

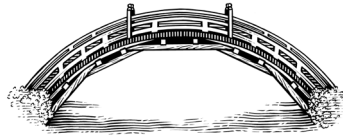
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Ramon Pacheco Pardo's

*South Korea's Grand Strategy:  
Making Its Own Destiny*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2023

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*Andrew Yeo*

*Darcie Draudt-Véjares*

*Duyeon Kim*

*Yves Tiberghien*

*Lam Peng Er*

*Ramon Pacheco Pardo*

## Can South Korea Really Develop a Grand Strategy?

*Andrew Yeo*

The study of grand strategy has proliferated in recent years in no small part due to the revival of great-power competition and endless pontification in the media about whether the United States and China are locked into a new cold war. The underlying assumption here is that grand strategy—a long-term perspective “focused on a state’s primary ends” and “mak[ing] use of all available means to achieve them”—is typically reserved for big powers (p. 16). In his latest book, *South Korea’s Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny*, Ramon Pacheco Pardo challenges that assumption both theoretically and empirically. He sets out to prove that “middle powers can have a grand strategy” and uses South Korea—the “quintessential middle power”—to make his case (p. 4). Pacheco Pardo briefly outlines South Korea’s foreign policy from 1948 to 1987 (see chapter 2), but the story of South Korean grand strategy is really a post-democratic one when South Korea began to possess the capacity and capabilities to project a regional if not global strategy over the long term. As such, the main time frame of the analysis is 1988 to 2022.

Pacheco Pardo is a prolific scholar and one of the most influential writers on South Korean foreign policy of this generation. *South Korea’s Grand Strategy* is his third book in two years.<sup>1</sup> However, Pacheco Pardo’s latest title is distinct from his other recent works given its deeper theoretical grounding. Building on insights from the literature on grand strategy and middle powers, and backed by an impressive volume of qualitative empirical data (including over 3,200 policy documents and 71 semi-structured interviews with current and former high-level government officials), Pacheco Pardo develops a theoretical model of middle-power strategy that helps explain South Korean foreign policy. His model draws extensively on William Martel’s theorization of grand strategy and spells

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<sup>1</sup> Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *Shrimp to Whale: South Korea from the Forgotten War to K-Pop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); and Victor D. Cha and Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *Korea: A New History of South and North* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

out the geographic scale, temporal scope, and the means and ends adapted for a middle-power strategy (p. 28).<sup>2</sup>

Pacheco Pardo then describes eight key factors propelling South Korea's grand strategy. The factors themselves are a combination of past events, political processes, and structural conditions: the division of Korea, the U.S.–South Korea alliance, the rise of China, economic development, the adoption of democracy, regional integration and globalization, and the Asian financial crisis (p. 55). Following Martel, Pacheco Pardo links the ends and means of grand strategy of a middle power such as South Korea. The broad ends include foreign policy autonomy, security, prosperity, and status, whereas the means to these ends include deploying a range of military, economic, diplomatic, informational, and cultural tools (i.e., soft power).

In addition to Martel's model, Pacheco Pardo uses a simple yet useful framework to conceptualize South Korean grand strategy based on four concentric circles illustrating the geographic division and scope of South Korean foreign policy. Each circle represents a specific region or set of countries (p. 83). Unsurprisingly, the foundation of South Korean grand strategy, represented by the innermost circle, encompasses South Korea's "triangular core": North Korea, the United States, and China. This is followed by East Asia, and, beyond that, greater Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. The outermost circle represents "the rest of the world" and global governance institutions (pp. 83–90).

The four concentric circles ultimately serve as the roadmap for organizing and explaining South Korea's grand strategy in the remaining empirical sections of the book (chapters 4–7) with a full chapter devoted to each of the four regions. For each empirical chapter, Pacheco Pardo structures his analysis by evaluating South Korea's means, ends, and strategic priorities under all seven South Korean presidents since South Korea's democratic transition. In doing so, Pacheco Pardo illustrates how grand strategy cuts across partisan politics. Each South Korean administration is still guided by the same broad goals of autonomy, reunification, peace, stability, and prosperity, even if they are motivated by different political ideologies and deploy a different combination of policy tools to achieve their ends.

Pacheco Pardo's book is the first substantial work on South Korean grand strategy and thus sets the bar for any future analysis on the topic.

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The book is also comprehensive and systematically organized, serving as a useful resource for any scholar or practitioner looking to better understand the foreign policy of different South Korean administrations toward different regions and issues. The book should be required reading for any serious scholar wanting to understand South Korea's past, present, and future grand strategy and foreign policy.

There are, however, a few issues worth raising in the book that might give readers some pause for thought. First, some scholars may dispute the degree of domestic consensus Pacheco Pardo suggests regarding South Korean grand strategy, especially if the end goals are defined in such broad terms. Very few will dispute that South Koreans of all political stripes seek to protect their nation from external threats or strive to achieve greater economic prosperity. Most states in the end will desire the same goals of security, stability, and prosperity (and perhaps elevated status). But this offers us little in the way of distinguishing one state's grand strategy from the next. For instance, other middle powers such as Indonesia, Brazil, and Turkey may also value autonomy, protection from external military threats, deeper integration in the world economy, and recognition as an influential middle power. When end goals are construed so broadly, grand strategy as defined by ends becomes much less useful.

