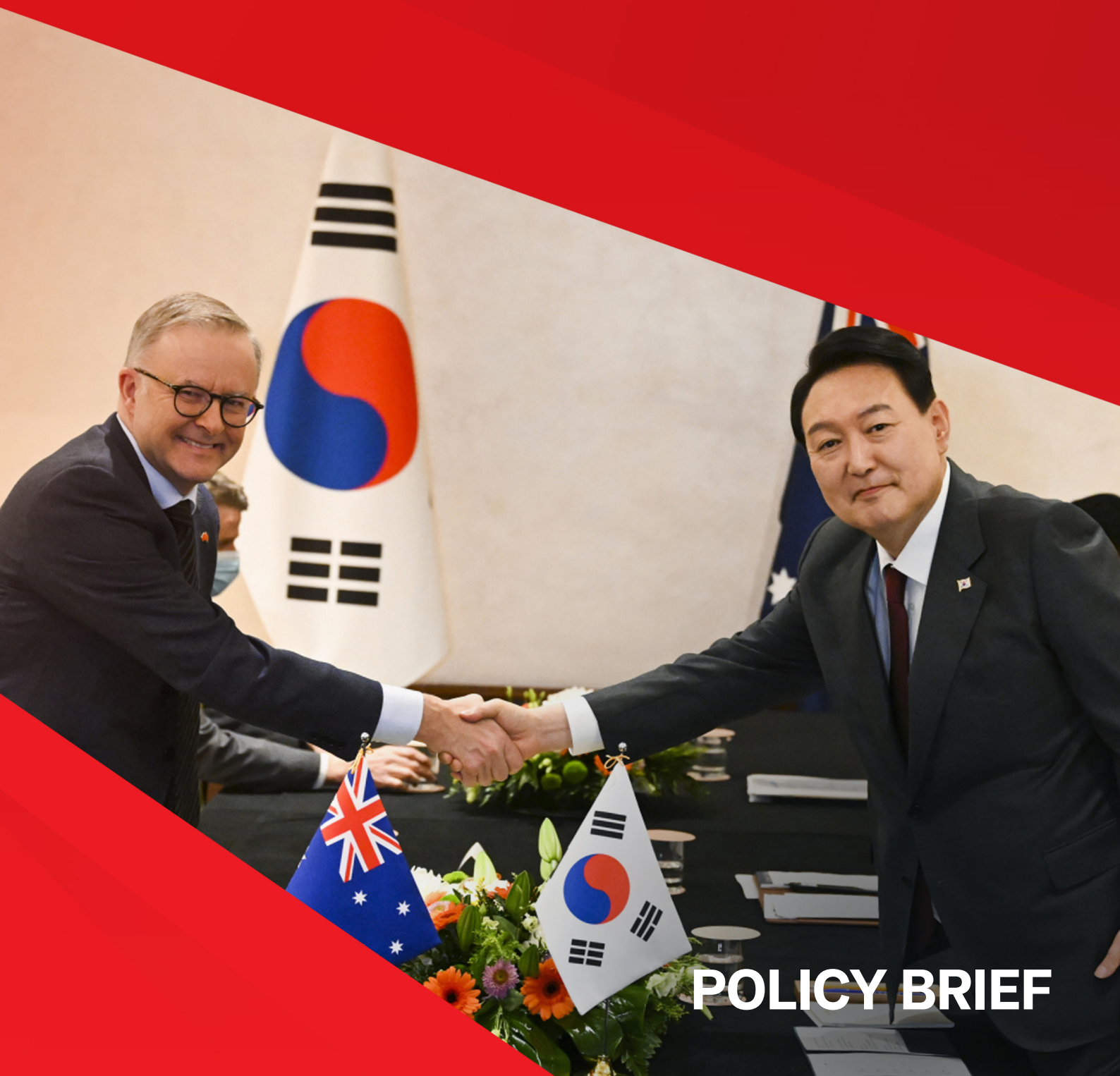


An agenda for Australia-ROK climate cooperation with Southeast Asia

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POLICY BRIEF

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AHA	ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUSMIN	Australia–US Ministerial Consultations
COP31	Conference of the Parties 31st session on Climate Change
Eximbank	Export Import Bank
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
HA/DR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
MOEF	Ministry of Economy and Finance
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
ODA	Official development assistance
ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar

Cover image: South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as they meet on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Madrid. (Office of the 20th President of Korea)

Executive summary

The intensification of climate change will have dramatic and destructive effects on Southeast Asia. For Australia, whose resilience and prosperity are intrinsically tied to those of its neighbours, preventing or minimising the impact of climate disasters increasingly features in its security policy. In the face of resource constraints and an ambitious variety of foreign policy priorities in Canberra, greater coordination and cooperation with partners is essential to realise an effective regional climate response. With the 2022 release of South Korea's (or Republic of Korea, ROK's) Indo-Pacific Strategy, the ROK stands poised to reimagine its partnerships in Southeast Asia and its contribution to combatting the region's greatest challenges—climate foremost among them.

More creative minilateral strategic coordination between Australia and ROK focused on mitigation, the net zero transition and disaster relief would make valuable inputs to Southeast Asian countries' climate responses. This brief begins by reviewing the trajectory of Australia-ROK bilateral cooperation on climate change, the policy settings towards the Indo-Pacific region established in both countries' recent strategic documents and the

implications for their approaches to climate financing. It proceeds by outlining three policy areas, infrastructure, emissions reductions and humanitarian assistance, in Southeast Asia where the two countries stand to make a major contribution to underwriting their partners' climate resilience.

The two countries should cooperate on financing regional infrastructure projects with clear green targets, including on telecommunications and digital infrastructure, deconflicting delivery strategies and enhancing the impact of existing institutional funds. With respect to emissions reduction, Australia could establish wider working level dialogue with the ASEAN-ROK Carbon Dialogue and explore technology sharing and research financing and partnership. In addition, Australia and the ROK should more closely coordinate on humanitarian assistance planning, exercising and delivery. Through coordination, deconfliction and limited cooperation in priority areas related to climate, Australia and the ROK can "maximise collective impact" in regional climate policy in the face of fiscal and capacity constraints, reinforcing what the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy calls a "regional cooperation system."¹



Introduction

Australia and the Republic of Korea in the Indo-Pacific

The Australia-ROK bilateral relationship is primed to pursue a more ambitious agenda. It has been lamented that Australia-ROK relations are “underdone” relative to other regional partnerships.² Historically, the ROK has seen its international role in narrow terms and has made its primary contribution through major multilateral forums. Australia was excluded entirely from the Moon Jae-in government’s New Southern Policy. Consequently, in recent years, Quad countries have taken precedence in Australian foreign policy thinking on Indo-Pacific partnerships.

Shifts in both countries’ Indo-Pacific outlooks warrant a reconsideration of this prioritisation. Both Australia and the ROK are working more closely than ever with their mutual US ally. Experts observe that Australian and the ROK perspectives on the regional rules-based order, economic connectivity, and development are becoming increasingly aligned,³ as formalised in the 2021 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁴ The two countries have a demonstrated shared commitment to confronting non-traditional security issues in the region. For example, the ROK-Australia-ASEAN Vaccine forum was convened in 2021 to facilitate cooperation on information-sharing and the organisation of a vaccine supply network during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ It is now evident that, after the United States, there is no country holding more common interests with the ROK than Australia.

The consonance of the latest documents released by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government in Australia and the administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol in the ROK should be a catalyst for greater coordination. The Albanese Government’s two major, recent foreign policy documents—the International Development Policy and the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040—increase Australian commitments to regional partners and call for partnering with others in these efforts to increase “collective impact”.⁶ These documents accept that Australian prosperity is intimately linked to the security of its neighbours and acknowledges Australia’s potential to be a more substantial investor.⁷

The 2022 Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific embraces, for the first time, a ROK Indo-Pacific concept. As the ROK strives to become a “global pivotal state”,⁸ it observes “ample potential” for trilateral cooperation with the United States and Australia.⁹ The strategy embraces future cooperative efforts in development “with other major donor countries such as the US [and] Australia... in marine environment, climate change, health, and digital and cyber areas.”¹⁰ The Albanese and Yoon governments are poised to act on their shared responsibility to regional partners.

