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## Australia and South Korea: Middle power cooperation and Asian security

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### Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) is taking on a larger role in international affairs. In the next few years, President Lee Myung-bak hopes to transform South Korea into a respected middle power with sufficient clout to effect change on the global stage.<sup>1</sup> If that can be achieved, it would reverse the perception that South Korea, plagued by insecurity, parochialism and the shadow of its larger neighbours, has failed to exert the kind of

international influence generally expected of a country of its size and strength.

Indeed, it seems that Lee's vision for a 'Global Korea'—a state that can rival other middle powers like Australia in the provision of peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and post-conflict stabilisation operations—has been warmly welcomed in many circles. Washington's policymakers see great promise in Seoul's new-found activism: 'Korea offers the best potential for a change in focus from narrow



South Korea's President Lee Myung-bak receives military honours upon his arrival to Canberra, 5 March 2009. © Daniel Munoz—Pool/epa/Corbis

shared interests to broad global aims'.<sup>2</sup> And Australian counterparts seem to share this view. In April 2010, then Foreign Minister

Stephen Smith stated that the bilateral relationship contained 'great untapped potential'.<sup>3</sup> On the face of it, this appears true.



Comparing Australia and South Korea on paper reveals a long list of similarities: both are liberal democracies, longstanding allies of the US and active participants in key regional and international forums; they have a robust, complementary trading relationship<sup>4</sup> with a free trade agreement in the pipeline; both have China as their largest trading partner and espouse a common view of most global security issues. Yet, despite many similarities, Seoul and Canberra have maintained an economically ‘hot’ but politically ‘cool’ engagement.

At first blush this seems puzzling. But the lack of interest in a stronger strategic relationship is straightforward: our two countries have faced very different, largely exclusive strategic dilemmas. South Korean security policy has maintained a near-myopic focus on the Korean Peninsula, where other middle powers have had very little influence. And Australia has been concerned primarily with its immediate neighbourhood and maintaining the centrality of the ANZUS alliance by supporting global US operations.

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So, why the sudden interest in South Korea as a strategic partner? How much could we realistically expect to gain from a closer relationship? Where do our shared strategic interests lie, and how would further diplomatic or military cooperation enhance those interests? Moreover, will South Korea be able to sustain its current enthusiasm for an enhanced global role or will its aspirations be checked by events closer to home?

For Australia, a more comprehensive partnership with South Korea may be of

increasing value, given the tectonic strategic shifts in our region. If so, it should be viewed as a long-term investment. Short-term gains are unlikely. Our expectations should be clear: the Australia–South Korea relationship will not be a central component of the Asia–Pacific region’s future security architecture. It will be a relationship based on common interests, not common threats. And South Korea will need time to develop the diplomatic, military and political resolve to fulfil its middle power aspirations.

Based on that assessment, this paper advances a number of ideas about how we should progress the Australia–ROK relationship:

1. The strategic relationship will be shaped by the broader machinations of the US-led ‘hubs and spokes’ alliance system. Working within this framework is the clearest and most constructive focus for the relationship.
2. The main benefits from expanding the relationship are diplomatic rather than military: regular high-level contact between Australian and South Korean officials can allow the two countries to coordinate strategies for coalition building in regional institutions. Even so, incremental steps to improve military-to-military relations could yield significant benefits for both countries.
3. Lee Myung-bak’s blueprint for a ‘Global Korea’ and the expectation of greater Korean participation in nontraditional security initiatives will create new opportunities for collaboration. The Gillard Government should continue to support this vision through active forms of cooperation.
4. The 2009 Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation outlines a number of expanded areas where

Australia and South Korea can work together on security issues. Of them, the most important will be coalition building, peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilisation.

5. South Korea and Australia must outline the extent of their common interests and encourage greater public support for further engagement.

### Middle power aspirations

The definition of what constitutes a middle power in the contemporary international order is the subject of ongoing debate.<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, middle powers are those states that have a median set of capabilities (economic, military and diplomatic) and are committed to using those resources to pursue an active role in international affairs. They are sometimes called ‘second-tier powers’ or ‘regional security powers’. The idea that there is a putative class of states in between the great and small powers seems to survive the real-world observation that size can be an illusive variable.

The typical middle power role is thought to include a preference for coalition building with ‘like-minded’ countries in multilateral institutions, the promotion of international legal norms and the use of diplomatic, military and economic resources to achieve selected political outcomes.<sup>6</sup> The pursuit of middle power diplomacy is also cyclical and dependent upon the priorities of the government of the day.<sup>7</sup> Not all states that have the means to do so will follow this particular course of action: adequate resources are one thing, but governments must decide if, when and where a middle power agenda suits their interests.

Middle powers generally champion the existing order. As they lack the necessary power to coerce or deter the heavyweights—

and therefore do not occupy permanent seats at exclusive decision-making tables such as the United Nations (UN) Security Council—they encourage others to play by the rules.

