. According to the government, as well as most experts, participation in this format opens up opportunities for strengthening technological alliances with the United States and the advanced countries of the region, weakening trade dependence on China, and using the competitive advantages of South Korea to advance its economic positions in the region. In the long run, Seoul’s strategic aspirations are connected with the intention to become one of the leaders in establishing a new regional economic order and a kind of mediator in relations between developed and developing countries in the Indo-Pacific [20].

Next in line is the question of relations between South Korea and *Quad*, as well as other US-centered arrangements with a narrow range of participants in the region. The approaches of the current administration have been significantly adjusted in comparison with the previous period. Even during the pre-election campaign, Yoon Suk-yeol stated that he would seek the country’s entry into the “four-party format” on a phased basis. Certain plans are being made for the participation of the ROK in the Five Eyes – an intelligence alliance of five Anglo-Saxon countries. In May 2022, the candidate for the post of director of the National Intelligence Service, Kim Gyu-hyun, announced the desirability of South Korea to join this mechanism in order to gain access to confidential data on existing security threats and to establish information exchange on this point with the “world democracies”. The political leadership of the country has not yet clarified its position on this issue, but it is clear that the statements of the head of intelligence could hardly have been made without approval from above [21].

At this stage, the process of South Korea’s integration into the aforementioned “mini-parties” has not been developed. It is noteworthy that in the past, Washington gently pushed the ally to expand its interaction with *Quad*, but now it has become more restrained. When discussing this topic during the US-South Korean summit in Seoul in May 2022, President Biden limited himself to “welcoming” the interest of the ROK government in the activities of the quadripartite format, without giving the “green light” to the formal joining of this mechanism. It was also agreed that in the near future, South Korea would intensify cooperation with *Quad* partici-

pants on such issues as combating pandemics, climate change, and the creation of new technologies, which involves joining the relevant working groups [sources 7].

At this stage, Japan is an active opponent of the membership of the ROK in *Quad*, which, not without reason, fears that Seoul will bring to this format some issues painful for Tokyo related to the historical and territorial disputes between the two countries. Therefore, both the Japanese and the Americans consider the removal of existing mutual claims an important precondition for the accession of South Korea. This, in turn, implies the development of political dialogue, the normalization of relations, as well as the establishment of effective work in a trilateral format with the participation of the ROK, Japan, and the United States, not only on North Korea but also on regional security issues. Despite Yoon Suk-yeol's declared desire to work in this direction, the result is not yet obvious. This is caused by the persistently strong anti-Japanese attitude of a significant part of the socio-political establishment and its demands for compensation to the citizens of the ROK for the damage caused during the colonial period.

## CONCLUSIONS

President Yoon Suk-yeol, already in the first months of his tenure in power, managed to shift the previous foreign policy guidelines by proposing a number of important innovations. Nevertheless, the process of reversing the country's international course, which began in May 2022, has not yet been fully completed. The steps taken on the external front are often chaotic, impulsive in nature, and are not always backed by due expert study.

In addition, political elites, including representatives of the ruling camp, do not always keep up with the actions of the presidential team, which is in a hurry to innovate. The attitude toward them is still quite wary. Weaknesses still are the lack of a coherent strategy in the Russian and Chinese directions, as well as a plan to overcome the impasse in inter-Korean relations. One gets the impression that Seoul does not fully understand what should be done to resolve the nuclear issue, especially against the backdrop of the failure of previous efforts to involve North Korea in the denuclearization dialogue. By leaving those rears open, South Korea risks facing difficulties in its race for globalization and regional economic leadership.

It should also be said that the idea of the need to ensure the "strategic autonomy" of the country and maintain a reasonable balance in relations with its influential neighbors – the United States, China, and Russia has not disappeared from the public discourse on political issues. In addition, interaction with Washington is believed to be accompanied by a clear understanding of the boundaries and limits of such cooperation and the creation of safety nets in case of possible changes in US policy in the region as a result of the 2024 presidential election.

The Democratic Party, which is the conductor of these approaches, maintains a fairly strong position in the country and in the National Assembly of the ROK, especially since Yoon Suk-yeol's support rating in the summer of 2022 fell to an all-time low of 28%. Therefore, it can be expected that after the first shock caused by the defeat in the presidential elections, the Democrats will go on the counteroffensive. In the long term, this portends serious political battles, where issues on the foreign policy agenda can take their rightful place.

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