



South Korea's Foreign Policy Dilemma in the Indo-Pacific Era

Speaker: Dr. Sandip Kumar Mishra, Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

Chair: Amb. Skand R. Tayal, Former Ambassador of India to South Korea

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Venue: Zoom Meeting

The seminar began with a brief introduction of the topic by the chair where he contextualized the topic. The chair flagged certain key points, which according to him, were the primary determinants of South Korean foreign policy. He emphasized the importance of Indo-Pacific in South Korea's geo-strategic calculus due to its maritime space as well as land mass in East Asia. According to the chair, the centrality of the Indo-Pacific in South Korean strategic thinking is formed by Seoul's dependence on sea routes for oil and trade. South Korea's interests in the Indo-Pacific could be enlisted as peace and stability in East Asia, unimpeded trade relations and flow of trade, complete freedom of navigation. It is also important to note that South Korea does not have any major conflict with China and the US led world order in weakening in lieu of Washington's lack of willingness to share the burden with allies like before. The chair ended his remarks by posing a holistic set of questions involving how South Korea would want to position itself in the developing US-China dynamic? What economic direction will the South Korean companies take? How would they push for a multipolar East Asia without annoying China?

In light of this introductory comment, the speaker began his presentation by reflecting on South Korea's 'strange' behavior vis-à-vis China in recent times as well as during the pandemic. Contrary to popular belief in the strategic circles of US, South Korea has sought to cooperate with China in dealing with the pandemic. He contextualized this behavior in the larger patten of South Korean engagement with China prior to the pandemic. According to him, there has been an increasing commitment to cooperation between the two countries in the last few years, especially after South Korean President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017. On the other hand, the speaker presented a sobering picture of the status of US-South Korean relations. He took note of the deteriorating ties between the two countries. Deliberations on US began with US President Donald Trump's reluctance to continue with the US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement. He then reflected on US' decision to make revisions in their military stationing in South Korea, which was perceived by South Koreans as a 'dilution' of security commitment. However, the speaker later elaborated on how the US is South Korea's primary partner.

With regards to growing involvement with China, the speaker mentioned that China became South Korea's top trading partner in 2004, replacing the US. Chinese trade engagement with South Korea accounts for almost a quarter of Seoul's total export trade which in turn forms a bulk of South Korea's GDP. He, therefore, argued that it will be unfair to expect South Korea to completely 'disengage' with China, even in the face of US-China competition, because of the heavily entwined nature of their trade relationship. Interestingly, he also noted that the recent comments from the leadership in Seoul with regards to China refer to 'improving' or 'restoring' the relationship which could perhaps be understood as an attempt by Seoul to harp on their bolstering bilateral relationship in the past.

The speaker posited that South Korea's foreign policy is primarily dominated by North Korea followed by US, China, Japan, etc. Therefore, any major shift in its foreign policy will revolve around the question of North Korea. There is no doubt that US remains South Korea's top security alliance partner. However, China has also become its most important trading partner. Therefore, South Korea is making efforts to ensure that these two domains remain separate and there is no convergence or conflict among this. Perhaps this can be seen as a reason, according to the speaker, that South Korea has been hesitant to unambiguously state its position on the Indo-Pacific. However, the speaker noted that Seoul is pressing for convergence of their New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific. According to him, even though China has emerged as an important trading partner for Seoul, USA remains at the heart of South Korea's security architecture which is the fundamental basis of its foreign policy. Therefore, in the future if there is a situation of potential zero-sum game between US and China, there is little doubt that South Korea will side with Washington. However, he also heavily emphasized that South Korea's first priority would be to make sure that they are not at 'frontline' in any such situation. He concluded that by positing that South Korea's interests will be best protected if Sino-US tensions do not escalate, and even if they do, Seoul should ensure they are not a party to it. According to the speaker, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy may be overshadowed by its bilateral relationship with US which is at place which already provides a stable security alliance.

The talk was followed by an engaging and thought-provoking round of discussions where a number of issues were raised. On the idea of a multipolar Indo-Pacific, the speaker argued that South Korea believes that Japan would in any case advocate for such an arrangement, and therefore has not seen any active initiative from South Korea. This was followed by a question on whether it is important to have vision for the Indo-Pacific or a strategy, to which he asserted that having only a vision is not enough, there should be a strategy in place. On the idea of South Korea's economic engagement with India, he argued that South Korea has been interested in India, but India must ensure that realization of the potential is not difficult. Following this, a couple of questions were raised on the Quad Plus and South Korea's growing engagement in Africa. In response to this, the speaker argues that the Quad Plus is an arrangement that deals with the pandemic and it might be early to make more of it. With regards to Africa, he said that Seoul's outreach is essentially based on its economic and trade objectives. Another question was raised on what kind of Indo-Pacific order would South Korea imagine, post-Covid, to which he posited that ideally, South Korea would not want escalation of US-China rivalry, however he also conceded that the scope of such a scenario is increasingly shrinking. On the question of nuclear issue and North Korea, the speaker said that there has been a growing popular sentiment in South Korea of having its own nuclear

program, however they are under compulsion from US. With regards to North Korea, he said that a possible situation of unification should not be written off, interestingly, conservatives in South Korea advocate for unification while progressives focus on good relations with North Korea. However, the younger generation is skeptical of any such unification in the future due to the economic disparities between the two countries. Finally, on the question on US, the speaker endorsed US as South Korea's primary choice in any crunch situation. He argued that the leadership in Seoul has reiterated numerous times that even any instance of disagreement between the two countries should be seen as a divergence within the basic framework of friendship.

This report was prepared by Sayantan Haldar, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

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