A realist perspective is prevalent in relation to the newly emerging naval rivalry between the United States and China and its consequences for their neighbors. China’s drive to construct artificial islands in the South China Sea has drawn global attention, while its Belt and Road Initiative has induced the United States and Japan to counter-propose the Free and Open Indo–Pacific strategy. The shifting attention beyond the China Seas has everyone scrambling to protect their commercial interests and national security, which are heavily dependent on the sea lines of communication. This study examines the rivalry between the United States, China and Japan, and draws its implications for South Korea from a ‘point–line–plane’ perspective. In the face of thorny challenges in the Indo–Pacific region, South Korea needs to rejuvenate its long-lost identity as a sea power and its navy should work closely with the Vietnam People’s Navy. In particular, establishing a strategic point at one of the naval bases in southern Vietnam such as Danang, Cam Ranh or Nhơn Trạch will have significant consequences not just for their bilateral ties but also for the South China Sea region and beyond.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative, Free and Open Indo–Pacific strategy, South China Sea, point–line–plane strategy, Republic of Korea Navy, Vietnam

**Introduction**

The balance of power and interest at sea is in flux in Asia. The relative tranquility outside sovereignty matters has now been replaced by the excessive claims of maritime areas, abusive exploitation of marine resources, and artificialization and militarization...
of disputed offshore features. With its sovereignty and sovereign rights claims in the South China Sea, China is at the center stage of this new regional dynamics. China has transformed the barren atolls and submerged reefs it controls into militarized artificial islands, while frequently engaging in rhetorical and physical confrontation with its neighbors in the vicinity of disputed islands. Far beyond the South China Sea, China has also implemented its ambitious project to connect Asia with Africa and Europe under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the aim of “improving regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth.”

A purely realist perspective is prevalent with regard to the question of what the rise of China means for its neighbors. China’s construction and militarization of artificial islands have drawn so much attention to Southeast Asian countries and beyond. In an action–reaction cycle of responses to China’s expansionist policy, the United States has redefined its area of vital interests by shifting its geostrategic focus from the Atlantic to the Indo–Pacific Ocean. There is no doubt that the United States and China are engaging in new hegemonic competition.

Although South Korea is an important stakeholder, if not a direct shareholder, in the South China Sea, it has maintained a low profile over the issue for fear of being trapped between the United States and China. After years of hesitation, the incumbent President Moon Jae-in announced after the summit meeting with the U.S. President Donald Trump on June 30, 2019 that he would collaborate with the United States on its Indo–Pacific strategy in relation to South Korea’s New Southern Policy focusing on Southeast Asia. But the strategic position of his administration remains ambiguous. South Korea is equally ambivalent about the participation in the BRI because of its potential consequences in both financial and strategic terms.

Why is so much tension proliferating in maritime Asia? Despite its explicit intention to become a middle power, why does South Korea remain indifferent in the new development with its underlying strategic posture ambiguous at best? What has South Korea done so far and what should it do to become a true middle power?

The remainder of this study unfolds in five sections. The second section examines the maritime rivalry between the United States and China and the resurgence of Japanese sea power from the viewpoint of the point–line–plane strategy. This section sets the background against which South Korea has pursued (and should pursue) maritime middle power strategy.

The third section critically reviews South Korea’s long-lost identity as a sea power. From the 14th century on, the Korean nation has held a landlocked geographical perception despite its long history of sea-based culture and livelihood. It was not until the late 19th century that a strict ban on private maritime trade and offshore settlement was lifted in the face of Western and Japanese incursion. Aside from the constant threat from North Korea, the long-lost identity as a sea power explains the slow progress in implementing South Korea’s vision for the blue-water navy that can operate as a member of a multinational coalition in theaters as distant as the Strait of Hormuz.
The fourth section examines South Korea’s role in the interplay between geopolitical and geo-economic developments where the maritime rivalry is redefining the balance of power and interest. In relation to its overseas naval operations, South Korea has been asked to increase its activities in the region through joint exercises and training patrols with its allies. This indicates that the South Korean government should no longer avoid becoming a responsible stakeholder in regional maritime affairs. That is why South Korea must rejuvenate its long-lost identity as a sea power, and its navy should place more emphasis on point–line–plane perspectives in pursuing its Navy Vision 2045. In this regard, this study argues that South Korea has to work closely with the Vietnam People’s Navy. In particular, establishing a strategic point at one of the naval bases in southern Vietnam such as Danang, Cam Ranh, or Nhơn Trạch will have significant consequences not just for their bilateral ties but also for the South China Sea region and beyond.

