

The South Korea-Australia partnership: State of play



Executive summary

The Australia and Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) relationship witnessed significant advancements over the last 15 years. Their increasing bilateral cooperation has been especially pronounced since 2021, when Canberra and Seoul established a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), making Australia the first country for South Korea to share a CSP with besides that with the United States. Since then, Australia-ROK cooperation has been structured around three key pillars: strategic and security cooperation (pillar 1); economic, innovation and technology cooperation (pillar 2); and people-to-people exchange and linkages (pillar 3).

Despite these advancements, the relationship between Australia and the ROK remains less developed than many stakeholders in both countries anticipated. In response, Australian universities and think tanks have produced a growing body of policy-oriented assessments and recommendations, outlining where and how the two countries can sustain and deepen their bilateral cooperation. With both governments now more closely aligned in their strategic visions for the Indo-Pacific and increasingly willing to commit the necessary resources to uphold their shared ambitions for the region's political, economic and security dynamics, there is a notably strong desire in Australia to seize this important window of opportunity.

From an Australian perspective, this briefing analyses the recent proliferation of reports by Australian policy-orientated groups to provide an updated ‘state of play’ on the Australia-ROK relationship. It evaluates progress in the three key pillars of cooperation, identifying which areas currently offer the greatest potential for sustaining the relationship’s momentum, while highlighting areas within their bilateral collaboration where further time and resources are most needed. By measuring progress in these pillars over the past decade, this brief suggests areas for leaders, policymakers and other stakeholders involved in the Australia-ROK relationship to prioritise in the coming years, to sustain their growing partnership, avoid a misallocation of resources, and maximise the strengths and capabilities of both nations. These overarching recommendations include:

- Consolidate and sustain Track 1, 1.5 and 2 efforts to identify concrete endeavours that put ‘meat on the bones’ of strategic priorities that have been developed, as well as fostering new ideas on how the two countries can achieve actionable objectives;
- Assess potential ROK technological engagement in selected areas of AUKUS Pillar II, noting financial and bureaucratic constraints on both the current state of AUKUS and the relationships between the ROK and AUKUS countries;
- Investigate the opportunities presented by the Australian Defence Strategic Review and the ROK involvement in bids for SEA 3000 work, which promises to improve defence relations and Australia’s naval shipbuilding outcomes even if one of the South Korean vessels is not selected as the next RAN general purpose frigate.

Introduction

Over the last 15 years, there have been significant advancements in the state of Australia’s relationship with South Korea. Persistent efforts have been made to improve the bilateral relationship and deepen ties across a range of areas. In line with this, universities, think tanks and other policy-oriented bodies increasingly published work exploring the nature of the relationship and recommending pathways towards improved cooperation.

This brief provides an overview of the current status of the Australia-ROK relationship, reviewing official progress on and examining influential policy research trends around three important pillars of Australia and the ROK’s bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership. Categorized during the creation of the 2021 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Australia and the ROK, these commonly referenced pillars include enhancing bilateral strategic and security cooperation (pillar 1); economic, innovation and technology cooperation (pillar 2); and people-to-people exchange and linkages (pillar 3).¹ Based on this literature survey, the brief identifies priority areas for further research and policy dialogue in these three key areas.

Reviewing Australia-ROK cooperation

Australia-ROK cooperation is building on a strong foundation of mutual alliances and shared military experiences, shared prosperity through complementary economic growth models, and robust sociocultural ties thanks to decades of education, tourism and immigration exchanges. The Australia-ROK security relationship has varied throughout the decades, sometimes witnessing periods of intense cooperation while being neglected at other times. Scholars and commentators on the Australia-ROK relationship explain the lack of sustained bilateral cooperation — especially when compared to Australia’s close strategic cooperation with Japan, not to mention the ROK’s deepening ties with Southeast Asia — as due to a wide range of factors. These include ROK’s preoccupation with the nuclear and military threats posed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea); differing threat perceptions vis-à-vis China; differing responses to US leadership and burden-sharing requests; the tyranny of distance between the two countries and competition for attention from other partners, resource and bureaucratic capacity constraints; changing national identities and status, and more.²

The Australia-ROK security relationship has varied throughout the decades, sometimes witnessing periods of intense cooperation while being neglected at other times.



Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence the Honourable Richard Marles MP and Minister for Foreign Affairs Senator the Honourable Penny Wong met with Korea's Minister for Foreign Affairs H.E. Mr Cho Tae-yul and Minister of National Defense H.E. Mr Shin Won-sik in Melbourne, May 2024.

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

As a result of these shifting and wide-ranging factors, this briefing categorises three distinct eras that have emerged in the bilateral Australia-ROK relationship since the outbreak of the Korean War. They are best conceived as:

1. Cold War and post-Cold War era, 1950-2008 (the period of 'modest' bilateral relations);
2. Enhanced cooperation era, 2009-2020;
3. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership era, 2021-onwards.

Australian and Korean security fortunes have been intertwined since the end of the Second World War, when Australian forces helped to defeat imperial Japan and liberate Korea in 1945. Australian personnel were involved in the UN commissions to resolve the division of the Korean Peninsula.³ When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Australia was one of the first countries to send combat forces and deployed over 17,000 troops throughout the three-year conflict, with 340 being killed in action. Australia subsequently played a key role as part of the United Nations Command and continues to contribute military personnel to upholding the armistice on the Korean Peninsula.

