

## POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF SOUTH KOREAN DEFENSE COOPERATION WITH NATO: THE CASE OF SWEDEN

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South Korea's new administration seeks closer defense industrial cooperation with NATO, but also engagement with NATO adversaries, Russia and North Korea. For NATO's newest member Sweden, defense cooperation with South Korea raises questions about security linkages between the Indo-Pacific and the Korean Peninsula, where it has historically played a unique diplomatic role.

This policy brief explores the compatibility of South Korean and Swedish policy goals in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific through three aspects: conceptual misalignment of Swedish and South Korean security outlooks, South Korea's transactional approach to Europe as contrasted to the Swedish long-term commitment to the Korean Peninsula, and the potential impact of defense cooperation on engagement with North Korea.

For South Korea's new administration, defense cooperation with Europe will contribute positively to its weapons export goals but will likely have a negative effect on its prospects for engaging with Russia. For Sweden, defense cooperation could contribute positively to its deterrence of Russia and its support for Ukraine, but Sweden must remain aware of South Korean transactionalism. For both countries, the effect of defense cooperation on engagement with North Korea (whether inter-Korean engagement, or Sweden's diplomatic role) is likely net negative, though more uncertain and contingent on the overall trajectory of Russia-North Korea relations.

This policy brief makes the following recommendations:

- South Korea must carefully assess the opportunity costs of engaging with Russia at the expense of European weapons exports.
- Sweden should continue to deepen its defense partnership with South Korea but Swedish policymakers must carefully consider the extent to which it can build a sustainable defense partnership with South Korea.
- Sweden should make its diplomatic role and objectives on the Korean Peninsula a more explicit part of both its security and its Indo-Pacific strategies
- Sweden should take a leading role in updating Europe's North Korea policy
- Sweden and South Korea should jointly take the lead on facilitating Europe-Indo-Pacific intelligence and knowledge-sharing about the Russia-North Korea relationship.

## Introduction

The NATO Summit at The Hague in June 2025 was a tense affair. European NATO members found themselves with a single purpose: assuring the United States of their continued commitment to defense spending. Yet for South Korea, Europe's sudden rush to increase its defense spending presented an opportunity. On the sidelines of the summit, South Korea and NATO announced a defense industrial partnership working group.<sup>1</sup>

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung was surely pleased with this outcome. By sending a senior adviser instead of going himself, he avoided political fallout from China and Russia, two states with whom he had vowed to improve relations as part of his “pragmatic” foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, his administration could position itself to respond to Europe's demand for more weapons to deter Russia.<sup>3</sup> In 2024, South Korea was the world's tenth largest arms exporter.<sup>4</sup> While South Korea has not provided arms directly to Ukraine, it has moved to backfill the voids left from European arms shipments to Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Most notably, South Korea and Poland have struck a deal for missile launchers, tanks, self-propelled howitzers and light combat aircraft, worth \$13.7 billion.<sup>6</sup>

The agreement on the sidelines of the Hague summit provides an opportunity to take stock of South Korea's defense cooperation with NATO countries, and ask to what extent is South Korea's approach to Europe compatible with Europe's approach to the Korean Peninsula, and vice versa. Sweden, which broke with a 200-year policy of nonalignment when it entered NATO in 2023, is a particularly interesting example of such cross-regional dynamics. The entry into NATO has prompted a broader change to Sweden's entire foreign policy posture, including an adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework into its policy documents, which focuses heavily on defense cooperation.

For both South Korea and Sweden, NATO represents a new geopolitical reality that both must deal with.

This reality presents opportunities and challenges for both countries.

The South Korean government under Yoon Seok Yeol sought to link Europe with the Indo-Pacific through NATO;<sup>7</sup> what the Lee Jae Myung administration will do is not yet clear. South Korea clearly seeks to maintain a defense export relationship with Europe, but can it do so while simultaneously signaling far less alignment with issues that NATO and Europeans care about, most notably support for Ukraine and diplomatic isolation of Russia? As this policy brief will argue, South Korea can have deep relations with Europe, or “pragmatic” relations with Russia, but it cannot have both.

Sweden's unique role on the Korean Peninsula might also be affected by its NATO membership. It has long acted as a protective power and mediator for the United States in North Korea, but now its NATO membership and aid to Ukraine puts it on the opposite side of North Korea, which is supporting Russia with material, as well as troops. Can Sweden maintain its role as neutral mediator on the Korean Peninsula under such circumstances, and while increasing defense cooperation with South Korea?

