

THE LA TROBE ASIA BRIEF

AUSTRALIA-KOREA MARITIME SECURITY: COORDINATING CAPACITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Troy Lee-Brown

**“THERE IS GROWING
RECOGNITION THAT
TRUSTED MIDDLE POWERS
SUCH AS AUSTRALIA AND
THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA
HAVE AN IMPORTANT
ROLE TO PLAY IN BOTH
MAINTAINING AND SHAPING
A STABLE, RULES-BASED
MARITIME ORDER.”**



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Welcome to the newest issue of the La Trobe Asia Brief.

South Korea has unique security challenges when compared to many of its neighbours. Like many it lives in the shadow of giants like China and Russia, but the ever-present threat of North Korea is less than 50km from its capital, Seoul.

While its alliance with the United States remains important to Korea's security and foreign policy outlook, there are many possibilities for stronger ties to allies and partners. This could present opportunities to enhance maritime security cooperation between Australia and Korea and with others in the region.

This Brief is the culmination of the research project "Australia-Korea Academic Maritime Security Dialogue: Coordinating Maritime Capacity Building in the Indo-Pacific", based around a series of workshops and meetings with collaborators from both countries.

It is a partnership between La Trobe Asia and the UWA Defence and Security Institute, supported by a grant from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australia-Korea Foundation. It also involved colleagues from the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and Ewha Womans University.

My thanks to all those collaborators who contributed to this report, and in particular lead author Dr Troy Lee-Brown, a Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia Defence and Security Institute, for his excellent work and analysis.

I would sincerely like to all those involved in this report, and we are grateful to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australia-Korea Foundation for their support in this research.

Professor Bec Strating
Director, La Trobe Asia

ABOUT THE SERIES

The La Trobe Asia Brief is a publication from La Trobe Asia, based at La Trobe University. This series provides a platform for commentary, research and analysis of policy issues that are of key importance in the Asian region. The papers in The La Trobe Asia Brief series are written for an informed audience. Authors will be invited by La Trobe Asia to contribute to this series.

PHOTOS

Front cover: Navy ships from Australia, Italy, Japan, South Korea and the United States sail in formation during Exercise Pacific Dragon 2024. Photo by LSIS Daniel Goodman (Department of Defence, Australia).

Inside issue: LSIS Daniel Goodman, LAC Ryan Howell, ABIS Richard Cordell Department of Defence, Australia), Matt Smith.

EDITOR

Matt Smith

THE LA TROBE ASIA BRIEF #15

© 2025 La Trobe Asia. All rights reserved.

La Trobe University does not take institutional positions on public policy issues. The views represented in this paper are the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the University or collaborating institutions.

Funding provided by the Australia-Korea Foundation



Research project partner



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Australia and South Korea seek to deepen maritime cooperation across the Indo-Pacific, the Australia–Korea Academic Maritime Security Dialogue revealed three key challenges that could be addressed to transform shared interests into deeper maritime collaboration.

First, Australia and South Korea maintain distinct regional priorities shaped by their geographies. Australia is more active in the Pacific Islands and Indian Ocean, leveraging its historical ties, defence presence, and development programs. In contrast, South Korea’s regional engagement is concentrated in Southeast Asia. These differing areas of focus need to be managed in order to implement robust joint maritime initiatives and to build coherent regional strategies.

Second, while both countries are close US allies, endorse a rules-based order and support multilateralism, their maritime strategies and defence policies differ markedly. South Korea’s security posture remains strongly influenced by the Korean Peninsula, while Australia’s strategic culture reflects broader Indo-Pacific threat perceptions. This divergence affects how each country operationalises its regional endeavours and needs to be carefully managed in order to not inhibit the development of joint regional maritime capacity-building.

Third, Australia and Korea lack robust mechanisms for joint maritime project implementation. Key areas—such as maritime domain awareness (MDA), climate-related

maritime challenges, non-traditional maritime issues, and legal capacity-building—remain underdeveloped. Establishing formal instruments for joint planning and execution, such as a bilateral maritime capacity-building initiative, would help to overcome these gaps.

