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Evolving Korea-NATO Relations: Global, Indo-Pacific and Korean Perspectives

Wooyeal Paik & Yoon Jung Choi | 6 February 2023

Key Issues

- Korea and NATO have an opportunity to deepen their partnership, but there is a need to insist on sustainable peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. The partners still need to become more comfortable working with each other.
- NATO still needs to prove its worth in the Indo-Pacific region, but it should be mindful of how it is perceived by countries in Asia. Korea can work with the Alliance to better respond to security dynamics.
- Beyond a shared threat perception of security risks, Korea and NATO can further develop their military ties through defence-industrial relations, research and interoperability.

The Korean perspective on Republic of Korea (“Korea”)-NATO relations largely mirrors that of NATO. The primary dimensions of interest for Korea centre on military procurement, capability development, weapons system standardisation or interoperability, science and technology, cyber security, maritime security, nuclear security and emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), among many others. Furthermore, given the growing global and regional strategic awareness of China, Russia and North Korea in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, Korea has hastily, but earnestly, taken its partnership with NATO more seriously. As strengthening relations with Asia-Pacific partners forms an important aspect of the NATO 2030 agenda, Korea wants to boost ties with the Alliance. However, it largely lacks a sophisticated and detailed scheme for doing so at this moment. Like most countries,

Korea has become disoriented from the rapid and uncertain shifts in global security.

US grand strategy, NATO and the Indo-Pacific

This hasty interaction between Korea and NATO, which takes place under the NATO Asia-Pacific 4 (AP4) framework, has been made possible, and even encouraged, by the United States’ (US) hard push to make the two partners more connected and integrated on security matters. The NATO AP4 summit in Madrid in June 2022 was certainly one of the rare occasions to connect the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions: a connection that the US has been aggressively mobilising its allies and partners for as a way to constrain China and Russia. The US, a declining hegemon that is not capable of going it alone in both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, but strong enough to assemble its

capable junior partners, makes a great effort to form a global security framework to literally cover the entire globe in more multilateral ways. This strategic action is shattering economic globalisation. Not only is there bloc formation against China and Russia, but the US is formulating a more partial globalisation that serves its own interests.

The US' grand strategy, which sounds outdated in an era of hyper-connectivity and "glocalisation", seems to head in the direction of a convergence between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions. In this

Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific" by NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) reiterated that ['the Indo-Pacific region is the most populated and has the potential to become the world's richest and most developed area in the next 20 years'](#). At the same time, NATO highlights the [growing influence of China](#) and its international policies as possible challenges that the Alliance will have to overcome together, particularly as the values of democracy, freedom and rule of law are imperilled. Against this threat, it is NATO's obligation to support partners and help protect common values and the rules-based international order. Therefore, NATO

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context, the NATO AP4 format, which has been quickly institutionalised over the past months, starts to play an essential role from a military dimension. Certainly, this military dimension is not isolated from economic and technological dimensions. If anything, this military strategy appears to be amalgamating with initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the European Union (EU)-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). Of course, this is logical because security is becoming more comprehensive and it combines military, economic, political, environmental and technological dimensions at the individual and global levels. Therefore, Korea's evolving military relations with NATO as an organisation, as well as its individual member countries, is subject to the US' agenda-setting power. This fact has not been lost on Korean decision-makers.

NATO, the Indo-Pacific and Korea

Nevertheless, the Korea-NATO relationship has undoubtedly entered an unprecedented era of cooperation based on shared threat perceptions and strategic calculations in the Indo-Pacific. NATO's 2022 [Strategic Concept](#) underscores that the Indo-Pacific is an integral part of its strategy, especially given that developments in this region can have a direct impact on Euro-Atlantic security. Although NATO has not issued an Indo-Pacific strategy, its political and diplomatic interests in the region are extensive. For example, in 2022 a document entitled "Strategic Foresight Regional

['will strengthen dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific to tackle cross-regional challenges and shared security interests'](#). NATO's cooperation with the AP4 countries, including Korea, could be best understood in this context.

Korea's recently announced [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) shows the strong orientation of the Yoon government to oppose threats posed to the status quo by unilateral and coercive force. It also advocates for the universal values of freedom, peace and prosperity and a rules-based world order. Rooted in the shared values of democracy, freedom, human rights and rule of law, NATO member countries are naturally Korea's indispensable like-minded partners. Because the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a strategic space in international relations, it has prompted Korea and NATO to regard each other as partners for further cooperation.

Even though the progress in military relations between Korea and NATO has happened over the past few months, Korea is not really familiar with NATO. Since the first-ever NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting with the Asia-Pacific partners in December 2020, Korea's strategic and military community saw little hope for meaningful and tangible gains in the Korea-NATO partnership, aside from occasionally coordinated condemnation of North Korea's nuclear provocations. However, a small number of strategic thinkers in the policy community and senior decision-makers in the current government have started to realise the

potential for a monumental change in military relations. For example, Korea's defence industries are already in full motion and it is only a matter of time before Korea sees plenty of productive opportunities in establishing and accelerating bilateral relations with NATO and its individual countries. This could lead to deeper military relations, which would be eventually combined with other security dimensions such as economic security, technological security and environmental security.