While Australia and the ROK have enjoyed full diplomatic relations since 1961, relations during the remainder of the Cold War and post-Cold War 1990s and 2000s (the first era in the bilateral relationship), were described as "quite modest"

or a period of notable "neglect."⁴ Relations over the last 15 years have, however, significantly expanded. Moves to deepen ties have been especially forthcoming since the signing of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021, when ROK President Moon Jae-in was in Australia marking 60 years of diplomatic relations between Australia and the ROK and wherein the two countries established the areas for enhanced bilateral cooperation under the three pillars previously outlined — strategic and security; economic, innovation and technology; and people-to-people exchange.⁵ Still, concerns abound about lost opportunities and the lack of concrete steps to help bolster the bilateral relationship before "the window closes."⁶

The benchmark for relations over the last 15 years has been the Joint Statement on Enhanced Global Security Cooperation signed by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and President Lee Myung-bak in March 2009. This document set the foundation for what this brief defines as the onset of the relationship's second era of bilateral cooperation, or the 'Enhanced cooperation era.' This included committing to more frequent dialogues at the ministerial level and consultations below that, as well as enhancing cooperation on shared international challenges including, among others, combatting transnational crime groups, terrorist organisations and international actors actively working to undermine the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. This was followed by the ratification

of the General Security of Military Information Agreement in 2010, the first bilateral Haedoli Wallaby maritime exercise in 2012, which has since worked to enhance the two countries' combined maritime operational capabilities and interoperability, and Prime Minister Julia Gillard and President Lee Myung-bak's bilateral meeting that set the stage for the start of biennial '2 + 2' meetings between Australian and ROK foreign and defence ministers, which started in early 2013.⁷ This was especially significant as it represented the first 2 + 2 that the ROK participated in outside of its alliance with the United States. The following year saw the ratification of the 2014 Korea-Australia Free Trade Agreement and an official visit by Prime Minister Tony Abbott to South Korea where he and President Park Geun-hye agreed to further cooperation on defence science and technology, industry, maritime security and non-traditional security.⁸ This was followed up with the 2015 Blueprint for Defence and Security Cooperation and further bilateral naval exercises in 2017.

Bilateral stumbling blocks and periods of neglect

This strong and consistent progress in the bilateral partnership does not mean it has always been smooth sailing or that strategic approaches between the two states have been in clear alignment. In 2017, the Moon administration released its New Southern Policy framing an ROK foreign policy focused on Southeast Asia. While in many ways this was highly complementary to Australia, given its proximity and interests in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Moon government's policy allocated Australia a second-tier position as a global partner, not a regional one. This was also shaped by the Moon administration's efforts to avoid South Korea aligning too closely with regional partners' strategic and security initiatives that could be interpreted by Beijing as anything approaching a seemingly 'anti-China' military front.⁹ In contrast, the 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper conceptualised the region as the 'Indo-Pacific,' positioning the ROK as a key regional power alongside Australia.

Some argued Australia's position at the time preferred its relationships with China and Japan over that with the ROK and that this ranking was made evident by a lack of Australian "resourcing towards supporting [Australia-Korea] bilateral relations."¹⁰ Three years later, the 2020 Australian Defence Strategic Update failed to mention the ROK, and by mid-2021 it was argued that the "Australia-South Korea security relationship is adrift ... [as] cooperation at head-of-government

level has not kept pace with the development of other dimensions of their relationship and their respective international priorities."¹¹

Later that year however, an Australia-Republic of Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) was delivered, heralding the start of what appears to be the workings of a third era of bilateral cooperation. The 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership era' is one built on enhancing cooperation across the three pillars of their relationship to achieve their "common vision of an open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region."¹²

Yet foundational barriers still remain. Under the Albanese government, Australia's foreign policy agenda has been dominated by the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, Australia's two most important subregions in the Indo-Pacific.¹³ Geographic location is an even more powerful pull for the ROK. North Asian security concerns dominate ROK thinking, especially in relation to the direct security threat from North Korea and its patron, the People's Republic of China. For the last 75 years, while South Korea's strategic geography has made it relatively isolated from the Asian continent and, in many ways, allowed it to function politically, economically, militarily and socially as an island state, its geographic connection with the Asian mainland nevertheless continues to shape South Korea's security thinking in ways that are different to Australia's.

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is built on enhancing cooperation across the three pillars of their relationship to achieve their "common vision of an open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region."

While the ROK's New Southern Policy agenda has helped to widen Seoul's aperture on regional security concerns, it remains "constrained" in its strategic ambition.¹⁴ The release of the ROK's own Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022 tried to signal a shift in its geostrategic priorities, but progress has so far been mixed across its nine ambitious lines of effort — with the most progress being made in the ROK's most proximate relationships with the United States and Japan.¹⁵ Conversely, despite Australia's long-term regional balancing strategy, articulated in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review; the 2024 National Defence Strategy;¹⁶ and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declaring at the 2023 Shangri La dialogue that Australia is "not opting out from the big questions of security and stability"¹⁷ in the region, Australia remains less engaged in north Asian security — with its flashpoints of Taiwan, North Korea, the East China Sea and South China Sea — than it does in other subregions.¹⁸

One of the reasons for the accelerated engagement between the two countries since the start of the Enhanced cooperation era in 2009 are their exceptionally solid foundations. Despite their geographical separation at different ends of Asia, both countries are "strong liberal democratic states, with complementary capabilities and interests as formal treaty allies of the United States ... advanced economies with robust trading ties, and no history of adverse relations between them."¹⁹

For many years now, the steady and persistent improvement in relations hinted that the Australia-ROK bilateral relationship seemed to be on the cusp of a big leap forward or major initiative that would supercharge the partnership.²⁰ But such a view overlooks the steady and important improvements that occurred in the Enhanced cooperation era that laid the foundations for the acceleration in recent years.