Australia, for example, has never been a prime mover in international security affairs. Instead, we’ve pursued our interests by being a strong supporter of the rules-based order that emerged following World War II.<sup>8</sup> And we’ve thrown our military resources behind that commitment, for example in UN peacekeeping and stabilisation operations, the International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. Australian diplomats have a proud record in building pro-reform coalitions on a broad range of issues, including disarmament and nonproliferation, free trade and the environment.

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South Korean leaders, conversely, have shied away from a more active middle power role, despite having adequate resources at their disposal for at least the past two decades. This is largely a by-product of Seoul’s focus on North Korea, and the pattern of conflict and reconciliation that has dominated the Korean Peninsula for six decades.

But in the early stages of this new century, that pattern appears to be changing. South Korea has adopted the rhetoric of a more confident, outward-looking state,<sup>9</sup> one that seeks recognition of its achievements and greater involvement in multilateral institutions. It boasts a dynamic and highly

competitive economy, a modern and professional military that already contributes to peacekeeping, stabilisation and anti-piracy missions, and a growing official development assistance (ODA) program.<sup>10</sup>

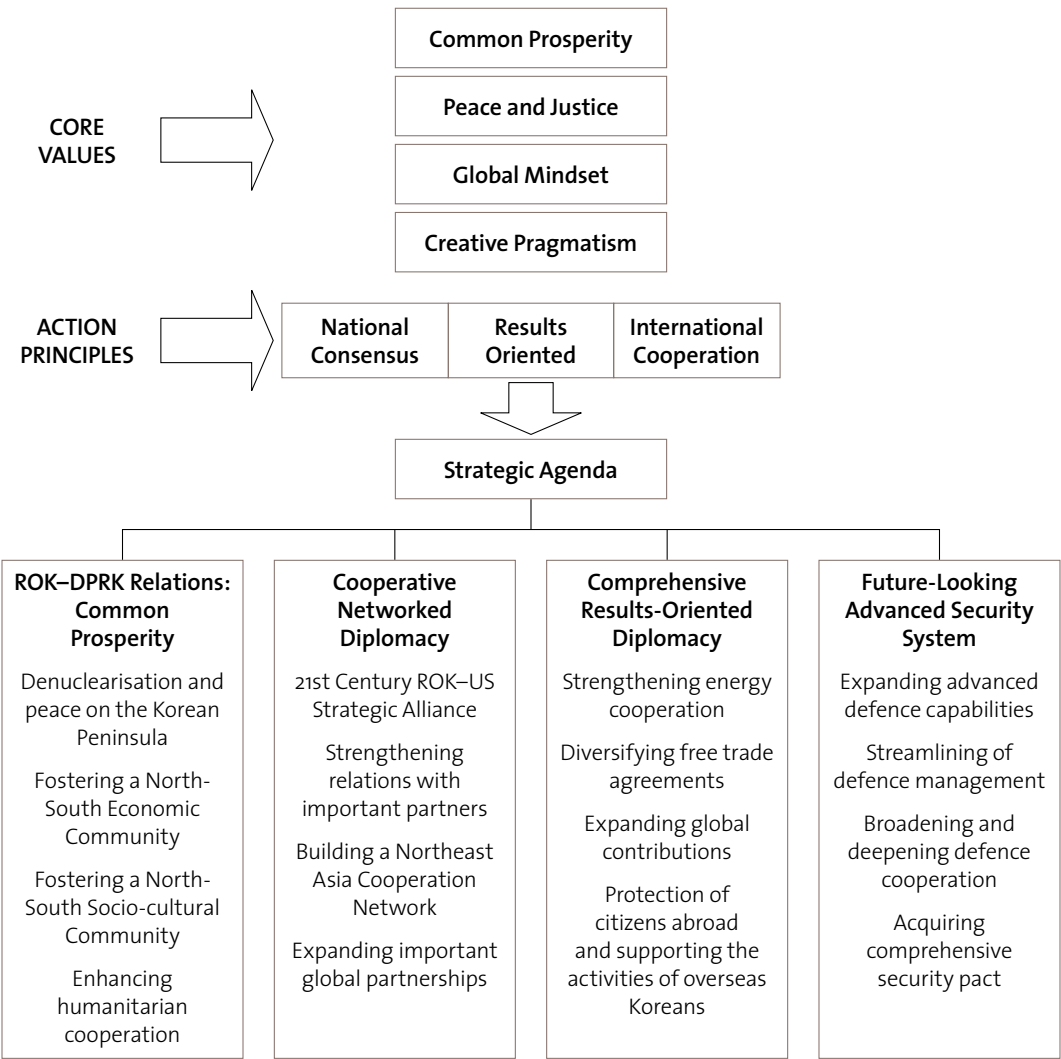
It has also been a strong supporter of the UN. In 2006, the ROK successfully lobbied for a former foreign minister, Ban Ki-moon, to become UN Secretary General. In 2010, it referred the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* to the Security Council for mediation.

