

Commentary



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Building a Canada-South Korea Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

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On December 27, 2022, South Korea released its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) exactly one month after Canada's [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). Seoul and Ottawa have been keen in promoting their respective nations as strategically important and economically relevant in the Indo-Pacific. Toward this end, the two countries have found it mutually beneficial to boost Canada-South Korea ties over the past year. Several recent high-level visits between Canadian and South Korean officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's visit to Seoul in late May 2023 – the first visit by a Canadian leader in nine years – indicate the political determination of both countries to diversify and strengthen relationships among like-minded partners.

In addition to detailing recent bilateral agreements and their deliverables, this commentary explores how South Korea and Canada have approached the Indo-Pacific region in similar and different ways based on their geographic location, material capabilities, and normative power. As middle powers seeking to expand their role in the Indo-Pacific, both countries can turn to each other to further their regional relevance and influence. At the same time, different geographic

and geopolitical constraints facing Canada and South Korea, respectively, will require them to pursue different strategies to meet long-term national objectives.

Recent developments in Canada-South Korea relations

Canada-South Korea relations have historically been friendly but not necessarily deep. Canada's contingent of 26,000 soldiers dispatched to South Korea during the Korean War (the third highest total among international forces under the United Nations Command) and its strong ties to the United States set the early tone and political direction of Canada-South Korea relations. In 2014, Canada's bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with South Korea strengthened economic ties between the two countries.

The [Canada-Korea Free Trade Agreement](#) remains to date Canada's first and only bilateral trade agreement in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2022, South Korea ranked as Canada's [7th largest trading partner](#) and 6th largest source of merchandise imports with Canadian exports to South Korea reaching [\\$6.64 billion](#). Underpinned by the presence of [240,000 Canadian-Koreans](#), people-to-people ties also blossomed as a growing number of international students, immigrants, and tourists from South Korea arrive in Canada each year.

Over the past year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol have worked hard to develop an Indo-Pacific Strategy for their respective nations. Recognizing shared threats, common values, and a need for greater economic cooperation, Ottawa and Seoul have accelerated bilateral relations. During Yoon's visit to Ottawa in September 2022, the two governments established a comprehensive strategic partnership touching on [five priority areas](#): defending the rules based order; security and defense; economic prosperity and security; climate change, the environment and energy security; and health and culture.

South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin's travel to Ottawa and Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly's visit to Seoul in April 2023 [progressed negotiations towards an information and intelligence sharing agreement](#) to strengthen defense and security ties. Trudeau's May 2023 summit with Yoon marked the 60th anniversary of South Korea-Canada diplomatic relations and provided an opportunity to assess the future direction of bilateral relations.

The two leaders signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) on critical mineral supply chains, the clean energy transition and energy security. [Significant](#)

[attention](#) was given to clean technologies and green and sustainable economic growth with both South Korea and Canada seeking to boost their global competitiveness in areas including batteries and zero-emission vehicles. The two governments also issued a new youth mobility arrangement enabling up to [12,000](#) Korean and Canadian youth to further people-to-people ties through work and travel opportunities.

Mutual interdependence at the right moment

The flurry of high-level diplomatic activity in Canada-South Korea relations over the past year begs an important question: why now? In an era of heightened geopolitical competition and weakened global governance, Ottawa and Seoul have drawn the same conclusion: Canada and South-Korea can and should benefit from closer cooperation. More fundamentally, both countries have sought to rebrand their foreign policy in line with their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. Advancing Canada-South Korea cooperation not only enhances Canadian and South Korean material interests, but also conveys to the Indo-Pacific, and the wider international community, that Canada and South Korea are relevant Indo-Pacific actors with an important role to play in the region.

Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy identifies Canada as a "Pacific country" with [25,000km of Pacific coastline](#). Canada has a rich history of relations in Asia, including long-standing membership in regional organizations such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Despite these ties to Asia, most countries will more readily identify Canada as an "Anglo" or "North Atlantic" country with deep political and cultural ties to the West (the United States, United Kingdom, and France in particular) rather than an Indo-Pacific country. To reimagine itself as an Indo-Pacific player and to be seen by others as regionally relevant, Ottawa will need to cultivate deeper ties with other actors in the region. Improving ties with South Korea, an advanced democracy that plays an important role in the critical and emerging technology supply chain ecosystem with an increasing strategic portfolio in the Indo-Pacific, helps legitimate Canada's status as an Indo-Pacific country.