To address these challenges to advance a coordinated and resilient Australia–Korea regional maritime partnership, Australia and Korea should:

- Make maritime security a regular item in “2+2” ministerial dialogues and establish a regular Track 1.5 Maritime Dialogue to deepen strategic alignment.
- Expand real-time data sharing and surveillance collaboration to improve maritime situational awareness and counter grey-zone threats.
- Better coordinate respective maritime capacity building strategies to avoid duplication and amplify regional impact – Southeast Asia is an area where coordination remains most practical.
- Focus on working on ‘non-traditional maritime security’ issues such as tackling IUU fishing, climate-related impacts, pollution, and trafficking through joint enforcement and governance support in littoral states.
- Better align interoperable systems like maritime domain awareness and cyber-secure platforms to address hybrid maritime threats effectively.



INTRODUCTION

As maritime security challenges across the Indo-Pacific become more complex and multidimensional, there is growing recognition that trusted middle powers such as Australia and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have an important role to play in both maintaining and shaping a stable, rules-based maritime order. In the lead-up to the 2025 South Korea presidential election, a delegation of six Australian academics led by Professor Bec Strating (La Trobe Asia) and Dr Troy Lee-Brown (UWA Defence and Security Institute) travelled to South Korea in late April 2025 as part of an Australia-Korea Foundation funded project.

Convened by La Trobe Asia and the UWA Defence & Security Institute with support from the Australia-Korea Foundation and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Dialogue brought together 25 Australian and Korean academics, government officials, and maritime policy experts. Key Korean partners included the Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA) and Ewha Womans University, with support from the Australian Embassy in Seoul. The Dialogue served as a platform to deepen academic and policy engagement between the two countries and explore avenues for enhanced bilateral cooperation in maritime affairs across the Indo-Pacific.

The Dialogue unfolded across three structured sessions that reflected the breadth of shared strategic interests and maritime policy challenges facing Australia and South Korea. In Session 1, participants considered the geopolitical outlooks and Indo-Pacific strategies of both countries, including how Australia and South Korea define and pursue their interests across Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Islands. While both countries have articulated Indo-Pacific visions, key differences remain in how these policies are operationalised—particularly in relation to geography, defence policy, and regional partnerships. At the same time, participants recognised growing convergence in certain foreign policy values, including a shared commitment to ASEAN centrality, the importance of a rules-based maritime order, and multilateralism. Opportunities to expand bilateral maritime cooperation were identified in areas such as regional diplomacy, climate security, and coordinated capacity-building programs in other regional countries.

In Session 2, the Dialogue turned attention to the maritime security outlooks of Australia and Korea, including each country's maritime strategies, capacity-building programs, and security cooperation frameworks. Participants observed that while both countries face unique maritime challenges—ranging from illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing to sea line of communication (SLOC) vulnerability and gaps in maritime domain awareness (MDA)—they share a growing interest in strengthening regional maritime governance. Existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation was assessed, including Australia and Korea's engagement through the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). However, participants also noted that despite strong political will and shared values, different geographies and therefore contrasting focus means coordination between Australia and Korea on maritime issues remains underdeveloped, particularly in civil maritime capacity building and coordinated regional programming.

Session 3 focused on identifying forward-looking and practical avenues for cooperation. Discussion centred on how Canberra and Seoul might jointly respond to emerging regional maritime concerns, including climate-related maritime displacement, infrastructure vulnerability, and illegal maritime activity in the South China Sea, Eastern Indian Ocean, and Pacific Islands region. Ideas discussed included the establishment of a joint maritime capacity-building initiative for Southeast Asian and Pacific Island states, better integration of climate resilience into maritime programs, and joint support for regional maritime training centres and maritime legal reform assistance. There was strong consensus that closer alignment in bilateral and multilateral maritime initiatives would improve the effectiveness of Australia and Korea's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, however this is most likely to occur in Southeast Asia rather than the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

Ultimately, the Dialogue underscored the potential of the Australia-Korea bilateral relationship to serve in addressing critical regional maritime governance challenges, although this will require political will. With their complementary strengths—Australia's long-standing development and defence presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and Korea's growing diplomatic engagement in Southeast Asia and technological expertise—both countries are well-positioned to jointly contribute to a secure, stable, and prosperous maritime region. This policy brief captures the key insights and policy recommendations emerging from the Dialogue and outlines pathways for building a more coordinated and enduring Australia-Korea maritime partnership.



GEOPOLITICAL OUTLOOK AND INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIES

Australia and the Republic of Korea are increasingly drawn together by shared interests and mutual concerns in the Indo-Pacific—a region that has become an epicentre of strategic competition, economic interdependence, and regional cooperation. While both countries are firmly aligned with the US-led alliance system, their regional outlooks, strategic cultures, and geopolitical priorities exhibit important differences. Australia and South Korea's regional outlooks diverge due to differing threat perceptions and historical experiences, with Australia prioritising a free and open Indo-Pacific with a strong focus on China's regional assertiveness, whereas South Korea remains primarily concerned with deterrence on the Korean Peninsula and managing its complex relationship with North Korea. Nonetheless, evolving regional dynamics, including maritime challenges and shifting power balances, could provide new opportunities for Australia and Korea to deepen cooperation.

