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## Strengthening South Korean Value Diplomacy for U.S.-South Korean Normative Alignment

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### Introduction

The foreign policy of any state is formulated by calculating national interest and normative ideals. If national interest is based on tangible economic and security gains, normative ideals are often understood as universal and transformative values. However, this distinction is often blurred in reality, as normative choices are made in the context of long-term national interest. Furthermore, a state's normative alignment can change due to ideologically different new governments or contentious domestic challenges. The worst-case scenario occurs when a strong state withdraws from leadership of a normative coalition of like-minded states. Like-minded states tend to disperse when they lose their leader; the decline of the Community of Democracies after the United States's neglect is such a case. States fail to pursue consistent foreign policy because normative politics are in flux domestically and internationally.

Despite this complexity, a strong power can exercise normative foreign policy more effectively than a weaker power, as it can employ both hard and soft power. The United States played such an enforcement role during the post-Cold War unipolar world. A newly emerging strong state, such as China, can challenge an existing norm or establish a new norm. What about middle powers? Lacking unilaterally exercisable power, middle powers frequently champion multilateral rules and norms that can protect their interests from great power coercion. Professor Andrew Cooper characterizes a middle power as normatively more virtuous and trustworthy in the global order and describes its preferred diplomacy as pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems, embracing compromise positions in international disputes, and adopting the notions of “good international citizenship” (Cooper et al. 1993, 116). The government of former South Korean President Lee Myung-bak pursued middle powermanship under the Global Korea slogan, emphasized value-based international contributions by expanding foreign aid, and hosted the Group of Twenty (G20) and other global meetings.

Now, the Yoon Suk Yeol government has scaled up its middle-power ambitions to those of being a global pivotal state by highlighting South Korea's international contributions and values-based diplomacy (Yoon 2022a). Like the Lee government, the Yoon government is building its proactive multilateral diplomacy while deepening its long-standing alliance with the United States. But the

U.S.-China relationship has changed significantly between the Lee and Yoon governments: geopolitical competition between the United States and China has intensified during the intervening fifteen years, expanding beyond the economic and military spheres to include technology and ideology. Under U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, an ideological narrative dividing the world between democracies and autocracies has set in. The Russian war in Ukraine has caused Western European countries to merge democratic unity and collective security. In Northeast Asia, North Korea's nuclear capabilities now threaten not only South Korea but also the faraway United States. Facing all these high-risk challenges, the Yoon government has tightened military and economic ties with the United States.

The two countries' shared democratic values and liberal norms have emerged as a crucial component of deepening bilateral ties. This normative alignment has invited criticism from Beijing, but the Yoon government has so far not rolled back its advocacy for those values—although it has carefully dubbed them as “universal values” rather than liberal or democratic values. The national confidence gained by globally successful popular Korean culture and deteriorating public opinion against China have helped fuel this value assertiveness.

### Summary of the CFR Workshop

The Council on Foreign Relations held a virtual workshop on June 26, 2023, on “U.S.-South Korea Policy Coordination Toward China on Democratic Values and Human Rights.” The workshop's core takeaways included the following:

- *Leadership change has made South Korea reflect values in its foreign policy and expand “contributive diplomacy” for collective goods in the region and the world.* South Korea's recent values-based diplomacy has been shaped by President Yoon Suk-yeol himself. Yoon has emphasized individual freedom, human rights, and the rule of law as universal values. Obviously, those values are better kept in democracies than autocracies. But, by framing them as universal, Yoon has avoided wading into the ideological divide between democracy and autocracy and allowed himself to engage illiberal democracies. His speeches at his inauguration, the UN General Assembly, and the U.S. Congress all point out that threats to freedom and human rights can be checked when people are united to confront them. In the two main strategy reports on the Indo-Pacific and national security released by Yoon's administration, those universal values are championed to preserve the peace and prosperity of the region and South Korea itself by strengthening rules-based order. Both reports are based on the vision of South Korea as a global pivotal state, under which leadership in multilateral diplomacy is sought. More official development assistance, humanitarian support, and peace-keeping activities are regarded as instruments of achieving this leadership.
- *Several concrete actions have been taken demonstrating the Yoon government's commitment to values-based diplomacy.* South Korea joined the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) voting to check China's human rights violation against the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang in June 2022. Although this vote did not receive enough support to be adopted a resolution, it was an important move to bring China's treatment of Uyghurs into the UN system. South Korean

