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Introduction

Over the last five years, the strategic partnership between the European Union and the Republic of Korea (ROK) has considerably deepened under the conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol's value-based diplomacy. However, after the martial law crisis at the end of 2024, Yoon was impeached, and the liberal Lee Jae-myung assumed office in 2025, who seeks to pursue a pragmatic diplomacy instead (Park, 2025). It is uncertain whether the EU–ROK strategic partnership will enjoy the same momentum as under Yoon, as Lee has been critical of his predecessor's foreign policy, including core issues for the EU such as NATO, Ukraine, and Russia. Lee's absence from the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague further reinforces the possibility of a policy change towards the EU.

A core difference in Seoul's potential policy shift lies in Lee's embrace of 'pragmatic diplomacy', an approach ostensibly antithetical to Yoon's value-based diplomacy. However, this paper argues that there will likely be more continuity than change, as structural conditions and strategic culture draw it closer to the EU, despite an avowed turn towards pragmatic foreign diplomacy. In the first section, these structural and cultural influences are introduced as elements of the ROK's strategic culture. Then, it turns to Yoon Suk Yeol's foreign policy and how this, amongst other structural factors, contributed to a closer EU–South Korea strategic partnership. Subsequently, it discusses how Lee's foreign policy may set itself apart from its predecessor and identifies how this may affect the developments in the EU–South Korea strategic partnership, including challenges to future cooperation.

1. South Korea's foreign policy: strategic culture and structural determinants

Structural explanations of state behaviour found in (neo)realism often provide a useful tool for explaining foreign policies. However, as put by historian Colin Gray (2009), "all people are 'social creatures'" that condition their actions in the context of culture. Therefore, strategic culture acknowledges that structural conditions, as well as ideas, norms, values, and beliefs cultivated through collective experiences, matter for explaining state behaviour (Kartchner et al., 2023; Tellis et al., n.d.), thus offering a more nuanced account of the motivations and intentions behind state behaviour (Kartchner et al., 2023; Lantis & Howlett, 2016).

Located on a Peninsula surrounded by the great powers China, Japan and Russia, the ROK's geography and historical experience of the great powers' interests in the region have profoundly shaped its strategic culture (J. Kim, 2015a; Snyder, 2020). It has been subject to invasions by imperial powers in the late nineteenth century, including Japanese colonisation between 1910 and 1945, which remains deeply ingrained in Koreans' collective memory, creating a self-perception that their country has historically been victimised by larger powers (K.-J. Kim, 2020).

This legacy has nurtured a historical sense of vulnerability, which created a strong drive for Koreans to become a "master of one's own destiny" as an unabated pursuit for strategic autonomy (Kang & Bang, 2016; J. Kim, 2015b; Pardo, 2023a; Snyder, 2020).

Following the Korean War (1953) that left the country impoverished and devastated, outward engagement, economic development and democratisation are considered crucial elements for leaving a past of victimisation behind. Democratisation paralleled the economic development of the country that enabled South Korea to accrue the capabilities to pursue its interests more autonomously and assume a more active role in the international system, leading South Korean policymakers to identify the country as a middle power by the 1990s (Pardo, 2023a). Relatedly, many South Koreans equate democratisation to global relevance, as the democratic consolidation contributed to building international partnerships, enhancing trade and gaining international recognition (Chung, 2003; Stephan, 2023).

The Korean War also entrenched the structural conditions that shape the contours of the ROK's foreign policy, producing a degree of continuity of the priorities of South Korean policymakers (Pardo, 2023a). While the Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953 ended the fighting between South Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the DPRK continues to pose an existential threat to the ROK, a reality that continues to define Seoul's priorities. As it continues its decades-long military buildup, it has at times provoked military confrontations and has become increasingly assertive with its nuclear sabre-rattling (J. Kim, 2015a; Pardo, 2023a). Simultaneously, after the US's instrumental role in bringing the Korean War to an end, it has continued to form the bedrock of South Korea's security architecture, allowing South Korea to direct more resources to its post-war economic development (Snyder, 2020). As with most alliances, the continued reliance on the US's security architecture poses a classical alliance dilemma: it needs to reconcile its desire for autonomy with the necessity of being dependent on a more powerful guarantor, which occasionally gives rise to fears of abandonment (Pardo, 2023a; Snyder, 2020).

