



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



EAST ASIA EXPLORER JANUARY 2025

Authors

Pradeep Taneja

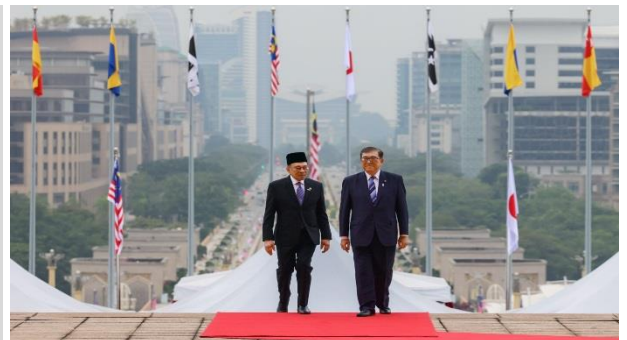
Prabir De

Jayantika Rao T.V.

Arshiya Chaturvedi

Biren Nanda

Volume III, Issue 1



Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

www.delhipolicygroup.org



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

East Asia Explorer

Vol. III, Issue 1

January 2025

ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

Authors

Pradeep Taneja, Non-Resident International Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

Prabir De, Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS)

Jayantika Rao T. V., Research Associate, Delhi Policy Group

Arshiya Chaturvedi, Research Associate, Delhi Policy Group

Ambassador Biren Nanda, Senior Fellow for Act East Diplomacy, Delhi Policy Group

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.

Cover Image:

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba met the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, in Kuala Lumpur, on January 10, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister's Office of Japan](#)

South Korea's now impeached president, Yoon Suk Yeol, gave a speech at the President's residence, on December 14, 2024 after the impeachment motion in the National Assembly was passed for his controversial imposition of martial law. Source: [Office of the President Republic of Korea](#)

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba held a summit meeting with President of the Republic of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, in Jakarta, on January 11, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister's Office of Japan](#)

© 2025 by the Delhi Policy Group

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor,

India Habitat Centre,

Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003.

www.delhipolicygroup.org

East Asia Explorer

Vol. III, Issue 1

January 2025

Contents

Rugby As a New Weapon in Australia’s Diplomatic Armoury Against Chinese Influence	
Pradeep Taneja	1
Myanmar’s uncertain political scenario holding back the ASEAN-India physical connectivity	
Prabir De	4
Japan’s Commitment to Southeast Asia: Ishiba’s Visit to Malaysia and Indonesia	
Jayantika Rao T.V.....	7
South Korea’s Political Upheaval and its Geopolitical Implications	
Arshiya Chaturvedi	11
India’s ‘Act East Policy’ and her National Security Challenges	
Biren Nanda	17

Rugby As a New Weapon in Australia's Diplomatic Armoury Against Chinese Influence

by

Pradeep Taneja

China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, began the year with a visit to Namibia, the Congo, Chad and Nigeria. It has been the hallmark of China's diplomacy for the past 35 years that its foreign minister picks a few African countries for his first overseas visits of the year. It is designed to convey the importance China attaches to relations with Africa and to highlight the contrast with the United States and the West, which are criticised for interfering in the internal affairs of African states and neglecting their development needs. Likewise, [China accuses Australia](#) of treating its much smaller neighbours in the South Pacific as a "condescending master".

Australia naturally opposes that descriptor and has launched a counter offensive to respond to China's growing economic, diplomatic and security footprint in the Pacific. But before we examine Australian perspectives on Chinese diplomacy in its neighbourhood, let us first briefly look at some of the characteristics of China's diplomacy with developing countries.

China's diplomatic engagement with Africa is representative of its diplomatic practices in its relations with developing countries in general. Chinese diplomacy in Africa and the Indo-Pacific has evolved over the years as its power has grown. Its principal characteristics can be traced through several themes and strategies it uses to advance its interests.

The most conspicuous element of China's diplomacy over the past decade or more has been the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which it has disbursed hundreds of billions of dollars in loans and investments to build ports, railways, highways, power plants and other infrastructure in various parts of the world. According to [one recent report](#), the cumulative Chinese "engagement" in BRI has already exceeded US\$1 trillion, although I would take that figure with a big pinch of salt. Africa has emerged as the largest recipient of BRI loans and investments, which China uses to gain influence and foster political relations.

Another strategy China uses to enhance its diplomatic influence is by trying to build its soft power and cultural influence. The principal vehicle for this purpose has been the Confucius Institute programme, launched in 2004 to strengthen ties with other countries through the promotion of Chinese culture and language. Under this programme, the Chinese government provided partial funding to foreign universities and schools to establish Confucius Institutes and Confucius classrooms to teach Chinese language, calligraphy, and other Chinese arts and crafts. China also sends Chinese teachers to Confucius Institutes who become the institute's co-directors.