governments have historically avoided condemning China's human rights violations in international organizations like the United Nations; the Yoon government's vote in favor reveals values-based diplomacy in action. At the same time, the Yoon government has also taken a more assertive position on North Korea's human rights issues in the United Nations, cosponsoring two resolutions, one by the General Assembly and the other by the HRC. The Yoon government also hosted the Summit for Democracy Indo-Pacific Regional Meeting on March 30, 2023. President Yoon pledged to implement \$100 million over the next three years.

Common values and partnership for rules-based order have been also called for as the basis of improving sour relations with Japan. Facing domestic opposition over forced labor compensation issues and other thorny historical conflicts, overturning the bilateral relations with Japan was a difficult task for Yoon. However, the Yoon government managed to push bilateral deals to cooperate with Japan. Responding to the security challenge posed by North Korean nuclear and missile threats is the primary reason for this rapprochement. At the same time, improving South Korea-Japan bilateral ties has been regarded as crucial for trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan to build the rules-based liberal order in the region. Yoon's diplomatic overtures have expanded to Europe, including his participation in NATO Summit and humanitarian support for Ukraine and forthcoming reconstruction aid after the war is over.

- *U.S. leadership should support the values-based diplomacy of the Yoon government consistently and reciprocate with material benefits to win South Korean domestic public support.* South Koreans regard the United States as a favorable and trustworthy partner that shares their values. On the other hand, China has been losing its appeal due to coercive diplomacy and perceived China-centered cultural hegemony. However, this state cannot be permanent. Domestically, Yoon's approach to China is facing attacks from his opposition, who claim that his position is contributing to an unprecedented trade deficit with China and hurting the economy. Therefore, U.S. leadership needs to provide material benefits that can quiet this vein of criticism.

Furthermore, severe partisanship in American politics makes it difficult to predict the next U.S. government's position on values-based diplomacy. As in the past, South Korea relies on support and joint action from the United States. If the United States wants South Korea to continue to champion values-based diplomacy, U.S. institutions—including official entities working on democracy assistance and civil society organizations—should deeply engage their counterparts inside South Korea. This should not be a difficult task: bipartisan congressional support for South Korea's values-based diplomacy is strong. Last, but not least, to sustain South Korea's values-based diplomacy, the United States should allow South Korea room to engage China on universal values.

### **Presidential Discourse and Basic Foreign Policy Tenets**

South Korea's new diplomacy is the result of government and presidential change. President Yoon Suk-yeol has indicated since his election campaign that he would more explicitly align South Korea with the

United States. Those remarks implied that, if elected, he would reject the so-called strategic ambiguity previously used to balance Seoul’s relationships with Washington and Beijing (Gallo 2021). Yoon’s explicit alignment with the United States seems to be based on personal belief, though couched in the language of universal, not U.S., values. Compared to previous South Korean presidents, Yoon is rather unique in using the word *freedom* in his speeches. In his inaugural NATO, UN General Assembly, and U.S. state visit speeches, President Yoon emphasized freedom as the most important universal value to be protected individually and collectively. Three speeches reveal his thinking on freedom as a political value:

- In his inaugural speech on May 9, 2022, Yoon revealed his philosophy of freedom. To overcome external and internal crises, he said, “Belief in shared values is paramount ... And the most important core value is freedom.” He went on, saying that, “Human history shows that when political and economic freedom reigns supreme, that is where prosperity and abundance flourished. When prosperity and economic freedom flourishes, that is when freedom reaches even the darkest corners. Freedom is a universal value. Every citizen and every member of society must be able to enjoy freedom. If one’s freedom is infringed upon or left uncorrected, this is an assault on everyone’s freedom ... everyone must be guaranteed the right to receive quality education and everyone must be granted the freedom to access and experience various cultural activities” (Yoon 2022b).
- In his UN General Assembly speech titled “Freedom and Solidarity: Answers to the Watershed Moment,” Yoon’s belief in freedom as an individual right to escape poverty and receive quality education led him to support global health funds. He introduced his speech by highlighting human rights violations globally and appealed for solidarity for freedom and commitment to norms consolidated within the UN system. “Today, the global community is yet again witnessing freedom and peace of its citizens put in jeopardy,” he said. “Attempts to alter the status quo by force endanger the lives of innocent people; nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction pose increasing threats to humanity; systemic violations of human rights leave millions of children deprived of their future. Such threats to freedom and peace must be overcome through solidarity and fearless commitment to the framework of universal global norms consolidated over the years within the UN system” (Yoon 2022c).
- In his April 23, 2023, address to the joint meeting of the U.S. Congress commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, titled “Alliance of Freedom, Alliance of Action,” Yoon said that “[t]ogether with the U.S., Korea will play the role as a ‘compass for freedom.’ It will safeguard and broaden the freedom of citizens of the world” (Yoon 2023).

In addition to Yoon’s speeches, two reports released during the past half year detail the direction of the Yoon government’s foreign policy. South Korea’s overriding national interests—security, prosperity, and a heightened international profile—are described as better served by advocating for universal values and cooperating with like-minded states. Both reports emphasize the benefits of harmonizing normative values and the national interest, a strategy referred to as contributive diplomacy.

- The Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in December 2022, argues that the region’s peace and prosperity are better preserved when those values are kept. The report says that as a trade-

dependent democracy, South Korea's next leap forward relies on a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific region and that South Korea will remain committed to promoting freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. International cooperation to promote the rule of law and human rights is noted as one of nine core lines of the Yoon government's Indo-Pacific strategy.

- The National Security Strategy, released in June 2023, proclaims that “as a global pivotal state grounded in the spirit of freedom and solidarity, the Republic of Korea endeavors to actively address the rapidly evolving security environment. ... Undoubtedly, pursuing freedom will continue to present us with even more opportunities, while maintaining solidarity will pave the way for an even greater future. Therefore, we commit to joining hands with the international community to safeguard universal values, such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law, and to uphold the international order based on rules and principles.” In the section titled Defending Liberal Democracy and Contributing to Global Prosperity, advancing leadership in multilateral diplomacy to uphold a rules-based international order is prioritized. Expanding official development assistance and peacekeeping operations are mentioned as its tools. Supporting the realization of humanitarian values is described as one of major points of international development assistance. Continuing the provision of humanitarian support to war-stricken Ukrainians is pointed out as an example.

### **Actions Taken to Promote Liberal Norms**

The Yoon government was vocal at the United Nations in condemning human rights violations by China and North Korea. The Yoon government also supported Biden's democracy agenda by cohosting the second Summit for Democracy. During its efforts to normalize bilateral relations with Japan, the Yoon government emphasized shared values within the Korea-Japan partnership. Some of the notable actions taken by the Yoon government in its values-based diplomacy include the following:

