Issue Brief
November 6, 2026

Poland-South Korea Defense Cooperation and Changing Security Perspective

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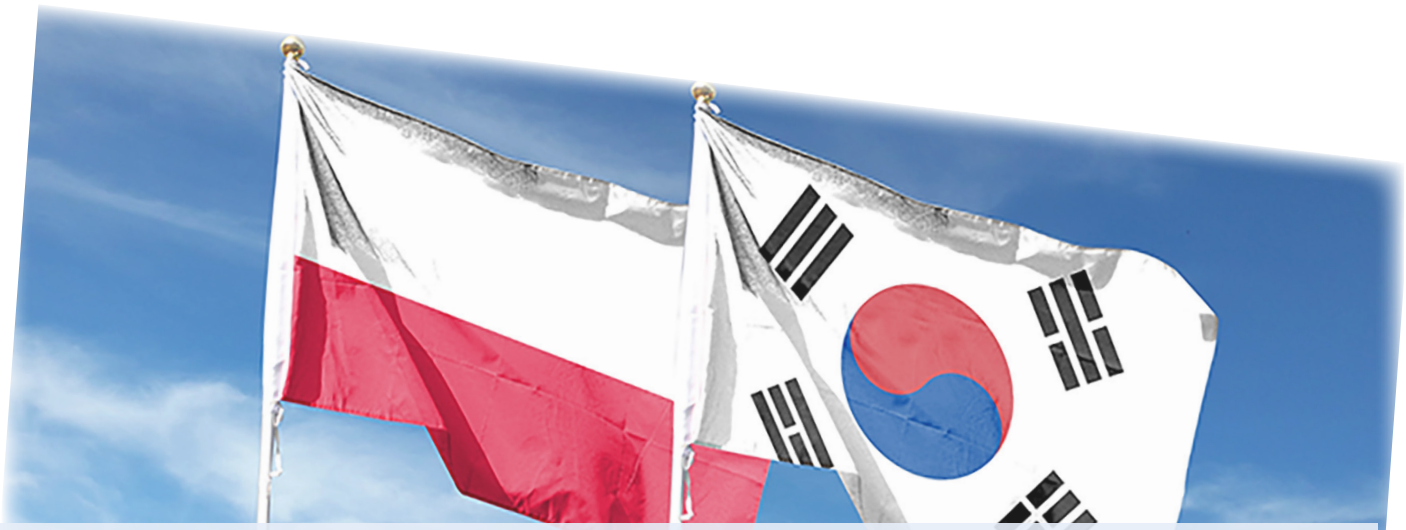


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One of the most significant geopolitical outcomes of the Russian war against Ukraine is the incremental growth in defense cooperation between Poland and South Korea. It started as a practical procurement decision by Poland, which has now developed into a deeper strategic cooperation between the most influential middle powers in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. This is not just a transactional partnership but the emergence of cross-regional defense cooperation that eschews conventional Western suppliers, diversifies deterrent systems, and reconfigures the geography of strategic dependency, which is a symptom of a structural change in global security politics.

Background

Within today's international security paradigm, the idea that regional rivalries, competition, and strategic games can be analyzed solely on the basis of their geographic scope is becoming less relevant. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 challenged the very foundation of the European security architecture, raising doubts about the conventional approach to treating Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific as separate strategic zones. In this light, the increasing defense cooperation between Poland and South Korea becomes a valuable example of security interdependence and defense industry cooperation across regions.[1]

It is important to understand how the security concerns faced by Poland and South Korea relate to their respective strategic interests to comprehend the importance of defense cooperation between these states. In the case of Poland, located on NATO's the eastern flank and increasingly concerned about Russia's assertive policies, the consequences of the war in Ukraine, and the need to develop effective deterrence in Eastern Europe are among the primary security concerns of the state. At the same time, the defense partnership is crucial for South Korea as the country faces a military threat from North Korea, the instability

of the Korean Peninsula, and the growing power competition in the broader Indo-Pacific region.[2] Even though these two countries are located in different parts of the world, their security concerns are connected via defense technology, military modernization, manufacturing, and partnerships.

The most obvious sign of the partnership between Poland and South Korea is Poland's acquisition of South Korean military hardware.[3] However, the partnership encompasses more than just arms procurement. It includes technology transfer, local manufacturing, maintenance, military training, and industrial cooperation, which distinguishes it from an ordinary arms deal. Therefore, this cooperation forms part of larger discussions on Europe's defense industrial capacity, diversification of supply chains, and defense burden-sharing among partner countries.