Recently, in response to criticism from abroad and internal reviews of the programme, the Confucius Institute programme has been brought under a newly created body, the Chinese International Education Foundation, which uses a different model of funding than its predecessor, the Office of Chinese Language Council International or Hanban. The controversial programme has been more successful in developing countries than in the developed world, where it has been slammed for being an arm of the Chinese state and for interfering with academic freedom by blocking any discussion of taboo subjects such as Tibet, Taiwan and human rights. In the United States, 104 of the 118 Confucius Institutes have already been shut down, although there are [reports](#) that some have re-opened under different names.

The other strategies China has deployed as part of its diplomatic outreach include the promotion of security relations, building strategic partnerships, and characterisation of its economic engagement with developing countries as “win-win” cooperation, although some have described the ‘win-win’ tag as China winning twice.

Returning to the subject of how Australia views Chinese diplomatic outreach, one is reminded of Australia-China relations under the previous governments of Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison. Under their respective leaderships, Australia emerged as a fierce critic of China’s attempts to expand its diplomatic influence through the above initiatives. The language Australia uses now to describe its relations with China has changed under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, but the substance remains largely the same.

Australia refused to join the BRI when it was first announced by Xi Jinping during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia back in 2013-14. When one of the Australian states – Victoria – signed a Memorandum of Understanding on BRI with a Chinese government agency, the federal government under Morrison brought in new laws that allowed it to scrap that MOU. There has been no change in Australia’s policy on the BRI under Albanese, nor have the restrictions placed on Chinese companies such as Huawei been lifted.

Australia has also strongly pushed back against Chinese attempts to sign secret security agreements with smaller Pacific island states. Australia was alarmed by the former Solomon Islands government signing a security agreement with China. Since then it has promised hundreds of millions of dollars in security assistance to its Pacific neighbours to dissuade them from entering into security agreements with Chinese government agencies.

Chinese diplomats have argued that Pacific island leaders do not share Australia’s fears of Chinese influence in the Pacific. They have accused Australian politicians and diplomats of harbouring a Cold War mentality. Meanwhile, the Australian government has come up with novel ways of winning hearts and minds in the Pacific islands.

Everyone knows that rugby league and Australian-rules football are popular sports in several of the Pacific island nations, especially Papua New Guinea. But PNG rugby fans

have not been able to cheer for their own rugby league national team because there isn't one. Under a [new deal announced by Albanese](#) and his PNG counterpart, James Marape, in December 2024, Australia will spend whopping A\$ 600 million to raise and train a national PNG rugby league team that will compete in the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) competition by 2028. Announcing the new deal, Prime Minister Albanese said "Rugby league is the national sport of Papua New Guinea and PNG deserves a national team".

This is being seen by some as a master stroke by the Australian government as it will do more to unite the people of Australia and PNG in a common passion for a sport than any other form of economic assistance. But how does this help counter Chinese influence in the Pacific? Under the deal, the government of Prime Minister Marape has agreed to sign a "parallel" agreement on "strategic trust" that will keep Chinese police and military out of PNG and reaffirm Australia's status as PNG's closest security partner.

As Australia continues to stabilise its bilateral relations with China, Australian perspectives on Chinese diplomacy are shaped by a complex mix of economic interests, security concerns, and regional and global security dynamics.

Myanmar's uncertain political scenario holding back the ASEAN-India physical connectivity

by

Prabir De

2023 and 2024 appeared to be watershed years for ASEAN-India relations. To boost India-ASEAN economic relations, PM Modi announced a 12-point agenda in Jakarta in 2023 and another 10-point agenda in Vientiane in 2024. These two lines of activities cover a wide set of areas crucial for economic engagement, thus reflecting India's high commitment to ASEAN-India relations. Although some progress has been made in the case of soft connectivity, the entire hard infrastructure is yet to see meaningful progress. Undoubtedly, the current state of affairs in Myanmar is holding back the physical connectivity between ASEAN and India.

Out of the 12-point proposal, digital cooperation has witnessed some progress. The real-time, cross-border linking of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Singapore's PayNow has been implemented in 2023 and both sides are planning to expand the operation. ASEAN has shown interest in India's UPI and so also India to ASEAN's fast payment systems (FPSs). In June 2024, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) officially joined "Project Nexus", marking a milestone in India's integration with ASEAN's financial infrastructure.

In October 2024, PM Modi announced a 10-point plan which included: i) celebrating the year 2025 as ASEAN-India Year of Tourism for which India would make available US\$ 5 million towards joint activities; ii) to celebrate a decade of 'Act East Policy' through several people centric activities including a Youth Summit, a Start-up Festival, the Hackathon, a Music Festival, ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks and the Delhi Dialogue; iii) to organize ASEAN-India Women Scientists Conclave under the ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund; iv) doubling the number of scholarships at the Nalanda University and the provision of new scholarships for ASEAN students at Agricultural Universities in India; v) a review of 'ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement' by 2025; vi) enhancing disaster resilience infrastructure for which India would make available US\$ 5 million; vii) initiate a new Health Ministers' track towards building health resilience; viii) initiate a regular mechanism of the ASEAN-India 'Cyber Policy Dialogue' towards strengthening Digital and Cyber Resilience; ix) conducting a workshop on Green Hydrogen; and x) and an invitation to ASEAN Leaders to join the 'Plant a Tree for Mother' campaign towards building climate resilience.