STRATEGIC CONCERNS AND FOREIGN POLICY DRIVERS

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the central focus for both Australia's and Korea's foreign and security policies. Their concerns are shaped by a blend of traditional and non-traditional threats, uncertainty around shifts in US regional commitment, and the assertiveness of regional powers such as China and North Korea. Australia views the Indo-Pacific through a broad strategic lens, framing its foreign and defence policies around regional stability, open SLOCs, and maintaining adherence to the rules-based international order. Australia's foreign policy displays a high degree of continuity and bipartisanship, enabling a relatively stable strategic outlook. There is little serious debate over the main pillars of foreign policy in Australia's parliament, ensuring that even with changes in government, Australia's central pillars of foreign engagement including the US alliance tend to stay the same over time.

In contrast, South Korea's strategic posture has traditionally been more focused at home, rooted in the security dynamics of the Korean Peninsula and the enduring threat posed by North Korea. However, this perspective could be shifting—Seoul is becoming increasingly comfortable talking about regional maritime security indicating a strategic recalibration that includes broader regional considerations such as the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and Yellow Sea. The ROK is coming under greater regional pressure to expand its strategic geography to address the challenges posed by China's maritime assertiveness, the threat to regional SLOCs, and the ambiguities surrounding US strategic retrenchment.

Currently, the PRC is building steel structures inside the South Korea-China Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ) in the Yellow Sea supposedly for aqua-farming. These actions not only strain relations with Seoul but might also increase ROK interest in working with likeminded partners on maritime domain awareness and rules-based norms building.



COMPARATIVE STRATEGIC APPROACHES

Australia has taken a proactive role in shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture through engagement in minilateral groupings such as the Quad and AUKUS. It has also emphasised multilateral maritime domain awareness (MDA) and regional capacity-building initiatives. This expansive engagement is a natural extension of Australia's geography and reliance on secure maritime trade routes. South Korea, while historically focused on security on the Korean Peninsula, is increasingly engaging with regional partners on maritime issues. South Korea's expanding involvement through mechanisms such as the ROK-Philippines and ROK-Vietnam maritime dialogues, and its participation in the Balikatan exercises reflect this growing engagement. These activities highlight Korea's growing awareness of the need to secure regional SLOCs and uphold maritime norms. Despite having different starting points, both nations share an interest in maintaining maritime stability and preventing escalation in the Indo-Pacific's contested waters.

CURRENT AREAS OF STRATEGIC COOPERATION

The Australia-Korea relationship has seen steady growth in both defence and non-traditional maritime cooperation. The Sixth Australia-ROK 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting in May 2024 reaffirmed their commitment to joint exercises, information sharing, and defence industrial collaboration. South Korea's participation in Talisman Sabre in 2023 and 2025 further signifies deepening operational engagement. Defence industry collaboration is also evolving with Hanwha Australia's Redback Infantry Fighting Vehicle contract representing a landmark cooperation that could be expanded into naval platforms and maritime surveillance technologies.

Beyond traditional defence, the countries cooperate on non-traditional threats such as IUU fishing, disaster relief, and cybersecurity. The joint focus on Maritime Domain Awareness, anti-IUU operations, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR), and cybersecurity cooperation are all emerging pillars of bilateral security engagement. Despite the progress, challenges persist. Political will, operational coordination, and policy alignment remain uneven. Foreign policy in Korea is sometimes characterised by partisanship and polarisation, which can inhibit long-term planning – current President Lee and former President Yoon have differing approaches to Indo-Pacific security and the future of Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy remains unclear. Meanwhile, Australia's maritime capabilities remain under resourced and limited.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCED COOPERATION

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for strengthening maritime cooperation bilaterally and with others in the Indo-Pacific region. First, both countries can increase interoperability through joint maritime exercises focusing on anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue, and MDA. Australia's experience with Western anti-submarine warfare systems and Korea's diverse technological base provide complementary expertise. Second, there is room to formalise reciprocal access for security cooperation through Visiting Forces Agreements or commensurate instruments, enabling routine bilateral and multilateral engagements in each others' areas of the Indo-Pacific.

