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Pragmatic Diplomacy and Strategic Autonomy
for a Responsible Global Power

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Abstract

The international environment is undergoing structural transformation at multiple levels: U.S. hegemonic primacy is eroding, the Western-led order is weakening, and rapid advances in artificial intelligence are blurring the human-machine boundary. These trends are interconnected and together are producing the disorder characteristic of a hegemonic interregnum, marked by intensified interest-driven competition in which states increasingly rely on their own capabilities.

Amid growing uncertainty, South Korea requires a strategy that broadens its policy options while safeguarding national interests. This brief argues for a balanced strategy—a calibrated approach that combines principled positions on core and structural interests with flexibility on relational and transactional issues. Such a strategy should also be inclusive, avoiding the preemptive exclusion of any state. As the United States redefines alliances and places greater emphasis on burden-sharing, South Korea must secure strategic autonomy amid the enduring entrapment-abandonment dilemma within the ROK-U.S. alliance. Doing so will enable a more self-reliant alliance posture and greater sovereign discretion over core interests.

By leveraging its national strengths—advanced manufacturing, highly skilled human capital, cultural influence, and a resilient democratic system—South Korea can pursue an alliance management strategy suited to an era of transactional partnerships. As an advanced middle power with a history of colonial subjugation, however, it should not seek to become a pole within a power-centered multipolar system. Instead, it should contribute to a rules-based multilateral order grounded in consent and cooperation. This requires building solidarity with like-minded middle powers and expanding engagement with the Global South, which constitutes the majority of the international community. Through proactive diplomacy, South Korea can evolve from a norm taker into a norm promoter, consistent with its identity as a Responsible Global Power.

Keywords

Responsible Global Power, strategic autonomy, inclusive balanced strategy, self-reliant alliance strategy, pragmatic diplomacy

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An Era of Interests and Transactions

Debates on the Korean Peninsula have consistently unfolded against the backdrop of major international upheavals and systemic crises. The peninsula has long been sensitive to geopolitical shocks, but prevailing analyses suggest that recent transformations in the global environment are qualitatively distinct from those of the past. To begin with, the existing order, commonly referred to as the liberal international order, is being rapidly and forcefully eroded. Unilateral tariffs and retaliatory trade measures are proliferating; international law and institutions are being hollowed out; and the concept of “economic security”—whereby economic policy is increasingly shaped by security logic—has become widely normalized.

At the center of this turbulence lies U.S.-China strategic competition. Although recent summit diplomacy has produced a tactical *détente*, the structural rivalry between the two powers remains unresolved. Some characterize the current period as a G2 configuration, while others describe it as a G0 era. The former highlights the dominance of two superpowers, while the latter underscores the end of U.S.-centered unipolarity without the emergence of a new hegemon. Both interpretations share a recognition that the U.S.-led order—arguably the most powerful hegemonic order since World War II—is in decline.

Through its 2025 National Security Strategy, Washington signaled that it would no longer assume the role of Atlas, a provider of global public goods. It also underscored differentiated treatment of allies based on their alignment with U.S. national interests. This shift reflects a hegemonic interregnum, in which the existing hegemon is weakening without a visible successor. Major powers are increasingly pursuing self-interested foreign policies, contributing to the rapid fragmentation of the international system. Russia has

sought to alter the status quo by force in Ukraine, while the United States has also engaged in military actions involving Iran and Venezuela. With permanent members of the UN Security Council themselves resorting to the use of force, the UN's capacity to address international crises has been severely constrained.

The deeper structural driver of these developments is the decline of the Western-led international order. Since the Age of Discovery, Western powers—including Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, and ultimately the United States—have played a dominant role in shaping global affairs. It was the West, building on the modern nation-state system, that spearheaded transformative processes such as industrialization and the expansion of democratic governance. Today, however, the relative economic strength of advanced Western states is diminishing, and their normative authority is increasingly contested. While great powers have never been disinterested actors, Western democracies historically emphasized morality, freedom and human rights, albeit often inconsistently. At present, even this normative framing is eroding, and more overt forms of interest-driven competition and transactional behavior are becoming predominant.