In the last ASEAN-India summit, leaders agreed to create a new ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2026-2030) that will guide both sides in realizing the full potential of the ASEAN-India partnership and adopted Two Joint Statements: i) The Joint Statement on Strengthening 'ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region'. ii) In the context of the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) leaders recognized the contribution of India's 'Act East Policy' in advancing the partnership between ASEAN and India; and iii) Regarding the 'ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Advancing Digital Transformation' leaders appreciated India's leadership in the field of digital transformation and welcomed partnership with India in digital public infrastructure.

Projects which have witnessed a delay or a temporary closure are as follows: (i) the construction of the Trilateral Highway (TH) between Yargi and Kalewa and replacement of 69 bridges along the Trilateral Highway; and (ii) the construction of the road between Paletwa (Myanmar) and Zorinouri (India) as part of the 'Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project'. Without completion of the Trilateral Highway, connecting ASEAN with the first IMEC will remain incomplete and the extension of the Trilateral Highway to Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam wouldn't take off.

India and Myanmar signed five MoUs under the Quick Impact Projects framework, focusing on agricultural development, vocational training, disaster management, and education. Some of these projects are also closed, and Myanmar's current situation is not suitable for running projects having long-term impact on the economy.

India's border connectivity projects with Myanmar along Manipur and Mizoram states are moving slowly or stopped. The prolonged fight of rebel groups with the military junta government in Myanmar and the ethnic conflicts in the region are some of the proximate reasons for closing of the formal border trade between India and Myanmar. However, there are some positive developments at the India-Myanmar border. The formal trade at Moreh-Tamu border has just opened in January 2025 after a long closure since March 2020. The Government of India (GOI) has also allowed the Free Regime Movement (FRM) between India and Myanmar with a shorter distance and only for the local people. The FRM was closed in early 2024. However, the trade through Moreh-Tamu border points will not take place until the ethnic conflicts in the region are resolved.

The 44th ASEAN Summit, held during 6 – 11 October 2024 in Vientiane, Lao PDR, underscored the need for immediate intervention in Myanmar's worsening crisis. Despite multiple efforts, including ASEAN's 'Five-Point Consensus', we are yet to see any progress in Myanmar. The ongoing war

between the Junta government and rebel groups is causing huge damage to Myanmar. To bring peace and stability in Myanmar, India has to play a strong catalytic role.

Myanmar holds the strategic and economic significance for ASEAN-India connectivity. Myanmar is also the bridge-head connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia. India shares a 1,643 km-long border with Myanmar. Therefore, establishing peace and democracy in Myanmar is the key to the multi-modal connectivity and the economic corridor that links Southeast Asia, India, West Asia, and Europe. A broader engagement with various stakeholders in Myanmar may help India to safeguard its strategic interests, and also to bring back ASEAN-India connectivity projects on the ground.

Japan's Commitment to Southeast Asia: Ishiba's Visit to Malaysia and Indonesia

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

Introduction

Southeast Asian leaders, like their counterparts around the world, are adjusting their strategies to navigate the current geopolitical landscape, especially during the second Trump administration. While there is considerable discourse regarding the continuity of American policy toward Southeast Asia, it is evident that numerous changes are anticipated. The new US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has made it clear that US foreign policy will be driven by three main goals: to make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.¹ In this context, US partners in Asia, notably Japan, are compelled to intensify their engagement with other nations in the Indo-Pacific to prevent a shift towards China amid a diminishing commitment from the Trump administration.

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba made his first bilateral visit since taking office in October 2024, choosing to meet with the current ASEAN chair, Malaysia, and subsequently visiting Indonesia—the largest member of ASEAN—from January 9 to 12, 2025. His selection of official visits abroad is not surprising for two reasons. First, as the US will focus on strengthening bilateral relations rather than regional institutions like ASEAN, Japan aims to reinforce its economic and strategic interests and demonstrate that multilateralism will not be overlooked. Regional institutions will still receive the respect that the countries involved seek. Second, as key players in the Global South, both Indonesia, which recently joined BRICS as a full member (January 6, 2025) and Malaysia, a BRICS partner country as of October 2024, Japan plans to bolster its presence in the region to mitigate the potential negative impacts of China's influence.