Third, both countries can explore collaboration within AUKUS-adjacent frameworks. While Korea's inclusion in AUKUS Pillar 2 remains uncertain, selective cooperation in areas such as AI, cyber, and maritime technology could yield dividends without necessitating formal membership. Fourth, Australia and Korea can co-lead efforts in regional maritime governance. Shared initiatives on maritime climate resilience, environmental protection, and undersea infrastructure security can complement harder-security engagements. Enhancing their joint leadership could also support the rules-based maritime order and garner regional stability. Finally, integrating ministries such as Korea's Ministry of Unification into high-level strategic dialogues could enhance mutual understanding. Understanding North Korea policy and inter-Korean relations are key considerations that need to be factored into broader maritime and defence cooperation.

Australia and Korea, as committed US allies and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific, are increasingly converging on maritime security as a key area of bilateral engagement. Their cooperation spans a broad spectrum—from anti-submarine warfare to maritime governance—and is underpinned by mutual concern for regional stability and the rules-based order. While differences in political culture and strategic focus persist, these can be addressed through deeper dialogue, operational coordination, and public diplomacy. South Korea's critical interests in SLOCs and freedom of navigation are not different from Australia's, underscoring their shared stakes in maritime security. In a region marked by complexity and competition, Australia and Korea are well-positioned to shape a stable maritime future—one grounded in collaboration, deterrence, and inclusive governance.



MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Australia and the Republic of Korea are increasingly recognising the strategic necessity of maritime cooperation as both nations confront a rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific security environment. Shared concerns about regional stability, SLOCs, and non-traditional threats such as IUU fishing, piracy, and maritime cyber-attacks have the potential to drive a closer convergence in their maritime security agendas. As middle powers with maritime interests, Australia and Korea are well-positioned to enhance regional maritime capacity building through bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral cooperation. This section explores the current maritime strategies of both countries, their existing contributions to maritime capacity building in the Indo-Pacific, and the scope for enhancing cooperation.

MARITIME STRATEGIES OF AUSTRALIA AND KOREA

Australia's maritime strategy is shaped by its unique geography as a three-ocean nation. Despite this, it has sometimes been criticised for its historic "sea blindness" with its military posture traditionally oriented around land forces. However, the rise of China as a maritime power has forced a strategic recalibration. While Australia still lacks a comprehensive maritime security strategy, recent developments such as the 2022 Civil Maritime Security Strategy and the 2024 Surface Combatant Fleet Review reflect an increasing emphasis on maritime defence capabilities, including a proposed expansion of surface combatants from 11 to 26 vessels and the continued commitment to nuclear-powered submarines through AUKUS.

Korea's evolving geostrategic posture is leading to enhanced maritime outreach, particularly through its former New Southern Policy, Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) which promotes civil maritime cooperation, and the regionally-focused Indo-Pacific Strategy, which all place emphasis on its role as a maritime nation. While the future of former President Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy remain unclear under current President Lee, these policies aim to diversify diplomatic and security relationships beyond the Korean Peninsula, particularly with Southeast Asia and India. The ROK's increased participation in maritime dialogues and exercises, such as with Vietnam and the Philippines, underscores an increased appetite for regional maritime engagement.

Canberra should also seek to engage the new Lee Jae-myung administration through South Korea's "pragmatic diplomacy" as a basis for continuing and extending cooperation with fellow middle powers in functional areas such as maritime security.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO MARITIME CAPACITY BUILDING

Australia contributes significantly to regional maritime capacity building through programs such as the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP). This initiative provides Guardian-class patrol boats, infrastructure support, and maritime training to Pacific Island nations. Other contributions include the Enhanced Aerial Surveillance Program and the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu, which facilitate regional information sharing. Australia also collaborates through multilateral surveillance under Operation Solania, in coordination with France, New Zealand, and the United States. However, there are critiques that such efforts often prioritise Australia's strategic denial of Chinese influence over genuine regional partnership. In Southeast Asia, Australia lacks an equivalent to the PMSP but supports capacity building through the Defence Cooperation Program and diplomatic engagement through DFAT. Initiatives such as funding maritime environmental governance, legal frameworks, and joint naval training exercises—particularly with the Philippines—demonstrate Australia's more diversified regional engagement. In its maritime diplomacy, Australia often focuses on 'low-hanging fruit' like skills development, legal training and environmental protection to circumvent more sensitive issues such as maritime and territorial disputes.