Still, NATO is cautious in its military approach to the Indo-Pacific. As NATO ACT's [Regional Perspectives Report](#) points out, the Alliance's active military presence in the Indo-Pacific region could spark more competition and escalate the deterrence posture of countries in the region, including China, in the future. As a possible result, this could instil feelings of uneasiness in many regional actors who do not want to pick a side between the US and China and lead them to refuse cooperation with NATO. In this scenario, it could further bipolarise the region and may result in an uncontrollable situation for the West and its like-minded partners. Therefore, it is recommended that NATO and its partners should enhance deterrence by strengthening strategic relationships relative to all instruments of power based on mutual interest, while transcending traditional

promote cooperation with partner countries in the region, including: 1) securing rules- and norms-based order ("freedom"); 2) inclusive security in the maritime, cyber and health domains ("peace"); and 3) reinforcing cooperation in cutting-edge technologies and balanced digital growth in the region ("prosperity").

A more effective option would be for NATO to do more public diplomacy to convince regional countries to cooperate more with it. Accordingly, if cooperation between Korea and NATO in the Indo-Pacific region can serve as common ground for the interests of other countries in the region, the partnership will be able to achieve the most tangible and realistic outcomes. Strengthening the capacity of Indo-Pacific regional states can ultimately be an important starting point for NATO countries to reduce their economic over-dependence on China, while preventing the expansion of Chinese influence in the region.

In this context, Korea, which has been accumulating valuable experience of cooperation with regional partners such as ASEAN and India through various initiatives like the New Southern Policy Plus, could help NATO succeed in turning these partnerships into a deliberative and proactive form of cooperation.

“Strengthening the capacity of Indo-Pacific regional states can ultimately be an important starting point for NATO.”

ideological divides. Bearing such strategic concerns in mind, it is noteworthy that NATO ACT's [Regional Perspectives Report](#) is grounded on a framework of five themes – Politics, Human, Technology, Economics/Resources and Environment – that addresses military implications within each theme.

Korea as a core partner for NATO

In the case of Korea, its Indo-Pacific Strategy places more emphasis on mutually beneficial cooperation with regional countries based on universal values. Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to build an international order with the three major visions of '[freedom, peace and prosperity](#)', along with the three principles of cooperation of inclusiveness, trust and reciprocity. Under the three major visions are nine core areas to

By linking the five themes suggested in NATO ACT's [Regional Perspectives Report](#) with the nine pillars of Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Korea's cooperation with NATO in the Indo-Pacific region can be envisaged and materialised across a variety of policy areas such as maritime security, supply chain cooperation, technology and digital cooperation, health capacity building and the Net Zero Partnership.

Developing Korea-NATO relations: some suggestions

Given the potential of Korea-NATO relations, there is a need to think of practical ways to develop the partnership further. In this respect, we detail below five policy recommendations to take the Korea-NATO partnership to the next level.

First, the partners should take a step-by-step approach to enhancing the relatively new cooperation between Korea and NATO. More public diplomacy is recommended so that Korea and NATO can understand each other and form closer relationships at various levels. For example, some Track 1.5 strategic dialogues can be initiated by Korea's Permanent Mission to NATO and vice versa.

Second, the partners should increase respective human resources to cope with a high demand for rapidly developing Korea-NATO relations in multiple areas. The Korean Permanent Mission to the NATO is severely understaffed with uniform and civilian personnel, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence lack diplomats and officers who can deal with NATO affairs. The Korean government should at least triple the number of staff at the mission and headquarters, following Japan's example.

Third, Korea should expand defence-industrial cooperation with NATO and its individual countries. The market has started to open-wide for Korean manufacturers in areas such as ground and air forces,

and this will likely soon be followed by naval forces. Korea should be proactive in this regard, but just selling weapons systems to NATO countries is not enough – there is a need to achieve a higher level of interoperability too. Additionally, two-way technology transfers must happen: this demands that industry, research and development institutes such as the Agency of Defence Development and the Mission in Brussels reach out not only to buyers but also producers and sellers such as France, Germany and Italy.

Fourth, Korea should be aware that the growing bond with NATO could create a set of negative externalities. Hostile reactions from Russia and China should be expected and any leaning toward the US along with NATO might trigger unexpected consequences for Korea.

Finally, we recommend the delivery of tangible results. Focusing on the areas suggested above, Korea and NATO should work together in the Indo-Pacific region and the Euro-Atlantic region to solve regional problems and create synergies that can contribute to the sustainable peace and prosperity of the regions.

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