



South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Role of the ROK Navy and Coast Guard

2023-02(S)

Lee Jaehyon, Senior Fellow
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
2023.06.27

The term "Indo-Pacific region" has become widely accepted as a regional unit that encompasses South Korea. This region signifies a new era of "maritime politics," wherein maritime connections and events hold significant importance. Countries in the region are also formulating their own Indo-Pacific strategies with a strong emphasis on maritime affairs. Consequently, it is crucial for South Korea's foreign policy to align with this evolving trend.

This article presents a proposal outlining short-term, medium-term, and long-term roles for the ROK Navy and Coast Guard in shaping South Korea's maritime strategy. In the short term, the ROK Navy and Coast Guard should focus on supporting naval and coast guard capacity building efforts in Southeast Asia. They should actively participate in enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities, strengthening maritime law enforcement capabilities, and engaging in military public diplomacy. Furthermore, it is essential to enhance cooperation with Southeast Asian nations through joint exercises, thus fostering closer ties in the region.

Looking ahead to the long term, South Korea should strive to establish a firm presence in Southeast Asia by organizing joint exercises led by the ROK. Additionally, securing access to ship repair and support facilities should be a priority for South Korea, enabling efficient maintenance and logistical support for naval operations in the Indo-Pacific region. It is important to note that this article does not delve into specific plans and strategies; rather, its aim is to raise public awareness regarding the pivotal role of the ROK Navy and Coast Guard in South Korea's maritime endeavors.

Maritime Orientation of the Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region is clearly defined by its strong connection to the ocean. As implied by its name, it encompasses the Indian and Pacific oceans. This distinctive term marks a departure from previous regional designations, which were primarily land-focused. The Indo-Pacific places oceanic connectivity at the forefront, considering territories, countries, and continents as ancillary to these vast bodies of water.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) serves as the driving force behind the Indo-Pacific concept. QUAD countries have placed notable emphasis on the maritime domain in their Indo-Pacific strategies. The United States, in its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, designates the region between the U.S. Pacific coast and the Indian Ocean as the Indo-Pacific region. Japan, often credited with coining the concept, begins its discussion of the Indo-Pacific at the confluence of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian

Ocean. Australia, which possesses the world's third-largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) after France and the United States, defines the Indo-Pacific as stretching from India's east coast to the United States. Notably, six out of the nine pillars of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy are related to maritime affairs.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) underscores the significance of the maritime domain and perspective, prioritizing maritime cooperation as a key element of its cooperation agenda. The European Union defines the Indo-Pacific as an area "stretching from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands" and places considerable emphasis on maritime governance, including maritime order and the marine environment.

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific regional concept signifies a shift from a land-centric to an ocean-centric mindset. While actors in the Indo-Pacific region are based on land, the ocean serves as their meeting point, facilitating interaction and occasional confrontations. Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region, therefore, revolves around the sea, highlighting its central importance.

The Role of the ROK Navy and Coast Guard in the Indo-Pacific

South Korea holds a vital position within the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, and it is imperative for the ROK Navy and Coast Guard to assume a leading role. As South Korea expands its strategic presence in the region, unintended strategic misunderstandings may arise. While the Navy and Coast Guard are not completely immune to such attention and misunderstandings, they may comparatively draw less attention. Historically, navies around the world have embraced engagement with other nations as an integral part of their mission. Therefore, as an initial step towards augmenting South Korea's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region, it is crucial for the ROK Navy and Coast Guard to adopt a more proactive approach and actively engage with regional navies and coast guards.

Among the sub-regional areas, the ASEAN region of Southeast Asia should be South Korea's primary focus within the Indo-Pacific region. The ASEAN region constitutes a sub-unit of the Indo-Pacific region and shares the closest political, security, economic, and socio-cultural ties with South Korea. Owing to the existing basis of close cooperation, it will be less sensitive when the ROK Navy and Coast Guard engage in collaborative efforts. In line with its new Southeast Asia policy, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), South Korea prioritizes maritime cooperation as one of the primary domains for comprehensive security cooperation with ASEAN. Both the ASEAN Political and Security Community and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) recognize maritime issues as key areas for cooperation.

By actively pursuing enhanced engagement with regional navies and coast guards, South Korea can establish a stronger strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The ASEAN region, given its close ties and existing cooperation, serves as a promising starting point for South Korea's endeavors in the Indo-Pacific region. Emphasizing maritime cooperation aligns with the priorities outlined in South Korea's Southeast Asia policy and resonates with the perspectives of ASEAN regarding the Indo-Pacific region.

Short-term Cooperation: capacity building, MDA, law enforcement, and military public diplomacy

There are several areas of cooperation that can be initiated right away, providing quick and tangible results. These include naval and coast guard capacity building, enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), strengthening maritime law enforcement, and engaging in military public diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Cooperation on naval and maritime capacity building in Southeast Asia has already commenced to some extent. Given the relatively limited naval capabilities of Southeast Asian countries, they would greatly benefit from improved naval capabilities, enhanced operational capabilities of naval equipment, logistical support, and training programs for naval officers. Such support would also foster interoperability between Southeast Asian navies and the ROK Navy.

