

Korea's Expanding Regional Role Should Include Australia and India



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An Australia-ROK-India trilateral is an unconventional but highly promising configuration that deserves greater attention to bolster the region's security.

As Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney say, the world is in rupture. What we are seeing in West Asia has deep and significant effects across the world. Enhanced regionalism can provide a mechanism for countries to collectively respond to this rupture. Although most countries will never be able to be completely self-sufficient, shifting global dependencies to regional partnerships can reduce the impact of global shocks and intensifying competition. This trilateral partnership will not fix the world over night but will help the three countries become more resilient and more prosperous, while also supporting the region's stability.

The ROK today is undergoing a significant shift in its international posture. Traditionally seen as a middle power focused on the Korean Peninsula and its immediate neighbourhood, Korea is increasingly embracing a broader strategic identity. The current government has articulated ambitious international plans. The ROK's trajectory is clear, it seeks to be a technologically advanced, strategically autonomous middle power, capable of navigating great power competition without being constrained by it.

Importantly, this outward turn creates new openings. South Korea is no longer looking only to traditional partners but instead, is actively exploring diversified partnerships with likeminded, or complementary partners.

This is where countries like Australia and India enter the picture. India, prioritised in the previous liberal government's 'New Southern Policy', offers a non-aligned, leading Global South voice, while Australia, a trusted partner of both the U.S and Japan, compliments the ROK's existing alliances.

This type of trilateral partnership is unusual. Most trilateral partnerships emerge from strong, mature bilateral relationships, but this grouping is different. It is composed of three bilateral relationships that, while friendly and growing, are widely regarded as underdeveloped relative to their potential. This means that the trilateral is open-ended, flexible, and full of opportunity, unburdened by complicated histories or tensions. An important side-effect of stronger trilateral engagement will be that that bilateral engagements also become stronger.

The strongest case for this trilateral lies in shared challenges, and complementary strengths, across defence industries and supply chains. For example, on cyber threats, India's cyberspace is the second most targeted globally, with cyberattacks rising 138% between 2019 and 2023. South Korea faces persistent cyber espionage, particularly from North Korea. The Australian Signal Directorate receives an average of one cybercrime report every six minutes.

All three are investing in AI, cyber resilience, and critical infrastructure protection. There are opportunities here for sharing of lessons learnt, co-design of systems, and information sharing. All three hold, or have held, bilateral cyber dialogues. Merging these together would allow the gaps of the bilateral exchanges to be addressed, reduce the administrative burden of multiple, similar activities, and allow the three countries to work together more effectively to address current challenges.

Focusing on resilience, supply chains represent another key area of alignment. All three countries are seeking to: 1) reduce reliance on single sources for critical goods, 2) build trusted networks for semiconductors, critical minerals, and advanced manufacturing and 3) enhance economic security without abandoning openness. Here, again, complementarities emerge. A trilateral framework could help integrate these strengths into more resilient, diversified supply chains. Given the current state of world affairs, prioritising better coordination of critical minerals and refined fuels such as Naphtha will be essential. Australia's resourcing, India's processing capacity and Korea's export need are obvious complementarities.

Other pragmatic areas for stronger engagement include clean energy, green steel production, pharmaceuticals, green maritime engagement and shipbuilding and Artificial Intelligence. Enhanced security collaboration in the maritime, cyber, and space domain are also promising once familiarity and trust is built.

In a time of uncertainty, the region is not short of institutions or dialogues. What it needs are partnerships that are working towards common goals, outside of great power competition, for the betterment of the region. Better coordination that can achieve tangible outcomes, without getting lost in the bureaucracies of the multilateral system, is urgently needed.

A trilateral partnership with Australia and India provides the ROK with an alternative and complementary pathway, expanding its diplomatic influence, creating new defence industry opportunities, and enhancing its maritime security posture.

If developed thoughtfully, this trilateral could become a valuable pillar of regional cooperation, by complementing, not replacing, existing multilateral structures.

In doing so, it would reflect a broader truth about this region, and this month has really shown this. The world is extremely sensitive to conflict, blockade, or shifts around the world, even when issues are far away and the impacted country has no ability to stop the conflict. Australia, India, and the Republic of Korea must become more local, while protecting their domestic industries and security with likeminded partners, outside of great competition or historical complexities. A partnership, or even just stronger coordination between these three countries could be a great start.

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