

Free, Peaceful and Prosperous: South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Middle Power Convergence with Australia

By Rory Medcalf

Over the past decade, a concept called the “Indo-Pacific” has replaced the late 20th century “Asia-Pacific” as a central frame of reference for strategy and external policy. Definitions vary. Some cast the Indo-Pacific as a neutral term for the connectivity of a two-ocean region.¹ Others depict it more as loaded code for balancing or even allegedly containing Chinese power through coalition building across a larger regional canvas.² In any case, many nations and international institutions have adopted variants of the Indo-Pacific as a framing concept for strategy and external policy. This pattern has extended beyond early advocates such as Quad partners Australia, Japan, India, and the United States to include the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union. Although the Indo-Pacific is often associated particularly with Japan and its influential prime minister, the late Abe Shinzo, in fact Australia was the first country to formally recognize the Indo-Pacific as its regional security environment.³ As a fellow middle power and independent-minded U.S. ally, with its own geopolitical complexities to navigate, Australia provides an illuminating example for South Korea as it operationalizes Indo-Pacific strategy.

Until the early 2020s, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was conspicuously missing in the list of Indo-Pacific converts. This was despite some obvious structural reasons for Seoul to come to terms with the Indo-Pacific concept, including economic dependence on Indian Ocean sea lines of communication, status as a U.S. ally, and membership in ASEAN-centric regional institutions. Under the New Southern Policy of the Moon Jae-in administration, there were tentative steps towards greater engagement with Southeast Asia, India, and Australia, but hesitancy to identify with Indo-Pacific strategy and its connotations of challenging China.⁴ Seoul's reluctance to join the Indo-Pacific tide dissipated, however, with the election of Yoon Suk-yeol in May 2022. His administration soon set about developing a formal “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific,” released in December 2022.⁵ The Indo-Pacific

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context also featured in Seoul's subsequent national security strategy in June 2023, and the historic statements emerging from the Camp David trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan summit in August 2023.⁶

A document is one thing, genuine strategic commitment is another. Questions remain about how far the ROK will go in fulfilling the promise of its Indo-Pacific declaration. What is the logic and motivation for Seoul's Indo-Pacific policy? How distinct is it from the outlooks of others, including fellow U.S. allies as well as middle powers? How will the China factor influence Seoul's choices? Will the constant threat from—and inextricable connection with—North Korea inevitably constrain South Korea's resourcing and attention of broader regional involvement? What are conceivable next steps in developing the ROK strategy, in terms of practical measures and ties with Indo-Pacific champions and groupings, including the Quad? Will the ROK's Indo-Pacific pivot prove ephemeral, only to be undone by the next leftward change of government in Seoul—or indeed the next “America First” administration in Washington? And how does the Australian experience—and the opportunities from the evolving Australia-ROK relationship—inform these prospects?

This essay does not answer all these questions in depth. Rather, it provides material to inform more comprehensive answers by examining two points of particular focus: the insights ROK policymakers can draw from Australia's Indo-Pacific story; and a consideration of how Australia (along with other Indo-Pacific partners) can support South Korea's sustained engagement across the two-ocean region, for the benefit of region-wide stability, prosperity, and openness.

Rise or Revival of the Indo-Pacific

The rapid emergence of the Indo-Pacific to become an orthodox way of framing the Asian strategic environment warrants explanation. It is not immediately obvious why a term compounding two oceans should be a logical shorthand to supplant “Asia-Pacific” in describing an Asia-centric region. There remains healthy debate about what the Indo-Pacific actually means and why so many governments have embraced it. Some of this can be simplified to contrasting notions of an “inclusive” Indo-Pacific—focused on connectivity and multilateralism—and a more “exclusive” version characterized by the balancing or even containment of China by the United States and some of its closest democratic friends.⁷ However, what is clear is that the Indo-Pacific is no longer some kind of intellectual oddity or insurgency, as it may have seemed to be just a decade or so ago, but an accepted organizing principle for much of the world's diplomacy. This relates to its utility, flexibility, and relevance to the challenges of the time, particularly as they relate to how to come to terms with Chinese power.