Strategic alignment on climate action in Southeast Asia

New forms of Australia-ROK cooperation on climate mitigation would meet the needs of vulnerable countries throughout Southeast Asia while also realising mutual economic and security benefits for both countries. Into the future, components of both countries’ existing efforts on

regional climate action, including commitments made in the ROK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and Australia’s International Development Policy and Southeast Asia Strategy, stand to be harmonised.

Leading regional cooperation on climate change and energy security is a core line of effort identified in the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹¹ The strategy emphasises the need to enhance research and development on green technologies and work collaboratively with partners.¹² Southeast Asia, as a so-called top priority partner, is central to this recognition.¹³ Both prior to and following the release of the strategy, the ROK has recognised climate resilience as essential “for the co-prosperity of Korea and ASEAN”.¹⁴ President Yoon’s five carbon neutral policies specify international climate cooperation as a priority endeavour.¹⁵ The Yoon Government’s Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative has increased cooperation in areas like digitalisation, environment, climate change and smart cities, among others.¹⁶ The Yoon government has also begun to elevate climate financing initiatives in the region.¹⁷

Climate change is labelled the “greatest shared threat to all countries” in Australia’s August 2023 International Development Policy, which commits to “responding to the calls of the region” to increase Australian investment.¹⁸ This document invests 1.7 billion USD in new spending over five years in Australia’s development program.¹⁹ The policy acknowledges the rising cost of climate adaptation efforts. Subsequently, the Development Finance Review that accompanied the policy recommended that Australia scale its development finance mechanisms to support partners’ responses to climate change.²⁰ It observes that “Australia’s development financing in Southeast Asia will always be modest compared to others...but it could be significantly more influential through strategic selectivity and the greater mobilisation of external capital.”²¹

The other major recent policy of the Albanese Government, its Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040, takes further steps to support regional climate adaptation and mitigation. The document promises greater Australian attention on matters related to the green energy transition and infrastructure in Southeast Asia.²² Specific commitments range from support for the ASEAN Climate Change Centre to the implementation of the Australia-Indonesia Climate and Infrastructure Partnership to exploring climate-resilient agriculture opportunities in Laos. A comprehensive Australian approach to climate financing in Southeast Asia has long been absent, with the South Pacific dominating the near-term priorities of the Albanese government. Prior commitments to Southeast Asian partners have been piecemeal and resource-limited.²³

New configurations of Australia-ROK partnership could enable effective climate action by relieving some resource constraints and capacity problems that have plagued both countries to date. Guided by the countries’ latest strategic documents, this brief emphasises three policy areas where Australia-ROK cooperation could benefit partners’ climate resilience. This brief will focus exclusively on opportunities for the two countries to partner in Southeast Asia, though some of its recommendations could apply equally to the South Pacific.

Climate resilient infrastructure and development financing

Ensuring that the lifespan of critical infrastructure is not limited by sea level rise, extreme weather events and high temperature is fundamental to any country's resilience.²⁴ Despite significant promises and commitments on climate finance from developed countries, shortfalls in regional infrastructure financing initiatives jeopardise Southeast Asia's ability to adapt to the climate crisis. Southeast Asia faces an investment shortfall exceeding 100 billion USD a year.²⁵ It is broadly agreed that none of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved without some direct or indirect input on infrastructure.²⁶ The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that Southeast Asian countries require an estimated 210 billion USD annually of additional investments to provide climate resilient infrastructure.²⁷

