

Common Waters: Japan, South Korea, and Maritime Security Assistance in Southeast Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article proposes that Southeast Asia is an ideal space for cooperation between Japan and South Korea, given that both countries share strategic priorities in the region.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Although Japan and South Korea's bilateral ties are typically defined by long-standing issues over historical issues and territorial disputes, each country shares a wide set of geopolitical interests, leading to an "Asian paradox" of mismatched priorities. This paradox is clearly visible in Southeast Asia. While Tokyo's strategic ties with the subregion, often via the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are deeper and predate Seoul's, South Korea is increasingly expanding its own relations with the region alongside its growing security outreach across the Asia-Pacific. As a result, Japan's and South Korea's interests and activities are meeting in strategic spaces in Southeast Asia, such as the South China Sea and the Mekong River basin. Despite sharing common goals in these spaces, so far Seoul and Tokyo have not collaborated in their efforts. While many hurdles still limit direct security cooperation between Japan and South Korea, even indirect cooperation in shared strategic spaces in Southeast Asia could provide both countries an opportunity to build trust and provide security benefits to countries in Southeast Asia.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S. can incentivize Japan–South Korea cooperation in Southeast Asia through the Quad Plus framework.
- Expanding the General Security of Military Information Agreement between Japan and South Korea could be a method of increasing their cooperation in Southeast Asia.
- To achieve greater cooperation toward these aims, the U.S. should support strategic latitude for Japan and South Korea in Southeast Asia.

In November 2021 the newest flagship of the Philippine Navy's state-of-the-art frigate class, the BRP *Jose Rizal*, conducted exercises with the JS *Kaga*, the unofficial aircraft carrier of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.¹ This military engagement, hailed in both Manila and Tokyo as a further step toward growing the countries' burgeoning strategic relationship, belied the crucial role played by another Asian maritime power—the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea). In the bidding process, Hyundai Heavy Industries, a South Korean conglomerate, was chosen over competitors from Germany, India, and Spain to build the *Jose Rizal* for the Philippine Navy. The ship is also armed with anti-ship missiles and torpedoes designed for the ROK Navy.² While the exercises of the *Kaga* and the *Jose Rizal* contributed to strengthening Japanese-Philippine maritime ties, these exercises would not have been possible without the expertise and industry of South Korea.

This example is but one of many highlighting the importance of growing maritime security relations between Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia, comprising the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For Southeast Asia, a region with increasingly contested strategic maritime spaces, Japan and South Korea are welcome security partners that provide access to technology, industry, capacity building, and training, as well as a degree of strategic assurance. For Japan, Southeast Asian maritime security is a long-standing strategic priority, and expanding Japan's reach in the region is an ongoing imperative. For South Korea, Southeast Asia is a region of growing importance, especially as it continues to perceive itself as dependent on the trade and energy flows through Southeast Asia's global commons, and Seoul desires to expand and deepen its diplomatic heft in the region.

This article argues that a triangular maritime security relationship between Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia provides opportunities for all three parties—and especially for cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. Despite their fraught relationship, Japan and South Korea share several strategic priorities in Southeast Asia. Crucially, these shared interests are also prioritized by Southeast Asian leaders, lending credence to the potential for a triangular relationship that is increasingly beneficial for all. Nevertheless, the weakest link in this triangle is the relationship between Seoul and Tokyo.

¹ Jairo Bolleda, "PH Navy Holds Passing Exercises with Japanese Vessels," *Rappler*, November 15, 2021
 ~ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/photos-philippine-navy-holds-passing-exercises-japanese-vessels>.

² "Philippine Navy's First Jose-Rizal Class Frigate Leaves South Korea," *Janes Defence*, May 18, 2020
 ~ <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/2020/05/18/be6cf6ea-2d6d-4350-a37d-6bed47605667>.

Strengthening maritime cooperation in Southeast Asia between Japan and South Korea would thus benefit all parties, as well as implicitly serve the strategic aims of the United States.

This article is organized into four sections:

- ≈ pp. 104–7 provide a brief background on the Japan-ROK relationship and summarize what the authors identify as the main narratives surrounding Seoul-Tokyo reconciliation to distinguish the article’s recommendations for facilitating cooperation from previous stalled attempts.
- ≈ pp. 107–13 lay out a methodology for understanding the triangular relationship described above.
- ≈ pp. 113–24 provide two case studies of potential maritime cooperation between Japan and South Korea in Southeast Asia: the South China Sea and the Mekong River basin.
- ≈ pp. 124–26 summarize the argument made in the article and provide recommendations for U.S. policymakers on how to best support the consolidation of a mutually beneficial security triangle in the heart of this priority region for security.

THE JAPAN-ROK RELATIONSHIP

As many analysts of Northeast Asia emphatically argue, Japan and South Korea’s strategic alignment is expansive, underscored by the countries’ democratic values and their shared perceptions of their regional security environment (regarding North Korea and, increasingly, China). Yet their dearth of cooperation belies their common interests.³ The two countries’ inability to effectively and sustainably work together, often referred to as the “Gordian knot” of U.S. strategy in Asia,⁴ remains one of the United States’ greatest challenges in forging a coherent network of like-minded allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. This “Asian paradox” represents a serious threat to stability in East Asia in the face of an ever more assertive China and a

³ Michael J. Green and Nicholas Szechenyi, *Power and Order in Asia: A Survey of Regional Expectations* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], July 2014) ≈ http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140605_Green_PowerandOrder_WEB.pdf; and Jada Fraser, “The Cornerstone and the Linchpin: Reconstituting U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation,” *Pacific Forum, Issues & Insights*, no. 22, November 2022, 1–12 ≈ <https://pacforum.org/publication/the-cornerstone-and-the-linchpin-reconstituting-u-s-rok-japan-trilateral-security-cooperation>.

⁴ Daniel Snieder, “Cutting the Gordian Knot in South Korea–Japan Relations,” *East Asia Forum*, April 4, 2022 ≈ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/04/04/cutting-the-gordian-knot-in-south-korea-japan-relations>; and Mintaro Oba and Ji-Young Lee, “Pragmatic Stability, Latent Tensions,” *Comparative Connections* 22, no. 1 (2020): 119–26 ≈ <https://cc.pacforum.org/2020/05/pragmatic-stability-latent-tensions>.

nuclear North Korea. Coined in 2013 by former South Korean president Park Guen-hye in her address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, the term “Asian paradox” highlights the disconnect between South Korea and Japan’s “growing economic interdependence on the one hand, and backward political, security cooperation on the other.”⁵ As the United States faces a widening gulf between its resources and goals, improving cooperation with and among its most important allies in Northeast Asia is now more critical than ever.

Numerous historical grievances frustrate meaningful Japan-ROK cooperation, such as the use of forced labor and “comfort women” (a term referring to Korean and other women forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army).⁶ Previous attempts at reconciliation between Japan and South Korea include efforts at “grand bargain” compromises, “threat focused” strategies, and various levels of U.S.-involved mediation paths. Notably, there are also observers who argue that the relationship has no hope for improvement and therefore that focusing on mending it is a waste of time and resources.

Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder provide an example of a “grand bargain” compromise in their book *The Japan–South Korea Identity Clash*. An agreement to improve relations, they argue, would rest on a series of government statements and actions in which the United States would recognize its role in both the origination and perpetuation of many of the historical flashpoints in the Japan-ROK bilateral relationship; Japan would acknowledge government responsibility for the crimes perpetrated against South Koreans, pay reparations to individual “comfort women” and forced laborers, and relinquish its claims to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands; and South Korea would accept the Japanese offer as definitive and would pledge to commence a forward-looking relationship with Japan.⁷

“Threat focused” strategies, including those proposed by realist scholars such as Michael Green and Victor Cha, keep the bilateral relationship focused on shared security threats like North Korea. In his “quasi-alliance theory,” Cha argues that Japan and South Korea are more likely to cooperate during times

⁵ Katrin Katz, “Korea–Japan Relations, 50 Years In: Demystifying the Paradox of Cyclical Tensions and Rapprochement,” CSIS, August 13, 2015, 1 ~ https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150813_Korea_Japan_Relations_50_Years.pdf; and Jada Fraser, “Textbook Diplomacy: Nationalism and Historical Narrative Reconstruction in the Japan–South Korea Relationship” (BA thesis, College of Liberal Arts, University of Texas at Austin, April 2020) ~ <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/irg/honors/theses.php>.

⁶ Jada Fraser, “Abe Shinzo and the Japan–South Korea Relationship: Near- and Long-Term Legacies,” Pacific Forum, July 11, 2022 ~ <https://pacforum.org/publication/pacnet-35-abe-shinzo-and-the-japan-south-korea-relationship-near-and-long-term-legacies>.

⁷ Brad Glosserman and Scott A. Snyder, *The Japan–South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 172–73.

when they are uncertain about the U.S. commitment to the region.⁸ Green has argued that even while compromises between Japan and South Korea on historical issues remain remote, cooperation in areas of mutual interest can productively strengthen the relationship. Green, among others, has previously proposed a multipronged approach that involves addressing separate issues through different channels to lower the costs of an all-or-nothing solution—such as the grand bargain compromise—and create space and time for incremental progress.⁹

“Pro-U.S. mediation” strategies, like one described by Mark Manyin, consider Washington to have a necessary role in pushing for improvement in Japan-ROK relations.¹⁰ Conversely, the “nonintervention” school of thought sees U.S. intervention in the conflict as ineffectual and believes that Japan-ROK relations will see sustainable improvement only when driven exclusively by South Korea and Japan.¹¹ Finally, there are those that fall into the “no hope” camp and argue that working to bridge the divide between the two countries is not worth the time and resources. This point of view is often promulgated by the far left in South Korea and far right in Japan, and it can also be seen in Samuel Huntington’s article “Clash of Civilizations?”¹²

As argued by one of the present authors elsewhere, it is important to think creatively about ways to facilitate coordination that reflects the respective strategies of both countries.¹³ While acknowledging the existing

⁸ Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁹ Michael J. Green, “The Japan-Korea Impasse and the Security of Northeast Asia,” *Nippon*, November 5, 2019 ~ <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a06403/the-japan-korea-impasse-and-the-security-of-northeast-asia.html>.

¹⁰ Mark E. Manyin, “Managing Japan-South Korea Tensions,” Council on Foreign Relations, Discussion Paper, December 2015 ~ https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2015/12/Discussion_Paper_Korea_Japan_Manyin.pdf.

¹¹ Daniel Sneider and Cheol Hee Park, “Resolved: The United States Can Fix the Japan-South Korea Problem,” CSIS, *Debating Japan*, no. 4, July 9, 2021 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resolved-united-states-can-fix-japan-south-korea-problem>.

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, 22–49 ~ <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>; Cheol Hee Park, “South Korean Views of Japan: A Polarizing Split in Coverage,” Korean Economic Institute, June 24, 2020 ~ http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_jointus-korea_2020_2.4.pdf; and Colleen Sharkey, “Japanese Far-Right Hate Group Helped Popularize Anti-Korean Sentiment,” University of Notre Dame, Keough School of Global Affairs, August, 25, 2021 ~ <https://keough.nd.edu/japanese-far-right-hate-group-helped-popularize-anti-korean-sentiment>. For more on how left-wing Korean nationalism and right-wing Japanese nationalism exacerbate tensions in the bilateral relationship, see Gi-wook Shin, “The Perils of Populist Nationalism,” Stanford University, Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Commentary, September 2019 ~ https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/shin_perils_of_populist_nationalism.pdf.

¹³ Fraser, “The Cornerstone and the Linchpin”; and Nicholas Szechenyi, Hannah Fodale, and Jada Fraser, “The Case for U.S.-Japan-ROK Cooperation on Democracy Support in the Indo-Pacific Region,” CSIS, November 3, 2021 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/case-us-japan-rok-cooperation-democracy-support-indo-pacific-region>.

literature on Japan-ROK cooperation, this article proposes a different avenue for such collaboration by the two countries—one that highlights the potential for mutual security and commercial non-zero-sum gains—thereby deepening security relationships in Southeast Asia. Japan and South Korea share geopolitical goals, economic interests, and defense capabilities that would make expanding maritime security assistance in Southeast Asia a unique, mutually beneficial point of convergence. Such cooperation would fill the demand for maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia more efficiently by streamlining duplicative efforts and reducing redundancies. As Japan and South Korea are both increasing defense spending while facing human resource and fiscal constraints, collaboration on maritime security efforts in Southeast Asia would enable both countries to save resources and allocate them elsewhere. Moreover, this article's recommendation for Japan and South Korea to partner with Southeast Asian countries is in line with empirical evidence that Japan-ROK cooperation tends to be more easily pursued when other countries are included.¹⁴ Although this article does not argue that successful instances of Japan-ROK maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia would sequentially and necessarily lead to great improvements in their diplomatic relationship, it makes the case that less politically sensitive areas of security cooperation would build trust and normalize some aspects of the security relationship, benefiting Southeast Asia as well.

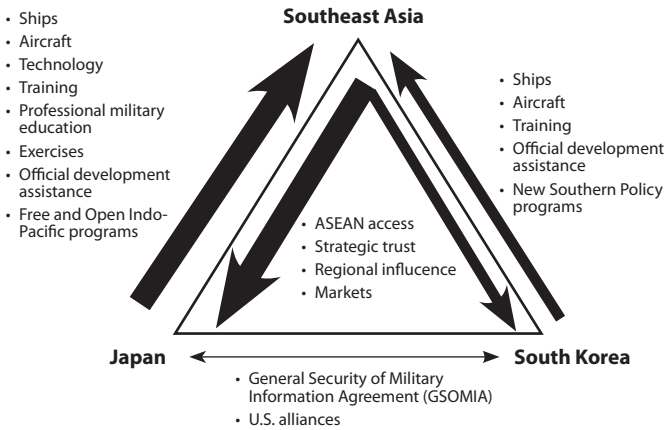
METHODOLOGY

This article postulates that relations between Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia constitute three legs of a supply-and-demand security triangle. Japan and South Korea, the suppliers of the security relationship, sit at the bottom of the triangle, feeding Southeast Asian demand on the top. The strongest, most established relationship within the triangle is that between Japan and Southeast Asia. At the bottom of the triangle, Japan and South Korea share links of investment and trade but few security ties. This is currently the weakest leg of the triangular relationship. **Figure 1** illustrates this triangle.

¹⁴ Naoko Aoki, "Takeaways from a Time of Increased Friction: South Korea-Japan Security Cooperation from 2015 to Present," Korea Economic Institute, September 23, 2021 ~ <https://keia.org/publication/takeaways-from-a-time-of-increased-friction-south-korea-japan-security-cooperation-from-2015-to-present>; and Sarah Teo, "South Korea's Defence Diplomacy in East Asia," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Policy Brief, December 1, 2013 ~ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05835>.