The fifth section analyzes why Vietnam will find such a proposal interesting in relation to its response to China in the South China Sea. This section argues that soft balancing has become the most important element in Vietnam’s hedging strategy. As a way to soft balance against China, Vietnam has reached out to major countries in the Indo–Pacific, whose physical presence would likely constrain China from conducting assertive actions. Vietnam’s soft balancing strategy opens a new horizon for a bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Vietnam.

The last section summarizes the key arguments and draw policy implications for South Korea and its neighbors. The most important conclusion is that South Korea should no longer shy away from becoming a responsible maritime middle power.

The Rise of Sino–U.S. Hegemonic Competition and the Resurgence of Maritime Japan

The Asian waters have become the site of an intense naval rivalry between the United States and China, in which Japan is also becoming more involved, departing from its earlier hands-off policy. First and foremost, there is a growing unease about China’s ever-expanding presence across the region. China is committed to challenging the status quo in maritime Asia, which has been under the de facto control of the United States in the post–Cold War period. China shows no intention of giving up on its extensive claims over the disputed islands in the East and South China Seas, even though such unilateral actions are frowned upon by its neighbors. China is no longer secretive about its enlarging naval capabilities aimed at military operations beyond its offshore boundaries.

The evolution of China’s naval strategy can be explained from a point–line–plane perspective. China has been busy securing its control over offshore features in
the South China Sea (‘point’ strategy) over the past two decades and is now ready to connect them with various “chain” schemes such as the nine-dash line, first and second island chains, the string of pearls, and the belt and road initiative (‘line’ strategy). As seen in Figure 1, the BRI, amongst others, is the latest and most extensive effort to achieve the ‘Chinese dream’ through the creation of interconnected corridors and passageways (‘plane’ strategy). China’s plane strategy has also evolved into a three-dimensional ‘space’ strategy, as illustrated not only by its unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013 but also by its frequent violations of the South Korean ADIZ (KADIZ) as well as the Japanese zone (JADIZ). It is also likely that China will declare an air defense zone in the South China Sea at the expense of its Southeast Asian neighbors.

It is a controversial issue whether China’s effort to secure points, lines, and planes is offensive or defensive. China’s true position can perhaps be found somewhere between a security maximizer (defensive realist) and a power maximizer (offensive realist). China’s BRI indicates that Beijing desperately needs to secure access to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in order to continue its economic prosperity. In the defense sphere, the A2/AD strategy is defensive in nature. Yet China is also likely to flex its military muscles against its neighbors when deemed necessary. As the Economist puts it, “China has no appetite for international crises, unless they are of its own devising.”

China’s rise at sea has prompted the United States to come back to maritime Asia over the past decade. For instance, the Air–Sea Battle (ASB) doctrine was adopted in 2010 followed by the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) in 2015 as an integrated strategy in Asia. Along with former U.S. President
Barack Obama’s pivot to Asia, the latest manifestation of America’s point–line–plane strategy to counter China’s rise is the Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) strategy. Such a dramatic shift in America’s reaction to China can also be characterized as point–line–plane strategy. It is notable that the United States has strengthened its strategic footholds (‘point’ strategy) across the region and intended to tie them together with a joint concept (‘line’ strategy). Equally important, the global commons—such as outer space, cyberspace, the high seas, and the deep seabed—has now been incorporated in JAM-GC (‘plane’ strategy).

The FOIP concept also represents a significant change in America’s strategic linkage between the Indian Ocean region and the Asia–Pacific region with an emphasis on maritime issues. In recognition of the “increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans,” the Trump administration also changed the name of the U.S. Pacific Command to the U.S. Indo–Pacific Command in May 2018. Although uncertainty remains over the specifics of the initiative, the Trump administration has shown its commitment to defining a clear vision and to mobilizing the political will and economic resources necessary to implement the strategy. The three pillars of the FOIP include security, economics, and governance.

Many Asia scholars are concerned that President Trump’s “America First” policy agenda can create a perfect storm of conflict with an unsatisfied China. As the trade war initiated by President Trump and escalated by President Xi intensifies, it is not clear how the Sino–U.S. dynamics in the Indo–Pacific region will be redefined and reshaped in the coming years. The hegemonic competition at sea will be waged under great uncertainties.