Research interest in the Australia-ROK relationship since 2021

The very success of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has bred its own momentum. With more funding, the Australian Government's increased focus on the bilateral relationship generated a range of think tank reports, media coverage and commentary all pushing to "activate greater cooperation."²¹ At times it seems the greatest concern has been that expanded cooperation might falter and that the antidote is to move at an accelerated pace.

The policy community, in Australia at least, has done just that. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership era has seen a flourishing of research at the Track 2 and Track 1.5 levels that

has surged off the back of the advances made in Track 1 diplomacy. Since 2021 in Australia, there has been a marked acceleration of publications on the bilateral partnership, including eight major policy reports and a range of smaller publications.²²

In 2023, there was a crop of Australian-focused publications on the bilateral partnership with four major policy reports from think tanks including the United States Studies Centre (USSC), the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Asialink, and the University of Melbourne's Korea-Australia Relations Project. The remaining four reports covering the period of 2021-2023 came from the Asia Society Australia, the Defence and Security Institute at the University of Western Australia and two from the Perth USAsia Centre. The themes in these reports are diverse and each publication has its own areas of emphasis, but the common features are a very strong foci on defence and security cooperation, economic, innovation and technology cooperation, as well as people-to-people ties — the pillars of the CSP.²³

While these reports are admirable in their aims and innovative in their ideas, all emphasise the strategic case for greater cooperation, yet risk saturating efforts to encourage such cooperation. This alone could create a somewhat artificial expectations gap. Indeed, at least half of these reports were just published in 2023. Only time will tell if their policy recommendations will be adopted in future bilateral engagements.

This does generate some risk in Track 2 analysis. The very momentum that led to major advances in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership potentially positions the Australian and Korean governments in a 'do more, spend more money, pay more attention dynamic,' resulting in the possible allocation of resources into areas that are relatively in less need for enhanced cooperation or fail to effectively leverage Australia and the ROK's respective advantages and national capabilities. While cognisant that this report in and of itself adds to this discourse, the focus of this paper is more on the state of play in the bilateral partnership, providing a report card on what has been suggested, what has been achieved and what remains to be covered.

The goal is to build on the excellent work of the major Australian policy reports on the bilateral relationship, to condense their approaches, and identify areas of success, areas of continuing endeavour and areas yet to be developed.

This is done with an eye to constraints. As Peter K. Lee has argued, middle power cooperation is a costly enterprise given the 'capability constraints' of the states involved.²⁴ Australia and

the ROK have, in many ways, been identified as model or archetype middle powers — even if this typology is itself seen by some as *passee*.²⁵ As such it is important to take stock of the advances so far in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership era, to assess where progress has and has not been made to identify and consolidate future areas of cooperation.

In assessing the bilateral relationship and policy recommendations for enhanced bilateral cooperation there are three key themes, derived from the pillars of the CSP:

1. Foreign policy and defence cooperation;
2. Economic, technological and international development cooperation; and
3. Cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

The biggest focus of the policy reports and their main framing sits at the strategic level, anchored in the regional foreign policy and defence cooperation agenda enabled by trade, tech and investment and people-to-people ties. All the reports underscore the convergence of interests that the two nations have in the region, from democracy and economic diversification, to the pursuit of free trade and the regional security order.

Despite differences in emphasis, 2023 saw key progress in other significant areas in minilateral engagement that helped to enhance the bilateral partnership. The ROK-US-Japan leaders meeting at Camp David in August sought to bring forth a

“new era of trilateral partnership.”²⁶ The leaders’ statement outlined a “shared ambition to a new horizon, across domains and across the Indo-Pacific and beyond.”²⁷ In 2024, a much more modest grouping and the first-ever ROK-Australia-Japan dialogue commenced at the official and Track 1.5 level. The official Track 1 talks included the first standalone meeting of defence ministers on the sidelines of the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. The inaugural Track 1.5 dialogue was hosted at the United States Studies Centre (at the University of Sydney,) where Australian, Japanese and South Korean participants broadly argued that trilateral cooperation has “the potential to facilitate synergies, including establishing divisions of labour, risk sharing, building resilience, avoiding duplications of effort, pooling influence, and achieving economies of scale,” to address shared regional challenges.²⁸

Despite these successes, questions remain about how the geographical divide in Asia will define the parameters of ROK-Australia relations moving forward. The ROK’s traditional focus of seeing security partners through an economic lens, whereas Australia has primarily viewed the ROK through a security lens, is cited by some scholars as a point of divergence.²⁹ This, coupled with Australia’s sporadic levels of focused engagement with the ROK and the challenges for Canberra to consistently address and shape broader North-east Asian security issues all offer important capacity constraints that must be acknowledged.



A Republic of Korea Air Force F-15K Slam Eagle takes off from RAAF Base Darwin during Exercise Pitch Black 24. Source: Australian Department of Defence

Table 1.