FIGURE 1

Japan–South Korea–Southeast Asia Triangle



As noted above, the triangle is far from equally balanced. Japan and Southeast Asia share deep and dynamic relationships on both security and economic matters based on decades of trust-building and mutually beneficial arrangements, with Japan supplying the security needs of Southeast Asia. South Korea and Southeast Asia, on the other hand, share comparatively modest but growing security ties. While South Korea does not have the same stature as Japan in Asia, the former is an increasingly welcome security partner across ASEAN and provides crucial resources that Japan lacks, such as purpose-built warships. Once more, though South Korea’s economic and security relations with Southeast Asian states are less developed than those with Japan, South Korea enjoys growing trust and access in the region, bolstered by its reliable supply of security assistance.¹⁵

While each leg of this security triangle is crucial, this article focuses on the relationship between Japan and South Korea, as this relationship is arguably the weakest link among all three parties. Japan and South Korea, outside of their alliance relationships with the United States, are both net

¹⁵ For further context on the growing relationship between South Korea and Southeast Asia, see, for example, Kathryn Botto, “South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2021 ≈ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572>.

suppliers of security assistance and have little need for each other's military hardware or training opportunities. Therefore, despite the fact that Japan and South Korea are closely aligned in geopolitical terms, they fail to cooperate effectively on defense matters.¹⁶ This is because leaders in both countries are often inclined to see the other as a liability, sharing an overall alignment on regional goals but ignoring the other as either a potential source of supply or demand for security partnerships.

This lack of motivation to cooperate stands in stark contrast with Southeast Asian nations' eagerness to partner with both Japan and South Korea on defense-related initiatives. Conventional analyses of the region, and ASEAN as a whole, frequently stress Southeast Asia's desire to "not be forced to choose" in the developing great-power competition between the United States and China.¹⁷ Southeast Asia's modern sense of regionalism is rooted in its history of colonization and imperialism, followed by the bloody ideological conflicts of the Cold War. Yet, despite a desire to remain nonaligned from any one great power, the countries of Southeast Asia face myriad security challenges, namely from the territorial ambitions of China. As such, Southeast Asia faces two seemingly contradictory needs: increasing military assistance from outside powers, while avoiding alignment on either side of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Here, South Korea and Japan prove ideal partners. Each is a modernized and sophisticated military power that desires greater security ties with the region and holds similarly skeptical views of China's goals in the region. Both countries are also robust maritime powers, able to provide training, support, and resources for Southeast Asia's greatest security need: navies and coast guards.¹⁸ Importantly, thus far, ASEAN states' building of closer relations with Japan and South Korea has not antagonized China enough to spark a diplomatic backlash from Beijing.¹⁹

¹⁶ Michael J. Green and Cheol Hee Park, "Assessing the Direction of South Korea–Japan Relations in a New Era," CSIS, Commentary, October 6, 2020 [~ https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-direction-south-korea-japan-relations-new-era](https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-direction-south-korea-japan-relations-new-era); and Green and Szechenyi, *Power and Order in Asia*.

¹⁷ Multiple versions of this commonly used phrase exist across media relevant to Southeast Asia. For examples, see Jonathan Stromseth, "Don't Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of U.S.-China Rivalry," Brookings Institution, October 2019 [~ https://www.brookings.edu/research/dont-make-us-choose-southeast-asia-in-the-throes-of-us-china-rivalry](https://www.brookings.edu/research/dont-make-us-choose-southeast-asia-in-the-throes-of-us-china-rivalry).

¹⁸ While South Korea is not typically included in the category of "maritime powers" through force of its navy alone, this article will consider South Korea an influential maritime power thanks to the combined capabilities of its navy, shipbuilding sector, and maritime weapons sales capacity.

¹⁹ Koki Shigenoi, ed., "Japan's Role for Southeast Asia Amidst the Great Power Competition and Its Implications for the EU-Japan Partnership," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 2022 [~ https://www.kas.de/documents/267709/18041095/Japan%27s+role+in+South+East+Asia+amidst+the+great+power+competition+%28English%29.pdf/160eef85-d166-9d09-3388-f6a30afdb10?version=1.0&t=1651136707700](https://www.kas.de/documents/267709/18041095/Japan%27s+role+in+South+East+Asia+amidst+the+great+power+competition+%28English%29.pdf/160eef85-d166-9d09-3388-f6a30afdb10?version=1.0&t=1651136707700); and Lee Jaehyon, "New Emphasis Needed: South Korea's New Southern Policy and ASEAN," ISEAS Perspective, no. 110 (2020) [~ https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_110.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_110.pdf).

Japan and South Korea, too, have their own motivations for deepening security ties with Southeast Asia. Despite Seoul and Tokyo's current estrangement, each holds a large stake in maintaining the U.S.-backed security order in the Indo-Pacific region. This order is buttressed by the free movement of trade and goods across strategic chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait and South China Sea, both of which are in Southeast Asia. Japan and South Korea also depend on these waterways to import the vast majority of their energy and to transport their exports to Africa, Europe, and South Asia.²⁰

The geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia to modern Japan has been well understood by leaders in Tokyo for more than a century. In the decades following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, political doctrines of "southward expansion" (*nanshin-ron*) stressed the importance of the region as a natural sphere of economic and political influence for Japanese imperial control.²¹ A highly militarized version of the doctrine became official national policy in 1935 and motivated Imperial Japan's invasion of the region in the early years of World War II.²² Despite its defeat and occupation, Japan continued to prioritize the region in the postwar period, albeit now as a zone of economic reconstruction rather than military conquest. Throughout the Cold War, Japan rebuilt trust with countries across the region through economic outreach and "heart-to-heart" diplomacy.²³ The foreign policy doctrines of Prime Ministers Shigeru Yoshida and Takeo Fukuda, for example, both placed Southeast Asia as a priority in Tokyo's grand strategy.

Today, surveys suggest that Japan is the most trusted country among political and economic leaders in Southeast Asia, enabling Tokyo to freely and easily engage with the region on economic and security affairs.²⁴ Indeed, Southeast Asia is central to Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, which stresses the importance of free trade, defense cooperation, and regional integration.²⁵ Japan is also the region's largest sovereign investor, largest source of foreign aid, and consistently in the top-three trade partners

²⁰ "Asia Region Is Most Dependent on Middle East Crude Oil, LNG Supplies," Reuters, January 8, 2020 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/asia-mideast-oil-factbox/factbox-asia-region-is-most-dependent-on-middle-east-crude-oil-lng-supplies-idINKBN1Z71VV>.

²¹ Hajime Shimizu, *Southeast Asia in Modern Japanese Thought: The Development and Transformation of "Nanshin Ron"* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1980).

²² Ibid.

²³ Toru Yano, "The 'Fukuda Doctrine' and Its Implications for Southeast Asia: A Japanese Perspective," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1978): 60–64 ~ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27908336>.

²⁴ Sharon Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2022 Survey Report," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, February 2022 ~ https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital_FINAL.pdf.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "Foreign Policy: Free and Open Indo-Pacific," May 16, 2022 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html.

of each Southeast Asian country.²⁶ Put simply, Japan remains an economic powerhouse in Southeast Asia with a great deal of strategic access and influence as a result. The Kishida administration's ambitious new National Security Strategy, released in December 2022, commits Japan to even greater security and economic outreach to Southeast Asia, signaling its high prioritization of a continued presence in the region.²⁷

Since the decades following the division of the peninsula at the end of the Korean War, South Korea, too, has long recognized the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. During the postwar consolidation of the South Korean government, engagement with Southeast Asia mainly hinged on the diplomatic battle with North Korea to secure international recognition and legitimacy.²⁸ Since the early 1970s, South Korea has, to varying degrees, sought to develop relations with countries in Southeast Asia based on “economic diplomacy and diplomatic pragmatism.”²⁹ From the late 1990s through the early years of the 2000s, South Korea's self-recognition as an important middle power accelerated its outreach as a “bridge” between Southeast and Northeast Asia and as a “model of economic success and democratic development [that] developing Southeast Asian countries [could] adopt.”³⁰ During the same time, *hallyu*, or the “Korean wave” of pop culture, proved a hit in Southeast Asia.³¹ In addition to increasing the value of ASEAN-ROK trade—Korean cultural exports to ASEAN countries increased from \$800 million in 2015 to \$1.3 billion in 2017—hallyu enhances South Korea's soft power and is utilized in support of the country's foreign policy goals.³²

²⁶ “A Glimpse into Japan's Understated Financial Heft in South-East Asia,” *Economist*, August 14, 2021 ~ <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2021/08/14/a-glimpse-into-japans-understated-financial-heft-in-south-east-asia>.