At its core, the Indo-Pacific is a super-region, a strategic system, defined by connectivity and contestation across two oceans, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.⁸ It emphasizes the multipolar and maritime nature of this system. It recognizes that, while such a region is Asia-centric, it is not exclusively comprised of Asian countries, but instead acknowledges substantial and growing links between Asia and the world—global stakeholders—through the maritime space. Globally, the Indo-Pacific matters because it is the emerging center of gravity economically, demographically, and strategically, and is anticipated to remain so well into the 21st century.

The geographic boundaries of the Indo-Pacific are contested. Like all regional constructs in geopolitics, of course there is something artificial and contingent about the Indo-Pacific; after all, seemingly settled terms such as “Asia” and “Europe” have also shifted in meaning throughout history. For example, do the east coast of Africa and the west coast of South America really figure as part of the Indo-Pacific strategic system? Where is the invisible line in the ocean that marks the outer rim of the Indo-Pacific? At the same time, it is worth emphasizing what binds the Indo-Pacific: the sea lines of communication, on which so many large regional economies depend. Moreover, while the boundaries may be fluid – this is, after all, a maritime setting—the geographic core of the Indo-Pacific is quite evident: the sea lanes of Southeast Asia. These congested maritime highways for trade, energy, navies, coast guards, and fishing fleets are the connective tissue at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, and include straits and chokepoints, the archipelagic waters of Indonesia, and critically the South China Sea: not China’s lake but every trading nation’s business.⁹ This centrality of Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific also adds to the diplomatic relevance of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) and the various ASEAN-centric regional diplomatic institutions.¹⁰

Although the term Indo-Pacific only became commonplace in diplomatic discourse over the past decade, the structural drivers of this contemporary regional order were becoming apparent in the 1990s. A critical factor was the spectacular growth of China as a trading economy, including its sudden dependence on the Middle East and Africa for oil imports, requiring a focus on the Indian Ocean and the “Malacca Dilemma”—a perceived risk of a U.S.-led blockade in some future crisis.¹¹ The rise of India and the blossoming of U.S.-India security relations in the early 2000s was another element. Japan became one early driver of Indo-Pacific thinking, under the banner of the “confluence of the two seas” and a recognition that Japan’s interest in balancing China’s growing power required closer alignment with India and Australia as well as the United States.¹² The origins of the Quad, in mobilization for disaster relief after

the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami dovetailed with the growth of Indo-Pacific awareness.¹³ The establishment in 2005 of the East Asia Summit—to include India and Australia—reflected a conscious effort by ASEAN to widen its own regional vision, including to dilute Chinese influence.¹⁴ From 2008, piracy in the Gulf of Aden drew in navies from all over the world—including China, Japan, and the ROK—to protect their interests in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean.¹⁵ All of these developments were building blocks of today's Indo-Pacific consciousness.

A key reason for the adoption of the modern Indo-Pacific as a diplomatic frame of reference is its utility, and much of that rests with the duality of the concept. It is inclusive, focused on regionwide connectivity and engaging China when Beijing plays by international rules, yet simultaneously exclusive: a code for balancing against China when it fails to respect the rights of others.¹⁶ It is about regional order yet also reflects the engagement of global stakeholders. It is maritime, yet also acknowledges that the most vital nodes of regional connectivity are where the land meets the sea: ports and undersea cables, making it a complement rather than an alternative to continental Eurasian frameworks.

Finally, another reason the Indo-Pacific is likely to endure is that it is not entirely new. The Asia-Pacific moment of the late 20th century—a privileging of the economic and security links of East Asia, America, and Australasia – was an anomaly in its exclusion of the Indian Ocean. For much of history, there have been active patterns of civilizational engagement between the Indian and Pacific oceans: trade, religion, culture and power relations too.¹⁷ Much of these preceded the period of European colonialism—consider the spread of Buddhism from India to China, Korea, and Japan—although Indo-Pacific interaction also intensified due to colonial connections and the pan-Asian character of movements for self-determination. For decades after the Second World War, the inward-looking character of China and India—the region's two great economic engines—delayed the return of Indo-Pacific regionalism. But it was only a matter of time.