Ishiba's Visit to Malaysia

Prime Minister Ishiba held the Japan-Malaysia summit meeting with Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, on January 10.² The Japan-Malaysia summit statement covers the key areas of the two countries' mutual

¹ "Secretary of State-designate Marco Rubio with George Stephanopoulos of Good Morning America". US Department of State, January 22, 2025. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-designate-marco-rubio-with-george-stephanopoulos-of-good-morning-america/>

² "Japan-Malaysia Summit Meeting". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 10, 2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/my/pageite_000001_00001.html

strategic interests, including cooperation in maritime security and cyber-security. The defence cooperation includes maritime partnerships, cooperation in cybersecurity, and bilateral coast guard collaboration, facilitated by the strategic dialogue that began in December 2024 and through Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework.³ Defence issues, particularly maritime security cooperation, have been an important component of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) agreement between Japan and Malaysia, which was signed in December 2023.

The discussion covered various areas of economic cooperation, including resilience in supply chains for critical sectors such as semiconductors, aircraft parts, and the development of rare-earth resources. Due to Japan's concerns about energy security, both countries agreed to ensure a stable supply of liquefied natural gas from Malaysia. They also expressed interest in collaborating on carbon capture, storage, and other green energy technologies. They also shared perspectives on economic initiatives, like the Asia Zero Emission Community framework, which aims to foster cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries on decarbonisation efforts.

Additionally, the leaders exchanged views on regional and international situations, including developments in the East and South China Seas, the Middle East, and Myanmar. They confirmed their commitment to working together to address these issues. Both leaders emphasised the importance of maintaining and enhancing a free and open international order based on the rule of law. They reaffirmed their commitment to fostering global cooperation through the realisation of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) and the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP). Overall, the meeting was comprehensive, addressing various topics and areas for potential cooperation.

Ishiba's visit to Indonesia

Following his visit to Malaysia, Prime Minister Ishiba met with Indonesian President Subianto Prabowo on January 11. At the outset of the discussions, Prabowo expressed his view of Japan as "a long-standing partner and friend," expressing his desire for Tokyo to contribute to his administration's key priorities, particularly in strengthening Indonesia's defence capabilities.⁴ Consequently, defence cooperation became the primary focus of the visit.

³ "Japan-Malaysia Summit Meeting". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 10, 2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/my/pageite_000001_00001.html

⁴ "Japan-Indonesia Summit Meeting". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 11, 2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/id/pageite_000001_00758.html

The leaders agreed to convene a 'Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting' (2+2) later this year. Furthermore, they endorsed the establishment of a defence consultation between their defence officials to address maritime security issues, including collaboration on defence equipment and technology. While specific details regarding the defence technologies under consideration for the transfer were not disclosed, Japan has recently suggested a joint development project for the Mogami-class frigate.⁵

The most significant outcome of the meeting, which attracted considerable attention, was Tokyo's agreement to provide Jakarta with high-speed patrol boats for the Indonesian Navy through the OSA. This strategic move by Japan sent a strong message about its commitment to enhancing regional maritime security amid the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. On the other hand, it was evident that Prabowo aimed to emphasise his commitment to Indonesia's national sovereignty through this agreement. Previously, he faced criticism for his collaboration with China on maritime issues, which appeared to offer potential concessions to China regarding Indonesia's claims in the North Natuna Sea. This led some to question his dedication to upholding national sovereignty. Therefore, this new agreement was intended to demonstrate that Prabowo would prioritise Indonesia's national interests while maintaining a cooperative relationship with China.

Additionally, the two leaders also confirmed the promotion of cooperation in the resource and infrastructure development to ensure energy security, decarbonisation through various pathways. They welcomed the agreement on coordinated financing by JBIC and other entities for the Muara Laboh geothermal power project, which falls under the Asia Zero Emission Community (AZEC) platform. Moreover, a loan deal signed a day before the summit revealed that Japan would provide Indonesia with an additional 83.4 billion yen (US \$530 million) in low-interest loans for the ongoing development of the Patimban Port, transforming it into a new international seaport.⁶

In a bid to strengthen ties, Ishiba sought to deepen his relationship with Prabowo by backing a key initiative of the latter's administration: a free-meal program aimed at tackling child malnutrition and boost economic growth. Prime Minister Ishiba expressed his desire to contribute to these efforts by leveraging Japan's experiences in school meal programs, such as sending

⁵ "Japan to Again Propose Frigate Development with Indonesia". The Japan News, January 1, 2025. <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20250101-230765/>

⁶ "Japan OKs 83 bil. yen in extra loans for new Indonesia international port". Kyodo News, January 26, 2025. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2025/01/67a09bc8a421-japan-oks-83-bil-yen-in-extra-loans-for-new-indonesia-intl-port.html?phrase=Foreigners%20in%20japan%20given%20extra&words=>

experts and providing training for Indonesian government officials. Prabowo welcomed Ishiba's proposal, stating, "Japan's 80 years of experience in nutrition programs would bring valuable support to Indonesia's initiatives."

Conclusion

During his visit to Indonesia, Prime Minister Ishiba articulated the significance of fortifying Japan's relationship with Southeast Asia. He stated, "With uncertainties rising in the global situation, it's crucial that we beef up our relationship of trust with Southeast Asia"⁷. Ishiba's four-day visit to Malaysia and Indonesia highlighted Japan's commitment to deepening ties with Southeast Asian maritime nations that benefit from Japan's Security Assistance (OSA), including providing defence equipment.