### Global Korea

A middle power agenda in international security is consistent with President Lee's blueprint for a Global Korea. Based on the core values of peace, justice, common prosperity, global mindset, and creative pragmatism, the Global Korea program has four main tenets:

- inter-Korean relations based on mutual benefits and common prosperity
- cooperative networked diplomacy
- comprehensive and results-oriented foreign policy
- future-looking and advanced security.

Figure 1: Security strategy—South Korea



Source: The Blue House, *Global Korea: The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea*, March 2009.



At the heart of this strategy are the twin pillars of bilateral and multilateral security cooperation to mitigate the risks of a rapidly changing global security environment. Indeed, Lee has spent his first 30 months in office reinvigorating existing friendships—such as confirming the centrality of the US alliance in ROK foreign policy and formalising the China–ROK–Japan trilateral strategic dialogue—while at the same time pursuing new forms of cooperation. And Australia has come to the party, signing the Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation with South Korea in March 2009.

The Joint Statement is essentially a list of middle-power security contributions where cooperation can be expanded: counter-terrorism, disaster recovery, peacekeeping, civil–military coordination, disarmament and nonproliferation, joint naval exercises, intelligence sharing, defence industry cooperation, and a host of other nontraditional security issues, including combating transnational crime, personnel exchange programs and cybersecurity.

Much of the statement is routine business. It reiterates some existing forms of cooperation and promises greater consultation on areas of mutual security concern. But it also contains the seeds of a more ambitious agenda—one that would see military forces, diplomats and police working cooperatively on common projects to achieve wider political outcomes. Advancing the bilateral relationship beyond intermittent consultation to ongoing cooperation in times of relative stability would be difficult enough. Doing so in a complex and shifting regional security environment will be an even greater challenge.

## Implications of a changing regional security environment

Any discussion about the future of the Australia–ROK relationship should contain an analysis of the regional trends that will shape that interaction. The evolution of a new security order in Asia will determine the mutual strategic interests of each partner and the opportunities and constraints for bilateral cooperation. Naturally, this is a selective exercise. But, looking out from 2010, the following issues are likely to form the strategic parameters under which an enhanced Australia–ROK partnership can occur.

In the coming decades, we're likely to see a more complex and contested Asian security order, one in which middle powers will pursue their interests in the shadow of increasing competition between a growing number of major powers.

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Short of war or military adventurism, the recalibration of power relativities in Asia will drive a steady evolution of the current order, rather than any abrupt upheaval. Countries will experience occasional periods of tension as new spheres of influence emerge, territorial disputes flare up, militaries grow more capable, historical grievances linger, and states attempt to manipulate the rules that govern the regional and international order.

Unless greatly strengthened, the cooperative security arrangements that have mushroomed in the post-Cold War era, such

as the Six Party Talks and the ASEAN Regional Forum, will continue to be poor mechanisms for resolving crises, and their existence will not diminish the enduring importance of bilateral alliances or the growth of bilateral security agreements.

The European experience of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century showed that economic interdependence alone is a defective leash for the dogs of war. Asia's economic and political dynamism has been complemented, if not made possible, by a predictable strategic environment underpinned by US primacy. An Asia without American leadership would be a much more uncertain place, one where geopolitical, historical and cultural rivalries have a freer run.

The US has lost a lot of treasure recently—in two costly wars and a devastating financial crisis—and its fiscal outlook remains uncertain. In the next decade, we are unlikely to see the US military conducting interventions similar to those in Kosovo, Somalia or Haiti, let alone operations of the magnitude of those in Iraq or Afghanistan. And there's no candidate looking to usurp this global role; at most, there'll simply be a period of limited or small-scale international interventions. The US will still come to the aid of states experiencing natural crises, as it did in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami and the earthquakes in Pakistan, Haiti and Chile. But its footprint will be lighter and, in our region, others will be expected to make their mark.

Alliances will be one form of partnership, but there'll be others as well. The GW Bush Administration dismissed the idea that the American juggernaut should be constrained by large coalitions and formal agreements. Instead, it favoured a more fluid strategy of niche partnerships—coalitions of the willing. And while the Obama Administration has extended olive branches to traditional

US allies, it too has been shopping for new strategic partners.

The expansion of US bilateral assistance programs to increase the capacity of states like Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia to respond to traditional and nontraditional security threats is a clear part of this strategy.<sup>11</sup> And the US will continue to pursue non-treaty-based forms of cooperation such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) in order to deal with emerging security challenges, such as illicit weapons trafficking. As a result of these shifts in US strategy in Asia, the Cold War alliance system will no longer be the only decisive factor in the strategic policy choices of either the US or its Asian allies.

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Strategic analysts in both Canberra and Seoul expect that the US will remain the dominant power in Asia for some decades to come, but the rapid modernisation of the Chinese military, especially the navy, will challenge American maritime power in parts of the western Pacific and the South China Sea. In the absence of alternative regional leadership, most of our neighbours will welcome an ongoing role for the US in tempering disputes and preserving the regional balance of power. Uncertainties and anxieties about China's rise may reinforce rather than undercut that position.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to recent academic conjecture about the dawn of a new China-centric security order in Asia, most regional policymakers will continue to view a balance of power that favours American

leadership and the pursuit of national interests as the primary drivers of strategic policy choice.