Australia-ROK cooperation on infrastructure financing would increase the resilience of their supply chains and support their shared partners. Southeast Asia is central to Australia and the ROK's respective efforts to "friend-shore" their trade, given ASEAN's established importance as a trading partner for the ROK and growing relevance for Australia.²⁸ As critical infrastructure underwrites a country's economic prosperity, Australia and the ROK's economic interests demand that they support their partners in this area. Incorporating resilience into infrastructure projects increases their cost by only 3-4 per cent for sweeping net benefits.²⁹

Experts consistently encourage the Australian Government to increase its infrastructure financing efforts in the region.³⁰ In its International Development Policy, the Government has announced a strategic investment facility for Southeast Asian infrastructure projects and is looking to further mobilise private and public sector capital for investment and financing. In the realm of climate resilience, Australia has been increasingly engaged in delivering undersea communications cables in the Pacific, both independently and in partnership with the United States, Japan and New Zealand.³¹ Building on such initiatives, the Government is well-positioned to cooperate with additional partners on infrastructure assistance.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy pledged to increase the ROK's official development assistance (ODA) to reach the "world's top ten levels," including by expanding its contribution to cooperation funds in Southeast Asia.³² Already, the ROK is a world leader on development effectiveness.³³ Climate has begun to emerge as a priority. In May 2021, Seoul signed a memorandum of understanding with the ADB earmarking 700 million USD in co-financing for climate-related sovereign development projects over three years.³⁴ On a project-by-project basis, there is ample opportunity for Australia and the ROK to cooperate on their regional development priorities. Given their shared view of the greatest non-traditional security threats, climate resilience is a natural starting point.

Australia and the ROK should explore a partnership on discrete regional infrastructure investments oriented around clear green targets and the SDGs. Subjects could include telecommunications and digital infrastructure, as Australia already undertakes similar projects in the Pacific through the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific³⁵ and through its afore-mentioned Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership with the United States and Japan. Australia could contribute to the Asian Development Bank's Innovative Finance Facility for Climate in Asia and the Pacific, launched in May 2023, of which the ROK is already a contributor.³⁶ The ADB's ASEAN Infrastructure Fund, launched in 2019 advocating principles of sustainability and inclusive green growth, is another potential venue for coordination.³⁷

In recognition of the high priority placed on Canberra and Seoul's diplomatic ties in Indonesia, projects in Indonesia might prove a natural first case. The ROK inputs into components of the Australia-Indonesia Climate and Infrastructure Partnership should be considered. Indonesia is Australia's second largest development partner,³⁸ and suffers almost 30 billion USD per year in economic losses as a result of natural disasters.³⁹ Undertaking trilateral development cooperation would reduce costs, increase options and strengthen Indonesia's resilience to climate effects.

In many cases, it will remain more effective to deliver investments independently. Accordingly, in those instances, Australia and the ROK should deconflict their efforts to avoid duplication and share best practices on climate resilience. The ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasised the need for universal values and standards. On this basis, future ROK inputs into the Blue Dot Network could be considered, which already is dedicated to creating a certification mechanism for common infrastructure standards to promote sustainable, resilient infrastructure.⁴⁰

RECOMMENDATION

Given Australia and the ROK's existing commitments in regional organisations, the two countries could explore aligning investment priorities in multilateral formats. In the first instance, Australia and the ROK could coordinate their efforts with the United States, their shared ally that is facing staunch competition from China on regional infrastructure. Trilateral projects proposed through the US Development Finance Corporation, or broader investments through the Quad, may create opportunities for project-specific coordination on Southeast Asia. Japan has a reputation for considerable infrastructure development in the region and is ASEAN's premier partner on network aid and quasi-aid.⁴¹ Given recent improvements in Japan-ROK ties, trilateral or multilateral coordination in this area seems increasingly viable.



