

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

AUKUS STRAND B: OPPORTUNITY FOR SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN?

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In August, the United Kingdom House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee published a report titled “Tilting Horizons: The Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific.” The report covers a wide spectrum of foreign and security policy recommendations pertaining to the Indo-Pacific region at the UK’s national strategic level. It addresses matters concerning relations with allies and partners, approaches to China, as well as human rights and the rules-based international order. Notably, the report suggests that the UK should propose to the United States and Australia that South Korea and Japan be included in the AUKUS partnership.

The report notes that AUKUS goes beyond the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines by Australia. It emphasizes that the participation of the United States, the UK, and Australia in AUKUS also encompasses close collaboration in critical areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, quantum technologies, and undersea technologies. According to the report, these critical domains in turn provide economic and security benefits for the UK. Therefore, the report recommends expanding the scope of cooperation to include “Strand B,” involving South Korea and Japan.

As of now, there is no definitive government position on this proposal in South Korea or Japan. It will probably take some time for concrete discussions to take place. Nevertheless, this proposal should be seriously considered by policy experts in South Korea and Japan, for the following reasons.

Firstly, Japan is an island nation, and, like the UK and Australia, it has no choice but to use sea routes to reach the outside world. The Korean Peninsula, on the other hand, is part of Eurasian continent, but due to the frozen inter-Korean conflict, South Korea finds itself as a de facto island, making maritime connectivity absolutely critical to its economy. The Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, as well as the South and East China Seas are all critical to energy imports of both South Korea and Japan. In the event of an emergency or contingency along these sea lanes, both countries would be at risk of a major economic crisis. Therefore, serious consideration should be given to working more closely with maritime powers such as the United States, the UK, and Australia on maritime security.

Secondly, if AUKUS serves as a platform for future core technology cooperation as the report suggests, this could also prove beneficial to South Korea and Japan. In particular, the cyber and space sectors stand to benefit from collaborative efforts and synergies. North Korea, a direct threat to both South Korea and Japan, has engaged in cryptocurrency theft for missile development, and is attempting to develop reconnaissance satellites, as evidenced by Kim Jong Un's visit to Vostochny Cosmodrome and discussions with Putin on space cooperation. It is important to recognize the close interconnection between cyber and space domains. Undersea cables also play a crucial role in this context. Satellites are directly linked to various communication services, and in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Internet of Things and autonomous driving will increasingly rely on satellites. Therefore, space security and cybersecurity are inherently intertwined. In addition, given that most of the Internet and international telecommunication networks are facilitated through submarine cables, their military significance is also on the rise.

South Korea and Japan are both liberal democracies with many similarities in political culture and values related to human rights and individual freedoms, values they share with the AUKUS countries. From a national security perspective, it is imperative for these countries to work together in building a resilient cyber and space infrastructure.

Thirdly, while improved relations between Seoul and Tokyo have prompted efforts to strengthen trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan, there is still no strong public consensus in all three countries. The leadership of these countries must demonstrate to their citizens the tangible benefits of cooperation with one another. In this regard, partnering with AUKUS in emerging security fields such as maritime security, cybersecurity, and space security can help foster the development of new industries and synergize related research fields, providing a compelling argument to their respective populations.

The concern, of course, lies in how China might react. The three AUKUS countries, along with South Korea and Japan, have deeply interconnected economic relationships with China. Consequently, turning China into an adversary serves no one's best interests. South Korea, in particular, has been cautious about joining the QUAD for this very reason. It is important to recognize that stability and peace in the South China Sea and East China Sea are important to the AUKUS countries, South Korea, China, and Japan.

At the same time, if the strategic competition with China is a decades-long technology war, it makes sense to collaborate with countries that can trust each other and have complementary strengths and synergies, rather than fight individual battles. Given that the race for future technologies involves setting standards and ushering in the era of space exploration, South Korea and Japan may need to discuss with AUKUS how to avoid exclusion from this competition without turning China into an enemy.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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