In the Asian maritime theater, an equally important but forgotten player is Japan. Over the past two centuries, the rise and fall of Japan as a regional sea power has been remarkable. Japan, though a traditional sea power, has been left out of the new hegemonic maritime competition until recently. At the turn of the new millennium, however, its naval resurgence has been uninterrupted albeit slow. The mounting significance and the growing power of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) show that the Japanese identity as a sea power has survived the decades–long hibernation in the postwar period.

More openly is Japan trying to overcome legal, political, and diplomatic constraints on the expansion of the JMSDF. It is no coincidence that Japan possesses one of the most sophisticated naval capabilities. For fiscal year 2020, a record budget of USD 49 billion (JPY 5.32 trillion) have been dedicated to the JMSDF, marking the seventh consecutive year of increase. The JMSDF will use the sum to purchase new submarines, ships, and stealth fighters—especially F-35B—and to remodel the Izumo helicopter carrier so that it can carry F-35Bs and thus become a de facto aircraft carrier. Equally notable is the evolution of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) into a vehicle for defending Japanese maritime interests. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the JCG has been given a substantial budget increase annually, with the primary goal
of strengthening its maritime security capability in maritime domain awareness and maritime patrols in the East China Sea and beyond.\(^\text{19}\)

With such high stakes, Japan seeks to deepen its engagements in the Indo–Pacific region and use the umbrella term Free and Open Indo–Pacific strategy as a framework for its point–line–plane strategy. Since Prime Minister Abe formally introduced the concept in 2016, Japan has employed it “as a network of nations and regional organizations that value freedom, the rule of law, and market economics that are free from force or coercion and serve as a foundation for peace and prosperity.”\(^\text{20}\)

**Korea’s Long–Lost Identity as a Sea Power**

During the *Joseon* Dynasty (1392–1897), many Korean kings either ignored or suppressed the Korean maritime identity, resulting in a long state of isolation as a hermit kingdom. Over the past six centuries, Korea has identified itself as a land-oriented country, best illustrated by the sea-ban policy during the *Joseon* Dynasty. In line with China’s policy, originally designed to deal with piracy and other external threats coming from the ocean, the *Joseon* Dynasty strictly banned private maritime trade and offshore settlement. Its foreign trade was limited to expensive tribute missions to China through land routes. Even after the realization of the importance of naval defense during the Japanese invasion of Korea in the late 16th century, the counterproductive, isolationist policy continued in a strengthened form, including the empty-island policy in the 17th century, only to be forcefully abandoned by the Western and Japanese colonial powers in the late 19th century.\(^\text{21}\)

Under the security umbrella made available by the United States during the Cold War period, South Korea’s maritime domain awareness was limited to the coastal areas to protect itself from North Korea’s irregular maritime aggressions. It was not until the 1990s that the Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy developed an ocean-going vision and blue-water capability as South Korea’s dependence on foreign trade increased. For instance, it was not until 1990 that the ROK Navy began to participate in the U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise. The ROK Navy ships of the Cruise Training Unit circumnavigated the world for the first time in 1992.\(^\text{22}\)

South Korea’s vision for the blue-water navy, first announced in 1991 by then-President Roh Tae-woo, has been implemented more slowly than originally predicted. This stands in stark contrast to South Korea’s shipbuilding capacity, which leads the world in commercial orders, as well as its dominant reliance on maritime trade. Despite its ambition to become a strong middle-power blue-water navy, ROK Navy warship procurement is on a sluggish track at best. Understandably, the direct and close threat from North Korea makes land-based defense a top priority. With the sinking of the Pohang-class corvette *Cheonan* in March 2010, the plan to build a blue-water navy was further scaled back to pay more attention to coastal defense. Although the ROK Navy announced its plan to acquire a new line of submarines and more
Aegis-class destroyers, the gravitation toward land and coastal defense remains strong enough to deter South Korea from becoming able to “operate as a member of a multinational coalition, operate short-term in theaters as distant as the Strait of Hormuz, and operate long-term in the East Asian region,” in the words of former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral An Byoung-tae (April 1995–April 1997).23