What distinguishes a nation's grand strategy, however, is often the means to the ends. Here, Pacheco Pardo illustrates how South Korean progressives and conservatives at times carve out different paths toward specific end goals. For example, in seeking inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification, conservative governments tend to prioritize "economic coercion and deterrence" whereas progressive governments will prioritize "diplomatic means and economic engagement" (p. 153). On Japan, which falls into the East Asia concentric circle, progressives and conservatives also employ a different combination of means to navigate their relationship with Tokyo while maintaining the same greater objective of protecting against external threats and remaining integrated in the regional economy. President Yoon Suk-yeol's willingness to improve South Korea-Japan ties as a means of strengthening South Korea's security and status in the region differs from that of his predecessor Moon Jae-in (2017-22), who distanced himself from Japan. I agree with Pacheco Pardo on the relative consensus between South Korean progressives and conservatives on the broad aims

of grand strategy.<sup>3</sup> However, spelling out some of the key differences in the means used to achieve grand strategy objectives by each side could be elaborated further. Doing so might then preempt potential criticism from others who see less domestic consensus in South Korean foreign policy and grand strategy.


Second, as with most middle and small powers, South Korea does seek a certain degree of autonomy as an end goal. This theme is underscored in the book's subtitle. But autonomy here must be qualified. First, although South Koreans (and progressives in particular) desire greater autonomy and less reliance on the U.S.–South Korea alliance, in recent years and particularly under the Yoon government, South Korea appears to be enmeshing itself in a dense web of partnerships and coalitions with like-minded countries. This effort has only accelerated since the release of South Korea's own Indo-Pacific strategy in December 2022. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, enmeshment within the wider Indo-Pacific security network may reflect greater autonomy in the sense that South Korea need not rely on only one country (that is, the United States) to defend against external security threats. However, deeper engagement within the Indo-Pacific security network, including membership in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, engagement with the Quad, and the tightening of the U.S.–Japan–South Korea trilateral also reflects closer ties to the United States. As Yoon claimed, the U.S.–South Korea alliance remains the “central axis” of South Korean foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Pacheco Pardo makes a distinction in geographic priorities between East Asia, greater Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean. This ordering and nomenclature may reflect how South Koreans perceived regional priorities in the past. However, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept may suggest merging East Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean into a single broader Indo-Pacific and Eurasia priority or shuffling and redesignating Japan and Southeast Asia as higher priorities.

Last, there is some disconnect between the two frameworks used to decipher South Korean grand strategy. The Martel-based model introduced

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<sup>3</sup> Similar debates appear regarding the degree of consensus behind U.S. grand strategy. Whereas some scholars argue that the very broad end goals of U.S. grand strategy (security, freedom, economic prosperity, and so forth) remain the same across Republicans and Democrats, others see variations in grand strategy depending on the party in power. For further discussion, see C. William Walldorf Jr. and Andrew Yeo, “Domestic Hurdles to a Grand Strategy of Restraint,” *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019): 43–56; and Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Yoon Suk-yeol, “South Korea Needs to Step Up,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022  <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

in chapter 1 (and the broader discussion on middle powers) suggests that the author will adopt this model to develop a framework for evaluating middle-power grand strategies that travel beyond South Korea. However, the division of grand strategy into four concentric circles in chapter 3 presents a different framework for assessing South Korean foreign policy. Although Pacheco Pardo continues to use the Martel model to guide discussion on South Korean foreign policy in each empirical chapter (i.e., each concentric circle), the juxtaposition of the Martel model and the regional framework makes it harder to generalize the book's findings to other middle-power cases. The book briefly addresses how the framework remains relevant for middle powers more generally in the conclusion (pp. 231–33), but other scholars might find it useful to examine how these core findings on South Korea generalize to other specific country cases.

*South Korea's Grand Strategy* is the first, but it will certainly not be the last book on the topic, given the country's global ambition. In addition to comparing the South Korean case with other middle-power grand strategies, future studies should also take a closer look at the role of domestic politics in shaping South Korean grand strategy. Policy analysts will find it helpful to observe whether South Korean grand strategy evolves as geopolitical competition continues to unfold. ◆

## In the Middle of It All: Unpacking South Korea's Foreign Policy Priorities

*Darcie Draudt-Véjares*

Ramon Pacheco Pardo's latest book, *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny*, seeks to dissect and understand the intricacies of South Korea's foreign policymaking. Serving as an expansive empirical account, the book systematically explores South Korean politics across eight presidential administrations since 1988. Joining a renewed wave of book-length scholarly endeavors aiming to unravel the complexities of South Korea's foreign policy, Pacheco Pardo introduces three empirical research questions that form the backbone of the book's analysis: "What factors explain South Korea's grand strategy? What are the goals of South Korea's grand strategy? What are the means of South Korea's grand strategy?" (p. 3). These questions set the stage for the book's systematic examination of South Korea's positioning on the global stage since the country's transformative period of democratization.

To address these questions, Pacheco Pardo has undertaken commendable empirical research, drawing on an extensive examination of thousands of government documents, primarily from South Korea and the United States, combined with interviews with Korean policy elites. Through this qualitative data, Pacheco Pardo has sought to unearth and provide nuance to the means, goals, and ends of South Korea's national strategy.

One of the most important aspects of Pacheco Pardo's book is how seriously it takes the middle-power concept. Indeed, upon my reading, it becomes evident that the true objective of the book lies in the examination of middle powerism rather than grand strategy itself. Across the chapters a straightforward argument takes shape: South Korea has a grand strategy. South Korea is a middle power. Therefore, middle powers can have grand strategies.