State of play in the ROK-Australia relationship over the last 10 years

Foreign policy and defence cooperation	Economic, technological and international development cooperation	Cultural and people-to-people exchange
What has been achieved?		
Recognised the shared threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the ROK, Australia and the Indo-Pacific's security.	Identified priority areas for collaboration on economic security issues.	Established notably closer ties in the higher-education sector.
Transitioned ROK-Australia security cooperation beyond the confines of the Korean Peninsula and into the wider Indo-Pacific region.	Identified and affirmed the energy transition as an important feature of the bilateral relationship, including bolstering clean energy supply chains and supporting regional decarbonisation.	Greater availability and accessibility to opportunities and financial avenues for Australians and South Koreans to study in each other's country and respectively learn about Australia and the ROK.
Increased number of joint military exercises.		
What is still underway?		
Tightening relationships between Australian and ROK officials who are knowledgeable and/or supportive of the bilateral partnership, including at the presidential and ministerial levels in both ruling and opposition parties.	Exchanging risk assessments on emerging geoeconomic trends at both the policymaking and business-levels to ensure effective joint policy responses.	Reducing barriers for South Koreans and Australians seeking long-term work opportunities in Australia and the ROK respectively.
Building on Hanwha's recent advancements in the Australian defence industry sector, Australia continues to encourage ROK defence industries to actively bid for Australian defence contracts.	Promoting cooperation on green tech development between the ROK and Australia, as well as with partners in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, to support supply chain resilience and advance technologies to help the ROK and Australia achieve Net Zero by 2050.	Ensuring the ROK-Australian relationship's social license is strongly upheld by consistently engaging with local communities in both countries.
Coordinating a regional risk assessment over whether existing risk management mechanisms are suitable for today's changing strategic environment to produce tangible outcomes from these consultations.	Increasing momentum and industrial cooperation on developing and launching space technologies, including ground-to-space launch systems and satellites.	
Increase ROK-Australia maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia, including coordination with maritime partners within ASEAN.	Expanding cooperation on critical emerging technology standard-settings and establishing avenues for dialogue with ASEAN and Pacific Island states to ensure such technologies meet and are harmonised with local needs.	
Not achieved		
Formally integrating ROK-Australian defence cooperation into broader regional multilateral and/or trilateral groupings, including with the United States and/or Japan.	Facilitating and encouraging the ROK's formal ascension into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.	ROK and Australian fundraising organisations and industry groups distributing greater opportunities for smaller, but more numerous, pilot projects that can showcase the importance of the ROK-Australia relationship to South Koreans and Australians at the grassroots level.
	Identifying where the ROK can contribute to the development of AUKUS Pillar II technologies or creating a joint ROK-Australia government fund to support scientific research collaboration on technologies relevant to the AUKUS enterprise.	Identifying and utilising an array of influential Korean Australians that can act as cultural ambassadors actively promoting the ROK-Australia relationship.
	Reforming international trade rules to ensure the global trade architecture is congenial to facilitating rapid and sustained economic development among the ROK and Australia's partners in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.	

The framing of the relationship is therefore key. While stakeholders have been impatient for progress, understanding how the Australia-ROK bilateral relationship has developed over the last decade is key to assessing which areas in the partnership have notably progressed and which particular areas should be allocated more time for fruition. As noted, the renewed emphasis on the Australia-ROK relationship has led to an expansion of think tank and university reports focused on the bilateral partnership. The following section of this brief therefore takes stock of the recommendations outlined in these recent reports. This will set a benchmark for setting the agenda of the partnership and determining future progress. Each section will consider progress on policy recommendations to date, those still in progress and those areas not yet achieved.

Foreign policy and defence cooperation

Some of the strongest progress in the Australia-ROK relationship has been in foreign policy and security cooperation. For the ROK, the change in administration in May 2022 marked a new opportunity in bilateral relations. For example, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol had campaigned on closer strategic alignment with the United States and cooperating with other US allies. His first phone calls upon taking office were with the leaders of the Quad countries, including Australia. The ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs also published an Indo-Pacific strategy in December 2022. This significantly advances Australia's expectation for the ROK to take a more proactive security role beyond the Korean Peninsula in the broader region, and is a positive signal of a convergence of Australian and ROK strategic views towards the Indo-Pacific.³⁰ Such a move provides a platform for coordinating with other regional countries sharing Indo-Pacific strategies.³¹

President Yoon's outline of this policy, with its focus on a "rules-based order firmly anchored in universal values," underscores the ROK Government's rejection of the unilateral use of force to change the regional status quo.³² The ROK's efforts to uphold the "open and fair" economic order in the "Indo-Pacific by joining forces in strengthening the resilience of global supply chains and economic security in the region, and creating inclusive economic and technological ecosystems" indicate that the ROK and Australia's regional strategic ambitions are coming closer together.³³ The ROK's adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy also brings it in line with the United States, Japan, India, France, Canada and ASEAN — with its strategy document's emphasis on values and regional order.³⁴

The question for security cooperation is, therefore, what practical elements in the bilateral agenda can be achieved within a constrained administration in Seoul and, in Canberra's case, a government that has historically been relatively less consistent on its engagement in Northeast Asian security affairs.

A key question for this strategy will be its longevity, given South Korea's domestic politics and the ruling People Power Party's defeat in the legislative elections in early 2024. While foreign policy was not a main issue in the election and as one Australian expert has argued, Yoon's party's election defeat will not see a fundamental change in foreign policy, it has been argued that the impetus and momentum behind the strategy will inevitably ebb.³⁵ Questions also abound about the administration's execution ability. It has been argued that for President Yoon there is a clear gap between "rhetoric and implementation" in South Korean foreign policy.³⁶ This means that while the two nations' strategies are now more aligned, the drive to follow through on this approach within the ROK administration may well be constrained. The question for security cooperation is, therefore, what practical elements in the bilateral agenda can be achieved within a constrained administration in Seoul and, in Canberra's case, a government that has historically been relatively less consistent on its engagement in Northeast Asian security affairs. All partnerships have limitations: the key is the level of practical application that can be undertaken by both sides to build and maintain momentum.



The Australia-Japan-South Korea Track 1.5 Dialogue hosted by the United States Studies Centre in June 2024.