Lacking natural resources, South Korea has to rely on overseas producers for most raw materials. More than 90 percent of its oil and gas supplies are shipped through the SLOC stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the Korean Peninsula. In fact, a dense network of maritime trade with both neighboring and distant countries is not historically new for Korea. One of the ancient Three Kingdoms in Korea, Baekje, prospered by acquiring much wealth through trade with China and Japan by sea until it was defeated by an alliance of Silla and the Chinese Tang Dynasty in 660 and submitted to Unified Silla in 668. Unified Silla also emerged as a regional sea power, particularly in the 9th century when Commissioner Chang Bogo, also known as the “King of the Yellow Sea” established a naval base called Cheonghaejin on a coastal island in the Yellow Sea and monopolized the sea lines of trade and communication in Northeast Asia. The subsequent Goryeo Dynasty (918–1302) also engaged in international maritime trade far more energetically than its predecessors to the point at which it traded with Arabian merchants. The modern English name of Korea originates from the kingdom that was introduced to the West by those Arabian merchants.25

**Redefining South Korea’s Middle Sea Power Strategy**

Amidst the increasingly contested regional balance of power, South Korea should and can play the role of a safety mechanism and contribute to the maintaining of prosperity, security, and a rules-based order against any coercive tactics that threaten to undermine enduring principles that South Korea and other countries hold dear. Shaping dynamics
in the Indo–Pacific requires South Korea to employ a comprehensive maritime strategy that covers legal and fair foundations acceptable to all parties concerned. South Korea’s middle power diplomacy at sea should be something more than simple national egoism.  

President Moon Jae-in’s New Southern Policy can serve as a useful platform. The New Southern Policy is an extension of his regional partnership initiative for peace, prosperity, and people. The initiative will offer South Korea an important mechanism through which it can set the agenda in maritime issue areas. However, it still lacks detailed action plans in order for South Korea to become a maritime middle pivot and might potentially conflict with the BRI of China and the FOIP of the United States and Japan. Its success will depend on how effectively South Korea strikes a delicate balance between deterrence and reassurance that present both risks and opportunities for its allies and strategic partners.

Then, what can be done to make South Korea a sea power again? The remainder of this section focuses on the role to be played by the ROK Navy. In recent years, naval progress has been significant and steady in material terms. South Korea’s defense budget for 2019 was USD 39.5 billion, an increase of 8.2 percent from 2018. About 28 percent of the total defense budget (USD 11.2 billion) has been dedicated to the ROK Navy, which used much of this money to invest in new submarines and warships. In late 2018, the South Korean government also approved a basic plan to locally develop a new class of destroyers, under the Korea Destroyer Next Generation (KDDX) project, by the end of the 2020s. Nevertheless, South Korea is being left behind by its neighbors, who possess one of the world’s fastest growing (China) and most sophisticated (Japan) naval capabilities.

Against this backdrop, the ROK Navy is pursuing the strategic vision for its centennial anniversary as Navy Vision 2045, which specifically calls for the rejuvenation of Korea’s long-lost identity as a maritime nation. As part of the vision, it has also proposed building an ICT-based, system-driven Smart Navy. More specifically, (1) the ‘Smart Ship’ plan introduces a roadmap for an integrated control system entitled the Total Ship Computing System; (2) ‘Smart Operations’ aims to utilize artificial intelligence and big data technologies in the command and control system; and (3) the ‘Smart Sea’ goal places emphasis on strengthening the global network of information sharing in areas of global and regional public goods, such as search and rescue operations and marine environmental responses.

Notwithstanding its ambitious goals and determination for success, the vision could be drifted by a tide of geopolitical uncertainty unless it stands on a firmer geometric foundation as well as a broader geographic imagination. As a rising middle power that is heavily dependent on ocean-borne commerce, South Korea needs more overseas points before it can earn and use its blue-water capability effectively in terms of line and plane perspectives.

South Korea’s first-ever and, so far, only overseas naval ‘point’ operation is its
participation in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia as part of a multinational naval task force, Combined Task Force (CTF) 151, since spring 2009. The Cheonghae Unit, named after Cheonghaejin mentioned above, consists of a 4,200-ton destroyer, an anti-submarine helicopter, three rigid-hull inflatable boats, and about 300 troops. It has escorted over 20,000 commercial vessels and conducted over 20 operations as of February 2020.31

South Korea’s participation has not only contributed to global peace and stability but also demonstrated its blue-water capability and interest in playing a more important role in the global arena at a time when support for the global commons is diminishing.32 However, there is a geometric gap caused by the geographical distance—more than 10,000 kilometers—between the Gulf of Aden and South Korea. The Cheonghae Unit and the ROK Navy more broadly do not have any reliable ports-of-call en route to and from the gulf region. Such long deployments urge South Korea to find a place to serve as a regular port-of-call for its warships making passage in either direction.

