



South Korea and the QUAD & Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Introduction

The United States has strongly encouraged the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) to participate in the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) since their inceptions. South Korea, however, has not officially joined either one, as government leaders have been carefully considering what joining would mean for its “strategy of survival and development for the future,” especially against the background of an ever-intensifying U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Whether South Korea takes sides with the U.S. or China is a matter of secondary consideration, as the ROK must firstly review its strategy in terms of confronting an apparent revival of the Cold War in this region of the world. The dilemma facing South Korea, though, is as follows: the more intense the U.S.-China rivalry becomes, the stronger the U.S. pressure on South Korea to take its side will become, which will also intensify China’s warnings against the Korea-U.S. alliance.

This article aims to articulate the position of South Korea in relation to the QUAD and the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy. Several key questions relating to the QUAD and the Indo-Pacific strategy within South Korea and in the international community will be addressed.

The QUAD & the Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Moon-Biden Summit, May 21st, 2021

The ROK-U.S. Leaders’ Joint Statement at the Moon-Biden Summit in Washington, DC on May 21st, 2021, made clear that South Korea supports the U.S. vs. China regarding the Indo-Pacific strategy and acknowledged the importance of the QUAD.

President Moon and President Biden commit “to oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize or threaten the rule-based international order and commit to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific.” Furthermore, both Presidents “pledge to maintain peace and stability, lawful unimpeded commerce, and respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and

overflight in the South China Sea and beyond,” “emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” “share our [their] intent to promote human rights and rule of law issues, both at home and abroad,” and “acknowledge the importance of open, transparent, and inclusive regional multilateralism including the Quad.”

Then, the question remains: “has the Moon government of South Korea decided to join the Indo-Pacific strategy and the QUAD?” or “has the Moon government responded overly positively as a way to dispel Washington’s doubt about “South Korea’s leaning towards China”? If the former is the case, it means the Moon government practically gave up its long-held strategic balancing of the U.S. and China. If the latter turns out to be the case, it means the Moon government has not changed its policy to balance the two powers, still walking a fine line between them.

South Korea’s Position towards the QUAD & the Indo-Pacific Strategy

The author will address several key questions relating to the QUAD and the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy within South Korea and the international community.

First, what are South Korea’s main concerns in joining the QUAD and the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy?

They include various multi-levelled considerations, outlined as follows:

■ How to justify joining the QUAD and the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy, especially as South Korea determines what joining them will mean for its “strategy of survival and development for the future” during a time of ever-intensifying geopolitical conflict, which includes the U.S.-China rivalry and the ever-increasing geostrategic need to seek a more autonomous, independent diplomatic stance

that balances the U.S. and China, without taking sides;

■ How to justify joining the two engagements while South Korea avoids strengthening and consolidating the divide between the two blocs – the U.S.-led vs. the China-led bloc – along the 38th parallel, which highly influences the prospects for Korean unification and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula;

■ How to justify joining as South Korea keeps Japan, its ex-colonizer, from becoming overly involved in Korean Peninsula-related affairs, while the U.S. & Japan-led QUAD emphasizes the U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation in dealing with China and North Korea;

■ How to justify joining as South Korea creates more room for independence for inter-Korean affairs apart from the U.S.-ROK alliance in dealing with North Korea, in particular, when the U.S. wants to “underscore the fundamental importance of U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation for addressing the DPRK,” and coordinate its and South Korea's approaches toward North Korea “in lockstep”; and

■ How to justify joining when China repeatedly threatens retaliation, alluding to South Korea's deployment of the U.S. THAAD system on the South Korean soil, and when South Korea depends on China for 25.8% of its total exports (2020), which is almost double that of the U.S., and while the U.S. does not have the will and capacity to supplement the potential economic losses inflicted on South Korea by China's potential retaliation.

Second, could South Korea become an (unofficial) “QUAD-Plus” partner? If that's the case, in which areas would an increased cooperation with the QUAD be most feasible?

■ The South Korean government does not appear to advocate the stance of “QUAD-Plus,” because it does not want to be treated as a second-rate member of the organization; QUAD-Plus gives the impression that South Korea cannot be a full member or player as long as the

name “QUAD” is retained; and

■ If South Korea clearly wants to participate in international cooperative enterprises in the areas of climate change, global health, advanced/emerging technologies, supply chain resilience, migration and development, etc., it may want to do so by using all relevant mechanisms serving those purposes, including the QUAD/QUAD-Plus. However, South Korea's entrance into QUAD/QUAD-Plus has to meet at least one essential condition: the QUAD/QUAD-Plus is used strictly as a functional platform for non-military/non-security cooperation.

Third, South Korea's foreign policy aims at reducing external dependencies and at diversifying its foreign relations, e.g., through the New Southern Policy. Would an increased cooperation with the QUAD be in line with this policy?

