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Expanding South Korea's Security Role in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Introduction

South Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK), is a Northeast Asian power with a global presence, yet its geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia is rarely exercised. This limited profile contrasts sharply with South Korea's activity on and around the Korean Peninsula. While President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) solidified Global Korea, a policy of expanding South Korean contributions globally, President Park Geun-hye focused more on the peninsula and Northeast Asia. Park's impeachment requires renewed focus on maintaining stability on the peninsula until the domestic political situation stabilizes, but over time, Seoul should flex its regional muscle as a middle power.

South Korea's focus on Northeast Asia and the peninsula is easily understood. After all, it is home to the region's most acute security challenge and two of the world's largest economies. North Korea poses a looming threat, and South Korea is a principal actor in preventing conflict and safeguarding liberal democracy on the peninsula. At the same time, South Korea can hardly ignore China, a vast and reemerging power. Seoul also has made significant strides toward increased security cooperation with Tokyo, including through an intelligence-sharing agreement. These dynamics demonstrate that South Korea is a consequential power in Northeast Asia.

South Korea is so firmly ensconced in Northeast Asia that when the United States launched its pivot to Asia in 2011, South Korean experts held that it had little to do with South Korea. The U.S.-ROK alliance remained focused on the peninsula, and South Korea's status as a Group of Twenty nation cast it as a more globally minded nation than one focused on Asia. From antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden to peacekeeping and stabilization operations, trade in electronics and high-technology products, and combating climate change, pandemics, and proliferation, South Korea has remained prominent in international politics.

However, in Southeast Asia, South Korea's role tends to have little resonance. South Korea's security activity in Southeast Asia lags behind because for many years it could leave Southeast Asian security to the United States and others to manage and more recently because South Korea probably wishes to avoid a confrontation with China. While South Korea, like China and Japan, depends heavily on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, it has relied on the United States to guarantee the free flow of commerce in that vital semi-enclosed body of water linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. At the same time, as Asian maritime tensions have escalated in recent years, Korea has sought to avoid becoming enmeshed in the middle of a major-power contest between its primary ally and its top trading partner.

South Korea still depends on the United States for immediate security and on China for trade. The need to balance between these goals of security and economy has been a factor constraining South Korea's appetite for clashes with either major power. Surely, if South Korea sought security entanglements with Japan or with South China Sea claimants in Southeast Asia, that would catalyze Beijing to pressure Seoul. However, South Korea could play a larger role in the wider region, particularly if it were able to place its national interests over the voiced concerns of China. Managing a rising China and coping with rising maritime tensions might seem like security challenges of choice to decision-makers in Seoul who have to concentrate on Pyongyang's nuclear and missile provocations. Nevertheless, South Korea has much to lose if it does not help Southeast Asia address regional flash points such as disputes in the South China Sea.

Importance of the U.S.-ROK Alliance for Security in the Asia-Pacific Region

Traditionally, the U.S.-ROK alliance has had a narrow focus of deterring and defending against the North Korean threat, and the South Koreans initially perceived the U.S. policy of rebalancing to Asia as being largely separate from Korean Peninsula-related issues. However, for several reasons, the alliance architecture is both necessary and efficient for the maintenance of the U.S. objective of bolstering security in the Asia-Pacific region.

The first and most obvious reason is that South Korea helps anchor U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Korea is the only location in mainland Asia where the United States enjoys a military foothold. Moreover, the type of presence matters a good deal. The fact that the majority of troops in Korea are soldiers (Eighth United States Army) while those in Japan are marines (Third Marine Expeditionary Force) reveals the different natures of Korea's and Japan's military values. The U.S. military presence in Japan serves a marshaling or contingency purpose, whereas the presence in Korea serves a more operational and war-fighting function.¹ Thus, the type of military presence on the peninsula makes Korea the geopolitical beachhead for the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

Second, the U.S.-ROK alliance provides physical territory from which to manage the North Korea problem. Conflict with Pyongyang is a functional issue—especially with regard to nuclear proliferation—that cannot be attributed solely to geopolitics. The U.S.-ROK alliance can help convert functional solutions into regional presence, as exemplified by the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment decision.² The main purpose of the alliance is to deter North Korea, but “the U.S.-South Korea alliance is a vital tool for both Seoul and Washington to shape Asia's developing regional order and their respective roles within it.”³

Third, the U.S.-ROK alliance is a stockpile of practices designed to promote the interests of both nations. The affinity shared by the two countries and its peoples is the stronghold in which alliance interest, stratagem, and diplomacy reside. Not only does such longevity prove how strong the alliance is but it also provides historical legitimacy to U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific.