An ideal location can be found in Vietnam, with whom South Korea shares significant interests in both economic and strategic terms. First and foremost, the two countries have rapidly expanded their economic ties since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. Vietnam is South Korea’s third-largest trading partner after China and the United States and is expected to become the second-largest after China in a few years. South Korea is the second-largest trading partner and the largest investor for Vietnam.33 The growing importance of bilateral economic relationship means that the security and safety of the sea lines of communication that lie between the two countries are now more important than ever before.

Second, the security collaboration between Hanoi and Seoul has also been augmented for the past ten years as part of a wider strategic partnership agreed in 2009. The incumbent Moon Jae-in government’s emphasis on Southeast Asia under the New Southern Policy has made South Korea’s defense ties with Vietnam even deeper and wider.

In particular, the ROK Navy has developed close ties with the Vietnam People’s Navy. The Vietnamese Navy is a regular participant in the International Fleet Review of the ROK Navy, which has been held every ten years since 1998 when the ROK Navy celebrated its 50th anniversary. The Cheonghae Unit has visited Vietnam five times thus far, in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015, and 2018, and has conducted anti-piracy drills together with the Vietnamese Navy. Aside from establishing regular dialogue channels, high-profile meetings between navy leaders have become more frequent and visible.34 The ROK Navy has also handed over two decommissioned Pohang-class corvettes, Gimcheon and Yeosu, to Vietnam as part of its commitment to assisting the Vietnamese Navy.35

As a next step in cementing their strategic ties, the two navies can work together to establish a strategic point at one of the naval bases in southern Vietnam such as Danang, Cam Ranh, or Nhơn Trạch.36 The ROK Navy has already made multiple visits
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10 to these bases and received a warm welcome. It will have significant consequences not just for their bilateral ties but also for the South China Sea region and beyond.

More broadly, South Korea and Vietnam should and can deepen their burgeoning defense partnership to ensure that Hanoi stands a better chance in a complex geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea. Both countries can seek closer collaboration on naval patrol and surveillance craft, personnel training and development, ICT-based command and control system, and information sharing in areas of search and rescue operations and marine environmental responses. The next section analyzes why Vietnam will find this proposal interesting. This does not mean that South Korea should encourage Vietnam to pursue a destabilizing and unwinnable arms race with China.

Vietnam’s Hedging Strategy in the South China Sea

For Vietnam, the significance of the South China Sea is not questionable in both material and symbolic terms. The Paracel and Spratly Islands provide strategic foothold and a maritime buffer through which its long, thin, S-shaped mainland can be protected. Energy-hungry Vietnam, one of Asia’s fastest-growing economies, also eyes the high potential of oil and gas deposits in the seabed. It relies on the sea waters to supply a large portion of its marine diets as well. Yet material consideration is not the only driving force behind its maritime claims. The South China Sea touches on a fundamental part of its national identity.

Vietnam is not the sole party to the sovereignty and sovereign rights disputes with China in the South China Sea. But it has had the most obvious and greatest differences with Beijing. Both countries recognize that it is not in their national interest to confront each other directly. Nevertheless, their bilateral relationship has been imbued with widespread suspicion, painful memories, and lingering tensions. Since the early 1970s, the two longtime rivals have engaged in a series of military skirmishes. The first and most serious clash occurred in 1974 when China forcefully captured the western

Figure 3. Vietnam People’s Navy’s Naval Regions

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Paracel Islands from South Vietnam. In 1978–79, bilateral differences over the Spratly Islands led to a large-scale border dispute. In early 1988, their naval forces violently collided with each other over the occupation of several reefs in the Spratly Islands. A number of confrontations continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s, although none of them escalated beyond accusations, minor displays of military force, and seizures of some civilians.\(^{39}\)

The past decade was not an exception. The level of military tension increased during the period of 2009–2011, although it was brought under control by the Agreement on Basic Principles signed in October 2011 as a \textit{de facto} bilateral code of conduct. The unstable balance after the months-long stand-off near the Paracel Islands in the summer of 2014 has been occasionally interrupted by diplomatic and military confrontations, the latest of which began in mid-July 2019, when the Chinese geological survey vessel group \textit{Haiyang Dizhi 8} allegedly violated Vietnam’s EEZ and continental shelf.\(^{40}\)