In parallel, the transatlantic alliance that has underpinned the postwar order is experiencing significant strain. The United States has moved beyond criticizing allies for free-riding, hinting at territorial ambitions involving allied territory. At the 2026 Munich Security Conference, European leaders went so far as to describe the United States as a destroyer of the international order. While part of this tension reflects Western Europe's longstanding reliance on U.S. security guarantees, a deeper cause lies in Europe's relatively limited capacity to generate immediate, tangible strategic returns in a more transactional environment. Had Europe possessed greater assets capable of generating clear benefits for the United States, even President Trump might have adopted a less confrontational approach toward allies.

Another dimension of the decline of the Western-led order is the rise of the Global South. Many Global South countries share a history of colonial subjugation and therefore perceive Western double standards with particular acuity. For instance, some view Western condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as inconsistent when contrasted with more muted responses to U.S. and Israeli military actions involving Iran. More fundamentally, the Global South—characterized by substantial populations, abundant resources, and considerable growth potential—is increasingly emerging as a key driver of global political change.

These transformations are further reinforced by technological change. Advances in artificial intelligence are blurring the boundary between human and machine, reshaping not only economic structures and labor markets but also the broader conditions of

human existence. AI has already permeated multiple dimensions of warfare, fundamentally altering its character. Debates are intensifying over the extent to which AI should be entrusted with lethal decision-making authority, as well as over issues of accountability and governance. As AI becomes embedded across all domains, competition for technological leadership—especially between the United States and China—is accelerating, contributing to technological concentration among major powers. States are investing heavily in sovereign AI capabilities, and technology blocs are increasingly forming along U.S.-China lines. Competition at the geopolitical and technological levels is thus deeply intertwined.

A central challenge is that intensified great-power competition tends to impose disproportionate costs on weaker states. In a system governed by interests and transactions, uncertainty and volatility increase significantly; alignments may shift rapidly based on changing calculations of advantage. Situated along the fault line of major-power rivalry, South Korea must develop a foreign policy strategy that reflects these evolving dynamics. The current South Korean government has articulated a commitment to “national interest-centered pragmatic diplomacy.” This represents a meaningful departure from the previous administration’s more ideologically driven approach, which constrained South Korea’s ability to effectively advance its national interests. However, because all states claim to pursue national interests and pragmatic approaches, the substance of this ‘national interest-centered pragmatic diplomacy’ requires more precise articulation. This issue brief therefore examines the strategic content and direction of pragmatic diplomacy in advancing South Korea’s national interests, particularly in the context of intensifying great-power competition.

Inclusive Balanced Strategy

As the global environment becomes increasingly fluid, it is more difficult to rely on a single dominant foreign policy framework. Effective strategy must vary according to the issue and context. The Yoon Suk Yeol administration advocated “strategic clarity,” but in practice this approach remained embedded in a West-oriented, bloc-based diplomatic framework shaped by values and ideology, treating North Korea, China, and Russia primarily as adversaries. As a consequence, South Korea effectively relinquished opportunities to leverage relations with China and Russia in managing North Korea, contributing to the acceleration of North Korea-Russia rapprochement. More importantly, while South Korea pursued a values-based pro-Western policy, Western partners—particularly the United States—continued to engage South Korea largely through an interest-based lens.

The Lee Jae Myung administration's foreign policy, shaped by a reassessment of these limitations, places greater emphasis on pragmatism. Pragmatic diplomacy seeks to expand policy flexibility in order to advance national interests in a rapidly changing environment. When even allies' interests diverge, excessive alignment with any single state risks significantly constraining South Korea's strategic options. In an era of transactional relations, flexibility should take precedence over rigid alignment. The critical question is whether South Korea can formulate timely and context-specific responses tailored to individual issues and counterparts.

Pragmatic diplomacy should not be misconstrued as opportunistic or purely self-serving behavior. Rather, it aims to overcome the limitations of binary choices by preserving policy flexibility and avoiding strategic deadlock. At the same time, all states possess core interests that are non-negotiable, and South Korea is no exception. A coherent strategy must therefore combine principled commitments on core interests with adaptability on relational and transactional matters. Values and interests in international relations are not mutually exclusive; effective diplomacy requires their careful calibration. This is particularly important given that major powers frequently frame their own interests as universal values and seek to project them outward.

In this context, a balanced strategy is central to pragmatic diplomacy. South Korea's approach should not be equated with classical balance-of-power strategies historically employed by great powers such as Britain. Rather, it entails hedging against the risks of extreme alignment and calibrating policy across multiple dimensions—between foreign and North Korea policy, and between South Korea's interests and those of its counterparts. It also requires balancing principled stances on non-negotiable issues with flexible responses on matters that vary by context.

