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by Julie Kim

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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For over 60 years, the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) and Canada have maintained friendly relations, involving regular bilateral talks, strong trade ties, international student exchanges, and defence cooperation. The Canada-Korea Free Trade Agreement (CKFTA) signed in 2014 remains to date Canada's first and only bilateral trade agreement in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, Canada has a direct interest in security on the Korean Peninsula and the broader Indo-Pacific. Since the Korean War (1950-1953), during which more than 26,000 Canadians served, Canada has maintained a continuous presence in the United Nations Command (UNC) and has actively participated in multinational efforts to counter threats posed by North Korea.

While these diplomatic ties are significant, Canada and South Korea have not traditionally viewed each other as their closest partners. Ottawa has prioritized its relationships with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Five Eyes member states, while Seoul has primarily engaged with the United States and its East Asian neighbors. However, due to a shifting geopolitical landscape, emerging security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, and global supply chain disruptions, both Canada and South Korea are seeking to expand partnerships. As Canada faces a trade war with the United States in 2025, it must reconsider its trade relationships and diversify its defence supply chains. With its largest trading partner threatening to impose significant tariffs on Canadian goods, reducing reliance on the U.S. market will be crucial. Meanwhile, South Korea is increasingly concerned about growing military cooperation between Russia and North Korea. In response, it will seek stronger collaboration with its Indo-Pacific allies and NATO member states. With the launch of their respective Indo-Pacific Strategies and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Canada and South Korea now have the necessary policy framework and government support to accelerate collaboration.

Canada and South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategies

The Indo-Pacific is the world's fastest growing economic region and accounts for 65 per cent of the global population. It is also Canada's second largest regional export market and trading partner after the United States with annual two-way trade valued at $226 billion. As a Pacific nation, Canada shares 25,000 kilometres of Pacific coastline and maintains robust economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties with Indo-Pacific countries.

In light of this context, Canada released its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) in November 2022. The strategy demonstrates the political and strategic importance of the region, as well as Canada's commitment to deepening engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Canada's updated defence strategy, *Our North, Strong and Free*, also

identifies the Indo-Pacific as a key strategic region for Canada's future security and prosperity.

In December 2022, a month after Canada, South Korea also released its own Indo-Pacific Strategy, aimed at fostering a "free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region." The strategy emphasizes South Korea's commitment to continue partnering with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific to address regional and global challenges, including North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, supply chain disruptions, cybersecurity, and climate change.

In its Indo-Pacific Strategy, South Korea refers to Canada as a Comprehensive Strategic Partner and expresses its intention to enhance cooperation. Canada is also committed to maintaining a close relationship with South Korea to ensure regional peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and to uphold the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region. Considering their shared bilateral and global strategic interests, Canada and South Korea can take practical steps to ensure they continue to benefit from expanding cooperation.

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Key Developments in Defence Cooperation

In September 2022, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic relationship, South Korea and Canada elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) based on five pillars: defending the rules based international system, democracy, freedom, human rights, and gender equality; strengthening security and defense partnerships, including peacekeeping and maritime security; enhancing economic prosperity and security, cooperating on supply chains, critical minerals, and ST&I, and promoting trade and investment; addressing climate change and the environment, supporting energy security, and developing sustainable energy source; and deepening partnerships in health and culture.

Following the establishment of the CSP, Canada and South Korea have engaged in active high-level exchanges. To implement the partnership, in July 2024, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Canada and South Korea released an Action Plan, which expands on each pillar of the CSP with more detailed initiatives. In September 2024, Canada's Minister of National Defence, Bill Blair, visited South Korea and reaffirmed Canada's commitment to maintaining security on the Korean Peninsula and the Indo-Pacific. Most recently, in November 2024, Canada and South Korea held their inaugural Foreign and Defence (2+2) Ministerial Meeting in Ottawa.