Fourth, both South Korea and the United States share increasing maritime interests. South Korea is geographically a peninsula but geopolitically an island, lacking ground access to Asia because of North Korea. Therefore, conflict in any sea line of communication (SLOC), let alone South Korea's maritime territory, will harm South Korea's national interests. If China truly seeks hegemony over its near seas, it will threaten South Korean interests. *Ipsa facto*, South Korea has been advocating the importance of its access to the maritime commons for decades, but only recently has its voice been heard.⁴ This interest is largely in line with the United States' strategic outlook on the maritime domain and that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well.⁵

Finally, the U.S.-ROK alliance does not offset other bilateral ties. For example, the U.S.-ROK alliance can thrive regardless of the U.S.-Japan alliance and vice versa. This is not because of South Korean and Japanese amity but because both bilateral security frameworks target similar threats, namely North Korea and, potentially, China. This puts the United States in a unique position, where it can worry less about balancing its alliance efforts between Japan and South Korea, as it had to do

between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁶ The United States can and should focus on furthering both alliance structures but should also be sensitive to the cleavage between Japan and South Korea and not push too hard for a trilateral alliance.⁷ Kim Jong-un's provocations and nuclear and missile programs are the best accelerators of U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation, while an overly assertive United States is the most likely brake on such a process.

South Korea playing a greater regional role, beyond the Korean Peninsula, could take the U.S.-ROK alliance to the next level, contributing to regional security and reinforcing U.S. efforts to re-balance to Asia. As vital security interests in Asia multiply and increasingly intersect, it would not be wise for South Korea to limit its strategic outlook to North Korea and Northeast Asia. South Korea or any ASEAN country is unlikely to simply cut its economic ties with China and queue behind the United States. At the same time, it is disadvantageous for the United States to not act while half of the region's nations drift toward China. Thus, placing a middle power—a gear—between the hub and the spokes will not only allow the United States to manage the region with more leverage but to do so with less effort. As the East-West Center's Satu Limaye notes: "Indeed, having South Korea, a democratic alliance partner contributing to Southeast Asia's diplomacy, security, and development offers the [United States] a broad range of cooperative opportunities and an alternative to the region overly reliant on countries that are not America's allies or democracies."⁸

Why South Korea Should Play a Greater Role Beyond the Korean Peninsula

South Korea's most immediate security interest weighs heavily on issues with the north. Despite being preoccupied with intra-peninsular issues, however, South Korea's regional and global roles have been meaningful, both in soft agendas such as climate change and peace establishment and in hard operations such as nonproliferation and counter-piracy operations, proving that Seoul can and should play a bigger geopolitical role in the Asia-Pacific region.

As a nation deeply embedded in a liberal international order, South Korea should understand that advocating its regional role and helping to reinforce the authorities of international rules are in line with its interests. This is especially true when South Korea wishes to exemplify itself as a manifestation of the successful international system, particularly at a time when that very system appears to be fragmenting. Likewise, not advocating for its interests regionally could harm South Korea's interests.

For instance, although it may seem wise for South Korea to distance itself from regional security issues, refraining from weighing in on the contested South China Sea may silence it in the foreseeable future if—and when—the dispute spreads to the Yellow Sea. On the other hand, advocating for international norms could help South Korea gain a precedential advantage against Japan's assertion over Dokdo/Takeshima. Similarly, with concerns about political violence and transnational terrorism resurgent in Southeast Asia, South Korea could do more to provide assistance and tailored training for combating terrorism and political violence. After all, South Koreans rely heavily on unfettered regional maritime commerce, both for the import of natural resources and the export of manufactured goods.

