

Chapter 1

SOUTH KOREA AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: PARADOX OF A CRUCIAL MARITIME PLAYER

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The South China Sea is a critical maritime gateway for the Republic of Korea's (ROK) national survival. Due to the presence of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the ROK cannot utilise any land-based trade routes, making Seoul's dependence on maritime trade exceptionally high. The value of maritime trade is not merely an economic issue for the ROK. Because of limited domestic resources, the ROK imports most of its essential commodities, such as oil, iron ore, and coal. All of these resources traverse the maritime domain, again underscoring the extent to which the ROK's survival depends on the safety of seaborne trade. These critical resources predominantly reach the ROK via the South China Sea, highlighting its importance to Seoul.

Despite the importance of maintaining safe sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through the South China Sea, the ROK's interest in the region has been relatively limited compared to other countries that share similar geopolitical concerns. For instance, the ROK only began explicitly referring to the South China Sea in its 2020 Defence White Paper – a relatively late development compared to Australia and Japan, which began raising concerns over the issue in 2013 and the 1990s, respectively.¹ The ROK has publicly, on occasion, issued broad statements supporting freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea even before 2020.² However, it has consistently avoided establishing a physical presence in the region. In fact, the ROK has never deployed its naval assets to the South China Sea in a manner similar to Australia, Japan, or the United States, which regularly send naval vessels to signal their commitment to freedom of navigation and to support the peaceful resolution of disputes.

This clearly illustrates a paradox in the ROK's relationship with the South China Sea. Despite recognising the value of the South China Sea and the importance of stability in the region, Seoul has consistently avoided positioning itself in maritime disputes. This approach contrasts not only with that of its regional partners but also with several European countries, such as France, Germany, and the UK, that regularly deploy naval assets to the South China Sea. This chapter explores this paradox and alternative pathways

¹ The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2020 국방백서 [2020 Defence White Paper] (The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2020), 12 and 15-16. [in Korean]; Australian Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Australian Department of Defence, 2013), 8 and 11. See also, Japanese Defense Agency, “防衛白書 平成 8 年版 [Defence White Paper 1996],” Ministry of Defense Japan, accessed November 23, 2025, http://www.clearing.mod.go.jp/hakusho_data/1996/103.htm. [in Japanese]

² Jaehyon Lee, “South Korea and the South China Sea: A Domestic and International Balancing Act,” *Asia Policy* 21, (2016): 36.

in the following order. First, it examines the ROK's assessment of conflict escalation risks in the South China Sea. Second, it evaluates the diplomatic and military measures the ROK is currently taking to avert escalation. Finally, it offers recommendations on what the ROK can do, jointly with other middle-power states both within and outside the region, to enhance stability in the South China Sea and prevent escalation. In particular, this paper argues that the ROK should increase its naval presence in the South China Sea while taking a cautious approach to arms exports to South China Sea stakeholders, recognising that such exports could affect the regional balance of power.

Assessment of escalation risks in the South China Sea by the ROK

The ROK often interprets developments in the South China Sea by linking them to the situation on the Korean Peninsula. This tendency is reflected clearly Seoul's key strategic documents, including its Defence White Papers and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. According to the 2022 Defence White Paper, the most recent edition at the time of writing, the South China Sea is mentioned four times, but none of these references relates to escalation scenarios. The document only offers general observations, such as: "China is using its rapidly growing economic and military power to strengthen its influence in the Taiwan Strait, in addition to the East and South China Seas".³ While the South China Sea is acknowledged as host to critical SLOCs, the discussion remains limited to broad factual statements. For example, it notes that "[the Indo-Pacific] region has numerous shipping lanes of strategic importance, such as the sea lines of communication linking the Strait of Hormuz with the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea", but provides no further analysis.⁴ Regarding the ROK's position on the South China Sea dispute, the Defence White Paper states:

[The Republic of Korea and the United States Defence Ministers] reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the sea, lawful unimpeded commerce, and respect for international law including freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful use of the seas, including the South China Sea and beyond. They further expressed their intent to work together for that purpose.⁵

Indeed, this language is quoting a simple joint statement issued by the ROK and the United States, and it does not have significant implications for Seoul's defence policy. More precisely, it was included in the Security Consultative Meeting section, which generally discusses alliance defence policy with a primary focus on the Korean Peninsula. There was no follow-up analysis, further confirming that the ROK's assessment of the South China Sea is made in conjunction with its considerations regarding the Korean Peninsula; in other words, it does not conduct a separate assessment.

³ The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2022 국방백서 [2022 Defence White Paper] (The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2023), 8.