Indo-Pacific Strategies

In 2013, Australia was the first country in the world to formally declare its region of strategic interest as the Indo-Pacific. This was not an explicit act of China-balancing—in the way that later American and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategies were interpreted—but rather a recognition of growing connectivity across the two oceans, Australia's dependence on a complex regional economy, Australia's proximity to the Southeast Asia sea lanes, and a pragmatic effort to redefine

the region in a way that automatically dealt Canberra in.¹⁸ Indonesia also made its own bid around this time to leverage its geographic centrality to expound ASEAN principles of amity and cooperation across this larger regional system, partly to preempt gathering strategic rivalry.¹⁹ America's Indo-Pacific diplomacy at this point, the second term of the Obama administration, was still uneven. The half-hearted "pivot to Asia" involved a recognition of the Australia-U.S. alliance and U.S.-India ties as having an Indo-Pacific character. But this was tempered by a lingering attachment to Asia-Pacific frameworks focused on East Asia and the hope that globalization would further the constructive engagement of a reforming China.²⁰

In the 2010s, the regional strategic outlook darkened, with Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea, worsening China-India and China-Australia relations, the deepening of U.S.-China strategic rivalry and North Korea's nuclear intransigence. Many of these developments were affected by Xi Jinping's hardening authoritarianism, combining extreme control domestically with military modernization and ambition abroad.²¹ Correspondingly, even as more governments began to recognize the objective realities of an Indo-Pacific strategic system, they crafted Indo-Pacific strategies as way of expanding their options to resist Chinese power, discourage confrontation, or both.

Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy of 2016 and the Trump Administration's strategy of 2017 (reflecting a classified plan that came to light in 2021) are often identified as the more confrontational and exclusive policies of this era.²² That is not the whole picture: these documents also reflected some of the unifying principles evident in the more inclusive visions of others, notably Australia, India, Indonesia, ASEAN, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the European Union, Britain, Canada, and South Korea. Second iterations of American Indo-Pacific strategy under Biden, and Japanese under Kishida, took a further leaf from the inclusivity book, with a greater emphasis on development, connectivity, and consultation.²³

Indeed, one striking feature of all declared Indo-Pacific policies is their commonality of principles. The 2019 ASEAN Outlook lists more than 14 principles including ASEAN centrality, openness, inclusivity, rules, mutual respect, and rejection of the threat or use of force.²⁴ If one conducted the diplomatic equivalent of a blind taste test, superimposing the ASEAN Outlook on recent Quad communiqués or EU statements or indeed the South Korean Indo-Pacific strategy, it would be hard to tell them apart. Nations and institutions have tended to accumulate adjectives to frame their Indo-Pacific policies, to

demonstrate that realistic policy is not a simple choice of either balancing or engaging: it is possible and necessary to do both. The South Korean approach typifies this trend, which is apparent also in multilateral consensus-building such as through the May 2023 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: “free, open, fair, inclusive, interconnected, resilient, secure and prosperous.”²⁵

Australia: Southern Star

The Australian experience is particularly useful to analyze, including because Australia is a middle power U.S. ally, a pioneer of Indo-Pacific thought, and, significantly for the ROK, it is not Japan. On the one hand, Australia’s international posture is sometimes stereotyped largely through the lens of the nation’s status as a U.S. ally, an “Anglosphere” nation and part of the democratic “West.”²⁶ This is misleading, as Australia’s independent foreign policy has always synthesized at least three distinct dimensions: to be sure, reliance on a powerful ally (initially Britain and since the mid-20th century the United States); but also engagement with Australia’s region; and support for a rules-based global order.²⁷ All three objectives are integrated in Canberra’s efforts to forge a tacit and practical Indo-Pacific strategy.

Even though Australia, at the time of writing in 2023, still lacks a single public-facing document titled “Indo-Pacific strategy,” the elements of such a policy are woven through multiple published policies, declarations, and plans, including Defence White Papers in 2013 and 2016, a Defence Strategic Update in 2020, a Defence Strategic Review in 2023, and a Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017.²⁸ Each of these refers to the Indo-Pacific dozens of times, sometimes with precise definitional language and explanations of how the Indo-Pacific shapes policy and capability decisions. For much of the time since 2013, Australian diplomacy has steadily advocated Indo-Pacific framing of the regional security environment. This means that the proliferation of Indo-Pacific thinking in other countries can be credited as something of a quiet “strategic shaping” success for this middle power.²⁹ For instance, the defining features and principles enunciated in Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper can be found in Indonesian policy and the subsequent 2019 ASEAN Outlook.