Ishiba's trip aimed to establish a common ground to address China's assertive actions within the region. Japan recognises ASEAN and its member countries as vital partners in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific and upholding a rules-based regional order. Therefore, his meeting with these two ASEAN member states was an attempt to affirm Japan's strong commitment to collaborating with ASEAN.

Additionally, by also focusing on economic cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia, Ishiba aimed to diversify Japan's relationships with these countries, preventing them from being purely defence focused. This strategic approach by Japan with increased engagement in both defence and economic sectors has the potential of creating deeper relationship with these countries. As a result, there is a significant possibility that Southeast Asia will be able to continue to maintain its balanced stance rather than lean towards any one power.

⁷ "Ishiba hopes diplomacy will give boost to parliamentary management". The Japan Times, January 12, 2025. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/01/12/japan/politics/ishiba-diplomacy-boost-diet-management/>

South Korea's Political Upheaval and its Geopolitical Implications

by
Arshiya Chaturvedi

A chain of events was set in motion on December 3, 2024, wherein the South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol imposed martial law under the pretext of a historically favourite justification of protecting the nation from alleged pro-North Korea sympathisers. This has plunged the nation into a period of political turmoil and instability.

South Korea has had a traumatising political history marked by authoritarian regimes and imposition of martial law. However, since the country's democratisation in the 1980s, it is the first time that martial law has been imposed by any leader. This declaration saw an immediate socio-political backlash, as citizens took to the streets in protest, demanding Yoon's resignation and the members of the National Assembly convened an emergency session to swiftly overturn martial law with a majority vote.⁸ The opposition-led National Assembly further went on to initiate impeachment proceedings against Yoon, which were successfully passed after several attempts for securing the necessary votes.⁹ As of now, Yoon awaits a ruling by the Constitutional Court, which will decide whether to uphold his removal from office.¹⁰ He also faces a criminal investigation for the abuse of power related to his imposition of martial law, which led to an arrest warrant being issued against him, leading to tense standoff between his presidential security detail and law enforcement before he was arrested on January 15, 2025.¹¹

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who assumed the role of acting president after Yoon's suspension from office, was also impeached by the National Assembly for opposing the appointment of the Constitutional Court to review Yoon's impeachment.¹² With both the President and Prime Minister impeached, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok is the current acting president,

⁸ Omer, Nimo. "Monday Briefing: After a Month of Political Chaos, Where Does South Korea Go Now?" The Guardian, January 6, 2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/06/first-edition-south-korea-political-crisis>.

⁹ Ng, Kelly. "South Korea Parliament Votes to Impeach Yoon Suk Yeol over Martial Law Attempt." BBC News, December 14, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c140xjv31lxo>.

¹⁰ Yoon Min-sik. "Yoon Expected to Speak at Impeachment Trial at 2 p.m." The Korea Herald, January 21, 2025. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10403530>.

¹¹ Supra note 2.

¹² Koh Ewe. "Yoon Suk Yeol: South Korea's Scandal-Hit President Who Declared Martial Law." BBC News, December 4, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2nyp3pxrko>.

although with a temporary and limited mandate.¹³ While South Korea's political landscape remains in a limbo, discussions have begun regarding the potential next leader. The Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) leader Lee Jae-myung stands as the most probable candidate for the presidency but faces legal challenges of his own, including allegations of corruption, election law violations, and misuse of corporate funds.¹⁴

Yoon's controversial presidency, characterised by domestic governance failures, media censorship, contentious government appointments, and corruption scandals involving his wife, Kim Keon-hee, along with divisive foreign policies, particularly his rapprochement with Japan and aggressive stance on North Korea, fueled discontent.¹⁵ This discontent was reflected in the 2024 legislative elections, where Yoon's People Power Party (PPP) failed to secure a majority and it was the DPK which got the parliamentary majority.¹⁶ Given the present political situation of South Korea, it is logical to argue that South Korea's next leader, whoever they might be, will aim to avoid repeating the mistakes that led to Yoon's political downfall, likely leading to a shift from existing political approach.

This change in South Korea's leadership and the potential shift of political approach will not only affect domestic affairs but also have a profound impact on the geopolitical landscape of the Korean Peninsula and larger Indo-Pacific region, with significant implications for major powers notably US, Japan and China. The US has long maintained a strategic interest in the region by establishing a bilateral defence relationship with South Korea post the Korean War (1950–1953) through the Mutual Defense Treaty (1953)¹⁷, to ensure peace and security in the Korean Peninsula. While US-South Korea relations have generally enjoyed a consistency across different South Korean administrations, President Yoon has pursued a more proactive engagement with the US under his "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) strategy that aims to enhance South Korea's role

¹³ Supra Note 1.