- *Joining UN voting to check China's human rights violations.* In October 2022, the forty-seven-member UN Human Rights Council voted on a resolution to hold a debate the following year on alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang, China. This highly debated resolution was rejected by a narrow margin of nineteen votes against to seventeen in favor, with eleven abstentions. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Michele Taylor noted that evidence of human rights violations in China's Xinjiang province was recorded in a previous UN report and that it was crucial to hold a debate in a neutral forum. The report, issued on August 31, 2022, by former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, documents credible evidence of torture or other ill-treatment against the Uyghur minority and states that the violations could constitute crimes against humanity (Schlein 2022). However, the United States was unable to secure enough swing states to keep the issue on the UN agenda (Wintour 2022). South Korea's vote against China is a clear departure from previous South Korean governments that had avoided condemning China's human rights violations in the United Nations.
- *Becoming assertive on North Korea's human right issues.* The Yoon government cosponsored a UNHRC resolution (Kim 2023), adopted on April 4, 2023, denouncing North



Korea's gross human rights violations, a break from the Moon Jae-in government's five years of muted criticism (*BBC News Korea* 2022). This followed South Korea's cosponsoring of the UN General Assembly's resolution on North Korea's human rights violations that was adopted on November 15, 2022. Previous progressive governments in South Korea had been less vocal about North Korea's human right issues in the United Nations due to their priority on improving inter-Korean relations.

- *Hosting the Summit for Democracy.* The South Korean government hosted the ministerial Indo-Pacific Regional Meeting of the second Summit for Democracy, titled "Challenges and Progress in Addressing Corruption," in Seoul on March 30, 2023 (MOFA 2023). The participating Indo-Pacific countries adopted the Seoul Declaration on Challenges and Progress in Addressing Corruption, reaffirming the importance of promoting democracy and the need to combat corruption. President Yoon called the meeting an opportunity to affirm the willingness to implement the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, and attached great significance to Indo-Pacific countries reaffirming their commitment to protect democracy. He also stated that to repay the international community for its support for South Korea's democratization, South Korea would implement development cooperation projects worth \$100 million over the next three years in areas such as the e-government system, digital transformation, strengthening technological capabilities, transparency, and anti-corruption efforts. The "democracy promotion for future generations," a 1.5 track youth forum, will also be carried out by South Korea to contribute to shared values. Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin stated that the international community should utilize the Summit of Democracy as an opportunity to cooperatively protect democratic principles and stressed South Korea as a living testament to the truth that democracy remains the most effective means to freedom, peace, and prosperity.
- *Embracing Japan as a partner for rules-based order.* Regardless of ideological differences between progressives and conservatives, all South Korean leaders have emphasized their commitment to preserving the rules-based order. The May 21, 2021, Biden-Moon joint statement stated that the two countries "oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order and commit to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific" (The White House 2021). The freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and beyond was included, and the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait was emphasized. A year later, less than two weeks after President Yoon's inauguration, the May 21, 2022, Biden-Yoon Joint Statement envisioned a "heightened role in advancing freedom, peace, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond," and noted their respect for international law including freedom of navigation, overflight, and other lawful use of the seas, including in the South China Sea (The White House 2022). In this sense, both Moon and Yoon showed the same support for the standing rules-based order. However, the fundamental difference between Moon and Yoon is their contrasting positions on diplomacy toward Japan. In his 2022 Liberation Day speech, Yoon stated that Japan is Korea's partner as they face common threats to the freedom of global citizens, and that the two countries can move to resolve their historical problems by collaborating on shared universal values (Lee 2022). Despite strong criticism from the

opposition party, Yoon initiated a de facto resolution for the dispute over wartime conscripted labor that has historically strained Korea-Japan relations.

- *Engaging Europe through liberal values.* Yoon's rules-based order expands to Europe. At the June 29, 2022, NATO summit, Yoon, the first Korean leader to attend a NATO summit as an observer, said, "[a]s a new structure of competitions and conflicts is taking shape, there is also a movement that denies the universal values that we have been protecting." Voice of America quoted an anonymous South Korean official who stated that Yoon was referring to the Ukraine war, and like most countries, raised concerns about Russia's and China's respective responsibility (Shin 2022). Ten months later, Yoon condemned Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in the Biden-Yoon joint statement and clearly implied that the "global comprehensive strategic alliance" between the United States and South Korea is equally applied to the war in Europe as the alliance rooted in shared values. The South Korean government has offered \$100 million worth of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine so far.

