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THE PENINSULA

A Labour United Kingdom and the Indo-Pacific Question: Tasks for South Korea

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On July 4, the Labour Party secured a landslide victory in the United Kingdom's general elections. The results were hardly a surprise as Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, was long favored to win. The Labour Party will be returning to Downing Street after 14 years of Conservative rule. As such, we can expect to see changes in the nation's foreign policy direction, including its approach toward the Indo-Pacific region. Previous statements by Starmer and members of his team suggest that the United Kingdom under Labour leadership will reorient the United Kingdom back to Europe. In this context, it will be important for South Korea to not only push for greater bilateral relations but also act as a link that keeps the United Kingdom engaged in the Indo-Pacific region.

The United Kingdom's Policy Toward the Indo-Pacific

The United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific policy, termed the "Indo-Pacific Tilt," was first introduced in a government document published in March 2021 titled "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (Integrated Review)." The objective of the Indo-Pacific Tilt was to make the United Kingdom the European country with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific region by 2030. To this end, the United Kingdom pushed forward numerous initiatives, including forming the trilateral partnership with Australia and the United States (AUKUS), joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as a Dialogue Partner, and dispatching the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and carrier strike group to conduct joint activities

with regional partners. In an updated version of the 2021 Integrated Review, the [2023 Integrated Review Refresh](#) noted that the Indo-Pacific Tilt has been delivered and that the next task is to make the increased engagement stronger and more enduring.

As part of its Indo-Pacific Tilt, the United Kingdom also boosted bilateral relations with many Indo-Pacific countries, including South Korea. Relations between the United Kingdom and South Korea significantly expanded in recent years, with the signing of the [Downing Street Accord](#) in November 2023 to elevate relations to a Global Strategic Partnership. The lengthy document underscores the two countries' commitment to strengthening an open and resilient international order to foster global security, promoting a rules-based economic order, and delivering a sustainable future. The detailed list of areas of cooperation, from artificial intelligence to clean energy partnership, indicates a future-oriented relationship based on shared values and a common perception of the challenges facing the two states.

A Europe-Shaped Foreign Policy Direction Under Starmer

While the specifics of the new government's foreign policies have not been announced, we can expect a Britain that is more focused on Europe. To be sure, the United Kingdom will not abandon the Indo-Pacific region. Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy [reiterated](#) that the Labour Party will deliver on AUKUS and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with Italy and Japan and reaffirmed that the UK Carrier Strike Group will revisit the region next year. However, there has been little elaboration on the kinds of initiatives the Labour Party has in store for the Indo-Pacific region, going beyond the achievements made during the Conservative Party's term.

Furthermore, Starmer's view that the United Kingdom should be more Europe-minded has long been consistent. For example, in October 2021, Starmer has [commented](#) that, "Whatever the merits of an Indo-Pacific tilt, maintaining security in Europe must remain our primary objective." In February 2022, he commented that under his leadership, the Labour Party's commitment to NATO would be "[unshakeable](#)." For Starmer, the handling of Brexit under the Conservative government dramatically damaged relations with [Europe](#), which is in dire need of repair.

But there will also be some continuity in terms of the UK policy toward China. There is broad bipartisan consensus that China poses a threat to UK national interests. Lammy has criticized the Conservatives' approach toward China over the past 14 years, [stating](#) that policies have "oscillated widely" and that the Labour Party would adopt a more consistent strategy. He also [commented](#) that Labour would carry out a complete audit of UK-China relations. To this end, he pledged to strengthen cooperation with the European Union and NATO. While cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region is also noted as being important, Lammy has [commented](#) that, as it stands, the Indo-Pacific Tilt has been more rhetoric than substance.

South Korea-UK relations: A Way Forward

Amidst the prospects of a Europe-focused government under the Labour Party, South Korea should actively work to deepen bilateral relations with the United Kingdom and help keep the United Kingdom engaged in the Indo-Pacific region. To begin, the two sides should build on the activities carried out since the signing of the Downing Street Accord. For example, the two sides should make progress on a memorandum of understanding

for defense cooperation and make plans for more frequent joint military exercises in various domains. This includes expanding the scale and complexity of the Imjin Warrior exercise and increasing the number of UK Royal Marines participating in the South Korea-led Ssang Yong exercise alongside the US Marine Corps. Cyber is another area where the two sides have begun to deepen cooperation. For example, in February of this year, South Korea and the United Kingdom carried out the first joint cyber exercise organized under the Strategic Cyber Partnership, which was established as part of the Downing Street Accord. The Labour Party should build on this momentum to help bilateral relations take the next step forward.

Furthermore, South Korea should remind the United Kingdom that the war in Ukraine has brought Europe and Asia closer together than ever before. There is evidence of North Korean artillery shells and ballistic missiles being used in Russia's war efforts, and the likely transfer of Russian military technology to North Korea severely undermines the global non-proliferation regime. Thus, the United Kingdom's efforts to deter North Korea from acquiring further nuclear and ballistic missile technologies are directly linked to the United Kingdom's interests in ending the conflict in Ukraine and bringing security to Europe.

In addition, the United Kingdom's priority in restoring relations with Europe and NATO is not orthogonal to a robust Indo-Pacific strategy. Many countries in the Indo-Pacific, including South Korea, are actively invested in deeper relations with NATO. The Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), signed between South Korea and NATO in 2023, allows greater functional and technical cooperation between the two. This will also support greater interoperability between South Korean and UK armed forces.

In boosting bilateral relations, it helps that the leaders have already met. When President Yoon Suk Yeol made a three-day state visit to the United Kingdom in November 2023, he met then-opposition leader Starmer, and the two agreed on the need to increase bilateral trade and investment as well as the need for closer security cooperation. With the right political will and momentum, cooperation between South Korea and the United Kingdom under the new Labour government can ensure that the United Kingdom remains engaged in the Indo-Pacific region.

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