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THE PENINSULA

South Korea's Role in Furthering the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt

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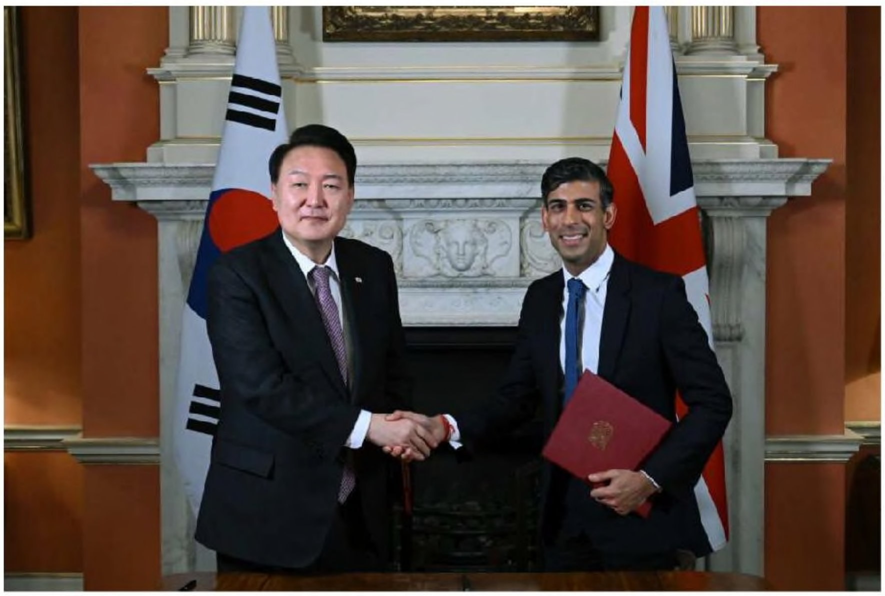

The British government announced that the United Kingdom's approach toward the Indo-Pacific region, termed the Indo-Pacific Tilt, has been successfully completed and that the next stage will involve increasing engagements within the region. This provides an opportune moment for South Korea to expand its bilateral relationship with the United Kingdom by increasing cooperation in minilateral groupings and supporting areas of weakness in the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt.

Evaluating the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt

In March 2023, the British government published the Integrated Review Refresh 2023 (the Refresh), titled "Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World." The document updated the contents of the Integrated Review 2021 to reflect changes that occurred worldwide during the past two years, namely, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Integrated Review 2021, which outlined the government's defense, development, and foreign policy priorities, introduced the idea of an "Indo-Pacific Tilt." The concept represents the United Kingdom's plans to become the European country with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific region by 2030, focusing on nine key areas, such as concluding trade agreements and strengthening cooperation on defense and security cooperation, among others. In the Refresh, it was noted that the Indo-Pacific Tilt had been delivered.

In reality, the United Kingdom's pursuit of the Indo-Pacific Tilt over the past three years has yielded mixed results. There are numerous achievements that ground the United Kingdom as an important stakeholder in the region. For example, the United Kingdom became a Dialogue Partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in August 2021, the first new Dialogue Partner in 25 years. The United Kingdom also concluded negotiations to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in March 2023, which is expected to enter into force in the second half of the year. This makes the United Kingdom the first European country to join the CPTPP trade bloc. The United Kingdom, along with the United States and Australia, also launched the trilateral AUKUS partnership, which supports Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.

However, there are also a number of areas where the Indo-Pacific Tilt has fallen short. Namely, it is unclear how the Indo-Pacific Tilt will respond to evolving geopolitical challenges, particularly from China and North Korea. To be fair, the language on China has become stronger. Integrated Review 2021 described China as a "systemic competitor," whereas the Refresh notes that China is an "epoch defining systemic challenge." The Refresh also highlights China's aggressive stance toward the Taiwan Strait, which was not mentioned in the Integrated Review 2021. However, without clarifying the range of possible military and non-military options that can be utilized in the case of a cross-strait conflict, it is difficult to envision how the United Kingdom will be engaged in such a situation.

Moreover, the United Kingdom's approach toward North Korea has become more ambiguous. Whereas the Integrated Review 2021 notes that the United Kingdom will "remain the most engaged non-regional partner on denuclearisation by North Korea and on sanctions enforcement," the Refresh simply remarks that North Korea should "show restraint and work towards peace" and that the United Kingdom is "clear that its nuclear and weapons programmes must be dismantled." There is no mention of how North Korea's weapons program should be dismantled or how the United Kingdom will be engaged in the process, causing the comments on North Korea to read like an afterthought.