This set of claims serves as the book's central focus and offers notable contributions to both scholarly conceptualizations of middle powers and their practical applications in policy. International relations scholars, policy researchers, and policymakers alike have all grappled with what constitutes a middle power and how that status affects military strategy

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and foreign relations. As Pacheco Pardo notes, scholarly treatment of grand strategy has mainly derived from large-state behavior. He aptly critiques the literature on middle powers, noting that the concept, theories, and policy recommendations vis-à-vis middle powers have been largely developed from Western cases such as Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (p. 26), and he invites scrutiny into the characteristics that distinguish a middle power from a mid-sized state, sparking a call for greater conceptualization and theorization.

I am as yet unconvinced by Pacheco Pardo's somewhat uncritical acceptance that a middle power can indeed have a grand strategy. In the initial chapters, particularly chapters 1 and 3, the book overviews the conceptual landscape of a middle power, intertwining it with the contours of South Korea's particular strategic means, goals, and ends. To define a middle power, Pacheco Pardo unproblematically introduces a set of conditions that are a combination of hard capabilities and soft power: a respectable military, developed economy, and cultural or social attraction. To these, he also adds ideational and behavioral dimensions as critical components: self-identification as a middle power, good diplomatic citizenship, and playing the role of an honest broker in international relations (pp. 24–25).


Regrettably, by including so many diverse capabilities, ideas, behaviors, and relationships into the definition of a middle power, the framework or conceptualization leaves little room to account for the internal variation over time and space. In social science speak, this lengthy list of factors, means, and goals (see chapter 3) risks overdetermining the existence and coherence of a grand strategy. Moreover, given that the book argues for a geography-based organization of grand strategy, the theoretical framework and subsequent empirical chapters might have been strengthened and sharpened had the author dug more explicitly into a relational or identity approach and considered how and whether these immaterial aspects of power differentially affect grand strategy across time (e.g., presidential administrations) and space (e.g., the regional targets around which the book is organized).

Among the seventy-plus interviewees are non-Korean policy experts, who, based on the footnotes, seem to be largely American and Chinese—an incredibly important consideration for understanding middle-power behavior in the international arena. However, these non-Korean perspectives were not particularly visible in his analysis. Given the centrality of relationship-building in his conceptualization of grand strategy and middle powerism, identifying, amplifying, and situating these anecdotes and



insights from South Korea's diverse foreign partners could have significantly fortified the book's conceptual claims. This approach could have added a valuable dimension to the analysis, not only providing a more holistic understanding of how South Korea's strategic decisions resonate with and respond to international counterparts but also adding further nuance to the role of networks, relationships, and ideas in middle-power strategy.

The book opens a door for further investigation into what goals, means, and ends a middle power might have cross-nationally. For Pacheco Pardo's model to have explanatory leverage, we need to see how and under what conditions this far-reaching model applies to other middle powers. How do other middle powers align with or diverge from South Korea's model? Does a shift in foreign policy priorities necessarily mean a change in grand strategy, or are they distinct dimensions that can evolve independently? Can middle powers have different grand strategies for different regional targets, and, if so, how? How much agency does a middle power truly have in shaping its destiny amid the complex web of structural, geographic, and institutional factors?

In a world where geopolitical landscapes are ever evolving, understanding how middle powers navigate and shape their destinies is not just an academic pursuit; it is a key to unraveling the complexities of global governance. *South Korea's Grand Strategy* serves as a significant step in that direction, urging scholars to build upon its foundations and continue unraveling the mysteries of strategic decision-making in the world of middle powers. If we accept Pacheco Pardo's claim that South Korean foreign policy communities are more similar than different (and many, present author included, would take issue with that), then an interesting question might be, despite growing partisanship, different ideologies vis-à-vis North Korea, and economic fluctuations over the past 35 years, why is there this consensus? Why or through which mechanisms do South Korea's grand strategy vary depending on distance? This scholarly landscape awaits further exploration, and Pacheco Pardo's work lays the groundwork for addressing these questions in future research—for the case of South Korea and for further afield. 

## South Korea's Quest for a Grand Strategy: Theory versus Practice, Domestic Factors, and Nuance

*Duyeon Kim*

Ever since the early 2000s, South Korean policymakers, bureaucrats, pundits, and journalists have noted in private conversations that their country needs a national long-term strategy that cuts across politically polarized administrations. When asked what continues to prevent the advent of such a strategy or grand strategy, policymakers and government officials over the past two decades have pointed to four main factors: ideological differences between conservative and progressive administrations<sup>1</sup>; pressure for officials to react to events and achieve quick results within each five-year presidential term; a fierce environment for domestic politics; and pressure for South Korea to survive in a complex geopolitical landscape and achieve economic development and prosperity in a short period of time.<sup>2</sup> The conversation today is no different than it was twenty years ago, let alone thirty-five years ago when South Korea chose democracy for good. Meanwhile, the mainstream approach in Western academic studies has been to analyze how South Korea's foreign policies have fluctuated across different administrations and party lines.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of a grand strategy and the necessity of one, according to South Korean practitioners, is precisely why Ramon Pacheco Pardo's book *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny* is an interesting academic contribution and unique argument. It illuminates and articulates a phenomenon of which South Koreans themselves are not aware. Pacheco Pardo records astute historical observations of South Korea's foreign policy

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<sup>1</sup> The words "progressive" and "liberal" are not entirely accurate to describe the political left-of-center in the South Korean context but are, nevertheless, widely used loosely for convenience and simplicity.

<sup>2</sup> Author's interviews of South Korean policymakers and officials between 2002–23, including individuals who served in government since 1988.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most recent and prominent works studying the country's foreign policies across different administrations is Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

history, drawing on interviews and academic theory, to offer a theoretically compelling argument that the country has indeed had a grand strategy since 1988. With this argument, the book is likely to be met with both praise and questions by South Koreans who read academic books in English.

