

## YIM SUNG-JOON

Senior Advisor at Lee International IP & Law Group, former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, former National Security Advisor to President Kim Dae-jung

### **Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri and the WPC**

Now, Yim Sung-joon, first I would like to remind everybody that you also had a very distinguished career in the diplomatic service of your country, in particular as the National Security Advisor, so the people with us this morning are very experienced. I would also like to mention that you are one of the longest-standing friends of the WPC and I remember our discussion in a hotel in Seoul in 2007, I think, when we discussed this project, and you were one of the very first to support it. Thank you very much for everything and now your views on this Indo Pacific context that South Korea joined lately, with a lot of hesitation. Perhaps, since time is short you could also add some remarks on a more immediate issue, which is the latest developments in North Korea and the way they affect or are perceived in your country.

### **Yim Sung-joon**

Major strategic shifts have occurred recently in the area within and around the Indian and Pacific Ocean. The Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept was floated more than a decade ago, however, it gained global attention only after US President Trump referred to the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) during his visit to Asia in Nov. 2017. Soon after that, the US Administration officially replaced the “Asia- Pacific” with “Indo-Pacific” to describe the US strategic sphere across Asia. The US FOIP is, in a nutshell, a manifestation of a hegemonic competition with China and a geopolitical scheme to counterbalance China, which has been extending its influence over a wide region with its rising military and economic capabilities. The US was concerned about Chinese building a sphere of influence from the Eastern China Sea to the Indian Ocean, thereby restricting US global power projection and leadership in the international system over the longer term. Thus, the US has moved its strategic pivot westward from the Asia-Pacific to include India and the Indian Ocean Rim and in May 2018, modified its military doctrine to rename the US Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command.

The Biden Administration which pronounced “Anything but Trump’ policy guideline, faithfully inherited Indo-Pacific strategy from the previous administration and released its Indo-Pacific strategy report on Feb. 11, 2022. From the beginning, the US considered South Korea, Japan, Australia and India as keys allies in its efforts of pushing forward the IPS. Beside South Korea, the US, Japan, Australia and India launched the quadrilateral security dialogue, which was another component of the US strategy for the Indo-Pacific.

The vision of Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region can be attributed to Japan's Prime Minister Abe, who became the strongest advocate for the Indo-Pacific strategy. Japan believes that the threat from China is not only at sea but to their own territory. Japan is often credited with jump-starting the Indo-Pacific concept with a speech given by then Prime Minister Abe to the Indian parliament in 2007. But there was a lag in Japanese institutional follow-up because Abe lost power and returned as Prime Minister in 2012, and then there began to be more of a structural focus in Tokyo on his vision of an FOIP.

Australia was the first country which rendered full-fledged commitments to the US for its Indo-Pacific strategy. Up until the mid-2010s, despite concerns over security threats posed by China's military expansion, hard balancing against China did not seem to be an option for Australia. Now bilateral relationship between Australia and China has been put at the lowest ebb with exchanging the retaliatory measures on the trade. China's economic sanctions against Australia in 2020 amplified anti-Chinese public sentiment. In response to the growing economic threat from the overreliance on China, Australia is experimenting with government policies related to trade and investment diversification.

The shift of Australia's China policy is an interesting case to study how the regional order is likely to evolve in the growing US-China conflict.

Now, I would like to turn to Korea's relevance to the Indo-Pacific strategy. From the beginning, the US sought to persuade South Korea to join the FOIP framework, but South Korea refrained from officially engaging in it. South Korea is by location an Indo-Pacific country and a middle power that wields influence as a strong democracy, unchanging ally to the US and the 3rd largest economy in East Asia. However, due to a combination of South Korea's domestic politics and strategic constraints in foreign policymaking, South Korea stayed behind the curtain for the last 5 years. Now it formally announced the formulation of its long-awaited Indo-Pacific strategy by the end of this year. President Yoon outlined key elements of his Indo-Pacific strategy with strengthening of the rules-based international order built on universal values, "I plan to create a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region through solidarity and cooperation with ASEAN and other major nations" in the speech delivered to the ASEAN summit in November this year. Why did South Korea take a long time to embrace the US led initiative for the Indo-Pacific?

