

**SOUTH KOREA IN 2022:
ASPIRING TO BECOME A
GLOBAL PIVOTAL STATE?**

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Executive Summary

1. South Korea's conservative party took political power in the March 2022 presidential election narrowly beating the progressive candidate by less than 1%. With the new conservative government came a new direction and policy agenda for Korea, and nowhere was this more visible than in the realm of foreign policy.
2. The Yoon administration seeks to revitalise the US-ROK Alliance making it the central axis of its foreign policy. Seoul has decided to promote close cooperation with the United States in not just military and politics but also advanced technologies to uphold the rules-based liberal international order.
3. Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy sets out the vision of a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region based on the principles of inclusivity and openness. It also invokes a new "global pivotal state (GPS)" role for Seoul, which amounts to self-recognition of Korea's growing material capabilities and its increasingly vital role in the US-ROK alliance and international affairs.
4. There is an inherent tension in Seoul's promotion of its GPS role. On the one hand, the GPS conception aims to promote liberal values and practices based on international law and the United Nations. On the other hand, it seeks to expand and strengthen US-ROK alliance relations.
5. It remains to be seen how Seoul will reconcile its GPS role conception and alliance commitment when the United States breaches general liberal principles especially in the trade and technology realms.
6. The Yoon administration has issued a plan to Pyongyang that promises economic cooperation if the North denuclearises. However, it has also stated that hard military power and increased military exercise with the United States is the most effective way to deter the North. Seoul will come under pressure if little progress is made on the denuclearisation issue in the coming years.

7. The relations with China remain quite thorny as Korea has improved its cooperation with the United States, especially in advanced technologies. The latter has attempted to reorganise global supply chains with a significantly reduced role for China. Seoul and Beijing could struggle to find common grounds, despite the need to improve the bilateral relationship.
8. ROK-Japan relations have started to improve after a hiatus under the previous Moon administration. A compromise was reached on the forced labour compensation issue, the most significant stumbling block in the bilateral relationship. Despite domestic political backlash in Korea, the two countries are set to promote bilateral cooperation within the US trilateral framework.
9. Successive administrations all struggled to generate satisfactory growth and dealt with such social problems as low fertility rate and rising inequalities. If the Yoon administration also fails in this regard, there would emerge significant domestic political and socioeconomic constraints on what he can do in foreign policy.
10. All eyes will be on the National Assembly election in 2024, as Yoon aims to take over the legislature or, at least, reduce the gap between his conservative party (103 seats) and progressive party (180 seats).