²⁷ Cabinet of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo, December 2022) ~ <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

²⁸ David I. Steinberg, “South Korea in Southeast Asia: Enhancing Returns and Reassurances,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1995): 74–88 ~ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27912120>.

²⁹ Brian Bridges, “From ASPAC to EAS: South Korea and Southeast Asia,” *Asian Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2014): 33–55 ~ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44074542>.

³⁰ Hallyu describes the rise in popularity of Korean popular culture content including television dramas, movies, pop songs and their associated celebrities. Sarah Teo, Bhubhindar Singh, and See Seng Tan, “Southeast Asian Perspectives on South Korea's Middle Power Engagement Initiatives,” *Asian Survey* 56, no. 3 (2016): 555–80 ~ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26364373>.

³¹ Shim Doobo, “Korean Wave in Southeast Asia,” *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 11 (2011) ~ <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-11/korean-wave-in-southeast-asia/#:~:text=Since%20the%20late%201990s%2C%20an,of%20Korean%20popular%20culture%20in>.

³² Primastuti Handayani, “Korean Wave in ASEAN Keeps Going Strong,” *Jakarta Post*, April 25, 2019 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/04/25/korean-wave-in-asean-keeps-going-strong.html>; and Dal Yong Jin, “The Korean Wave,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, May 26, 2020 ~ <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/05/26/the-korean-wave>.

Former president Moon Jae-in's signature foreign policy, the New Southern Policy (NSP), was to some extent a reformulation of South Korea's strategy of the past several decades. The NSP sought to elevate South Korea's relations with Southeast and South Asia to the same level as relations with China, Japan, and the United States. Importantly, the NSP was motivated by the need to diversify economic and security relations amid U.S.-China strategic competition—as being in the middle of this competition is an uncomfortable position that South Korea and Southeast Asia both intimately understand. South Korea also has strong economic interests in the region. Since 2017, the ten member countries of ASEAN have ranked as South Korea's second-largest trading partner (after China), with trade volume more than tripling from \$61.8 billion in 2006 to \$189.5 billion in 2021.³³ In addition, between 2012 and 2021, South Korean foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia more than doubled, underscoring the government's recognition of the region's growing strategic significance (**Figure 2**).³⁴

The “peace pillar” of the NSP focused on deepening security relations with Southeast Asia, though this pillar often faced criticism as the least substantial element of the policy, as it avoided potentially sensitive areas of traditional security cooperation.³⁵ South Korea's military ties with the region remain comparatively less developed than its economic and soft-power linkages. However, the ASEAN-ROK Defense Ministerial Dialogue, recently launched in November 2021, heavily emphasizes maritime security cooperation in its action plan.³⁶ Most notably, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration's “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region” places a renewed emphasis on deepening both economic and defense relations with Southeast Asia.³⁷ Seemingly, then, Japan's and South Korea's strategic aims in Southeast Asia (and even those of the United States) are not in conflict with one another. Rather, they share enough alignment to suggest that the region is a

³³ Association of Southeast Asian Nations Member States (ASEAN), “The Nineteenth AEM-ROK Consultation,” Joint Media Statement, September 16, 2022 ≈ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ADOPTED-AEM-ROK-19-Media-Statement.pdf>; and “S. Korea, ASEAN to Upgrade Their FTA,” *Korea Herald*, July 27, 2021 ≈ <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210727000496>.

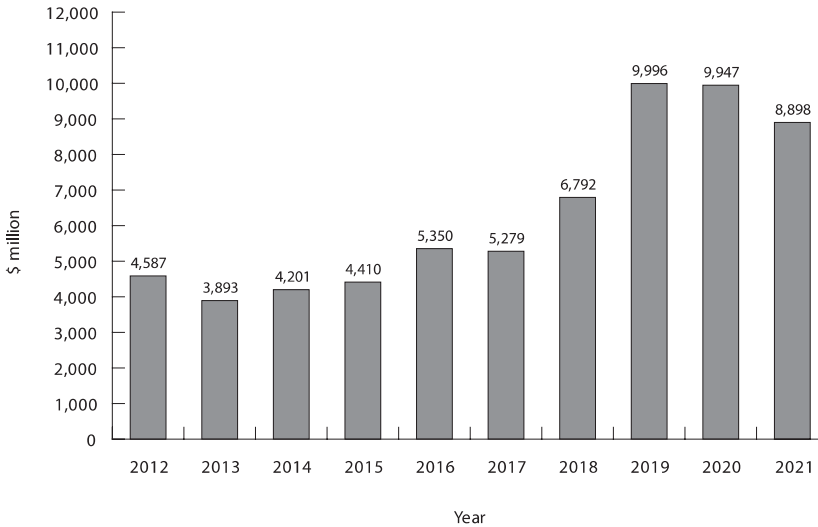
³⁴ “Statistics of Foreign Direct Investment,” Korea Eximbank ≈ <https://stats.koreaexim.go.kr/en/enMain.do>.

³⁵ Kathryn Botto, “South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2021 ≈ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572>.

³⁶ “S. Korea, ASEAN Launch New Defense Ministerial Dialogue,” Yonhap News Agency, November 10, 2021 ≈ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211110009400325>.

³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ROK), *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (Seoul, December 2022) ≈ https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133.

FIGURE 2

South Korean FDI in Southeast Asia

Source: “Statistics of Foreign Direct Investment,” Korea Eximbank [~ https://stats.koreaexim.go.kr/en/enMain.do](https://stats.koreaexim.go.kr/en/enMain.do).

logical point of collaboration between two like-minded countries. The Yoon administration’s outreach campaign to Tokyo to work together on increasing pragmatic cooperation holds promising potential for strengthening the Japan-ROK leg of the security triangle with Southeast Asia.³⁸

CASE STUDIES

South China Sea

Japan, South Korea, and many Southeast Asian countries share similar interests and concerns regarding security in the South China Sea. All three parties are heavily reliant on South China Sea trade routes for their economic and food security. The assertive and provocative actions of China’s People’s

³⁸ Lee Haye-ah, “Yoon, Japan’s Kishida Agreed to Seek Quick Settlement of Forced Labor Issue: Official,” Yonhap News Agency, November 16, 2022 [~ https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221116008500315](https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221116008500315); and Terrence Matsuo, “Uncertain Prospects for Yoon’s Japan Initiative,” Korea Economic Institute, August 2, 2022 [~ https://keia.org/the-peninsula/uncertain-prospects-for-yoons-japan-initiative](https://keia.org/the-peninsula/uncertain-prospects-for-yoons-japan-initiative).

Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the South China Sea, motivated by the country's disputed claims within its so-called nine-dash line, directly threaten the integrity of these sea lanes and hold all parties' access at risk. Japan and South Korea can cooperate to bolster maritime security efforts with Southeast Asian countries to secure open access and safeguard rule of law in the South China Sea along two main lines of effort: coordinating maritime capacity-building activities to reduce redundancies and coordinating technology transfers to improve maritime domain awareness capabilities.

