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FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA: THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Abstract. *This article analyzes the institutional and legal foundations of the foreign policy activities of the Republic of Korea. The study highlights the role and significance of the key normative legal documents that shape the country's foreign policy, including the Constitution, the National Security Strategy, and the Defense White Paper. In addition, the functional role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea is examined. The article also analyzes the main principles of foreign policy and their legal basis, revealing the mechanisms of their practical application. Furthermore, the specific features of the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea are compared with those of other countries' foreign policy approaches.*

Keywords: *foreign policy, Republic of Korea, National Security Strategy, Defense White Paper, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, state protocol, middle power diplomacy, institutional framework.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary system of international relations, the foreign policy pursued by states based on their national interests is a key determinant of national development. Therefore, a state's foreign policy is not only a set of strategic decisions but also a complex process regulated by a clearly defined institutional and legal framework. The effectiveness of foreign policy largely depends on its normative-legal basis, the distribution of competencies among state institutions, and the clarity of decision-making mechanisms. For this reason, the analysis of the organizational and legal foundations of foreign policy is of significant theoretical and practical importance in any scientific study of state foreign policy.

From this perspective, the foreign policy of the Republic of Korea is distinguished by a specific institutional system and a set of normative legal instruments. The interaction between the key legal documents regulating foreign policy and the institutions responsible for its implementation ensures consistency and effectiveness in the conduct of foreign policy. This article examines the nature of foreign policy as a concept, the key documents and institutions forming the legal-organizational foundation of South Korea's foreign policy, its principal foreign policy principles, and a comparative analysis of its approach relative to neighboring states and Uzbekistan.

METHODS

This article employs a systematic approach, logical analysis, and comparative political analysis methods. The systematic approach enables the examination of South Korea's foreign policy as an integrated organizational and legal system rather than a collection of isolated decisions. Logical analysis is used to trace the evolution of key institutions and normative documents. Comparative political analysis facilitates the identification of similarities and differences between the foreign policy frameworks of the Republic of Korea and those of the United States, Japan, China, and Uzbekistan. Primary sources include the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, the National Security Strategy of 2023, the Defense White Paper of the Ministry of National Defense (2022), and relevant legislation retrieved from the Korea Legislation Research Institute database.

RESULTS

The concept of foreign policy. Foreign policy is an important sphere of political activity that reflects a state's overall direction in the international arena. It serves to regulate relations between a given state and other countries and peoples based on its national interests, goals, and principles. This policy is implemented through various instruments and mechanisms, among which diplomacy holds a central role. By its nature, foreign policy is closely linked with domestic policy, and its content and direction are determined by the socio-economic conditions of society. The foreign policy of developing and newly independent states is generally focused on strengthening political sovereignty, achieving economic independence, and ensuring equal participation in the international system (Diplomatic Dictionary, 1984:vol. I). The effectiveness of foreign policy primarily depends on the extent to which it is based on an organized and legal framework.

Constitutional and institutional foundations. The Republic of Korea conducts its foreign policy on the basis of the Constitution adopted on 17 July 1948 and revised several times, most recently in 1987 (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1948/1987). In the same year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established under the “Government Organization Act.” This institution is responsible for formulating and implementing foreign policy, conducting foreign economic policy, protecting Korean citizens abroad, analyzing international relations, and managing external information policy. Following the establishment of the Republic of Korea on 15 August 1948, diplomatic relations were established with countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, and embassies were opened in these states. In addition, representative missions were established in Japan and at the United Nations (CountryStudies, n.d.).

Institutional development of the diplomatic training system. Institutional development of Korea’s foreign policy system has placed significant emphasis on diplomatic training. On 24 June 1963, the Diplomatic Service Training Institute was established under Cabinet Decision No. 1358 and placed under the authority of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Later, on 5 January 1965, it was reorganized into the Foreign Affairs Research Institute by Presidential Decree No. 2030. On 31 December 1976, it was further transformed into the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security by Presidential Decree No. 8377. Finally, in 2012, it was restructured into the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, which today serves as the country’s leading research and training institution for foreign policy experts and decision-makers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, n.d.).

Administrative reforms within the state governance system have also directly influenced the transformation of foreign policy institutions. Pursuant to Presidential Decree No. 15710 of 28 February 1998 and Decision No. 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade dated 3 March 1998, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was reorganized into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This reform expanded its functions to include comprehensive trade policy formulation, negotiation of international trade agreements, and rapid response to foreign economic issues. In 2013, during the administration of Park Geun-hye, the ministry was again restructured and renamed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Dushaeva, 2024). The table below illustrates the contemporary organizational structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Table 1. Organizational Structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

