Journal of East Asian Studies (2024), **24**, 286–304
doi:10.1017/jea.2024.16

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Threat Perception Variation in the Indo-Pacific

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(Received 28 February 2023; Revised 17 May 2024; Accepted 28 May 2024)

Abstract
The US has declared its intent to strategically compete with the rising power of China on all fronts. However, Washington's overt extension of US–China rivalry into the ideological realm presents unique challenges to its Indo-Pacific order-building process. The balance of threat theory provides a useful conceptual toolkit to unravel the case of the geostrategic positioning of South Korea, which is a close US ally and already engaged in a delicate balancing act between the US and China, to set the stage for a deeper examination of how the strategic community within South Korea views America's augmented policy of resisting "authoritarianism" and national debates on the prospect of an ideational "threat" from China. It then contemplates how policymakers in South Korea could respond to the new challenges this raises, concluding that the advent of an intensified values competition requires further finessing of their already delicate balancing act.

Keywords: Balance of Threat; Indo-Pacific; Strategic Competition; Alliance

Introduction

The core tenets of traditional Realist International Relations (IR) theory predict that alliances are formed between states primarily as a response to a mutually identified external threat. Yet threat perceptions among alliance partners oscillate over time in response to both external and internal environmental stimuli. The historical record shows that even when an overriding strategic threat unites allies—such as the "Communist threat" during the Cold War—the direction and intensity of threat perceptions will vary between allies, and this can lead to periodic crises of confidence in alliance commitments. Convergent threat perceptions lend alliances cohesion and resilience, and the diminution or disappearance of a binding threat may cause their dissolution (Walt 1997; He and Feng 2010; Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016; Cha 2016). When this did *not* occur as predicted when the Soviet threat collapsed in 1991, observers were surprised that US alliances in Europe and Asia persisted

regardless. After a period of "alliance drift" in the post-Cold War period, US allies in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea (with Thailand notably excepted), are again aligning more closely to confront the challenges of strategic competition, brought about by the rise of China and persistence of North Korean nuclear intimidation (Wilkins 2022). This applies even more clearly in Europe, where NATO allies are enhancing their cooperation in the wake of Russian aggression in Ukraine (NATO 2021).

In the contemporary global environment, mutating threats are emerging which may test the resolve of US alliances as never before and impact the international security and business environment alike (Kim and Raswant 2022). Non-traditional security threats such as terrorist non-state actors, mass migration and climate change are high on the security agenda of the US and its democratic allies. But in an international system defined by strategic competition, one perceived "threat" overshadows them all. Just as with the Soviet Union, the challenges raised by an ascending China can be viewed across the *material* and *ideational* domains (see Alagappa 1998). In the first instance, China threatens the current balance of power in the region, as it has proceeded to transform its economic might into military prowess to materially overturn the strategic equilibrium. While this development tends to capture the most attention, more recently, policy makers and scholars have begun to focus on the ideational (ideological) dimension that accompanies this materially based challenge. In essence, policy makers in the US (and elsewhere) now perceive China's authoritarian/nationalist domestic system and its ambitions to normatively reshape regional and international order (i.e. "making the world safe for autocracy") as a compounding danger to the preservation of democratic regimes. Indeed, both dimensions are now seamlessly incorporated into both US and allied blueprints for strategic competition (Hodzi 2019; Department of State 2019; Hodzi 2022; Blinken 2022; Edel and Shullman 2021; Kroenig 2020). For government officials and strategic commentators in the US, these two challenges go hand in hand, and policy responses increasingly reflect the syncretic nature of material and ideational factors in American strategic thinking.

With the literature on the material changes to the (military) balance of power already extensively covered in the literature (Allison 2017; Yaacob 2024), the literature speaking to the ideational dimension is also evolving (Foot and Walter 2011; Mazarr et al. 2018). This is in close relevance to the stronger policy emphasis that the current US Administration has accorded to the "contest of values" (democracy versus autocracy), and by extension the liberal international order (or rules-based order) versus a "revisionist" order. In light of this perceived challenge, US diplomacy has proactively pursued a "values" agenda, both in its national policy and through a range of other multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral policy platforms. The multilateral Summit for Democracy, served as a platform to propagate the notion that the spread of authoritarian ideas posed a real danger to democratic values (White House 2021b, 2021d, 2021e). While prominent minilateral forums, such as the G7, the Quad (US–Japan–Australia–India) and AUKUS (Australia–UK–US) issued statements to similar effect (White House 2021b, 2021c). At the bilateral level, both Australia and Japan have emphatically echoed the US position, both underscoring their efforts at "values-based" diplomacy (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2022; Reilly 2020; Envall and Wilkins 2023). As a result, scholarship has begun to emerge to explore this dramatic change in government appraisals of the threat of authoritarianism to democratic regimes more broadly (Chou, Pan, and Poole 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But from the perspective of South Korea, another key US democratic ally on the geographical periphery of China, which is confronted across the border by a hostile North Korean regime, simple conformity with US policy is more complicated. So far, Seoul has not actively pushed an externally focused and confrontational valued-based agenda like other US allies above, and the debate upon how "authoritarianism" presents itself as a threat to national (domestic) security is still unresolved. It is uncertain how this issue might impact the US–ROK alliance, given the divergent threat perceptions we explore in this article. By affording greater analytical scrutiny to the state of debates on this issue among the South Korean strategic community, an improved understanding of relative US–ROK positions may assist in identifying both general and specific fissure points related to values competition among allies. This has important implications for alliance management and both Seoul and Washington have a strong interest in preventing a crisis, given the increasingly unstable regional and global environment. Moreover, any public divergence in opinion between allies would likely be exploited by Beijing in an effort to undermine alliance solidarity.