### **Recommendations for Sustaining the South Korean Government's Value Diplomacy**

The South Korean government under Yoon has pursued value diplomacy to an unprecedented degree. If this policy shift is to continue, three factors should be considered: the backlash to South Korea's relations with China, domestic politics inside South Korea, and potential political changes in U.S. leadership.

- China has been criticizing the United States' formation of smaller coalitions as weakening the United Nations. In response to the U.S. narrative of democracy vs. autocracy, China has pushed a counternarrative arguing that its political system is a different, better-functioning form of democracy. When South Korea hosted the second Summit for Democracy, China criticized South Korea as championing U.S. ideology rather than universal values as Yoon claimed. As conflicts mount between South Korea and China, economic retaliation and icy diplomatic relations could grow, similar to China's 2016 economic retaliation over South Korea's deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in Sangju. To make South Korea's democracy diplomacy sustainable, narratives of universal values need to include China as a partner in certain areas. It will be very challenging for South Korea to address China's human rights violations and, at the same time, engage China in commonly valued areas such as youth and women's rights. South Korea should consider cooperating with European democracies and international organizations as it tries to adapt its values diplomacy to China.
- According to a 2022 survey by the East Asia Institute, China is disliked and mistrusted, and about twice as many Koreans answered that South Korea should take a tougher position against China's human rights violations. When asked which country was more favorable, 56.7 percent of South Koreans answered the United States while only 10.9 percent answered China. The United States is also ten times more trusted than China, as 85.1 percent of South Koreans answered that they trust the United States while only 8.2 percent answered that they trust China. This clear preference for the United States over China is also demonstrated in

value alignment: 86.1 percent agreed that a strong U.S.-South Korea alliance is natural as both countries share values and orientations. When asked if South Korea should take a similar stance as other democratic countries in taking a tougher position against China's human rights violations, 60.7 percent answered yes while 27.5 percent didn't feel the need.

- However, economic concerns are likely to influence South Korean attitudes. South Korea has been facing economic difficulties including an unprecedented trade deficit with China. South Korea's post-pandemic economic growth still relies on the Chinese market. Opponents of Yoon's values diplomacy argue that it is likely to hurt South Korea's economic interests by provoking China. Korean businesses are now building bigger factories in the United States for a stable supply chain, which is expected to decrease South Korea's trade dependence on China. During this transitional period, Yoon should counter the economic loss argument at home. In this aspect, whether the Biden administration can extend subsidies to Korean firms operating battery factories in the United States or exempt Korean semiconductor manufacturers in China from restrictions will be important issues for Yoon to secure domestic support for values diplomacy.
- The Yoon government's values diplomacy dovetails with South Korea's alliance with the United States and the Biden administration's adoption of diplomacy supporting democracy. This means that a possible government change in the United States—and consequently weaker support for democracies abroad—could dampen Yoon's initiative in advocating universal values and contributing to democracy assistance. Therefore, regardless of new leadership following the U.S. presidential election in 2024, bipartisan recognition of Yoon's initiative and accompanying support will be desirable.

### **Conclusion**

Amid the intensifying ideological competition between the United States and China, the Yoon government has aligned with the United States normatively, risking souring relations with China. President Yoon's consistent messages of commitment to freedom and human rights have been articulated through a series of speeches and accompanying major national reports on foreign policy. Several concrete actions, such as joining the UN Human Rights Council, voting against China, and hosting the Summit for Democracy, have followed. Reversing diplomacy toward Japan and supporting Ukraine with noncombatant support have followed the logic of democratic cooperation. In order for the Yoon government's values diplomacy to sustain, engaging China in common interests and cultural values, securing economic gains from values diplomacy, and consistent U.S. democracy diplomacy will be critical. ■



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