Common interests

Australia and South Korea have long enjoyed a highly symbiotic trading relationship but—to be frank—not much else. The two countries have been largely indifferent to a more comprehensive bilateral security agenda. There are two principal reasons for this, and both of them have to do with exclusivity.

The first is that until recently Australia and South Korea maintained largely exclusive security interests. For more than sixty years, South Korea has been confronted by a persistent and existential threat from its northern neighbour. Except for a large

contribution of troops to the Vietnam War, Korean defence forces have been reserved for Korean Peninsula contingencies. The major powers of Northeast Asia—China, Russia, Japan and the US—have been instrumental in managing the standoff between North and South; middle powers, such as Australia, have exerted little influence.

Australia faces no such existential threat. As an island nation, we’re largely divorced from the strategic vagaries of continental Asia. This has allowed our defence forces to conduct small-scale interventions in our immediate neighbourhood and to provide modest contributions to US operations overseas. This discrepancy in relative geostrategic positions and imperatives is reflected in the defence forces of each country, as Table 1 demonstrates.

Table 1: Defence forces, selected countries

	Regular force	Reserve force	Tanks	Other armoured vehicles	Combat capable aircraft	Helicopters	Major surface combatants	Patrol & coastal combatants	Submarines	Amphibious
S. Korea	687,000	4,500,00	2,810	2,922	498	275	47	76	13	12
Australia	57,777	21,574	59	1,768	147	181	12	14	6	3
Northeast Asia										
N. Korea	1,106,000	4,700,000	3,500+	3,060+	620	302	8	329+	63	10
China	2,285,000	510,000	6,550+	5,720+	1,907	665	80	253	65	84
Japan	230,300	41,800	880	950	340	566	52	7	16	5
Taiwan	209,000	1,657,000	926+	2,284	479	275	26	73	4	19
Southeast Asia										
Indonesia	302,000	400,000	0	1,069	96	146	30	41	2	29
Singapore	72,500	312,500	196	1,924+	104	80	12	23	4	4
Vietnam	455,000	5,000,000	1,315	2,400	219	91	11	38	2	6
Thailand	305,860	200,000	333	1,554	186	282	26	73	4	19
South Asia										
India	1,325,000	1,155,000	4,047+	1,882+	655	665+	45	28	16	17
Pakistan	617,000	No data	2,461+	1,266	395	212	7	8	8	0
Extra-regional										
USA	1,536,657	857,063	6,523	28,082	4,076	5,272	110	16	71	31
Russia	1,027,000	20,000,000	23,510+	28,960+	2,118	1,588	57	75	66	42+
Canada	65,722	33,967	121	1,343	97	133	15	12	4	0

Source: Australian Defence Almanac 2010–11, ASPI.





The South Korean and US navies reenact the historic Inchon Landing on 15 September 2010. The event was designed to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the operation which decisively turned the tide of the Korean War in favour of the UN forces fighting for South Korea.  
© Yonhap News Agency/epa/Corbis

The second reason is that the highly centralised ‘hub and spokes’ system that prevailed during the Cold War era was largely an exclusive arrangement. The US ‘extended deterrence’ strategy of the Cold War tightly bound both allies to US strategic preferences in return for implicit security guarantees. This gave Australia the confidence and leverage to persist with a broader regional engagement strategy without the need for a significant military build-up or the acquisition of an independent nuclear deterrent.

For South Korea, US extended nuclear deterrence guarantees and the presence of American troops on its soil allowed it to modernise and democratise in peace. But Washington needed to talk Seoul, unlike Australia, out of developing a nuclear weapon. From 1968 to 1975, the country planned to obtain both a plant to reprocess plutonium from spent fuel and intermediate-range missile delivery systems. Subsequent experiments in nuclear fuel recycling have kept the nuclear proliferation door slightly ajar.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Cold War alliance arrangements were on the whole successful in placating both South Korea and Australia, and as a result neither ally ventured far beyond its relationship with the US to secure its strategic interests.

Twenty years out from the end of the Cold War, that exclusivity has eroded. Building additional bilateral security partnerships held little appeal for South Korea and Australia as long as the US enjoyed overwhelming military superiority in the region. But fears that Washington will be unable to shape the Asian security environment by itself have forced allies to reconsider this standing convention.

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This isn’t to say that Australia or South Korea is looking to abrogate its alliance relations with the US. On the contrary, both countries look set to augment their bilateral relationship in order to offset the burdens of maintaining peace and stability. And Washington supports this initiative, reversing its Cold War dictate of discouraging bilateral security cooperation between allies.<sup>14</sup> In the past few years, we’ve seen concerted efforts to strengthen connections between the Australian, Japanese and South Korean spokes of the old San Francisco alliance system.