Key developments

Australia, for its part, has reciprocated this renewed cooperation with the ROK under the Albanese government. Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles made multiple visits to the ROK to attend the ROK's first leaders' summit with Pacific Islands Forum countries in 2023, as well as defence summits. Foreign Minister Penny Wong also visited Seoul in July 2024 for meetings with President Yoon; Assistant Foreign Minister Tim Watts attended the first ROK-hosted Summit for Democracy in 2024; and Trade Minister Don Farrell visited in October 2022, among many others. The rapid tempo of official exchanges also includes meetings between Prime Minister Albanese and President Yoon as part of the NATO Indo-Pacific 4 summits in 2022 and 2023, and with Deputy Prime Minister Marles in 2024. The two leaders have also met on the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific's major summits. What has been notably missing so far is an official visit by either leader.

In terms of diplomatic engagement, the very fact that Australia is the first country for the ROK to develop a 2+2 meeting after the United States is significant. The most recent meeting on 1 May 2024 laid out important incremental steps for the relationship. Building on the historic US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David, the ROK and Australian foreign and defence

ministers agreed to “explore trilateral cooperation between Australia, the ROK and Japan through government and 1.5-track Indo-Pacific dialogues.”³⁷ This direction was actioned soon thereafter, with the first Australia-ROK-Japan officials' meeting in Canberra and a Track 1.5 dialogue hosted by the United States Studies Centre in Sydney.³⁸

The USSC's Track 1.5 dialogue highlighted trilateral cooperation as a promising avenue for the three countries to address specific foreign and defence policy agendas, ranging from regional deterrence to the development of clean energy technologies to defence industry federation. The developments in bilateral and trilateral cooperation in recent years among the three countries, including with the United States, have certainly helped facilitate an environment more conducive to bolstering trilateral cooperation between Canberra, Seoul and Tokyo. While the dialogue also identified obstacles to further cooperation, including the potential for Chinese pushback; competing domestic political priorities within and between the three democracies — and in the ROK and Japan's case, sometimes volatile relations — Australian, South Korean and Japanese participants broadly concurred that recent improvements among the three countries' relationships should be built upon to advance shared objectives. These include trilateral trade agreements on key sectors such as digital trade and

critical minerals; bolstering deterrence against regional provocations and efforts to alter the status quo; and coordinating responses to humanitarian crises and foreign aid assistance programs in the region.³⁹

Recognising that the delta for ROK and Australian regional cooperation, at least geographically, sits in Southeast Asia, both countries agreed to cooperate more in this vital area, including in the Mekong subregion, on infrastructure decarbonisation, the diversification of supply chains and critical minerals.⁴⁰ The other significant development was the Korea-Pacific Islands Summit held on 29 May 2023 — a core area of interest for Australia.⁴¹ This saw the ROK double the scale of its Official Development Assistance to the Pacific Islands by 2027. The 2+2 agreed to increased cooperation in the region, particularly on regional disaster preparedness and cyber capacity.⁴²

In bilateral defence cooperation, a significant number of recent policy reports recommended enhanced Australia-ROK military exercises. In this area there has been a notable increase under the Yoon Suk-Yeol administration. October 2023 saw the signing of Service-to-Service MOUs at the 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministers meeting. This lays the framework for increased interoperability and engagement in more complex military exercises. Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles evaluated South Korea's participation in 2023's Exercise Talisman Sabre, Pacific Vanguard and the Australian Air Force's Pitch Black 2022 as a "significant milestone" in the bilateral defence relationship.⁴³ The 2024 2+2 included the signing of the MOU between the Korea National Defense University and the Australian Defence Force Training Centre; the ROK's inaugural dispatch of observers to Exercise Southern Jackaroo in June 2024; and the ROK's participation in the regional peace operations Exercise Pirap Jabiru in Southeast Asia. It also saw the first 'ROK-AUS Defence Conference' held in Canberra on 11 July which focused on evaluating the regional security environment and the status of the strategic partnership between the two nations, along with deepening discussions on identifying new areas for increasing defence industry cooperation. The latter has already seen South Korean defence firm Hanwha securing contracts to deliver armoured infantry fighting vehicles and self-propelled howitzers for the Australian Army.⁴⁴

Going forward

Diplomatic engagement

Despite these major steps, there are still key areas that a range of the policy reports have high-

lighted as needing further development. These include the following steps:

- Ensure sustained and increased levels of bilateral engagement between Australian and ROK officials, especially with those who are aware or supportive of the bilateral relationship in both countries' ruling and opposition parties;
- Closer Australia-ROK diplomatic and governance cooperation to deliver regional public goods. Specifically, more creative minilateral strategic coordination between Australia and ROK focused on mitigation, the net zero transition and disaster relief would make valuable inputs to Southeast Asian countries' climate responses;⁴⁵
- Take advantage of the 2024 2+2 meeting between ROK and Australian defence and foreign ministers regarding cooperation in Southeast Asia to include a focus on maritime security and preserving the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea;
- Build on shared opposition to international actions that undermine international peace and stability through more formal coordinated diplomatic action;
- For Australia: maintain a more consistent approach to diplomatic engagement with the ROK and reflect such consistency in key guiding policy documents; and
- For the Yoon administration: continue to drive the execution of its Indo-Pacific strategy and ensure the ROK plays a more prominent security role beyond the Korean Peninsula.

