

The Role of Korea in Promoting Maritime Security in the Asia-Pacific Region

Captain Pongsakorn Puangsuwan

National Defense Course for Future Leaders, National Defense Institute

Received 02 July 2026; Received in revised form 20 July 2026

Accepted 24 August 2026; Available online 1 September 2026

Abstract

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region is critically important due to the presence of major Sea Lines of Communication, strategic maritime chokepoints, leading economies, and contested maritime domains. Stability at sea underpins global trade, energy security, and regional prosperity while increasingly shaping the strategic calculations of major powers and the broader international order. Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has evolved from a bipolar structure into a complex multipolar order characterized by competition and selective cooperation among major actors, including the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union. These dynamics, together with evolving U.S. defense strategies emphasizing engagement with China and greater burden-sharing among allies, have significantly influenced the Asia-Pacific security environment.

As a middle power, the Republic of Korea faces the strategic challenge of redefining its role amid these changes. Recent conflicts, particularly the Russia – Ukraine War and instability in the Middle East, have highlighted the importance of military capability, diplomatic influence, economic resilience, and technological advancement as key elements of national power. Simultaneously, the region confronts growing non-traditional maritime threats that are transnational in nature. they require enhanced international cooperation and multilateral coordination. In accordance with the Complex Interdependence theory, the Republic of Korea is able to strengthen maritime security through two complementary approaches: enhancing its autonomous capabilities and fostering cooperation through multilateral engagement with regional partners and institutions. The role of South Korea is significant in promoting long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords

Maritime security, Asia-Pacific Region, Sea Lines of Communication, Traditional and Non-Traditional Challenges

Introduction

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region critical importance, whereas the region encompasses some of the world's busiest sea lines of communication, major economic centers, strategic maritime chokepoints, and contested maritime domains. Stability at sea directly affects global trade, energy security, and regional peace and prosperity. Beyond its economic significance, maritime security has become increasingly important in shaping the strategic calculations of major powers and influencing the evolving international order.

Following the end of the Cold War, the international system gradually evolved from a bipolarization structure toward a more complex and dynamic distribution of power. In this environment, the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union have emerged as influential actors as a multi-polarization shaping the global balance of power and the direction of the international order. Consequently, patterns of strategic competition and selective cooperation among major powers have increasingly affected the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region. Recent developments in 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy, reflecting approaches emphasizing direct engagement with China to achieve the US. national objective without confrontation while increasing burden-sharing arrangements with allies and partners, particularly in the defense and military-industrial sectors, further illustrate the evolving nature of great-power relations and their implications for regional security.

As a result, shifts in the strategies and policies of major powers have compelled regional states to reassess and adapt their foreign and security policies in order to safeguard national interests and respond effectively to emerging challenges. As a middle power situated in the Asia-Pacific, the Republic of Korea faces the strategic imperative of redefining its role and positioning within the evolving international order (Shon, 2016). This process has become increasingly important amid ongoing global crises, including the Russia–Ukraine War and persistent instability in the Middle East. These developments have demonstrated that military capability, diplomatic influence, economic resilience, and technological advancement are critical determinants of national power to overcome challenges.

In addition, the Asia-Pacific region faces a growing range of non-traditional maritime challenges, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, transnational crime and natural disasters. As these challenges are inherently transnational in nature, no single state can address those challenges effectively alone. Instead, they require enhanced international cooperation, institutional coordination, and constructive regional engagement.

The Republic of Korea can play a significant role in strengthening maritime security and promoting regional stability through the enhancement of its maritime and defense capabilities, active participation in multilateral security cooperation, and support for rules-based maritime governance. The efforts are

particularly important as the regional maritime security in the increasingly complex and strategic world order.

Research Objective

The objectives of this research are to examine the maritime security environment in the Asia-Pacific region by analyzing its underlying causes, strategic drivers, and the key factors that shape the formulation and implementation of international maritime security policies. In addition, the study seeks to identify and propose effective policy approaches for the Republic of Korea's maritime security strategy in response to the evolving regional security environment and the ongoing transformation of the international order.

