

# CANADA, SOUTH KOREA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Lately, the world has witnessed the geopolitical construct of the Asia-Pacific being progressively replaced by the Indo-Pacific. This has created a diplomatic domino effect with many governments shifting their focus to Indo-Pacific and articulating their strategic approach towards the region.<sup>1</sup> As a result, major powers like the US, France and the European Union (EU) have come out with their Indo-Pacific Strategies (IPS), attempting to articulate and accentuate their economic, political and strategic interests in the region. The latest to join this list are Canada and the Republic of Korea (ROK), who unveiled their strategies on 27 November 2022 and 28 December 2022, respectively. Both the documents signal a major transformation in their respective government's foreign policy outlook.

Canada identifies itself as a Pacific nation and describes the Indo-Pacific as its neighbouring region. The strategy implies that the future of the Canadian economy, trade, immigration policies, environment and security would be extensively shaped through Canada's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> But it must be noted that Canada's attempts to engage with the region are not new. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Canadian government, led by then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, sought to play a more active role in the emerging security and economic cooperation architecture of the region. This proactive engagement continued with successive Canadian governments which even participated in the early multilateral negotiations on the South China Sea (SCS) disputes.

However, post the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Canada began to disengage from the region due to budgetary constraints and diminishing political support.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, Canada's visibility and influence in the region receded as a result of which it was excluded from the East Asia Summit (EAS). Also, despite being a dialogue partner of ASEAN and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Canada was not invited to be the part of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus).<sup>4</sup>

After a prolonged period of absence, Canada's need to re-engage with the region was brought forth by the findings of the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. These findings were released in 2015 in a report titled 'Securing Canada's Place in Asia-Pacific: A Focus on Southeast Asia'. This report recommended leading the whole country's effort to recognise the importance of the Asia-Pacific region for securing Canada's future prosperity and seizing regional opportunities. The report underscored the need for developing and implementing a comprehensive and sustained approach to strengthening Canada's engagement with the region.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, the Trudeau administration began scaling up Canada's military, economic and diplomatic presence in the Indo-Pacific. In 2018, the Canadian Navy launched Operation Projection, which is an ongoing naval presence mission in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>6</sup> On the economic and diplomatic front, Canada signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement in 2016 and began seeking membership in forums like the EAS and ADMM-Plus.

In line with these efforts, its IPS has been underpinned by a core assumption that the rising influence of the Indo-Pacific region is a once-in-a-generation shift that requires a Canadian response.<sup>7</sup> The strategy has pledged to allocate US\$ 2.3 billion for investments in five priority

areas over the next five years.<sup>8</sup> These relate to security, trade and resilient supply chains, human resources (HR), sustainable development and strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific nations.

The strategy describes China as a disruptive global power and unequivocally makes it clear that Canada will challenge China on issues like coercion and violations of human rights. At the same time, the strategy also implies that Canada would seek to cooperate with China on issues such as climate change and nuclear proliferation. The strategy envisages a four-tier diplomatic engagement with China at domestic, bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.<sup>9</sup> In a nutshell, Canada's IPS reflects its aspirations to re-engage with the Asia-Pacific region and regain lost ground, post its disengagement in the late 1990s.

South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin has described their IPS as the de-facto foreign policy doctrine of the Yoon administration and a new chapter in Korean diplomacy for a proactive engagement in both regional and global affairs.<sup>10</sup> Being geographically located in a high-threat environment, Seoul has been maneuvering between Washington and Beijing with a cautious and at times ambiguous approach. Despite being a formal ally of the US under the 1953 Mutual Defence Treaty, South Korea has deep-rooted economic linkages with China which is its largest trading partner with Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since 2015. These factors had compelled the erstwhile government in Seoul led by Moon Jae-in to avoid antagonising China and accommodate its rise through a cautious posture of strategic ambiguity.<sup>11</sup>

However, observers have noted that South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy indicates the Yoon government's clear departure from this strategic ambiguity. The strategy illustrates Seoul's strategic alignment with Washington's IPS which is firmly rooted in preserving the rules-based international order and promoting democratic values.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the strategy seeks to promote a more mature relationship with China based on mutual respect and reciprocity guided by international norms and rules.<sup>13</sup>