Defence cooperation

Opportunities continue to exist to bring the ROK into more formal agreements beyond the longstanding US-ROK alliance. The Australia-ROK-Japan trilateral in 2024 was a positive step forward, but momentum in this area needs to be maintained and other initiatives remain to be operationalised. These include the following steps:

- For South Korea: seek US and Japanese support to include Australia in the annual Indo-Pacific Dialogue to ensure better communication and alignment on regional defence issues;
- For Australia: more consistently ensure that its more established partnerships, such as with Japan, do not overshadow its efforts to bolster cooperation with the ROK to address shared regional challenges;
- For Australia: build on the 2024 Korea-Pacific Islands summit by encouraging ROK participation in military exercises in the Pacific;

- Explore opportunities for bilateral cooperation on the margins of existing multilateral forums including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus, NATO's meetings with its Indo-Pacific partners or when Australia and South Korea are invited as guests to G7 meetings; and
- Build on the 2024 ROK-AUS Defence Conferences in Canberra and Seoul to identify areas for closer defence industrial collaboration.

Economic, technological and international development cooperation

Economic cooperation has been one of the key foundations of the Australia-ROK bilateral relationship. In 2023, South Korea was Australia's fourth-largest trading partner valued at \$70.9 billion, and Australia's third-largest export market at \$43.6 billion.⁴⁶ More significantly, South Korea has been among Australia's top trading partners for almost 40 years.⁴⁷ The 2014 Korea-Australia Free Trade Agreement saw two-way trade more than double over the past decade. Today, strong government-to-government and business-to-business cooperation is taking place in priority sectors such as renewable energy, critical minerals, supply chain resilience, industrial manufacturing, and science and technology, among others.

The ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy, as Scott Synder has highlighted, is framed around its export dependency, the risk of regional geopolitics, and building resilient economic relationships with regional partners.⁴⁸ The ROK's regional strategy notes that its trade dependency is a context for framing its strategic approach, with the Indo-Pacific region representing "78 percent of total exports and 67 percent of total imports to South Korea, two-thirds of South Korea's foreign investments is directed to the Indo-Pacific, and 64 percent of South Korea's inbound crude oil and 46 percent of inbound natural gas supplies pass through the South China Sea."⁴⁹ The ROK's approach is entirely consistent with Australia's strategic documents, which have highlighted its trade-dependent maritime nation status and the importance of maintaining the rules-based international order. As a result, and as part of its external balancing strategy, Australia has, for more than a decade, consistently expanded its economic, strategic and comprehensive partnerships in the region, including its decision to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). While the ROK announced its intentions to commence the

application process to accede to the CPTPP on 13 December 2021, progress has been slow and is not yet complete. According to the Perth USAsia Centre, South Korea's inclusion in the CPTPP would bring about a "de facto FTA between Korea and Japan" — a delicate issue for both countries and an impediment to Seoul's desire to formally join.⁵⁰

Issues involving secure supply chains, critical minerals and technology cooperation have understandably become consistent and important themes for bilateral cooperation to focus attention on in the near future.

Nevertheless, both countries ultimately prioritise free and open trade and the maintenance of a rules-based international order as their foundation. Both nations have also become increasingly concerned by trade dependency, especially on China, and both have been the recipients of Beijing's trade sanctions. In the most recent 2+2 meetings, Australian and ROK ministers identified future opportunities for cooperation including diversification and supply chain resilience, regulatory controls, critical and emerging technologies, and engaging business communities to improve mutual risk analyses.⁵¹ Given that issues surrounding economic security are hardly confined to the region alone — with the International Monetary Fund reporting over 2,500 national industry policies in 2023⁵² in response to supply chain resilience, climate change and geopolitical developments — issues involving secure supply chains, critical minerals and technology cooperation have understandably become consistent and important themes for bilateral cooperation to focus attention on in the near future.

Recent Australian think tank and policy-oriented reports also highlighted the potential for ROK-Australia cooperation to extend into other economic and technological domains, engaging additional partners. Clean energy supply chains and regional decarbonisation are priorities for

both countries, with such reports consistently identifying these as key areas of collaboration. Notably, James Bowen and Kyle Springer have emphasised the hydrogen partnership in their major report, underscoring the opportunity for Australia to diversify its export base.⁵³ Southeast Asia is a critical region for mutual cooperation on these issues, where stronger coordination is needed. Both countries could also play a broader role in reforming the international trading system, helping developing and emerging economies like those in Southeast Asia adopt greener, low-carbon technologies while pursuing rapid economic growth.⁵⁴

Beyond Southeast Asia, ROK-Australia cooperation has advanced in the space and cyber domains. In 2021, both countries signed a five-year MOU on space cooperation, followed by a tech bridge event in 2022 designed to explore satellite collaboration. However, progress has been slow. The Australian Space Agency, established only in 2018, has faced challenges under the Albanese government, which has shown little interest in the sector and cut the \$1.2 billion National Space Mission for Earth Observation and other programs in 2023 due to budget savings measures — a move described as an “industry-wide hit” that left the sector in limbo.⁵⁵ The latest 2+2 meeting made no significant commitments to space cooperation, contrasting with the 2021 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which discussed Australia and the ROK as close partners in earth observation and space imagery, and promised an annual Australia-ROK Space Policy Dialogue.⁵⁶

In contrast, cooperation on cyber and critical technologies is firmly on the agenda. The most recent 2+2 meeting agreed to expand collaboration on critical emerging technologies, including AI, quantum and telecommunications through the upcoming Cyber and Critical Technology Policy Dialogue. Both countries have developed cyber security strategies based on the need for international law, regulations and norms in cyberspace, and are committed to advancing global discussions on responsible AI in military

applications. In 2024, this collaboration has expanded into broader cooperation across the Pacific region.⁵⁷