⁴ The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2022 국방백서 [2022 Defence White Paper], 12.

⁵ The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 365.

The statements on the South China Sea are somewhat bolder in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, which evaluates the significance of the South China Sea in terms of the ROK's national security. The document assesses the South China Sea as follows: "In particular, the South China Sea is a key sea route, accounting for around 64% and 46% of our crude oil transport and natural gas transport, respectively".⁶ Compared to the Defence White Paper, this reflects an enhanced level of interest by the ROK government in the South China Sea, underscoring its reliance on the SLOCs passing through the region. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is a central government strategic document, whereas the Defence White Paper is narrowly focused on the Ministry of National Defense. This demonstrates that, although there are interests in the South China Sea within the ROK central government, Seoul's defence community does not require the South China Sea as an operational area. This distinction is visible in the differences between the ROK's diplomatic engagements and its military presence in the South China Sea, which is discussed in detail later. Moreover, the document states:

Furthermore, considering the changing security environment, we will strengthen strategic communication and cooperation with ASEAN not only on the traditional security issues related to the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea, but also on economic security, maritime security, and other emerging security issues.⁷

This is arguably the first official ROK government statement expressing its interest in the South China Sea. Although it does not directly address how the ROK government views the dispute itself, the statement clearly demonstrates its interest in the region as part of its broader Southeast Asia policy.

Meanwhile, in November 2025, the United States Forces Korea (USFK) – a subordinated unit of the US Indo-Pacific Command that has been traditionally in charge of deterrence and defence of the Korean Peninsula – revealed a new strategic map of the Indo-Pacific region (see Figure 1), prompting renewed discussion of the South China Sea within the ROK's security community. The newly released map presents the Korean Peninsula 'east up', highlighting its maritime connectivity to the wider Indo-Pacific.⁸ Given that the United States has suggested an expanded role for the USFK in broader Indo-Pacific operations, the map implies the possibility that the USFK could become involved in various contested areas of the region, such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, if so circumstances require.⁹ This means that, regardless of the ROK's reluctance to

⁶ The Government of the Republic of Korea, *자유, 평화, 번영의 인도-태평양 전략* [Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region] (The Government of the Republic of Korea, 2022), 5. [in Korean]

⁷ The Government of the Republic of Korea, *자유, 평화, 번영의 인도-태평양 전략* [Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region], 13.

⁸ Xavier T. Brunson, "[Commander's Article] The East-Up Map: Revealing Hidden Strategic Advantages in the Indo-Pacific," United States Forces Korea, November 16, 2025, <https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/4332674/commanders-article-the-east-up-map-revealing-hidden-strategic-advantages-in-the/>.

⁹ Yu-jung Lee, "USFK Confirms Stance on Strategic Flexibility, Suggests U.S. Troops in Korea Already Deterring China," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 12, 2025,

become entangled in wider regional issues, Seoul may be drawn into a potential conflict in the South China Sea if the USFK plays an active role in such scenarios. For example, the USFK Air Force could be deployed in a potential South China Sea conflict. Such a scenario could in turn open ROK-located USFK Air Force bases to Chinese retaliation. In other words, irrespective of the ROK government's own assessment of escalation risks in the South China Sea, the ROK may already be indirectly implicated due to the US government's willingness to deploy the USFK for broader regional contingencies. Indeed, the United States would still need to consult with the ROK should it mobilise the USFK for operations beyond the Korean Peninsula.¹⁰ However, it is crucial to note that wartime operational control (OPCON) over both the USFK and the ROK Armed Forces rests with the Commander of the USFK.¹¹ Although there are ongoing debates regarding the transfer of wartime OPCON to a ROK commander, no such transfer has yet been confirmed.¹² This means that, should a conflict escalate into war, the USFK could even issue orders that would involve the ROK Armed Forces in the conflict.

Diplomatic and military measures to avert escalation

In addition to a lack of clear assessment of conflict escalation risks in the South China Sea, the ROK's engagement in the area remains marginal compared to that of other regional middle-power countries. In particular, rather than having its separate South China Sea policy, the ROK often addresses the South China Sea or issues related to it as part of its broader approaches to Southeast Asia or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This again illustrates its reluctance to become fully engaged in regional disputes.

As noted in the escalation risk assessment, the ROK's first explicit articulation of its interest in the South China Sea appeared in its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Following this, the ROK continued to express concern over disputes in the South China Sea, particularly those involving clashes between China and the Philippines. Under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration (2022-2025) in particular, the ROK government frequently emphasised coercive actions carried out by China. For instance, regarding the incident in which a Chinese coast guard vessel rammed a Philippine coast guard ship near the Second Thomas Shoal, a disputed area between the two countries, the ROK government stated:

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-06-12/national/defense/USFK-confirms-stance-on-strategic-flexibility-suggests-US-troops-in-Korea-already-deterring-China/2328993>.

