

13. South Korea and Japan's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

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- Pacific maritime security relies on a strategic order where shared values and objectives are upheld by the region's diverse international partners. In a region that aims to be 'friends to all,' the deepening securitisation of United States-led alliances with Japan and South Korea driven by the rise of great power politics could impact the strategic balance and priorities sought by Pacific Island countries.
- Japan and South Korea are strengthening ties with Pacific Island countries in diverse areas of maritime security, including their regional development agenda that extends beyond great power politics. Careful harmonisation of resources coming from Japan and South Korea is needed to effectively contribute to the crowded donor space of the Blue Pacific.

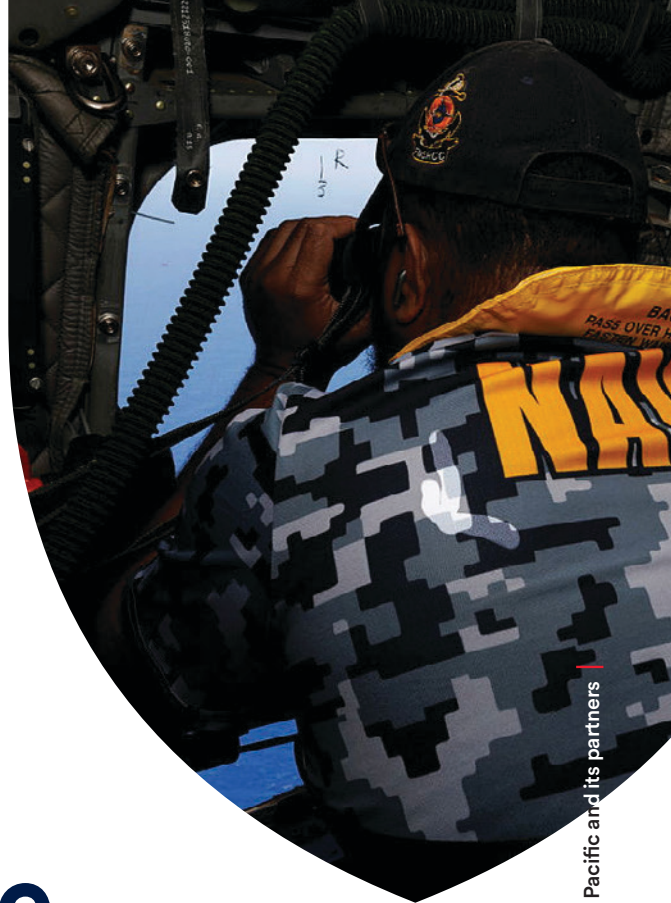
Japan and South Korea are significant global naval powers with a newly developed focus on the Pacific.³⁸⁶ Japan,

a founding member of the **Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue** from 1989, and South Korea, an early Dialogue partner from 1995, are credible and trusted partners of the Pacific.³⁸⁷ Japan developed and articulated its focus on a **Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy** in 2016 and Korea's 2022 **Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region** expands the geographical scope of their traditional maritime security focus area.³⁸⁸ The 2024 Lowy Power index situates Japan and South Korea on the rise in terms of resources and influence with China demonstrably impacting US primacy in the core strategic region of Asia.³⁸⁹

In examining major powers' engagement with Pacific Island countries, this paper highlights two key implications of analysing Japan and South Korea together. First, as formal Asian allies of the United States (US), Japan and South Korea are situating themselves in US-led multilateral alignments in the Indo-Pacific,

e.g., the Quad and AUKUS. Japan and South Korea represent external security strategies rooted in great power politics, which Pacific Island countries' approach cautiously. Second, Japan and South Korea are involved in maritime security cooperation in the Pacific, with a regional focus on development and stability that aligns with the goals of Pacific Island countries and extends beyond great power politics. This paper argues that it is important for Japan and South Korea to continue their maritime security cooperation with Pacific Island countries in alignment with Pacific priorities.

The rise in power of South Korea and Japan establishes a foundation for elevated relations with Pacific Island countries, which nonetheless continue to occupy a peripheral position in the major strategic interests of Japan and South Korea.³⁹⁰ The gambit for these two nations is that while deeper engagement in the Pacific may bolster their common ally, the US, it may cause tension in their strategic



Pacific maritime security cooperation: views from the Pacific and its partners

and economic relationship with China. Despite these challenges, recent summits with Pacific Island countries reveal concrete outcomes on maritime security, which we will examine.³⁹¹ This paper explores Japan and Korea's relations with the Pacific in turn, set against the backdrop of great power politics in the region.