Going forward

Economic cooperation

Progress continues to be made bilaterally and multilaterally, but of all the major policy reports assessed, this is an area full of yellow and red flags, where current initiatives either need work or, in some instances, have stalled. The focus must include fulfilling the following key initiatives:

- For Australia: continue to encourage closer Japanese-ROK engagement, including cooperation on economic issues which could help facilitate the ROK’s future CPTPP membership;
- Turn discussions surrounding economic security into tangible outputs that can strengthen diversification and supply chain resilience and ensure effective regulatory controls around critical and emerging technologies;
- Pursue opportunities to encourage the energy transition as an element within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership economic cooperation agenda, of which both countries are members;
- Reform international trade rules to improve international development. This is a recognised part of the bilateral partnership, however this area of cooperation has yet to be operationalised into practical steps. Australia can encourage ROK participation in the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement and work together to encourage ASEAN partners to also engage; and
- For Australia and the ROK: find new pathways for improved development on space technologies, utilising the ROK and Australia’s respective advantages in space technologies and geographic space to host space launch systems.

Economic cooperation continues to progress bilaterally and multilaterally, but of all the major policy reports assessed, this is an area full of yellow and red flags, where current initiatives either need work or, in some instances, have stalled.

People-to-people exchanges

The glue that connects and drives all partnerships is people-to-people connections. The broad-based social license for an enhanced partnership must come from the populations of each country.

In Australia, opinion polling is an important measure of public receptivity to bilateral partnerships. The Lowy Institute's 2024 poll includes a 'feelings thermometer,' measuring Australians' warmth towards other countries and territories on a scale of 0° (coldest feelings) to 100° (warmest feelings). In this indicator, the ROK has consistently been measured at 64% over the last 10 years. This puts South Korea behind New Zealand, Japan, the United Kingdom and Germany, but ahead of most other regional countries and the United States (59%).⁵⁸ On the Lowy Institute's 'best friend in Asia' poll, South Korea fares less well, measuring 3% in 2024 and falling well behind Japan (43%), Singapore (16%), Indonesia (15%), China (11%), India (10%).⁵⁹ While a mixed report card, the warm feeling towards the ROK nevertheless provides a firm platform for closer engagement.

One of the most successful areas of engagement has been through education. Higher education is Australia's fourth largest export industry and has attracted more than 30,000 South Koreans travelling to Australia each year to study at the university level and in vocational training. Educational understanding between the two countries has also been enhanced by the establishment of a Visiting Professor of Australian Studies in the ROK from 2024 and the Australia Korea Foundation continues to fund key areas of bilateral engagement. Despite these notable advances, this still means that South Korean students don't even make the top 10 provider countries in Australia.⁶⁰ It also remains to be seen what impact the Australian Government's crackdown on the number of international students at universities will have, and whether it will dissuade South Korean students from pursuing their studies in Australia.⁶¹

Going forward

A range of opportunities exist to continue educational, cultural and business engagement at the people-to-people level. Recommendations from policy reports have included the following steps:

- Engage influential Korean Australians as cultural ambassadors in promoting the bilateral relationship;
- Ensure attractive immigration opportunities (work, travel, etc) between Australians and South Koreans including where possible, reducing visa processing fees, wait times, and eligibility requirements;

- Australian and South Korean funding organisations and industry groups should prioritise smaller and more numerous pilot projects, such as agriculture, technology, research on visa employment outcomes and civil society dialogues and university-based forums, which all raise greater awareness and visibility on the Australia-ROK relationship and its economic and social benefits for the two countries; and
- Ensure local communities in both countries are actively engaged in investment projects, raising awareness of the ROK-Australia relationship and how it benefits local communities, ultimately bolstering the strength and sustainability of their social license.

New frontiers

The above 'to do' list of initiatives for Australia and the ROK is extensive. It will take time for Track 1 diplomacy to produce practical and tangible initiatives that action the range of ideas proposed across diplomacy, defence, trade, technology and cultural ties. Many of the initiatives proposed at the Track 1 or 2 level are either in progress, albeit some for almost a decade, or proposed for implementation. Only time will tell their impact on the bilateral relationship.

In the policy community, it is always tempting to tell government to do more and spend more time and resources. With this in mind, this brief produced a report card measuring what practical proposals in existing policy reports have been adopted, while highlighting areas for further cooperation.

Two relatively new areas in the bilateral relationship that also need consideration are in AUKUS Pillar II's pursuit of advanced technologies and secondly, naval shipbuilding. The latter could be a potential game changer for bilateral cooperation in defence industry.

AUKUS Pillar II

The AUKUS defence technology sharing pact between the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom consists of two pillars: Pillar I's provision of submarine nuclear-power technology to Australia and Pillar II's pursuit of accelerating the development of advanced technologies. These include artificial intelligence and autonomy, quantum technologies, cyber capabilities, undersea capabilities, electronic warfare capabilities, hypersonics and counter-hypersonics capabilities, innovation and information sharing and deep space advanced radar capabilities.⁶²



Republic of Korea Marine Corps soldiers on the Flight Deck of HMAS Adelaide during a cross deck from ROKS Marado as part of Exercise Talisman Sabre 23. Source: Australian Department of Defence

While in many ways progress has been slow in AUKUS Pillar II, this is somewhat understandable given the need to align the defence research and development and procurement systems of the three countries.⁶³ Pillar II is the one area of the AUKUS pact where there has been continued speculation about the inclusion of other countries. Australian Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles has made various mentions of Japan ‘docking’ into the pact.⁶⁴ In April 2024 the AUKUS defence ministers announced principles for additional AUKUS Pillar II partner engagement on specific projects, where new partners could contribute to the AUKUS enterprise. Soon thereafter Japan’s entry took another important step forward following President Joe Biden’s announcement at the US-Japan leaders meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio that in “recognizing Japan’s strengths and the close bilateral defense partnerships with the ... AUKUS partners — Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States — are considering cooperation with Japan on AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects.”⁶⁵

While an important announcement, it did not entail a plan for immediately actioning Japan’s involvement. Given that Japan needs to overcome significant barriers to engagement on AUKUS, it was more an announcement of intent. The partnership will most likely be concentrated in niche capabilities areas rather than a broad-based partnership leading to a ‘JAUKUS.’ This

announcement was still significant, however, in that it gave a clear indication of the strategic direction of and increasingly inclusive trajectory of the AUKUS pact.