¹⁴ Seung-hyun, Song. "Who Could Be South Korea's Next Leader?" The Korea Herald, December 14, 2024. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10017129>.

¹⁵ Supra Note 1.

¹⁶ McCurry, Justin. "South Korea PM Offers to Resign after Heavy Defeat in Parliamentary Elections." The Guardian, April 11, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/11/south-korea-elections-opposition-victory-democratic-party-president-yoon-suk-yeol>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense. "Defense Vision of the U.S. -ROK Alliance." U.S. Department of Defense, November 13, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3586528/defense-vision-of-the-us-rok-alliance/>.

and responsibilities in addressing regional and global challenges through values-based diplomacy.¹⁸

Shortly after President Yoon took office, South Korea and the US deepened their bilateral ties by establishing a Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.¹⁹ Under this they agreed to increase bilateral cooperation for military exercises, defense technology, and equipment sharing through frameworks like the Regional Cooperation Framework for US-ROK Alliance Contributions to Security in the Indo-Pacific.²⁰ Beyond defence, the US and South Korea have also increased collaboration on the economic security aspect, focusing initiatives on technological development and supply chain resilience including the US-ROK Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies (CET) Dialogue launched in 2023²¹ and the United States-Korea Supply Chain and Commercial Dialogue (SCCD)²² established in May 2022. The countries are also engaging on the issue of cybersecurity through initiatives like the 1st ROK-US Working Group Meeting on the DPRK Cyber Threat²³ and the ROK-US Cyber Consultation.

Under US encouragement, the Yoon administration pushed for stronger Seoul-Tokyo ties to enhance the 'Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework's' effectiveness in advancing Indo-Pacific objectives and countering China's influence. Yoon made significant efforts toward rapprochement with Japan through compromises on key historical disputes. At the Camp David Summit, 2023 an agreement was reached on the forced labor issue by Japanese

¹⁸ R.O.K. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy: Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace and Prosperity." R.O.K. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. June, 8, 2023. https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1

¹⁹ R.O.K. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Korea, US Upgrade Ties To Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance." R.O.K. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. May, 5, 2022. https://down.mofa.go.kr/us-en/brd/m_4511/view.do?seq=761722&page=13

²⁰ U.S. Department of Defense. "Regional Cooperation Framework for U.S.-ROK Alliance Contributions to Security in the Indo-Pacific." U.S. Department of Defense, October, 30, 2024. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3951831/regional-cooperation-framework-for-us-rok-alliance-contributions-to-security-in/#:~:text=Both%20the%20U.S.%20and%20ROK,sea%20guaranteed%20to%20all%20nations>

²¹ U.S. Mission Korea. "JOINT FACT SHEET: Launching the U.S.-ROK next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies Dialogue." U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, December 8, 2023. <https://kr.usembassy.gov/120923-joint-fact-sheet-launching-the-u-s-rok-next-generation-critical-and-emerging-technologies-dialogue/#>

²² U.S. Department of Commerce. "United States - Korea Supply Chain and Commercial Dialogue Ministerial Joint Statement." U.S. Department of Commerce, April 27, 2023. <https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2023/04/united-states-korea-supply-chain-and-commercial-dialogue-ministerial>

²³ R.O.K. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Outcome of the 1st ROK-U.S. Working Group Meeting on the DPRK Cyber Threat." R.O.K. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. August, 10, 2022. https://down.mofa.go.kr/us-en/brd/m_4511/view.do?seq=761729&page=13

companies, and as a consequence of that agreement the South Korean government committed to compensating the victims instead of holding Japanese companies accountable.²⁴ This move strengthened ROK-Japan bilateral ties and enhanced trilateral cooperation with the US. This was evident from the increased frequency of summits, military exercises, and security initiatives such as the establishment of a real-time trilateral data-sharing mechanism on North Korean missiles, and a trilateral “Commitment to Consult” on regional security challenges²⁵. But this agreement also faced strong domestic criticism. DPK, South Korea’s main opposition party has condemned the agreement as the “most humiliating moment” in the country’s diplomatic history, while other critics accused Yoon’s foreign policy of prioritising US interests over South Korea’s national interest. Public sentiment has also been largely critical as indicated by a South Korean based survey, which found that 59% of South Koreans disapproved of Yoon’s unilateral gesture toward Japan.²⁶

The US-ROK alliance enjoys strong bipartisan support in South Korea, with both the ruling PPP and the opposition DPK considering it crucial²⁷, particularly in the face of North Korea’s persistent threats, including active nuclear testing, and China’s territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea. From the US perspective, the alliance with South Korea is a key component of its Indo-Pacific strategy for maintaining its regional dominance and countering China’s growing influence in the region. It is therefore possible to come to a logical and reasonable conclusion that in the broader context, due to their shared strategic interests, longstanding defense ties, and the trust built over the years of partnership, the US-ROK relationship will not face any significant disruptions. However with the US undergoing a leadership transition and South Korea facing political instability, some points of contention may emerge. For instance, recently, President Donald Trump, in his inaugural address on January 20th referred to North Korea as a nuclear power, raising immediate concerns in South Korea about possible shift in the US stance on North Korea’s