Through an assessment of regional security dynamics, geopolitical competition, and emerging maritime challenges, this research aims to develop policy recommendations that enhance maritime security, protect national interests, and strengthen the Republic of Korea's role as a constructive contributor to regional security. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the promotion of sustainable peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Research Hypothesis

Both bilateral and multilateral cooperation are essential to promoting security and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. The Republic of Korea can leverage these frameworks to strengthen collaboration with its long-standing allies and regional partners while contributing to a stable balance of power within the evolving multipolar international order shaped by major powers. At the same time, self-reliance remains a fundamental component of national security and sovereignty. Enhancing autonomous capabilities is essential for safeguarding South Korea's national interests and ensuring strategic flexibility in an increasingly uncertain security environment. By combining robust self-reliance with active international engagement, South Korea can strengthen its capacity to address emerging challenges effectively. This dual approach will not only advance South Korea's national interests but also contribute to regional peace, security, and prosperity.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on descriptive and analytical approaches. Information and data are collected from a wide range of secondary sources, including academic literature, scholarly journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and publications issued by relevant international organizations. These are systematically categorized, analyzed, and synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of the maritime security environment in the Asia-Pacific region within the context of the evolving international order. Particular attention is given to identifying

key security issues, emerging challenges, and structural constraints arising from changes in the international system and their implications for regional stability and security.

The analysis is conducted through the application and comparative assessment of major theories and concepts in International Relations, including Realism, Liberalism, and the Balance of Power framework. These theoretical perspectives are utilized to explain and interpret security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly those related to great-power competition, geopolitical transformation, maritime disputes, and emerging non-traditional security challenges. By integrating theoretical and empirical analyses, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the factors shaping regional security dynamics and the evolving strategic environment.

Furthermore, the findings of this research are employed to evaluate and propose policy options for the Republic of Korea's maritime security strategy. Particular emphasis is placed on the effective utilization of national power, including military, diplomatic and economic instruments, to strengthen maritime security, protect national interests, and contribute to long-term national stability and prosperity. The study also examines how the Republic of Korea can enhance its role as a responsible middle power in promoting regional maritime cooperation and security governance.

The scope of this research encompasses the evolution of the international security environment from the post-Second World War period to the present day. The analysis begins with the establishment of the United Nations and the emergence of the post-war international order, which sought to promote international peace, collective security, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The study subsequently examines the Cold War period and the Korean War, both of which were characterized by ideological rivalry, the expansion of great-power influence into the Asia-Pacific region, and the emergence of strategic competition that significantly shaped the regional security landscape.

The analysis then extends to the post-Cold War era and the contemporary international environment, focusing on the transformation of the global balance of power, the rise of China, renewed great-power competition, and the emergence of complex transnational security challenges. Particular attention is given to the implications of these developments for maritime security, regional stability, and security governance in the Asia-Pacific region. Through this historical and analytical examination, the study seeks to identify the strategic challenges and opportunities facing the Republic of Korea and to propose policy recommendations for enhancing its maritime security in an increasingly complex and contested regional environment.

New World Order

Since the Cold War, ideological polarization has profoundly shaped the political and security dynamics of the Korean Peninsula. The strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union

extended into Korea, where the two superpowers supported democracy and communism, competing political and ideological systems. This geopolitical confrontation ultimately resulted in the division of the peninsula and culminated in the Korean War (1950–1953). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the international system transitioned from a bipolarization structure toward a more complex multi-polarization. In this evolving environment, the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union emerged as influential actors shaping the global balance of power and the contemporary international order.

Within this changing geopolitical landscape, North Korea has maintained close strategic and political relations with China, while the Republic of Korea has continued to rely on the United States as its principal security ally. For more than seven decades, the U.S.–Republic of Korea alliance has served as a cornerstone of security on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. The alliance has contributed to regional stability through cooperation in defense, economic development, technological innovation, and to protect the freedom of navigation for safety and security of maritime trade routes.

