



[After Trump Series 2] Prospects for U.S.–South Korea Cooperation in an Era of U.S.–China Strategic Competition

South Korea and Indo–Pacific Security: Building New Networks Beyond the “Quad”

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”) has emerged as one of the highest-profile initiatives associated with the Trump administration’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept. Renewed attention to the Quad reflects long-standing U.S. efforts to shift from a bilateral hub-and-spoke model of Asian security toward a networked approach that encourages new “multiparty arrangement(s)” with “our strongest, most important allies”.¹ Yet the Republic of Korea (“South Korea”), one of the region’s leading middle powers and a close U.S. ally, is notably absent from this forum.

South Korea’s absence from, and potential participation in, the Quad has been a hot topic in Seoul and allied capitals. The Moon administration has shown little desire to join the arrangement, with a senior adviser recently suggesting a U.S. invite to participate in the Quad would present South Korea with an “existential dilemma.”² This paper argues that zero sum debates around a Korean role in the Quad are misplaced. Relevant policymakers should focus less on formal participation in the Quad and more on the defense relationships between South Korea and Quad countries such as Australia and India. The remainder of this paper explores recent trends in South Korea’s defense relationships with these partners and assesses potential obstacles to, and opportunities for, closer cooperation in the future.

¹ “Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.” Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson | Center for Strategic and International Studies. CSIS, 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>.

² “(LEAD) Seoul’s Participation in ‘Quad’ May Jeopardize Regional Security: S. Korean Adviser,” October 27, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20201028000251325>.

South Korea, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and the Quad

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue first met in 2007, emerging from a more informal Australia-India-Japan-U.S. core group that was established to coordinate responses to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.³ Although the group failed to gain traction in 2007, partially due to China's strong objections, it was revived after a decade-long hiatus in November 2017.⁴ While media reports frequently depict the dialogue as an anti-China containment mechanism or the precursor to a more formal "Asian NATO", participating nations themselves have pushed back against these characterizations, stressing the positive sum ambitions of the dialogue.⁵ Moreover, official statements from recent discussions consistently emphasize the non-exclusive nature of the grouping, and its role as just one among many elements of a broader, ASEAN-centric security architecture.⁶

These assurances have met with some skepticism in South Korea. Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha recently summarized the government's uncertainty about the group, noting that South Korea had not only "never been invited by the Quad", but would also be reluctant to join "anything that automatically shuts out, and is exclusive of, the interests of others."⁷ This reluctance stems in large part from a desire to avoid antagonizing China and to maintain a sense of strategic autonomy between Washington and Beijing. However, it also reflects unhappiness with Japan's role in conceptualizing earlier iterations of the quadrilateral mechanism and the Indo-Pacific concept. Following the first meeting between President Trump and President Moon in 2017, presidential aide Kim Hyun-chul captured these concerns: "Japan initiated the free and open Indo-Pacific idea, and it does not seem right for South Korea to join in the plan."⁸

In spite of its skepticism about the Quad and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, the

³ Tanvi Madan. "The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the 'Quad'." War on the Rocks, November 16, 2017. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>.

⁴ Tanvi Madan. "What You Need to Know about the 'Quad,' in Charts." Brookings. Brookings, October 8, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/05/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-quad-in-charts/>.

⁵ Bhim Burtel. "'Asian NATO' plan stillborn at Tokyo Quad meet," Asia Times, October 9, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/asian-nato-plan-stillborn-at-tokyo-quad-meet/>; "Remarks by Deputy Secretary Stephen E. Biegun - United States Department of State." Remarks by Deputy Secretary Stephen E. Biegun. U.S. Department of State, October 12, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/remarks-by-deputy-secretary-stephen-e-biegun/>.

⁶ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Australia-India-Japan-United States Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, October 6, 2020. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/australia-india-japan-united-states-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting>.

⁷ Seung-yeon Kim. "FM Reacts Negatively about Joining U.S.-Led 'Quad' Alliance," Yonhap News Agency (김승연, September 28, 2020), <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200925008900325>.