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The issue is also especially important in the context of the NATO-EU security architecture. While NATO's main goal is to guarantee the collective defense and security of its members, the EU plays an important role in strengthening defense industrial capacity, resilience, and overall security policy.[4] In Poland's case, its defense capability improvement and cooperation with South Korea presents both opportunities and problems for these institutions. On the one hand, defense equipment from South Korea can strengthen Poland's military preparedness and deterrence capacity on NATO's eastern flank. On the other, its raises concerns related to dependency on foreign suppliers, interoperability of various weapons systems, maintenance costs, and competition with the European defense industry. Thus, when assessing such cooperation, it is necessary to consider not only its obvious military benefits but also the connection between NATO's principle of collective defense and the EU's objective of greater industrial-defense autonomy.

Another important feature of this case study is the strengthening of the institutional linkages between the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic.[5] Specifically, military cooperation between Russia and North Korea makes the security connection between Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific more tangible. Analyzing the war in Ukraine and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula separately is becoming increasingly difficult. Despite the differences in the causes of conflicts, political context, and military situation in both regions, developments such as military cooperation, arms deals, or strategic alignment in one region may have consequences for the security situation in the other region. The importance of reconsidering traditional concepts of regional security becomes obvious. Nowadays security is not merely a question of geographical area in which threats emerge; it is also shaped by the interconnections between different regions

through military, industrial, technological, economic, and diplomatic interactions.

Against the above-mentioned background, this issue brief examines Polish-South Korean defense cooperation in the context of changes in the global security situation. The aim of this brief is to evaluate the impact of this defense partnership on Poland's military modernization, NATO's deterrence capacity on its eastern flank, the EU's defense industry priorities, and strategic relations with the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the brief outlines opportunities for further defense cooperation, identifies possible challenges in case of dependence and coordination and explores policy options. In this sense, the Poland-South Korea relationship represents more than just a bilateral partnership; it serves as a significant case study for understanding how security dynamics in Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific are becoming interconnected and how this interplay may shape the future of the international security architecture.

Interconnection between Eastern European Security and Indo-Pacific Security

There are three ways to identify the increasing overlap between Central and Eastern European security and Indo-Pacific security. First, this overlap represents a big departure from traditional understandings of regional security. Until recently, the European security architecture was viewed primarily through the prism of Russia, NATO, and transatlantic relations, whereas security in the Indo-Pacific was linked mostly to the rivalry between the U.S. and China, the Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan. However, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that this separation increasingly fails to reflect reality. In the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, NATO explicitly stated that contemporary threats are "global and interconnected" and that events in the Indo-Pacific have direct implications for Euro-Atlantic security.[6] A year later, NATO, along with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, reaffirmed the interconnectedness of security in both regions.[7]

> ***"There is an increasing intersection between Russia's actions and the activities of Indo-Pacific actors. North Korea offers the most striking example of this. Following the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Russia in June 2024, which includes a mutual military assistance clause applicable in the event of war, North Korea has moved beyond providing mere political support.***

The flow of weapons, technology, capital, and combat experience increasingly extends beyond the boundaries of regional security complexes. The IISS points out that the war in Ukraine has highlighted these linkages; for instance, through the military support provided to Russia by North Korea, the use of Chinese dual-use technologies to bolster the Russian defense industry, and the growing importance of Asian manufacturing capabilities for European security.[8] This means that a crisis in one region can affect the availability of ammunition, air defense systems, production capacities, and strategic resources in another.

This does not imply either the disappearance of the geographical dimension or a complete merger

of the two security spheres. NATO remains a Euro-Atlantic alliance, whereas Indo-Pacific nations operate within distinct alliances and threat contexts. However, the way threats emerge and spread is changing. The analytical challenge, therefore, no longer lies merely in assessing threats within distinct regional frameworks, but in understanding how events in one theater of operations can transform the balance of power and constraints in another.

Second, there is an increasing intersection between Russia's actions and the activities of Indo-Pacific actors. North Korea offers the most striking example of this. Following the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Russia in June 2024, which includes a mutual military assistance clause applicable in the event of war, North Korea has moved beyond providing mere political support.[9] It has supplied Russia with ammunition and ballistic missiles and subsequently deployed thousands of troops to fight alongside Russian forces. The IISS estimates that at least 11,000 North Korean soldiers were transferred to Russia, initially primarily for combat operations in the Kursk region.[10] NATO has observed that North Korean troops and armaments are being deployed against Ukraine; in exchange for Russian support with North Korea's illicit weapons programs.[11]

> ***"Characterized by speed and scale, the progression of the Poland-South Korea defense partnership is unprecedented in Polish history. After the United States, South Korea is considered to be one of Poland's most significant partners in the defense sector. The high value of recent arms contracts make the Polish defense market an important revenue stream for South Korean companies and a 'potential gateway' to the wider European market.***

This process is therefore significant in two respects. North Korea gains the opportunity to test personnel, doctrine, and weapon systems under the actual conditions of a high-intensity conflict, while closer cooperation with Russia may yield technological, economic, and political benefits. This creates a feedback loop: the support provided to Russia influences the course of the war in Europe, while the benefits obtained from Russia can, in turn, bolster North Korea's capabilities in Asia.

