

Center for Asia Pacific Strategy

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Panel Discussion Summary

“Global Maritime Britain and the Republic of Korea: Asia-Pacific Partners?”

Host Organizations: Kings College London Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies and Center for Asia Pacific Strategy

Date: September 23, 2021

Opening Remarks: Mrs Hee-Eun Kim, President and CEO, Center for Asia Pacific Strategy

Moderator: Dr. Greg Kennedy, Director of the Corbett Centre

Panel Members:

1. Dr. Shin Beom-cheol, Director of the Center for Foreign Affairs and Security at Korea National Institute of Strategic Studies
2. Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Head of the Department of European & International Studies at King’s College London
3. Dr. Ahn Dukgeun, Dean of International Affairs at Seoul National University;
4. Mr. David Henig, Director of UK Trade Policy Project at the European Centre for International Political Economy
5. Rear Admiral (retired) Kim Jin Hyung, ROK Navy
6. Captain (retired) Kevin Fleming, Royal Navy.

Introduction

On September 23, 2021, the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy and the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies at King’s College London co-hosted “Global Maritime Britain and the Republic of Korea: Asia-Pacific Partners,” an online symposium that focused on what the United Kingdom (UK)’s “Global Maritime Britain” posture into the Asia-Pacific region means for the UK-Republic of Korea (ROK) strategic relations. The discussion’s moderator was Dr. Greg Kennedy, Director of the Corbett Centre, and panelists were Dr. Shin Beom-cheol, Director of the Center for Foreign Affairs and Security at Korea National Institute of Strategic Studies; Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Head of the Department of European & International Studies at King’s College London; Dr. Ahn Dukgeun, Dean of International Affairs at Seoul National University; Mr. David Henig, Director of UK Trade Policy Project at the European Centre for International Political Economy; Rear Admiral (retired) Kim Jin Hyung of the ROK Navy; and Captain (retired) Kevin Fleming of the Royal Navy.

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Ms. Hee-Eun Kim, President and CEO of the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy, provided opening remarks and the overall structure for the discussion: the panelists would discuss the following three topics – regional security concerns in the Asia-Pacific, Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and impact and influence of the UK carrier strike group for ROK-UK strategic relations.

Regional Security Concerns in the Asia-Pacific

Dr. Shin highlighted three major security hotspots in the region: Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and North Korea. Due to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s close geographical proximity to the ROK and subsequently its political, diplomatic, and economic influence on its neighbors, the ROK government has traditionally been very careful to avoid speaking out against the PRC. On May 21, however, the ROK departed from its typically neutral position regarding issues surrounding the PRC by mentioning the “importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” in President Joe Biden and President Moon Jae-in’s joint statement. However, the ROK has again avoided the issue of Taiwan Strait since the presidential summit, and it is unclear whether there will be any changes in practice to support the May 21 statement.

The ROK’s position on the PRC’s aggressive behavior in the South China Sea is similar; while the ROK government has commented on the importance of freedom of navigation and respect for the rule of law, it has not undertaken combined patrols with the United States or other countries. The ROK selectively participates in combined military exercises with low potential of angering the PRC, typically in areas distant from the PRC.

On September 21, President Moon gave a speech at the UN General Assembly in which he said that he still continued to seek an end-of-war declaration among the United States, Republic of Korea, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and People’s Republic of China. The PRC would probably support such a declaration as it could argue that the United Nations Command, which was established to respond to DPRK hostilities in 1950, is

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no longer legitimate and necessary in the absence of war. The US position, however, is that an end-of-war declaration would be purely political without legal ramifications. The DPRK, as it continues to seek recognition as a de facto nuclear weapons power, will not return to the negotiation table. If Moon continues to pursue negotiation even when the DPRK shows no interest, the ROK may lose its strategic position going forward.

Dr. Pacheco Pardo divided his presentation into two main topics: regional security concerns in the Asia-Pacific and Europe’s position on cooperation with the ROK. On the former, there are three areas pertaining to the PRC’s rise but also offer opportunities for cooperation: maritime security, cybersecurity, and conflict management. Europe sees a lot of potential in cooperating with the ROK in the maritime domain. Ongoing cooperation in the Gulf of Aden is one present example, but there is a lot of untapped potential to be identified and developed.