To be sure, the Indo-Pacific Tilt was not intended to be a military or defense strategy. The Refresh notes that the Tilt was largely achieved through non-military instruments, such as diplomacy, trade, development, and technological exchanges. However, a blueprint on how the United Kingdom plans to respond to regional security challenges and an acute awareness by the British government of regional countries' security concerns would consolidate the United Kingdom's image as a reliable partner. This is especially important in a geopolitical context where defense, economic, and strategic interests are closely intertwined.

Implications for South Korea

For South Korea, the fact that the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt has been achieved points to both seized and missed opportunities. Bilateral relations between South Korea and the United Kingdom have gathered speed in recent years, fuelled by the Yoon administration's ambitions for South Korea to become a Global Pivotal State. For example, less than two years after the South Korea-UK Bilateral Framework for Closer Cooperation was adopted in June 2022, the Downing Street Accord was signed in November 2023, which elevated the bilateral relationship to a global strategic partnership. This evolution is notable in that it reconceptualizes South Korea-UK relations into a future and globally oriented one, cross-cutting various sectors and levels of government.

However, one feature of the current state of relations is that it is categorically bilateral and has not been integrated into a broader minilateral grouping. Indeed, South Korea is missing in the numerous minilateral fora that include the United Kingdom and other Indo-Pacific countries, particularly those that play a role in the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt, such as the CPTPP, Five Eyes, Five Power Defence Arrangement, and the Global Combat Air Programme. One exception may be the G7, where South Korea was invited to attend for the first time in 2021 by the United Kingdom, the host of that year's G7 Summit. However, the G7 is not a grouping that solely focuses on the Indo-Pacific region, and South Korea's participation is not a permanent feature.

While not necessarily a problem, South Korea's non-membership in minilateral groups with the United Kingdom points to limitations in developing a more comprehensive and future-oriented relationship. Minilateralism has become a defining characteristic of the Indo-Pacific region's institutional architecture. The limited number of members in each grouping and its focus on a specific issue have advantages over multilateralism, such as greater effectiveness in getting things done, driving the dialogue on a specific issue forward, and increasing the members' influence on the issue. Successful cooperation between countries in a minilateral grouping deepens relations among the members, strengthen networks, and make each other their preferred partners for future occasions. South Korea's lack of participation in such minilateral relationships will, over time, reduce its influence on various agendas and weaken its place in the regional architecture, despite having strong bilateral relations with individual countries in minilateral groupings.

The flip side is that these areas also offer opportunities. South Korea's recent deepening of relations with European countries and NATO makes it an attractive partner with which the United Kingdom can broaden relations. There certainly seems to be some appetite for this from the UK side. In a briefing prepared by the UK House of Commons, the Foreign Affairs Committee recommended South Korea, New Zealand, and Japan as "ideal candidates" to incorporate into Pillar II of AUKUS. South Korea should proactively carve out where it can contribute to this regard.

South Korea's push to realize an expanded G7 Plus is a good start, but it should also consider how it can bring the G7 to the Indo-Pacific region by, for example, taking part in future sessions of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Indo-Pacific. South Korea's intention to join the CPTPP is also a positive sign, and if domestic hurdles can be overcome, it will allow South Korea and the United Kingdom to further deepen economic relations. South Korea can also help the United Kingdom bolster its relatively weak strategy toward North Korea within its Indo-Pacific Tilt by discussing where and how the United Kingdom can contribute to North Korea's denuclearization.

Conclusion

The events of the last three years have underscored the growing importance of the Euro-Atlantic region and the relative decline of the Indo-Pacific region from the United Kingdom's list of priorities. According to the Refresh, the Tilt has been completed, and the next step will involve consolidating existing institutions and engagements with allies.

In this context, the task for South Korea is to demonstrate the value of integrating the South Korea-UK bilateral relationship into the various minilateral groupings that characterize the region's mode of partnerships. This will not only push the level of bilateral relations to the next level but also ensure South Korea is part of the evolving regional architecture. For the United Kingdom, investing in embedding bilateral relations with South Korea into a broader network can help ground the Indo-Pacific Tilt and fill in the gaps missed during the first three years of the Tilt.

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