¹⁰ Clint Work, "The South Korea-US Alliance Is Due for an Overhaul," *The Diplomat*, May 19, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/the-south-korea-us-alliance-is-due-for-an-overhaul/>. See also, Jeong-kyu Lee, "Implications of U.S. Forces Korea's Strategic Flexibility for Security on the Korean Peninsula," *Sejong Focus*, October 31, 2025, <https://sejong.org/web/board/1/egoread.php?bd=22&itm=&txt=&pg=1&seq=12529>.

¹¹ The USFK Commander and the ROK-US Combined Forces Commander are held by the same individual, with the USFK Commander also serving as the ROK-US Combined Forces Commander.

¹² The ROK Policy Brief, "전시작전통제권(전작권) 전환 [Wartime Operational Command Transfer]," *The ROK Policy Brief*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.korea.kr/special/policyCurationView.do?newsId=148897535>.

Regarding the incident between Chinese and Philippine vessels in the South China Sea on 22 October, our government expresses concern over unilateral actions that heighten tensions and threaten the safety of seafarers. Our government supports peace and security, the maintenance of a rules-based international order, and the freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, in the South China Sea – a major sea line of communication.¹³

Throughout the Yoon administration, the South Korean government issued similar statements on four occasions, despite criticisms from China.¹⁴ In response, Beijing repeatedly asserted that the ROK is not a stakeholder in the South China Sea and that it would not be beneficial for the ROK to involve itself in the disputes.¹⁵ The Yoon administration's continued references to the South China Sea indicate that, at least rhetorically, the ROK has begun to show greater diplomatic engagement with the issue. However, such statements ceased during the Lee Jae Myung administration, which began in June 2025. Unlike the Yoon administration, the Lee administration did not issue any statements regarding the South China Sea dispute by the end of 2025.

Despite the rhetoric, the ROK's military engagement has not developed to the same extent, and its posture towards the South China Sea has not changed substantially as a result. Over the past decade, many regional middle-power navies – most notably Australia and Japan – have expanded their patrol activities in the South China Sea. Australia's premier annual regional naval engagement programme, Indo-Pacific Endeavour, began in 2017 and deploys Australian naval forces across the broader Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea, each year.¹⁶ This has increased the Royal Australian Navy's presence in the region, and on several occasions, Australian naval assets have conducted transits through the South China Sea with an emphasis on freedom of navigation.¹⁷ Similarly, Japan launched its flagship annual 'Indo-Pacific Deployment' in 2017. Like Australia, Japan

¹³ The Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “대변인 정례브리핑 (10.24) [Spokesperson's Regular Briefing (24 October)],” The Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 24, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4078/view.do?seq=368586&page=1.

¹⁴ The Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “외교부 브리핑 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Briefing],” The Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed November 27, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4078/list.do.

¹⁵ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Korea, “주한 중국대사관 대변인, 남중국해 문제에 대한 한국 측의 부당한 발언 관련 성명 발표 [Spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in South Korea Issues Statement Regarding South Korea's Unjustified Remarks on the South China Sea Issue],” Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Korea, June 21, 2024, https://kr.china-embassy.gov.cn/kor/sgxx/202406/t20240621_11439820.htm.

¹⁶ Australian Department of Defence, “Indo-Pacific Endeavour,” Australian Department of Defence, accessed December 8, 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/operations/indo-pacific-operations/indo-pacific-endeavour>.

¹⁷ Defence Media, “Australia Conducts Routine Transit through South China Sea,” Australian Government Defence, November 22, 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2025-11-22/australia-conducts-routine-transit-through-south-china-sea>.

regularly conducts transits through the South China Sea during these deployments, highlighting its commitment to a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’.¹⁸



FIGURE 1: MAP OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA WITH SURROUNDINGS

Source: Xavier T. Brunson, “[Commander’s Article] The East-Up Map: Revealing Hidden Strategic Advantages in the Indo-Pacific,” *United States Forces Korea*, November 16, 2025, <https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/4332674/commanders-article-the-east-up-map-revealing-hidden-strategic-advantages-in-the/>

However, despite the ROK’s increased rhetorical references to the South China Sea and its stated interest in freedom of navigation, its naval presence in the region has not expanded. Unlike Australia and Japan, the ROK does not maintain annual or regular naval operations in the South China Sea; rather, the area is simply used as an en route passage for naval operations heading to other regions. The closest activity that the ROK Navy conducts in the South China Sea is the annual Cruise Training Task Group, which provides final-year naval academy midshipmen with seafaring experience.¹⁹ Each year, the task group undertakes a long-distance deployment, often visiting Southeast Asian

¹⁸ Commander, Task Force 71/Destroyer Squadron 15 Public Affairs, “U.S., Canada Support JMSDF Deployment Exercise in South China Sea,” U.S. Pacific Fleet, October 3, 2022, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/newsroom/news/article/3179624/us-canada-support-jmsdf-deployment-exercise-in-south-china-sea/>.