For Vietnam, the rise of China as a regional and global power is inevitable. Its top priority is thus to hedge against potential risks and threats by engaging China as much as possible both on land and at sea. On the one hand, the pacific influence of increasingly important economic interdependence has indeed warmed their diplomatic ties since they normalized their relations in 1991.\(^{41}\) It is not a coincidence that Vietnam has decided to participate in China’s BRI. On the other hand, Vietnam’s efforts to improve its ties with China cannot disguise Hanoi’s fear of aggressive, expansive, and revisionist Beijing. It is unlikely that Vietnam will bandwagon with China by surrendering Beijing its sovereignty and sovereign rights in the South China Sea. Aside from Vietnam’s vulnerability and sensitivity to trade with China, Chinese militarization in the area alarms many in Hanoi.\(^ {42}\)

Vietnam constantly remains vigilant about Chinese intentions and military capabilities. Its military strategy is increasingly becoming focused on deterring China from seizing disputed islands.\(^{43}\) But with limited material resources, internal hard balancing is not an option for Vietnam. It is obvious that the huge gap will not be filled any time soon and that Vietnam is not yet capable of sustaining an extended, large-scale, or high-intensity conventional conflict with China.\(^{44}\)

In order for Vietnam to maintain the not-too-close, not-too-far approach to China under the strategic uncertainties, it is ever more important to strike a balance between engagement and deterrence. Soft balancing has thus become the most important element in Vietnam’s hedging strategy. As a way to soft balance against China, Vietnam has reached out to India, the United States, Russia, Australia, and other Indo–Pacific countries. Vietnam would likely increase their stakes in the South China Sea and invite their physical presence in light of the freedom of navigation, which will in turn constrain China from conducting assertive actions. Of course, it is unlikely that Vietnam will be able to get any stronger support from its partners, which fear China’s reprisal.\(^{45}\)
Notwithstanding, Vietnam’s soft balancing strategy in the South China Sea opens a new horizon for a bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Vietnam. Without posing any serious, united oppositions to China, South Korea can help Vietnam better address its problems with training capacities, weapon systems, and maritime domain awareness capabilities.

**Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The rise of maritime rivalry in Asia offers a compelling reason for South Korea to build up its own sea power capability. The new rivalry is taking place in the broader context of hegemonic competition between the United States and China, as well as the resurgence of traditional naval power of Japan. This has become a defining feature of maritime Asia. The competitive elements in the Sino–U.S. rivalry, and more broadly among regional players, have symbolic, geopolitical, geo-economic, and cultural significance, preventing all the concerned parties from giving way to the other side on maritime issues. In particular, the United States and China believe that a concession in the South China Sea could possibly jeopardize their claims elsewhere in the Indo–Pacific region. During this last decade the countries have become more hostile toward each other at sea. Losing such hegemonic competition would be the worst-case scenario for both parties.  

The rivalry between the United States and China certainly has significant implications for South Korea, providing it with powerful reasons to set up its own point–line–plane strategy. Without the right sense of geometric direction, South Korea’s efforts toward a blue-water navy will remain adrift in the middle of a rising geopolitical tide.

Much to South Korea’s relief, the successful operations of the Cheonghae Unit for the past ten years indicate that the ROK Navy has enough potential to play out in the global arena, as long as it can secure trustworthy ports-of-call *en route* to and from the gulf region. In this regard, developing and upgrading the strategic partnership with Vietnam is crucial for both South Korea and Vietnam as regional middle powers. Vietnam’s soft balancing strategy in the South China Sea opens a new horizon for a bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

In conclusion, the South Korean government should become a responsible stakeholder in regional and global maritime affairs. In order to navigate through geopolitical turbulence that is constantly and rapidly changing, South Korea has to abandon its land-locked mentality. The beginning of change can start from efforts to rejuvenate its long-lost identity as a sea power and prioritize where and with whom to work. The making of South Korea as a middle sea power is not necessarily for its own egoistic self-interest. South Korea as a value state should, and can, propose a roadmap for a new regional maritime order that can contribute to regional peace and global stability.
The Hegemonic Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region

Notes


2. For instance, China and the Philippines have engaged in a tense stand-off in the Scarborough Shoal since 2012. In 2013, the Philippines filed a claim against China and sought arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In 2016 the International Arbitral Tribunal rejected China’s comprehensive claims, including the nine-dash line and entitlements to maritime areas, while judging that China had violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights as well as its obligation to protect the marine environment. Meanwhile, competition for hydrocarbon potentials continues between Vietnam and China, as best exemplified by the deadly confrontation in the summer of 2014 (Koo, “Belling the Chinese Dragon at Sea,” 54).