South Korea's ultimate goals have broadly been survival and reunification. Survival generally means state survival, but the professional survival of government officials is sometimes a consideration as well.<sup>4</sup> Survival has and continues to shape South Korea's domestic and foreign policies toward national security and prosperity.<sup>5</sup> The country's goal to defend itself and promote its own economic well-being has been constrained by its unique geographical and geopolitical position as well as its external strategic environment.

A fundamental constraint is continued disagreement between conservative and progressive political parties on the means and tools to use to achieve their goals of owning their destiny on both the security and the economic fronts (often described as "autonomy" or even "independence" in Korean depending on context and political leaning) and reunifying the two Koreas. At times, progressives and conservatives have even disagreed on the definition of their end goals, including autonomy and security, as well as the definition of fundamental values such as democracy, while using the same terminology. Korean is a high-context language, not a literal one, so understanding nuances (often missed in English translations) and domestic politics are key to truly understanding Koreans and their policy directions. Moreover, in achieving its ultimate objectives, South Korea faces major constraints from the interplay between ideology and domestic politics with great-power politics, its rising neighbor China, and the existential threat from North Korea.

For these reasons, skeptics might raise a word of caution about attempting to describe past phenomena by projecting our understanding of the present day. In other words, one could argue that observing a pattern of elements that would be defined as a grand strategy in theory is different from a country having a grand strategy in practice or implementing it over time. Policymakers and government officials have admitted to the

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<sup>4</sup> Author's interviews of former South Korean diplomats and experts, July 2022. See also Duyeon Kim, "If Taiwan Falls to China: Implications for the Korean Peninsula," in "The World after Taiwan's Fall," ed. David Santoro and Ralph Cossa, *Pacific Forum, Issues and Insights* 23, SR 2, February 2023, 41–50.

<sup>5</sup> Duyeon Kim, "Indo-Pacific Views of Korean Peninsula Security" in "Embracing the Indo-Pacific? South Korea's Progress Towards a Regional Strategy," ed. Kyle Springer, Perth USAsia Centre, November 2020, 76.


absence of forethought and deliberate intent to plan long term and craft a grand strategy that remains consistent in both progressive and conservative governments. They point to the pressures of time and demands to achieve quick results within a five-year presidential term. In other words, a shared goal does not necessarily translate into possessing a deliberate grand strategy to achieve such an end.

Pacheco Pardo makes a strong case for refraining from providing a definition of grand strategy because of the numerous definitions of the concept since its origins in the eighteenth century (p. 16). In this sense, it is understandable that he would base his analysis on a general understanding of grand strategy that “takes a long-term perspective, is focused on a state’s primary ends, and makes use of all available means to achieve them” (p. 16). At the same time, the lack of specificity and the application of the concept’s general contours could open the door to various debates of his thesis because of nuances and domestic political factors specific to South Korea. Despite disagreements among scholars about grand strategy’s definition, the various interpretations still imply a common factor: deliberate intent by policymakers and cognitive awareness that they are designing and implementing a grand strategy that transcends politics beyond any specific presidential term.

Since 1988 every South Korean administration has presented some formulation of national political visions, agendas, goals, tasks, initiatives, and signature policies rather than a grand strategy. Some of them were certainly long-term but not always global in scale. The Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–13) was the first to begin pursuing truly global aspirations in its foreign policy. After his immediate successors regressed to either regional or parochial aims, the current Yoon Suk-yeol government has expanded upon Lee’s thinking to become the most global so far in its perspective and approach.

Still, with its argument that South Korea has a grand strategy based on academic theory, the book could inspire future policymakers and politicians (at least those who regularly read English books) to begin designing a grand strategy that can weather the storms of party politics and different ideologies. While the author alludes to the “shrimp among whales” analogy to describe South Koreans’ views of their own country stuck between big powers, South Koreans instead have seen themselves as dolphins for the past decade. Pacheco Pardo’s detailed account of the ingredients that make up the country’s status as a middle power more accurately support South

Koreans' self-view today of being fast and clever like a dolphin, navigating its destiny among big powers.

Pacheco Pardo deserves credit for attempting to fill a gap in the existing grand strategy literature by applying grand strategy theory to middle powers. The book makes a meaningful academic contribution by introducing a theoretical framework of analysis that can be tested to study other middle powers and whether they indeed have a grand strategy. 

## Middle-Power Strategic Autonomy: The Surprising Tale of South Korea's Grand Strategy

*Yves Tiberghien*

In this remarkable book, *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny*, Ramon Pacheco Pardo pushes the boundaries of the study of grand strategy by applying it to middle powers, focusing on one in particular: the Republic of Korea (ROK). Pacheco Pardo argues that the country has pursued a consistent grand strategy since the end of the Cold War and across administrations of different political stripes. The ultimate goal has been “to break with centuries of Korea being a ‘shrimp among whales,’ and for South Korea to be autonomous and make its own destiny” (p. 5). Furthermore, he argues that the ROK has succeeded in this strategy, gaining more independence, voice, and impact regionally and globally.