The 2009 Australia–ROK Joint Statement would have been actively encouraged by the US for precisely this reason. It capitalises on South Korea’s desires for greater responsibilities in international security and its gradual development of the military capabilities to sustain them. And, although it isn’t binding, the statement lays clear foundations for a stronger strategic relationship, one that may see the two spokes working in concert on a variety of secondary security issues.

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By far the most important issue for Australia and South Korea is the longevity of US primacy in a more competitive Asian security environment. The obligation to increase allied contributions to regional security should be seen as an opportunity, rather than as an encumbrance. We can both use the visibility and influence generated by enhanced strategic cooperation to reinforce our claims to middle power leadership in the Asia–Pacific region. And implementing the action plan outlined in the 2009 Joint Statement would go a long way towards rolling back the strategic disinterest that’s pervaded our bilateral relationship with South Korea.

### Continuing constraints

Australian and South Korean hopes to deepen and broaden the strategic relationship between the two countries will be determined by the efforts of each partner to successfully navigate the regional security

environment. For Seoul, the development of a truly strategic foreign policy is still a work in progress. Diverting resources away from an exclusive focus on national security issues will require a more stable Korean Peninsula.

Additionally, assuming greater international responsibilities will involve new costs and responsibilities. A further challenge lies in the need to bring the South Korean public on board, convincing them that a global middle power role is in their interests. Notwithstanding these constraints, both sides have a lot of work to do in order to overcome a long history of mutual indifference towards non-economic forms of cooperation.

So the barriers to a more comprehensive security partnership between Canberra and Seoul are considerable. Four in particular stand out:

- the ongoing challenge posed by North Korea
- the difficulties of building a more integrated military capability
- the question of public support
- the relative ‘thinness’ of the existing bilateral relationship.

Each is discussed below.

#### *How do you solve a problem like North Korea?*

The Korean Peninsula has been relatively stable for the past few decades, but far from static. New uncertainties and risks will continue to challenge the fragile peace including: growing asymmetries in the economic and military capabilities of the ROK and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK); China’s alliance with the DPRK and its dominant place in both Korean economies; possible regime change in Pyongyang; democratic politics and generational change in South Korea; the reshaping of US–ROK alliance relations; and North Korea’s military

brinkmanship and nuclear belligerence. Add to this equation a raft of other variables—the modernisation of China’s People’s Liberation Army, Sino-US competition, changes in the force structures of other regional states, and erratic domestic political systems, to name a few—and the Korean problem becomes more complex.

President Lee has been praised for his cool handling of the *Cheonan* crisis, despite the fact that a multinational team blamed the DPRK for the deaths of the 46 ROK sailors on board. As with other incidents of North Korean provocation, the South has exercised patience and restraint in order to ensure the stability of the peninsula. But the sinking is a painful reminder that, in the absence of a definitive peace, internal anxieties about North Korea’s behaviour will periodically, if not regularly, challenge South Korea’s resolve to fulfil a middle power role in international affairs. Domestic support for a ‘Global Korea’ vision is likely to be low in the face of future attacks, and will drive debates about whether military resources devoted to international responsibilities would be better used for national security programs.

North Korea is also an important element in the simultaneously cooperative and competitive relationship between Washington and Beijing. Although the US supports a multilateral framework for the negotiation of the North Korean issue through the Six Party Talks (involving China, Japan, Russia, the US and North and South Korea), it wants China to lead that process. Beijing has made some effort to meet that expectation, for example by pushing and cajoling North Korea back to the negotiating table on several occasions since 2001.

But Washington remains deeply frustrated with the Chinese Government’s over-cautious diplomatic approach. Beijing’s lack of any real determination in pushing the North Koreans towards a final negotiating position suggests

that China has less leverage over Kim Jong-il’s regime than many in Washington would hope for. And despite the occasional hints of a return to the negotiating table, there’s little hope that the fundamental tensions between Pyongyang and its various interlocutors in the Six Party Talks will be resolved anytime soon.

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The reality of the Korean Peninsula, and the principal reason why progress on both denuclearisation and reunification is unlikely, is that the status quo suits the strategic interests of all the major players. China doesn’t want to lose a buffer state between itself and America’s two North Asian allies, so Beijing will continue to do just enough to prop up the dynastic regime in Pyongyang. Both South Korea and Japan have watched German reunification with great interest—and they don’t want to pay the enormous costs that reunification of the two Koreas would inevitably entail. Likewise, Russia doesn’t want to see an influx of North Korean refugees across its border. And Pyongyang, isolated, autarkic, paranoid and penniless, has just one trump card left in its hand—its nuclear and ballistic missile program. Giving it away would be strategic suicide—and the North Koreans aren’t going to do that.

#### *Military capabilities*

South Korea’s middle power aspirations are dependent upon its ability to defend itself against threats from the North. Its US\$22.3 billion defence budget in 2009 makes it one of the region’s major military

players, with only China and Japan spending a larger amount. And despite the numerical advantage North Korea enjoys across several platforms (see Table 1), South Korea is modernising its military while the North's equipment becomes increasingly antiquated. Over the next ten years, the ROK aims to improve the qualitative characteristics of its military while reducing the quantity of military manpower and weapon systems.