Critics of Australia’s Indo-Pacific settings have simplistically characterized them as crude alignment with American “containment” strategy (itself a debatable definition).³⁰ In reality, there has consistently been a sophistication and duality at work. Consider the vocabulary used to define Australian Indo-Pacific policies: never a cut-and-paste of the Japanese or American “Free and Open” formulation. Even conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who

advocated a “world order that favors freedom” also called for an “open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific” with “ASEAN at its core.”³¹ Australia’s Indo-Pacific policies have always involved pro-alliance military balancing as well as more subtle diplomatic hedging, even if the relative weight of each element has shifted from government to government. It is notable that there has been continuity across multiple Australian governments of both major political persuasions, from the Labor administration of Prime Minister Julia Gillard (which redefined the region as the Indo-Pacific in 2013) through the conservative governments of Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull, and Scott Morrison, to the return of Labor under Anthony Albanese in 2022. This is reflected in their many speeches and policy pronouncements, as well as more tangible actions their governments have taken, from accepting U.S. military force rotations in Australia’s north and west to fundamentally strengthening ties with India.

The continuity can be credited to several factors, including traditions of bipartisanship in Australian foreign and security policy, consistency of advice from an apolitical civil service and intelligence community, the recursive influence of Indo-Pacific policies proliferating among allies and partners (that is, Australia’s earlier Indo-Pacific advocacy reflecting back), and the basic reality that an Indo-Pacific posture matches Australia’s geography. No nation other than Indonesia is so literally Indo-Pacific in terms of its place in the world. For Australia, the Indo-Pacific is home.

Crucially, Australia’s Indo-Pacific policies are not merely declaratory. Indeed, this is more about deeds than words. Canberra may lack a public-facing strategy document, but over the past decade it has lived Indo-Pacific policy every day. This is apparent across multiple dimensions of external policy, from which Seoul can draw inspiration.

- *Diplomatic institution-building (bilateral, minilateral and multilateral):* Australia has been active in developing and leveraging the full range of regional institutions. The U.S. alliance remains core, reimagined to take advantage of Australia’s pivotal location, but this is augmented by strengthened bilateral partnerships with Japan and India, the Australia-India-Japan trilateral and the Quad. At the same time, Australian governments have been at pains to invest in dialogue with ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum, and even the (somewhat underwhelming) Indian Ocean institutions, not only for the intrinsic value of such comprehensive regional engagement but to offset perceptions that Australia is deprivileging relations with its immediate neighborhood or making all its diplomatic bets on the United States and hard balancing strategies.³²

- Defence capabilities and engagement:* The trend in Australian military modernization in the Indo-Pacific era has been to prioritize maritime forces and power projection over earlier traditions of sustaining a balanced force or focusing on small expeditionary or stabilization operations far from home. The apotheosis of this was the audacious decision in 2021 to seek nuclear-power submarines under the AUKUS arrangement with the United Kingdom and United States.³³ Critics will say that progress towards Australia's maritime military ambition has been and will continue to be slow and uneven, but nonetheless the Australia of the 2020s is developing a force posture capable of strike and long-range maritime operations (albeit with a concentration of firepower in the continent's northern approaches, which also happen conveniently to be the central waterways of the Indo-Pacific).³⁴ Although Canberra continues to emphasize a degree of self-reliance in combat and logistical capability, the reality is that major warfighting by its forces would be difficult to imagine—and impossible to execute—outside an alliance context. Australia matches its regional capability quest with defense diplomacy aimed at building wide coalitions of interests across the region, for example the annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour deployment, which takes an Australian naval task group alternatingly to the Indian Ocean/Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, to conduct humanitarian and combat exercises with diverse partners.³⁵
- Development assistance and capacity-building:* As Australia has begun to recognize the challenge of growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, it has become more instrumental in using its development assistance for geopolitical ends. Australia aid and capacity-building is no longer dissipated with little regard to strategic purpose. Instead, even where the effect at one level is humanitarian and developmental, there is also a focus on building the capability, resilience, and sovereignty of states and societies in Australia's neighborhood, especially Southeast Asia and the Pacific.³⁶ This reinforces acceptance of Australia as a security partner and helps to dilute or minimize the influence of China in ways that could become contrary to Australian interests—for example, Chinese security presence in Australia's proximity.
- Economic policy, including trade and investment diversification:* As a resources exporter, Australia has long been a champion of free trade, and a reluctant (and only partial) convert to 21st century geo-economics, the use of economics for state advantage in international power politics. This change has occurred through defensive responses to China's behavior, including espionage, foreign interference, and economic

sanctions against Australia in recent years. Australian policymakers have also become concerned about geo-economic risk as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and corresponding impacts on supply and infrastructure vulnerabilities. Accordingly, Australia now pursues a more sophisticated, layered, and risk-informed range of policies in relation to trade, investment, infrastructure, and technology. This includes diversifying trade partners, exploring technology cooperation with a focus on standards and trust, and ensuring that national infrastructure (such as 5G networks) and regional connectivity (such as undersea cables) cannot be dominated by a coercive power.³⁷ At the same time, Australia's trade dependence on China—notably in iron ore exports—remains significant.