The book takes a comprehensive approach to the study of South Korea's grand strategy, asking three main research questions that focus on the causal factors, goals, and means of this grand strategy (p. 3). The book's working definition of grand strategy is one that sees grand strategy as “long-term in scope, concerned with the state's most important priorities, and inclusive of all spheres of statecraft (military, diplomatic, and economic)” (p. 3). In addressing the book's questions, Pacheco Pardo offers an excellent balance of theoretical discussion, historical background, and analytical review of behavior during each Korean presidency across the four main concentric geographic spheres envisioned in the strategy (the triangular core made of North Korea, the United States, and China; East Asia; greater Eurasia and the Indian Ocean; and global governance) (p. 83). The evidence presented is thorough and comprehensive, including review of 2,300 government documents and several hundred interviews and background conversations, both inside and outside South Korea. The book covers the variation of government actions over the 34-year period from 1988 to 2022 with clear writing and a good mix of focused theoretical consistence and texture. Ultimately, the book argues that the common threads and similarity of behavior across the eight administrations are much stronger than the ideological and tactical differences among those various governments.

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The book makes several major contributions to the fields of international relations and ROK studies and fills important gaps.

First, the book offers an excellent theoretical chapter on the intellectual history, scope, and limits of the concept of grand strategy. It covers the concept's precursors in the nineteenth century, post-Cold War studies on U.S. grand strategy, and recent works on Chinese grand strategy. The book demonstrates how the concept deserves to be taken to its broadest potential beyond the military field, Western great powers, and China.

Second, the book offers an update to the three-decades-old literature on middle powers, demonstrating how they too are able to develop a comprehensive grand strategy in response to the core variables that define their environment and their own strategic goals, and that they can tailor the strategy to a series of means and regional theaters. The book advocates taking the concept of grand strategy beyond its typical use with mostly Western powers and presents South Korea as a crucial case in this research. A particularly important contribution is the point that middle powers such as the ROK can exercise autonomy and possess the ability to control, or at least manage, structural forces to a greater extent than is often understood.

Third, Pacheco Pardo successfully demonstrates that the South Korean story is more significant than is often realized: the case reveals how a long-term strategy can greatly serve the interests and position of a middle power in a tough neighborhood. In fact, there is also an interesting implicit positive comparison with Japan, a country that had shown more variation and hesitation until Shinzo Abe's grand strategy after 2012.

Fourth, the book makes a valuable empirical contribution to the understanding of Korea's foreign policy over more than three decades by tying various pieces together into a coherent whole. The empirical chapters offer a remarkable step-by-step summary of key moves, particularly regarding relations with the United States, China, and North Korea. Chapter 4 on South Korea's triangular core will serve as a strong reference in the field, especially the narrative on the dramatic reversal toward China during the Park Geun-hye administration (pp. 132–36). Few authors have managed to connect South Korea's global governance strategy (including trade, the G-7, and the G-20) with its North Korean and China strategy in the way that Pacheco Pardo does.

Fifth, the book contains very useful gems of analysis. For example, the discussion of the China paradox in ROK grand strategy, presenting both a key security threat and a great source of economic prosperity, is excellent (p. 93). The discussion on the pursuit of military capabilities (which

covers the Park Chung-hee era) is also important and striking (p. 74). The differential in military spending as a percentage of GDP (2.7% for South Korea and 1.1% for Japan in 2022)<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that South Korea's strong military posture offers the country more leverage in its grand strategy than Japan may have relative to its size.

With the hindsight of new structural developments in 2022–23, I would like to propose several key questions and comments for further analysis and discussion.

First, chapters 1–3 on the elaboration of the grand strategy and its trajectory are focused primarily on top leaders and elite circles. It would be helpful to know more about the processes inside the black box of state policymaking: Who were the actual authors and advisers who devised key planks of the grand strategy, and what ideas, interests, or institutions shaped this process? Who were the dissenting voices and what were key debates (e.g., regarding China policy during the Park, Moon, and Yoon administrations, given the zigzags in approach)? How does the public view this grand strategy? We know that Korean young people (especially young women) are currently deeply disillusioned by South Korean society, economics, and politics—some believe that the country has evolved into such a competitive, cut-throat society that it no longer offers hope for a good life. One expression of this frustration is the lack of interest among young people to marry or have children (with the fecundity rate falling below 0.7 children per women in 2023, the lowest in the world). Did the marshalling of state resources around a deeply competitive strategy play a role in this process? What is the hidden human cost of the strategic space gained through the grand strategy?

Second, the book's core model (Table 3.1, p. 55) presents the U.S.-ROK alliance both as an independent variable (environmental driver) and a dependent variable (tool) for Seoul's grand strategy, creating a bit of a circular argument. It would be important to clarify this by further separating the two dimensions (strategic and military dimensions) if possible, given the close ties between them. Another theoretical query relates to the idea of middle-power coalitions. It appears that Korea rarely pursues large middle-power coalitions to create critical mass. Is that a limit to its strategy? And what is causing this?

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<sup>1</sup> Nan Tian et al. "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2023 ~ [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2304\\_fs\\_milex\\_2022.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2304_fs_milex_2022.pdf).



Third, I wonder whether some rethinking of the margins of the four geographic priorities circles could be useful. There are three reasons for this—the first, key one is the ambivalent place occupied by Japan in the model. Placing Japan in the second circle along with Southeast Asia seems to miss how critical the U.S.-Japan alliance is to the U.S.-ROK alliance. In fact, the pretense has been lifted in 2023 with the Camp David agreement and the overdue rapprochement between the ROK and Japan. We are now seeing a clear triangle of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, with many intertwined dimensions. But in reality, this was always present, implicitly or explicitly. The second reason relates to the lumping of India with Russia and Eurasia. My conversations with South Korean academics and officials point to the similar strategic importance given to Southeast Asia and India in the context of South Korea's December 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, a position that builds on years of gradual investment in India. Finally, the four-circle strategy seems to imply a hierarchy among the levels. I would argue that the last circle (global governance) has gained tremendous prominence for South Korea's grand strategy since 2010 and the enormous impact of South Korea's G-20 presidency. It may be good to indicate that this last circle is not the least important by far—it may even rank as equal to the second level in priority.