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The far-reaching 2020 Defense Reform Plan (DRP) is principally designed to replace outdated 1960s-era weaponry while maintaining the ability to deal with contingencies involving North Korea. Much like Australia, South Korea will modernise its navy's surface combat ships, upgrade its submarine force and add Aegis capability to naval weapons systems. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) will increase C<sup>4</sup>ISR capabilities (command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance).

The upshot would be a significant boost in the aggregate capabilities of the ROK military, allowing Seoul to reduce its reliance on the US for essential weapons and equipment. The fruits of the DRP would allow a gradual shift towards a broad-based, multifaceted force that can contribute to a variety of international security missions. South Korea will also regain wartime control of its own forces from Washington in late 2015.

At this point in time, however, the ROK faces a number of hurdles in carrying out the modernisation of its defence force outlined in the 2020 DRP. Evaluating each of them is beyond the scope of this paper, but by taking a simple economic metric one can appreciate the difficulty of the task ahead.<sup>15</sup>

The current reform program is based on a budget for the Ministry of National Defense that increases steadily from 2006 through 2020. For the 2006–2010 period, this translates into an increase of 9.9% per year. In reality, however, the average increase has been only 7.2%, placing the 2010 military budget approximately US\$3.1 billion behind schedule.<sup>16</sup>

The DRP budget timeline is based on the assumption that South Korea's GDP and government spending will increase in parallel, but the global financial crisis demonstrated that GDP may grow at a slower rate than expected. And if the ROK were to suffer another major economic shock in the years to 2020, the defence portfolio would likely find itself competing with other government services for a share of the budget—a fight it could very well lose. To say nothing of the usual delays in capability development programs, there's strong evidence to support the view that budget shortfalls will postpone, if not prevent, the implementation of some of the changes declared in the DRP. As one commentator noted in 2010, 'almost certainly, the original DRP 2020 goals will not be reached'.<sup>17</sup>

Further clouding the crystal ball is the fact that, as conditions on the peninsula change, the ROK Government will be tempted to tinker with the DRP. For example, the previous administration believed that the Sunshine Policy would augur a peaceful era of inter-Korean relations. On the basis of that assumption, it shifted its attention away from the North Korean threat to the development of a bluewater navy and an advanced air force.

As the security situation on the peninsula deteriorated, however, the DRP was revised to target North Korea's asymmetric capabilities and nuclear weaponry. This year, the sinking of the *Cheonan* has placed amendments to the DRP to better address the North's conventional forces under the spotlight.

In other words, South Korea is suffering from the Goldilocks dilemma: trying to assemble a military that balances utility and flexibility for a range of different scenarios at home and abroad. In short, the exact composition of South Korea's future force structure, and its ability to work alongside Australia on a range of nontraditional security initiatives, remain open questions.

#### *Global Korea: A successful brand?*

Economic power alone won't be sufficient to command global influence. As one commentator notes, 'those who aspire to have influence must have political strength and the ability to project influence persuasively'.<sup>18</sup> But for all the talk of South Korea becoming

a lynchpin in Obama's global strategy and a vehicle for preserving US interests in Northeast Asia, the South Korean public remains sceptical about the need to assume that role. Devoting resources to middle power activism at the expense of isolating North Korea seems unpalatable to many.

Politics in Seoul has sharp edges. Unpredictable swings in public opinion—including periods of anti-Americanism—and corresponding changes in policy debates are common. More importantly, it seems that South Korean society remains deeply divided over a number of matters—historical, social, and political—that are central to a basic understanding of what its nation represents and what role it should play abroad.<sup>19</sup> Lee has been successful so far in drawing support for his country's pursuit of enhanced international leadership. But whereas the notion of a 'Global Korea' may be championed by members of the political elite in Seoul, the jury is still out about whether the idea will enjoy lasting popular support.



Leaders of the G20 countries and organizations at the G8 Summit in Toronto, Canada 27 June 2010. Among those pictured is President of South Korea Lee Myung-bak (L in front row). © Justin Lane/epa/Corbis



For now, there are tentative signs that the South Korean people are warming to the idea of a Global Korea. The deployment of a Provincial Reconstruction Team to Afghanistan—a team of forty-nine civilian aid workers and eight police officers currently based in Parwan that will be joined by about a hundred reconstruction workers and forty police officers—has received public backing.<sup>20</sup> Two years ago, Seoul withdrew its personnel from Afghanistan following the abduction of a church group by the Taliban in Kandahar. That the Korean people have thus far supported a return to the Afghan conflict may stem from a growing belief that Korea has a national interest in contributing to international security, in addition to stability on the peninsula.<sup>21</sup>

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#### *Seoul mates?*

There's no doubt that Australia–ROK ties have improved in the past few years. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and President Lee enjoyed a natural rapport.<sup>22</sup> Just as both countries were instrumental in the creation of APEC in 1989, Rudd and Lee did a lot of the spadework that saw the G20 replace the G8 as the principal international economic forum after the global financial crisis. In support of the ROK, Rudd sent five Australian defence experts to investigate the sinking of the *Cheonan*, and publicly condemned Pyongyang upon the release of the findings. These developments gave the bilateral relationship a clear focus for practical cooperation.