To shed much-needed light on the Korean position regarding America's attempt to ideationally balance China in tandem with its conventional material balancing, we examine official government documents in Korean (including Diplomatic White Papers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefings, and other policy statements) and English, survey debates among the associated thinktank community in Korea (e.g. Korea Institute of International Affairs, the East Asia Institute), and draw upon a wide range of scholarly publications to round out the picture. In this way we seek better substantiate a cogent picture of Korean perspectives and contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complex dilemmas and nuances evident within the Korean strategic community. This will fill a gap in the literature through presenting the somewhat divergent approach of the ROK as a US ally, as compared to more "conformist" allies such as Japan and Australia.

The article develops its arguments as follows. In the opening section, we deploy conventional Realist theory as a point of departure for framing balancing responses, noting how these apply to the unique geostrategic circumstances South Korea faces. In the process, we connect the perception of "authoritarianism" as a "threat" with Balance of Threat Theory, by focusing on "offensive intentions." The second section then builds out some of these observations in the process of unpacking Korean responses to (i) the American-led drive for ideational (values-based) competition with China, juxtaposed against (ii) Korea's own national perceptions of an authoritarian "threat" to democracy. The third section reviews the actual and potential policy options available to Seoul for navigating the contradictions the foregoing appraisals present. The conclusion establishes that beyond the conventional practices of national balancing behavior explained by IR theory, Korea is concomitantly engaged in another "balancing act" through which it aims to reconcile competing tensions between the new policy trajectory of its military ally, the US, and its own somewhat divergent assessments of an ideational threat from China, a country bordering the Korean Peninsula.

Balance of threat theory in perspective

This section explores the relevancy of the conventional theories of Balance of Power and Balance of Threat in relation to the Indo-Pacific security system, before drawing out underexplored aspects of this theory that can be brought to bear on ideational

https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

matters, though further extrapolation of a rising power's "offensive intent," and which sets the stage for the "authoritarian" challenge.

On the basis of South Korea's (self)-identification as a "middle power," the country will be highly sensitive to shifts in the regional distribution of power according to scholars (Easley and Park 2018; Huynh 2021; Son 2014; Kim 2022). As such, Balance of Power theory suggests several likely patterns of behavior. In essence, South Korea could either to "balance" against China (Lim and Cooper 2015), "hedge" between the US and China (Hwang and Ryou-Ellison 2021; Lee 2017; Snyder 2018), or re-align to "bandwagon" China (Keum and Campbel 2023; Kang 2009). The literature comes down (relatively) conclusively in favor of assessing South Korea's position as conforming to "balancing," as opposed to the other options available. This is substantiated by the fact that South Korea has been a US ally against North Korea since 1953 ('a blood alliance'), and that its deep integration with US defense policy is entrenched in the policy establishment as an "alliance consensus" among Seoul's political leadership (Yeo 2020, 41).

But this is where the Korean material balancing strategy becomes more complex. Seoul's primary motivation is the balancing of the North Koren threat, not a military threat from China. South Korea's defense posture and armed forces, alongside its US (and UN) allies are configured for deterring and responding to a North Korean offensive, not against China. But several intervening factors complicate the picture. First, Beijing looms in the background of the North Korean threat, as a treaty ally with Pyongyang, and which fought alongside it in the Korean War (1950–53) (Kim 2018). Furthermore, Beijing's position as a treaty ally of North Korea has long been presumed to give it leverage over Pyongyang's nuclear program—an issue vital to South Korea's security.

