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Enhancing Trilateral Security Cooperation: Korea, the United States, and Indonesia

By Sook-yeon Lee

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Introduction

The current era is characterized by the prominence of the Indo-Pacific region. The region hosts 65 percent of the world's population, contributes over 60 percent of global GDP, and plays a pivotal role in half of the world's maritime transport. Considering that approximately 85 percent of South Korea's GDP relies on foreign trade, the Indo-Pacific plays a vital role. The region represents 78 percent of South Korea's total exports and 67 percent of total imports, and the majority of South Korea's top 20 trading partners are in the Indo-Pacific. Strategic shipping routes in the region, including the South China Sea, are vital for South Korea's trade, especially as they account for around 64 percent of crude oil and 46 percent of natural gas transport.¹

In response to these geopolitical and geoeconomic realities, the Republic of Korea (ROK) unveiled its "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" in December 2022. The strategy underscores the ROK's commitment to a rules-based international order and its national interests in regional peace and stability. Central to South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy is its emphasis on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a strategic partner.² The relationship with ASEAN is pivotal, given the region's economic vitality, strategic maritime routes, and role in regional and global supply chains. Thus, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), launched alongside the Indo-Pacific Strategy, identifies eight core lines of effort, aligned with the three key visions of freedom, peace, and prosperity.³

In particular, Indonesia, given its multifaceted strategic importance to both South Korea and the United States, is a key partner in advancing a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, Indonesia, as the de facto leader nation in the Southeast Asian region, has spearheaded the establishment of ASEAN and the ASEAN community, the development of the ASEAN Outlook on

Dr. Lee Sook-yeon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Security Policy at Korea National Defense University. She serves as a Lieutenant Colonel in the active-duty ROK Marine Corps and holds a position as a Board Member of the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies. This paper was finalized in late May 2024

the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and ASEAN's sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia (such as patrols in the Malacca Strait and the Sulu Sea).⁴ Therefore, cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Indonesia, including efforts to enhance Indonesia's capacity as a regional leader, will contribute significantly to regional peace.

The Special Strategic Partnership between Korea and Indonesia, along with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the United States and Indonesia, highlights Indonesia's pivotal role as a vital partner in addressing both regional and global issues. Therefore, this paper discusses trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Indonesia in the security sector. The first section investigates existing cooperative activities between the three countries. The second section explores opportunities and potential future areas for trilateral security cooperation. Lastly, the third section discusses potential challenges that may impede future progress and considerations for developing trilateral cooperation.

The Development of Partnerships with Indonesia

Korea-Indonesia

Seoul and Jakarta officially established diplomatic ties in 1973 and have steadily strengthened them since, propelled by South Korea's economic growth and Indonesia's regional leadership. The diplomatic and defense relationship between South Korea and Indonesia, which marked its 50th anniversary in 2023, has evolved into a cornerstone of regional stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia.⁵

The bilateral relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership during South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's state visit to Indonesia in December 2006, aiming to expand cooperation across political, economic, and cultural spheres.⁶ The partnership was further solidified by the bilateral creation of the Korea-Indonesia Economic Cooperation Task Force in 2007, focusing on defense and forestry.⁷ The relationship has seen substantial achievements in the area of defense, marked by South Korean exports of submarines and supersonic jets to Indonesia and a joint project to develop fighter jets.⁸ The bilateral relationship was further strengthened during the Park Geun-hye administration, highlighted by the signing of the Korea-Indonesia Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2013.⁹ Furthermore, the establishment of the cross-regional grouping of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA) served to underscore the depth of this partnership.¹⁰

The New Southern Policy, initiated by the Moon Jae-in government, elevated the relationship to a Special Strategic Partnership in 2017, thereby highlighting Indonesia's significant role in South Korea's foreign policy through defense, maritime cooperation, and regional peace initiatives. Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian country to attain such a partnership status with Korea, signifying mutual trust and a shared middle-power identity.¹¹ The Korea-Indonesia Defense Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2013 and effective from September 2018, and the first two-plus-two meeting between the South Korean and Indonesian foreign and defense ministers in August 2021 underscore the two countries' commitment to enhancing defense collaboration and strategic communication.¹² The initiation of the two-plus-two meeting has notably bolstered strategic discussions on crucial topics, encompassing the establishment of a bilateral defense cooperation commission, collaborative ventures in fighter aircraft development, cybersecurity, maritime security, and counterterrorism initiatives.¹³ The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has continued to prioritize this bilateral relationship, as evidenced by reciprocal state visits demonstrating a commitment to enhancing both security and economic partnerships.¹⁴