The most significant takeaway from the strategy is that Seoul's outlook for the Indo-Pacific is shaped by its aspirations to become a global pivot state and expand its influence beyond the Korean Peninsula. To achieve this, the strategy seeks to deepen strategic cooperation with nations across the key regions of the Indo-Pacific including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania and East Africa.<sup>14</sup>

The strategy lays down nine core lines of effort for enhancing the strategic cooperation between South Korea and other like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. These efforts cover cooperation in domains of maritime security, cyber security, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, energy security, management of resilient supply chains and promoting rule-based order through diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> The strategy has been successful in reaffirming President Yoon's efforts to adopt a more assertive and proactive foreign policy in comparison to his predecessor. At the same, the greatest challenge for the Yoon administration would be to deliver on these commitments in the face of possible Chinese pressures in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Through the analysis of these two strategies, certain common threads can be observed

### *The primacy of Strategic Depth with the US*

One of the most important commonalities of both strategies is their consonance with the American strategic perspective on the region that has been bought forth in the US's IPS released in early 2022. ROK's strategy describes Seoul's alliance with the US as the lynchpin for peace and prosperity in the Korean Peninsula and the Indo-Pacific.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Canada's IPS highlights Ottawa's commitment to strengthen its engagement in the region

through US-led economic and security groupings like the G7 and the Five Eyes. Also, Washington and Ottawa have been working towards establishing the Canada–US Strategic dialogue on the Indo-Pacific to synchronise their engagement in the region.[18](#)

### *Focus on engagement with the ASEAN*

The support for ASEAN centrality and its outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) has been highlighted in both strategies. ROK's strategy has identified the Yoon administration's Korea–ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) as the platform for enhancing engagement with the ASEAN.[19](#) Canada's strategy envisages the elevation of Canada–ASEAN relations to the level of strategic partnership and attaining membership in forums ADMM-Plus and EAS.[20](#)

### *Recognition of India's Strategic Significance*

The emphasis on enhancing strategic cooperation with India has been a key highlight in the IPS of not only the ROK and Canada but also the US, France and the EU. All these strategies have acknowledged India's economic, demographic and political significance to the Indo-Pacific.

### *Aspirations to become a global pivot state*

Pivot States have been defined as those that possess military, economic and ideational strategic assets that are coveted by great powers. A change in a pivot state's association has important repercussions for regional and global security.[21](#) This has been explicitly stated in ROK's strategy where it is stated that Seoul aspires to become a global pivotal state that actively seeks to shape the geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.[22](#) On the other hand, although not explicitly mentioned, Canada's IPS is reflective of Ottawa's aspirations to become a pivotal middle power in the long run through its active engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Despite the above-elucidated common threads, the analysis of the strategies also highlights differences, as under:

### *The stance against a Belligerent China*

Although both strategies are underpinned by their support to preserve existing rules-based order and oppose any unilateral attempts to challenge the status quo in the region, the language adopted to criticise China's actions differs. Ellen Kim notes that ROK's strategy has adopted a more nuanced language mindful of not antagonising China. On the other hand, Canada's strategy has been explicit in pointing out China's blatant disregard for international rules and norms that have caused a detrimental impact on the Indo-Pacific.[23](#)

### *Immigration Policies*

South Korea is a small and ethnically homogenous country, and its strategy does not include a focus on immigration policies. On the other hand, Canada being a large country with a sparse population; focus on immigration policies to attract skilled manpower from the Indo-Pacific region has been a key aspect of its strategy.

### *Defence Cooperation with India*

ROK's strategy envisages fostering a stronger relationship with India across all areas including defence. But Canada's strategy notably excludes the mention of defence cooperation with India but emphasises strengthening economic ties and facilitating the immigration of skilled manpower.

American historian Williamson Murray remarked that only great powers are capable of making grand strategies and middle or small powers can only respond to those strategies.<sup>24</sup> This particularly holds true in the context of the IPS of both Canada and ROK which reflect their alignment with the US's outlook for the region. At the same time, factors like geography and demography have also resulted in certain differences in their respective approaches to dealing with China and the region as a whole. However, the biggest challenge that lies ahead for both ROK and Canada is in sustaining their commitment and producing tangible deliverables that have been elucidated in their respective strategies.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.*

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