

**Between Giants:
Strategic Autonomy for East Asia's Middle Powers
in the U.S.–China Rivalry**

Yoochan Kong
George Mason University Korea

Abstract

The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China places South Korea in a delicate strategic position where great-power competition pushes Seoul to choose sides. However, the concept of strategic autonomy shows that middle powers can still navigate a narrow but meaningful path of agency. This paper focuses on how South Korea can sustain strategic autonomy amid U.S.–China rivalry by recalibrating its alliance with the United States, protecting itself from Chinese economic and political coercion, and diversifying partnerships in security, technology, and diplomacy. The central research question asks how South Korea can strengthen its autonomy while managing asymmetric dependence on the United States and growing vulnerability to China. Drawing on historical alliances, the THAAD deployment, and debates over technology alliances, the paper argues that autonomy is not neutrality but, rather, proactive leadership, institutional resilience, and a commitment to democratic values. By doing so, South Korea can shift from a reactive state to a proactive actor shaping a regional order based on freedom and stability.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy; Middle Power; U.S.–China Rivalry; South Korea; Cold War; Conflict Analysis and Resolution; Economic Coercion; Technology Alliance

Introduction

The rivalry between the United States and China has become one of the central geopolitical challenges of the twenty-first century, and South Korea feels its pressure more directly than almost any other country. Both Washington and Beijing are strategic rivals seeking to maintain and assert influence across the Indo-Pacific region. Their competition now extends across security policy, economic frameworks, technological ecosystems, and even cultural and ideological narratives. In many respects, this dynamic resembles the earlier Cold War, when great powers competed for alignment, loyalty, and strategic advantage among states caught between

them. The current environment is not identical to the past. Still, the pattern of competing spheres of influence, pressure on middle powers, and the narrowing space for diplomatic ambiguity shows clear historical continuity.

South Korea often finds itself pulled in two directions: wanting independence while knowing how much it still relies on both sides. However, as Kevin Rudd warns, “it is hazardous to attempt any single, authoritative forecast of what the U.S.–China relationship will look like by 2030.”¹ As a middle power positioned at the intersection of this rivalry, South Korea must navigate a complex and often unforgiving strategic landscape. This challenge is rooted not only in contemporary competition but also in the country’s historical experience of colonization, division, and dependence on external security guarantees. Today, the convergence of global supply chains, digital infrastructure, and regional security institutions has made South Korea’s strategic choices even more consequential and more constrained.

The concept of strategic autonomy offers a valuable framework to understand how South Korea can maintain meaningful agency without becoming trapped in a zero-sum contest between two great powers. Autonomy in this context does not mean neutrality or disengagement. Instead, it refers to a state's ability to make independent, interest-driven decisions while remaining integrated within a broader network of alliances and partnerships. For South Korea, this requires safeguarding democratic institutions, strengthening national security, and ensuring economic resilience amid coercive leverage and structural vulnerability.

From Analysis to Policy Application

This research employs a qualitative analytical approach that integrates theoretical and empirical perspectives. The study draws from academic sources on middle power theory, alliance politics, and strategic autonomy.²

This study is based on a close examination of key documents and real-world cases. One major example is the 2016 THAAD deployment, which led to substantial economic pushback from China. That case shows how far strategic ambiguity can go, and where it starts to break down when a country depends too heavily on another. By examining how other middle powers, such as Australia and Japan, handle similar pressures, the paper explores how nations can maintain a sense of independence through broader diplomacy and robust, well-built institutions.

The approach of this paper blends theory with real policy thinking. It examines how South Korea can translate the idea of autonomy, often discussed in abstract terms, into actions that shape its strategy. In doing so, the study aims to offer both a clearer understanding of the concept and practical takeaways for policymakers.

South Korea Between Great Powers

Since the end of the Korean War, the alliance between South Korea and the United States has been the backbone of the country's security and one of the main reasons behind its economic growth. Yet that same partnership has also built in specific imbalances, structural ones that continue to shape and sometimes restrict Korea's ability to act on its own. Victor Cha explains that "the United States deliberately sought to create bilateral alliances to exert control over weaker states and to prevent them from initiating conflict."³

As Cooper observes, "middle power theorists ever struggle to frame a coherent definition of the category... yet even this seemingly simple formulation proves painfully convoluted."⁴ This conceptual complexity reflects South Korea's ambiguous status, neither small nor great, yet profoundly constrained by alliance structures. The Cold War logic of control embedded within the alliance still shapes its structure today.