Recently, Canada and South Korea have expressed mutual interest in further strengthening defence cooperation. Canada's Department of National Defence (DND) and the ROK's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) held annual Joint Committee Meetings on Materiel Cooperation in May 2023 and January 2024. Additionally, Canada and DAPA signed a revised Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on arms industry and logistics cooperation in December 2022 and a 10-year MOU on defence research and development cooperation in January 2023. In June 2024, DAPA signed a Defence Industry and Procurement Cooperation MOU with the Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC). It includes sharing knowledge on government-to-government (G2G) procurement, creating networking opportunities for defence companies, meeting Industrial and Technological Benefits (ITB) obligations, and exploring opportunities to enter third export markets through joint ventures. These recent agreements highlight a growing commitment between Canada and South Korea to deepen their defence cooperation in the face of evolving global security challenges.

Expanding Canada-Korea defence cooperation

Strengthening defence industry collaboration in maritime security

South Korea's defence industry has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven by strong government support, competitive pricing, and faster delivery times. The country is committed to expanding its defence industry and exports, aiming to become the world's fourth-largest arms exporter by 2027. Meanwhile, Canada needs to consider more innovative and cost-effective procurement strategies to enhance its defence supply chain.

There are many opportunities to deepen defence industry partnerships between Canada and South Korea by leveraging each other's strengths and capabilities. Recently, South Korean defence industry and government officials have actively pitched proposals to supply the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) with various new equipment, including howitzers, rocket launchers, training aircraft, and submarines. In particular, one area where their interests align is the Canadian Patrol Submarine Project (CPSP). Since the CSP emphasizes strengthening security and defense partnerships in maritime security as its second pillar, the CPSP presents a natural opportunity for future collaboration. In July 2024, the Canadian government announced that it began the process of procuring up to 12 conventionally powered, under-ice capable submarines to replace its aging fleet of Victoria-class submarines. In September 2024, a Request for Information (RFI) was issued to gather information on the procurement, construction, delivery, and operational capabilities of potential bidders, as well as the establishment of a submarine sustainment capability in Canada.

South Korea's submarine technology is widely recognized for its advanced capabilities and competitive pricing. By acquiring South Korean submarines, Canada will be able to gain access to advanced technology that would strengthen its naval forces in a timely manner. For South Korea, exporting submarines to Canada would open a new market and potentially create more opportunities for future defence partnerships with other NATO members. Moreover, such a partnership would generate economic benefits for both countries as they collaborate in joint ventures and co-development of submarine systems. For instance, Hanwha Ocean has recently established strategic partnerships with Canadian companies like CAE, Gastops, and Curtiss-Wright Indal Technologies. Therefore, this partnership would not only provide Canada with advanced naval assets but also pave the way for Canada and South Korea to deepen their defence cooperation through research and development collaboration, joint development of military technologies, and increased interoperability.

Military Operations in the Indo-Pacific and Strategic Security Partnerships

As part of its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, the CAF has undertaken several operations in the region. Under Operation HORIZON, the CAF is deployed to strengthen military cooperation with allies by participating in pan-domain (maritime, land, air, cyber, and space) exercises. The CAF also participates in a multinational effort to enforce UN sanctions against North Korea under Operation NEON. Moreover, the CAF participates in Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), the world's largest biennial maritime military exercise, as well as Exercise PACIFIC VANGUARD alongside South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. Considering these experiences, the Canadian and South Korean navies could expand the number of joint exercises to enhance their maritime security cooperation.

In terms of security cooperation, the United States-South Korea-Japan trilateral relationship is arguably the most established minilateral framework in the North Pacific. This partnership is built on shared security concerns, especially regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, and has been institutionalized through regular joint military exercises, dialogues, and agreements. In August 2023, the leaders of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan held a trilateral summit at Camp David, where they announced plans to deepen their security partnership and launch an annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue. Moreover, beginning in June 2024, the three countries will regularly hold a trilateral multi-domain military exercise called Freedom Edge. This exercise aims to enhance trilateral interoperability and will focus on areas such as cooperative ballistic missile defence, anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue, and defensive cyber training.