Second, whilst South Korean military deployments are aimed at North Korea, these create capabilities within the US alliance that could be notionally transferable in a conflict with China itself. While this is a side-benefit for Washington, in terms of boosting its ally's ability to contribute to the alliance and regional security more generally (Heung Kyu Kim 2016), Beijing is well aware of the potential fungibility of US–ROK alliance capabilities. This predicament is best illustrated by Seoul's decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile-defense system in 2016. Though designed to counter North Korea, Beijing saw this (within the context of the US alliance) as potentially also directed at blunting its own missile attack capabilities. This led to a diplomatic stand-off and cascading rounds of economic coercion (unofficial sanctions) against South Korea (Kim 2017b). While this was an unintended consequence of countering one threat, it raised the specter of another. Interestingly, President Park, leader of the government responsible for the THAAD deployment, attended the China Victory Day parade standing next to President Xi Jinping and President Putin during the Commemoration of the Anniversary of the Victory of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War. Nevertheless, the result of the "THAAD trauma" (Seong Han Kim 2021) was to inadvertently heighten South Korean threat perceptions of Beijing, with economic statecraft being viewed as a tool likely to be employed in future characteristics of such an authoritarian regime.

The dilemma above illustrates the fine line that Seoul must tread in its balancing posture. South Korea must nationally balance the North Korean threat, whilst not alarming China (or face retaliation), it must placate the demands of its US ally to contribute to regional security (by balancing China), and upon whom it depends for

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assistance towards North Korea. This ensures that Seoul must give primary attention to balancing North Korea, even as it views China as a possible long-term threat in the future and is encouraged in this view by Washington. South Korea therefore pursues a delicate balancing act between these conflicting imperatives, that has resulted in a rather "indirect" or "low-key" balancing posture (with the US) toward China to date (easily mistaken for "hedging"). So far this "low-profile" stance has not attracted public criticism from Washington. Excepting occasional disputes (above and below) with Beijing, it appears that China has learned to accept that South Korean reinforcement of its capabilities, including through its alliance, is directed at North Korea. While Beijing (reluctantly) acquiesces to the US–ROK alliance, this "quiet balancing" strategy appears sustainable as long as Seoul is able to avoid provocations.

However, there are emerging signs that could upset this fragile status quo—if the US–China conflict continues to escalate in the future, South Korea's balancing act risks being caught in the crossfire and being subjected to counter pressures from both sides. Over the years, the competition between the US and China has rapidly evolved across new areas and issues, such as cyber security, the Huawei issue, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Sang Bae Kim 2020), and has now forcefully manifested itself in the ideology domain. The intensified US diplomatic emphasis on the conflict between democracy and authoritarianism posits that China's political system based on a specific ideology poses a "threat" not only to sustaining the US-led liberal international order but to democratic countries themselves. How does this US diplomatic push in the domain of values competition further complicate South Korea's existing balancing act? By returning to the question of how "threats" are constituted, we can place the American proposition in context.

Balance of Threat Theory holds out four different constituent elements of "threat"—aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions—and which determine whether a state elects to balance against a threatening actor or bandwagon with it (Walt 1985, 1987, 1992). Of the four different elements Walt (1985, 13) argues that "one cannot say a priori which sources of threat will be most important in any given case, only that all of them are likely to play a role." From Seoul's perspective, China's aggregate power is unquestionable, so are its offensive capabilities (though these are not specifically directed at South Korea). Geographic proximity is also acutely perceived by policy makers in Seoul. When other elements of threat intensify, closer proximity raises the prospect of more severe outcomes, since proximity implies greater vulnerability in the case of conflict or coercion from the threatening power, regardless of the weaker side's strategic choice as in balancing or bandwagoning.

Among four different constituents of threat, it is therefore the last— "offensive intentions" that would be a deciding factor in the South Korean calculus. But a foreign government's motivations are notoriously difficult to ascertain and must be assessed across a spectrum of indicators that Walt identifies as "moral," "intellectual," "peaceful," and "benevolent" signifiers of behavior (Walt 1985). As a close US ally, South Korea needs to consider Washington's assessments in tandem with its own national estimates, and this is where shifts in American policy that appear to fuse material factors and ideational factors enter the equation, with respect to "offensive intent" on the part of Beijing. The US Department of Defense (DOD) started publishing its annual report, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China* quantifying China's material capabilities as far back as 2000, and by 2018, its *National Defense Strategy* stated that "China is a strategic competitor using predatory

https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

economics to intimidate its neighbors" and "it is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to *shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model*" (Department of Defense 2018, 1–2; emphasis added). It further elaborated the government's determination to resist "threats2 posed by authoritarianism, declaring "We have shared responsibilities for resisting authoritarian trends, contesting radical ideologies, and serving as bulwarks against instability" (Department of Defense 2018, 9).