7. The Chinese ADIZ in the East China Sea overlaps both the South Korean and Japanese ADIZs. In the first half of 2019, Chinese military aircraft entered the KADIZ more than twenty times without prior notice to South Korea. In a rare show of force, two Chinese H-6 aircrafts and two Tu-95 Russian bombers simultaneously entered the KADIZ without prior notice on 23 July 2019. The unusual exercises jointly conducted by the Chinese and Russian air forces were allegedly intended as a show of force against joint drills between the United States and South Korea as well as to further widen the diplomatic rift between South Korea and Japan, thus throwing off the balance of power around the Korean Peninsula. In the meantime, a Russian warplane, an A-50 early-warning and control aircraft, illegally trespassed into South Korea’s territorial airspace above the East Sea/Sea of Japan near the easternmost islets of Dokdo twice in the same day, prompting South Korea’s Air Force to fire warning shots in a first-ever airspace violation by a foreign airplane (“Russian Aircraft Violates S. Korea’s Airspace above East Sea Twice,” Yonhap News, July 23, 2019).

10. The BRI was officially launched in 2013 by China’s President Xi Jinping, who was inspired by the Silk Road constructed during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) to connect China to the Mediterranean via Eurasia. The BRI consists of a Silk Road Economic Belt—a transcontinental passage that links China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe by land—and a 21st century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route connecting China’s coastal regions with Southeast and South Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East, and eastern Africa, all the way to Europe. The program is projected to have over USD 3 trillion investments, largely in infrastructure development for railways, roads, seaports and airports, as well as communications networks and power plants. The BRI’s geographical scope is constantly expanding. So far it covers over 70 countries, accounting for about 65 percent of the world’s population and around one-third of the world’s gross domestic product (European Bank, “Belt and Road Initiative,” https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html (accessed November 28, 2019)).


13. The United States has made it clear that it “will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and demonstrate resolve through operational presence in the South China Sea and beyond” and that it “cannot accept Chinese actions that impinge on the interests of the international community, undermining the rules-based order that has benefitted all countries” (Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, June 3, 2017). Some commentators have noted that America’s maritime strategy under Trump has changed from “pivot” to “hammer”. For instance, Dobell argues that “as the pivot passes, Asia confronts a new president who seems to think all the U.S. needs is a bigger and better hammer” (Graeme Dobell, “From Pivot to Hammer,” The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, November 21, 2016, http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/from-pivot-to-hammer/ (accessed November 28, 2019)).


It takes two points to determine a straight line (Euclid’s Postulate 1) and at least three straight lines to enclose a space (Euclid’s Axiom 9).
After a lengthy and somewhat tortuous internal debate, the South Korean government finally decided in January 2019 to deploy the Cheonghae Unit to the Strait of Hormuz to “uphold the safety of Korean people and freedom of navigation.” But the deployment is explicitly, if not implicitly, independent of an American request to join a U.S.-led maritime security initiative to safeguard the Persian Gulf amid security threats from Iran (Shim, “Seoul to Send Destroyer to Hormuz Strat”). At U.S. 5th Fleet’s base in Bahrain on November 7, 2019, Australia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Albania, and the United States celebrated the opening of a new command center for the joint Strait of Hormuz maritime security initiative, Coalition Task Force Sentinel (“Strait of Hormuz Security Coalition Stands Up HQ in Bahrain,” The Maritime Executive, November 8, 2019, https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/new-maritime-security-coalition-stands-up-hq-in-bahrain (accessed November 28, 2019)).


During the Cold War period, the Soviet Navy based at Cam Ranh Bay (and the U.S. Navy at Subic Bay in the Philippines) severely constrained China’s strategic points, lines, and planes in the South China Sea, while keeping the balance of power in the region (Min Gyo Koo, Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia: Between a Rock and a Hard Place (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 177).


Koo, Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia, 162.


Koo, Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia, 137–66.

43. In recent years, Vietnam has developed and fielded key deterrence capabilities such as Kilo-class submarines, Su-30MK2 maritime strike fighters, a network of anti-access missiles, and other weapon systems (Grossman, “Can Vietnam’s Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?”).


45. Tran and Sato, “Vietnam’s Post–Cold War Hedging Strategy.”


**Notes On Contributor**

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