Fourth, could it be said that the critical events that took place in 2015 and 2016 do represent a second critical juncture? In 2015, China refused to nudge North Korea to cooperate with South Korea and the United States, despite enormous “gifts” from South Korea to China. In 2016, there was the THAAD deployment and the massive Chinese boycott in response. My own conversations in Seoul indicate that there is a “before 2016” and “after 2016” for South Korea's view of China and of the strategic environment. These events also massively affected public opinion and initiated a reversal of negative views toward Japan and China in the minds of the people: after 2016, South Koreans clearly see China as a greater threat than Japan.

An additional potential critical juncture that receives relatively brief mention in the book is the rise of tensions between the ROK and the United States during the latter half of the Trump administration in 2018–20 over burden-sharing contributions for the U.S. military presence (see pp. 145–47). At one point, the position of the Trump administration was to multiply the Korean burden sharing by up to four times the traditional level, with a threat to withdraw troops and erode the alliance otherwise. Seoul balked and discussions remained unresolved. My own recollection is that both the Korean public and elite reacted furiously to the episode and that it had a deep effect on Korean thinking regarding nuclear weapons and

further military autonomy. This is particularly relevant in the light of the U.S. presidential election in 2024 and what may come after.

Fifth, I would query the key argument in the book's conclusion that South Korean elites "can assume that the international environment in which they have developed their grand strategy for over three decades will remain relatively stable for the time being" (p. 234). My recent conversations with Korean elites indicate that they are greatly concerned about the seemingly uncontrollable acceleration of U.S.-China tensions and the great uncertainties generated by the 2024 U.S. presidential election, as well as the rising risks of a Taiwan contingency or a South China Sea incident (in light of China-Philippines tensions around Thomas Shoal).

This raises the following question: Was the success of Korea's grand strategy due to the clever marshaling of strategic vision and tools? Or was it also due to timing and luck, namely a rare period of U.S.-China equilibrium that generated both systemic security and economic growth in the region? Can South Korea retain its carefully crafted strategic autonomy if the U.S.-China tensions escalate toward a Taiwan contingency, a North Korean challenge, or the unraveling of global supply chains? How resilient is South Korea to a U.S.-China cold war or conflict?

Finally, it is important to note the new acceleration in the South Korean grand strategy contained in the country's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, especially the notion of "global pivotal state" advanced by the Yoon administration, with an emphasis on making a much greater contribution the world and to the liberal international order.<sup>2</sup> This fits nicely with the arguments of the book and happened just after it went to print. The new strategy added much on the concept of economic security, which is both a new South Korean contribution but also a source of tension between the security and the prosperity/globalization dimensions discussed in the book.

In closing, I wish to thank the author for a terrific contribution to the literature on grand strategy, middle powers, and South Korea in particular that will serve as a reference for years to come. ◆

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Andrew Yeon, "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State," Brookings Institution, December 19, 2023 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/south-korea-as-a-global-pivotal-state>.

## The Future of South Korea's Grand Strategy in the 21st Century?

*Lam Peng Er*

With *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny*, Ramon Pacheco Pardo has written a pathbreaking, scholarly book that explains comprehensively, systematically, and persuasively why South Korea has swiftly emerged as a middle power shaping its own future. Not only does this book analyze South Korea's foreign policy and grand strategy very well, but it is also a useful case study for comparison with the strategies of other quintessential middle powers. In the study, Pacheco Pardo illustrates that, notwithstanding the domestic politics of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the political pendulum of progressive and conservative presidents, the country has maintained a strategic consistency in becoming a regional and global middle power.

To be sure, the ROK's quest for security, prosperity, and status is not unique; most states in the international system—small, medium, and great—pursue such aims. What is most impressive about the ROK case, however, is the vision, will, capability, and opportunities of the country amid geostrategic and material constraints to catapult from being a metaphoric “shrimp among whales” to become a big fish among whales within a generation or two since the end of the devastating Korean Civil War divided the peninsula and nation.

In the spirit of a friendly and respectful debate for the author and scholars of Korea, I have nine observations and suggestions for future research on the ROK's grand strategy. Indeed, although some of these issues with implications for South Korea's grand strategy touch on the book's discussion, others were not highlighted. Some of my proposals are speculative because they address black swans and future challenges in an uncertain world.

First, a detailed analysis of the ROK as a G-20 country would be welcomed. Indeed, being a G-20 member is a signifier of being a solid middle power. In what ways has South Korea shaped the agenda of G-20 summits and working groups? How important is the G-20 in the ROK's grand strategy? What are the results, if any?

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Second, there is a need for detailed research on the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) based in Seoul. Arguably, the Northeast Asia subregion has suffered from an “institutional deficit” of regionalism in contrast with Southeast Asia. Through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Southeast Asia leads the larger East Asian region in multilateral institutions, including ASEAN +3, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. What is the ROK’s leadership role in the nascent TCS? Does South Korea play a bridging role between China and Japan? How does the TCS feature in Seoul’s grand strategy?