¹⁹ Goun Heo, “해군, 9월부터 105일간 美·호주 등 9개국 10개항 순항훈련 [Navy to Conduct 105-day Cruising Training Exercise Visiting 10 Ports in 9 Countries Including the United States and Australia from September],” *News1 Korea*, July 21, 2025, <https://v.daum.net/v/20250721060149553>.

countries and therefore traversing the South China Sea. However, this does not mean that the ROK formally categorises this presence as part of its military measures in the South China Sea aimed at maintaining freedom of navigation. Although the task group passes through the region annually, the ROK government does not issue specific statements about these transits or link them to its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy. This means that while the ROK does maintain some degree of military presence in the South China Sea, the ROK government does not appear to utilise this presence for purposes of escalation avoidance or crisis management in the region.

Policy recommendations for the ROK

Even though the ROK rhetorically engages on the South China Sea issue through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, in practice, it provides little military support to that rhetoric. The ROK, however, has clear incentives to allocate more resources towards the South China Sea with the aim of enhancing stability in the region. As discussed in the escalation risk assessment section, the ROK relies on the South China Sea for about sixty-four per cent of its crude oil imports and forty-six per cent of its natural gas transportation. This means that, if freedom of navigation in the South China Sea were denied, the ROK's national survival would depend on whichever country controlled the area. Numerous international analyses, including the 2016 UNCLOS ruling, demonstrate that China is seen as asserting excessive maritime claims in the region, which could jeopardise the ROK's national interests by granting Beijing the ability to influence or restrict critical maritime trade.²⁰

One of the most direct, yet politically challenging, ways for the ROK to contribute to stability in the South China Sea would be to increase its naval presence in the region. Currently, both regional and extra-regional middle-power countries are actively expanding their naval activities in the South China Sea, with one of their primary goals being to deter escalation by signalling their willingness to be involved. Such signalling communicates that, should China attempt to change the status quo by force, it would face significant resistance.²¹ However, China too is investing heavily in expanding and enhancing its naval capabilities; and despite continued interest and increased naval presence by countries supporting freedom of navigation, China may ultimately be able to outmatch the overall sea power balance. In such a scenario, China might simply ignore these countries' deployments and continue to assert its excessive maritime claims. Strengthening the ROK presence in the South China Sea could help prevent this outcome,

²⁰ US Energy Information Administration, "South China Sea," US Energy Information Administration, March 21, 2024, https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea. See also, United Nations, *Reports of International Arbitral Awards: The South China Sea Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China, Award of 12 July 2016* (United Nations, 2016).

²¹ Dongkeun Lee, "Navies in the Indo-Pacific: A Key Shaper of the Balance of Power," Australian Institute of International Affairs, August 28, 2024, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/navies-in-the-indo-pacific-a-key-shaper-of-the-balance-of-power/>.

and contribute to a regional balance of power in favour of supporting freedom of navigation

Yet, this would not be easy for Seoul, largely due to substantial domestic constraints. Although no public polling specifically addresses the ROK's views on involvement in South China Sea disputes, data exists regarding public perceptions of a Taiwan Strait crisis. According to a survey conducted by the East Asia Institute, while 87.5 per cent of respondents agreed that a Taiwan Strait contingency is crucial for the ROK's national security, only thirteen per cent believed the ROK should deploy its forces to such a crisis. Meanwhile, 71.8 per cent opposed the involvement of USFK in that scenario.²² The Taiwan Strait is geographically closer to the ROK and its implications for the ROK's security would be even more significant than a conflict in the South China Sea. Accordingly, if public support for Seoul's involvement in a Taiwan Strait contingency is already this low, this suggests that opinion in favour of intervening in a South China Sea crisis would be even weaker.