The South China Sea can be considered a global flashpoint due to the vast amounts of international trade transiting its sea lanes. Approximately one-third of global maritime trade passes through the area, a proportion that increases for the large economies of Northeast Asia.³⁹ Japan's and South Korea's most important shipping routes transit the South China Sea: in 2016, 42% of Japan's trade and approximately 50% of South Korea's trade transited the South China Sea.⁴⁰

An extremely important subset of trade for Japan and South Korea is energy. Sea lanes in the South China Sea carry approximately 85%–90% of Japan's and South Korea's oil imports and 33% of Japan's and South Korea's liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports.⁴¹ Both states are increasingly reliant on Australia, the largest LNG exporter in the world as of 2021, for supplies, and most Australian LNG exports pass through the South China Sea.⁴² Japan and several Southeast Asian countries also share resource extraction interests in the South China Sea, as the area is estimated to hold modest but significant LNG deposits. Many of the disputes between Southeast Asian claimant states and China center on rights to drilling and resource exploration, and China's assertive posture prevents Japan from exploring partnering options for energy extraction.⁴³

³⁹ Uptin Saiddi, "Here's Why the South China Sea Is Highly Contested," CNBC, February 7, 2018 ~ <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/07/heres-why-the-south-china-sea-is-highly-contested.html>.

⁴⁰ "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" CSIS, China Power, updated January 25, 2021 ~ <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea>; author's own calculations based on "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?"; and "South Korean Foreign Trade in Figures," Santander Trade Portal, May 2022 ~ <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analise-markets/south-korea/foreign-trade-in-figures>.

⁴¹ Mikkal E. Herberg, "The Role of Energy in Disputes over the South China Sea," National Bureau of Asian Research, June 28, 2016 ~ <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-role-of-energy-in-disputes-over-the-south-china-sea>.

⁴² Josh Lewis, "Australia Remains World's Top LNG Exporter but It Could Lose Its Crown This Year," Upstream, January 19, 2022 ~ <https://www.upstreamonline.com/lng/australia-remains-worlds-top-lng-exporter-but-it-could-lose-its-crown-this-year/2-1-1147625>.

⁴³ Semiha Karaoglu, "The South China Sea Dispute and Its Challenges to Japan's Economic Interests," Asia Power Watch, August 31, 2020 ~ <https://asiapowerwatch.com/the-south-china-sea-dispute-and-its-challenges-to-japans-economic-interests>.

Perhaps the most underappreciated factor driving state interests in the South China Sea is fishing. The impact of dwindling fish stocks for food security will only continue to impel intervention by regional states, considering each country's level of food dependence. The South China Sea is home to about half of the world's fishing vessels and produces around 12% of the global fish catch.⁴⁴ Seafood accounts for between a third and a half of the protein intake in many Southeast Asian countries, as well as in Japan and South Korea, increasing anxiety across the region that these worrying trends in fishing could lead to a human security crisis. Data reveals that South China Sea fishing stocks have declined by 75%–95% since the 1950s, and catch rates have decreased by 66%–75% in the past two decades.⁴⁵ Unprecedented levels of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing further complicate fishing viability in the sea. Tellingly, when looking at the ten worst-performing countries in IUU fish exports and imports, only two countries—Germany and India—are not fishing in the South China Sea.⁴⁶

Given these shared interests and concerns regarding the South China Sea, Japan and South Korea are unsurprisingly each unilaterally involved in providing maritime security assistance to Southeast Asian countries. Both countries share strategic interests in seeing more capable Southeast Asian claimant states contribute to safeguarding open sea lanes in the South China Sea. By assisting with capacity-building and training activities with Southeast Asian coast guards and navies, Japan and South Korea enhance these countries' ability to resist PLA Navy pressure. But more could be done, with greater efficacy, if these efforts were coordinated between Japan, South Korea, and each Southeast Asian partner country.

Japan has provided maritime assistance to Southeast Asia since the 1960s, when the Japan Self-Defense Forces began re-engaging in the global security community.⁴⁷ Significant concerns over China's military power projection capabilities and the PLA Navy's assertive posture over territorial

⁴⁴ Asyura Salleh, "The South China Sea: Preventing the Tyranny of the Commons," *Diplomat*, January 4, 2020 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/the-south-china-sea-preventing-the-tyranny-of-the-commons/#:~:text=Fishery%20stocks%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea%20are%20necessary%20to,of%20the%20world's%20fishing%20vessels>.

⁴⁵ Gregory B. Poling, "Illuminating the South China Sea's Dark Fishing Fleets," CSIS, January 9, 2019 ~ <https://ocean.csis.org/spotlights/illuminating-the-south-china-seas-dark-fishing-fleets>.

⁴⁶ Kevin Varley et al., "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea," Bloomberg, September 2, 2020 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-dangerous-conditions-in-depleted-south-china-sea>.

⁴⁷ Hanh Ngyuen, "Maritime Capacity-Building Cooperation between Japan and Vietnam: A Confluence of Strategic Interests," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 128 (2021) ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-148-maritime-capacity-building-cooperation-between-japan-and-vietnam-a-confluence-of-strategic-interests-by-hanh-nyuyen>.

and maritime disputes in the South China Sea catalyzed exponential growth in Japan's assistance to the other South China Sea claimant states. The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force only began conducting meaningful bilateral capacity-building exercises with Southeast Asian navies in the past decade, but cooperation has quickly and steadily grown.

In particular, Japanese and Philippine maritime forces enjoy especially strong military-to-military ties and began cooperating in bilateral naval exercises in 2012. The Philippines and Japan share a number of "firsts" for Japan in the region. For example, the Philippines hosted the first deployment of Japanese armored vehicles to Southeast Asia after World War II, and it was the first country to acquire Japanese defense equipment of any kind. It was also the first site for deployment of Japan's Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade.⁴⁸ Most recently, in the first-ever "2+2" summit, a meeting of the two countries' foreign and defense ministers, Japan and the Philippines agreed to pursue a reciprocal access agreement. The joint statement from the meeting agreed on the need to facilitate combined exercises in the face of China's increasingly assertive pursuit of sovereignty claims in regional waters and "strongly opposed actions that may increase tensions" in the South China Sea.⁴⁹

While South Korea has a shorter history of maritime security cooperation with Southeast Asian states, this cooperation has accelerated in the past decade amid growing concerns about aggressive PLA Navy actions in the South China Sea. As highlighted above, ROK-Philippines defense ties are steadily growing. Beyond the delivery of the Philippine Navy's first two guided-missile frigates, BRP *Jose Rizal* and BRP *Antonio Luna* by Hyundai Heavy Industries, the South Korean government also donated a Pohang-class corvette that is now considered one of the most capable and heavily armed ships of the Philippine fleet. In a recent development, one of the Jose Rizal-class frigates was equipped with South Korean-made SSM-700K C-Star anti-ship cruise missiles, the first time any Philippine Navy ship has been thus equipped.⁵⁰ The ROK Navy and the Philippine Navy regularly hold bilateral talks, conduct officer exchanges, and run education, training, and other capability-development programs.⁵¹

⁴⁸ John Bradford, "Southeast Asia: A New Strategic Nexus for Japan's Maritime Strategy," Center for International Maritime Security, September 21, 2020 ~ <https://cimsec.org/southeast-asia-a-new-strategic-nexus-for-japans-maritime-strategy>.

⁴⁹ "Joint Statement of the Inaugural Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ('2+2')," Department of Foreign Affairs (Philippines), April 9, 2022 ~ <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisories/update/30364-joint-statement-of-the-inaugural-japan-philippines-foreign-and-defense-ministerial-meeting-2-2>.