Above all, the defense relationship and military exchanges between South Korea and Indonesia have significantly advanced, building upon the foundation of defense industry collaborations. Defense collaboration between the two nations focuses on Indonesia's military modernization plan, known as the Minimum Essential Force (MEF), aiming to strengthen its defense industry with support from South Korea through joint production and technology transfers. Particularly, bilateral cooperation in the defense industry has been a crucial area of mutual benefit, initiated by the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Defense and Military Supplies Cooperation in 1995. Since 2012, annual defense industry cooperation meetings have emphasized technology transfers and co-production. Indonesia has procured armaments such as tactical combat vehicles, submarines, and aircraft from South Korea. In return, South Korea has acquired CN-235 aircraft from Indonesia.¹⁵

Key developments so far have included South Korean exports of KT-1 training aircraft and T-50 advanced trainer jets to Indonesia, as well as joint initiatives for fighter jet development. Recent significant contracts, including the export of submarines and additional T-50 jets to Indonesia, and the joint development of KF-21 fighter jets underscore the strategic depth of the bilateral relationship. Since 2015, Korea and Indonesia have jointly funded the KF-21 project, which aims to develop 4.5-generation fighter jets, with a total budget of 8.8 trillion won through 2028.¹⁶ Presently, over 30 Indonesian technicians are employed at the Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) factory to contribute to this project. Such

defense industry collaboration has made Indonesia one of South Korea's leading armament purchasers among ASEAN member states, alongside Indonesian efforts to modernize its primary weapons systems by 2024.¹⁷

US-Indonesia

Established in 1949, the diplomatic ties between the United States and Indonesia have evolved significantly, leading to a deep and extensive security relationship. This transformation began with the launch of the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership in 2010, which was enhanced to a Strategic Partnership in 2015 and was further elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2023.¹⁸ These developments demonstrate a mutual commitment to addressing global challenges and advancing peace and prosperity, grounded in shared values of democracy and pluralism. Furthermore, the two countries have developed their partnership and strengthened bilateral defense cooperation through the initiation of annual Ministerial Strategic Dialogues and other high-level engagements, with the aim of addressing international security challenges. This includes the first-ever senior officials' two-plus-two dialogue in October 2023, which emphasized US support for the modernization of Indonesia's defense forces.

Strategic ties between Indonesia and the United States, similar to those between Indonesia and Korea, have been significantly shaped by arms procurement, with a particular focus on aviation assets. Over \$3.1 billion in US arms were exported to Indonesia from 1950 to 2022, encompassing airplanes, helicopters, and missiles.¹⁹ Between 2012 and 2021, 21 arms procurement agreements were signed, and active sales under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system amounted to \$1.88 billion.²⁰ Notable FMS cases include various fighter aircrafts and missiles, culminating in the approval in 2022 of a possible sale of F-15 aircraft and equipment worth an estimated \$13.9 billion. In 2023, further defense agreements were made, including the sale of 24 S-70 Blackhawk helicopters and 24 F-15 fighters, emphasizing military modernization and the deepening of interoperability between the two nations.²¹

The United States and Indonesia have developed a robust military partnership characterized by over 200 annual military exchanges, including significant exercises such as Super Garuda Shield.²² The Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) and Cope West exercises further solidify this partnership.²³ They focus on enhancing maritime and air-to-air training capabilities, addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the 2023 Keris Marine Exercise (MAREX) marked the first marine

corps exercise between the two countries.²⁴ These exercises demonstrate the depth of interoperability and commitment to regional security cooperation between the United States and Indonesia, encompassing a range of activities from subject-matter expert exchanges to large-scale, multilateral drills.

Educational exchange programs between Indonesia and the United States are a crucial component of the bilateral defense relationship. Since 1970, over 7,000 Indonesian military and civilian personnel have received education in the United States, investing more than \$130 million in these programs. Indonesian institutions have also educated over 100 American military officers.²⁵ In November 2022, the defense ministers of the United States and Indonesia discussed security initiatives, including professional military education, Indonesian force modernization, and cooperation in the maritime domain, as key cooperative endeavors. The ministers also agreed to expand bilateral military training and education by hosting new language training courses and expanding cooperation for emerging defense leaders.²⁶

The recent focal point of interest between the United States and Indonesia centers on maritime security cooperation. The United States and Indonesia signed an MOU on maritime cooperation in 2015.²⁷ Although this agreement did not directly address traditional security-related matters, the United States has played a crucial role in supporting Indonesia's maritime law enforcement capabilities by constructing a maritime training center on Batam Island and implementing joint training programs with the US Coast Guard.²⁸ Furthermore, during the US-Indonesia summit in November 2022, commitments were made to support Indonesia's monitoring program for Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, including the acquisition of drones. These efforts underscore a broader US strategy aimed at enhancing maritime security, safeguarding maritime domains, and promoting sustainable fishing practices, reflecting the comprehensive nature of US-Indonesia defense collaboration.²⁹

Exploring Emerging Prospects in Trilateral Security Cooperation

As previously discussed, South Korea-Indonesia and US-Indonesia security relations have significantly deepened over time. However, trilateral security cooperation among the three countries remains unexplored. This is mainly because the US-Indonesia relationship encompasses a wide range of activities, such as bilateral and multilateral military training, arms procurement, military education, and maritime security, while collaboration between South Korea and Indonesia has primarily centered on the defense industry. Furthermore, it was only after the initiation of the New Southern Policy in 2017 that South Korea

enhanced its comprehensive relationships with Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. However, even within the framework of the New Southern Policy, critiques emerged that suggested South Korea's engagement with Southeast Asia prioritized economic, socio-cultural, and people-to-people exchanges over the political-security sector.³⁰ Although South Korea has consistently expressed its intention to strengthen security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through initiatives such as the New Southern Policy, the recent Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative, concrete actions have only recently begun to materialize.