For such a strategy to be viable, inclusiveness is essential. South Korea should avoid targeting or excluding any state in advance. This is particularly important on the Korean Peninsula, which lies at the intersection of competing great-power interests. A rigid alignment with any single bloc risks placing the peninsula at the forefront of geopolitical confrontation. Notably, North Korea frames current dynamics as a Cold War-style bloc confrontation and appears to believe that strengthening ties with China and Russia can offset pressure from the United States and the broader international community.

If the regional environment hardens into a Cold War-style structure of ROK-U.S.-Japan versus North Korea-China-Russia, South Korea's policy options would narrow considerably, and inter-Korean relations would become subordinate to great-power rivalry. Preventing such an outcome requires cultivating diverse partnerships, including both multilateral and minilateral arrangements that transcend bloc politics. Given that

China and Russia maintain diplomatic relations with South Korea and remain significant economic partners, Seoul requires a flexible strategy that leverages these relationships alongside its expanded capabilities and accumulated diplomatic capital.

Alliance Strategy Based on Self-Reliance and Strategic Autonomy

Changes in U.S. foreign strategy and alliance policy constitute a critical variable shaping South Korea's strategic environment. In its 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS), the United States formally codified its revised foreign policy outlook. In the 2025 NSS, Washington stated that it would prioritize its own interests, urging allies to cease free-riding, assume primary responsibility for their own security, and fulfill their roles as allies. The 2026 NDS reaffirmed this position, emphasizing allied burden-sharing and stating that allies bear primary responsibility for their own defense while the United States provides "critical but more limited support." In short, Washington is redefining alliances not primarily on the basis of shared threats, but increasingly in terms of interests and transactions.

As noted earlier, the weakening of the transatlantic alliance stems not only from European NATO members' reliance on the United States without sufficiently strengthening their own defense capabilities, but also from its limited capacity to generate meaningful mutual benefits. By contrast, South Korea is often regarded by the United States as a model ally because it shares the costs of its own defense, offers clear areas of mutual benefit—such as shipbuilding and semiconductors—and is expected to contribute to countering China.

The central challenge in the ROK-U.S. alliance is the entrapment-abandonment dilemma. Traditionally, concern over U.S. abandonment has dominated South Korean security thinking. More recently, however, as the United States—focused on strategic competition with China—presses South Korea to expand its role, concerns have increasingly shifted toward entrapment in unwanted conflicts. For its part, the United States seeks to reduce its own entrapment risk by urging allies to assume greater responsibility for their security, while also encouraging burden-sharing in ways that advance U.S. interests. In essence, both South Korea and the United States are now constrained by different dimensions of the entrapment-abandonment dilemma.

As global uncertainty intensifies and the very meaning of alliances evolves, South Korea's alliance policy must shift toward a strategy grounded in self-reliance. Self-reliance is critical because, in an environment of heightened uncertainty, national capabilities constitute the most dependable asset. During the Cold War, when alignments were largely defined by ideology, an alliance-centered foreign strategy may have been sufficient.

Today, however, Seoul must recognize that it is Washington—its closest ally—that has already begun to redefine the terms of alliance.

In an era of transactional alliances, states must possess assets that enable them to balance interests vis-à-vis their allies. South Korea now faces a United States that may impose tariffs on allies, disregard previously agreed commitments, and even signal territorial ambitions involving allied territory—all in pursuit of its own interests. Fortunately, South Korea possesses world-class manufacturing competitiveness, highly skilled human capital, broad cultural influence, and a resilient democratic system. Taken together, these assets provide South Korea with the capacity to negotiate on relatively equal footing even with the world's most powerful state.

At the same time, the structural reality of South Korea's security dependence on the United States cannot be ignored. U.S. extended deterrence remains essential for countering North Korea's nuclear threat, and no credible alternative has yet emerged. South Korea's advanced conventional forces are capable of playing a central role in defending the Korean Peninsula. Even so, the ROK-U.S. alliance will remain a core pillar of South Korea's security for the foreseeable future. The challenge is that, as long as Seoul cannot fully overcome its security dependence on Washington, its policy options will remain constrained. It is in this context that strategic autonomy becomes indispensable.