During the Trump administration, Washington's push for Korea to pay more for defense made something clear: the alliance had a transactional side that many hadn't fully noticed before. For South Korea, it was a wake-up call. The debate that followed wasn't just about money; it was about how to make the partnership feel more balanced and how to protect a sense of national control in the process. As Jae-Bong Lee observes, "South Korea would rather weaken than strengthen its dependence on the military alliance with the United States."⁵ The statement reflects not anti-American sentiment but an aspiration for recalibration, maintaining the alliance while securing greater strategic control.

At the same time, China's growing economic power and its use of that power to pressure others have made South Korea's balancing act even harder. China's reaction to the THAAD deployment showed how Beijing could turn economic ties into a political weapon, punishing Seoul for choices it didn't like. For South Korea, this made one thing clear: strategic autonomy can't just be about security anymore. It also has to consider how exposed the country is in areas like trade, technology, and the institutions that link them.

Converting Structural Constraints into Strategic Opportunity

South Korea has always had to deal with strict rules regarding geography and strategy. Surrounded by powerful and often competing neighbors—China, Japan, Russia, and North Korea—South Korea faces persistent constraints on its strategic maneuverability. South Korea must constantly adjust its diplomacy in a region where influence and tension are often in conflict. This is different from other middle powers like Australia or Canada.

The THAAD deployment in 2016 became a real turning point in how South Korea viewed its own security choices. China's reaction was swift, and sharp economic sanctions hit Korean firms such as Lotte; even cultural exports like music and TV shows faced new restrictions. The episode made clear how economic tools could be used to pressure a state's political decision. Bee Yun Jo explains that "China's coercive response to the 2016 deployment of THAAD in South Korea has... caused a hardening rather than 'loosening' of the security linchpin of the ROK-US alliance."⁶ This episode revealed that ambiguity, once seen as a sophisticated balancing strategy, was interpreted by Beijing as a sign of weakness.

For a long time, Incheon has been the gateway to the Korean Peninsula. It is not just a port city; it represents South Korea's openness and its important position between major powers. Incheon has become a place for peace talks and international conversations over time. It shows that the country wants to stay balanced between the US and China.

The U.S.-South Korea alliance remains the most essential part of the country's security. It also maintains the imbalance in operational control and important defense decisions. This unequal structure often strengthens a quiet sense of reliance that goes beyond military issues. As a result, the quest for autonomy becomes both a strategic and a psychological endeavor, hinging on confidence as much as competence. Yet, as Goh argues, even in a regional order led by major powers, smaller states can still create room to act by working through institutions and carefully balancing between stronger countries.⁷ South Korea's task is thus to convert structural constraints into opportunities for independent action.

South Korea's Strategic Autonomy Amid Rivalry

Alliance Dependence and Recalibration

For a long time, the ROK-U.S. alliance has been the basis of South Korea's safety. However, over time, it has also made the partnership feel

more hierarchical. The arguments over sharing the cost of defense during the Trump administration made this imbalance even clearer. They showed how changes in Washington politics can make Seoul feel less stable. Stephen R. Nagy notes that “the Indo-Pacific’s middle powers are aligning to adapt to these changing dynamics and transforming their diplomacy and cooperation into “neo-middle-power diplomacy.”⁸ For South Korea, it’s time to move from simply managing the alliance to taking real initiative. That means working closely with countries that share similar values, not just through diplomacy, but through technology and shared norms. By regaining wartime operational control and building stronger homegrown defense systems, Korea can finally speak with its own voice inside the alliance.