South Korea also has important reasons to become more involved in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia and South Korea both are caught between the growing influence of China's economy and their dependence on U.S. security. South Korea is also seen by ASEAN countries as a politically more neutral state compared to Japan or China.⁹ This is most likely a product of Seoul's intentions to maintain an equidistant position between the United States and China as well as a byproduct of the Korean population's enduring suspicion toward Japan's possible remilitarization. South Korea's relatively low profile in the Southeast Asian region also adds to ASEAN's neutral perception toward South Korea. Such perceived neutrality could attract ASEAN toward the development of an extended multilateral security architecture between Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, with South Korea at the center.¹⁰

South Korea's Increasing Capabilities

Despite constant threats from North Korea, South Korea has proved itself capable of playing a greater role beyond the Korean Peninsula. The Cheonghae antipiracy unit is currently on its twentieth rotation to protect the Gulf of Aden and has led several successful operations, including the rescue of the South Korea freighter *Samho Jewelry*.¹¹ South Korea has also sent some 5,000 troops to Afghanistan and 20,000 troops to Iraq for reconstruction and stabilization purposes. In the 1970s, more than 325,000 Korean troops were dispatched to Vietnam to fight alongside U.S. troops.

In the past ten years, South Korea has signed thirty-nine bilateral security agreements, fourteen of those with Asia-Pacific countries.¹² In 2014 alone, South Korea's defense exports generated \$3.6 billion, with major deals including a \$1.2 billion contract to build six corvettes, or small warships, for the Royal Malaysian Navy and a \$420 million bid for twelve FA-50 fighter jets for the Philippines. According to an IHS Balance of Trade report, by 2020, South Korea will generate more annual revenue from defense exports than China.¹³ President Park alone held twenty bilateral summits with heads of ASEAN members during the first three years of her disrupted presidency.¹⁴ Exercises are held routinely with ROK and ASEAN members—Cobra Gold, RIMPAC, and the ADMM-Plus, to name a few.¹⁵

Concomitant with its emergence as a major global trading nation, South Korea has emerged as one of a handful of Asian countries with a blue-water navy. South Korea has to maintain superiority over North Korea in its littoral waters, manage the danger of maritime territorial disputes that might escalate to larger conflicts, and protect SLOCs throughout the world's oceans at the same time.¹⁶ South Korea should maintain a fleet that is both sufficient in size and capability to deny naval conflicts within its perimeter and maneuverable enough to project force to distant sea-lanes, if necessary.¹⁷

The discourse on South Korea's pursuit of a blue-water navy has been going on since the 1990s, as Seoul transformed into an export-oriented economy that made the nation reliant on its SLOCs. At the same time, traditional advocacy for a peninsula-focused littoral navy dwindled as South Korea's national strength overwhelmed that of its northern rival.¹⁸

The March 2010 sinking of the South Korean navy's ship *Cheonan*, which was perceived by some naval critics as a penetration into the littoral (brown) waters, seemed to reverse the trend.¹⁹ The incident reminded South Koreans of their primary foe—North Korea—and confidence in building an ambitious oceanic navy suffered a serious setback. The confidence was gradually restored, however, in part through actions such as Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) underwater demolition and SEAL teams' successful antipiracy operation in the waters off Somalia.²⁰ The blue-water fleet momentum is still very much alive within South Korea.

In February 2016, ROKN opened a naval base at Jeju Island, located off Korea's southernmost tip. The facility is home to the recently commissioned ROKN Maritime Task Flotilla 7, the first ROK flotilla designed to sail for expeditionary purposes. South Korean leaders underscore the importance of safeguarding Korea's vital SLOCs around the globe. Despite some criticism from the

leftist political opposition, which argues that opening a naval base will likely result in further militarization and, therefore, instability in the region, most Koreans appear to accept that South Korea now requires an open-ocean navy.²¹ Increased interest in the deep waters has led South Korea to rethink its current and future naval strategy.

Although dwarfed by those of its strong neighbors, China and Japan, South Korea's navy ranks eighth-largest in the world. The country has 177 ships, including twelve destroyers, a large-deck amphibious vessel, twelve submarines, and 65,000 sailors.²² Considering the overwhelming size and number of its neighbors' fleets, the most feasible naval structure for South Korea would be a fleet that can maintain maritime superiority at its littorals, while avoiding decisive naval battles in the oceans.²³ Strategically, the Jeju naval base provides a harbor suitable for both purposes.

What South Korea Can Do To Bolster Regional Security

The national interests of all major states in East Asia continue to be the maintenance of a regional order in which all can prosper and live in peace. South Korea's cooperating with and providing political transparency to neighbors is important to achieve this common objective. For instance, managing the North Korean nuclear threat will require clear channels of communication with China, especially during a crisis. However, the United States expects that South Korea, like all nations, should be allowed the right of self-defense. Seoul should not have to sacrifice that fundamental right of sovereignty because of the coercive tactics of a larger power. Beyond this, the United States looks increasingly to middle powers such as South Korea to help underwrite the regional and global rules of the road. In the Asia-Pacific region, this increasingly requires South Korea to become involved in the ongoing tensions over rules, norms, and order at sea.