The Australian story does not provide a perfect template for South Korea in navigating its own Indo-Pacific path. There are distinct differences in national experience, endowments, geography, and strategic culture. Even so, some obvious lessons arise. In particular, as a middle power Australia has sought to maintain a certain flexibility and freedom of maneuver, which its close alliance with the United States—and character as a liberal democracy—can sometimes obscure. Notably, at the time of writing in mid 2023, Australia under a center-left (Labor Party) government is attempting a “stabilization” of relations with China—somewhat in the style of the diplomacy of certain Asian countries, including South Korea—in which provocative rhetoric is avoided, pragmatic dialogue is pursued, but defensive capabilities are quietly strengthened. In this regard, the contemporary regional vision of Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, termed “strategic equilibrium,” is a combination of deterrence and diplomacy: seeking to support the balancing of Chinese power and the dissuasion of aggression, while reassuring other middle players that confrontation and conflict are not the intention, and that dialogue and confidence-building measures should be urged on every side.³⁸

Korea's Indo-Pacific Voyage

For its part, South Korea is a puzzling piece of the Indo-Pacific mosaic. In recent times, it has developed deep economic interests and reliance across the region. Moreover, despite its peninsular position in Northeast Asia, Korea was not as isolated from the mental map of the wider region as one might presume. From the 1500s to the 1900s, with remarkable consistency, European maps entitled “Asia” encompassed an Indo-Pacific arc from the Indian Ocean rim to China, Korea, and Japan. Such an integrated cartographic vision of Asia was not solely a Western invention. Indeed, one of the first Asian perspectives

on the broader region was the Korean Kangnido map of the known world, dated to 1402.³⁹ This renders a coherent and broadly accurate map of a region encompassing East Asia, Southeast Asia, India, Eurasia, and even the edge of Africa. It would have been informed by contact with Chinese, Mongol, Muslim, and European maps and knowledge. Even six centuries ago, Korean civilization was no hermit.

Yet as the Indo-Pacific has become a prominent frame of reference in regional diplomacy over the past decade or more, Seoul has been something of a laggard—or a skeptic—in getting on the bandwagon. That is understandable at one level: like any middle power, the ROK has limited resources and attention, while quite uniquely it faces the immediate challenge of a heavily armed, totalitarian, and volatile neighbor, which also happens to be its estranged kin. Although a U.S. treaty ally, Seoul has long been determined to keep the alliance focused on North Korea rather than wider regional risks and the China challenges.

On the other hand, the ROK has substantial interests across the Indo-Pacific strategic environment. As a nation heavily reliant on resource and energy imports, it has one of the most acute dependencies on Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian sea lanes of any country. Its trade and investment patterns span the region, and extend not only to East Asian neighbors, but the United States, Southeast Asia, Australia, India, and beyond. As a middle power and a democracy, its diplomacy relies on regional institutions and partnerships and adheres to rules, norms, and international law. South Korea has maritime interests, through trade, a globally significant shipbuilding industry, and stewardship of its own sea resources and territories (some of them contested).⁴¹ It also has large and growing maritime capabilities, including a “blue water” or ocean-going navy with advanced firepower.⁴² Now, in the 2020s, the ROK is also becoming a major exporter of armaments and military equipment, including to Indo-Pacific partners, such as Indonesia, thus combining the economic and security dimensions of its regional engagement.⁴³

Thus, one might say that, even if some governments in Seoul, especially on the left, have previously sought to evade the Indo-Pacific, the region has found South Korea. Not that it is fair to say that the ROK has not contributed to Indo-Pacific regionalism. Indeed, Seoul had a guiding hand, sometimes forgotten by much of the region. The establishment of the East Asia Summit in 2005 was the culmination of a long effort to create a leaders'-level regional body with ASEAN at the core.⁴⁴ Much of the original intellectual impetus arose from a process of experts and eminent persons known as the East Asia Vision Group, and subsequent East Asia Study Group, both established under the ASEAN+3

mechanism on the initiative of President Kim Dae-Jung.⁴⁵ Between Kim's inspiration and the able co-chairing by former foreign minister Han Sung-Joo, the South Korean fingerprints on what became the preeminent institution of Indo-Pacific multilateralism—such as it is—are undeniable.

