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Expanding Canada-ROK Naval Cooperation

By Julie Kim

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BRIEFING NOTE

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Summary

- The deployment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) KSS-III submarine to Victoria, British Columbia, represents a significant opportunity to deepen naval cooperation and could serve as a foundation for future bilateral exercises.

- Canada and the ROK engage regularly in maritime security cooperation through multilateral frameworks; however, direct bilateral naval engagement remains limited and has yet to develop into structured exercises.

- Expanding Canada-ROK bilateral naval exercises would enhance interoperability, operational readiness, and maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific. It would also support the implementation of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy and contribute to diversifying defence partnerships beyond traditional allies by deepening engagement with like-minded middle powers.

Context

- Canada and the ROK are like-minded partners with strong political alignment, reinforced by their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Recent defence agreements, including the Canada-Republic of Korea Security and Defence Cooperation Partnership in October 2025 and the Agreement on the Protection of Military and Defence Classified Information in February 2026, demonstrate that defence cooperation has become a key pillar of the bilateral relationship.

- The two countries have established maritime security cooperation through multilateral frameworks. Both participate in major naval exercises such as Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and Exercise Pacific Vanguard. Canada also deploys three warships annually to the Indo-Pacific to enhance military cooperation under Operation HORIZON and contributes to Operation NEON, which enforces United Nations sanctions against North Korea and requires coordination with regional partners, particularly the ROK.

- These engagements have contributed to building interoperability and reinforcing the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. However, Canada-ROK cooperation in the maritime domain has largely taken place within multilateral or U.S.-led settings.

- While these multilateral exercises remain valuable, they are limited in depth compared to bilateral engagement. As a result, direct and sustained interaction between the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the ROK Navy remains underdeveloped.

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The ROK Submarine Deployment to Canada

- On 25 March 2026, the ROK Navy's KSS-III submarine departed Jinhae Naval Base for Victoria, British Columbia on a 14,000 km mission. The submarine is expected to arrive in late May.

- During its transit, the submarine will make logistics stops in Guam and Hawaii. In Hawaii, two RCN submariners will embark under the REGULUS exchange program and join the ROK Navy for the final leg to Canada. This highlights the growing partnership between the two navies while providing RCN personnel with direct exposure to onboard systems and crew operations.

- Upon arrival, the submarine will participate in bilateral anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercises with the RCN and the Royal Canadian Air Force.

- This deployment is significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the Korean submarine's operational capability to conduct long-range missions. Second, it represents the first practical form of direct bilateral naval engagement between Canada and the ROK at an advanced operational level. Finally, it demonstrates the ROK's willingness to engage Canada more directly as a strategic partner.

- Taken together, this deployment can be understood as a test for future bilateral exercises and could serve as the foundation for more regularized and structured Canada-ROK naval cooperation.

Why Bilateral Exercises Matter

- Expanding bilateral naval exercises would provide several operational benefits. Most importantly, it would enhance operational interoperability between the RCN and the ROK Navy. While the two navies operate compatible systems and regularly engage in multilateral settings, bilateral exercises would allow for more focused training in areas such as communications, tactical coordination, and joint ASW operations.

- Bilateral exercises would also improve environmental familiarity. For the ROK Navy, operating in Canadian waters would provide experience in the North Pacific and cold-weather environments near the Arctic. For the RCN, operating alongside the ROK Navy would enhance its experience in Indo-Pacific operations and provide exposure to advanced naval platforms and practices.

- Unlike large-scale multilateral exercises, bilateral engagements can be tailored to specific operational objectives and capability gaps. This enables deeper integration and more

practical outcomes, moving cooperation beyond symbolic participation toward operational alignment.

- At the same time, sustaining regular bilateral naval exercises between Canada and the ROK will require a pragmatic approach.
  - Geographic distance, competing operational commitments, and resource constraints may limit the frequency and scale of bilateral exercises.
  - Canada must also balance Indo-Pacific engagement with its NATO obligations and domestic priorities.
  - These constraints can be mitigated by adopting a flexible approach. Rather than establishing entirely new deployments, Canada could integrate bilateral training components into existing Indo-Pacific missions, such as Operations HORIZON and NEON.

Implications for Canada

- Building on the upcoming submarine deployment, Canada should formalize regular bilateral naval exercises with the ROK. The two countries could designate hub ports—for example, Victoria in Canada and Busan or Jinhae in the ROK—to facilitate joint exercises, naval maintenance, and logistics support.

- Expanding bilateral naval exercises with the ROK would have several strategic implications for Canada.
  - First, it would reinforce Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy by demonstrating direct and sustained engagement in the region. Moving beyond multilateral participation toward bilateral cooperation signals a more serious approach.
  - Second, it would support Canada's broader objective of diversifying its defence partnerships. While the United States remains Canada's primary security partner, deeper cooperation with the ROK would support Canada's efforts to strengthen partnerships with like-minded middle powers.
  - Finally, increased bilateral engagement would strengthen Canada's operational capabilities, particularly in areas such as ASW and maritime domain awareness, which are becoming increasingly important in the evolving security environment. Enhanced information sharing and joint training would also enable faster identification of potential threats in the Indo-Pacific.

- There is also potential to expand cooperation beyond bilateral engagement. Canada and the ROK should explore opportunities for trilateral maritime cooperation with Japan. Strengthened Canada-ROK bilateral ties could serve as a stepping stone toward more coordinated mini lateral cooperation in the North Pacific. Such an approach would complement existing security frameworks while allowing Canada to play a more active role in the region.

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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