In addition to the US and DPRK, the military and economic rise of China represents a third element of South Korea's triangular core shaping its foreign policy. As the largest regional power offering considerable economic opportunities and holding leverage over the DPRK, China is both a key enabler for the ROK's economic prosperity and a crucial actor in moderating Pyongyang. Paradoxically, however, its rise is increasingly seen as a growing threat by its perceived growing assertiveness, including the weaponisation of economic relations against the ROK and other states (Pardo, 2023a). As a consequence of the intensification of the US–China rivalry and the conflicting demands from both sides, Seoul faces an entrapment dilemma, as Seoul cannot afford to isolate China while the alliance with the US remains essential to national security (E. Kim & Cha, 2016). So far, South Korea has

sought to balance both ends by pursuing strategic flexibility or 'strategic ambiguity'. However, as the US–China rivalry intensifies, it becomes harder to harmonise their respective strategic interests, which limits Seoul's ability to pursue an autonomous foreign policy(Hwang, 2022; Jin, 2016; Pardo, 2023a).

2. Deeper EU-ROK partnership under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration

The relationship between the ROK and the EU was historically primarily driven by trade and investment. However, since the 2010s, it has expanded further into political and security domains, eventually becoming one of the deepest and most well-developed strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific (Pardo, 2025a; Richey & Christensen, 2021). It is anchored in mutual interests and perceptions of "like-mindedness" found in values, democracy and the rule of law, and, as supporters of multilateralism, they have forged strong ties in international institutions (Ferreira-Pereira & Smith, 2021; Pardo, 2025a).

Despite their geographical distance, the deterioration of their respective strategic outlooks has increasingly brought the ROK and the EU closer together, as their threat perceptions have gradually converged in recent years. For most of the post-Cold War era, European policymakers did not have to be concerned with traditional security threats, which contrasts with South Korea's enduring North Korea threat. Accordingly, most security cooperation took place in non-traditional security domains, such as non-proliferation and cyber threats, but for Seoul, these were always of a more immediate nature compared to Brussels (Pardo, 2025a; Richey & Christensen, 2021). Over time, however, Brussels and Seoul are increasingly confronted by similar threats and actors, including the weakening of the international rule-based order (Pardo, 2025a). Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its increasing assertiveness and the eventual Ukraine War (2022) necessitated Europeans to contend with traditional security threats (European External Action Service, 2016). Although geographical proximity creates differences in immediacy and scale, the rise of China poses shared challenges to the international rule-based order and economic security.

In the context of this deteriorating strategic landscape, policymakers in Brussels and Seoul increasingly find common challenges and their interests converging. Both have longstanding security dependencies on the US that are increasingly brought into question, especially under the first and current Trump administration (Badawi & Zreik, 2025; Cha, 2024; Paik, 2023; Stangarone, 2021). With the security commitments and conditions of their alliances being challenged, Brussels and Seoul are compelled to reassess and develop autonomous capabilities, as well as to diversify security partnerships with capable and reliable 'like-minded' actors (Paik, 2023; Pardo, 2023b, 2025a). Moreover, Brussels underscored the interrelationship between peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and prosperity in Europe,

while affirming the need to work closely with like-minded partners such as South Korea (European Commission, 2022; European External Action Service, 2016). Likewise, Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy identifies the EU as an important partner that shares the values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and seeks to preserve the rules-based international order (Government of the Republic of Korea, 2023).

Against the backdrop of these structural conditions, it was during the 2020s that the security cooperation with the EU arguably deepened the most, first under liberal president Moon Jae-in and later under the conservative president Yoon Suk Yeol (2022–2025) (Pardo, 2025a). Traditionally, Korean conservatives tend to lean more towards the US, while liberals tend to assume a more critical stance towards it (Pardo, 2025b), which reflects Yoon's close ideological alignment with Biden's dichotomous framing of international politics as democracies vs autocracies (Matamis, 2024). It mirrors various policy documents and rhetoric, including Yoon's (2022) ambition to transform the country into a Global Pivotal State "that advances freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values", as well as the importance it attributes to partnering with like-minded states in its Indo-Pacific strategy (Office of National Security, 2023). The Global Pivotal State, moreover, embraced a proactive role in regional and global challenges and sought to deepen its relations with the EU (Nilsson-Wright, 2023; Pardo, 2025a).

The Ukraine War (2022) furthermore underscored the interconnectedness of the Indo-Pacific and European theatres. Just days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China announced a "no limit" partnership with Russia and has contributed to keeping Russia economically afloat afterwards. During the war, the DPRK entered a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, eventually leading to the deployment of North Korean troops in Ukraine and supplying Russia with munitions and arms (Choi, 2025). This deepening is particularly worrisome for Seoul, as it was followed by mutual transfers of arms and technology that advance North Korea's military capabilities (Howell, 2024a).