Korea's capacity-building efforts are expanding in scope, including Korea's growing role in assisting littoral Southeast Asian states with Maritime Domain Awareness, providing decommissioned vessels, and supporting information-sharing networks. Korea also recognises hybrid maritime threats, such as attacks on submarine cables and maritime cyber operations, as a significant area of focus, particularly given its advanced digital economy.

JOINT PRIORITY AREAS AND STRENGTHS

Shared interests are critical building blocks of bilateral maritime security cooperation. Australia and the ROK share overlapping interests in maritime security, including freedom of navigation, the protection of undersea infrastructure, and maritime rule of law. However, while both countries participate in multilateral exercises such as Talisman Sabre, bilateral maritime engagements remain limited. Developing routine security engagements and creating bilateral engagements before or after larger multilateral exercises are necessary for fostering familiarity and interoperability. Both nations also need to focus on concluding negotiated instruments such as Visiting Forces Agreements that could



facilitate regular deployments and operations in each other's maritime spaces.

Additionally, both countries can collaborate on addressing hybrid maritime threats – joint efforts to secure undersea infrastructure, combat maritime cyber threats, and strengthen coast guard cooperation are areas where Australia and Korea possess complementary strengths. Both nations also share a concern about maintaining the regional maritime order in the face of Chinese grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea. Australia and Korea's shared interest in a rules-based order, along with their respective alliances with the US, forms the strategic rationale for deeper cooperation in contested maritime spaces.

EXISTING PARTNERS AND INSTITUTIONS

Australia and Korea are already engaged with a wide array of partners in the Indo-Pacific. Australia's key maritime partners include the US, Japan, ASEAN countries, and Pacific Island states. Korea, under its Indo-Pacific Strategy, is expanding relations with India, ASEAN, and Pacific Island nations, recently holding its first summit with Pacific states. Multilaterally, both countries contribute to ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), and they participate in regional dialogues on maritime law, security, and the blue economy. While Australia is a member of the Quad, there was discussion about whether Korea should be included, citing its growing maritime role and shared strategic concerns. Both countries are also developing security relationships with Japan – the signing of Reciprocal Access Agreements (RAA) between Japan and Australia, and between Japan and the UK and the Philippines, shows how security networks are expanding among US allies. While Korea's outreach and interest in security networking aligns well with Australia's multilateral maritime engagements, the two countries are best to focus on developing deeper relationships in Southeast Asia where coordination is most practical.

EXISTING BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Bilateral maritime cooperation between Australia and Korea has room to grow. There are foundational agreements in place—such as Military Logistics and Information Sharing Agreements—but these are not maritime-specific. Maritime security should be prioritised at the next Australia-Korea "2+2" meeting of foreign and defence ministers. Held alongside the meeting, an Australia-Korea Maritime Track 1.5 would build on the efforts of previous Track 1.5 dialogues such as the 2024 'Australia-Republic of Korea Dialogue on Security Cooperation' convened by the United States Studies Centre. This would help elevate maritime issues to the highest strategic levels and institutionalise them as a policy priority. The importance of publicly accessible records of maritime cooperation to build broader support across government, private sector, and civil society is also required. A coordinated strategy could help identify overlapping strategic goals, foster engagement, and avoid duplication with third-party actors.

Minilaterally, there is potential for trilateral or quadrilateral cooperation. For instance, a maritime trilateral between Australia, Korea, and Japan could focus on coordinated capacity-building efforts to support Southeast Asian partners, which could help to avoid duplication of aid and assistance, particularly in training, technology transfer, and maritime governance.

Australia and Korea have laid important groundwork for deeper maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, but much of this cooperation remains underdeveloped or focused on broader security rather than specifically maritime issues. Maritime security is a broader concept than traditional defence and security. There are benefits of working on 'non-traditional maritime security' issues – less politically sensitive, addressing transnational and practical challenges, and boosting cooperation in a range of sectors that are not always brought into "security" conversations. With both nations increasingly identifying as maritime powers, now is the time to build routine bilateral maritime activities, codify cooperation in official documents, and engage in multilateral efforts to support regional capacity-building.

MARITIME COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

As already discussed, Australia and South Korea have increasingly found common cause in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain, however a realistic perspective must be maintained on the opportunities and limits in moving the relationship forward. This cooperation stems from converging national interests in areas such as economic resilience, climate adaptation, and a shared support of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As maritime threats grow more diffuse and multidimensional, both nations are well-positioned to enhance regional maritime security capacity-building and governance.

STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC MARITIME DOMAIN

Both Australia and South Korea recognise the Indo-Pacific as a central theatre for strategic competition, economic interaction, and transnational challenges. Their dependence on secure SLOCs for critical trade—including energy and raw materials—renders maritime security a matter of national survival. Trade routes connecting the two countries primarily traverse increasingly contested waters like the South China Sea and East China Sea, making cooperation on SLOC protection and contingency planning imperative. The vulnerability of these maritime routes is underscored by the absence of formal Australia-ROK contingency planning. Incorporating alternate SLOCs—connecting the Philippine Sea, South Pacific, and Northeast Asia—into naval exercises could

lay the groundwork for a future crisis-resilient maritime trade network. The inclusion of Japan in trilateral planning would also further bolster collective resilience.

ENHANCING MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS COOPERATION

A cornerstone of maritime cooperation lies in enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which refers to the effective understanding of maritime activity with security, environmental, and governance implications. Both countries have developed MDA capabilities: Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program, particularly the Enhanced Aerial Surveillance Program (EASP), supports Pacific Island nations, while South Korea's coast guard modernisation and ASEAN engagement platforms provide a parallel path. Aligning these efforts—through joint patrols, synchronised training, and real-time information sharing—can increase their impact. Establishing a dedicated Australia-Korea MDA working group would facilitate this process by institutionalising bilateral dialogue, connecting key agencies like the Australian Border Force and the Korean Coast Guard. Integrating technological tools such as AI-enabled vessel tracking, drone surveillance, and encrypted communications can elevate the speed and accuracy of maritime threat detection. Harmonising data-sharing protocols across Australian and Korean systems would also allow for near real-time responsiveness to illicit maritime activity, from IUU fishing to helping to combat grey-zone tactics.



REGIONAL MARITIME CONCERNS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE INDIAN OCEAN, AND THE PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific's maritime landscape is defined by diverse but interrelated challenges. In Southeast Asia, non-traditional threats such as IUU fishing, environmental degradation, and transnational crime persist alongside traditional tensions over maritime boundaries. The Indian Ocean, particularly the eastern corridor, is witnessing increased naval presence from extra-regional actors, intensifying strategic competition. In the Pacific Islands, climate change constitutes an existential threat, with rising sea levels, coastal flooding, and declining fish stocks directly undermining national survival. Australia and Korea's maritime interests are affected both directly and indirectly by all of these developments. In response, both countries have shown a willingness to act. Australia's CMSP in the Philippines and South Korea's Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) are two examples of civil maritime initiatives that address these pressing regional concerns. Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks for maritime governance, improving inter-agency coordination, and empowering local actors have emerged as effective and sustainable engagement.

BUILDING REGIONAL CAPACITY THROUGH JOINT INITIATIVES

Rather than operating parallel capacity-building programs, Australia and South Korea should pursue the delivery of co-designed initiatives. These may include co-hosted coast guard training programs, collaborative delivery of surveillance technologies, and joint maritime exercises that simulate regional security contingencies. Including local partners from Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands in these programs would create a multiplier effect by fostering local ownership and boosting long-term capacity.

Practical areas where this bilateral partnership can have significant regional impact in civil maritime security include: technical assistance for maritime law enforcement and inter-agency coordination; legal reforms aligned with UNCLOS and other maritime conventions; public outreach through academic and civil society linkages; and maritime governance projects tied to food security and renewable energy. For example, mobile IUU fishing detection applications, low-impact aquaculture systems, and offshore renewable energy pilots could all be developed and implemented jointly. Such programs would serve dual purposes by enhancing governance while also addressing the socio-economic vulnerabilities exacerbated by maritime insecurity.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MARITIME COOPERATION

Climate change presents an overarching challenge across all maritime domains in the Indo-Pacific. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, ocean warming, and natural disasters are reshaping the maritime landscape. These impacts are not confined to the environment—they affect food security, migration patterns, and regional stability. Australia

and South Korea have incorporated climate into their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. South Korea's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy and Australia's 2023 International Development Policy both emphasise climate action. These converging priorities offer an opportunity to build cooperative, climate-resilient infrastructure in maritime zones. Australia and Korea could co-invest in adaptation-focused infrastructure projects, such as climate-resilient ports, green shipping corridors, and ocean monitoring platforms. The Oceanix Busan floating city prototype offers one model for regional scalability. In addition, supporting fishery-dependent communities through AI-powered stock monitoring and sustainable marine economies will help mitigate the economic impacts of ocean warming.