⁸ Rachel Lee, "Moon Cautious about Indo-Pacific Proposal" (The Korea Times, November 10, 2017), https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/11/113_239062.html.

Moon administration has nonetheless acknowledged “common ground” between the Trump administration’s strategy and its own New Southern Policy (NSP).⁹ Both countries committed during the June 2019 Trump-Moon Summit to better align their regional activities.¹⁰ This has created space for some new engagement between South Korea and Quad countries in the Indo-Pacific, including a series of high-level, weekly “Quad-plus” coordination calls among Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, the United States, and Vietnam to discuss responses to the COVID outbreak.¹¹ The United States and South Korea also participated in a recent quadrilateral naval exercise with Australia and Japan off the coast of Guam.¹² To date, however, defense ties have played a less prominent role in the Moon administration’s regional engagement. The primary mini-lateral defense dialogue in which South Korea participates—the Defense Trilateral Talks—has been hampered by political tensions between Tokyo and Seoul.¹³

The downturn in South Korea’s relationship with Japan will continue to make Northeast Asian defense cooperation challenging, but Seoul is unencumbered by similar historical baggage in South and Southeast Asia, the focus of the Moon administration’s New Southern Policy. The initiative’s main focus has been economic and trade ties, but a closer review of South Korea’s defense relationships with key players such as India and Australia suggest that a stronger emphasis on defense cooperation might be a boon for the NSP and a way to generate stronger ties between South Korea and the Quad. The following section explores recent trends in South Korea’s defense ties to India and Australia.

India–South Korea Defense Ties

The India-South Korea relationship was relatively distant throughout the Cold War, largely due to India’s close ties with both Russia and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (“North Korea”).

⁹ “Remarks by President Trump and President Moon of the Republic of Korea in Joint Press Conference,” The White House (The United States Government, June 30, 2019), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-moon-republic-korea-joint-press-conference/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Telephonic Press Briefing with Stephen E. Biegun, Deputy Secretary of State - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, October 20, 2020), <https://www.state.gov/telephonic-press-briefing-with-stephen-e-biegun-deputy-secretary-of-state/>.

¹² [https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/display-news/Article/2345763/us-allied-forces-conduct-exercise-pacific-vanguard/#:~:text=Pacific%20Vanguard%20brings%20together%20more,off%20the%20coast%20of%20Guam.&text=PACIFIC%20OCEAN%20\(Sept.\)](https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/display-news/Article/2345763/us-allied-forces-conduct-exercise-pacific-vanguard/#:~:text=Pacific%20Vanguard%20brings%20together%20more,off%20the%20coast%20of%20Guam.&text=PACIFIC%20OCEAN%20(Sept.))

¹³ “Joint Readout From the 12th Japan, Republic of Korea, and U.S. Defense Trilateral Talks” (United States Department of Defense, May 13, 2020), <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2185551/joint-readout-from-the-12th-japan-republic-of-korea-and-us-defense-trilateral-t/>.

The two countries have grown steadily closer over the past two decades, concluding a strategic partnership agreement in 2010, which was then elevated to a special strategic partnership in May 2015.¹⁴

A 2005 agreement on defense industry cooperation kickstarted new growth in the bilateral defense relationship, which has expanded significantly over the past fifteen years.¹⁵ Since this point, the two countries have signed an array of defense agreements on topics ranging from defense education to military exchanges and technology cooperation.¹⁶ Most notably, the two countries concluded a 2014 Agreement on the Protection of Classified Military Information, which facilitates sharing of sensitive defense information, as well as a September 2019 defense logistics agreement that provides special bilateral refueling and maintenance rights.¹⁷ India remains the only country other than the United States with whom South Korea has concluded such a logistics agreement.