Strategic autonomy originally emerged in European security discourse during the Cold War, particularly within the French Gaullist tradition, which emphasized resistance to dependence on the United States and NATO. At its core, strategic autonomy entails reducing security dependence on the United States: more concretely, it involves strengthening military autonomy in order to enhance political independence. Since the Trump era, debates on strategic autonomy in Europe have expanded to include related concepts such as strategic sovereignty, influencing the foreign policies of non-aligned India and Global South states, including Brazil. Ultimately, strategic autonomy is not about isolationism or self-sufficiency, but about preserving sovereign choice in the pursuit of national interests and values.

Among the policy issues South Korea currently faces, the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) and the development of nuclear-powered submarines are directly linked to strategic autonomy. The OPCON issue concerns the sovereign right of a state to exercise primary responsibility for its own defense, while independent deterrence capabilities—including nuclear-powered submarines—are central to strengthening defense capacity.

In this sense, the core issue in the strategic autonomy debate within the ROK-U.S. context is not whether to abandon or exit the alliance, but how much sovereign discretion South Korea can secure while maintaining it. Strategic autonomy is therefore not binary, but a matter of degree—varying across issues and contexts. For example, South Korea's sovereign decision-making should be respected in matters directly affecting the Korean Peninsula, where its vital interests are at stake.

Because major powers often make decisions based primarily on their own interests without sufficient regard for directly affected parties, divergences can arise even among allies. For this reason, securing strategic autonomy in the protection of South Korea's core interests will become increasingly important. The extent of strategic autonomy South Korea can achieve ultimately depends on the leverage it can bring to bear. While such debates may have seemed unnecessary when South Korea was a weaker state, it now possesses sufficient capabilities to negotiate with major powers.

Strategic autonomy also extends beyond the ROK-U.S. alliance. Enhancing it requires reducing economic dependence on China just as it requires mitigating security dependence on the United States. President Lee Jae Myung has noted in media interviews that the so-called *anmi gyeongjung* formula—security with the United States, economy with China—is no longer viable. His remarks underscore the need for South Korea to redesign its foreign policy by diversifying economic and technological partnerships and reducing reliance on any single country. In this sense, strategic autonomy involves easing structural constraints that limit policy choice while expanding sovereign discretion over core interests. Put differently, if an inclusive balanced strategy focuses on diversifying policy options under uncertainty, strategic autonomy emphasizes strengthening South Korea's responsibility and agency in matters of direct national concern.

Responsible Global Power Diplomacy

South Korea's foreign policy must ultimately evolve into a more proactive and engaged form of diplomacy commensurate with its expanded capabilities and international standing, rather than reflecting the posture of a peripheral or marginal state. This does not imply bandwagoning in an era of great-power competition. Rather than passively reacting to the choices of major powers, South Korea should make proactive decisions aimed at achieving more favorable outcomes. Although advancing national interests in an anarchic international system remains a universal challenge, the path forward lies not in coercion, but in shaping norms and institutions grounded in consent and cooperation. As a Responsible Global Power, South Korea should not seek to become a pole in a multipolar order; instead, it should contribute to a multilateral system in which fair competition is governed by rules endorsed by the international community. With its

manufacturing strength, cultural influence, and institutional resilience, South Korea is well positioned to advance its interests within such a framework.

South Korea's foreign policy as a Responsible Global Power should also serve to promote order and peace not only on the Korean Peninsula, but across the broader region and the international community. As an advanced country with a history of colonial subjugation, it should pursue a foreign policy distinct from that of traditional major powers. This does not mean sacrificing its national interests in order to provide global public goods or uphold universal values. Rather, it entails aligning its national interests with broader global objectives. For example, its pursuit of denuclearization and peace should be framed not as a reluctant concession, but as a proactive commitment to strengthening nonproliferation norms. Only with such framing can South Korea exercise meaningful authority as a norm-setting actor.

At the same time, South Korea should avoid significantly undermining the interests of other states in pursuit of its own. While success achieved through fair competition justifies the pursuit of national interests, it is equally important to avoid long-term structural harm for short-term gains. Historical experience—particularly the legacy of imperial powers drawing arbitrary boundaries without regard for local conditions—serves as a cautionary reminder of the enduring consequences of such actions.

Finally, transitioning from a norm taker to norm promoter requires not only strong national capabilities, but also the support of a broad network of partners. South Korea must therefore strengthen solidarity with like-minded middle powers while deepening engagement with the Global South. At the same time, it should maintain an inclusive diplomatic approach that is not constrained by alignment with any single bloc in an era of intensifying great-power competition.

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