Thus, in which specific areas could these three countries begin to explore security cooperation? The defense industry and arms purchases stand out as prominent areas within each bilateral relationship. However, these sectors may not serve as feasible starting points for trilateral security cooperation due to the numerous stakeholders and complexity of the processes involved, in addition to the significant level of political trust required. Another important consideration is acknowledging and respecting Indonesia's neutrality and its reluctance to align with major powers in ways that might antagonize China. South Korea, too, shares concerns about straining relations with China, as its Indo-Pacific strategy explicitly states that it "neither targets nor excludes any specific nation."³¹ Therefore, adopting a cautious approach that ensures military sensitivity is crucial to establishing trilateral cooperation. In this context, initiating cooperation in maritime security and counterterrorism provides a practical foundation for expanded collaboration.

Maritime Security Cooperation

South Korea's commitment to enhancing regional stability and security, especially in the maritime domain, is clearly demonstrated through its evolving relationship with ASEAN countries and strategic initiatives. The collaboration gained momentum in 2017 when South Korea decided to strengthen defense ties with Southeast Asian nations, thereby significantly increasing resources dedicated to maritime security. This effort was further emphasized in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which focuses on expanding security cooperation, protecting Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), fostering peace in the South China Sea, and ensuring freedom of navigation. It also emphasizes addressing comprehensive security challenges and fostering cooperation with ASEAN on those issues.³² The Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative also demonstrates South Korea's commitment to maritime security cooperation. KASI focuses on maritime law enforcement, joint naval exercises, and environmental protection, aligning with the Indo-Pacific Strategy's objective of upholding the rules-based international order.³³

Indonesia, as the largest ASEAN maritime nation, confronts various maritime threats like illegal fishing, piracy, and territorial violations. Estimates suggest that illegal fishing activities cost Jakarta at least \$3 billion annually in lost revenue.³⁴ Despite ongoing efforts by ASEAN member states, the threat of piracy and armed robbery against ships continues to affect the region. There was a marginal increase in incidents in the waters around the Strait of Malacca, Singapore, and the South China Sea in 2022.³⁵ Above all, protecting its maritime territory remains a significant challenge for Indonesia, especially amidst conflicts in the South China Sea. Chinese vessels and unmanned submarines and drones intruding into Indonesian waters, particularly in the Natuna Sea, pose a threat to its sovereignty.³⁶ Key events, such as Indonesian President Joko Widodo's 2016 meeting aboard a warship in the Natuna Islands, demonstrated Indonesia's resolve to safeguard its maritime sovereignty.³⁷ In 2014, President Widodo introduced the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) vision and devised a comprehensive maritime security strategy structured around seven pillars.³⁸ The significance of maritime cooperation to Indonesia is evident through initiatives such as the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the 2023 ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO).³⁹

Enhancing Maritime Law Enforcement Capacity

In the Indo-Pacific, characterized by complex geopolitics and significant maritime activity, collaboration among coast guards plays a pivotal role in ensuring maritime security. It serves as a strategic and effective approach to address the region's diverse and transnational challenges. In light of the strategic competition among major powers, coast guard-led initiatives are preferred over traditional military measures to avoid provocation. This approach is also emphasized in South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which acknowledges the vital contribution of coast guard cooperation in tackling maritime challenges and combating transnational crime.⁴⁰

In response to maritime security challenges, Indonesia established its coast guard, known as Bakamla, in 2014, consolidating diverse maritime functions across several ministries.⁴¹ As a newly formed agency facing shortages in resources, personnel, and expertise, the Indonesian Coast Guard needs cooperation with the more experienced US and South Korean coast guards to strengthen its capabilities. A practical step for enhancing this trilateral cooperation involves consolidating the separate training support provided by South Korea and the United States into a more cooperative and comprehensive program for the Indonesia Coast Guard.