Meanwhile, South Korea only tepidly embraced the Indo-Pacific language until the rise of the conservative Yoon government. Since coming to office, Yoon has sought to engage other actors on Indo-Pacific issues in both bilateral and multilateral settings. In fact, the Yoon government has linked South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy to its concept of the "[global pivotal state](#)" – that is a

country seen as important and relevant beyond its immediate region and fully engaged in supporting a rules-based international order. Deepening ties with a globally engaged, norm-abiding country such as Canada would certainly strengthen South Korea's image and reputation as a global pivotal state.

Additionally, Canada possesses critical minerals such as lithium, nickel, and cobalt, needed to produce batteries and electric vehicles which could help South Korea wean its reliance on minerals from China and [soften the impact](#) of the [U.S. Inflation Reduction Act](#). As a “[responsible and reliable energy security partner](#)” Canada is also capable of meeting South Korea's much-needed demand for energy. Seoul and Ottawa have much to gain economically, politically, and diplomatically by strengthening relations.

Geopolitical differences and challenges

There is still plenty of room for growth in the Canada-South Korea comprehensive strategic partnership. However, different geopolitical constraints and opportunities confronting Ottawa and Seoul also suggest some important differences in how Canada and Seoul are likely to address regional challenges. First, geography still matters. South Korea's small geographic size and proximity to China means that Seoul will feel the pressure of U.S.-China competition more acutely than Canada. Additionally, the high degree of economic interdependence between South Korea and China means that Seoul will move more cautiously than Ottawa on policies which appear to undercut Chinese interests. Canada in contrast is a vast country located in North America. Canadians are less likely to think of China as an existential threat or feel as politically vulnerable as South Koreans in the face of Chinese economic coercion or an arms buildup from the People's Liberation Army.

Second, perhaps because of Canada's geographic advantages, Ottawa's rhetoric toward China has taken a [sharper turn](#) than that of South Korea as evidenced by their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. Canada's strategy includes a relatively lengthy section on China, and in the second sentence, [calls out](#) China as an “increasingly disruptive global power.” Beijing's past detention of Canadian citizens, and more recent revelations of [Chinese interference](#) in Canadian elections have pushed Ottawa toward a more confrontational path with Beijing. In contrast, South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy only [briefly mentions China](#), referring to Beijing as “a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region.” How Canada and South Korea navigate U.S.-China

competition and the degree to which either country will be vocal or pro-active on issues, such as Taiwan stability, human rights in Xinjiang, or cooperation on U.S. export controls against China, may therefore vary.

Third, both countries must still prioritize ongoing security issues closer to home. Canada's focus is concentrated closer to its own borders, including the Arctic region. As a member of NATO, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine also continues to weigh on Ottawa which has contributed [far more aid](#) to the Ukraine than South Korea (over \$3.5 billion USD compared to an estimated \$430 million USD). For South Korea, North Korea's missile and nuclear threat and inter-Korea relations is still a primary concern to South Koreans. Although trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific alliances have begun to converge with South Korea and others participating in recent NATO meetings, and with Trudeau [drawing attention](#) to security and human rights issues in North Korea during his summit meeting with Yoon, the Indo-Pacific agenda may lose focus should contingencies arise closer to home.

Conclusion

Ottawa's Indo-Pacific Strategy is designed to bring credibility to Canada's interests in the region. It also signals to the United States and other democratic allies Canada's willingness to deter China from undermining global rules and norms. Likewise, South Korea released its Indo-Pacific Strategy to demonstrate that South Korea's interests go beyond just the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, and that it aspires to shape and support a rules-based international order. Despite their different geographies and geopolitical constraints, the two middle powers can learn from each other as they chart distinct paths forward in the Indo-Pacific century. [MLI](#)

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