In this context, the ROK was able to position itself as a valuable and reliable geopolitical partner to Europeans. As one of the few non-NATO countries, South Korea aligned with Kyiv by joining the EU-led sanctions against Russia, sending direct non-lethal and indirectly lethal military aid to Ukraine, and calling out Russia's aggression (Pardo, 2025a). It simultaneously positioned itself as a valuable and reliable partner by helping to mitigate Europe's constrained ability to support Ukraine militarily and rebuild member states' militaries after decades of underinvestment in the defence sector. Having emerged as a prominent defence industry during the last decade, South Korea is able to meet Europe's defence needs at a pivotal moment for European security (Uk & Fiott, 2024). Over this timeframe, cooperation with the EU deepened considerably by expanding bilateral agreements with EU member states, practical cooperation with NATO by entering the APT4, and by signing a security and

defence partnership in 2024 (European Council, 2023; European External Action Service, 2024; Pardo, 2025a; Park, 2025).

3. Lee Jae-myung's pragmatic foreign policy and the EU

Yoon's presidency was cut short following the failed martial law decree that led to his impeachment in early 2025. This left the country in a political crisis, deepening polarisation in an already polarised society, at a time when it is facing economic headwinds (Howell, 2024b). Whereas Yoon will be mostly remembered for his foreign policy achievements, the ROK's new liberal president Lee Jae-myung, will likely have to direct more attention to domestic and regional challenges, as South Korea's strategic environment has considerably deteriorated due to an emboldened North Korea and China's growing assertiveness (Bak, 2025; Matamis, 2025). The second Trump administration's transactional foreign policy may, moreover, add pressure on existing economic challenges, and its confrontational approach to China is likely to exacerbate South Korea's strategic dilemma (Howell, 2024b).

To navigate these challenges, it is uncertain whether the Lee administration will continue Yoon's Global Pivotal State foreign policy, as President Lee Jae-myung has been critical of his predecessor's value-based diplomacy. Driven by an ideological foreign policy, Lee argues that the Yoon administration has strained its relations with Pyongyang, Beijing and Moscow, which is contrary to Seoul's interest, as all three powers are intertwined with South Korea through their geographical proximity and economic ties (Da-gyum, 2025). Lee also believes that Yoon's hardened policy towards Pyongyang pushed it closer to Russia (Jae-woo, 2025; J. Kim, 2024; M. Kim, 2025). Instead, Lee seeks to steer the country towards a policy of 'pragmatic diplomacy' that, while still predicated on the US–South Korea alliance, seeks to avoid firm alignment with any great power, in order to best pursue national interests. For Lee, this means recalibrating South Korea's foreign policy to restore its relations with Pyongyang, Beijing and Moscow, through increasing economic engagements and by avoiding antagonising them (Da-gyum, 2025; Yonhap, 2025b). Some warn that this could entail a shift in its approach to security challenges, from one that seeks to expand security partnerships with core allies to one that seeks to engage with China and Russia as an element of its security architecture (D. Lee, 2025).

Accordingly, a change of policy on Russia can cause tension and may stymie deeper security cooperation with the EU. In the past, Lee has expressed scepticism towards Yoon's approach to Ukraine, such as his disapproval of Yoon's consideration of sending ROK troops to Ukraine to monitor DPRK movements and sending direct military aid. Moreover, when the Ukraine War broke out, Lee suggested that Ukraine had provoked the war in 2022 (Hyeon-beom, 2022; Hyun-woo, 2023; M. Lee, 2024; Yonhap, 2024). If the ROK recalibrates its Russia policy by means of engagement while adopting a more cautious approach toward Ukraine, it risks undermining the momentum of expanding its security partnership with the EU. It will also face fewer restraints from the US in doing so, given the current Trump administration's more

conciliatory approach to Russia, as it has been unwilling to impose further sanctions, expressing interest in possible economic engagement when the fighting ceases (Belin et al., 2025; K. Johnson, 2025; Rescheto, 2025). This could weaken South Korea's commitments to the rigorous implementation of sanctions against Russia and, in the most extreme case, possibly result in greater cautiousness in its arms exports to Europe.

However, it seems unlikely that the advances in the EU–ROK cooperation will be reversed or that the appetite for closer cooperation will disappear, as the ROK's strategic dilemma will continue to push for a diversification of partnerships. One of Lee's objectives under his pragmatic diplomacy is to avoid firm alignment between China and the US, a desire that may become increasingly difficult, if not impossible in some cases, as the US-China competition intensifies. Washington's China hardliners are increasingly prioritising deterring China, and are considering using troops stationed in South Korea not just for deterring the DPRK, but also for wider challenges in the Indo-Pacific, including a potential Taiwan contingency (Howell, 2024b; Sang-ho, 2024, 2025). Conversely, while China remains essential for South Korea's economic well-being, it continues to view its increasing regional power with caution and has to manage the risks of economic interdependence, given its willingness to leverage them in the past (Lim & Ferguson, 2022; Santander, n.d).