China's role is also of great significance. In 2024, NATO designated China a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war effort, citing support for the Russian defense industry and the supply of dual-use goods.[12] Through successive sanctions, the EU has imposed restrictions on Chinese companies supplying the Russian military sector with key components, machine tools, and technologies, including those used for drone production.[13] This implies neither a formal military alliance between China and Russia nor Chinese involvement in the war on a scale comparable to that of North Korea. However, it highlights how Russia's ability to rebuild its military capabilities increasingly depends on economic and technological ties to Asia. Conversely, a major crisis in the region, most likely an escalation of tensions surrounding

Taiwan, would likely compel China, and potentially North Korea, to reassess their own military requirements and to direct greater resources and strategic attention toward the Indo-Pacific, which could limit the means available to support Russia's war effort in Europe.

This cooperation undermines the earlier assumption that the effects of the war could be confined to a single operational theater. CSIS notes that cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea has intensified significantly since 2022, although it remains primarily bilateral in nature and does not constitute a unified military bloc.[14] Even without formalized coordination, these states can mutually offset their respective shortages, facilitate the circumvention of sanctions, exchange technologies and military expertise, and create additional challenges for Western defense planning across multiple regions simultaneously.

Third, the role of the United States. Both regions are part of an integrated system encompassing American alliance commitments as well as military and industrial capabilities. Consequently, a crisis in one theater of operations affects deterrence calculations in the other. The 2026 U.S. defense strategy explicitly addresses the "problem of simultaneity," referring to the need to prepare for a scenario in which adversaries might act in a coordinated or opportunistic manner across multiple regions simultaneously.[15]

This dynamic affects how the United States focuses its attention and allocates its armed forces, ammunition, air defense systems, and logistics capabilities. The growing emphasis on deterring China in the Indo-Pacific region increases the pressure on European allies to shoulder a greater share of the responsibility for their own region's security. Donald Trump has made the principle of burden-sharing a central element of his NATO approach by consistently pushing for increased defense spending by European allies and strongly supporting the commitment to allocate 5 percent of GDP to defense and related expenditures by 2035.[16] At the same time, a major crisis in Europe could limit the resources available for deterrence efforts and for supporting allies in the Indo-Pacific.

> ***"The Poland-South Korea defense partnership represents a landmark convergence between the security spheres of the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe. This transregional cooperation has provided Poland with an alternative industrial route through which it can reduce its reliance on European powers while still maintaining a high degree of NATO interoperability.***

CSIS points out that the challenge of simultaneity itself heightens the importance of defense-industrial cooperation among allies across different operational theaters.[17] Consequently, the crux of the matter is not a choice between Europe and the Indo-Pacific; it is rather about the ability to maintain credible deterrence in both areas with limited resources. In this context, decisions regarding priorities, force deployments, and burden-sharing in one theater of operations directly affect security in the other.

Poland-South Korea Defense Cooperation and Its Significance for Transregional Security

The defense partnership between Poland and South Korea has evolved into a critical component of transregional security between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. In the wake of the 2022 escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war, it represents a shift in the procurement of military capabilities along the eastern flank of NATO. Together, South Korea's advanced defense manufacturing capacity and Poland's modernization needs have fostered a rapidly developing defense partnership, offering an alternative to more traditional approaches to military modernization and readiness.

Since the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2013, Poland and South Korea have elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, announced in April 2026.[18] This elevation reflects a deeper commitment to bilateral relations beyond matters of security alone, such as energy, technology, and infrastructure.[19] However, even prior to this development, much of the Polish-South Korean defense relationship had centered around large-scale arms deals. In July 2022, Poland signed a series of equipment contracts with South Korea, securing contracts for more than 1,600 K2 tanks, K9 howitzers, and FA-50 jets combined, as part of an effort to rapidly equip the Polish army.[20] Only months after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, then-Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence Mariusz Błaszczak referenced the 'situation on [the] eastern border' during the approval conference, stating, 'We do not have time, we cannot wait. We have to arm the Polish Army.'[21] Following the first tank deliveries from South Korea to Poland, both nations signed an additional agreement establishing the Joint Korean Polish Committee on Cooperation in the Fields of Defense and Defense Industry, comprising six subcommittees dedicated to 'enhancing military cooperation, education and scientific and technological research.'[22] Furthermore, in December 2025, the third agreement under the HOMAR-K launcher program was signed, authorizing the production of CGR-080 precision rockets in Poland in collaboration with Hanwha Aerospace, a subsidiary of one of South Korea's largest conglomerates.[23] This 'Polonization' of new technologies has become a central strategy in establishing Poland as a regional defense hub, especially as a destination for South Korean exports.[24]