No.	Position	Functional Area	Department
1	Minister of Foreign Affairs	–	–
2	First Vice Minister	Regional diplomacy	Bureaus of Asia-Pacific; Northeast & Central Asia; ASEAN & Southeast Asia; North America; Latin America & Caribbean; Europe; Africa & Middle East
3	Second Vice Minister	Functional global affairs	Consular Affairs; International & Nuclear Affairs; Development Cooperation; International Legal Affairs; Public Diplomacy; International Economic Affairs; Bilateral Economic Relations; Climate Change & Environment
4	Chancellor of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy	Diplomatic personnel training	Agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
5	Vice Minister for Strategy and Intelligence	Intelligence-related affairs	Agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (South Korea). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Foreign_Affairs_\(South_Korea\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Foreign_Affairs_(South_Korea))

Constitutional distribution of foreign policy authority. Regarding the institutional foundations of foreign policy, the Constitution of the Sixth Republic assigns the conduct of foreign affairs to the President and the State Council, subject to the consent of the National Assembly. The President receives or dispatches ambassadors without legislative approval. However, treaties must obtain legislative consent. Declarations of war, the deployment of troops abroad, and the stationing of foreign troops within national territory also require legislative approval (Article 60 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1948/1987). The National Assembly has a standing Foreign Affairs Committee, which submits the results of its deliberations to plenary sessions. The Assembly may also adopt a recommendation for the dismissal of the Prime Minister or a member of the State Council (Article 63 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1948/1987).

The President is assisted by the National Security Council in formulating and implementing foreign, military, and domestic policies related to national security before they are reviewed by the State Council (Article 91 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1948/1987). The National Intelligence Planning Agency performs functions similar to a combination of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau

of Investigation. It has direct access to the President and operates under his personal direction in the overall conduct of foreign policy. Thus, the President occupies the most central position in the conduct of foreign policy.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is organized into functional and regional divisions. Its personnel consist of civil servants and a highly qualified foreign service corps, selected on the basis of at least a university degree and success in a highly competitive examination. By the late 1980s, the Institute of Foreign Affairs had developed a highly rigorous curriculum covering international diplomacy, specialized field training, and intensive language instruction (CountryStudies, n.d.).

State protocol. In the Republic of Korea, state protocol is an important institutional system that regulates foreign policy and diplomatic relations. State protocol is primarily managed by the Protocol Bureau within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This structure is responsible for organizing official visits of heads of state, receiving foreign delegations, and coordinating official meetings and ceremonies. It also plays a key role in accrediting diplomatic representatives and formalizing their respective privileges and immunities. Within the framework of state protocol, presidential visits, international summits, official banquets, and national-level ceremonies are carefully planned. The protocol order of participants, seating arrangements, placement of national flags, as well as the sequence of official speeches and meetings are all based on clearly defined rules grounded in the principles of the Vienna Convention (Obrezkova, 2019:1C(29)).

Diplomatic network and international legal instruments. The Republic of Korea maintains diplomatic relations with more than 190 countries worldwide. The government operates 115 embassies, 46 consulates general, and five permanent missions to international organizations. In addition, 42 Korean cultural centers in 32 countries are active in promoting Korean culture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, n.d.). The Republic of Korea has ratified the following key international legal instruments related to diplomatic service: the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961); the Optional Protocol on the Acquisition of Nationality (1961); the Optional Protocol concerning the Compulsory Settlement of Disputes (1961); the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969); the United Nations Charter (1945); the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963); the Protocol on Consular Disputes (1963); and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons (1973).

Table 2. Comparative Table of Foreign Policy Bodies and Legal Foundations by State

No.	Country	Foreign Policy Institutions	Legal Basis
1	Republic of Korea	National Assembly; President; Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Constitution; National Security Strategy; Defense White Paper
2	USA	Congress; President; U.S. Department of State	Constitution; National Security Strategy; Decisions of the U.S. Department of State
3	Japan	Parliament; Cabinet of Ministers; Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Constitution; National Security Strategy; Defense “Blue Book”
4	China	Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CPC); Ministry of Foreign Affairs; State Council	Constitution; Law on Foreign Relations; National Security Law
5	Uzbekistan	Supreme Council; President; Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Constitution; “Uzbekistan–2030” Strategy; Law on the Concept of Foreign Policy Activity (2012)

National Security Strategy and Defense White Paper. In recent decades, South Korea has significantly strengthened its position in the international arena through diplomatic efforts, a soft power strategy, and political and economic initiatives. To conduct a unique foreign policy, the state utilizes important documents such as the National Security Strategy adopted in 2018 during the Moon Jae-in administration, and the Defense White Paper first adopted in 1967 with subsequent amendments (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea, 2022). The national security strategy is revised in each presidential term and the principles are modified. The administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol was the first to publish this strategy under such a name. The 2023 National Security Strategy consists of a total of 8 sections. When the Yoon Suk Yeol administration presented its concept for national security and foreign policy to be a “global core state contributing to freedom, peace, and prosperity,” it emphasized that this document would be based on the principles of the National Security Strategy (Yoon Suk Yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy, 2023). At the same time, it also focuses on the following principles:

Close cooperation with the allied United States and other partners to significantly strengthen independent defense capabilities and establish sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula; respecting and actively protecting universally recognized principles and rules of the international community; opposing any violation of fundamental universal human values, such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law; promoting national interests

and pragmatism through cooperation with the international community, with an emphasis on mutual respect and shared interests; and actively identifying and responding to new security threats in the economic, social, and environmental spheres (Yoon Suk Yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy, 2023).