This policy brief explores the compatibility of South Korean and Swedish policy goals in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific through three aspects: conceptual misalignment of Swedish and South Korean security outlooks, South Korea's transactional approach to Europe as contrasted to the Swedish long-term commitment to the Korean Peninsula, and the potential impact of defense cooperation on engagement with North Korea.

For South Korea's new administration, defense cooperation with Europe will contribute positively to its weapons export goals but will likely have a negative effect on its prospects for engaging with Russia. For Sweden, defense cooperation could contribute positively to its deterrence of Russia and its support for Ukraine, but Sweden must remain aware of South Korean transactionalism. For both

countries, the effect of defense cooperation on engagement with North Korea (whether inter-Korean engagement, or Sweden's diplomatic role) is likely net negative, though more uncertain and contingent on the overall trajectory of Russia-North Korea relations.

## Conceptual Misalignment of Swedish and South Korean Security Outlooks

According to the *Swedish National Security Strategy* (published in July 2024), deterrence of Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea and support for Ukraine are two crucial Swedish security policy objectives in Europe.<sup>8</sup> The strategy document also notes that strengthening cooperation with “states of particular importance for us ... in Asia and the Pacific” is important because “the security of Europe and Asia has become increasingly interlinked.” The *National Security Strategy* frames this interlinkage as a structural force, driven by the “dynamics of the US-China relationship.” At the same time, the Swedish Ministry of Defense issued a brief guideline document for defense cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region, the *Defence Policy Direction for cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region* (hereafter *Indo-Pacific Defence Policy Direction*). This document, framed security linkages between the two regions as driven by “authoritarian states and non-state actors [who] question international norms and agreements by making threats or using military force.”<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the driver of the Indo-Pacific-Euro-Atlantic security linkage, Sweden frames it as a negative development that aligns threat actors across different regions. It therefore warrants a positive linkage of “like-minded” partners. To this end, the *Indo-Pacific Defence Policy Direction* seeks to align Sweden with both EU and NATO's Indo-Pacific strategies through three “focus areas”: defense relations, military presence, and defense and technology cooperation.<sup>10</sup> In December 2024, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, explicitly framed his planned Seoul visit – cancelled at the last minute due to former President Yoon's martial

law declaration – as an effort to strengthen defense industrial relations with Japan and South Korea.<sup>11</sup>

Once the Swedish Prime Minister manages to reschedule his trip to Seoul, he may find a more difficult audience. The administration of Lee Jae Myung is undertaking a course-correction of South Korean foreign policy, and appears to have abandoned the Indo-Pacific strategy of its predecessor.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the Yoon administration pursued a policy aimed at closer alignment with “like-minded” partners within the region and beyond, the new security strategy being drafted in Seoul will reportedly dispense with terms like ‘Indo-Pacific’ and ‘like-minded’, as the Lee administration seeks to pursue engagement with China, Russia, and North Korea. Progressives in Seoul argued that Lee not attending the NATO summit was conducive to this goal, as it reduced the impression of South Korea's alignment with an anti-Russia or anti-China bloc. At the same time as ‘the Indo-Pacific’ is becoming the organizing concept for many European states' approaches towards Asia (including Sweden), the new South Korean administration is abandoning the concept, which could undermine the conceptual basis for future cooperation. The debate in Seoul on its Indo-Pacific outlook is far from settled on the matter but will certainly be much more contested than during the previous administration.

## South Korea-Swedish Defense Cooperation: Quick Cash vs Long-Term Commitments?

Since the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-22), South Korea has become the world's fastest growing arms exporter. Russia's invasion of Ukraine created a particularly lucrative opportunity for South Korea, as exemplified by the massive export deal with Poland.

Like Poland, Sweden is also looking to acquire big-ticket items to address urgent defense priorities. Air defense capabilities to fend off Russian missile strikes, and long-range capabilities that can hold targets at risk in Russia are among the capabilities that Sweden is seeking to procure in the next few years.<sup>13</sup> In April

2025, the Korean defense procurement minister visited Stockholm to pitch such capabilities from the Korean export catalogue.<sup>14</sup> According to South Korean media reports, the minister discussed “South Korean weapons systems, such as the M-SAM II air defense system and Chunmoo multiple rocket launch system” with his Swedish counterpart. Both sides also agreed to further cooperation on AI and space technologies.<sup>15</sup>