This announcement, in turn, raised serious interest in other aligned countries, especially the two remaining Five Eyes partners — Canada and New Zealand, and in the ROK. South Korea officially voiced its interest in joining Pillar II during their 2+2 meeting with Australian officials in May 2024, with ROK Defence Minister Shin Won-sik stating that the ROK’s “differentiated science and technology capabilities will contribute to the peace and stability of the development of the AUKUS Pillar 2 and regional peace.”⁶⁶ These ambitions received a major boost on 17 September 2024, with the Joint Leaders Statement to Mark the Third Anniversary of AUKUS noting that:

*Following initial consultations this year and leveraging Japan’s deep technical expertise, AUKUS partners and Japan are exploring opportunities to improve interoperability of their maritime autonomous systems as an initial area of cooperation. Recognizing these countries’ close bilateral defense partnerships with each member of AUKUS, we are consulting with Canada, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea to identify possibilities for collaboration on advanced capabilities under AUKUS Pillar II.*⁶⁷

This is now an immediate action area for the ROK. It should consider taking measures to enhance its ability to ‘dock’ into AUKUS. This an opportunity for Seoul to assess and upgrade its internal protective security measures and focus its defence research and development efforts in technologies most aligned with AUKUS priority areas.

Naval shipbuilding

In 2022, the Albanese government commissioned a Defence Strategic Review (DSR) lead by former foreign and defence minister Professor Stephen Smith and former chief of the defence force Air Marshal Sir Angus Houston. One of the key outcomes of the DSR, delivered in February 2023, was for an ‘enhanced lethality surface fleet’ for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). This recommendation and a broader focus on enhancing speed to capability led to the enactment of a key recommendation of the DSR, an independent analysis of the RAN’s surface fleet. This report recommended to government the purchase of 11 general-purpose frigates under Project SEA 3000. The independent analysis also included a shortlist of existing platform designs from Japan, German, Spain and the ROK. The shortlisting of these platforms, including two designed from the Korean companies Hyundai Heavy Industries and Hanwha Ocean, was a significant change to naval capability procurement in Australia.

The selection of Japan and the ROK in the shortlist was in and of itself a significant development given the RAN’s long-standing preference for US, UK or European shipbuilders. In addition, the selection of two platform designs from the ROK not only significantly enhances their odds for selection, but also raises the potential for a significantly enhanced defence partnership and presents other potential areas for cooperation to likely emerge in the near-future.⁶⁸

More generally the ROK’s expertise in shipbuilding is an area that deserves significant investigation for Australia to gain insight for its own program of continuous naval shipbuilding, which has been an unrealised policy ambition for decades.

Conclusion

The ROK-Australia relationship is in both an exceptionally strong and a somewhat fragile place. The strength is evident in significant efforts to bolster the relationship detailed in the two most recent eras. This has provided a strong foundation for future cooperation and the maintenance of the ROK-Australia relationship, as much as the nature of the changing geopolitical balance in the Indo-Pacific demands it. These shifts are both challenging each country, while simultaneously driving their strategic alignment closer together.

However, the geographical realities of each country and, in particular for the ROK with its land border with the DPRK and geographic proximity with the broader Asian mainland, challenges their ongoing security relationships and priorities beyond the Korean Peninsula. Similarly for Australia, its position at the other end of Asia and on the hinge of the Indo-Pacific will require it to reconcile its priorities on the South Pacific and Southeast Asia against the broader and complex security issues facing Northeast Asia.

The Yoon administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy provides an important catalyst for each country to seize on converging strategic priorities. It gives impetus to Tom Corben’s call to operationalise key areas of the partnership “before the window closes.”⁶⁹ That said, the plethora of recent Track 2 reports by think tanks and university programs have laid out a broader agenda for engagement. Emphasis now needs to fall into key areas:

- Consolidate Track 1, 1.5 and 2 efforts to identify concrete endeavours that put ‘meat on the bones’ of strategic priorities that have been developed, as well as providing an avenue for imagining new pathways in which the two countries can focus on achieving actionable objectives;
- Assess potential ROK technological engagement in selected areas of AUKUS Pillar II, noting all realistic financial and bureaucratic constraints on both the current state of AUKUS and the relationships between the ROK and AUKUS countries;
- Investigate the opportunities presented by the Australian Defence Strategic Review and the ROK involvement in bids for SEA 3000 work, which promises to improve defence relations and Australia’s naval shipbuilding outcomes even if one of the South Korea vessels is not selected as the next RAN general purpose frigate.

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Cover photo: Royal Australian Navy sailor Leading Seaman Aviation Anthony Hunt from HMAS Toowoomba greets crew members from the Republic of Korean ship Gang Gam — Chan during a cross deck exercise as part of the regional presence deployment 2023. (Australian Department of Defence)

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