In implementing its recent Indo-Pacific strategy, Seoul has made a reasonable start in 2022-23. For instance, it has initiated a summit-level dialogue with all Pacific Island leaders, and advanced security dialogue with Japan bilaterally and the United States and Japan trilaterally.⁴⁶ The full logic and extent of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, however, remain to be seen. Much more challenging than mere declaratory policy will be the series of difficult choices and trade-offs yet to be made: signals that demonstrate commitment. These could include allocating forces to engage with Indo-Pacific partners, expanding development assistance in Southeast Asia, the Pacific and/or Indian oceans, joining clear statements of solidarity in response to emerging regional risks beyond the peninsula, and genuinely preparing for those contingencies in consultation with others.

After all, the strategic picture in the region is dynamic and fraught with risk. The Indo-Pacific concept involves a recognition that sustaining security and prosperity demands a willingness to defend the predictability and connectivity underpinning regional order. In other words, no nation is truly an island in this region. In Korean terms, the security of the peninsula cannot be insular, not that it ever really was. For middle powers to protect and advance their interests across a region of connectivity and contestation, the external balance of partnership-building is vital, alongside the internal balancing of building their own capabilities.

As Seoul's Indo-Pacific and national security strategies recognize, risks to ROK interests can originate from many sources, and can intersect and interplay with cascading consequences. Threats from North Korea remain present and profound. But China is increasingly acknowledged as a source of coercion and assertiveness against South Korean interests. Seoul now openly underscores the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, as affirmed in a mid-2023 defense ministers' communique with the United States and Japan.⁴⁷ Effectively managing these risks requires maintenance and intensification of the ROK-U.S. alliance, but also highly credible national military capabilities and a wider web of partners.

Seoul and Canberra: prospects for middle power partnership

Against this disturbing geopolitical backdrop, a closer security partnership between the ROK and Australia is a logical objective. For many years, this relationship was underdone.⁴⁸ To be sure, the two countries had some convergences of interests and history. For example, Australia was a substantial contributor of forces under the UN unified commander during the Korean War.⁴⁹ The two are among key U.S. treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific. The two have become major trade partners, with Australian energy and resources vital pillars of South Korea's economic development and continued prosperity, and a recognition in Australia that South Korea can be vital in diversified supply chains for critical technologies.

Moreover, there have been some commendable earlier attempts at tightening bilateral security relations, including during the “Global Korea” push of the Lee Myung-bank administration, and the introduction of reasonably regular ‘2+2’ (combined foreign and defense ministers’) dialogue in the 2010s. In 2021, the relationship was elevated to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” bringing together the unlikely ideological pairing of the Morrison conservative government in Australia and the left-wing administration of Moon Jae-in: even then, despite Seoul's wariness on the Indo-Pacific or overt China-balancing, there were ambitions for defense industry, joint military exercises, training, science and technology.⁵⁰ The lack of a formal Indo-Pacific strategy and diplomatic caution about explicit China-balancing did not prevent Seoul from sending a destroyer to participate in the large-scale Australia-U.S. Talisman Sabre amphibious warfare exercise in 2021.⁵¹

Yet a fully-fledged strategic partnership has not been a front-rank priority for either country, at least until recently. Seoul's defense alignment has been overwhelmingly focused on bilateralism with the United States. Australia, on the other hand, has actively pursued new partnerships and the “mini-lateral” cooperation of small groups. In this, Canberra has prioritized Japan and India well ahead of South Korea.