Recent developments in 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy have introduced important adjustments to alliance management and regional security strategy. Under the principles of “America First” and “Peace Through Strength,” the United States has emphasized strengthening deterrence, preserving military superiority, enhancing the resilience of its defense industrial base, and encouraging greater burden-sharing among allies and partners. At the same time, Washington has sought to manage strategic competition with China while maintaining channels for dialogue and cooperation on issues of mutual interest. These policy adjustments reflect broader efforts to adapt American grand strategy to an increasingly competitive and multipolar international environment (United States Department of War, 2026).

The evolving strategic posture of the United States has prompted allies and partners across both Europe and the Asia-Pacific to reassess their foreign and security policies. This trend reflects broader changes in the international security environment, where traditional assumptions regarding alliance commitments, deterrence, and collective security are increasingly subject to scrutiny. Consequently, many states have sought to strengthen national resilience, expand defense capabilities, and diversify strategic partnerships in response to emerging uncertainties.

In the case of the Republic of Korea, the United States has played a central role in the country's security architecture since the Korean War. Following the successful amphibious landing at Incheon in 1950 and the subsequent institutionalization of the bilateral alliance, cooperation expanded through joint military exercises, defense technology cooperation, intelligence sharing, and maritime security initiatives. The continued presence of the U.S. military forces in Northeast Asia, including bases in Okinawa, Japan, and Pyeongtaek, Korea, have long been regarded as important components of regional deterrence to North Korea and China military capabilities.

For decades, U.S. security guarantees enabled allies, involving South Korea, Philippines and Japan, to allocate substantial resources toward economic development while relying on American military protection. However, in the new U.S. defense strategy, the U.S. advocates allies meet the standard of burden sharing around the world and simultaneously leverages allied production to incentivize them to increase defense spending as quickly as possible. These developments have encouraged regional allies to reassess defense priorities, increase military expenditures, and enhance indigenous defense capabilities in order to ensure long-term national security. These changes show that the contemporary international order is undergoing a process of rebalancing, and the balance of power becomes more altered. States are increasingly compelled to adopt more self-reliance security strategies, while international institutions, including the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, face growing scrutiny regarding their effectiveness in maintaining global peace and security. The current situation is able to be understood as a transition toward a more complex multi-polarization system.

Regional International Policies

With regard to sovereignty and maritime boundary delimitation, the Asia-Pacific region continues to experience numerous unresolved claimed areas and maritime disputes across several strategically important location. Among the most significant are the competing sovereignty and sovereign rights claims in the South China Sea, which have become a major source of not only geopolitical tension but also security concern. Since 2023, the People's Republic of China has published an updated official map that includes a revised "ten-dash line," expanding upon the previous "nine-dash line" representation of its maritime demarcation (Sakamoto, 2024). This development has generated concern among neighboring states and the broader international community, as it is perceived as reinforcing China's territorial and maritime zones in disputed waters. The issue is further complicated by the status of Taiwan, whose strategic location at the intersection of key maritime routes connecting East Asia and the Pacific Ocean makes it a critical factor in regional security and geopolitical competition.

The expansion and continued assertion of maritime claims in the South China Sea have intensified longstanding disputes between China and several Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. These disputes involve overlapping claims to maritime zones, including Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and continental shelves, as well as competing interpretations of sovereignty over land features. As a result, concerns regarding regional stability and national interests of states have become increasingly prominent and required effective mechanisms for peaceful resolution.

At the same time, Japan has accelerated its defense modernization efforts in response to an increasingly complex security environment in Northeast Asia. Rising defense expenditures, investments in advanced military capabilities, and revisions to national security policies reflect Tokyo's growing concern regarding regional security challenges (Johnson, 2026). In addition, the sovereignty dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima between Japan and the Republic of Korea remains unresolved. Although the dispute

has been managed peacefully, it continues to serve as a source of historical and political disagreement between the two countries and occasionally affects bilateral relations.