Against this backdrop, rather than abruptly increasing its naval presence, **the ROK should consider making better use of existing operations. For instance, when the Cruise Training Task Group mentioned is deployed annually through the South China Sea, the government could explore opportunities for joint port calls with like-minded navies to demonstrate that the ROK's presence can be coordinated with both regional and extra-regional middle-power countries.** Potential partners could include Australia, Japan, France, Germany, and the UK, all of which regularly deploy warships to the South China Sea. Such an approach could minimise direct confrontation with China, as South Korea would not be adding new deployments explicitly intended to safeguard freedom of navigation. Instead, it would be sending an indirect signal to China that the ROK is also interested in maintaining the freedom of navigation in the region while continuing the existing operational patterns.

Indeed, participating in multilateral exercises and conducting maritime patrols in the South China Sea should be considered a long-term objective of South Korea's involvement in the regional dispute, given that freedom of navigation in this area is not merely an economic issue for the ROK.

As a third recommendation, **a diplomatic initiative that the ROK should consider more seriously is the transfer of retired warships to Southeast Asian countries.** The ROK has already undertaken such measures. For instance, four *Pohang*-class patrol combat corvettes have been donated to Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines, which is directly involved in maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Although the ROK's intention behind these transfers was not explicitly linked to concerns about the

²² Yeonggyo Jeong, Hyeonjoo Park, and Jihye Yoo, ““대만해협, 韓에 중요” 88%...“군사충돌 땐 파병” 13%뿐 [새 정부 외교에 바란다⑤] [“Taiwan Strait Deemed Crucial for South Korea” by 88%... Only 13% “Support Troop Deployment in Case of Military Conflict” [Expectations for the New Government's Diplomacy]],” *The JoongAng*, June 12, 2025, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25343155>.

PRC, Beijing nonetheless viewed the action with suspicion. In 2014, when the transfer to the Philippines was decided, the Chinese Embassy in the ROK issued a diplomatic complaint – an indication that Beijing considered such deliveries to be an unfavourable development.²³ This case offers an important lesson for Seoul. Transfers of retired warships can influence the South China Sea disputes by contributing to the recipient state's maritime capabilities, thereby shifting the regional balance of power. Accordingly, the ROK should carefully consider the destination of future donations to ensure they support deterrence and stability in the region. A similar logic applies to the ROK's naval exports more broadly, given that the country has become one of the world's leading arms exporters.²⁴ Future warship exports to South China Sea claimant states could directly affect the regional balance of power, meaning that the ROK should view its arms exports not merely as economic transactions but also as instruments that contribute to regional security dynamics.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ROK's assessment of conflict escalation risks in the South China Sea, its current diplomatic and military actions aimed at preventing a crisis in the region, and policy recommendations for cooperation with like-minded middle-power countries. The analysis shows that the ROK does not maintain a distinct risk assessment for the South China Sea, despite the area's importance as a critical maritime gateway for the ROK's national survival. Although the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy introduced some shifts in language, these changes have been largely rhetorical. In practice, the ROK's naval presence in the South China Sea remains limited compared to that of other middle-power states. The evolving approach of the Lee administration has not significantly deviated from this policy, and Seoul has even reduced its rhetorical engagement with the South China Sea during the first six months of the administration.

This chapter has proposed that the ROK could increase its naval presence by expanding its deployments in the South China Sea, or alternatively coordinating joint port calls through the existing Cruise Training Task Group. This latter approach would help minimise domestic political risks, while enabling the ROK government to sensitise the public to South China Sea-related threats to their own security and prosperity. Such engagement and debate may in turn generate more durable public support for a stronger South China Sea military presence. This chapter has also recommended the transfer of both retired and newly built naval assets to countries involved in the South China Sea disputes, as another avenue for the ROK to contribute to regional stability. Such assets

²³ Ildo Hwang, “[단독]중국의 노골적인 ‘상전 노릇’ [[Exclusive] China's Blatant ‘Master-Servant Behaviour’],” *The Dong-A Ilbo*, August 3, 2014, <https://www.donga.com/news/BestClick/article/all/20140803/65559613/1>.

²⁴ Sipri, “Arms Transfer Database,” Sipri, accessed November 28, 2025, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/>.

directly shape the balance of power in the South China Sea and therefore support the deterrence of potential conflict in the region.

A key concern regarding the ROK's future involvement in the South China Sea dispute relates to recent changes in government. President Yoon Suk Yeol, who had announced the Indo-Pacific Strategy, was impeached following the 2024 martial law crisis, leading to the opposition party taking the presidency. The new administration has shown relatively limited interest in continuing the previous government's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which suggests that the ROK's engagement in the South China Sea could become marginalised under the current leadership.²⁵

²⁵ Dongkeun Lee, "South Korea Moves Away from Former Indo-Pacific Strategy," East Asia Forum, July 21, 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/07/21/south-korea-moves-away-from-former-indo-pacific-strategy/>.