Third, the “brains” and thinkers of South Korea’s grand strategy deserve more explicit attention. While Pacheco Pardo’s book does a sterling job in describing and analyzing the change and continuities of the country’s grand strategy through its various presidencies, the key advisers, top bureaucrats, and scholars—who presumably played a pivotal role in crystalizing the grand strategy for their presidents—remained anonymous in his main text. It would be interesting to see a few key strategists and their thoughts and roles in shaping grand strategy on behalf of their presidents highlighted.

Fourth, it would be useful to examine Korean public opinion and elite surveys on South Korea’s foreign policy and role in the world. After all, the ROK is a democracy, and elite and public opinion do matter in certain areas of policymaking. Presumably there is a national consensus that supports the ROK’s grand strategy, but it would be valuable to see if this hypothesis is supported by empirical evidence.

Fifth is the issue of North Korea’s relentless nuclearization. Around 70% of the South Korean public favors going nuclear to counter threats from Pyongyang and Beijing.<sup>1</sup> Though the United States remains committed to extended nuclear deterrence of the ROK, there is the niggling untested question of whether the United States is willing to exchange Seattle for Seoul in a catastrophic nuclear war with North Korea if future U.S. presidents were to advocate “America first” at the expense of U.S. allies. Is it conceivable that Seoul would seriously consider the nuclear option for its security by paradoxically adopting mutual assured destruction as deterrence if there is the perception, rightly or wrongly, that a future U.S. president may waver in the commitment to unequivocally extend the nuclear umbrella to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “South Koreans Want Their Own Nukes: That Could Roll One of the World’s Most Dangerous Regions,” *Asahi Shimbun*, November 30, 2023 ~ <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15070825>.

South Korea? How would this emerging debate within South Korea shape its future grand strategy?

Sixth, what role should the ROK have in arenas of human security and peacebuilding pursued by some middle powers? To be sure, the ROK has participated in many UN Peacekeeping Operations. But unlike Japan, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, South Korea has not been noted to seek the consolidation of peace in conflict or post-conflict areas that have suffered civil wars. Ideally, South Korea would acquire the knowledge, diplomatic expertise, and sense of mission to pursue a peacebuilding role often associated with quintessential middle powers as honest brokers in conflicts.

Seventh is the shadow of history cast on the mentality of South Korean elites and the public. Besides the residual historical issue of Japanese imperialism and colonialization (which colors contemporary South Korea–Japan relations) is the historical, tributary relations of various Korean kingdoms with the Sinic Middle Kingdom. In the past decade there have been few box office successes in South Korea that depicted the painful and asymmetrical relations between the Korean vassal state and its Sinic overlord, and, arguably, that such K-movies have done so well in the South Korean market means that there is a resonance among the public for such historical themes. To be sure, the international system in the 21st century is quite different from the traditional Sinic suzerainty system. But given the assertiveness of a rising China, it is an inescapable conundrum for a South Korean middle power that must maneuver between its most important security ally, the United States, and its most important economic partner, China, which are engaged in a hostile geostrategic competition. It would be illuminating if elite interviews and public opinion surveys could capture the disquiet, if any, about the Korean middle power coexisting with the Chinese Middle Kingdom. If indeed this hypothesis were to pan out, what might be the impact of this lingering perception of an overbearing China on ROK grand strategy in the 21st century?

Eighth, as a middle power, what should South Korea's role be in global governance, especially in UN specialized agencies? There are at least fifteen specialized agencies, and two are reserved for the leadership of the United States (the World Bank) and Europe (the IMF). China leads four out of these fifteen agencies. To be sure, three South Koreans have led in the UN and its specialized agencies.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, however, former foreign

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<sup>2</sup> These three were former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon, former director-general of the World Health Organization Lee Jong-wook, and the former secretary general of the International Maritime Organization Lim Ki-tack.

minister Kang Kyung-hwa lost her bid to become the director-general of the International Labour Organization even though she had impressive credentials. This episode reveals the fact that it is not easy for a Korean middle power to win the leadership role of a UN agency, and South Korea's current role in global governance via the UN specialized agencies is very modest at best. It would be interesting to see if the ROK will become bolder and more skillful in engaging in multilateral coalition-building to secure the bids of its candidates for director-general roles in UN specialized agencies.

Lastly, South Korea's total fertility rate of 0.70 in 2023 is the lowest in the world. This worrisome trend has negative implications for the ROK's middle-power role over the long run, as the replacement level is 2.1 births per woman. South Korea's population may "decline to 36.64 million by 2060 and just 15.63 million in 2100—less than a third of South Korea's population as of 2021,"<sup>3</sup> and the country is facing the rapid aging of its workforce. Thus, the ROK may well be confronted with the "guns versus butter" dilemma—how to ensure its own security and remain a viable ally to the United States while increasing welfare payments to a rapidly aging society. Will future presidencies grapple with the politically sensitive issue of raising taxes? Confronted by sharp demographic decline and rapid aging, will South Korea in the next few decades have the wherewithal to pursue its grand strategy as a middle power? There are neither easy answers nor easy solutions to these questions in the decades ahead.

In conclusion, Pacheco Pardo's fascinating book, rich in information and balanced analysis, has opened new lines of enquiry in the study of South Korea's foreign policy and middle-power grand strategy. I hope that at least a few of my thoughts may contribute to this roundtable discussion and a better understanding and appreciation of the ROK as a middle power shaping its own destiny for a better world. ◆

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<sup>3</sup> Troy Stangarone, "South Korea's Demographic Trends Continue to Decline," *Diplomat*, August 9, 2022 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/south-koreas-demographic-trends-continue-to-decline>.