Diplomatic relations between South Korea and the Pacific Islands countries have been elevated, transitioning from triennial to biennial meetings between foreign ministers.

Foremost, maritime security is fundamentally dependent on the stability of maritime zones. Japan explicitly acknowledges the strategic significance of the Pacific for ensuring uninterrupted maritime connectivity of the Indo-Pacific.³⁹² Japan's official position, in 2024, for the preservation of existing baselines and maritime zones supports the Pacific Islands Forum's vital maritime priority under the 2021 *Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise*.³⁹³ Japan's 2024 launch of its 'New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'' in India was a revealing diplomatic choice that underlines the rising power, connection and influence of these two nations in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁹⁴ South Korea, in 2022, also notably supported this Pacific Islands Forum declaration despite the very real consequences of taking a position on maritime boundaries given its own maritime disputes.³⁹⁵

Japan

This section examines the Pacific maritime security cooperation aspects of Japan's 'New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'' and later analyses the ramifications of Japan's potential accession to AUKUS and its discharge of nuclear wastewater.

Under the new plan Japan seeks to 'enhance the autonomy of each country and the unity of the region' and escalates its maritime security cooperation in the Pacific.³⁹⁶ In 2024, Japan released more detailed information regarding its 'Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'' outlining the specific 'items of cooperation' under four pillars:³⁹⁷

- Pillar 1 Principles for Peace and Rules for Prosperity: Promote peace through respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and oppose unilateral changes by force; establish rules for transparent and fair development finance.
- Pillar 2 Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way: Expand Japanese energy and infrastructure companies overseas to revitalize economies.
- Pillar 3 Multilayered Connectivity: Enhance connectivity to foster growth and reduce reliance on any single country to mitigate risk and political fragility.
- Pillar 4 Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the 'Sea' to the 'Air': Cooperate with countries and regional organizations sharing FOIP principles, promote the rule of law at sea through shared principles and knowledge exchange.³⁹⁸

The fourth pillar is focused on 'Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the 'Sea' to the 'Air'' and Japan's core contribution is through the Quad's **Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA)**.³⁹⁹ The 2024 Quad **Wilmington Statement** introduced the **Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Missions**, set to operate from 2025, and the **Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI)** to enhance capability and interoperability with partners in integrated monitoring and enforcement at sea.⁴⁰⁰ The Quad explicitly acknowledges the centrality of the Pacific Islands Forum and its support for the **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent** including the Pacific's expanded conception of security.⁴⁰¹ Japan also joined the **Partners of the Blue Pacific** in 2022, along with other founding members including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the US.⁴⁰²

In 2024, at the latest Japan Pacific Island Summit (PALM), there was a deepening of defence links under Japan's efforts for more expansive **Indo-Pacific**

Deployment (IPD).⁴⁰³ Specifically, continuing the arrangement for port calls by **Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF)** aircrafts and vessels and technical cooperation with the **Japan Coast Guard Mobile Cooperation Team (MCT)**.⁴⁰⁴ In 2024, the **Japan-Pacific Islands Defence Dialogue (JPIDD)** held its second dialogue, a critical forum to demonstrate alignment between its Indo-Pacific plan and the *2050 Strategy*.⁴⁰⁵ At the JPIDD, the Japanese Defense Minister Kihara sought harmonisation with the existing regional security forum the **South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM)** which is attended only by those Pacific Island countries with military forces.⁴⁰⁶

This reinforces Japan's shift towards closer relations with Pacific Island countries, which emphasises capacity building for maritime law enforcement agencies.⁴⁰⁷ This includes the Japan-Pacific Island countries **Ship Rider Cooperation Program** which has run since 2023.⁴⁰⁸ Japan also shares its global expertise in disaster management through HADR cooperation of armed forces to increase Pacific resilience.⁴⁰⁹ The outcome document of PALM 10 reflects a 27 year history of respectful cooperation, characterised by a well-thought-out and synergistic selection of mutually beneficial activities. This approach has solidified Japan's esteemed reputation for diplomacy, establishing it as a trusted regional partner.

There is a deliberate trend towards the securitization of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in response to the deteriorating geostrategic environment.⁴¹⁰ Japan seeks to reduce vulnerabilities within the Pacific and improve access to and within the region with an extensive and expensive 'accelerat[ion] of our support for the conventional infrastructure and to improve regional connectivity'.⁴¹¹ Given the comprehensive investment, it is worthwhile outlining the scope of works includes: airport development in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Palau; port development in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Samoa; and laying submarine cables in Micronesia.⁴¹²

Japan is also engaged in the softer diplomatic aspects of maritime security with diplomatic overtures to the Pacific aimed at enhancing capacity in ocean governance and the blue economy.