In response to the evolving regional security environment and changing expectations within alliance frameworks, the Republic of Korea has placed greater emphasis on strengthening its indigenous defense capabilities. This strategic orientation is reflected in recent national defense white paper, which emphasize both the preservation of peace on the Korean Peninsula and the enhancement of military readiness to address emerging security challenges. Such policies underscore the importance of maintaining credible deterrence while preparing for a rapidly changing strategic environment. National defense policy continues to adopt a cautious approach toward North Korea. Peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula are regarded as essential prerequisites for meaningful progress toward reconciliation and eventual reunification. Deterrence remains a central pillar of South Korea's national security strategy, supported by its alliance with the United States and reinforced through continued military modernization, technological innovation, and the development of independent operational capabilities (Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, 2026).

Furthermore, South Korea has increasingly sought to diversify its security partnerships beyond traditional alliance structure. In addition to maintaining close cooperation with the United States, Seoul has expanded defense and security cooperation with European partners and other like-minded states through defense-industrial collaboration, joint research initiatives, military exchanges, and strategic dialogues. These efforts are intended to strengthen strategic resilience, enhance defense capabilities, and reduce excessive dependence on any single security partner in an increasingly uncertain international environment.

These kinds of policies reflect broader concerns regarding peace and security in Northeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. Geopolitical competition, unresolved territorial disputes, military modernization programs, and evolving alliance dynamics have contributed to a more complex and competitive security environment. From a theoretical perspective, the trends may be understood as manifestations of a regional security dilemma, in which efforts by states to enhance their security increasing perceptions of threat among neighboring states and contributing to strategic competition and military balancing.

Moreover, South Korea's white paper can be interpreted not only as a response to the persistent threat posed by North Korea but also as an adaptation to a rapidly evolving regional security. Strengthening deterrence, enhancing military readiness, expanding maritime security capabilities, and broadening international security cooperation are regarded as essential measures for safeguarding national interests and contributing to the maintenance of regional peace, stability, and security.

Geopolitical Tensions and Economic Consequences

A geopolitical conflict is characterized by competition among states over political influence, economic advantages, strategic objectives, or territorial claims. Within the contemporary international system, conflicts are no longer confined to conventional military confrontations but are increasingly conducted through a combination of military, political, economic, and informational means. As a result, their consequences often transcend geographical boundaries and directly influence international political and economic dynamics. Conflicts in one part of the world can have substantial global repercussions, including disruptions to international trade, instability in energy markets, and heightened security challenges. This interconnected reality underscores the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary conflict.

The Russia–Ukraine War constitutes one of the most significant geopolitical crises in Europe since the end of the Cold War. The conflict has deep historical, political, and territorial roots, and it has escalated into a large-scale warfare since 2022. Ukraine's pursuit of closer relations with NATO contributed to escalating tensions with Russia, which perceived the potential expansion of the alliance into Ukraine as a threat to its national security. In response, Russia increased military deployments along the Ukrainian border before launching a full-scale invasion in February 2022. The conflict reflects the strategic importance that Russia assigns to Ukraine, particularly its role as a geographic buffer between Russia and NATO states (Rose, 2026).

According to strategic location, the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea possess considerably economic significance. The region serves as a critical hub for maritime transportation, energy transit, and agricultural exports. In particular, the Black Sea functions as an essential maritime corridor for the export of grain and other commodities to global markets. Disruptions to maritime transportation routes in the region have generated significant concerns regarding food security, commercial shipping, and international trade. The conflict has demonstrated how control over strategic location relating to maritime activities can influence both military operations and broader economic outcomes.

In addition, situations in the Middle East further illustrate how regional conflicts can generate far-reaching global security and economic consequences. In particular, tensions between the United States, Israel, and Iran have underscored the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. As a vital Sea Line of Communication (SLOC), the strait facilitates a substantial proportion of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments. Consequently, disruption to maritime navigation through this waterway has the potential to affect energy markets, commercial shipping, and economic stability on a global scale (Carra, 2026)

Periods of heightened military tension, including maritime blockades, mining operations, attacks on commercial vessels, or restrictions on freedom of navigation, can significantly increase transportation costs, disrupt supply chains, and create uncertainty in global energy markets. Such activities are particularly

consequential for energy-importing economies in Asia, including Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, which have depended heavily on Middle East energy transportation. Therefore, governments required to implement energy emergency measures to manage supply shortages, and mitigate the economic effects of rising energy prices (Hale, 2026).