**Author's Response:**  
**A Tale of South Korea, Middle Powers, and Grand Strategy**

*Ramon Pacheco Pardo*

**C**an South Korea have a grand strategy? More broadly, can middle powers have a grand strategy? Both are questions that scholars and practitioners of international relations and foreign policy are now debating in earnest. And they are the key questions that the five eminent scholars who have kindly contributed to this roundtable had to grapple with in this discussion of my book *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny*.

For a long time, the assumption was that only superpowers able to shape the international system could aspire to have a grand strategy—for example, the United States and China in the 21st century. This helps to explain why most extant literature on grand strategy focuses on the United States and, more recently, China as well. Increasingly, however, there is a realization that middle powers can indeed try to design and implement a grand strategy. This does not necessarily mean that middle powers will achieve the ends that they set out to attain; after all, not even superpowers realize all their goals. But it does imply that middle powers can set long-term ambitions to secure their survival and prosperity together with the means to achieve them. Thus, in recent years books, articles and studies of the grand strategies of middle powers, such as France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom, have become more frequent.

The contributors to this roundtable debate whether South Korea has a grand strategy. In the essay opening the roundtable, Andrew Yeo explicitly asks this question. Duyeon Kim is circumspect and casts doubt on South Korea having a grand strategy of its own in practice. Darcie Draudt-Véjares, Yves Tiberghien, and Lam Peng Er are more positive about South Korea's ability to develop a grand strategy. This debate among the contributors mimics the broader debate about middle powers in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere—in other words, it is not a discussion circumscribed only to the case of South Korea. In this particular case, I would argue that South Korea

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does have a grand strategy, contending that the roots of the strategy trace back to the country's transition to democracy in the late 1980s. Since then, agreement at the elite level over the country's key goals and a growing set of capabilities have underpinned a grand strategy that has transcended changes in government. This is the core argument of *South Korea's Grand Strategy*.

If we accept that South Korea has a grand strategy, what are the ultimate goals that it is trying to achieve? In my book, I argue that middle powers such as South Korea seek autonomy above anything else. There can be little doubt that superpowers can generally act as they please. Certainly, superpowers face constraints to their behavior, material or normative, but they can make fundamental decisions attending to their national interests more often than not. Their decision-making ability extends to key areas such as whether to invade another country (as the United States did in the early 21st century), to wage economic war (as China has become prone to do under Xi Jinping), or to turn their backs on allies (as both the Soviet Union and the United States did during the Cold War). Superpowers have the autonomy to engage in this type of behavior, and there is little that other powers can do to stop them.

The roundtable contributors explicitly and implicitly discuss whether South Korea is an independent international actor with its own autonomy. Tiberghien makes this the central narrative of his essay, while Yeo and Kim also delve into this question. Draudt-Véjares and Lam discuss how autonomy looks in practice, in the case of the latter by projecting into the future. Although I would not say that there is a consensus among the contributors that South Korea is fully autonomous and therefore has complete independence of action, all the reviewers emphasize the different decisions that the country can make as part of its international strategy. This is the marker of autonomy. In the book, I posit the same argument. Compared to the post-independence and Cold War eras, South Korea since democratization has been able to make autonomous decisions about its strategy. While the country is constrained by the structure of the international system, it is able to exercise its own preferences as well.

In a sense, the question of whether South Korea has a grand strategy and the subsequent and related question of whether it can have autonomy and independence of action are linked to the specific geographic space in which the country acts at any given point in time. For South Korea, the triangle comprising North Korea, the United States, and China is the most important area of operation. Relations with these three countries undoubtedly transcend foreign policy and have a clear domestic component:



North Korea is the other half of the divided peninsula and South Korea's biggest military threat, the United States is a decades-old ally and an undisputed superpower, and China is Korea's millennia-old neighbor and the other superpower of the 21st century. These three countries therefore shape South Korea's international relations like no other and are subject to heated domestic political and societal debate.

Arguably, this debate should make it more difficult for South Korea to have a grand strategy toward the region. After all, it is a democratic country in which conservatives and liberals alternate in power, and a grand strategy would imply that the ends of different leaders toward these countries remain broadly unchanged as well as, to an extent, the means to achieve them. The contributors to this roundtable discuss this point. Yeo and Kim are detailed in their discussions, linking the point to the question of whether South Korea has a grand strategy to begin with. Draudt-Véjares also stresses the importance of this aspect of South Korea's grand strategy. Tiberghien and Lam concentrate less on this triangular relationship, focusing their lenses elsewhere, but they too underscore that South Korea's ally and closest neighbors influence its grand strategy. Naturally, this triangular relationship is the emphasis of the longest case study in my book. I conclude that South Korea does indeed have a grand strategy toward the triangle comprising these three countries. Conservatives and liberals may prioritize certain goals and tools when dealing with these three states, particularly North Korea. But, as shown in the book, the differences among them are more often over form rather than substance.

In conclusion, I argue that South Korea, and by extension other middle powers, can develop their own grand strategy. In the book, I introduce a model that can serve to analyze the strategy of middle powers. I believe that the finding that South Korea has a grand strategy is especially significant insofar as this is (1) a country that until relatively recently some would have hesitated to place among the ranks of middle powers, (2) a vibrant democracy with robust policy discussions and changes in governing party, and (3) a middle power that sits in a relatively unstable region that entails an unpredictable external environment. At the same time, the conclusion that South Korea has indeed developed a grand strategy is reassuring in that it implies that long-term strategic thinking and planning remains possible for countries that set out what they want to accomplish and how they will try to achieve it. 