In 2022, at the global Our Ocean Conference Prime Minister Kishida made a US\$400 million commitment to improve ocean security, reduce ocean pollution, and bolster the Pacific's blue economy.⁴¹³ There is also emphasis on support for regional implementation of SDG14.⁴¹⁴ A particular strength of its ODA are the people-to-people relations developed under the UN **Nippon Foundation Fellowship program, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) Programme, Pacific Leaders' Educational Assistance for Development of State programme and Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs)** which include numerous maritime security related programs from climate change and disaster management to ocean affairs, marine science and fisheries.⁴¹⁵

Korea

Since 2022, Korea has implemented its '**Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region**' aiming for a resilient regional order based on universal norms, rules, values, and inclusiveness, with Oceania specifically in scope.⁴¹⁶ For Korea, isolated from land-based connections with the Asian continent by North Korea, maritime trade is essential, with the South China Sea serving as the primary route for transporting critical fossil fuel energy.⁴¹⁷ The development of Korea's 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy shifts Korea away from its previous national strategy the 'New Southern Policy' aimed at hedging its allegiances in a delicate balance between the global powers of China and the US.⁴¹⁸ Korea's deepening security relations with the US and Japan through trilateral Indo-Pacific cooperation are of the utmost consequence for the Pacific.⁴¹⁹ Korea's membership in the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** is also a further signal of its alignment with US-led security interests.⁴²⁰

Diplomatic relations between South Korea and the Pacific Islands countries have been elevated, transitioning from triennial to biennial meetings between foreign ministers. Since 2023, these have been complemented by a meeting of Heads of State — the **Korea-Pacific Islands Forum Summit**.⁴²¹ Korea's commitment at the summit to double

ODA by 2027 is a notable contribution to the region. However, the funding appears insufficient given the ambitious scope of marine and other security and development projects proposed at the Summit.⁴²² Maritime security investments are proposed for exchanges of maritime officials, training for marine engineers, fisheries officers, marine science PhD placements, fisheries conferences. Additionally, employing a phased approach, Korea aims for the expansion of an initial **Korea-Fiji Cooperation Center on Oceans and Fisheries** and Tuvalu fishing village small port construction project across the Blue Pacific Continent.⁴²³ Nonetheless, Korea brings regional expertise with a formal MoU established in 2016 for marine science cooperation with the **Pacific Community (SPC)**.⁴²⁴ Recently, it has refocused its efforts on enhancing cooperation through the **Korea Institute of Ocean Science and Technology**, specifically in geospatial technology and marine spatial planning.⁴²⁵

To date, Korea's security engagement in the Pacific remains limited, with its resources primarily focused on Asia.⁴²⁶ Korea's most significant future contribution to Pacific maritime security cooperation will likely come through its relationships with Australia and partners such as the US and Japan.⁴²⁷ For instance, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, includes the Pacific Island Forum members Australia and New Zealand which together 'conducted maritime security exercises to strengthen regional cooperation in the field of maritime security'.⁴²⁸

Prospects for the future

This final section investigates the potential effects on the Pacific arising from a new course in Japan and South Korea's security partnerships. The prospect of Japan or South Korea joining **Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement** is significant for the maritime security environment in the Blue Pacific. Pillar I of the AUKUS agreement facilitates cooperation on submarine equipment transfer to build and sustain nuclear-powered submarines, which Australia maintains is in line with international nuclear non-proliferation obligations.⁴²⁹ Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement allows cooperation on advanced military capability in artificial

intelligence, quantum computing, cyber and hypersonic technology and undersea capabilities.⁴³⁰

The prospect of Japan or South Korea joining **Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement** is significant for the maritime security environment in the Blue Pacific.

To set the scene, the Blue Pacific and the AUKUS agreement bring into sharp focus the divergence between the regional security priorities under the 2018 **Boe Declaration for Regional Security** and those of external Indo-Pacific security strategies focused on increased militarisation of the Pacific.⁴³¹ Pacific Island countries' anti-nuclear stance means relations with Japan remain strained following the discharge of treated wastewater from its damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power in 2023.⁴³² Japan and South Korea's technological, industry and military expertise would significantly enhance cooperation under the AUKUS agreement.⁴³³ Given the geostrategic pressures upon Japan and South Korea it is difficult to envisage how Pacific priorities will affect decision making under national Indo-Pacific focused security strategies. What is important is that expanded maritime security cooperation by Japan and South Korea is informed by Pacific priorities and complements existing international efforts.