Although the bilateral defense relationship has been on an upward trajectory for the past decade, it has often appeared unmoored from any sense of a common geostrategic vision. Two issues—naval cooperation and defense industry cooperation—have anchored the defense relationship, both of which are rooted in shared economic interests more than common defense priorities. South Korea's dependence on Indian Ocean-based maritime trade and India's interest in expanding its Pacific Ocean operations make maritime cooperation an obvious area of alignment for the two countries. In 2006, India and South Korea signed a bilateral coast guard agreement and they now conduct the SAHYOG-HYEOBLYEOG coast guard exercise on a biannual basis.¹⁸ They also committed to an-

¹⁴ Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Republic of Korea- India Joint Statement: Towards a Strategic Partnership View: Asia – Pacific Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea," Republic of Korea- India Joint Statement: Towards a Strategic Partnership View, Asia – Pacific Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 27, 2010), http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5659/view.do?seq=308076; "India - Republic of Korea Joint Statement for Special Strategic Partnership," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, May 18, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F25261%2FIndia++republic+of+ko-rea+joint+statement+for+special+strategic+partnership+may+18+2015>.

¹⁵ Harold W. Scott, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, "The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific". Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3125.html.

¹⁶ "MEA: Statements : Bilateral/Multilateral Documents," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, May 18, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F25261%2FIndia++republic+of+korea+joint+statement+for+special+strategic+partnership+may+18+2015>.

¹⁷ "Embassy of India Seoul, Republic of Korea," Embassy of India, Seoul, Republic of Korea : Documents signed during President Park's State visit to India, accessed October 30, 2020, <https://www.indembassyseoul.gov.in/page/documents-signed-during-president-park-s-state-visit-to-india/>; "India, South Korea Seal Logistics Pact," The Hindu (The Hindu, September 6, 2019), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-south-korea-seal-logistics-pact/article29354781.ece>.

¹⁸ Rajaram Panda. "India-Republic of Korea Military Diplomacy: Past and Future Projections," *Journal of Defence Studies*, (2011) Vol. 5 No.1; Sandeep Singh, "Indo-Korean Joint Exercise 'Sahyog-Hyeoblyeog 2018' Kicked off to Develop Maritime Anti-Piracy Operations," *NewsBharati*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.newsbharati.com/Encyc/2018/4/6/India-Korea-Naval-Exercise.amp.html>.

nual joint naval exercises in 2007 and now engage in regular naval staff talks and ship visit exchanges.¹⁹ A 2017 agreement to collaborate on military shipbuilding is likely to further enhance naval cooperation and interoperability.²⁰

Defense industry has also been a burgeoning area of cooperation between India and South Korea. Here, too, there is a natural alignment between India's desire to expand its procurement portfolio beyond traditional suppliers such as Russia, and South Korea's desire to build a stronger overseas market for its defense companies. Although the two countries have established multiple high-level dialogues to guide joint defense research and development, the path to closer industrial cooperation has been rocky. Recent successes include the aforementioned shipbuilding agreement as well as a 2017 agreement for Hanwha Techwin to co-develop an Indian version of Korea's K-9 howitzers.²¹ However, multiple agreements, including plans for South Korea to build mine countermeasure ships and fleet support ships for the Indian Navy, have been felled by disagreements over costs and technical details.²² Recent reports suggest a lucrative 2019 agreement for Korean and Indian defense companies to co-produce an anti-aircraft defense system is also at risk of falling apart.²³ Despite these challenges, the two sides nonetheless appear committed to further cooperation and recently outlined a new defense industry roadmap in February 2020 that includes plans for new air and naval collaboration and encourages Korean investment in Indian defense production "corridors" in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.²⁴

Australia-South Korea Defense Ties

The Australia-South Korea defense relationship has deep roots that stretch back to the Korean War, a

¹⁹ Outlook, "India, S Korea to Hold Joint Naval Exercise," <https://www.outlookindia.com/> (outlookindia.com, May 31, 2007), <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/india-s-korea-to-hold-joint-naval-exercise/477589>; "MEA: Statements : Bilateral/Multilateral Documents," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, accessed October 30, 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F25261%2FIndia++republic+of+korea+joint+state-ment+for+special+strategic+partnership+may+18+2015>.