STRENGTHENING MULTILATERAL AND MINILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

Both nations are active participants in regional security and development forums, including ADMM+, IORA, ReCAAP, and Pacific Islands Forum. Australia is also a member of the Quad, while South Korea has participated in Quad Plus meetings. Leveraging these platforms for joint action could enhance coherence in regional maritime governance. Australia and Korea should advocate for standardised regional MDA protocols and develop interoperable regional data hubs. Multilateral maritime exercises should be expanded to include MDA-focused components, with scenario-based planning and technology demonstrations, which not only strengthen interoperability but also project responsible leadership. In addition to traditional forums, new Track 1.5 and Track 2 mechanisms can be created to focus on maritime law, environmental protection, and climate resilience. These dialogues could aim to harmonise legal interpretations of EEZs, promote UNCLOS adherence, and enhance regional maritime literacy.

EXPLORING EMERGING FRONTIERS: THE UNDERSEA DOMAIN

As undersea competition intensifies—particularly in areas like submarine operations, seabed resource mapping, and cable security—Australia and South Korea must deepen cooperation in the undersea domain. By using autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs), sonar arrays, and undersea sensors, the two countries can collaboratively monitor sensitive underwater areas. Joint research and development (R&D) initiatives could yield breakthrough technologies in undersea situational awareness. Real-time data sharing mechanisms will be crucial in this context, allowing for early detection of anomalies and enhanced protection of critical infrastructure. Regular bilateral training exercises focusing on underwater domain awareness would strengthen preparedness and also signal strategic intent.

TOWARD A RESILIENT MARITIME PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

As two leading middle powers and important allies of the United States, Australia and South Korea have the opportunity to increasingly align their strategic focus on maritime security and maritime capacity building in the Indo-Pacific. This convergence reflects both shared values and overlapping interests in safeguarding regional stability, ensuring freedom of navigation, and reinforcing the rules-based international order. Amid growing geopolitical tensions and the evolving nature of maritime threats, the Australia–South Korea relationship can further mature from an economic focused relationship to one that recognises the importance of regional security and in particular the maritime domain as a pillar of regional engagement. However, this requires significant political will and for both states to look beyond their traditional areas of focus.

The following are recommendations for strengthening Australia–South Korea maritime cooperation:

1. Codify Maritime Security Cooperation in Bilateral Dialogues

Institutionalise maritime security as a standing agenda in the “2+2” foreign and defence ministerial dialogues to enhance strategic coordination and policy alignment. Additionally, an Australia–Korea Maritime Track 1.5 would build on the efforts of previous Track 1.5 dialogues.

2. Pursue a Treaty-Level Operational Agreement

Negotiate a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) or similar operational framework to enable joint exercises, personnel exchanges, and logistical cooperation across both countries’ maritime forces.

3. Expand Joint Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) Initiatives

Deepen collaboration on real-time information sharing, surveillance, and maritime situational awareness to counter grey-zone tactics and ensure the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

4. Leverage Complementary Regional Engagement Strengths

Coordinate Australia’s Pacific Maritime Security Program and South Korea’s Indo-Pacific policy to create a cohesive Indo-Pacific maritime engagement strategy, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

5. Strengthen Cooperation in Maritime Law Enforcement and Governance

Enhance joint efforts in maritime law enforcement, environmental protection, and regional capacity-building, particularly in combating illegal fishing, pollution, and trafficking.

6. Invest in Interoperable Maritime Technologies

Promote co-development and acquisition of interoperable systems—such as underwater surveillance, cyber-resilient platforms, and communication infrastructure—to respond effectively to hybrid maritime threats.

7. Build Routine and Sustainable Operational Engagements

Institutionalise recurring bilateral or trilateral maritime exercises, patrols, and personnel exchanges to embed trust, operational familiarity, and long-term interoperability.

8. Use Maritime Cooperation to Engage Third-Party Littoral States

Jointly engage Southeast Asian countries through capacity-building programs in areas like marine resource protection, infrastructure resilience, and maritime governance.



AUTHORS



Troy Lee-Brown – Lead Author

Research Fellow, Defence and Security Institute, University of WA

Troy Lee-Brown is a researcher in regional security, maritime security and international relations with a focus on defence and security issues in the Indian Ocean Region and broader Indo-Pacific.

Troy is the Editor of the DSI Black Swan Strategy Paper and also the Project Manager for the Blue Security Program, a DFAT-funded project which focuses on issues of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.