Chinese Coercion and Strategic Vulnerability

China’s pressure shows how trade can turn into a weapon. The THAAD incident made clear just how much South Korea depends on China’s market. Then came reports of spying and information manipulation, deepening the feeling that Seoul’s position was far more fragile than it seemed. According to a CSIS report, “Beijing’s influence operations in Australia show consistent, patient, and strategic efforts to cultivate networks of influence, develop long-term dependencies, and shape discourse on China across many facets of politics, business, and society.”⁹ For South Korea, the same dangers appear in new forms: corporate reliance, stolen technology, and media campaigns that twist public opinion. To face these threats, the country needs to expand its markets, strengthen its cyber defenses, and tighten its security laws.

Technology, Trade, and Emerging Alliances

Technological cooperation is becoming the new ground for strategic autonomy. For South Korea, semiconductors are not just an industry. They are its strongest card in the global supply chain. By joining projects like the CHIPS and Science Act and teaming up with Japan and Taiwan, Korea isn’t sitting on the sidelines. It’s stepping in to help shape the rules, showing how democratic nations can lead the future of technology together. As Seong-Hyon Lee explains, “A technology alliance commits countries to secure their national interests jointly; thus, mutual trust and a shared vision for the future are essential.”¹⁰ By joining these initiatives, South Korea can protect itself from outside pressure. It can step out of the shadow of coercion and act with more independence. In today’s digital age,

that means more than just following the rules; it means helping to write them.

Institutional Resilience and Domestic Reform

Autonomy cannot exist without strong institutions. South Korea's current legal framework, particularly espionage laws, remains overly focused on North Korea, leaving gaps in addressing broader foreign interference. Expanding these definitions to include cyber operations, economic coercion, and media manipulation would help protect sovereignty. Strengthening intelligence coordination and legal modernization will ensure that autonomy is grounded in domestic resilience rather than rhetoric.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to strengthen South Korea's strategic autonomy and enhance its ability to navigate the growing rivalry between the United States and China:

- Strengthen and modernize the ROK–U.S. alliance by transforming it into a more balanced partnership grounded in equality, shared operational authority, and advanced technological cooperation, including updated cyber defense and intelligence-sharing frameworks.
- Diversify South Korea's diplomatic and economic partnerships by deepening engagement with ASEAN, the Quad, CPTPP, and IPEF to reduce overdependence on any single actor and expand Korea's role in regional norm-setting.
- Enhance technological security and innovation capacity by protecting key industries such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence through stronger intellectual property laws, increased domestic research and development, and alignment with democratic technology coalitions.
- Reform legal and institutional frameworks by modernizing espionage and subversion laws to address contemporary hybrid threats, including foreign interference and information

manipulation, and by establishing a coordinated counterintelligence structure to reinforce institutional resilience.

- Advance value-based diplomacy that upholds democracy, transparency, and a rules-based order, thereby strengthening national credibility and deepening cooperation with like-minded states.

These initial recommendations are important because they provide South Korea with a practical framework for exercising genuine strategic autonomy in an era of increasing great-power rivalry. Strengthening and modernizing the alliance with the United States ensures that deterrence remains credible while reducing structural imbalances that have historically limited South Korea's decision-making authority. Diversifying partnerships protects the country from economic or political coercion and positions it to influence the development of regional norms rather than merely adapting to them. Enhancing technological security is essential in a world where national power is shaped by innovation, digital infrastructure, and control of critical supply chains. Legal and institutional reforms strengthen the state's ability to withstand hybrid threats that exploit outdated legislation, thereby reinforcing national resilience.

Finally, grounding foreign policy in democratic values strengthens South Korea's legitimacy and aligns it with states that share long-term strategic interests. Taken together, these steps help South Korea become a more secure, confident, and proactive middle power capable of shaping its strategic environment rather than being shaped by external pressure.

Conclusion

South Korea's pursuit of strategic autonomy must be understood within the broader context of a renewed great-power rivalry that increasingly resembles earlier periods of geopolitical tension. Just as the Cold War forced smaller states to navigate competing spheres of influence, today's competition between the United States and China places South Korea in a position where every decision carries strategic weight. Autonomy, therefore, requires more than maintaining a balance between partners. It demands a clear understanding of national interests, strong institutions, diversified relationships, and the confidence to act independently even when pressure rises from both sides.