The advancement of South Korea’s defense industrial objectives in Europe faces several obstacles, however. While Eastern and Central European states have welcomed South Korea’s arms exports to support their rearmament, Northern and Western European states like France and Germany view South Korean exports as potential competitors. Moreover, any reliance on defense material from the Indo-Pacific clearly runs counter to the European Union’s stated ambition to strengthen its own arms industry. By 2030, the European Commission has set a target of 60 percent domestic production in the sector.<sup>16</sup> The Swedish Defense Industrial Policy released in June 2025 also reflects this intra-European prioritization.<sup>17</sup>

While it must be acknowledged that the EU member-states, including Sweden, face significant obstacles to this goal, South Korea faces the risk of simply filling up a temporary capability gap. As Europe’s ability to arm itself grows, South Korea may become relegated to a much more minor role than it currently enjoys. For South Korea, this long-term challenge underscores the importance of establishing deep and long-running, mutually beneficial partnerships with European partners, which is surely one of the drivers of the dialogue agreed on with NATO at the Hague Summit.

However, the need to establish deeper partnerships with European partners would require South Korea to subscribe to Europe’s security agenda to a much greater extent than it has been willing to do thus far. Most notably, South Korea has shown reluctance to provide lethal aid directly to Ukraine for the fear that Russia will use that as an excuse to provide arms

to North Korea. While Europeans welcome South Korean sanctions on Russia and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, it has been an enduring frustration that South Korea – a partner supposedly aligned with European values – has not been willing to assume the political risk of lethal aid provision to Ukraine, especially after North Korea’s direct aid of troops and material to Russia.<sup>18</sup> Further underlining the conceptual gap opening up between Europe and South Korea, the Lee administration has now criticized its predecessor for its “value-based” foreign policy based on like-mindedness, and explicitly positioned its own “pragmatic” foreign policy as a contrast to it.<sup>19</sup>

Despite progress on defense cooperation, such as the agreement at the Hague Summit, South Korea’s willingness to commit to deepened partnerships with European nations thus remains in question, and its goal of exporting weapons to Europe may falter upon its unwillingness to become entangled in the Ukraine War. European states may not want to build the kind of long-term durable partnerships needed to sustain their rearmament effort in the decade to come with a partner that is not open to supporting their most crucial security objectives in ways they find meaningful, and which may even be opening itself up to Russian leverage.

Sweden’s support for Ukraine has only been a modest driver for Swedish-Korean defense cooperation so far. At the time of writing, the Swedish Defence Material Agency has ordered artillery shell propellants for Sweden, which is used in the Archer artillery systems that Sweden has provided to Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> This clearly bolsters the Swedish supply chain in its effort to provide an important capability to Ukraine and backfill its own capabilities. On balance, however, despite the surge of South Korean export interest towards Europe, Sweden has so far provided more military products to South Korea than vice versa. The two countries signed a defense cooperative agreement in 2009.<sup>21</sup> Since then, Swedish defense firms, primarily SAAB, have sold radar systems,<sup>22</sup> signals intelligence systems for submarines,



simulation software,<sup>23</sup> and supported development of algorithms for radar systems to South Korea's domestic fighter-jet development. The agreement was renewed in September 2025.<sup>24</sup>

Sweden views the defense equipment it provides to South Korea as a part of its broader diplomatic effort to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula. Ahead of his East Asia trip, Prime Minister Kristersson wrote:

Swedish military presence on the Korean Peninsula goes back 70 years. Sweden has the almost unique task to surveil the border between North and South Korea. Since 1995, we act as protective power for the United States and several other countries in North Korea. Swedish radar systems are used along the inter-Korean border to maintain security. Sweden is now the only Western country with an ambassador present in North Korea.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, this position means that the Swedish approach to defense cooperation with South Korea places more emphasis on long-term political commitment to the Korean Peninsula, compared to the much more transactional South Korean approach to Europe.<sup>26</sup>

### Potential Impact of Defense Cooperation on Engagement with North Korea

While the Swedish government's attempt to reinforce the security link between Europe and Asia has somewhat clear implications for its goals in Europe, it is less apparent how this linkage will affect Sweden's unique diplomatic role on the Korean Peninsula, and South Korea's goal of pragmatic engagement with Russia and North Korea.