²⁰ Vivek Raghuvanshi. "India, South Korea Sign Agreement to Build Warships," Defense News (Defense News, August 8, 2017), <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2017/04/21/india-south-korea-sign-agreement-to-build-warships/>.

²¹ Press Trust of India. "L&T Signs Deal with South Korea's HTW to Supply Howitzer to Indian Army," Business Standard (Business-Standard, April 21, 2017), https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/l-t-signs-deal-with-s-korea-s-htw-to-supply-howitzer-to-army-117042100487_1.html.

²² Vivek Raghuvanshi. "India Cancels Minesweepers Deal with South Korea," Defense News (Defense News, January 9, 2018), <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2018/01/09/india-cancels-minesweepers-deal-with-south-korea/>; Santosh Patnaik, "HSL Deal with Hyundai Falls Flat," The Hindu (The Hindu, May 8, 2018), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/hsl-deal-with-hyundai-falls-flat/article23806599.ece>.

²³ "Korea's Plan to Sell India 3 Trillion Won Worth of Weapons on the Rocks," Korea JoongAng Daily, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/09/20/national/defense/India-K30-Biho/20200920180600375.html>.

²⁴ "S. Korean, Indian Defense Chiefs Sign 'Roadmap' for Arms Industry Cooperation." Yonhap News Agency. 오석민, February 5, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200205003500325>.

conflict in which approximately 17,000 Australian personnel participated. Australia has maintained a role on the peninsula since this point through the United Nations Command (UNC), where Australian officers have played active leadership roles at both the UNC headquarters in Seoul and the UNC Rear in Japan.²⁵

Although the two countries have long-standing defense ties, the bilateral relationship was given relatively little priority until 2009, when Australian Prime Minister Rudd and Korean President Lee Myung-bak attempted to re-energize it through their “middle power diplomacy” initiatives. A 2009 Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation signed during the first Rudd-Lee Summit was soon followed by a limited intelligence sharing agreement in 2010 and a defense cooperation agreement in December 2011.²⁶ Prime Minister Tony Abbott and President Park Geun-hye continued to elevate the relationship, establishing an annual 2+2 dialogue in 2013. Australia was the first country other than the United States with whom South Korea agreed to such a high-level diplomatic mechanism.²⁷ The two countries also signed a new Defence and Security Cooperation Blueprint in 2015, which included commitments to collaborative defense education and training, annual mutual logistics cooperation meetings, and closer coordination on issues such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, and maritime security.²⁸

This flurry of diplomatic agreements belies what some experts describe as a defense relationship that may be more substantive on paper than in reality.²⁹ Much like the India-Korea partnership, Australian and Korean policymakers have struggled with misaligned priorities that have frequently

²⁵ Bill Paterson. “Australia and South Korea Can and Should Have Closer Defence Ties,” The Strategist (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 19, 2020), <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-south-korea-can-and-should-have-closer-defence-tiesoul/>; Whan-woo Yi, “Australian Rear Admiral Named UNC Deputy Commander,” Korea Times, May 1, 2019, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/05/176_268101.html.

²⁶ “Joint Statement on Enhanced Global & Security Cooperation between Australia & the Republic of Korea,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, March 5, 2009, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/in-force/kafta/news/Pages/joint-statement-on-enhanced-global-and-security-cooperation-between-australia-and-the-republic-of-korea>; “Blueprint for Defence and Security Cooperation between Australia and the Republic of Korea 2015,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, September 11, 2015, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/republic-of-korea/Pages/blueprint-for-defence-and-security-cooperation-between-australia-and-the-republic-of-korea>.

²⁷ “Joint Press Conference of ROK-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers' (2+2) Meeting (July 4, 2013) View: Press Briefings Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea,” Joint Press Conference of ROK-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers' (2+2) Meeting (July 4, 2013) View|Press Briefings Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, July 4, 2013), http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5679/view.do?seq=312529.