⁵⁰ Collin Koh, Twitter, June 3, 2022 ~ <https://twitter.com/CollinSLKoh/status/1532632799366131713>.

⁵¹ Priam Nepomuceno, "PH, S. Korea to Deepen Maritime Security Ties," Philippine News Agency, March 25, 2021 ~ <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1134805>.

In another first, the South Korean and Philippine defense ministers agreed to include the ROK Marine Corps in a combined exercise in the Philippines in October 2022.⁵² During the bilateral meeting, they also discussed progress in talks over a South Korean firm building patrol frigates for the Philippine Navy and “stressed that interoperability with Korean vessels will contribute to advancing the Philippine Navy’s combat power,” alluding to intentions to continue and expand combined exercises in the future.⁵³

Vietnam is also a high priority for both Japan and South Korea in defense matters. In 2011, Japan and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on capacity-building initiatives in defense, which covered areas such as personnel training, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterterrorism, military medicine, information technology training, and peacekeeping.⁵⁴ Since then, the two countries have issued joint statements on deepening security cooperation by building capacity in maritime law-enforcement activities and through developing coast guard information exchanges, military exchanges, and joint peacekeeping operations.⁵⁵ Most recently, in September 2021 the two countries signed a defense and technology equipment transfer agreement that will facilitate Vietnam’s access to improved capabilities and increase interoperability between both countries’ coast guards and navies.⁵⁶ In 2018, the South Korean and Vietnamese defense ministers signed a joint statement on defense cooperation, which was followed up a few months later by an MOU on “logistics support for peacekeeping forces, natural disasters, and humanitarian relief.”⁵⁷ Admittedly, however, there has not been much bilateral progress in these areas in the years since the document was signed. While South Korea tends to prioritize Vietnam in terms of official development assistance, and the two countries share sociocultural ties, defense and security cooperation remains comparatively underdeveloped.

Looking at the Philippines and Vietnam as example countries is helpful for understanding areas of overlap and opportunity in coordinating

⁵² Martin Sadongdong, “3760 Troops from PH, U.S., Japan, South Korea Test Cohesion in Marine Training,” *Manila Bulletin*, October 3, 2022 ~ <https://mb.com.ph/2022/10/03/3760-troops-from-ph-us-japan-south-korea-test-cohesion-in-marine-training>.

⁵³ “Marine Corps to Join Exercise in Philippines for First Time,” *KBS World*, June 3, 2022 ~ http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=170096.

⁵⁴ Carl Thayer, “Vietnam’s Extensive Strategic Partnership with Japan,” *Diplomat*, October 14, 2014 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/vietnams-extensive-strategic-partnership-with-japan>.

⁵⁵ Ngyuen, “Maritime Capacity-Building Cooperation between Japan and Vietnam.”

⁵⁶ Mari Yamiguchi, “Japan, Vietnam Sign Defense Transfer Deal amid China Worries,” *Associated Press*, September 12, 2021 ~ <https://apnews.com/article/technology-china-japan-tokyo-kamala-harris-9bf99b9422489050fcb0dde811741714>.

⁵⁷ Prashanth Parameswaran, “What’s in the New Vietnam–South Korea Defense Pact?” *Diplomat*, June 7, 2018 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/whats-in-the-new-vietnam-south-korea-defense-pact>.

Japan-ROK maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia. Japan and South Korea both hold combined exercises, conduct training programs, and have robust defense cooperation relationships with the Philippines. Coordinating exercises and training programs would maximize the effectiveness of these efforts by eliminating redundancies and focusing on specific goals, such as enhancing maritime surveillance capabilities and maritime law-enforcement abilities to respond to IUU fishing. With Vietnam, despite some recent steps to upgrade the security aspect of the ROK-Vietnam relationship, sufficient defense cooperation as well as training and capacity-building programs are still lacking. Under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration there is fertile ground to improve cooperation with Vietnam in these areas, and the heavy emphasis on maritime security cooperation in the new action plan of the ROK-ASEAN Defense Ministerial Dialogue underscores such an opportunity. As Japan is already pursuing these forms of maritime security cooperation with Vietnam, efforts should be made to coordinate trilaterally with South Korea.

Defense technology transfers from South Korea and Japan to partner countries in Southeast Asia could also be better coordinated to accomplish these same goals: reduce redundancies, improve maritime domain awareness competencies, and enhance coast guard capabilities. For example, South Korea excels in maritime radar technology and is set to begin mass production of the new, indigenously developed Maritime Surveillance Radar-II.⁵⁸ Seoul should make efforts to pursue defense technology transfer agreements with Southeast Asian countries for this maritime surveillance radar technology. Japan's P-1 maritime surveillance aircraft similarly would be an ideal focus of future defense technology transfer agreements in the region. The P-1 employs a state-of-the-art Toshiba HPS-106 active electronically scanned array radar, which uses four antennas to provide 360-degree coverage and infrared/light detection systems for surface detection. It was also the first operational aircraft in the world to make use of a fly-by-optics control system.⁵⁹ Through the coordination of maritime surveillance technology transfers to Southeast Asian states, coastal radar systems from South Korea and aircraft radar systems from Japan can complement the interests of all states involved.

The Quad Plus or ad hoc Quad activities make the most sense as a venue to coordinate these efforts. The group's membership already contains

⁵⁸ Ik-hwan Kim, "LIG Nex1 Signs Maritime Surveillance Radar-II Defense Contract," *Korea Economic Daily*, December 23, 2022 ~ <https://www.kedglobal.com/aerospace-defense/newsView/ked202212230019>.

⁵⁹ "Bangladesh Navy Could Acquire Kawasaki P-1 Maritime Patrol Aircraft," Navy Recognition, January 7, 2022 ~ <https://navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2022/january/11223-bangladesh-navy-could-acquire-kawasaki-p-1-maritime-patrol-aircraft.html>.

two of Southeast Asia's largest security partners—the United States and Australia—as well as Japan. Moreover, in 2022 the Quad announced a new initiative, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPPMDA), which seeks to share satellite data on illicit activity in the Indian and Pacific Oceans with countries across the region.⁶⁰ By enhancing the capacity of Southeast Asian countries to be more than passive receivers of this data and instead actively contribute to maritime surveillance, the efforts of the new IPPMDA initiative can be amplified. Beyond boosting Southeast Asian countries' maritime security capabilities, this coordination is in the national self-interest of both Japan and South Korea. The best-case scenario for the region is a virtuous cycle of capability and capacity improvement. Southeast Asian countries with improved defense capabilities and capacity can contribute more to regional maritime security. This, in turn, would free up resources that Japan and South Korea would otherwise be expending on trying to fill that gap, allowing them to invest even further in the region and on their own forces—an increasing priority for both countries. Rather than competing for influence in the region in a zero-sum way, Japan and South Korea can achieve positive gains by coordinating maritime security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries.

Mekong River

South Korea and Japan are both large investors in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in the greater Mekong subregion of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. The Mekong River serves as the lifeblood of this subregion, which is home to a population of roughly 300 million, by providing the primary source of water, calories, and economic opportunity for 60 million people.⁶¹ Japan and South Korea each have the opportunity to expand their security partnerships with the Mekong subregion across three lines of effort: riverine maritime domain awareness, riverine law enforcement, and investments and construction that support more sustainable damming, thus contributing to human and economic security.

Japan's modern security relations in the Mekong subregion began with its leadership of the United Nations Transitional Authority in

⁶⁰ Zack Cooper and Gregory Poling, "The Quad Goes to Sea," War on the Rocks, May 24, 2022. ~
<https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/the-quad-goes-to-sea>.

⁶¹ Brian Eyler, *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong* (London: Zed Books, 2019).

