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By Dr. Julie Kim

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BRIEFING NOTE

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This briefing note summarizes a roundtable discussion that took place on 3 March 2026, in Ottawa, Ontario, and was supported by the Korea Foundation.

Summary

- Intensifying maritime security threats – including North Korea's missile activity, the expansion of the Chinese navy, and deepening China–Russia military cooperation – underscore the importance of deeper cooperation among like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific.
- As Canada and the Republic of Korea (ROK) strengthen their defence cooperation, maritime security has emerged as a key pillar of bilateral relations and one of the most practical areas for expanding cooperation.
- Advancing Canada–ROK maritime security cooperation through expanded naval engagement, closer cooperation on maritime domain awareness, and defence industrial collaboration would directly support Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy while strengthening its role as a more credible and consistent security partner in the region.

Context

- Amid a shifting geopolitical landscape and increasing uncertainty with U.S. foreign policy decision-making, Canada needs to diversify its defence and security partnerships beyond its traditional allies. Canada's recent *Indo-Pacific Strategy* and defence policy, *Our North, Strong and Free*, also call for deeper defence cooperation with like-minded partners in the North Pacific.
- Canada has the longest coastline in the world, and faces growing maritime security challenges. As an Arctic state bordered by three oceans, protecting its territorial waters is a top national security priority for Canada.
    - China is pursuing an ambitious military build-up, prioritizing the development of nuclear, space, cyber, artificial intelligence, naval, and submarine

capabilities. In particular, its navy is expanding at a record pace and now has more ships than the U.S., operating 234 warships compared to the US Navy's 219, contributing to heightened tensions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.
    - North Korea's missile provocations and illegal maritime activities pose major security concerns for countries in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the ROK.
    - As sea ice melts at an accelerating pace, the Arctic is becoming increasingly accessible to actors with military ambitions such as China and Russia.
- Under this context, the ROK emerges as a natural and timely partner for Canada.
    - Canada and the ROK share a long-standing security relationship rooted in Canada's participation in the Korean War, and the partnership has strengthened through decades of diplomatic, economic, and defence cooperation. In September 2022, the two countries elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
    - More recently, the two countries further strengthened defence cooperation through the signing of the Canada-Republic of Korea Security and Defence Cooperation Partnership in October 2025 and an Agreement on the Protection of Military and Defence Classified Information in February 2026.
    - From Seoul's perspective, closer cooperation with Canada supports its broader strategy of working with like-minded middle powers to address regional security challenges while expanding opportunities for defence industrial collaboration.
- Overall, as security challenges in the maritime domain intensify across the Indo-Pacific, there is increasing interest in strengthening Canada–ROK maritime security cooperation for mutual benefit.

Considerations

- Canada has traditionally approached maritime and Arctic security through a Euro-Atlantic lens, with the U.S. as its closest partner. For example, Canada, Finland, and the U.S. signed the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE Pact) in 2024 to ensure peace and prosperity in the Arctic and polar regions.
- However, Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Arctic Foreign Policy recognize that protecting its northern region can no longer rely solely on Euro-Atlantic partnerships but requires broader engagement with like-minded partners across the North Pacific.

- Maritime security cooperation with the ROK aligns with Canada's defence and Arctic policies. In addition, Canada and the ROK share strong interests in ensuring freedom of navigation, reinforcing the rules-based international order, and contributing to stability in the Indo-Pacific.
- Despite the geographical distance, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the ROK Navy have a long history of military cooperation. This relationship dates back to the deployment of Canadian naval forces during the Korean War and continues through regular interactions in multinational operations and exercises.
  - Canada has maintained a continuous presence in the United Nations Command, and two Canadian generals have served as Deputy Commander.
  - Under Operation HORIZON, the RCN deploys three warships annually to the Indo-Pacific to enhance military cooperation, including port visits. Canada also participates in multinational efforts to enforce UN maritime sanctions against North Korea through Operation NEON.
  - Canada participates in international maritime exercises, such as Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), and regularly participates in Exercise Pacific Vanguard alongside the ROK, Japan, and the U.S.
  - These contributions demonstrate a long-standing commitment, but they remain modest relative to the scale of regional security challenges. Therefore, there is significant room to expand Canada–ROK maritime security cooperation.

Implications for Canada

- Canada has several opportunities to strengthen its partnership with the ROK across operational, technological, and strategic levels. In the near-term, Canada should expand naval engagement with the ROK by increasing joint operations and coordinated deployments in the Indo-Pacific.
  - The two countries could designate hub ports – for example, Victoria in Canada and Busan in the ROK – to facilitate naval ship maintenance, logistics support, and exercises.
  - Increased joint exercises and training with the ROK Navy would improve the RCN's familiarity with Indo-Pacific environments and enhance operational readiness.
  - Deeper interoperability with the ROK would also complement Canada's participation in multinational maritime exercises and reinforce its Indo-Pacific Strategy commitments.

- Canada and the ROK could deepen cooperation on maritime domain awareness and information-sharing.
  - Closer research and development cooperation could benefit both countries in strengthening maritime domain awareness. Canada's strengths in AI and robotics complement the ROK's advanced manufacturing capabilities.
  - AI-enabled systems and satellite surveillance could support faster identification of potential threats and improve monitoring of maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific.
  - Effective management and exchange of information will be essential for improving regional situational awareness.
- Canada and the ROK should explore opportunities for defence industrial collaboration. Naval vessels require the integration of shipbuilding, advanced weapons systems, and emerging technologies. Canada and the ROK could pursue partnerships in these areas to strengthen long-term defence capabilities.
- In the long-term, there are also opportunities for Canada and the ROK to collaborate in the Arctic.
  - Although the ROK is a non-Arctic state, its long-standing scientific presence, advanced maritime capabilities, and growing interest in Arctic shipping routes demonstrate that it is an active stakeholder in the region's future.
  - Canada and the ROK could collaborate in areas such as joint scientific research, maritime capability development, energy security, and protecting the Arctic environment and Indigenous lands.
  - They could also institutionalize high-level Arctic security dialogues and expand them into Track 1.5 forums involving industry and academia.
- Meanwhile, cooperation in some areas, such as sanctions enforcement or joint exercises, may require coordination with other Indo-Pacific allies.
  - The U.S.–ROK–Japan trilateral partnership is the most institutionalized minilateral security framework in the North Pacific. They regularly conduct multi-domain military exercises to enhance interoperability. Canada may have an interest in engaging with this framework given its shared values and strategic interests.
  - Cooperation among middle powers is also becoming increasingly important. Canada and the ROK could explore broader multilateral engagement with partners like Japan and Australia to strengthen maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.

About the Author

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Julie has previously worked as a Research Intern at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and a Global Asia Fellow at the East Asia Foundation. She has published various articles and a book chapter, including in the *Journal of East Asian Studies*, *BTI Country Report – North Korea*, and *Global Asia*. Her research interests include authoritarian regimes, geopolitics with a regional focus on the Korean Peninsula, and Canada-Korea defence cooperation.

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