Emissions reduction and innovation

Energy demands are growing across Southeast Asia, making it difficult for countries to focus on decarbonisation. Countries throughout Southeast Asia have set emissions reduction targets, with eight of the 11 countries in the region announcing plans for net zero, but many of these commitments are conditional on international funding.⁴² Based on current projects, Southeast Asia writ large is not on track to achieve its target of reducing emissions by approximately 33 per cent by 2030.⁴³ Singapore is the only country in the region that is expected to see a real carbon emission drop by 2030.⁴⁴

Since the Albanese Government entered office, Australia has sought to accelerate its net zero timeline and give weight to its bid to host the Conference of the Parties 31st session on Climate Change (COP31). Australia already has an array of technology-focused clean energy partnerships aimed at accelerating the production and deployment of renewable technologies.⁴⁵ Some experts have voiced hopes for Australia to become a renewable energy superpower in Southeast Asia, given that countries in the region are looking for partners in the energy transition. Australia was represented at the first meeting of the Asia Zero Emissions Community earlier this year—an initiative led by the Japanese government.⁴⁶ Perhaps the most significant adjacent development in Australia's foreign policy in this area has been the introduction of climate as a third pillar of its US alliance.⁴⁷

As one of the first countries in Asia to commit to comprehensive emissions reduction policies, the ROK has expertise to bring to bear in supporting regional emissions reduction. The Yoon government's Indo-Pacific Strategy voices an intent to "support the region's achievement of SDGs in the areas of climate change response, energy transition, and energy security".⁴⁸ The ROK has committed to developing and implementing unique bilateral and minilateral cooperation mechanisms to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions under Article 6.2 of the Paris Agreement.⁴⁹ The ROK is poised to launch a network base for global climate experts from the public and private sectors next year, that should elicit significant involvement from Australia.⁵⁰

Already, emissions reduction features prominently on the Australia-ROK bilateral agenda. The 2021 Australia-ROK Low and Zero Emissions Technology Partnership aims to increase the adoption of related technologies⁵¹. Promising new ventures such as the Han-Ho Hydrogen hub involving ROK companies

in Queensland could become a proof of concept for regional clean energy exports.⁵² Both the ROK and Australia can bring unique capability advantages to low-emissions energy production and innovation through technological innovation and digitalisation.⁵³ However, while the ROK has strategic footing to contribute more in the way of low-emissions energy, embodied in the 2020 ROK Green New Deal and the 2019 Hydrogen Roadmap, it lacks the resources to implement them alone. Australia has the requisite natural resources, but its efforts to date nationally and globally to lead on renewables, including the SunCable project that seeks to transit renewable energy to Australian and Asian markets, have been expensive and halting.⁵⁴

RECOMMENDATION

The ROK and Australia should explore joint financing of research and innovation projects supporting a sovereign renewable transition in Southeast Asia to maximise their impact and reduce the burden on any one country. The two countries can also advance decarbonisation efforts in Southeast Asia through technology sharing and research partnership. Existing bilateral research efforts, as funded by DFAT Australia-ROK Foundation, should be prioritised, and their broader applications for other partners should be considered. Under the auspices of the Australia-ROK Low and Zero Emissions Technology Partnership, the two countries could build on bilateral priorities while creating opportunities to demonstrate capability advantage in the broader region.

The above efforts should be underpinned by sustained and expanded diplomatic dialogue opportunities with Southeast Asian partners to ensure continued engagement on this issue. Australia could establish wider working level dialogue with the ASEAN-ROK Carbon Dialogue. The Australia-ROK partnership could be synchronised with other existing arrangements, including Australia's 2021 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Singapore for cooperation on low emissions solutions. Such coordination could enable trilateral information exchange on emission reduction strategies and carbon capture utilisation and storage research, development and demonstration.