South Korea will continue to strengthen trilateral security cooperation with the U.S. and Japan. In this regard, Canada may have an interest in promoting a quadrilateral security cooperation, given its shared values and interests with its North Pacific allies. At the same time, South Korea is seeking greater collaboration with NATO and is engaged with the alliance through the Indo-Pacific Partners (IP4), alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. With North Korea supplying ammunition and troops to Russia, its growing partnership with Moscow has become a security concern not only in the Indo-Pacific but also in Europe. As a founding member of NATO, Canada could take a proactive role in inviting South Korea and the IP4 to more discussions on strengthening security and stability across both regions.

Enhancing Cybersecurity Cooperation against North Korea

Cybersecurity is an increasingly critical aspect of national security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, where cyber threats have become more widespread. One of the most significant cyber threats comes from North Korea, whose malicious cyber operations pose serious risks to South Korea, the broader Indo-Pacific, as well as global security.

As the primary target of North Korean cyber attacks, South Korea has prioritized strengthening cyber resilience and expanding partnerships with key allies. In May 2022, South Korea became the first Asian country to join the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE). In November 2023, South Korea, the U.S., and Japan announced the establishment of a high-level cyber consultation group, which will meet every quarter to strengthen cooperation against North Korean cyber threats. South Korea also released a revised *National Cybersecurity Strategy* in February 2024 to adapt to the evolving cyber landscape.

Canada's IPS highlights cybersecurity as a key area of collaboration with South Korea. As part of its IPS, Canada launched the Cybersecurity and Digital Technology Diplomacy project, which allocates $47.4 million over five years (2022-2027) to enhance partner countries' cyber capabilities and foster regional cooperation through the deployment of cyber attachés. At the 2+2 Ministerial Meeting in November 2024, both Canada and South Korea acknowledged the growing challenges posed by hybrid and digital threats. They pledged to expand joint efforts to combat cyber threats and agreed to hold Canada-Korea Cyber Policy Consultations.

Building on these initiatives, the two countries should establish a formal intelligence sharing agreement on cyber threats, particularly those linked to North Korea. Moreover, a bilateral cybersecurity task force could further improve coordination and joint response

efforts. South Korea should also consider expanding its high-level cyber consultation group with the U.S. and Japan to include other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, to foster broader regional cooperation.

The Future of Canada-Korea Defence Cooperation

To address the growing security threats in the Indo-Pacific, Canada and South Korea should continue leveraging their respective IPS and strengthen defence cooperation with like-minded countries. Additionally, both nations must take concrete steps to implement their CSP, starting with the initiatives outlined in the Action Plan. The need for cooperation will likely increase as Russia and North Korea continue to deepen their military cooperation and as the second Trump administration potentially challenges the foundations of security alliances, including those with Canada, South Korea, and other Indo-Pacific countries. In light of this, Canada and South Korea should work together to build military interoperability capabilities and mitigate the effects of isolationist policies from Washington.

Furthermore, the year 2025 presents key opportunities for Canada and South Korea to demonstrate their commitment to becoming closer partners. Canada will host the G7 Summit in June 2025, while South Korea will host APEC in November 2025. As the host, Canada should invite South Korea to attend the G7 Summit, as Japan did in 2023, ensuring that South Korea has a voice in discussions on important and timely issues. Meanwhile, South Korea should work to establish a more solid foundation for defence cooperation with Canada and ensure that Canada is included in any future North Pacific collaboration with the U.S. and Japan.

For this partnership to be effective, it must be durable and long-term rather than a series of one-off engagements. Beyond high-level exchanges, Canada and South Korea should co-develop long-term military training and education programs, facilitate regular personnel exchanges, and establish mechanisms for ongoing defence dialogue. Moreover, strengthening ties between academia, policy-oriented think-tanks, and the private sector will be crucial in fostering deeper collaboration. These institutions can generate innovative ideas and maintain momentum in Canada-Korea defence cooperation through roundtables, conferences, and joint research seminars.

About the Author

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