Bec Strating

Director, La Trobe Asia

Bec Strating is the Director of La Trobe Asia and Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University. Her research focuses primarily on maritime disputes in Asia and Australian foreign and defence policy.

Bec leads the DFAT-funded Blue Security Program, focused on maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific. She is the co-author of 'Girt by Sea: Reimagining Australia's Security' (2024).



Sangmi Jeong

Center for Geopolitical Studies, Korea National Diplomatic Academy

Sangmi Jeong is a Research Professor at the Center for Geopolitical Studies, Korea National Diplomatic Academy. She holds a Ph.D. in Government and Public Policy from the University of Arizona. Her research focuses on South Korean public opinion on nuclear armament, ROK-Japan relations, and U.S.-China competition, as well as Australia's foreign policy. Her broader interests include domestic sources of foreign policy, social movements, and Indo-Pacific security.



Leif-Eric Easley

International Studies, Ewha Womans University

Leif-Eric Easley is a Professor of International Studies at Ewha University in Seoul. His research in academic journals focuses on U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral coordination regarding China. In international media, he is one of the most often-quoted scholars on North Korea.

He studied political science and mathematics at UCLA and received his Ph.D. from Harvard University's Department of Government.



Afeeya Akhand

Fellow, Australian Strategic Policy Institute

Afeeya Akhand is a Fellow with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). Her research interests include Australia-South Korea bilateral relations, climate change and social cohesion.

Afeeya is also an Emerging Associate at the Australian National University's National Security College and a Young Leader with the Pacific Forum. She holds a Master's degree in International Security from the University of Sydney specialising in Korean language.



Mike Bosack

Special Advisor, Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies

Michael MacArthur Bosack is the Special Advisor for Government Relations at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies and the founder of the Parley Policy Initiative.

Previously, he served in the U.S. Air Force as a Foreign Area Officer. Michael has completed fellowships with the East-West Center and the Mansfield Foundation, and he is the author of 'Negotiate: A Primer for Practitioners' (2022).



Wongi Choe
Head of the Center for ASEAN–India Studies

Wongi Choe is a Professor of Indo-Pacific Studies and the Head of the Center for ASEAN–India Studies at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA).

He is currently based in Taiwan as a visiting scholar, affiliated with both National Cheng Chi University and Academia Sinica. His research interests include South Korea's regional role and strategy, geo-political dynamics, maritime security, and regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific.



Danielle Chubb
International Relations, Deakin University

Danielle Chubb is an Associate Professor in International Relations at Deakin University. Her research interests include transnational human rights activism, the interaction of policy and public opinion in Australia, the policy dynamics of the Korean peninsula and the role of non-traditional actors in security arenas.

She is the co-author of 'Australian Public Opinion, Defence and Foreign Policy' (2021).



Ivy Ganadillo
International Studies, Ewha Womans University

Ivy Ganadillo is a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at Ewha Womans University, specialising in maritime security, Philippines–China relations, ocean governance, and East Asian security dynamics.

She is the Maritime Security Network Coordinator of the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (YCAPS) and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Indo-Pacific Studies Center.



Jiye Kim
Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland

Jiye Kim is an Assistant Professor at the University of Queensland and a researcher affiliated with the University of Sydney. She has previously worked in multiple Asia-Pacific countries, including South Korea, India, Japan, and New Zealand.

She contributes to emerging discourses in international relations and international security, focusing on the Asia-Pacific. She is the author of "The Future of the South China Sea" (forthcoming).



Suk Kyoong Kim
Coast Guard Studies, Hanseo University

Suk Kyoong Kim is a Professor at Hanseo University, and an expert in maritime security, maritime law enforcement and coast guards in East Asia. He previously has served as Commissioner General of the Korea Coast Guard (KCG), and had a public career in government for more than 20 years.

He is widely published on East Asia maritime issues, particularly on maritime security and safety, and his most recent book is "Coast Guards and International Maritime Law Enforcement" (2020).



Dongkeun Lee
Policy Fellow, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network

Dongkeun Lee is a Policy Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and has recently submitted his PhD thesis at the Australian National University.

His primary research focus is maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, with broader interests in international security of the region. He is also currently serving as a Non-Resident James A. Kelly Fellow at the Pacific Forum.

CONTACT

La Trobe Asia
La Trobe University
Melbourne, Victoria 3086
T +61 3 9479 5414
E asia@latrobe.edu.au

X
[@latrobeasia](#)



latrobe.edu.au/asia