²⁴ Mackenzie, Jean, and Nicholas Yong. “South Korea to Compensate Victims of Japan’s Wartime Forced Labour.” BBC News, March 6, 2023, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64858944>.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce. “United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement.” U.S. Department of Commerce. December 19, 2025. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621235/united-states-japan-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-joint-press-statem/>

²⁶ Yeo, Andrew. “South Korea-Japan Rapprochement Creates New Opportunities in the Indo-Pacific.” Brookings, March 17, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/korea-japan-rapprochement-creates-new-opportunities-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

²⁷ Yonhap. “DPK Leader Stresses Seoul-Washington Alliance in Meeting with Acting US Ambassador.” The Korea Times. The koreatimes Times, January 22, 2025. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/01/113_390922.html.

nuclear ambitions, which could have significant implications for South Korea's security and sovereignty²⁸.

Speaking of the ROK-Japan ties in light of a potential change in the South Korean leadership, is far from simple. ROK-Japan have a long history of fraught relations rooted in the legacy of Japan's colonial rule over Korea with contentious issues such as comfort women, forced labor, and territorial disputes which continues to shape their bilateral ties. President Yoon made a big mistake by pursuing foreign policy objectives in complete disregard of historical issues, public sentiments, and political sensitivities which contributed to his political ruin. The next South Korean leader in addressing domestic turmoil and public dissent, might reverse Yoon's widely criticised unilateral rapprochement with Japan. However, Japan and South Korea share the same geopolitical region and face common adversaries, making bilateral defense cooperation crucial for regional security and stability. For a stronger and more meaningful relationship, a balanced approach is needed where both countries make equal efforts to strengthen their partnership. Japan must make sincere efforts to acknowledge and address historical grievances, showing the South Korean people genuine remorse for past actions. Actions like Japan's Ministry of Education's approval of history textbooks that omit references to comfort women, forced labor, and claim disputed territories²⁹ sends a negative signal to South Koreans.

As far as South Korea's relations with China is concerned, South Korea's heavy trade dependence makes China indispensable for its economic stability. South Korea has maintained a delicate balance in its geopolitical strategy where it has sustained economic relations with China while simultaneously deepening its defense cooperation with the United States. Public sentiments towards China in South Korea have been largely unfavorable. Hankook Research conducted survey in July 2022, which polled 1,000 South Koreans aged 18 and above, observed that China was the second-least popular among five major countries, the United States (59%), North Korea (29.4%), Japan (29%), China (23.9%) and Russia (23.3%). The US-based Pew Research Center's study also recorded historically high levels of anti-China sentiment in South Korea, with 80% expressing negative views toward China.³⁰ Even politically, for instance, the Yoon administration under the rhetoric of its values-based diplomacy under

²⁸ Arin, Kim. "Democratic Party of Korea Chief Weighs in on Trump Calling North Korea 'Nuclear Power' - the Korea Herald." The Korea Herald, January 23, 2025. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10406157>.

²⁹ Ahn Sung-mi. "Seoul Calls out Japan's Watering-down History in Textbooks - the Korea Herald." The Korea Herald, March 29, 2022. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/2825335>.

³⁰ He-rim, Jo. "Anti-China Sentiment at Its Peak: Survey - the Korea Herald." The Korea Herald, August 22, 2022. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/2940577>.

the GPS strategy, has called out China for its human rights violation by supporting a resolution along 17 other countries for a debate on alleged human rights violations against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.³¹ While South Korea's public and political stance on China has been critical, the economic realities, including slow economic growth and significant trade dependence on China, will make the next leader likely adopt a cautious approach in managing relations with Beijing.

The South Korean political crisis clearly highlights how it is crucial for leaders to balance foreign policy objectives with domestic concerns for long term political viability. Yoon Suk-yeol, as president of South Korea, has faced challenges with a divided National Assembly because of his slim majority, limiting his ability to push through domestic policies. In such a fractured political landscape, he leaned heavily on foreign policy and geopolitics as his political agenda. However, in shaping foreign policy, Yoon erred by not adequately considering public opinion or building political consensus at home. Although Yoon's international policies have received the attention abroad, they have struggled to gain domestic support.

A nation's foreign policy is an instrument for securing its national interest. Foreign policy has implications for the well being of a nation's citizenry, but it is also a reflection of its national values on the global stage. Support from the people at home is then a requisite for its success, making it vital to engage them and address their concerns in a balanced way. India's External Affairs Minister, Mr. S. Jaishankar has resonated with this understanding and has often emphasised that foreign policy should not be confined to the elite or diplomatic circles but should be made more accessible and understandable to the common man.

³¹ Yeo, Andrew. "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State." Brookings, December 19, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/south-korea-as-a-global-pivotal-state/>.

