

## *INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY - ROK*

On November 11, 2022, the President of the Republic of Korea, Yoon Suk Yeol, at the ROK-ASEAN Summit said “We are living in the Indo-Pacific era. Home to 65% of the world’s population, the Indo-Pacific accounts for more than 60% of the world’s GDP, and half of the global maritime transport. Peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region directly affect our survival and prosperity. That is why he proposed a “free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region” through solidarity and cooperation with major countries including ASEAN.”

These are very profound statements as one would expect from a President of a Democratic Republic located between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, sharing a land border with a pariah North Korea and maritime neighbours with Japan and PRC. Incheon Airport of Seoul is located just about 515 kilometres from the famous Chinese Shipyard Dalian and 622 km from Qingdao. While the shipyard at Dalian builds Aircraft Carriers, Qingdao is the HQ of the North Sea Fleet and concurrently the Northern Theatre Command Navy. Till very recently it was the most important Naval Base of the PRC Navy.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) has an open economy which relies heavily on exports, with foreign trade having accounted for 85% of GDP in 2021. The Indo-Pacific Region alone accounts for approximately 78% of total exports and 67% of imports. ROK has very close trade relations with Indo-Pacific littorals, as 20 of its top trade partners are in the Indo-Pacific Region and 66% of its FDI is in this region. Therefore, peace and stability in the region are prerequisites for ROK’s prosperity.

The trade and commerce of ROK move on the sea lanes which crisscross the Indian Ocean, Straits of Hormuz, Malacca Straits & South China Sea (SCS). The South China Sea (SCS) accounts for 64% of crude oil and 40% of natural gas transportation. With these realities, ROK’s concerns are mounting due to rising geopolitical, diplomatic, security, economic and technological competition. This has made this region less secure, threatening the peace and stability necessary for a foreign trade-dependent country like ROK. The deepening arms race in the region coupled with a lack of action to build transparency and trust in military and security domains, has made the region less secure. ROK is a neighbour to two nuclear weapon states of which North Korea’s advancements in nuclear and missile capabilities are a serious threat to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and the broader Indo-Pacific. In this globalised world, governance seems to have deteriorated significantly as a result sanctions have no corrective impact. ROK believes that a collective effort to find common solutions to a range of complex challenges is necessary to build a sustainable and resilient regional order.

Believe in Democratic Principles:

ROK has emphasised time and again that it supports a free and open Indo-Pacific, which upholds international norms and strengthens rule-based order built on universal values including freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Importantly, the ROK opposes unilateral change of status quo by force and supports harmonious regional order where nation's rights are respected and this reflects the country's views on actions by PRC in the SCS as also North Korea in the Korean Peninsula. These views lead the ROK towards its commitment to economic security, trade being the pillar of its economy, ROK must maintain capacity and military capability even if it requires cooperation with other ASEAN members apart from the US and Japan. The conclusions drawn on its elevated Strategic Economic Partnership with India are extremely thoughtful given India's rapid economic rise and vast market being the most populous country in the world. ROK has a significant presence in India in the form of Samsung and Hyundai Motors. These two are market leaders in their sectors. Certainly, all economic activities require stable & secure seas.

Time to pay attention to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR):-

The Yoon government has displayed a marked shift from the previous government's Indo-Pacific Strategy, in the sense that IOR and South Asia have been accepted as a continuum in the Indo-Pacific. SCS remains the primary area of security concern for nearly all countries in the region which impacts their trade and commerce. ROK has observed that the so far peaceful IOR too is slipping into turbulence which is a concern for ROK. The main source of hydrocarbon import of ROK is from IOR. Needless to say, energy is a basic necessity for running the manufacturing and transportation sectors and its safe passage is important. Any instability in the security situation can adversely impact ROK's GDP like the recent attack by Houthis in the Red Sea and South Western parts of the Indian Ocean. India's role in providing maritime security to all commercial vessels, irrespective of their nationality, has contributed to an overall secure environment for the safe passage of commerce and hydrocarbons. The import figures of hydrocarbons in the year 2023 for ROK are:-

Saudi Arabia: 30.57 billion dollars

UAE: 9.8 billion dollars

Kuwait: 8.31 billion dollars

Iraq: 7.35 billion dollars

Qatar: 5.62 billion dollars

Mexico: 2.41 billion dollars

Brazil: 1.57 billion dollars

These figures are out of a total of 86 billion dollars of total oil imports which traverses over the Indian Ocean. Any disruption in the passage of hydrocarbon either during its passage or at choke points can be suicidal for the ROK, hence, maintaining a Comprehensive Strategic and Economic Partnership with India will enhance its relations with South Asia. ROK's dilemma in IOR has been the absence of US policy in IOR and therefore, the present government has been bold enough to display some strategic autonomy. Geopolitical dynamism could alter PRC and ROK relations with a very short warning time. It must be remembered that PRC's near-sea policy which is the basis of its misplaced claim of a nine-dash line arc begins from the southern tip of South Korea and takes Jeju Island in its claimed zone. PRC has already criticised the US positioning Theatre Air Defence system in ROK to counter the nuclear missile threat from North Korea. ROK is an ally of the US and geographically too close to China for comfort.

#### Way Forward:

With political shifts in the ROK, the policies have also witnessed some changes. The new strategy is all-encompassing which factors in the futuristic geopolitical alterations and reflects ROK's strategic autonomy to some extent and the Govt must institutionalise this strategy. The possible change of leadership in the US will call for ROK spending enhanced allocation for the defence budget.

What needs to be institutionalised? The Indo-Pacific division in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence should be considered on priority. The linkages between the two at working levels could be institutionalised at the Director and Deputy Director levels in both ministries. It would be prudent to give additional charge to the embassies located in key Indo-Pacific countries where future relations are expected to be strengthened. Naval Officers could be appointed in the Military Wing of these embassies who will initiate and monitor Maritime Security exercises between the two Navies. Diplomatically, ROK must request membership in Quad as Quad Plus. This will be a non-military partnership which should not raise alarm in the immediate neighbourhood. At the bilateral level, the ROK navy could consider exercises with Navies in the SCS and with the Indian Navy in the IOR. Also, joining the IOR MDA fusion centre will go a long way in vessel identification and security for its hydrocarbon-carrying vessels transmitting through the Indian Ocean and Straits of Malacca. These structures are the backbone of maritime security to trade and energy and for the overall GDP growth of ROK. Shifting some of the supply chains to safer countries should be considered. The Korea Institute of Diplomatic Academy and the Korean Institute of Maritime Strategy can play an important role

in shaping a favourable environment by conducting joint studies and publishing research papers on the necessity for the ROK to implement its Indo-Pacific Strategy in functionality.

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