Humanitarian aid and disaster relief

ASEAN states are among the most vulnerable to natural disasters in the world,⁵⁵ losing an average of 7.1 per cent of national gross domestic product (GDP) to natural disasters annually.⁵⁶ Since the establishment of the Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response in 2005 and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance in 2011 (AHA), ASEAN has become an effective body in coordinating disaster management.⁵⁷ However, as climate change increases the frequency of flash floods, forest fires, landslides and cyclones, the humanitarian needs of regional states are intensifying. Recent reports have indicated that Southeast Asian countries will fall short of meeting their agreed goals for disaster risk reduction by 2030 under the United Nations' Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.⁵⁸

Southeast Asian countries prefer a localised approach to humanitarian response that is led by local community actors, rather than international partners.⁵⁹ Experts have remarked of a regional philosophy of "nationally-led, regionally-supported and international-as-necessary" in regards to disaster management.⁶⁰ Regardless, Australia and the ROK have independently provided important inputs to date into regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Both countries have voiced their willingness to work with local actors. The ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy reflects on the need to provide "customised assistance that meets on-the-ground demand of partner countries."⁶¹ Subsequently, there are opportunities for the two to harmonise their efforts more constructively on this basis.

The ROK's notable recent humanitarian assistance efforts in North Korea, Ukraine and Turkey are useful test cases of the ROK's capability in this area.⁶² Southeast Asia has remained an ongoing focus of the ROK humanitarian assistance efforts, both via the MOFA KOICA projects and MOEF Eximbank loans; for instance, in 2020, the ROK announced a five year project through the ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Fund to train disaster response personnel and set professional standards for disaster management.⁶³ At home, both Australia and the ROK have

ongoing experiences with natural disasters. As recently as July 2023, the Yoon Government promised to overhaul its approach to extreme weather events caused by climate change, in response to storms devastating the country.⁶⁴ National policies in these areas could be instructive for Southeast Asian partners.

One of the commitments of Australia's International Development Policy is to create a whole-of-government humanitarian policy to deliver a responsive and effective framework for addressing humanitarian need in the region. This process is expected to commence this month and involve the whole-of-government.⁶⁵ The Development Policy prefaced that, "Australia is looking to strengthen mechanisms to coordinate assistance... [and] share Australia's experience and expertise in the Pacific to improve regional disaster preparedness and response capabilities".⁶⁶

RECOMMENDATION

The ROK and Australia should coordinate through the AHA on the pre-positioning of humanitarian supplies. The AUSMIN 2023 announcement that Australia and the United States will pre-position humanitarian supplies in Australia and Papua New-Guinea to enable more effective responses in the Pacific is a useful example.⁶⁷ Similar efforts could be undertaken by Australia and the ROK in Timor Leste and Philippines. Such projects answer a pertinent regional need at relatively low cost.

There is also ample opportunity to increase the ROK inputs into regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises and planning. In September 2023, the South Korean Navy participated in a multinational humanitarian assistance exercise led by the United States in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁸ Building on such efforts, existing exercises that Australia already undertakes, including through the Quad's partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HA/DR), should invite ROK involvement.

Conclusion

In recognition of their increasingly strong bilateral relationship and capacity constraints in their regional strategies, acting together on climate action in Southeast Asia is a means for Australia and the ROK to maximise their collective impact. Harnessing the ambitions of Australia's International Development Policy and Southeast Asia Strategy to 2040, and the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy, coordination and cooperation on regional development funding should be a foremost priority. Collaboration on climate resilient infrastructure, especially in telecommunications and digitisation, would improve partners' resilience to climate effects. In addition, Australia and the ROK can better coordinate on supporting regional emissions

reduction efforts, including through research, innovation and technology sharing and new inputs into groupings like the ASEAN-ROK Carbon Dialogue. Finally, greater coordination on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, recognising the leadership of local communities, including on the pre-positioning of supplies and on regional exercising and planning, would grow habits of cooperation and mitigate the likely effects of future climate disasters. In the face of constrained resources and intensifying challenges to the region's economies, the time is ripe for Australia and the ROK to take advantage of their strategic alignment and work to underwrite stability in their shared neighbourhood, while meeting regional partners on their terms.



Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Special Envoy for Southeast Asia Nicholas Moore launch Australia's new Southeast Asia Strategy to 2040 in Indonesia. (Anthony Albanese, Twitter)

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