The U.S.-South Korea alliance remains essential for deterrence and stability on the Korean Peninsula but autonomy requires that the alliance evolve into a more balanced partnership that reflects South Korea's capabilities and leadership. At the same time, South Korea must reduce its vulnerability to economic and technological coercion by broadening its trade networks, protecting key industries, and strengthening its digital and institutional defenses. China's growing influence and its willingness to use economic leverage reinforce the need for South Korea to pursue economic resilience and diversified cooperation.

As Nagy states, "middle powers are capable of shaping their environments when they coordinate, rather than when they merely react to great powers."¹¹ South Korea, too, can work to shape its strategic environment rather than respond to it. This requires active diplomacy, contributions to multilateral institutions, and participation in technology and security frameworks that support a stable and rules-based regional order. South Korea's history shows that alignment and autonomy are not opposing choices. When grounded in strong institutions, credible defense, and principled foreign policy, they can work together to strengthen national security.

However, important questions remain about how South Korea can operationalize strategic autonomy in practice. How can it sustain deterrence without increasing dependency on the United States? How can it protect its economy and technological base while managing competition with China? What institutional reforms are necessary to safeguard sovereignty in an era defined by cyber threats, information manipulation, and economic coercion?

Like all academic scholarship, further research is required to clarify how middle powers such as South Korea can translate the concept of strategic autonomy into actionable policy tools suited to the constraints of contemporary great-power competition. Future scholarship should investigate the specific mechanisms through which multilateral cooperation can enhance national resilience, including systematic analyses of South Korea's potential roles within ASEAN-Plus institutions, Quad working groups, and other emerging regional security and economic forums. Studies on technological alliances should explore the governance structures of semiconductor and artificial intelligence supply chains, as well as the development of shared digital-security standards among democratic states. Institutional modernization also warrants deeper examination, particularly regarding counterintelligence reforms, cyber

defense coordination, and legal frameworks capable of addressing foreign interference, disinformation, and hybrid threats.

Finally, additional research is needed on strategies to mitigate systemic vulnerabilities, including energy diversification, safeguards against economic coercion, and the creation of regional crisis-management mechanisms for future supply-chain disruptions. Collectively, these research pathways will contribute to a more stable Korean Peninsula and support a stronger and more resilient peace architecture across the Indo-Pacific region.

Notes:

¹ Kevin Rudd, “Ten Alternative Futures for U.S.-China Relations,” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 22 (2023): 24–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48724671>

² Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Seong-Hyon Lee, “U.S. Semiconductor Policy and South Korea: A Delicate Balancing Act between National Priorities and International Collaboration,” *Asia Policy* 18, no. 3 (2023): 101–27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27254673>

³ Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia*

⁴ David A. Cooper, “Challenging Contemporary Notions of Middle Power Influence: Implications of the Proliferation Security Initiative for ‘Middle Power Theory,’” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 3 (2011): 317–36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24909800>.

⁵ Jae-Bong Lee, “The Future of the ROK–U.S. Alliance in a Changing Strategic Environment,” *Asian Perspective* 45, no. 1 (2021): 65–85.

⁶ Bee Yun Jo, “Loosening or Tightening the Linchpin? The Effects of China’s Approach to US THAAD Deployment in South Korea” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 29, no. 1 (June 2022): 1–20.

⁷ Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies.” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 113–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30130520>

⁸ Stephen R. Nagy, “Middle-Power Alignment in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Securing Agency through Neo-Middle-Power Diplomacy,” *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (2022): 161–79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27227224>.

⁹ Cyrus Newlin, Heather A. Conley, Amy Searight, Tim Kostelancik, Rachel Ellehuus, Jeffrey Mankoff, and Devin Stewart. *Chinese Influence Operations: Countering Russian and Chinese Influence Activities: Examining Democratic Vulnerabilities and Building Resiliency*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25322.6>.

¹⁰ Lee, “U.S. Semiconductor Policy and South Korea: A Delicate Balancing Act between National Priorities and International Collaboration”

¹¹ Nagy, “Middle-Power Alignment in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Securing Agency through Neo-Middle-Power Diplomacy”