Neither Sweden's *National Security Strategy* nor its *Indo-Pacific Defence Policy Direction* make any mention of the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, the importance of Sweden's diplomatic presence on the Korean Peninsula is largely determined by circumstance and opportunity rather than strategic planning in Stockholm. During the Korean nuclear

crisis in 2017, for example, the previous Swedish government actively played a mediating role between the United States and North Korea.<sup>27</sup> Since the failure of the Hanoi Summit in 2019, which was followed by an ultimately fruitless senior-level meeting in Stockholm, there has been little role for Sweden to play (due in part also to the pandemic closure of all diplomatic missions to North Korea).<sup>28</sup> The only major (public) mediation effort by Sweden in recent years was to arrange for the transfer of a U.S. soldier, who was apprehended by North Korea after he defected across the inter-Korean border in 2023. That said, Sweden remains the only European state with a Special Envoy to the Korean Peninsula, and the current government has repeated its ambition to "maintain ongoing contact and advance dialogue between all concerned parties."<sup>29</sup> The question then is less about current opportunities to play mediator, but rather about Sweden's ability to play that role in the future, and whether Sweden's NATO membership and defense cooperation with South Korea might affect that role negatively.

What role Sweden can play in a future Korean crisis is unfortunately unclear. The 'negative' security linkage of Europe and Asia, particularly by North Korea's alliance with Russia, might reduce the space for Sweden to play a diplomatic role on the Korean Peninsula, even as the 'positive' linkage between the South Korean and European defense industrial sectors might serve to strengthen deterrence against Russia in Europe. In this context, increased defense cooperation with South Korea could – in the view of North Korea – undermine Sweden's credibility as a neutral broker. North Korea's view of Sweden's NATO-membership is negative. The North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Sweden (and Finland) joined NATO due to U.S. pressure, in a bid to "compress the strategic space of Russia."<sup>30</sup> While the statement is fairly restrained in its direct criticism of Sweden, it does indicate that North Korea sees Swedish autonomy as having been undermined by its NATO membership. In a future crisis, North Korea may thus be less likely to engage with Swedish diplomats.

This assessment might overstate the case, however. After all, Swedish provision of military technology to South Korea prior to the 2017 nuclear crisis did not seem to affect Sweden's ability to play honest broker then. The effect of any transfer of military equipment in either direction could therefore be marginal on Sweden's ability to carry out its diplomatic role. After the defense deal between South Korea and Poland, Russian President Vladimir Putin responded with a veiled threat to provide arms to North Korea.<sup>31</sup> North Korean media has amplified such Russian criticisms of European rearmament in the past, but generally pinned the blame on the United States and NATO for entrapping smaller states, as opposed to direct criticism of individual European states. However, it is likely that the closer the Russia-North Korea relationship becomes, the greater is the risk that the Swedish-South Korean defense cooperation would have negative effects on Sweden's diplomatic goals on the Korean Peninsula.

This prospect also underlines a fundamental contradiction between the Lee administration's defense export objectives in Europe and its stated desire to engage Europe's adversaries. Should the Lee administration seek to pursue deeper partnerships with Europe, the goal of "pragmatic" engagement with Russia will likely founder instead. It would be difficult for South Korea to explain to Russia how it wants to improve relations while it is simultaneously arming Russia's adversaries. The South Korean president managed to score a diplomatic win at the sidelines of the NATO summit, without the politically costly signal of going there himself. He should not be under the impression that he can continue to obtain benefits from Europe without putting serious political capital on the line.

South Korea can have deep relations with Europe, or "pragmatic" relations with Russia and North Korea, but it cannot have both. Defense partnerships with Europe may also undermine the ability for European partners like Sweden to play any role in future diplomatic crises on the Korean Peninsula. This outcome is admittedly less certain, but for an administration as concerned with restarting

engagement with North Korea as the incumbent South Korean one seems to be, it bears consideration in Seoul.

In the end, what might force the eventual outcome is the inherent futility of South Korea's attempt at reconciliation with Russia and North Korea; there simply is not much that South Korea can do to improve trading relations with Russia or dissuade Moscow or Pyongyang from strengthening their partnership.<sup>32</sup> North Korea has made clear that it is not interested in engagement.<sup>33</sup> Seoul's outreach to Moscow is at an early stage, but once the Korean president realizes that engagement with Russia will be dead on arrival, the sooner he will be able to turn and engage fully with the European defense market.