²⁸ “Outcome of the Second Republic of Korea-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers' (2+2) Meeting View: Press Releases Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea,” Outcome of the Second Republic of Korea-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers' (2+2) Meeting View|Press Releases Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, September 11, 2015), http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=315664.

²⁹ Bill Paterson. “Australia and South Korea Can and Should Have Closer Defence Ties,” The Strategist, August 19, 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-south-korea-can-and-should-have-closer-defence-tiesoul/>.

stymied closer defense cooperation. Given its role in the UNC, and therefore in a potential contingency, Australia has often prioritized new opportunities for bilateral exercises and engagements on the peninsula, especially in tandem with the United States. Korean policymakers have frequently been lukewarm to these proposals, in part due to South Korea's mixed feelings about the UNC as well as concerns about China's potential reaction.³⁰ Australian efforts to energize trilateral defense cooperation produced similarly underwhelming results. A trilateral Australia-Korea-US defense dialogue was convened under the Abbott administration, but quietly faded away, though the three countries did conduct a trilateral naval exercise in November 2017.³¹

Defense industry cooperation, by contrast, has been a priority growth area for Korean officials. Over the past decade, the two countries have signed three related memoranda of understanding: a 2011 agreement on Defence Industry Cooperation; a 2015 agreement on Defence Science, Technology, and Research; and a 2019 agreement on Defence Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation.³² Much like the India case, however, cost concerns and bureaucratic disagreements have repeatedly felled these cooperative endeavors. The sudden cancellation of a 2012 agreement for Korea's K-9 howitzers, shortly followed by South Korea's failure to win a bid for two naval replenishment ships, were points of particular tension, though the howitzer project was recently revived by the Morrison government.³³ There are some signs that the next few years may yield more meaningful cooperation between the two countries, including a maritime robotics project that could be a test case for collaboration in new innovative fields as well as South Korea's bid to supply Australia's next generation infantry fighting vehicle.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Author interview with former U.S. defense official (Washington, D.C., October 2020); Euan McKirdy, "US, Australia and South Korea Hold Joint Navy Drills," CNN (Cable News Network, November 7, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/politics/us-south-korea-australia-maritime-drills/index.html>.

³² "Blueprint for Defence and Security Cooperation between Australia and the Republic of Korea 2015," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, September 11, 2015, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/republic-of-korea/Pages/blueprint-for-defence-and-security-cooperation-between-australia-and-the-republic-of-korea>., Department of Defence, "Australia-Republic of Korea Foreign and Defence Ministers' 2+2 Meeting 2019 Joint Statement," Australia-Republic of Korea Foreign and Defence Ministers' 2+2 Meeting 2019 Joint Statement (Department of Defence Ministers, December 12, 2019), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/statements/australia-republic-korea-foreign-and-defence-ministers-22-meeting-2019>.

³³ Esteban Villarejo and Nigel Pittaway. "Australia Picks Navantia To Build Two Replenishment Ships," Defense News (Defense News, August 8, 2017), <https://www.defensenews.com/home/2016/03/11/australia-picks-navantia-to-build-two-replenishment-ships/>., "Self-Propelled Howitzers Back on the Cards," Australian Defence Magazine, May 14, 2019, <https://www.australiandefence.com.au/defence/land/self-propelled-howitzers-back-on-the-cards>.

³⁴ "Australia-Republic of Korea Foreign and Defence Ministers' 2+2 Meeting 2019 Joint Statement," Australia-Republic of Korea Foreign and Defence Ministers' 2+2 Meeting 2019 Joint Statement (Department of Defence Ministers, December 12, 2019). <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/statements/australia-republic-korea-foreign-and-defence-ministers-22-meeting-2019>., Tom Corben, "Australia and South Korea Can and Must Deepen Defense Industry Cooperation," The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, October 3, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/australia-and-south-korea-can-and-must-deepen-defense-industry-cooperation/>.

Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities

Two lessons are apparent in reviewing South Korea's defense ties with Australia and India over the past decade. First, there are common linkages across South Korea's defense ties with Quad countries that could provide a solid foundation for multilateral engagement. As per Figure 1 (below), South Korea engages in a high-level 2+2 dialogue, maritime exercises, and defense technology cooperation with Australia, India, and the United States, while both India and the United States have concluded logistics agreements with South Korea. South Korea also has some variation on a classified information sharing agreement with all four countries.

Figure1: South Korean Defense Ties with Quad Countries

	United States	Japan	Australia	India
2+2 Meetings	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Intelligence Sharing Agreement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Defense Logistics Agreement	Yes	No	No	Yes
Defense Industry Agreement	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Regular Bilateral Exercises	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Sources: Author's open source research, The RAND Corporation, "The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific". Santa Monica, CA., 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3125.html.

Second, despite obvious shared interests and values, divergent priorities and threat perceptions have prevented these partnerships from being more fully realized. There continues to be a disconnect between the broad Indo-Pacific focus of Quad countries and South Korea's need to prioritize security on the peninsula. Similarly, differing views between Australia, India, and South Korea about their ties to both China and Japan create constraints around certain types of defense cooperation. These substantive differences are unlikely to shift in the near-term and will continue to constrain the scope of both bilateral and multilateral defense ties.

There is nonetheless space for South Korea to carve out a larger regional security role in the Indo-Pacific region, a prospect that is often overlooked in zero sum debates about the Quad. South Korea's limited role in regional security networks stands at odds with the influence it wields as one of Asia's strongest democracies, East Asia's third largest economy, and one of the region's most capable militaries. It also constrains the Moon administration's ability to more fully realize its New Southern Policy, where South Korea could benefit from providing a stronger whole-of-government

framework to guide its strategic partnerships with like-minded partners. There are multiple issues—protecting freedom of navigation and overflight, preventing proliferation, promoting good governance, and maintaining the peaceful use of space and cyberspace—on which South Korea and its neighbors share interests as well as collective capacity.

Two general guidelines could help create space for stronger ties between South Korea and Quad countries. First, policymakers should focus less on the “Quad” and more on Quad countries when it comes to defense cooperation. As other experts have suggested, the “real story” is not the Quad itself; it is the “rapidly growing military engagement among the four countries” that provides meaning to the dialogue.³⁵ Rather than seeking to formalize a standing “Quad-plus” mechanism, policymakers should instead focus on building stronger bilateral and trilateral defense ties between South Korea and the Quad, especially Australia and India. Second, shared economic interests offer a more solid foundation for South Korea’s partnerships with Quad countries than shared security threats. Defense cooperation is likely to be more successful and sustainable when it can be directly linked to shared economic priorities and initiatives.

Four areas in which South Korea could begin to explore closer coordination with various Quad countries include: 1) maritime security; 2) space security; and 3) security assistance for Southeast Asia; and 4) military exercises and exchanges.

Maritime Security

Maritime security is an obvious starting point for multilateral cooperation between South Korea and Quad countries given the bilateral navy and coast guard cooperation South Korea already conducts with Australia, India, and the United States. All four nations have also committed to new naval investments and shipbuilding plans that may expand the scope for cooperation in the future. Looking ahead, the countries could explore new initiatives focused on enhancing maritime domain awareness, especially in the Indian Ocean. The United States recently announced its decision to appoint a naval liaison to India’s Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean Region (IRC-IOR).³⁶ Australia and South Korea could do the same, which could facilitate new opportunities for bilateral and small group information sharing. Similarly, Australia, India, and South Korea all operate Boeing’s P-8 Poseidon

³⁵ Dhruva Jaishankar. “The Real Significance of the Quad,” *The Strategist*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-real-significance-of-the-quad/>.