Characterized by speed and scale, the progression of the Poland-South Korea defense partnership is unprecedented in Polish history. After the United States, South Korea is considered to be one of Poland's most significant partners in the defense sector.[25] From 2022 to 2023, Poland imported nearly USD 15 billion worth of defense equipment from South Korea, accounting for 50.2 percent of all South Korean defense exports.[26] The total value of the initial agreements signed in 2022 is estimated at USD 44.2 billion.[27] Unlike Western suppliers, South Korea is uniquely positioned in its ability to provide expedited arms deliveries. The threat from neighboring Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) has consistently compelled South Korea to maintain 'hot' production lines, intrinsically linking the security and military preparedness of both NATO's eastern flank and the Korean Peninsula.[28] The value of these arms contracts with Poland is historically high, thereby making the Polish defense market an important revenue stream for South Korean companies and a 'potential gateway' to the wider European market.[29]

Even in industries beyond defense, the trade relationship between Poland and South Korea continues to grow in significance. With an aggregate investment value of around USD 7 billion in 2022, South Korea is Poland's largest

Asian investor and one of its ten largest foreign investors overall.[30] Prominent activities include the establishment of the startup incubator Samsung Inkubator Rzeszów by Samsung Electronics and the construction of the world's largest electric vehicle (EV) battery factory in Kobierzyce by LG Energy Solution.[31] From Warsaw to Kraków, these South Korean companies also maintain research and development centers, further investing in the country and in its 'traditional industries.'[32] Furthermore, South Korean companies continue to demonstrate strong interest in sustained collaboration with Poland. Many South Korean firms are seeking to participate in the large-scale Central Communication Port project outside Warsaw. Before withdrawing from the project in 2025, electric power giant Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power (KHNP) was originally selected to partner with Polish companies PGE SA and ZE PAK SA in the construction of Poland's second nuclear power plant in Pątnów.[33]

While industrial machinery still dominates bilateral trade from Poland, with mechanical and electrical equipment accounting for 40 percent of Polish exports to South Korea, cooperation seems to be expanding into other sectors, such as agrifood.[34] Freeze-dried and organic food products from Poland are of particular interest to South Korean consumers, as was Polish raw pork before its import was prohibited in South Korea.[35] Given South Korea's limited agricultural and food self-sufficiency, partly owing to the predominantly mountainous nature of its terrain, the country is a net importer of agricultural and food items.[36] As the governments of Poland and South Korea work to expand South Korea's access to Polish products, this reality offers an exceptional opportunity for both nations to address trade imbalances and support joint economic prosperity.[37]

The Poland-South Korea defense partnership represents a landmark convergence between the security spheres of the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe. This transregional cooperation has provided Poland with an alternative industrial route through which it can reduce its reliance on European powers while still maintaining a high degree of NATO interoperability.[38] However, such a model introduces new variables that may be cause for concern. Many of the aforementioned defense contracts are heavily underpinned by Poland's financial dependence on South Korean institutions. Approximately, 70 percent of the 2022 arms contracts' USD 14.9 billion value was covered by the South Korean government through loans and guarantees to Poland, which received more than USD 9 billion in assistance. Nevertheless, The South Korean government has justifiable concerns that could make it reluctant to approve such large-scale deals in the future.[39] Furthermore, in the case of heightened tensions between China and the West, South Korea's overreliance on Chinese critical minerals may prove to be a vulnerability in the international supply chain.[40] Military officials must also consider the 'homeland-first contingency risk' associated with an escalation on the Korean Peninsula, which could prompt South Korea to shift priorities away from supporting Polish security and toward their own national defense requirements.[41]

Conclusion

The Poland-South Korea defense partnership is a good example of the inter-regional security interdependence developing within the current international security structure. The partnership goes beyond the narrow framework of traditional arms acquisition, and extends into areas such as defense-industrial capacity, technology transfer, supply chain diversification, and coordination. Poland benefits from this partnership through opportunities to modernize its armed forces and develop its deterrence capabilities along NATO's

eastern flank, while South Korea stands to benefit from opportunities to enter the European defense market and develop new security partnerships.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of such cooperation depends on more than the availability of military equipment. Factors such as technical inter-operability, maintenance sustainability, industrial cooperation, and compliance with NATO/EU policies are just as important. Moreover, cooperation between Russia and North Korea highlights the links between security issues in Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions. As a result, the Poland-South Korea partnership demonstrates the limitations of traditional approaches that treat regional security issues as distinct problems confined to separate geographical zones. It underscores the necessity of balanced, sustainable, and coordinated collaboration between regional institutional frameworks and inter-regional partnerships to develop an effective security policy for the future.

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This policy brief is prepared based on the project titled 'Forging a Transcontinental Shield: South Korea's Defense Diplomacy in Europe and the Evolving Korea-EU Security Partnership' in the University of Warsaw.

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