In 2018, the coast guards of Korea and Indonesia signed a Maritime Security Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the aim of enhancing the capabilities of both countries' coast guards. This agreement specifically encompasses cooperation on joint training programs, supporting the establishment of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) systems, information sharing, and providing training support for Indonesian officers.⁴² The United States contributed \$3.5 million to support the construction of a coast guard training center in Batam, Indonesia, along with additional education and training resources.⁴³ Additionally, on April 2, 2024, the Commander of the US Coast Guard Pacific Area and the Commissioner General of the Korea Coast Guard signed a bilateral joint statement enhancing collaborative efforts between the two agencies and pledged to extend this cooperation to include multilateral ties with Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, and India.⁴⁴ These efforts aim not only to enhance Indonesia's coast guard facilities and equipment but also to cultivate skilled maritime law enforcement personnel and promote operational cooperation among the coast guards of the involved countries. Therefore, each avenue of bilateral cooperation can easily develop into trilateral engagement.

Expanding Trilateral Maritime Exercises

Regular and institutionalized joint exercises are crucial for enhancing international cooperation, technology exchange, and operational readiness among the navies and coast guards of participating nations. These exercises play a key role in bolstering maritime security and safety through mutual learning and increased interoperability. The perception of such military drills by neighboring countries, however, is nuanced and influenced by various factors such as its purpose, scenarios, scale of participation, and locations. Therefore, it is desirable for joint military exercises among the three nations to commence with sensitive and low-scale training that gradually expand and evolve over time.

First, the three countries could initiate exchanges and drills to enhance technical capabilities, facilitate the sharing of best practices, and strengthen relational ties. Activities would include search-and-rescue operations, maritime law enforcement, environmental conservation, and ensuring navigational safety. Another approach is to expand bilateral naval exercises between the United States and Indonesia and between South Korea and Indonesia into trilateral exercises. Although South Korea and Indonesia have not yet engaged in any regular bilateral exercises, Korea plans to conduct a joint submarine escape-and-rescue exercise with Indonesia in 2024. Indonesia had aimed to broaden its search-and-rescue training following the sinking of the KRI Nanggala

402 submarine.⁴⁵ Furthermore, given that South Korea and the United States have conducted bilateral diving exercises since 2021, it is appropriate to expand search-and-rescue exercises for sunken vessels to include all three countries.⁴⁶ Expanding the US-Indonesia Keris MAREX marine corps exercise to include Korea would also be valuable. Given Indonesia's archipelagic nature, this cooperation is vital and has the potential to evolve into large-scale exercises akin to the Cobra Gold exercise.⁴⁷

Enhancing MDA Capability and Information Exchange

Since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States has expanded its focus on security threats, particularly in maritime domains, leading to the development of national strategies centered on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). This initiative is aimed at countering security challenges, including those posed by China, and emphasizes international collaboration for real-time monitoring, analysis, and prediction of maritime situations affecting security, safety, environmental, and economic interests.⁴⁸ When the United States and Indonesia elevated their relationship by establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, the United States announced its commitment to dedicating over \$5 million to enhance MDA and maritime law enforcement in Indonesia.⁴⁹ This initiative underscores the crucial significance of cooperation and support in MDA for Indonesia, a nation confronted with substantial maritime threats, including transnational crimes, maritime accidents and disasters, IUU fishing, tsunamis, and other large-scale natural disasters.

South Korea, recognizing the significance of MDA and its necessity for international cooperation, is promoting the Korean MDA System as an intergovernmental project.⁵⁰ It considers regional and international MDA cooperation and information-sharing to be highly significant. In this regard, the synergy among the United States, South Korea, and Indonesia is notable. The exchange of satellite detection information and regional maritime data among these nations can refine Southeast Asia's maritime situational awareness and strengthen Indonesia's capability to utilize satellite and digital information. Especially given the importance of the Malacca Strait, enhancing the capabilities of the Indonesia Maritime Information Centre, alongside the Singapore Information Fusion Centre, and facilitating the sharing of maritime information are crucial. Furthermore, the three countries should expand their cooperation by establishing a regional MDA network, which can support joint monitoring, expert education and capacity building, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), disaster response training, and collaborative environmental monitoring.⁵¹ However, this collaboration ultimately

needs to extend beyond enhancing detection and monitoring systems and information sharing to include unmanned surveillance expansion, joint efforts in policy development, and strategic dialogue.

Counterterrorism Cooperation

Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim-majority population in Asia, with around 220 million Muslims out of a total population of 250 million, and has become a significant focus for ISIS recruitment efforts.⁵² The distinction of hosting Asia's largest Muslim population and the presence of numerous radical Islamic groups within its borders have made Indonesia a prime target for ISIS. Despite lacking an established organizational structure in Indonesia, ISIS has presumably networked with various jihadist groups long present in the country. This is part of a broader trend of growing violent and radical Islamic forces in Indonesia, such as Laskar Jihad and Jemaah Islamiyah, since the late 1990s. Following the decline of Jemaah Islamiyah, smaller factions have emerged, pledging support to ISIS and engaging in terror activities both domestically and internationally. High-profile attacks include the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2009 Jakarta hotel bombings, and the 2016 downtown Jakarta attacks. The incident in 2016, in particular, increased the regional terrorism threat, leading to heightened security measures across Southeast Asia.⁵³