India's 'Act East Policy' and her National Security Challenges

by
Biren Nanda

The priorities and Strategic Objectives of the Modi Government's Foreign Policy can be divided into four elements: (1) Prioritizing an integrated neighborhood, (2) Bridging diplomacy and development' (3) 'Acting East' as China rises and (4) India as a leading power: Raising ambitions.

When Prime Minister Modi rhetorically replaced two decades of India's 'Look East' policy with 'Act East,' the purpose was to show greater intent in realizing what had long been an aspiration for India: to become an integral part of Asia. The greater urgency implicit in the shift in terminology is largely an outgrowth of Indian concerns regarding China's rise and the upsetting of Asia's delicate balance of power. In addition to the development of military and dual use Chinese infrastructure in India's neighborhood and the Indian Ocean, India's concerns are three-fold: the risk of Chinese assertiveness on the disputed border, the possibility of Chinese primacy in the Indo-Pacific region, and an uneven economic playing field.

After the global financial crisis of 2007-08, American dominance of world affairs was an immediate casualty. China began testing the limits of American strategic presence in Asia and the national security environment for India underwent a change. Chinese troops made aggressive incursions across the LAC and began creeping aggression and occupation of land features in the Spratlys in the South China Sea.

Two major trends are defining the future of Asia in this century – the economic and the geopolitical. At the core of both trends is the relationship between the United States and China. China's assertive behavior has created a new environment for neighboring Asian countries. The US has conveyed through its pivot to Asia and the notion of rebalancing that it intends to retain a key role in Asia.

The potential danger of these developments is demonstrated by the tension that arises periodically over territorial disputes between the Philippines and China and between China and Japan. Whether the US will be drawn into these conflicts by its allies or whether it will renege on its alliance commitments to maintain a viable relationship with China heightens insecurities amongst its allies in Asia.

The gradual but steady rise of India, a revitalized Japan under PM Shinzo Abe and his successors and the US rebalance to Asia are major strategic developments which are presently shaping responses to the challenge posed by China to the status quo and the post World War II order in the region.

Under the first Trump administration America's NSS¹ and "principled realism" signaled an intent to reverse the US decline and reassert a "neo-American" order. US trade sanctions on China targeted key technologies vital for the realization of China's 2025 and 2049 goals.

Though committed to continuing a vigorous policy to counter the Chinese challenge, former US President Biden signaled important differences in his approach. Gone was the "America First" paradigm. The US was committed to its "historic partnerships" and to working with allies and partners. The strategic perspectives of the Biden administration were however, largely similar to the 'Indo-Pacific strategy' adopted by the Trump administration.

On present indications under the second Trump administration there will be a ratcheting up of the pressure on China through export controls and tariffs as the US seeks to maintain its primacy as the global hegemon in a unipolar world. The world may be displaying symptoms of multi-polarity in the economic domain but in terms of global security it will remain for the foreseeable future a unipolar world.

Despite the US rebalancing strategy and the pivot to Asia the will of the US to confront China has been questioned, ushering in an atmosphere of geopolitical uncertainty. For a majority of the countries in East Asia, however, there remains the belief that the US and its alliance system as well as its new security relationships with regional powers are here to stay, checking the tendency to capitulate to Chinese hegemony for the present

The great American "war on terror" and the grand American project to democratize the Middle East faces uncertain prospects. There is a growing sense that forces of extremism and terrorism have bounced back in the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent. The conflict in the Middle East has the potential to reignite forces of extremism. The US drawdown in Afghanistan and the failure of the US to persuade the Pakistan army to give up support for cross border terrorism against Afghanistan and India remains a source of concern.

Dealing with the threat from Pakistan is a serious security challenge for India. Efforts at normalizing relations between the two countries have failed and the problem is that the changing regional balance of power has allowed Pakistan new freedom to pursue cross border terrorism against India. The shift of the

power balance in favor of India after the liberation of Bangladesh has been neutralized by the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent by Pakistan.

The expanding strategic gap with China has begun to pose multiple security challenges for India in a number of areas. These include the disputed border, the military balance with China, the creation of border infrastructure, Beijing's policy of arming Islamabad and Beijing's efforts to block India's rise through initiatives like its opposition to India joining NSG. Beijing has also expanded its Naval presence in the Indian Ocean and established security partnerships with countries, which were once part of India's traditional sphere of influence.

India has pursued its 'Act East Policy' and actively participated in ASEAN centric security platforms like the EAS and ADMM+. These frameworks have however, failed to tackle hard security issues in East Asia due to the ASEAN reliance on consensus based decision-making, and the impasse between the United States and China on the key issues in the region.

India has addressed its security dilemma by moving closer to the United States while maintaining its existing security partnerships with key powers. India has also forged closer strategic and military ties with major Asian countries including, Japan, Australia and Indonesia.

¹ Trump Administration (2017. December) National Security Strategy of the United States of America. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>



Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org