Cambodia (UNTAC).⁶² By taking a primary position in rebuilding Cambodia's human security, Japan witnessed firsthand the importance of the Mekong River for the entire subregion. Within approximately a decade, Japan had staked a strong leadership claim in the Mekong subregion, pledging \$1.5 billion in Mekong-related investments in 2003, and demonstrated its larger commitment to Southeast Asia by signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2004.⁶³ With these initiatives as a baseline, each successive government in Tokyo continued to deepen Japanese outreach to the Mekong. For example, in 2009, the government launched its own Japan-Mekong summit, providing a long-term investment pledge of \$5 billion toward infrastructure, medical aid, and government improvement projects in the region. This placed Japan solidly as the largest donor and investor in the Mekong.⁶⁴ These now-yearly summits are complemented by several other regular meetings of ministers, development agencies, and investment organizations focused specifically on Japan-Mekong opportunities and initiatives. The Mekong River also factors into Japan's bilateral ties in the region, with one example being its May 2022 defense agreement with Thailand that allows for future exports of maritime radars and other relevant technologies.⁶⁵

Despite having a larger focus on economic development in the Mekong, Tokyo is willing to sign onto more strategic initiatives there too, including those led by the United States. In 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized Chinese actions along the Mekong River at the Lower Mekong Initiative ministerial meeting in Bangkok and announced a series of multilateral initiatives on electricity, technology, governance, and criminal justice that included Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN. These U.S.-led activities are, unsurprisingly, intended to oppose increasing Chinese influence in the subregion.⁶⁶ It is also no surprise that Japan's overall vision for security assistance to Southeast Asia—its “Vientiane Vision”—was promulgated in a Mekong riverine state. Included in the Vientiane Vision is an initiative for

⁶² Tadashi Ikeda, *The Road to Peace in Cambodia: Japan's Role and Involvement* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1998).

⁶³ Kanako Takahara, “ASEAN Leaders Arrive in Tokyo ahead of Landmark Two-Day Summit,” *Japan Times*, December 11, 2003 ~ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2003/12/11/national/asean-leaders-arrive-in-tokyo-ahead-of-landmark-two-day-summit>.

⁶⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “Mekong-Japan Action Plan 63,” November 7, 2009 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/mekong/summit0911/action.html>.

⁶⁵ “Kishida Agrees to Defense Deal with Thailand,” *Japan Times*, May 3, 2022 ~ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/05/03/national/politics-diplomacy/kishida-thailand-defense-deal>.

⁶⁶ “China ‘Taking Control’ of Mekong River via Dam-Building Spree, U.S. Warns,” *South China Morning Post*, August 2, 2019 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3021062/china-taking-control-vital-mekong-river-through-dam-building-spree-mike>.

training maritime police forces that is focused on countering organized crime and piracy along key waterways.⁶⁷

While South Korean efforts in the Mekong have been comparatively modest, Seoul is increasingly a player in the Mekong River basin's human security efforts. Its outreach to the Mekong subregion began in earnest in 2011 with the first Mekong-ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting, at which South Korea promulgated its Han River Declaration. Under the declaration, South Korea pledged to undertake sustainable development in the Mekong River basin, narrow development gaps within ASEAN, and foster cooperation within East Asia to promote a larger regional community.⁶⁸ In the years since, South Korea has proposed two additional Mekong-ROK "plans of action," identifying six priority sectors: information and communication technology, human resource development, green growth, water resource management, rural development, and infrastructure.⁶⁹

In September 2019, President Moon initiated the "ROK-Mekong Vision" at the first ROK-Mekong head-of-state-level summit. This vision included an expanded economic and cultural initiative based on a three-pillar approach of people-to-people exchanges, sustainable development, and prosperity through "experience sharing." Of note, this new vision included an explicit sub-priority of advancing nontraditional security—the first official mention of security in ROK-Mekong subregion relations.⁷⁰ While South Korean efforts have thus far not included security cooperation, Seoul is well-positioned to provide such assistance to the Mekong countries. South Korea boasts a robust navy, a capable shipbuilding industry, and an advanced technology sector active in the development of tools that are useful for maritime security.

The first sector ripe for Japan-ROK cooperation is building the maritime domain awareness capabilities of the Mekong riverine states. Although it is typically associated with larger bodies of water, like the South China Sea

⁶⁷ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Vientiane Vision 2.0 Puts Japan's Asia Security Role into Focus," *Diplomat*, November 19, 2019 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/vientiane-vision-2-0-puts-japans-asia-security-role-into-focus>.

⁶⁸ Mekong Institute, "A Decade of Mekong–Republic of Korea Cooperation," December 22, 2021 ~ <https://www.mekonginstitute.org/news-activities/detail/2021/09/22/a-decade-of-mekong-r>.

⁶⁹ "Ambassador Attached to the Ministry for Mekong Cooperation Delivered a Keynote Address at the Mekong–Republic of Korea (ROK) Regional Forum on the 10th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Mekong–ROK Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand), Press Release, October 8, 2021 ~ <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/mekong-rok-10th-anniversary-2?cate=5d5bc4e15e39c306000683e>.

⁷⁰ "Press Statement by the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand for the 1st Mekong-ROK Summit," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand), Press Release, November 27, 2019 ~ <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/111769-press-statement-by-the-prime-minister-of-the-kingdom-of-thailand-for-the-1st-mekong-rok-summit?page=5d5bd3cb15e39c306002a9ac&me nu=5d5bd3dc15e39c306002ab1c>.

or the Pacific Ocean, maritime domain awareness is a critical capability for large rivers such as the Mekong. Each riverine state struggles with managing relevant information from the river that is critical to national security and sovereignty, ranging from the number of boats passing through a country's territorial waters to the level of water flows following a weather event.⁷¹ Both South Korea and Japan regularly showcase their own top-line technologies in maritime domain awareness, including Japanese space-based information systems and South Korean maritime radar.

A practical example of assistance that Japan and South Korea can provide is water quality monitoring. Information on the Mekong River's "health" (i.e., water flows, biological habitats, and ship activity) is often lacking, despite the efforts of the interregional Mekong River Commission (MRC). Both Seoul and Tokyo can provide funding, training, and operational support for local governments to install and operate the water sensors that provide critical information on ecological and security concerns. This support could be noncompetitive, as Japan and South Korea could collaborate and pool resources in the MRC as a third party.

A second example of potential Japan-ROK cooperation is bolstering riverine policing in the region. The Mekong River is infamous as a conduit for drug trafficking and crime, dating back to its association with the Golden Triangle of drug cultivation in the mid-twentieth century. Today, the Mekong River is the heart of a larger regional illicit network of drug, contraband, and human smuggling with an economic value estimated at \$71 billion.⁷² Beyond their human cost and the associated rise in regional crime and corruption, these illicit activities compound the traditional security threat posed by China to the region. By pointing to the failures of the riverine states in the so-called 2011 Mekong River massacre, in which organized criminals killed thirteen Chinese sailors allegedly carrying methamphetamine pills, China successfully asserted its right to deploy a law-enforcement presence along Laotian, Cambodian, and sometimes Thai portions of the river.⁷³ Today, China pressures the riverine countries to conduct combined patrols with its People's Armed Police maritime units, often under the umbrella of its own Mekong regional body, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation organization.

⁷¹ Eyler, *Last Days*, 96–98.

⁷² United Nations Mission in Thailand, "Drug Trade in Golden Triangle Grows despite Pandemic," September 5, 2020 ~ <https://thailand.un.org/en/91513-drug-trade-golden-triangle-grows-despite-pandemic>.

