

UK-ROK RELATIONS: FORGING CLOSER TIES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

by
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The United Kingdom has been exploring viable options to partner with like-minded countries as part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. With the introduction of ‘[Tilt to the Indo-Pacific](#)’ in September 2021 under the Boris Johnson Administration, the UK has flagged its interests in the region as part of its post-Brexit foreign policy. The UK’s main interests in the Indo-Pacific remain in regional bodies, responding to an assertive China, and bolstering ties with like-minded countries in the region.

Although the UK remains a new entrant in the region, it is working closely to build ties with Japan and the ROK. The recent visit by South Korean President Yoon Seok Yeol to the UK stands symbolic as both countries upgraded their bilateral relations to ‘[Global Strategic Partners](#)’ by signing the Downing Street Accord. The meeting between the UK and South Korean leaders took place at a pivotal time: The former expanding ties with like-minded countries for its Indo-Pacific outreach and the latter lobbying to create chokepoints for North Korea.

Before the Accord, Yoon Seok Yeol had signed the ‘[Bilateral Framework for Closer Cooperation in 2022](#)’ with his erstwhile UK counterpart Boris Johnson to strengthen ties in the field of politics, security, science, and technology. The framework also included bilateral actions against North Korea (DPRK), human rights issues, and challenges posed in the post-pandemic order, particularly supply chains.

Downing Street Accord: Revival of Relations

The Downing Street Accord has been perceived as a cornerstone in UK-ROK ties. On the 140th commemoration of bilateral ties, the Accord elevated the status between the two countries to ‘Global Strategic Partners’ with a shared interest in cooperating on regional and global issues. The Accord signed between UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and

South Korean President Yoon Seok Yeol enables the two countries to bolster economic, security and technological ties. The Accord is an attempt to reshape the existing bilateral relations and further work towards an “open and international order”.

Regarding national security, they applauded the two nations’ [agreement to hold a 2+2 ministerial conference](#) on military and foreign policy. The two leaders expressed their expectation for more communication in the face of a rapidly shifting global environment and their commitment to bilateral support for world peace and stability as well as diplomatic and national security cooperation. The 2+2 ministerial dialogue is an enabler for further tightening sanctions on North Korea.

The two leaders said that they will deepen their bilateral collaboration to establish a free, open, and secure cyberspace by signing the ‘[UK-ROK Strategic Cyber Partnership](#)’ in honor of President Yoon’s official visit to the United Kingdom. The Partnership will address the creation of resilient cyber ecosystems and detect and deter malicious cyber threats. It also aims to bring together multiple stakeholders from both countries to work jointly and help countries from the Indo-Pacific region to deter any cyber threats. State-sponsored North Korean cyberattacks are alarmingly posing a threat to the U.S. and countries in the Indo-Pacific. In recent times, the ‘hermit kingdom’ has also improved its cyber capabilities and introduced a separate cyberwarfare program in national universities. Therefore, this partnership on cyber security is timely between the two countries. Both parties are committed to working together to increase their competitiveness in the military industry and to cooperatively penetrate shared markets as part of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on joint exports.

The two nations’ economies will be centered on trade and investment cooperation as well as science and technology. Seoul and London announced that they had completed a bilateral ‘[Digital Partnership and an MOU on Digital Government Cooperation](#),’ which they claimed established the groundwork for future collaboration on digital standards, artificial

intelligence, and 6G. They said that the [Terms of Reference on space cooperation](#) will present a chance for the UK and ROK to establish themselves as important allies in all spheres of the space sector, including industry, policy, and exploration.

Prime Minister Sunak and President Yoon decided to work together to address climate change and carry out the energy transition for a sustainable future. They also decided to establish a bilateral collaboration for clean energy, support the Global Green Growth Institute, located in Seoul, and work together to support international initiatives to address the climate catastrophe, such as the carbon-free energy project. Through the recently concluded strategic development cooperation between Seoul and London, developing nations received aid in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN. This was another collaborative endeavor.

Partners in the Indo-Pacific

The UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt and the ROK's emerging [role as a 'Global Pivotal State'](#) is a positive enabler for strengthened ties between the two countries in the region. Yoon Seok Yeol's conservative stand has revived the ROK's firm stance towards China and stronger deterrence policy towards North Korea. Similarly, the UK after Brexit has echoed U.S. foreign policy objectives by taking a hardline stand against China and involving itself in the Indo-Pacific, shifting from the earlier default Euro-Atlantic region.

However, with North Korea's alarming progress in nuclear missile testing and China's assertiveness in the region, UK-ROK relations can explore beyond the Downing Accord. The UK has signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan that allows the creation of a framework for the two countries to move their military forces whenever required. The UK and ROK can work out a similar framework that can facilitate the sharing of core aerospace technologies and interoperability for space security. This may act as counter effective strategy to Moscow's promise to [share space technology with Pyongyang](#).

The South Korean government is still hedging when it comes to China policy, imitating the previous

administration's "dual alignment" approach.

Considering the importance of inclusivity, it should come as no surprise that China is not singled out for criticism in the Indo-Pacific strategy, unlike the U.S., Japan, and Canada, whose approaches have been much more overt in labelling China as a "strategic challenge." The UK-ROK partnership in the region can diversify supply chains and security cooperation, and forge closer partnerships with like-minded countries in the region. The UK and ROK have called for ASEAN centrality and by devising soft power, particularly collaborations on maritime domain awareness, science and technology and space, the two countries can collaborate towards creating what truly constitutes a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Additionally, the UK has expressed its voice to expand AUKUS in what is commonly known as the AUKUS Plus format that includes ROK and Japan. AUKUS was outlined to share nuclear submarine technology with Australia and includes the UK and the U.S. However, the absence of [an Asian voice in AUKUS](#) has remained an irritant and although no plausible resolutions to include an Asian voice have been raised, the UK can explore this as a viable option to further strengthen its ties in the region.

New Phase of Collaboration

The ROK under Yoon Seok Yeol is exploring beyond Northeast Asia and reviving its image as a Global Pivotal image by partnering beyond the region. Thus, the Downing Street Accord ought to be the start, not the end, of a new phase of British-South Korean cooperation. The Downing Street meeting between the leaders of the UK and South Korea came at a critical juncture, with the former pursuing its Indo-Pacific outreach by strengthening ties with like-minded nations and the latter advocating to establish chokepoints for North Korea. An RAA would guarantee that Britain could keep expanding its security presence in the Indo-Pacific while South Korea could do the same in Europe, in addition to institutionalizing the developing bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

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