What form could or should an enhanced Australia-ROK security relationship assume? One starting point would simply be more seriousness in bilateral dialogue and intelligence sharing, an opportunity to improve situational awareness and help frame greater diplomatic activism by Seoul. For instance, Australian guidance on the complicated situation in the South Pacific—where China's influence is growing yet small island states wish to minimize exposure

to strategic rivalry—could be useful as South Korea steps up its development assistance and diplomatic presence there. Australian coordination and advice could help ensure South Korean aid complements rather than duplicates the existing efforts of others. Meanwhile, South Korean expertise can assist Australia, not only in understanding Northeast Asian geopolitics but also in specialized areas like technology competition. All this improved awareness and trust-building could inform an expanded suite of practical bilateral cooperation, including exercises and training, a survey of opportunities for defense industry partnership, and the early conclusion of military reciprocal access arrangements and a status-of-forces agreement.

In parallel, Canberra should encourage and enable Seoul's new openness to mini-lateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation. This is in Australia's interests for multiple reasons, not least the amplification that South Korean advocacy can bring to Australia's own diplomacy in favor of strategic equilibrium. Large-scale South Korean participation should become a regular part of major international defense exercises hosted by Australia: Talisman Sabre, Kakudu, and Pitch Black. South Korea forces should also have an opportunity to train in Australia, bilaterally, trilaterally with the United States, and even quadrilaterally with Japan. Australia should be an advocate of including South Korea – at least occasionally, and on the basis of shared interests and complementary capabilities—in Australia-U.S.-Japan activities. South Korea should be considered a strong candidate for “Quad Plus” activity in non-military areas like regional capacity-building, cooperation on critical technologies, and maritime domain awareness. Australia and the ROK could also consider forming a closer bilateral partnership into a core for new ad hoc coalitions or mini-lateral dialogues, for example with fellow middle power Indonesia, as a way of further socializing South Korea into region-wide arrangements and bolstering a third way in regional architecture which depends neither on the United States nor China.

Furthermore, the status of South Korea and Australia as two of the “AP4” (Asia-Pacific Four) partner states of NATO provides scope for these two middle powers to coordinate on how to manage mutual expectations with NATO and Europe, at a time when the impacts of the invasion of Ukraine are demonstrating linkages between Russia-centric Euro-Atlantic and China-centric Indo-Pacific strategic challenges.⁵² Increasingly forthright South Korea concern that Russia's aggressive challenge to global order also undermines stability in the Indo-Pacific is a sign of mature strategic policy that recognizes the connectedness of regions.

The AUKUS technology-sharing arrangement among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States is principally about sharing highly sensitive nuclear propulsion for Australia's submarine fleet, however it also boasts a "Pillar 2" of pooling industrial and research strengths of new technologies such as cyber, quantum computing, undersea detection, and hypersonics.⁵³ And AUKUS Pillar 2 is explicitly open to case-by-case involvement of fourth countries. In time, and as collaboration and trust evolve, South Korea could well be one such country.

Conclusion

South Korea has much to offer as an Indo-Pacific partner. Its emerging regional strategy is in the ROK national interest while also contributing to the interests of others and the collective good regionally: a virtuous circle. However, a realistic attitude is warranted, in managing expectations on all sides and in ensuring that ROK regional policy is future-proofed against changes in government. The Australian experience is instructive in this regard: a fellow middle power that has managed to ensure bipartisanship in external policy, and moreover one that, presently with a progressive government, is maintaining a balanced approach to the Indo-Pacific under the mantle of strategic equilibrium. Notably, in August 2023, the Australian Labor Party overcame internal differences at a landmark national conference to formally support AUKUS and its nuclear-powered submarine program—a development the Australian Left would once have considered unimaginable.⁵⁴ This Australian bipartisanship is informed by a strategic equilibrium concept—deterrence without destabilization—that should make sense for South Korean governments of right and left alike.

If any partner government in the Indo-Pacific has a chance of convincing both sides of ROK politics that a way can be found between capitulation to authoritarianism and an excess of confrontation, it may turn out to be Australia. After all, here is a center-left government with strategic policies with which a right-leaning South Korean government can concur. One way to cement the advantages of the Australian way for the ROK is for both governments now to move briskly to strengthen their bilateral strategic engagement, perhaps as a core for new middle power coalitions.

Endnotes

- ¹ The geopolitical neutrality of the Indo-Pacific concept is implicit in Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2019,” https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf which refers to: “A perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions ... as a closely integrated and interconnected region ... of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry.”
- ² For a case that the Indo-Pacific is overly ideological and containment-driven, see Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumley, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- ³ “Australian Defence White Paper, 2013,” p. 7, https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/WP_2013_web.pdf
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- ⁵ The Government of the Republic of Korea, “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region,” December 2022, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133
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