Cybersecurity and threats not only pertain to the PRC but also to Russia and the DPRK. The ROK Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have recently taken additional measures to address this issue. European countries seek to improve cooperation in cyber defense capabilities with the ROK and Japan. Discussions are taking place not only between militaries but also between law enforcement agencies, such as Europol, individual European countries’ police forces, and the Korean National Police Agency.

Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, there has been an acceleration in discussions on conflict management among like-minded countries so as to avoid over-reliance on the United States. In the Asia-Pacific, there may be increased discussions on conflict management between European partners and the ROK.

Regarding the DPRK, European leaders understand that their role is secondary until the United States and Republic of Korea make headway in the denuclearization of the DPRK. Denuclearization in the near-term will be difficult, and an agreement for arms control may be a good interim step in which the European partners can play a role in three ways.

First, countries such as the UK, France, and Sweden have technical expertise in the dismantlement of nuclear facilities and disposal of nuclear materials. Second, European

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countries can be parties to an arms control agreement between the United States and DPRK and continue to maintain the agreement even if a party defects from it. We have seen this exact situation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action regarding the Iran nuclear program. Third, Europe has a strong interest in preventing nuclear weapons proliferation by the DPRK so European countries would want to be a part of an arms control agreement to minimize the risk of such proliferation.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

Mr. Henig discussed the CPTPP primarily from the UK perspective. As a background, the UK has applied for inclusion in the CPTPP. While the economic benefits of CPTPP would not be significant, as the UK already has bilateral trade agreements with most of the CPTPP parties and the expected economic growth from participation in the CPP is less than 0.1% of the UK's gross domestic product, the opportunity to deepen relations with like-minded countries to influence larger powers in global trade such as the European Union, United States, and PRC would be beneficial. Certainly, the PRC's recent application to join the CPTPP complicates the UK's calculus.

Dr. Ahn started his discussion by explaining the ROK government's rationale for not joining the initial negotiations for CPTPP even though it was invited by the US government. President Barack Obama had basically described the CPTPP as an economic weapon to entrap the PRC, and given ROK policy to remain neutral between the United States and PRC, it did not want to appear as if it was joining an economic coalition against the PRC and risk losing economic relations with the PRC. Also, at the time, there was a significant political issue between the United States and ROK over the two countries' free trade agreement, and after a difficult process to rectify it, the ROK government did not want to get involved in another trade negotiations. Not joining the modern economic arrangement of CPTPP, however, cost the ROK. But the ROK is currently in the process of joining the CPTPP.

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The PRC is unlikely to be able to finish the accession negotiation as it is not allowed to negotiate the CPTPP’s terms and conditions but must simply follow them as they are. For example, the PRC still blocks websites such as Facebook and Google but to join the CPTPP, it would have to allow the free flow of data.

Mr. Henig added that there is opportunity for the UK and ROK to develop deeper trade dialogues, not just at the governmental level but also between academics, experts, and practitioners. CPTPP may not be the perfect solution and should be over-relied on, but it can provide a venue for further cooperation on global trade.

Impact and influence of the UK carrier strike group for ROK-UK strategic relations

Rear Admiral (retired) Kim focused on the PRC’s strategy, both in the maritime domain and also more broadly. The PRC’s expansion of its influence in the Pacific is a realistic threat to most countries in East Asia; the prevailing opinion, however, is that it is currently insufficient to deter US maritime power.

Regarding the Korean peninsula, the PRC wants to use the DPRK to force the withdrawal of US forces from the ROK and completely remove US influence from the peninsula. The PRC also wants the ROK to be its satellite state as evidenced by President Xi Jinping’s comment to President Donald Trump in April 2017 that Korea used to be a part of China.

Queen Elizabeth Strike Group’s visit to the ROK in August demonstrated the importance of cooperation between countries that pursue the values of liberty and democracy. As PRC’s military expansion has a direct impact on the ROK’s security and economy, the ROK should strengthen its solidarity with like-minded countries to ensure the rule of law and freedom of navigation on the high seas.

Captain (retired) Fleming discussed additional opportunities for cooperation between the UK and ROK. The UK’s Babcock International Group and ROK’s Hyundai Heavy Industries recently signed a memorandum of understanding in building the ROK’s first light aircraft

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carrier, which will carry F-35B fighter aircrafts. Besides coordinating on the important mission of deterrence, such as by temporarily integrating ROK navy ships into a future UK carrier strike group to visit the Western Pacific, the two countries can also work together on humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations, which are less politically sensitive. Given the Royal Navy’s absence from the Western Pacific for over half a century, there is an urgent need for the UK to rapidly improve and develop its understanding of the complexities inherent in the region.