This shift in perception during the first Trump administration towards China's "offensive intentions" featured heavily in its initial *Indo-Pacific Strategy* released in 2019, where it stated that "as China continues its economic and military ascendance, it seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and, ultimately global preeminence in the long-term" (Department of Defense 2019, 8). The Indo-Pacific Strategy was later updated to the same effect by the Biden Administration in 2022, claiming that the US and its allies "collective efforts over the next decade will determine whether the PRC succeeds in transforming the rules and norms that have benefitted the Indo-Pacific" (White House 2022, 5). Diplomatically, the US-led minilateral-based value cooperation has been reinforced in the Quad, AUKUS, and G7 summits (White House 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021e). In sum, the key strategic documents characterize China as being an authoritarian and expansive, and therefore harboring offensive intent.

The American assessments above not only speak to painting China as a state that possesses the elements of aggregate power and offensive capabilities (and proximate power in the Indo-Pacific), but suggest that it harbors hostile intent—the final missing piece to fully constitute a "threat." While such assessments are subjective—it is difficult to precisely measure the intentions of another government from outside—it can be demonstrated by pointing to behavioral trends or specific actions that might serve as indicators (such as "wolf warrior diplomacy" or "unsafe" intercepts in the South China Sea). The American view has been largely endorsed by its Japanese and Australian allies, including the increasing identification of authoritarian values with offensive intentions (Wilkins and Kim 2022).

Certainly, aggregate power and geographical proximity feature in Seoul's material threat perceptions of China, which explains its "low-key" conventional balancing (above). Yet in respect to "offensive intentions" by ideational means, South Korea holds a somewhat divergent and less "Manichean" perspective from Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra. The following section fully examines the position and perceptions of the Seoul government within the context of Sino-US rivalry across the ideational dimension. After introducing Korea's positioning within the broader context of strategic competition, we proceed to survey how government elites, policy analysts and scholars in South Korea view the US position in detail, before turning to their own specific national assessment of the authoritarian threat.

The authoritarian challenge: South Korean perspectives

This section introduces the case of South Korea and discourses among policy makers, security analysts and scholars in the country as regards to the intensification of strategic competition between the US and China, before progressing to more detailed appraisals on the advent of overt values-based confrontation. All elements of the strategic community in South Korea have been paying close attention to these trends, and an exploration of their perspectives will assist in better understanding how this middle power and crucial US ally views such pressing issues.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

According to the assessment of the Presidential Committee on Policy Planning and the Korean Association of Party Studies (2020), strategic competition between the US and China has greatly intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic. The adversarial relationship between the US and China has become increasingly evident in the geopolitical sphere, as each country has sought to launch flagship initiatives and counter-initiatives (not always directly related). A consensus opinion sees evidence in the launch of the American Indo-Pacific Strategy as a response to and a geopolitical pushback against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Jae Hyun Lee 2019; Oh 2021; Cho 2020; Oh 2020; Jiyeun Song 2020; Kim and Raswant 2022). Moreover, Korean scholars/analysts ascertain that the US is further leveraging its relationships with traditional treaty allies and forging new minilateral groupings, such as the Quad, united around the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision to push back against potential Chinese hegemonic ambitions (Jeon, Lee, and Song 2021). Moreover, Seung Joo Lee (2020) represents a consensus view that such competition is set to further intensify going forward.

Thus South Korea, as a US ally and China's geographic neighbor, is highly exposed to military, diplomatic, economic and trade conflicts (Jeon, Lee, and Song 2021, 14). As we pointed out earlier, the heightening of this strategic rivalry places South Korea in an invidious position, whereby it is exposed to both pressure from the US to join the anti-China front and pressure of economic retaliation from China. In particular, as the strategic competition between the US and China accelerates, there is a widespread concern that South Korea will be one day "forced to choose" between the two rival powers (Su Jeong Kang 2020; Sung Hae Kim 2020; Dong Gyu Lee 2020; Dong Ryul Lee 2020; Sanghyun Park 2020; Yeong Taek Song 2020). This mirrors the reluctance of Southeast Asian states to "pick sides" in the contents, commonly expressed under a regional mantra of "don't make us choose."

Among South Korean scholars, while some define the current competition as "Strategic" (Institute of International Affairs 2020), others view it as "hegemonic," which has broader implications for the regional order (Tae Hoon Choi 2020; Han 2020). However framed, these differences lead to the same conclusion of the fear of being forced to choose. At this stage however, the US strategy towards China has only required that the US–ROK alliance focus on non-sensitive domains, including the non-military realm, which is in line with South Korea's economic and security interests. The fear of being forced to choose and the practical approach of alliance are acknowledged by the leading South Korean figures in strategy and diplomacy, including Ki Jung Kim, President of Institute for National Security Strategy; Jun Hyung Kim, Chancellor of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy; and Jong Seok Lee, former Minister of Unification (Jong Seok Lee 2021). However, with the US initiating an intensified anti-authoritarian push, as we now describe, Seoul may be pressured to participate in more intensive ideological balancing that could entail serious risks.