However, amidst these security challenges, Indonesia has successfully integrated Islamic principles with democratic governance. This stance has garnered attention from the United States, which emphasizes counterterrorism cooperation with Indonesia. Despite historical tensions arising from human rights violations by Indonesian special forces, such as the Santa Cruz Massacre and abuses in Aceh and West Papua, relations between the United States and Indonesia thawed in the post-9/11 era. In 2002, the United States included Indonesia in the Regional Defense Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program, marking the beginning of restored military and defense engagement. The United States lifted an arms embargo in 2005 and resumed ties with Kopassus (Indonesian Special Forces) in 2010, following significant reforms implemented after the Suharto dictatorship.⁵⁴

Both the United States and South Korea identify counterterrorism as a pivotal area of cooperation with Indonesia. South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy commits to expanding counterterrorism exercises and capacity-building efforts across the region. The collaboration among the three countries on counterterrorism could begin with the exchange of specialized agencies dedicated to counterterrorism, the establishment of expert forums, and capacity-building through counterterrorism training and education.

Initially, such collaboration could begin with an exchange between the national counterterrorism centers of the three countries. South Korea operates the Counterterrorism Center directly under the Prime Minister's Office, which is responsible for developing national standard manuals, assessing readiness for counterterrorism, and coordinating international cooperation. Additionally, the center conducts an annual National Counterterrorism Comprehensive Training.⁵⁵ Should the United States and Indonesia participate in South Korea's national training program to discuss and coordinate counterterrorism response systems, it would present a valuable opportunity to enhance the response capabilities of each participating country and the region. In this way, if the three countries engage in exchanges centered around their national counterterrorism centers, it would not only contribute to regional stability but also aid in the advancement of one's own counterterrorism response capabilities.

Building upon collaboration between respective counterterrorism centers, the three countries could establish a counterterrorism forum and, furthermore, jointly host a forum for regional nations, thereby expanding expert exchanges. On November 3, 2023, South Korea and Indonesia jointly convened the Korea-Indonesia Counter-Terrorism Seminar to facilitate the sharing of expertise and best practices in counterterrorism between the two countries to strengthen capacity-building.⁵⁶ To expand such efforts, the three countries should develop a plan for establishing a new trilateral counterterrorism forum. Furthermore, it is conceivable for the three countries to collaborate on enhancing counterterrorism capacities across the Southeast Asian region. A notable example is the ASEAN Aviation Security Workshop Series jointly organized by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the U.S. Department of State, and the Indonesia National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) in November 2021. This event featured not only experts from South Korea and the United States but also from international organizations such as the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), disseminating diverse information and expertise to over 60 representatives from ASEAN member states.⁵⁷ If the three countries collaboratively host a forum that includes regional nations and international organizations on a regular basis, they could significantly enhance regional counterterrorism capabilities and promote the exchange of expertise.

Conducting joint military exercises is also crucial. Initiating Korean participation in exercises such as the annual US-Indonesia Garuda Shield joint exercise, as well as the US-led Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) for maritime security – where Korea is currently only an observer – could serve as a starting point. In particular, the Special Operations Forces and Marine Corps

of ROK and the US are globally renowned for their expertise in counterterrorism capabilities.⁵⁸ Therefore, joint exercises involving trilateral counterterrorism forces will contribute to enhancing Indonesia's capabilities. Furthermore, by sending officers for training at special forces institutions in South Korea and the United States, Indonesia could further develop their expertise.

Trilateral Security Cooperation in a Multilateral Context

Establishing cooperation solely among these three countries can be more challenging than pursuing multilateral collaboration, regardless of the specific areas involved. While South Korea has recently initiated trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, it has predominantly focused on its bilateral relationship with the United States and has limited experience in trilateral security cooperation. Indonesia prefers ASEAN-based multilateral efforts or sub-regional collaboration with neighboring countries. Moreover, even if the cooperation aims to address common non-traditional security threats, Indonesia may hesitate to engage in an initiative that is US-centric. South Korea might also share this reluctance. Therefore, a strategy of pursuing more inclusive multilateral cooperation involving additional Southeast Asian nations, led by the United States, South Korea, and Indonesia, may prove more effective.

One of the primary objectives of security cooperation is to enhance the response capability of each Southeast Asian country and the regional collective capability more broadly in addressing a range of critical issues. The most feasible starting point to achieve this objective would be for South Korea to participate in and actively contribute to initiatives that the United States is currently promoting across Southeast Asia. In this context, Indonesia could play a pivotal role in fostering tighter linkages among Southeast Asian nations within the multilateral cooperative framework. Moreover, trilateral cooperation within a multilateral framework could enhance Indonesia's role and participation while possibly addressing China's concerns. Such efforts, whether they pertain to maritime security or counterterrorism, are equally applicable in a multilateral context.