With the recent installation of a new Australian government, however, and Lee set to step down as president in 2012, there's a danger of losing momentum.

Unlike its conservative predecessor, the Rudd Government adopted multilateralism as a core foreign policy focus: the Asia Pacific Community, the Copenhagen climate conference, and a bid for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council are the main examples of that tendency. The recent re-election of the Labor Government (albeit with the support of several independents) and Rudd's appointment as foreign minister will bring an element of continuity to the bilateral relationship, but the foreign policy priorities of the Gillard prime ministership remain to be seen.

Leadership will be crucial in guiding broader public support towards a closer strategic partnership between Canberra and Seoul. This will be no easy task: the reference to 'strong people-to-people ties' in the 2009 Joint Statement is a mild embellishment. The two countries have shown little interest in developing the types of cultural, social and political links that would underpin a more comprehensive partnership. In the words of one commentator, 'Koreans think Australia is little more than a mine, a farm and a beach. Similarly, many Australians think Korea is little more than the home of kimchi, taekwondo, and occasionally, colorful parliamentary debate involving taekwondo.'<sup>23</sup> Korean language and society are a cultural blindspot in the broader Australian community. The so-called 'Korean Wave'—the popularisation of Korean cultural products that have been so successful in many parts of Asia—hasn't lapped against Australia's shores.

Nowhere is the sense of cultural indifference more obvious than in the promotion of Korean language and culture in our schools. There isn't a single student studying Korean in Year 12 in this country who is not of Korean descent.<sup>24</sup> In 2009, only forty-nine of 9,562 Australian primary and secondary schools offered Korean language studies, nine of them as part of the International

Baccalaureate course for international students.<sup>25</sup> There's an acute lack of Korean language teaching resources: the national cohort of Korean language teachers in Australian schools totals sixty-nine, few enough to fit into a large classroom.<sup>26</sup>

There's also a mismatch in the general warmth expressed by each population towards the other, arguably stemming from the fact that 'Brand Australia' has a stronger presence in South Korea. In a 2006 survey about international perceptions, South Koreans gave Australia their warmest ranking—65 degrees—out of fifteen countries.<sup>27</sup> Australia is a popular destination for South Koreans visiting for study or vacation. More than 190,000 Koreans visited Australia in 2008–09, while in the same period 19,350 student visas were issued to ROK citizens.<sup>28</sup>

Conversely, in the BBC 2010 World Poll, 35% of Australian respondents viewed South Korea as having a positive influence in world affairs, while 26% saw it as having a negative influence. This ambivalence was echoed in the 2009 Lowy Institute annual survey of Australian public opinion, in which South Korea was given a slightly 'warm' rating of 53 degrees. Ironically, Australians feel as close to democratic, pro-US South Korea as they do to autocratic China (both countries share a 53 degree rating).

### Ideas for enhanced cooperation

Notwithstanding these various hurdles, the potential gains from an enhanced Australia–ROK partnership would be sizeable. Building better habits of security dialogue and cooperation, however, will require a carefully balanced assessment of where and when our mutual interests coincide. And, as this paper has argued, expectations should be tempered by the realities of the complex issues at play in regional security dynamics.

Three broad areas of security cooperation stand out for consideration:

- enhanced cooperation in regional security forums
- assistance with post-conflict and stabilisation operations
- building the existing spokes of the San Francisco alliance system into a stronger quadrilateral framework.

### *Cooperating in regional institutions*

The US has at various times been chided for not paying sufficient attention to our part of the world. President Bush pursued a somewhat 'sporadic' approach to the region<sup>29</sup> but the Obama Administration has made a determined effort to overcome the diplomatic neglect of the Bush years, stepping up its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), developing new and existing relationships, and signalling its intention to join the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2011. We're likely to see more rather than less American involvement in our region in the coming years, and that's a good thing: the regular dispatch of high-ranking US officials to the region will make it easier for South Korea, Australia and the US to influence the process of order building in Asia.

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### *The benefits of Australian and South Korean participation in the region's cooperative security mechanisms are clear...*

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The benefits of Australian and South Korean participation in the region's cooperative security mechanisms are clear: middle powers can exercise leverage in such organisations, particularly when they work cooperatively beforehand. ASEAN, its offshoot arrangements (the ASEAN Regional Forum and EAS) and APEC can be useful vehicles for

preventive diplomacy and confidence-building measures. Regular consultations between ministers and other senior officials will help create a mutual agenda that can be used to shape order-building and policy choices.

Inside these institutional structures, South Korea and Australia can lead small coalitions of like-minded countries to achieve specific foreign and security policy outcomes. Institutional cooperation can also preserve US influence in regional discussions and encourage states to accede to the norms and rules of the regional order. A greater emphasis on multilateral cooperation may also offset a growing tendency to split regional diplomacy along a Washington–Beijing axis.