First, South Korea's hesitation was due to its preoccupation with North Korea, mostly the nuclear issue. The foreign and security policy of South Korea has been always set on inter-Korean issues with progressive governments like President Moon's. As a result, when the US FOIP first surfaced in late 2017, South Korea was reluctant to join it, because it was viewed as unfavorable to inter-Korean relations.

Second, the US FOIP was formulated to target the rise of China, therefore, supporting the US FOIP would complicate South Korea's relations with China, its top trading partner and a long-time stakeholder in the inter-Korean relations. As long as South Korea's foreign policy revolves around North Korea, South Korea cannot afford to antagonize China.



Third, President Moon, taking office in 2017, embarked on a new diplomatic initiative called “The New Southern Policy” (NSP) which overlaps with the Indo-Pacific region, perhaps could be called a Korean version of the Indo-Pacific strategy. By doing so, South Korea managed to secure autonomy and non-military engagement with the FOIP. Since the launching of the Biden Administration, South Korea’s stance on the Indo-Pacific started to change. In March 2020, South Korea participated in the first QUAD plus meeting along with New Zealand and Vietnam. A more noticeable shift in South Korea came during the Washington summit meeting between President Moon and President Biden in May 2021. President Moon endorsed the US FOIP framework by adopting the joint statement which contains the core elements of President Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy targeting China.

What led President Moon’s Government to be more receptive to the FOIP?

First, President Biden’s foreign policy was single-mindedly focused on maintaining US dominance over China and rallying its allies and partners around the anti-China network. If South Korea is isolated further, it would face the risk of damaging South Korea’s inter-Korean relations including the denuclearization of North Korea amid US indifference to South Korea’s policy.

Second, with rising anti-China sentiment, South Korea’s autonomy between the US and China (amounting to ambiguity) has become unsustainable domestically. When China economically retaliated against South Korea for the THAAD deployment in 2016, the majority of South Koreans perceived China as an economic and military threat.

The election of President Yoon early this year took a dramatic turn in shaping South Korea’s future Indo-Pacific strategy. President Yoon, a conservative party candidate vowed to strengthen US-Korea alliance relationship and reset China-Korea relationship criticizing the Moon administration for its lukewarm stances against China’s “cruelty” during the election campaign. Now we understand that President Yoon still faces the same geostrategic predicament as he had during the campaign, that is: the US is its ally and China is its largest trading partner as well as an important stakeholder in the inter-Korean issues.

It is more than half a year since the Yoon government began working on formulating its own Indo-Pacific strategy framework as promised. Global and domestic conditions that have shaped South Korea’s “strategic ambiguity” have not changed. Abroad, costs of strategic clarity are rising as the US-China competition takes an increasingly hostile turn; if China was willing to retaliate for THAAD, other signs of realignment, such as South Korea’s formal membership in the QUAD, are unlikely to go unnoticed. At home, the people’s priority is placed on economic turn-around, for which China’s cooperation is needed.

Under all circumstances, the most fundamental and uncompromising principles are the core national interests. It is thus critically important for Korea to establish a set of its own principles and terms for a flexible, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific in its strategy framework.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

Thank you very much, Sung-joon. Let me say briefly how I see this part of our session. I think this Indo-Pacific concept reflects a very subtle but also unstable, implicit equilibrium. The problem is that as I understand it, no country, particularly in Southeast Asia, wants to take sides



too clearly or openly vis-à-vis the US-China rivalry. However, since the whole construct is highly unstable, something could happen at any point that would in fact force some countries to take sides. Maybe not all and I think India has a very special role because it is becoming a giant. As the current Indian Foreign Minister says almost every day, India is proud of its civilization and intends to make its own choices by itself, they do not want any kind of strategy imposed from outside. The situation is much more complex for Japan and Korea and the margin for maneuver much more limited. I think we are talking about a very unstable situation, which is not surprising because the whole world is unstable today.