South Korean perspectives on the American values-based turn in strategic competition

Central to America's values-based emphasis on strategic competition is the incorporation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. The FOIP was initially promulgated by Japan's late Prime Minster Abe Shinzo, and embraced first by the

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Trump, and later by the Biden Administrations (White House 2017; 2022). While the FOIP entails efforts to promote peace and stability and economic development and connectivity, the ideational element on promoting values such as freedom, democracy and human rights have received greater attention under the Biden Administration, in line with efforts to keep the regional order "free and open" and based upon "rules" and "international law." This mandate has been co-opted vigorously since Biden's assumption of office in 2021 to emphasize the competition between these Western/democratic values and the authoritarian challenge (Wright 2021). Reinforcing this image, the *Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué* jointly released by G7 countries in June 2021, underscores Biden's democratic vision (White House 2021a). The Communiqué states that the G7 countries "will harness the power of democracy, freedom, equality, the rule of law" and promote their democratic values, including "by calling on China to respect human rights" concerning Xinjiang and Hong Kong (White House 2021a).

Since the US officially launched the Indo-Pacific Strategy under Trump in 2019 and began to focus on the value component in the FOIP in the Biden administration, the ideological characteristics of the US–China rivalry have explicitly appeared in the realm of public discourse. At a conference organized in Seoul, Evan Medeiros (2021), a former director at the National Security Council, emphasized that the US–China relationship has entered a "new normal" characterized by hostile competition not only in the fields of, economy, security, and technology, but also in ideology. Edgard Kagan (2021), a senior director on the National Security Council of the White House, also expressed "the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific, free of coercion, free of intimidation, free of economic retaliation or economic threats is critical, and the countries that share and demonstrate those values are finite." Their comments placed a clear line of demarcation between democratic and non-democratic countries.

The Biden administration's democratic focus has induced South Korean scholars to exchange views on the value aspects of US–China competition (Jong Seok Lee 2021). South Korean scholars generally agree with the US stance in principle and are fully cognizant that the US intends to intensively compete with China on the ideological front. For example, based on their analysis of the US DOD's 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* and the State department's 2019 *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, Yong Shik Joo from Chung-Ang University observes that "the FOIP strategy defines China as a fundamental threat to the liberal international order; therefore it [the FOIP] is *a very aggressive strategy that ultimately aims to change China's system*" and "can be seen as a strong expression of the US will to build a cooperative network to spread American values" (Yong Shik Joo 2020, 8, 14, emphasis added). Jae Woo Joo (2020) from Kyunghee University examined the White House's *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* (2020), similarly concluding that the document formalizes China as a communist country based on the totalitarian rule and that an ideological struggle exists between China and the US. Furthermore, Tae Hwan Kim and Han Kwon Kim, both from the Korean National Diplomatic Agency (KNDA), also comment on competition between the US and China over values and political systems, noting that "values are increasingly bloc-ized [sic] between liberalism and counter-liberalism" in the present strategic environment (National Research Council for Economics 2020; Tae Hwan Kim 2021, 1).

Notwithstanding, little attention is given in national debates about the actual desirability—or otherwise—of joining Washington in its values-based crusade against authoritarianism. South Korean scholars do not pass judgement on whether

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joining the US–China competition over values is the necessary feature of strengthening the existing US–South Korea alliance. Rather, they suggest that the liberal international order is a means for countries to alleviate the adverse effects of the US–China value conflict. Won Gon Park from Handong Global University and Jae Sung Jeon from Seoul National University argue that "*most countries* in the world under pressure from the US–China conflict, especially those that share the values of liberal democracy" should cooperate to restore the liberal international order (Won Gon Park 2020, 11, emphasis added). Additionally, they point out that liberal democratic countries other than the US have played a vital role in establishing the current international order (Jeon 2020).

Another concern of South Koreans is that, if excessive diplomatic emphasis on the FOIP's values proposition creates unwelcome pressure on domestic leaders in the region, such as quasi-democratic/authoritarian regimes in South East Asia, this raises the prospect *talmi ibhwa*—"leaving the US and joining China" (Yong Shik Joo 2020), although the probability of *talmi ibhwa* is remote in South Korea because of its path dependency on the US–ROK military alliance.

Moreover, in the government-level diplomacy between the US and South Korea, the values-related discussion has not been developed in comparison to the emphasis on the pragmatic interests shared between the two countries. A fact sheet on cooperation between the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and South Korea's New Southern Policy jointly published by the respective governments states that the two countries are "allies whose relationship is grounded in our shared values" (US Mission Korea 2020). However, the "shared values" are not explicitly elaborated regarding how they provide grounds for a joint effort to build a "world safe for democracy." Instead, the fact sheet includes far more detailed bilateral cooperation achievements and shared interests in economic prosperity, human capital, and non-traditional security. Therefore, South Korea's policy engagement in the US-led efforts to build a world safe for democracy at this time lacks substance.