Nevertheless, the disadvantages of these immature security architectures are also clear: none has been an effective mechanism for crisis management and conflict resolution. Regional states have differing views on what constitute security issues and what action should be taken to address them. This weakness will make it difficult for institutions to anticipate and cradle order-defining challenges. In fact, competition within and between institutions may hinder rather than help the emergence of a more effective regional security arrangement.<sup>30</sup>

Encouraging ASEAN members to adopt a workshop rather than a talkshop approach—to generate a clear, material commitment to achieving shared security objectives—is vital for the region. But ASEAN's track record won't fill Australian and South Korean policymakers with confidence about that happening soon. For these reasons, Australia's and South Korea's respective foreign policies will continue to employ a 'dual track' strategy that:

- encourages meaningful US participation in reforming regional institutions
- continues to pursue independent, bilateral agendas with key partners.

The first approach will be emphasised when the regional security environment is relatively stable, allowing each country to focus on coalition building, while alliance arrangements will be front and centre when that environment shows signs of stress. The second is a necessary hedge against continued weakness in multilateral institutions.

#### *Assisting with post-conflict stabilisation and peacekeeping operations*

South Korea has identified as a priority an increased role in peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilisation missions. ROK troops exercising and training in Australia for missions of that type may lead to bilateral cooperation in future contingencies—particularly those that occur in the so-called 'arc of instability.' ROK help in stabilising our immediate environs would be welcomed in Australia. And participation in these niche areas has been an effective strategy for middle powers to make concrete contributions to international security and thereby increase their international clout and visibility: a clear incentive for South Korea. Akin to Canberra's whole-of-government approach to nation building, South Korea's stabilisation efforts and ODA projects could be deployed in tandem to support the various phases of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

The Lee Government has already made good on its commitment to increase its involvement in these types of missions: it began deploying a Provincial Reconstruction Team to the Afghan province of Parwan in July this year. South Korea also plans to treble its ODA budget, from approximately US\$1 billion in 2009 to more than US\$3 billion by 2015.<sup>31</sup> As mentioned in the 2009 Joint Statement, Australia could help South Korea maximise its resources by offering enhanced training to ROK personnel in the areas of peacekeeping, civil–military coordination, international police deployment, and disaster management.

Australia should consider providing additional funding to the Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence based in Queanbeyan to support that work.

Disaster relief is another area where cooperation can be enhanced. South Korea made admirable contributions to the disaster relief operations that followed the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia, but its absence from US-led efforts was conspicuous, given Australia, Japan and India's participation. If nothing else, operating within a multilateral framework alongside other US allies may have raised South Korea's profile in the international community.

The Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) is developing a humanitarian response budget and capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance to areas afflicted by natural or manmade disasters. This is an area where Australia's aid agency, AusAID, could share its experiences of disaster recovery coordination and international humanitarian efforts more broadly. Late last year, the Australian and the Korean foreign affairs departments signed a memorandum of understanding outlining potential areas of collective contributions to development goals and cooperation within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee and other steering groups.<sup>32</sup>

### *Strengthening the spokes*

The 2009 Joint Statement mirrors many of the expanded areas of cooperation in the 2007 Japan–Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. We may eventually see the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia promoting inter-alliance coordination on a quadrilateral basis. And if we're to accept greater costs in order to shoulder the burden of these alliance commitments, it would make sense to sit down and decide how the relationships between the three 'spokes' can be better managed—and, where appropriate, integrated—to achieve shared objectives.

Japan and Australia have a strong track record of shared peace-building and reconstruction efforts in Cambodia, East Timor and Iraq, and after the Boxing Day tsunami. Each nation's defence forces have also strengthened their interoperability with US forces to carry out coordinated responses to disaster recovery, maritime security and related nontraditional security initiatives. These experiences could serve as a constructive template for increased bilateral and trilateral coordination efforts with South Korean forces. And cooperation involving all three allies may establish a regional precedent for other institutions and Asian actors to take their broader regional security responsibilities more seriously.

Quadrilateral coordination between the US, Australia, Japan and South Korea is already occurring under the auspices of the PSI initiative. In mid-September, Australia hosted the first Regional Operational Experts Group meeting of nineteen Asia–Pacific PSI members. And in October, the US, Australia and Japan conducted a maritime interdiction exercise near the port of Busan in South Korea. If sustained, South Korea's middle power aspirations will provide a range of opportunities for further 'needs based' quadrilateral coordination.

## **Conclusion**

As South Korea's capacity and desire to play a greater role in international security increase, new forms of cooperation with Australia will help prepare the country for participation in missions off the Korean Peninsula. This could lead to a range of mutual benefits. The modest vision for broadened security cooperation outlined in this report has been made possible by political commitments made in each country to find new ways to manage the region's evolving security environment. Australia–South Korea cooperation can play a small but productive role in this regard, and should be pursued vigorously by the Gillard Government.



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