Although only North Korea poses a real and immediate threat of war to South Korea, coercive diplomacy between neighboring countries can sap trust and trigger an arms race and skirmishes that could escalate. The metaphor of the boiling frog is often invoked to explain the security situation in maritime Asia. If China wants to veto South Korea's deployment of a THAAD battery, then it will presumably want to veto military upgrade by any other neighbor as well. In other words, such an act of deference to Beijing could be a step toward China asserting its status and authority as a regional hegemon that smaller Asian nations will be expected to defer to.

Between the extremes of a capable South Korean naval role joining an anti-China coalition and doing nothing, there is ample room for Seoul to press forward on its interests with respect to growing tensions in maritime Asia. The United States not only has an interest in harnessing South Korean capabilities as a counterweight to possible aggression in the region but also shares a direct interest with South Korea in not allowing the U.S.-ROK alliance to become too detached from the real security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region.

Specifically, South Korea could step up to deal with maritime security challenges posed, particularly by China, in the following ways:

- *Support arbitration and other means of peaceful dispute resolution.* Seoul needs to firmly support any new attempt by claimants in the South China Sea to settle disputes through mechanisms such as those agreed to within the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). South Korea could have been more vocal in its support of the July 2016 judgment with regard to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ruling on a South China Sea dispute, commonly referred to as *Philippines v. China*.
- *Embrace the rule of law and regional norm-building.* More generally, South Korea should find additional opportunities to support UNCLOS and regional norms, including advocating for a binding code of conduct in the South China Sea and including coast guard and law enforcement activities as part of the voluntary regional Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES).
- *Contribute to maritime transparency.* The United States is working with regional allies and partners to create a transparency regime in the South China Sea. Tapping into multiple layers of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities—both military and civilian—and erecting a

common operating picture at the technical level would be beneficial for regional stability and security. South Korea has the public and private sector personnel and technical means to contribute to a wider maritime common operating picture that could help deal with a wide range of contingencies from disasters to maritime coercion.

- *Join regional patrols that occasionally navigate through the South China Sea.* The United States conducts regular patrols and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to ensure freedom of the seas and uphold international law. Other countries should do likewise, both multilaterally and unilaterally. South Korea, along with Australia, India, and Japan, should selectively join such operations to remind all nations that the South China Sea is a vital international waterway on which all major trading countries depend.
- *Conduct more frequent multilateral maritime exercises throughout the Indo-Pacific region.* Seoul's blue-water capabilities mean that it is better able to regularly participate in numerous and more sophisticated multilateral exercises throughout the Indo-Pacific region.
- *Build partner capacity.* Professionalism across South Korean armed forces, law enforcement, and coast guard suggests that South Korea is well poised to help build the capacity of vital partners, especially South China Sea littoral countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. South Korea is already engaged in some high-profile defense coproduction efforts, such as a fighter program with Indonesia, but it should also be involved at operational levels to train and educate forces in the region to work with one another. These efforts can contribute to what can be called the Asian power web, a loose network of partners that is better able to work together, should circumstances require.
- *Ensure maritime tensions in Asia remain high on regional and global diplomatic agendas.* As both a Northeast Asian and middle power, South Korea has a responsibility to ensure that maritime disputes are raised and kept high on the agendas of major forums, both ASEAN-centered institutions, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, and the United Nations and other international institutions.

Conclusion

Donald J. Trump told Park Geun-hye that the United States is with South Korea “all the way and . . . will not waver” and is set to work closely with South Korea to prevent North Korea from threatening regional security.²⁴ But both South Korea and the United States also have an abiding interest in shrinking the gap between South Korea’s power and its influence on the Southeast Asian region. The Barack Obama administration actively supported intra-Asian security networking and cooperation, and the Trump administration should be even more receptive to allies playing a more active role in wider regional security concerns. Moreover, South Korea’s government can build on the investments and security ties begun in recent years. Aligning U.S.-ROK efforts on security cooperation with ASEAN, as well as coordinating activities with individual Southeast Asian nations, should become more prominent parts of a stable and prosperous regional landscape.

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