■ Apparently, the Moon government does not want to directly participate in the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy or the QUAD to promote its New Southern Policy; rather, it wants to “align” its New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy and “cooperate” with the U.S. in achieving the common objectives of their policies.

■ South Korea's New Southern Policy has not focused on the military/security issues in dealing with the ASEAN countries and India; rather, it has focused on the “three Ps” of People, Prosperity and Peace, so that it can smoothly promote sociocultural exchange, economic prosperity, and peace cooperation, or the building of a peace community with ASEAN and India.

Fourth, does the recent US-ROK summit mark a shift in South Korea's position towards the QUAD and the US Indo-Pacific strategy?

■ In the May 21st, 2021 Moon-Biden joint statement,

unlike in previous statements regarding the Indo-Pacific strategy and the QUAD, South Korea clearly accommodated the key agenda of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, against which China has repeatedly warned.

■ There are no "direct" mentions, however, of South Korea's participation in the Indo-Pacific strategy and the QUAD in both the joint statement and the Fact Sheet. Nor did Moon agree to include the word "China" in the joint statement when he agreed to include Taiwan and the South China Sea. Nor did he explicitly include the regions of "Hong Kong and Xinjiang," when he agreed to support the U.S. policy of promoting "human rights" at home and abroad. Note that the Biden-Suga joint statement of April 17th, 2021, included the word "China," "Hong Kong and Xinjiang," explicitly targeting China in promoting the Indo-Pacific strategy, human rights, etc.

■ The author is of the opinion that the Moon government has not decided to join the Indo-Pacific strategy and the QUAD; and has rather responded overly positively towards the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the QUAD as a way to dispel Washington's doubt about "South Korea's leaning towards China," "South Korea's eventual getting pulled into China's orbit," or the so-called "Finlandization of the Korean Peninsula" vs. China.

Fifth, what will be the main factors shaping South Korea's position towards the QUAD in the future? What are possible scenarios?

The main factors shaping South Korea's position towards the QUAD will include:

■ First, whether or not and how soon South Korea can justify joining the QUAD for its long-term strategy of survival and prosperity for the future, where its geopolitical challenges and geostrategic needs are met vis-a-vis the prospects for Korean unification and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as the U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific;

■ Second, the degree of seriousness of the U.S.-China rivalry, to the extent that it has a definitive impact on South Korea's decision to participate in the QUAD, and on taking sides between the U.S. and China, for instance, at the time of an imminent military conflict between the two powers;

■ Third, how decisively the future development of the coronavirus pandemic will influence the U.S. and China as well as Korea and others to change their approaches to the QUAD from a security-centered mechanism to a non-security-centered one in order to more effectively adapt to non-traditional/emerging security issues, including pandemics and man-made disasters; and

■ Fourth, the result of South Korea's Presidential Election on March 9th, 2022. If the liberal party wins, it will continue to avoid joining the QUAD/QUAD-Plus, not taking sides between the U.S. and China; the conservative party, once in power, will be more likely to join the QUAD/QUAD-Plus, taking sides with the U.S.

Finally, the possible scenarios regarding South Korea's joining the QUAD and the Indo-Pacific strategy will include:

■ First, South Korea's joining the QUAD and the Indo-Pacific strategy at an early date;

■ Second, South Korea's decision not to join the two agreements;

■ Third, South Korea's prolonged non-action regarding joining; South Korea may think that it doesn't need to decide too early, until its strategy of survival and development for the future during an ever-intensifying U.S.-China rivalry is fully reviewed and decided; and

■ Fourth, South Korea's participation in the QUAD/QUAD-Plus on the condition that it strictly remains as a functional platform for non-military/non-security cooperation in the areas of climate change, advanced technologies, and vaccine supplies, etc.; South Korea

declares conditional participation publicly so that it can revoke its participation when the declared conditions are not met.

The author fully appreciates the geopolitical challenges and geostrategic needs of South Korea to balance relations with the U.S. and China, and prefers to underscore the third and fourth possibilities as the most beneficial future scenarios.

About the author

Paik Haksoon is former President of Sejong Institute, a leading independent think tank in South Korea. He also worked as an advisor in various capacities to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and National Assembly. Currently, he is in charge of "The Kim Dae-jung Peace Forum" as the executive director. Dr. Paik has written extensively on North Korean politics, inter-Korean relations, U.S.-North Korean relations, and North Korean nuclear and missile issues. He is author of numerous books and monographs written in Korean, including: *Park Geun-hye Administration's Policy on North Korea and Unification: Comparison with Previous Administrations* (2018), *North Korean Politics in the Kim Jong Un Era, 2012-2014: Ideas, Identities, and Structures* (2015), *The U.S.-North Korea Relations During President Obama's Second Term, 2013-2014: Threat of the Use of Nuclear Weapons and the Collapse of Relations* (2014), *The History of Power in North Korea: Ideas, Identities, and Structures* (2010). He earned his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pennsylvania and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University.

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