Meanwhile, Korea's policy interest in spreading democracy appears to have been taking a step apart from the US efforts in the Indo-Pacific order building. Despite South Korea's track record in global democratic governance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; Human Rights and Social Affairs Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2019; Kyung Wha Kang 2020; Moon 2021; Community of Democracies 2021), it is unclear how it connects its international and regional governance engagement to the value-focused agenda of FOIP. Thus considered, South Korea's policy initiatives imply that the global and regional governance activities of South Korea launched in the early 2000s had much to do with human rights policy and the war on terrorism rather than raising an alert of threats to democracy or securitizing the threats coming from autocratic regimes, per se.

It is yet to be seen how much the Yoon administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and value diplomacy (Government of the Republic of Korea 2022; Reuters 2023) will actually assist the US in the scope of ongoing US–China competition, how China will respond, and, depending on China's response, whether the Yoon administration's value diplomacy will accelerate or fade. More important questions include whether the Yoon administration's value diplomacy will continue until the end of his regime and whether it will be a significant turning point in the China threat discourse within South Korea. To date, it is challenging to find convincing answers and evidence that the follow-up research of this article should look after with interest.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

South Korean national discourses on the value-driven threats from China

While the preceding section outlined how Washington's new stance on the values conflict is interpreted in discourses among policy makers, security analysts, and scholars in Korea, this section concentrates on national evaluations of a potential authoritarian challenge as distinct from the US.

Diverse viewpoints exist among South Korean scholarly community regarding how autocracy as a political system impacts regionally and globally beyond the Chinese national border. For example, Myung Sik Ham criticizes *Chinese-style* "democracy," arguing that it "is far from the meaning of political development as it does not tolerate any challenge to the one-party rule of the Communist Party and the authoritarian political system" (Ham 2021, 3). In a separate, but related, debate South Korean scholars have pondered if the emergence of more "liberal" factions within the Chinese political establishment could be productively engaged and encouraged to counter the current national/authoritarian trajectory of the CCP (Jeon 2020, 20).

Heon Jun Kim (2020) from Korea University considers that China was not proactive in spreading its own distinctive brand of human rights and democracy until about 2016. However, more recently, China has become active in advocating alternative norms and values. For example, the first South–South Human Rights Forum was held in China in 2017, and the human rights resolution prepared by Beijing, "Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights," was subsequently adopted at the UN Human Rights Council in 2018. Ham warns that "Chinese discourse [on Chinese-style "democracy"] is spreading faster than expected," and "non-Western countries will more actively listen to the Chinese model and Chinese measures" (Ham 2021, 4). In a counterpoint to these views, Jae Sung Jeon (2020, 13) detects little evidence of ideological "expansion factors" among Beijing's intentions, and points the inherent limitations of its authoritarian regime that circumscribe "the ability to be an exemplar and model state."

Without a clear national consensus of the spread of autocracy in the region or globally, concerns arise among South Korean scholars that China's autocratic regime could lead to an aggressive foreign and security policy, particularly in its periphery (Kim and Raswant 2023b; Lim and Kim 2020; Kim and Druckman 2020; Kim 2017a). They have examined "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," "New Type of International Relations," and "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy," as instituted between 2017 to 2018, in terms of the ideological implications (Jin Baek Choi 2020; Dong Gyu Lee 2019). Dong Gyu Lee (2019, 16) from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies explains that the CCP's ideology intends to communicate that "the values of Western countries are by no means universal and absolute" and these values "do not fit the situation of China." The problem is that Xi Jinping's ideology has the potential to develop into exclusive and aggressive foreign and security policies poised against countries with liberal democratic regimes (Dong Gyu Lee 2019; Park 2019), i.e., as the emergence of "offensive intentions." Current concerns regarding an increasingly aggressive foreign policy by an autocratic China have led to arguments that South Korea should augment its security and defense posture accordingly. Going back to the fundamentals of Balance of Power Theory above, this would necessitate a combination of internal balancing (self-help) and external balancing (strengthening alliances and partnerships). But this arrives at conclusions based upon the presumed hostile intent of authoritarian regimes towards

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their neighbors per se, rather than viewing such regimes as a definitive values-based challenge to the target state's internal democracy.