Using MDA cooperation as an example, South Korea could actively engage in initiatives such as the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, initiated by the United States in 2016, or the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI).⁵⁹ Similarly, South Korea has the potential to contribute to the Sustainable Fish Asia (SuFia) Project, announced at the 2023 US-ASEAN summit, which aims to combat IUU fishing.⁶⁰ Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes MDA cooperation and underscores maritime security collaboration, particularly with Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations. Therefore, even though Korea is not

a QUAD member, it can participate in IPMDA cooperation as well. To facilitate this, the United States should expand the scope of IPMDA from its QUAD-specific focus to a more inclusive regional initiative that incorporates additional participating nations. However, when Korea participates in US multilateral initiatives, it is crucial for Seoul and Washington to define a direction for mutual role-sharing to maximize Korea's strengths and compensate for its weaknesses with support from the United States.

Another approach would be to establish a US-Korea-Indonesia program, similar to the US-Japan-Philippines one. In April 2022, the coast guards of the United States, Japan, and the Philippines launched a program aimed at enhancing the capabilities of the Philippine Coast Guard through joint training. By December 2023, this training evolved into a multinational cooperative effort that included Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁶¹ Similar to the US-Japan collaborative efforts, which initially focused on the Philippines before its expansion, a comparable capacity-building initiative involving the United States, Korea, and Indonesia could be developed and potentially expanded to include other Southeast Asian countries. Such an approach is highly feasible and strategically advantageous. Similarly, China has also expanded its Aman Youyi (Peace and Friendship) anti-terrorism exercise, which started with Malaysia in 2014 and expanded to include Thailand by 2018. Later, it extended to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos by 2023, facilitating extensive multilateral training.⁶²

Challenges and Future Directions for Trilateral Cooperation

In the security sector, the primary challenge for trilateral cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and Indonesia is to maintain mutual trust. Specifically, the potential to initiate, sustain, and advance this collaboration depends on the strong commitment of leaders from all three countries and their willingness to establish mutual trust as the foundation for this endeavor. However, the diverse core interests and foreign security strategies of each country, coupled with the possibility of policy shifts resulting from election outcomes, may pose significant obstacles to this cooperation.

South Korea

Until now, South Korea limited the regional scope of its national interests to the Korean Peninsula at its narrowest and Northeast Asia at its broadest, with variations across different governments.⁶³ The Yoon Suk-yeol administration has expanded the geographical scope of its foreign strategy beyond that of the Moon Jae-in administration and previous conservative governments by encompassing the entire Indo-Pacific region. The Yoon administration's strategy

expresses a willingness to enhance Korea's role and contributions within this area. However, approximately one and a half years after the announcement of Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, domestic skepticism persists regarding Korea's ability to make significant contributions to the peace and prosperity of the entire region, given limited resources and capabilities and other competing strategic demands and vulnerabilities. Central to these discussions are two critical issues: deterring North Korea and managing relations with China.

North Korea has escalated its military provocations, including missile tests, by legalizing the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in 2023 and designating South Korea as its "No. 1 hostile country" in the North Korean constitution in February 2024.⁶⁴ After Putin's victory of a fifth term in March 2024, and if military cooperation between North Korea and Russia increases, South Korea will need to allocate more diplomatic and defense resources to counter North Korea. This may further limit its ability to contribute to regional issues, potentially diminishing cooperation.⁶⁵ Additionally, while the Yoon Suk-yeol administration aims to strengthen its alliance with the United States, enhance trilateral cooperation with Japan, and build ties with like-minded countries, many in Korea still advocate for a more balanced approach toward China, given significant bilateral economic ties and the need to effectively address North Korea's military provocations. This perspective is also reflected in the Yoon administration's strategic documents. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the term "China" is mentioned only twice, apart from the context of ROK-Japan-China trilateral cooperation. South Korea's National Security Strategy, released in June 2023, assesses regional and global threats not in terms of Chinese aggressiveness but rather in the context of "intensifying U.S.-China competition in the diplomatic, economic, and military spheres."⁶⁶ Although the document clearly states opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo by force, Korea often adopts ambiguous positions regarding China, potentially undermining the credibility of its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Another critical factor for consideration is domestic politics. The outcome of the recent South Korean general election in April is unlikely to significantly alter President Yoon's foreign policy trajectory, as his approach has been consistent and not driven by populism. However, opposition parties that advocate for a more neutral stance on global issues, including the Taiwan Strait and the Ukraine war, are expected to challenge Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁶⁷ Moreover, following the election defeat, his focus will likely shift toward domestic concerns within an opposition-dominated National Assembly. This shift could potentially erode confidence among international partners regarding his ability to maintain public support and effectively implement the Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁶⁸

The United States

The United States may also undergo significant policy changes and shift toward a decreased willingness to engage in certain Indo-Pacific initiatives. Should the 2024 US presidential election result in a president who prioritizes US interests over global leadership, support and attention toward Southeast Asia may diminish. Such a scenario already unfolded during the Trump administration. While the Obama administration had garnered significant trust from ASEAN countries through its “Pivot to Asia” policy, Trump consistently absented himself from ASEAN-based summits and did not meaningfully engage with Southeast Asian countries. As a result, trust in the United States among Southeast Asian nations significantly diminished, necessitating considerable efforts from the Biden administration to restore it.⁶⁹

Whether in the case of South Korea or the United States, a significant shift in engagement levels with Southeast Asia is likely to erode Indonesia's political trust in these countries, subsequently diminishing the momentum for potential trilateral cooperation among them. The results of a survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's ASEAN Studies Centre illustrate this clearly. The survey shows a positive correlation between Indonesians' assessment of the level of US engagement in Southeast Asia and their view of US reliability as a strategic partner; the more engaged the United States appears to be, the more reliable a strategic partner Indonesians see it as. The difference between the perception of US engagement at the end of the Trump administration versus the start of the Biden administration is rather stark. In Trump's final year in office, roughly 80 percent of respondents viewed US engagement either as having decreased or decreased substantially, with nearly 60 percent having little or no confidence in US reliability as a strategic partner. In Biden's first year, the survey showed a significant turn in such sentiments, with over 70 percent of respondents viewing US engagement as having increased or increased substantially, and over 50 percent being confident or very confident in US reliability with less than 25 percent having little or no confidence.⁷⁰

It is noteworthy, however, that Indonesian sentiment has palpably shifted in recent years regarding the Biden administration's engagement with Southeast Asia. In 2024, almost 38 percent of respondents viewed US engagement with Southeast Asia as having decreased or decreased significantly since the previous year, with over 60 percent of the respondents feeling that the United States is not as reliable (compared to 51.2 percent in 2023 and 36.6 percent in 2022).⁷¹

In the event of escalating strategic competition between the United States and China that prompts the former to intensify its efforts to counter the latter through alliances and partnerships, Indonesia, which has traditionally maintained a neutral diplomatic stance, and South Korea, which may be hesitant to engage in efforts aimed at containing China, might both show significant reluctance to continue robust trilateral cooperation. However, should China's unilateral actions and coercion intensify, the likelihood of strengthened and expanded cooperation among the three countries could correspondingly increase. This potential is primarily due to significant public resentment and distrust in Korea and Indonesia toward China's aggressiveness and breaches of sovereignty.

In a 2024 survey, almost half of the Indonesian respondents expressed either little confidence (39.6 percent) or no confidence (9.4 percent) in China's actions contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. Among those who distrust China, 42.3 percent attribute this sentiment to concerns that China's economic and military power could be used to threaten Indonesia's interests and sovereignty.⁷² The foremost desire among respondents with a pessimistic view of China-Indonesia relations is for China to resolve all territorial and maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international law, with an increase from 72.2 percent in 2023 to 78.6 percent in 2024.⁷³

In Korea, there is also growing skepticism and concern about China. According to the Pew Research Center, South Koreans were relatively positive about China in 2015, with only 37 percent holding unfavorable views.⁷⁴ However, a survey by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies in 2022 indicated that Korean attitudes toward China turned sharply negative in the following years, primarily due to tensions in bilateral relations surrounding the 2016 announced deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. In South Korea, China is the most negatively viewed country, with 81 percent of respondents, followed by Russia (77 percent) and North Korea (69 percent).⁷⁵ Furthermore, another survey results indicate that South Korea (81 percent) has the highest proportion of respondents perceiving China negatively, exceeding the proportions in Japan (69 percent) and Taiwan (62 percent).⁷⁶

Indonesia

Prabowo Subianto, who is set to assume office as the new president of Indonesia in October 2024, is expected to maintain the foreign and economic policies of the previous administration, having been elected with the support

of the current leader, President Joko Widodo. However, during his military service, he was implicated in suppressing pro-democracy activists under the Suharto regime and committing human rights abuses in conflict areas like Papua and East Timor.⁷⁷ These actions led to a nearly twenty-year ban from entering the United States, which was lifted when he became Minister of Defense in 2020. However, the United States' subsequent collaboration with Subianto in his ministerial role suggests that his past may not significantly impact bilateral ties between the United States and Indonesia or impede potential trilateral relations with South Korea. Nonetheless, it is imperative for Indonesia to recognize that both the United States and South Korea prioritize universal values, including democracy and human rights, as fundamental aspects of their foreign policy strategies.