Deeper security and economic cooperation with the EU may provide Seoul with breathing space, as its room to manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing is increasingly shrinking. Not only is Europe an attractive partner because of its international economic and geopolitical weight, but also its like-minded values. Even though a turn towards pragmatic diplomacy may suggest values will assume a secondary role, they are unlikely to be removed from the equation completely, as they are deeply ingrained in its middle power identity. As such, Lee's foreign policy team has underscored that shared democratic values and support for multilateralism can make the EU "the best like-minded partner in upholding shared values" and expressed a willingness to "solidify and expand" the ROK–EU strategic partnership, in order to promote international order and cooperate on global challenges (KF Vub, 2022, pp. 1–2). Hence, the EU remains an attractive partner to manage its dependencies in the face of uncertainty, as it can soften any potential blows while advancing its strategic autonomy.

Moreover, it appears unlikely that Seoul has the appetite to seriously sever its relations with the EU for better relations with Moscow. Getting too comfortable with Russia would be an unpopular policy, as public opinion polls reveal that most South Koreans view Russia as a security threat and source of international instability (Lipke, 2025). Nor is there a sound economic rationale to jeopardise EU relations over Russia. Before the war, Russia was the ROK's tenth-largest export market and has only decreased in importance afterwards, while the EU is its third-largest trading partner today (European Commission, 2025; E. Kim, 2024;

Stangarone, 2024). It also appears unlikely that Seoul will hold back on its expanding role in the European defence industry. Not only does it reflect a strong economic rationale, as Lee regards the defence industry as "new growth engines" (Yonhap, 2025a), but also a strategic one. As arms exports often provide the inroads for deeper security partnerships (Pardo, 2023b). There may, however, be more caution in engaging with security initiatives that could be viewed as too provocative in the eyes of Moscow or Beijing. As such, it appears unlikely the Lee administration will echo Yoon's willingness to consider sending direct lethal aid to Ukraine (M. Lee, 2024).

Although these factors pull Brussels and Seoul closer together, the geographical distance, in combination with separately evolving threat landscapes, may raise limits to the level of ambition for future cooperation (Richey & Christensen, 2021). Worsening regional security in both Europe and the Korean Peninsula risks that both turn inwards, towards their respective theatres, instead of outwards, to each other. Europeans are preoccupied with their Eastern borders and getting their defence in order, while Seoul's security environment is rapidly deteriorating (Guido, 2025). For South Korea, additionally, it makes more sense to bolster its ties with the US, which remains the most important strategic influence, irrespective of a conservative or liberal government (J. Kim, 2015a; Pardo, 2025b). By contrast, Europeans have limited regional capabilities in Asia, and it is unlikely that they will be ready to divert resources to Asia as Russia poses an immediate danger. This can be further compounded by a surge in Eurosceptic parties in Europe and internal political struggles in South Korea that may divert attention away from international cooperation (Hasselbach, 2025).

Conclusion

Changing from a presidency based on an explicit form of value-based diplomacy, under Yoon Suk Yeol, to one that proclaims to be pragmatic-based and seeking to recalibrate its relations with Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang has raised uncertainty over the future direction of EU–ROK cooperation. Yet, because the structural conditions of Seoul's security dilemma remain largely unchanged, this paper expects more continuity than change in the future of the strategic partnership with the EU.

The need to continue to diversify South Korea's international partners will not cease under the Lee administration, especially as the US-China competition intensifies. Avoiding taking sides or maintaining the perception of neutrality will become harder and may not always be possible, which creates a need to expand its room to manoeuvre strategically and soften potential blows. Although the role of values will likely wane in public discourse with the proclaimed shift to pragmatic diplomacy, shared values will continue to make the EU an attractive partner to deepen cooperation with, as it forms the foundation for popular

support and is core to its middle power identity. The decisiveness by which the Yoon administration aligned with like-minded countries and the momentum with which the EU-ROK strategic partnership developed will, however, likely slow down as a result of internal and external political developments, as well as a potentially more cautious Lee administration seeking to avoid provocative or antagonising rhetoric and actions in the eyes of Beijing, Pyongyang, or Moscow.

While it cannot be known how Lee's foreign policy will unfold, ultimately, its priorities and policies will be profoundly shaped by South Korea's triangular core, which has long conditioned the contours of its grand strategies (Pardo, 2025b). The foreseeable intensification of international politics and events that the administration cannot anticipate will similarly direct the attention and inform the policies during Lee's presidency. Although the character of South Korea's foreign policy may differ under a new government, the substance will likely remain persistent due to enduring structural conditions. The forthcoming national security strategy is expected to shed further light on the character of Lee's foreign policy and reveal how much it differs from its predecessor in practice.

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