In respect to how democracies should respond to the claim that Beijing seeks to make "world safe for autocracy" the national discourse tends to focus on challenges to the liberal international order, rather than authoritarianism as a threat to domestic security of democratic states as the US has done. If China more explicitly rejects the liberal international order in the future and intends to become a hegemon, other liberal-democratic countries, beyond the US, could be expected to counterbalance China (Jeon 2020). Countries in the liberal camp would voluntarily join the ideological contestation centering on the US–China competition. That is, the US is not the only obstacle to the realization of an authoritarian Chinese-led bid for regional, or even global, hegemony. It will face strong head winds in imposing such a condition from India, Japan, Australia and Europe, all of whom will resist such a change in the normative character of the regional/global order, and which South Korea would likely align (Dong Ryul Lee 2021).

These predictions, however, currently remain hypothetical scenarios. Concrete strategies for a democratic South Korea to use ideology as a means of diplomacy do not seem to be dominant in the scholarly community at this stage. Although there are more negative discussions on the nature of China's political regime, Korean perspectives on the China challenge are not explicitly ideologically driven at present. More positive assessments of China within South Korea are by no means motivated by endorsement of its autocracy, nor are its autocratic values seen as a direct threat to Korea's domestic security at this time. So far South Korean discourses are focused more on the tendency for authoritarian regimes to be aggressive towards their neighbors, plus concerns about how Beijing may seek to reshape the liberal international order in ways inimical to a democratic state. The official-level discourse remains relatively subdued on the same issues and rather vague in offering support to US-led efforts to amplify the values dimension, even as policy makers remain wary of this kind of Sino-US contest fueling the possibility of regional conflict.

South Korea's strategic options: a delicate balancing act

On the basis of the above discussion outlining South Korean perspectives on the US and China and the issue of a values-based contest, this section now outlines the potential options available to Seoul in terms of managing the composite dilemmas telegraphed above. Despite its earlier efforts at promoting democracy, it is clear that Seoul wishes to maintain a low profile as far as possible in the new contest pitching the democracies and autocracies of the world into conflict. The challenge is: how can it simultaneously mollify the exigencies of its vital US ally on one hand, without being seen to be ganging up on China? We identify three main ways, in addition to South Korea's existing balancing posture, that may assist in navigating this new values-based challenge. These are alliance management, safety in numbers, and an independent national policy course.

The first prospective course of action open to Seoul is to employ its leverage through its alliance with the US to proactively shape the agenda in ways more beneficial to South Korea's national interests and seek to temper some of the more controversial aspects of Washington's ideological diplomacy. Though the first Trump Administration presented serious challenges for alliance management, the

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alliance has endured, and in a deteriorating regional security environment Washington is keen to solicit support from South Korea (Junhyung Kim 2021). This positions Seoul well to shape the alliance agenda, perhaps subtly steering away from the values contest, towards regional/global governance issues of greater importance to South Korea. South Korean scholars recommend that the country advances the US–South Korean alliance towards encompassing non-military domains, including technology, industry, and public health.

Subtle diversion of the alliance agenda in this direction holds promise, since discussions about how alliances might better serve the global public good or the non-security interests are of great interest to American scholars as well (Cha 2021). The South Korean government also seems invested in strengthening the ROK–US alliance with the framework of public goods cooperation (Office of the President, Republic of Korea 2021). Rather than joining Washington in a direct ideological offensive towards China, South Korea could emphasize the need to reinforce the stability of the liberal international order—also a key concern for the US—through the provision of global public goods. Issues such as public health/pandemic response, development aid, technological solutions, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief are all areas that South Korea, through the US alliance could make meaningful contributions. They might also point to the scholarship of Joseph Nye who identified the "Kindleberger trap," a situation that occurs when major powers fail to supply public goods necessary to uphold the international system, leading to its collapse (Nye, Hamre, Cha 2021). By prioritizing these areas as opposed to trading ideological barbs with Beijing, South Korea could concretely assist in the maintenance of the liberal international order which is presumed to be under threat from Chinese (authoritarian) efforts to undermine it.

Another option for South Korea is to capitalize on its own capabilities to secure broader support across the region and globally, outside of its US-alliance and bilateral relations with China. To avoid being "entrapped" in the values escalation of Sino-US rivalry, South Korea could seek out other democratic partners, and engage with them multilaterally to avoid drawing the ire of Beijing (as it would if it acted bilaterally alongside the US)—that is "safety in numbers." Indeed, South Korea's dilemma is not unique because many other countries are allies or partners with the US and, at the same time, have China as the number one trading partner (Wilkins 2023). On this basis, South Korea can participate in global governance forums and voice solidarity with countries other than the US or China, such as Britain, France, Canada, and Australia (Kim and Raswant 2023a). These alternative ties mean that South Korea can avoid being unilaterally caught between worsening relations between the US and China in the future. Jae Sung Jeon (2020) argues that the US–China conflict is escalating in all directions, and South Korea needs to respond judiciously to each new evolution in US–China rivalry. Jeon (2020, 20) further asserts that "When China's sanctions and retaliation become a reality … [South Korea needs] diplomatic power to pursue a joint international response."