⁷³ Eyler, *Last Days*; and Prashanth Parameswaran, "China's Mekong Security Role in the Headlines with New Joint Patrols," *Diplomat*, March 31, 2020 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-mekong-security-role-in-the-headlines-with-new-joint-patrols>.

Japan has a long history of training overseas law enforcement, including those in Cambodia during its leadership of UNTAC.⁷⁴ Additionally, maritime law enforcement is one of the named initiatives of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative. Vietnam is currently the largest recipient of Japanese law-enforcement assistance, including a 2020 grant of six coast guard patrol boats worth \$345 million and a \$2.84 million grant to the Public Security Ministry in Hanoi for unspecified counterterrorism equipment.⁷⁵ Vietnam is not alone in desiring Japanese law-enforcement assistance. Thailand, for example, has cited Japan as a model for its own policing reform.⁷⁶

In 2015 the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA) launched the “K-cop” program to export South Korean police training and resources to developing countries. The program’s backers explicitly name the KNPA’s rehabilitation of its historically negative reputation as an example for governments with their own poor human rights histories. Vietnam is the primary recipient of this program so far, with a recent example of law-enforcement cooperation being a 2021 collaboration on digital criminal science research between the KNPA and the Vietnamese Public Security Ministry.⁷⁷

Law-enforcement assistance offers Japan and South Korea the opportunity to deepen their strategic ties with Southeast Asian states and improve regional security, while also working on a more cooperative basis. Ideally, such support could be deconflicted (if not coordinated) between Japan and South Korea, allowing each country to provide its own unique training and support capabilities without competing with the other for time or resources. Both countries can also offer lessons on how to carry out internal police reform as well as improve human rights in places with a history of troubled governance.

A third area for Japan-ROK cooperation in the Mekong subregion is in addressing the nontraditional and human security threats caused by widespread upstream damming along the river. Although not included in most Western definitions of security, damming projects on the Mekong River (known as the Lancang River upstream in China) have profound implications for regional food and economic security. Mitigating these risks through human security projects is increasingly a priority within the subregion and a

⁷⁴ Ikeda, *The Road to Peace*.

⁷⁵ Huynh Tam Sang, “Vietnam-Japan Relations: Growing Importance in Each Other’s Eyes,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 31 (2021) ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-31-vietnam-japan-relations-growing-importance-in-each-others-eyes-by-huynh-tam-sang>.

⁷⁶ “Japan Police Model Cited,” *Nation* (Thailand), August 9, 2017 ~ <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30323346>.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Public Security (Vietnam), “MPS and National Police Agency of the Republic of Korea Continue Project on Improving Criminal Science Capacity,” August 4, 2021.

leading cause of the riverine states' demand for greater overseas investment and aid. In 2021 a meeting between ASEAN and the MRC specifically identified "water security" as one of the region's top priorities, calling for greater regional management of water resources to be a national priority of each member government.⁷⁸

A notable example of the impact of damming on the subregion's food security is the depletion of fish stocks. The MRC estimates that upstream damming has led to a 40% drop in fish stocks in the last ten years. Because millions of Lao, Thai, Cambodians, and Vietnamese depend on Mekong River fish for upward of 80% of their daily protein intake, human security concerns such as declining fish stocks can outweigh more traditional hard security issues in regional capitals.⁷⁹ Yet these same governments still hope to harness the potential of the Mekong River for hydroelectricity, making a fully conservationist vision for the river implausible. Japan and South Korea can bolster their credentials in Southeast Asia by providing an alternative source of sustainable investment in improving water management infrastructure. This would help arrest the human security and livelihood concerns caused by current damming, which in turn will decrease the burden of negative side effects, such as drug and human trafficking, on local governments.

As with the previously outlined areas for cooperation targeted by Japan and South Korea, both countries have preexisting resources and capabilities well suited to this task. Certainly, Japan is ahead of South Korea in some respects, having already pledged \$7 billion in 2016 toward water infrastructure along the Mekong.⁸⁰ Yet South Korea has much to offer in the effort, including investments in Korean-made water desalination technologies, a recent focus area of the government. Most importantly, both Seoul and Tokyo have the sort of regional trust necessary to gain access to Mekong River development, a highly sensitive national resource for local governments.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY OPTIONS

Japan and South Korea share strategic priorities in Southeast Asia, as evidenced by both countries' prioritization of deeper security relations with countries across the region. Southeast Asian countries, in turn, widely welcome

⁷⁸ Mekong River Commission, "Water Security in the Mekong and ASEAN Key to a Safe and Sustainable Future," August 24, 2021 ~ <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/pr-20210824>.

⁷⁹ Eyler, *Last Days*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

these increased ties, as Japan and South Korea can provide advanced military capabilities without the drawbacks of U.S.-China great-power competition. Yet larger tensions between Japan and South Korea have thus far precluded any coordination on security matters. However, security cooperation in Southeast Asia can be viewed as a diplomatic opportunity for Japan and South Korea even if more immediate bilateral relations are strained.

Such cooperation would also benefit U.S. foreign policy goals. Despite its appeal as a non-U.S. option, Japanese and South Korean defense cooperation in Southeast Asia would improve military capabilities and maritime domain awareness in the region, directly contributing to U.S. security goals. Washington should incentivize South Korea and Japan to deepen their security partnerships in Southeast Asia and directly appeal to both countries to coordinate and collaborate wherever possible. This is especially true now during an apparent window of increased Seoul-Tokyo cooperation under the Yoon administration. The United States can promote such beneficial cooperation in the following ways:

1. *Incentivize Japan-ROK cooperation via Quad Plus.* One of the avenues reopened to Seoul-Tokyo relations by Yoon is collaboration via Quad Plus groupings (i.e., working groups that include more than the main four Quad members: the United States, Japan, Australia, and India). Specifically, the United States should advocate for a South Korean presence in all Quad Plus activities regarding the South China Sea, the Mekong River, and maritime domain awareness capacity building.
2. *Expand the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).* As one of the hallmark institutions of Japan-ROK cooperation, GSOMIA allows for limited information and intelligence sharing between Seoul and Tokyo. Although the agreement currently focuses on North Korean missile threats, GSOMIA is ideal to act as a clearinghouse to deconflict exports of sensitive technologies to third-party countries. Such a move could come with an additional benefit of institutionalizing and “normalizing” information sharing between Japan and South Korea through GSOMIA on less contentious geopolitical areas, which could increase the durability of the agreement during future ebbs in the bilateral relationship.
3. *Support Japanese and South Korean strategic latitude in Southeast Asia.* This article argues that South Korea and Japan each can offer Southeast Asia several comparative advantages in maritime security, even compared to the United States. As such, Washington should not see its role as “valuing” its allies’ alignment with immediate U.S. security actions in Southeast Asia. Rather, Washington should take a more pragmatic approach that encourages both countries to pursue their own relationships and comparative advantages free of

association with harder-edged U.S. security actions in the region. This will allow Seoul and Tokyo to maintain their appeal as lower-risk security partners in Southeast Asia, while still indirectly advancing U.S. national security interests in upholding freedom of navigation and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

In sum, Japan and South Korea face a unique opportunity for cooperation in Southeast Asia through maritime security. To be sure, prospects for improved ties face obstacles, as evidenced in the more widely discussed areas of wartime memory and bilateral military exercises. Nevertheless, Southeast Asia offers a zone of potential cooperation that appeals to their mutual self-interests and can remain somewhat separate from the fraught issues of bilateral reconciliation. While this article is not suggesting that coordinating maritime security activities in Southeast Asia will necessarily help bridge these more enduring issues in the Japan-ROK relationship, such coordination can serve as a basic trust-building measure and result in net gains by contributing to stronger security forces throughout the region. ◆