Questions and Answers

The first question, posed to Dr. Shin and Dr. Pacheco Pardo, asked about the UK’s management of its conflict with Russia even as the UK shifts its strategic focus towards the Indo-Pacific.

Dr. Pacheco Pardo explained that the UK’s greater involvement in the Indo-Pacific shows its changing threat perception of the PRC and is less about whether the UK continues to perceive Russia as a threat. PRC’s ambassador to the UK openly criticizing the country in a very undiplomatic way and PRC’s sanctions on various individuals in different European countries are two examples. Furthermore, various countries in the Indo-Pacific, such as India, Japan, Australia, and even the ROK in a quieter way, have been asking European partners to become more involved in the region.

Dr. Shin welcomed the European engagement on the issues with the PRC as the United States alone cannot respond to the PRC. If the United States, European countries, and Asian countries can come together, they will be able to provide a strong collective mechanism that can persuade the PRC to de-escalate.

The next question, which had two parts, first asked about the impact of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security pact on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The second part was whether AUKUS would also be influential over economic issues, either in the Indo-Pacific or even globally.

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Dr. Ahn responded that there is a need to wait and see whether the fallout between the AUKUS countries and France will have broader implications. It is also important to distinguish between the Trump administration, which focused on the trade deficit issue with the PRC, while the Biden administration is trying to address the more fundamental issue of industry and technology competitiveness.

Rear Admiral (retired) Kim added that expressed understanding of AUKUS by describing security as a matter of survival and economy as a matter of going hungry (or fed). The ROK would also prioritize security, so that Australia would choose to establish a security pact with the United States and United Kingdom at the risk of upsetting France is understandable.

Captain (retired) Fleming explained the UK rationale for AUKUS by pointing out that NATO, which is a military alliance, has become more of a political organization, and the UK can look elsewhere apart from Europe to focus on developing military capabilities with its allies. Even AUKUS, despite the nuclear-powered submarines being at the heart of it, shows a political nature, and there's more that needs to be played out.

The next question asked about the potential role of Africa in Indo-Pacific security affairs, whether there are opportunities or it would be more problematic.

Dr. Shin pointed out that Africa may be too far for African countries to have significant interest or capability to participate in Indo-Pacific security affairs. The ROK, however, is interested in contributing to security in Africa through peacemaking and peacebuilding approaches.

The final question asked about the potential for an improved ROK-Japan axis and whether that axis would have a stabilizing or destabilizing effect on the region.

Dr. Ahn responded that the discussion cannot be complete without including the PRC. As the three countries have more significant political issues than even what is publicly reported, there is much work ahead of them before any two of the three countries can start cooperating with each other.

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Dr. Pacheco Pardo left room for optimism, emphasizing that even as political relations between the ROK and Japan have deteriorated in recent years at the national level, various ministries continue to cooperate with one another. This cooperation at the ministerial level may not make the headlines, but it is ongoing on a regular basis. Another example is the combined exercises in the Gulf of Aden that involved the navies of the ROK, Japan, and European countries. As these instances are not widely reported, the perception is that the relations between ROK and Japan are simply bad.

Rear Admiral (retired) Kim explained that an enduring improvement in ROK-Japan relations will be difficult due to the historical issues which politicians from both countries exploit to garner domestic support.

Captain (retired) Fleming expressed optimism that a future UK carrier strike group to deploy to the Western Pacific will be escorted by both ROK and Japanese ships, as that would enhance each country's understanding of the other's capabilities and therefore improve overall security in the region. Just as countries are assessing the possible change in the balance of power with the establishment of AUKUS, they will do the same should ROK-Japan relations improve.

Dr. Shin mentioned that whether there is a conservative or progress administration in the ROK, each has promised to resolve the historical issues and improve economic cooperation. Once it is in power, however, it resorts to approaching Japan primarily based on domestic politics. Even though it is a long-lasting issue which will be further challenged by the changing demographics in both the ROK and Japan – i.e. the younger generation in Japan is less inclined to apologize to the ROK as it grows temporally more distant from the Japanese occupation of Korea while Koreans will continue to demand apologies from Japan – the PRC's rise may bring the ROK and Japan closer together in the future.

Mrs. Kim and Dr. Kennedy closed the session by recognizing the need for the Center for Asia Pacific Security and the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies to continue to work closely together based on the valuable discussion that was just conducted.