Lastly, Seoul could stake out a recognizably distinctive "national" approach from the US since it is well-equipped to practice such independent "middle power diplomacy" (Sung-Mi Kim 2016). South Korea has aimed to enhance cooperation and solidarity with countries in the "New Southern" south-east Asian region and consequently secure diplomatic resources to buttress its own position (Kyung Sook Kim 2021). In this respect, as a middle power, Seoul could champion a "third way," distinct from the hardline US approach or Chinese authoritarianism. Tae Hwan Kim

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(2021, 9) argues that South Korea should further formulate and disseminate "middle-of-the-road values and norms" in the face of "the current trends of the 'blocization of values' between liberalism and counter-liberalism." Tae Hwan Kim (2021) posits that positive peace, human security, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals are included in these values and norms and could be the focus of so-called "peace public diplomacy." Such an enterprise should prove acceptable to Washington also, as a US–ROK joint statement in May 2021 announced that "the U.S.–ROK relationship … is grounded in our shared values and anchors our *respective approaches* to the Indo-Pacific region" (Office of the President, Republic of Korea 2021, emphasis added).

Conclusion

This article critically examines the Balance of Threat Theory in the context of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and the US–China ideological friction, and argues that the US and its allies do not always share the same degree of perceived threat, using the case of South Korea. Our findings imply that when threat perception is high, proximity turns into a geography of conflict that requires neighboring countries to make hard choices.

The South Korean government is fully cognizant of the strategic competition underway between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific and globally. Consensus among the policy and academic communities believes this will only intensify. And it is likely to influence international business and the global economic environment (Kim and Raswant 2022). In this respect, US policy measures that sharpen the ideological dimension of the regional "contest for supremacy" are another indicator of this worsening trajectory (Friedberg 2011). Seoul's already perilous task of navigating Sino-US rivalry is further complicated by this escalation in regional tensions.

The article has traversed the government, policy, and scholarly discourses related to this issue to offer a more nuanced appreciation of how South Korea aims to position itself to avoid the worst consequences. We first argued that through its close alliance with the US that South Korea is effectively "balancing" the rise of China, though in subtle ways. This "indirect" balancing is necessitated by the need to focus primarily on the specific and most dangerous threat that North Korea poses to South Korea's survival, with secondary or longer-term "threats" being afforded less priority accordingly. Nonetheless, Seoul has to be careful to meet certain expectations from Washington in return for its assistance in securing the country against North Korea (not being "abandoned" by its ally). This can sometimes have unintended consequences, as the deployment of THAAD demonstrated. At the same time, Seoul must be cautious of overtly provoking Beijing, its geographic neighbor, and a treaty ally of Pyongyang. The nexus between these multiple factors ensures that Seoul is consistently forced to walk a tightrope in its strategic policy to manage disconnects between its own and its US ally's threat perceptions.

With the advent of explicit "values competition" between Washington and Beijing opening another front in their strategic rivalry, the dilemma is further exacerbated for South Korea, raising fears of "entrapment" into an ideological conflict with Beijing not of its choosing. For example, if Washington went as far as seeking to undermine the CCP to the extent that it targeted "regime change," this would cause great alarm in Seoul. In our survey of opinion on this matter, we concluded that while Seoul is aligned with the cause of democracy in principle, its concerns are less focused on the "threat" of authoritarianism to domestic security than Washington, but rather on its effect on exacerbation of aggressive foreign policy on its periphery. Korean

https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

commentators also ponder the more conceptual question of whether authoritarian regimes are more prone to initiating conflict with their neighbors, and whether this would prospectively also apply in the Chinese case.

In light of this, the section that preceded these conclusions indicated a number of ways for Seoul to maintain its delicate balancing act despite these new risk factors. We concluded that a package of measures that sought to mitigate deleterious effects of values-based confrontation could be deployed. Essentially, Seoul will need to carefully manage if and how the US–ROK alliance is operationalized in the values competition, ideally by shaping the agenda in different, but related, directions such as international public goods. It could also enhance its interaction and cooperation with like-minded democracies in various international fora, to relieve a degree of dependence (or entrapment) by Washington, seeking "safety in numbers." And lastly, it could invigorate its own middle power based initiatives on the democracy front to sidestep the US–China ideological clash and have unilateral control over its activities. These options are not mutually exclusive in nature, and they could be pursued in tandem to address the issues raised by the ideological clash and strategic competition more broadly.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

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Cite this article: Kim, Jiye, Arpit Raswant, and Thomas Wilkins. 2024. "Threat Perception Variation in the Indo-Pacific." *Journal of East Asian Studies* **24**, 286–304. doi:10.1017/jea.2024.16