Another critical consideration is that Indonesia's aspirations for economic development compel it to seek favorable relations with both Beijing and Washington, necessitating Jakarta's navigation of a delicate balance. Being pragmatic, Prabowo is expected to uphold the country's economic relationship with China, established by prior administrations, while concurrently leveraging Indonesia's non-aligned stance to derive benefits from both the United States and China.⁷⁸ In August 2023, following the issuance of a joint US and Indonesian defense ministerial press statement by the US Department of Defense, which contained criticisms of China and Russia, Prabowo refuted the statement's existence, highlighting, "Our relationship with China is very positive. We hold mutual respect and understanding."⁷⁹ In 2023, the budget allocation for defense increased by 3.2 percent compared to 2022, reaching approximately \$13.6 billion, which made it the largest single allocation in the budget.⁸⁰ However, Chinese aggression is not the primary driver of Indonesia's military modernization efforts. Numerous Southeast Asian nations, including Indonesia, have undertaken military modernization campaigns for decades, but their main aim is to bolster self-defense rather than balancing and countering China.⁸¹

Prabowo will not choose sides in the US-China competition. Despite its concerns about China, Indonesia is apprehensive about US efforts to build a regional anti-China coalition undermining its relationship with Beijing. Especially as Indonesia joins the ranks of Asia's rising powers, it will prioritize strategic independence.⁸² Indonesia aims to protect its interests while avoiding entanglement in the strategic competition between the United States and China. Indonesian policies might lead the United States to perceive Indonesia as a less reliable and effective partner compared to the Philippines or Vietnam, potentially challenging the continuity of trilateral cooperation between the United States, Korea, and Indonesia.

From Korea's perspective, the KF-21 Boramae fighter jet project significantly affects Indonesia's credibility. According to a 2016 agreement, Indonesia committed to funding 20 percent of the project costs, totaling 1.6 trillion won, by June 2026 for the development of the KF-21 fighter jet. As of March 2024, Indonesia has contributed only 278.3 billion won and has requested to extend the payment deadline to 2034. This financial inconsistency, coupled with alleged attempts by Indonesian engineers to leak confidential data about the aircraft in January 2024, has greatly diminished the trust between South Korea and Indonesia.⁸³ Indonesia intensified doubts about the KF-21 project when it signed a contract in February 2022 to acquire 42 Rafale fighters from France. Furthermore, although the contract was eventually scrapped, Indonesia had agreed in June 2023 to purchase 12 used Mirage 2000-5 fighters from Qatar for approximately 1 trillion won.⁸⁴ In early May this year, Indonesia finally proposed reducing its financial contribution to the KF-21 project to about one-third of the originally agreed amount. Although the Korean government is expected to accept this proposal in the national interest, it might undermine trust between the two countries, particularly concerning issues such as the provision of prototypes and the level of technology transfer.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly recognized for its geopolitical and geoeconomic significance. However, the expansion of instability and threats from various forces is also evident. Within this context, Southeast Asia's importance has increased, and Indonesia's role in ensuring regional peace and prosperity is expected to expand. Consequently, South Korea has established a Special Strategic Partnership with Indonesia, the only ASEAN country with which it has such a relationship, and the United States has formed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Indonesia, highlighting that both nations seek to enhance their multifaceted relationships.

However, Indonesia prioritizes taking a leading role in addressing regional issues while maintaining neutrality among major powers. This approach is exemplified by its decision not to involve major powers like the United States in coordinating joint patrols with littoral states, aimed at mitigating threats such as piracy and transnational crime in the Strait of Malacca.⁸⁶

Given South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which emphasizes inclusivity and avoids antagonizing any nation, Indonesia can serve as an ideal partner for South Korea, particularly in the context of enhancing security cooperation within Southeast Asia. Such cooperation can and does include the United

States. Yet, as there has been limited security cooperation involving all three countries to date, it is advisable to start with comprehensive security issues, such as maritime security and counterterrorism, before gradually expanding to additional areas. This approach not only meets Indonesia's pressing cooperative needs but also aligns with the areas where both the United States and South Korea have committed to enhancing cooperation with Indonesia.

However, differences in their respective core interests – South Korea's intense focus on the Korean Peninsula, the United States' emphasis on strategic competition with China, and Indonesia's adherence to an independent and active foreign policy – could potentially limit the expansion of strategic cooperation among the three countries. Therefore, it is essential for the three countries to persist in enhancing their strategic dialogues to foster deeper comprehension of each other's fundamental interests. These efforts are crucial for the development of mutual trust and for establishing a reliable security partnership among them. Furthermore, as this cooperation gradually strengthens, it will become possible to expand both the scope and depth of cooperation, thus contributing to the preservation of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

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- ⁸³ “Controversy Surrounding Indonesia’s Request to Pay One Trillion Share in Eight Years After Completion of Development ” *Donga Ilbo*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.donga.com/news/article/all/20240319/124036719/1>.
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- ⁸⁵ Yoo Sae-seul, “Korea likely to accept Indonesia’s proposal to pay reduced cost of KF-21 development project,” *Kyunghyang*, May 9, 2024, https://m.khan.co.kr/english/general_news/article/202405091736127/?eng.
- ⁸⁶ Gurpreet S Khurana, “Malacca Strait Security: Is an Extra-Littoral Naval Response Exigent,” *Indian Defence Review* 19, no. 3 (2004): 4-6.