Closely linked to capacity building is the enhancement of MDA. South Korea can offer assistance to Southeast Asian countries in terms of the essential capabilities required for MDA and operational capabilities of their equipment. Additionally, information sharing on the maritime situation in the archipelagic Southeast Asian region and the Northeast Asian region, gathered by South Korean satellites, could be facilitated. MDA cooperation also should involve dispatching more ROK Navy liaison officers to the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre, promoting closer collaboration.

Thirdly, in terms of capacity building for law enforcement related to various non-traditional and transnational issues, the Coast Guard should assume a leading role. Addressing ASEAN's areas of interest, such as small arms trafficking, human trafficking, illicit drug and wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing, and border management (including maritime borders), the Coast Guard, responsible for these areas domestically, can play a crucial role. Leveraging their accumulated expertise, the Korean Coast Guard can contribute to enhancing the capabilities of developing countries in Southeast Asia to address these transnational issues. This cooperation also fosters stronger ties between South Korea and Southeast Asian nations, as well as promotes transnational collaboration among Southeast Asian countries.

Military public diplomacy is another area where the Korean Navy and Coast Guard can make Korea's presence felt in Southeast Asia. The Navy already engages in military public diplomacy through sailing and cruising training programs for naval academy students. Continuation and expansion of these existing military public diplomacy efforts not only contributes to regional maritime issues but also lays the groundwork for South Korea to expand its role in regional maritime affairs in the future.

Advanced Long-term Cooperation: joint exercises and shared maintenance and repair facilities

The ROK Navy and Coast Guard have the potential to engage in higher-level cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, including joint ROK-led exercises and, in the long term, securing access to naval facilities in the region. Southeast Asian countries perceive South Korea as a trusted partner without hidden strategic agendas or threats. While South Korea is a developed country, it is not a

superpower, but a middle power. ROK-led military exercises can serve as a model for joint military exercises between trusted middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region.

While it is a new endeavor and not without challenges, a phased approach, and a focus on non-traditional security areas such as search and rescue, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism can pave the way for successful joint exercises. Such exercises enable the navies of developing countries in Southeast Asia to enhance their operational capabilities. For Southeast Asian nations with stronger naval capabilities, increased interoperability with the ROK Navy can be an additional benefit.

Moreover, as cooperation progresses and deepens, there is the possibility of securing access to naval bases or support facilities in Southeast Asia for the Korean Navy and Coast Guard. In order for South Korea to play a more significant role in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific region, ROK naval deployments, visits, and Coast Guard presence in these waters are crucial. To facilitate smoother operations and engagement, having facilities in Southeast Asia for ship maintenance, repair, and replenishment would be highly advantageous.

These facilities could not only serve the maintenance and repair needs of South Korean ships but also provide support to the hosting of Southeast Asian countries' ships. Additionally, they could contribute to South Korea's assistance in developing Southeast Asian maritime capabilities. Overall, through joint exercises and the establishment of naval bases or support facilities, the ROK Navy and Coast Guard can enhance their cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, foster regional security, and strengthen maritime capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the context of the competitive and cooperative dynamics unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea's role is crucial. However, its current contributions and strategic influence in the region do not adequately reflect its overall capabilities. For South Korea to operate more autonomously in the region and make substantial contributions to maritime affairs and cooperation in the region, a greater role for the ROK Navy and Coast Guard is required.

The question, however, is whether these entities possess the necessary resources to fulfill this expanded role. While the ROK Navy and Coast Guard possess significant capabilities, technology, and expertise, their roles have traditionally been focused on the Korean Peninsula. To effectively fulfill the expected role in the regional maritime domain while still maintaining defense capabilities for the Korean Peninsula, surveillance of surrounding waters, and protection of maritime sovereignty, the ROK Navy must overcome its limitations in terms of physical and human resources.

This entails the need for increased personnel, more naval vessels, and additional financial resources. Recognizing the importance of this role at the national or whole-of-government level is critical. By addressing these resource limitations and obtaining the required support, the ROK Navy and Coast Guard can truly leverage their capabilities, contribute meaningfully to the region's maritime domain, and establish a more influential and proactive presence in the Indo-Pacific.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2023-10).

(‘한국의 인태 지역 전략과 해군, 해경의 역할’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=88737>)



Lee Jaehyon

Center for Regional Studies

Dr. LEE Jaehyon is a senior fellow of the Center for ASEAN and Oceanian Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Previously, Dr. Lee was a research fellow at the Korean Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (KISEAS) and a visiting professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), Korean National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA). Dr. Lee's research focuses on Southeast Asian politics and international relations, East Asian regional cooperation, and non-traditional and human security issues. His recent publications include "Transnational Natural Disasters and Environmental Issues in East Asia," *IFANS Review* (2011), "Political Crises after Democratization in South Korea and Thailand: Comparative Perspectives of Democratic Consolidation," *Korea Observer* (2008), "A 2+2 for the Future: The First Korea-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting," (2013), "Identifying South Korea's Regional Partners: On the Environment, Family Values, Politics and Society," (2015). Dr. Lee received a B.A. and M.A. from Yonsei University and his Ph.D. in politics from Murdoch University, Australia.