The role of presidential orientation in foreign policy. In the presidential system of the Republic of Korea, foreign policy is deeply dependent on the ideological orientation and political support of the president. That is why every president who comes to power pursues a unique foreign policy. It serves not only as an external strategy but also as a platform for demonstrating national identity and strengthening internal legitimacy. As competition between the United States and China intensifies, South Korea is under increasing pressure – facing a choice of which side to take. At the same time, the country’s complex relations with North Korea and Japan continue to play an important role in shaping national identity. In this situation, while conservatives have long promoted anti-communism and a close alliance with the United States, progressives have been promoting the development of inter-Korean dialogue and more independent diplomacy in relations with Japan (Hankyoreh, 2019).

The foreign policy principles of Lee Jae-myung, who came to power after the elections in June 2025, are somewhat different. Upon coming to power, he announced a pragmatic foreign policy based on: a pragmatic approach grounded in national interests; a policy of strategic balance and autonomy; separation of economy and security; expansion of multilateral cooperation and diplomatic network; and a phased peace strategy for North Korea (Eun, 2026:1).

Table 3. Similarities and Differences in the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Korea

Foreign Policy	ROK – USA	ROK – Japan	ROK – China	ROK – Uzbekistan
Similarities	Both support liberal international order; consider alliances and multilateral diplomacy key principles.	Both are U.S. regional allies, support liberal international order, and recognize soft power as a key principle.	Both view economic diplomacy (trade, investment, technology) as a core principle; actively participate in UN and G20.	Both recognize sovereignty, peace, and diplomatic conflict resolution as important principles.

Differences	USA is a global power; ROK follows “middle power” diplomacy.	Japan is constrained by constitutional pacifism (Article 9); ROK pursues a more active military policy.	China sees itself as a “great power”; ROK prioritizes “middle power” diplomacy and relies on the U.S. alliance.	Uzbekistan does not participate in peacekeeping or military blocs; ROK has a military alliance with the USA and hosts U.S. troops due to North Korean threat.
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The analysis presented above reveals several significant features of South Korea’s foreign policy organizational and legal framework. First, the framework is distinguished by its layered structure: constitutional provisions establish the principal institutional authority, while the National Security Strategy and Defense White Paper provide operational guidance updated periodically to reflect changing geopolitical realities. This combination of stable constitutional foundations and regularly updated strategic documents enables the system to balance consistency with adaptability (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea, 2022; Yoon Suk Yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy, 2023).

Second, the dominant role of the presidency in the foreign policy process distinguishes the South Korean system from parliamentary systems such as Japan’s and brings it closer in institutional design to the American model, while remaining distinct in scale of global ambition. The president’s authority to receive and dispatch ambassadors, lead the National Security Council, and personally direct the National Intelligence Planning Agency concentrates significant foreign policy discretion in the executive (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1948/1987, Arts. 60, 63, 91).

Third, the ideological fluidity of South Korean foreign policy – whereby each new presidential administration significantly reorients foreign policy principles – introduces a degree of systemic volatility. The contrast between the conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration’s 2023 National Security Strategy, with its emphasis on the U.S. alliance and global normative leadership, and the pragmatic, balance-oriented approach of the Lee Jae-myung administration illustrates this volatility (Eun, 2026:1; Hankyoreh, 2019). The structural challenge this poses – how to maintain strategic continuity in foreign policy across presidential transitions – remains an important subject for further research (Dushaeva, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The foreign policy of the Republic of Korea is formed on the basis of clearly defined normative principles and institutions in international relations. The legal foundations of the state are the country's Constitution, the Defense White Paper, the National Security Strategy developed by the president, relevant decrees, and other international treaties. From an organizational standpoint, the National Assembly delegates foreign policy authority to the President and the State Council, and the President is the highest official conducting diplomatic negotiations and meetings on behalf of the state. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs implements this activity at the operational level. The Republic of Korea, like other states, pursues its own foreign policy based on national interests.

The comparative analysis conducted in this article (Tables 2 and 3) demonstrates that while South Korea shares certain institutional features with the United States and Japan – notably the centrality of a written constitution, a national security strategy, and a professionally staffed foreign ministry – it occupies a distinctive position as a “middle power” state navigating the pressures of great power competition, inter-Korean relations, and the management of complex bilateral histories with neighboring states. The continuing evolution of South Korea's foreign policy framework, most recently illustrated by the transition from the Yoon Suk Yeol to the Lee Jae-myung administration, underscores the dynamic interplay between institutional structure and presidential orientation that defines the Korean foreign policy process (Eun, 2026:1).

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