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In sum, South Korean and Swedish policy goals are internally conflicting, but mutually compatible to some extent. As summarized in Table 1 (on the following page), South Korean weapons exports can both support the Swedish goal of deterring Russia and support for Ukraine. There is a high degree of incompatibility, however, largely driven by South Korea's contradictory objectives of arming Europe and getting back on speaking terms with its adversaries. The case could be made that Sweden's unique diplomatic role on the Korean Peninsula – which on its face appears to be compatible with the Lee administration's aim to engage North Korea – could be affected negatively through defense cooperation with South Korea. However, this effect appears to be largely a function of how Russia perceives defense cooperation, and the extent to which North Korea finds it in its own interest to align with Russia on the issue.

## Recommendations

In an ideal world, South Korea would be able to have its pragmatism and eat it too. But closer ties with Europe are premised on maintaining distance to Russia, and the opposite is likely true as well. The Lee administration interprets pragmatism as a careful

**Table 1: Policy compatibility between South Korea and Sweden**

Mutual compatibility of Swedish and Korean policy goals			Swedish policy goals		
			Deterrence		Engagement
			Deter Russia	Support Ukraine	Maintain dipl. Role on K. Peninsula
South Korean policy goals	Deterrence	Increase weapons exports to Europe	Provides deterrent capability	Backfills supply chain	SWE role as neutral mediator in question?
	Engagement	Engage Russia	SK engagement strategy out of alignment with Europe		N/A
		Engage North Korea			Additional diplomatic channel

balancing of relationships with multiple actors, but a truly pragmatic foreign policy should also recognize its own limitations. As in all foreign policymaking, the other side gets a say in the outcome, and if South Korea views defense cooperation with Europe, including the newly launched defense industrial dialogue, as a purely transactional enterprise that does not require political commitment, its success will not be long-lived.

Europeans will eventually recognize that South Korea is an external party that does not necessarily share their threat perceptions. **South Korea must therefore carefully assess the opportunity costs of engaging with Russia at the expense of European weapons exports**, and vice versa, or at least be aware that by trying to choose both it may gain little from either side.

**Sweden should continue to deepen its defense**

**partnership with South Korea** to support backfilling of depleted supplies and further assistance to Ukraine. It is worth engaging South Korean defense contractors in discussion to acquire enhanced deterrence capabilities against Russia, but **Swedish policymakers must carefully consider the extent to which it can build a sustainable defense partnership with South Korea** if South Korea continues its pragmatic and – arguably – transactional approach to European security.

At the same time, **Sweden should make its diplomatic role and objectives on the Korean Peninsula a more explicit part of both its security and its Indo-Pacific strategies**. While it is difficult for Sweden to play a pro-active role in diplomacy on the Peninsula, re-asserting the commitment to its traditional role as a diplomatic mediator will be even more important in case of another crisis in the future.

**Sweden should also take a leading role in updating Europe's North Korea policy.** As a Korean expert on Europe notes, "Europe's approach to North Korea has stagnated into strategic irrelevance."<sup>34</sup> Although Sweden remains the only European country to have designated a Special Envoy to the Korean Peninsula, its policy towards the Peninsula has been relegated to an afterthought in security documents and would benefit from a commensurate re-think in Stockholm. This strategy should – as did the Swedish prime minister – purposefully frame defense cooperation with South Korea as part and parcel of a broader diplomatic engagement effort with North Korea. Doing so would not only make Europe a more relevant actor on the Korean Peninsula but also contrast Europe's willingness to support South Korea's political goals towards North Korea, in contrast with South Korea's reluctance to do the same towards Russia.

**Sweden and South Korea should take the lead on facilitating Europe-Indo-Pacific intelligence and knowledge-sharing about the Russia-North Korea relationship.** Such exchanges should not only focus on the threats that arise from this new authoritarian alignment but also explore where Russian and North Korean interests diverge, to better seize opportunities for engagement when and if they arise.

## Looking Forward

A first step towards establishing the conceptual clarity required to deepen defense cooperation between Sweden and South Korea would be for the Swedish Prime Minister to resume his hastily cancelled trip in December 2024. President Lee should re-invite the Swedish prime minister to Seoul, to send a strong political signal of South Korea's return to the international stage.

Beyond the Sweden-South Korea relationship, continued high-level political dialogue between the EU and South Korea can reaffirm shared threat perceptions, build mutual understanding

about conceptual differences towards Europe-Asia security linkages, and set appropriate expectations. In particular, the South Korean president must articulate a long-term diplomatic strategy towards Europe. Broad high-level engagement with Europe will be important to sustain the work of the South Korea-NATO defense industrial dialogue once it gets under way. Conversations about South Korea's provision of lethal aid to Ukraine should also continue, but Europeans should not set their expectations too high.

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## Endnotes

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