³⁶ “Joint Statement on the Third U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, October 27, 2020), <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-third-u-s-india-22-ministerial-dialogue/>.

maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, providing a common platform that could be used to extend cooperation through bilateral or trilateral exercises or maritime data sharing.

Space Security

Beyond the maritime domain, space security is another potential growth area for South Korea and Quad countries. North Korea's growing space and anti-space capabilities are an issue of concern, especially as South Korea works to develop its own space launch vehicles, global positioning system, and military satellites. Space is similarly emerging as a top priority for cooperation between Quad countries. South Korea is already pursuing bilateral space cooperation in the civilian arena with both Australia and India, and it conducts an annual space security dialogue with the United States. Moving forward, it might consider establishing a bilateral space security dialogue with New Delhi as well, whose space program could offer lessons learned for Seoul. This could facilitate opportunities for informal trilateral meetings on space security among the United States, India, and South Korea. The United States could also consider inviting South Korea to observe its multinational Space Flag exercise, in which Australia already participates.

Security Assistance in Southeast Asia

The Moon administration has recently donated military hardware to Southeast Asian countries, including two Pohang-class corvettes to the Philippines, as part of its growing outreach to Southeast Asia.³⁷ As South Korea continues with its own military modernization plans, it will have additional capabilities moving offline that it should consider providing to Southeast Asian partners. South Korea could increase the effectiveness of this security assistance by better coordinating its activities with the United States, Australia, and India, all of whom are enhancing their relationships in Southeast Asia as well. This could include discussions on collaborative logistics and maintenance support, standardizing training procedures, or even conducting joint exercises. Australia and South Korea might also consider coordinating efforts to refurbish and provide older assets such as their P-3 maritime surveillance aircraft to Southeast Asian partners.

³⁷ JC Gotinga. "PH to Buy 2 Navy Corvettes from South Korea, May Receive 2 More," Rappler (Rappler, August 24, 2019), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/philippines-buy-navy-corvettes-south-korea-receive-more>.

Military Exchanges and Exercises

Defense industry and technology cooperation has the potential to emerge as an increasingly valuable anchor in South Korea's ties to partners such as India and Australia. South Korea's formidable technological prowess, its willingness to engage in technology transfers and co-production arrangements that provide economic incentives for partner nations, and its close alliance with the United States, provide incentives for all three countries to further develop these ties. However, without a clearer geostrategic rationale that ties this cooperation to shared defense objectives, South Korea risks creating the perception that new agreements are purely transactional.

Going forward, policymakers in Seoul should place defense industry cooperation within a broader plan to build interoperability with like-minded regional partners. This could be done by seeking new opportunities for bilateral and multilateral exercises with Australia, India, and the United States. Both South Korea and India already participate as observers in Australia's annual Talisman Sabre exercise; moving toward full participation would be an important next step in creating multilateral exercise opportunities. Anti-submarine warfare exercises might be another area for further multilateral cooperation. South Korea already conducts bilateral anti-submarine warfare exercises with all three countries. Going forward, it might consider trilateral exercises, potentially inviting either Australia or India to join its bilateral exercise with the other country or inviting the United States to participate.

Conclusion

As the Moon administration continues to develop its New Southern Policy, defense cooperation should be an integral piece of its partnership-building activities with other Asian partners. Although South Korea enjoys a strong alliance with the United States, its influence as a leading Asian middle power would be enhanced by developing stronger security partnerships with other like-minded Indo-Pacific partners. Current debates around Korean participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue risk undermining this interest, by implicitly placing form over function and creating an overly narrow focus on a single dialogue mechanism. The more important goal for both Seoul and allied capitals should be to enhance South Korea's contributions to regional security through its participation in regional defense networks. Instead of looking to the Quad to achieve this goal, policymakers should instead focus on strengthening bilateral and trilateral defense ties between South Korea and Quad countries. This initiative would not only enhance South Korea's influence beyond Northeast Asia, it

would also provide a new area of cooperation for the US-Korea alliance, making it more relevant to the needs of the broader Indo-Pacific region.

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