These situations highlight the interconnected nature of contemporary security challenges. Although conflicts may originate in geographically distant regions, their effects can rapidly spread through global trade networks, maritime transportation systems, and energy supply chains. This issue is particularly relevant to the Republic of Korea. Despite its location on the Asian mainland, South Korea's geopolitical circumstances create conditions similar to those of a maritime-dependent state. The division of the Korean Peninsula and the absence of reliable overland transportation routes through North Korea significantly increase South Korea's reliance on maritime transportation for international trade, energy imports, and economic development. The security of Sea Lines of Communication is obviously essential to the country's national interests, economic prosperity, and overall strategic resilience.

Accordingly, geopolitical conflicts occurring in other regions of the world can have substantial implications for both South Korea and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Their effects extend beyond traditional military and security concerns to influence economic growth, industrial production, energy security, and regional stability. In an increasingly interconnected international system, the protection of maritime trade routes, the preservation of freedom of navigation, and the maintenance of stable maritime governance have become fundamental requirements for ensuring both national security and sustainable economic development. From a broader strategic perspective, these situations demonstrate that maritime security is no longer solely a naval or military concern, and for maritime-dependent states including the Republic of Korea, maintaining secure access to global maritime commons is essential for not only national defense but also long-term economic prosperity.

Non-traditional Challenges

Non-traditional security challenges have become increasingly significant in the Asia-Pacific region, necessitating enhanced regional cooperation and collective responses. One prominent example is illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, which poses a serious threat to maritime governance, marine resource sustainability, and regional stability (Information Fusion Center, 2022). IUU fishing activities frequently occur in grey zones or poorly monitored maritime areas, particularly in the Yellow Sea and other shared fishing grounds. Large-scale illegal fishing fleets, sometimes described as ghost fleets due to their use of vessel-tracking avoidance techniques, exploitation valuable marine resources, including blue crabs and other commercially important species, often beyond the effective reach of regulatory authorities. They have usually operated across maritime jurisdictions of several states, including China, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. These vessels frequently evade law enforcement and coast guard operations, thereby undermining fisheries management regimes and increasing tensions among coastal states (Urbina, 2020).

This illicit activity can be related to transnational crime, forced labor, human trafficking and smuggling as well.

The challenge of IUU fishing is closely linked to the broader agenda of sustainable development and environmental governance. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), a comprehensive framework consisting of 17 global goals designed to address major economic, social, and environmental challenges. Among these objectives, the 14th UNSDG, Life Below Water, emphasizes the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources. Effective measures to combat IUU fishing are essential for not only maritime security but also protecting marine biodiversity. At the same time, climate change has emerged as a critical transnational challenge with profound implications for human security, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Rising sea levels, ocean warming, changing marine ecosystems, and intensifying extreme weather condition present significant risks to coastal communities and maritime-dependent states throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The changes affect fisheries, maritime infrastructure, food security, and the livelihoods of millions of people. UNSDGs are required intension and cooperation to achieve all targets for environmental and human security by 2030 (United Nations, 2026).

Moreover, the Asia-Pacific region remains highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and other natural disasters frequently effect humanitarian and economic consequences that extend beyond national borders. Recent tsunami in Japan has once again highlighted the importance of disaster preparedness, early-warning systems, effective evacuation procedures and crisis response in reducing human and economic losses. In addition, historical disaster, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which affected numerous countries including Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka resulted in more than 230,000 fatalities, further demonstrate the devastating impact in a large scale requiring critical role of international organization and regional assistance (United Nations Development Programme, 2025).

Given the transnational nature of these non-traditional security challenges, regional cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) has become increasingly significant. Effective collaboration among states, international organizations, regional institutions, and non-governmental actors can strengthen preparedness, improve emergency response mechanisms, facilitate information sharing, and support long-term reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. Such cooperation not only enhances capability against future environmental disasters but also contributes to confidence-building among regional actors.

Non-traditional security challenges demonstrate that contemporary security extends beyond responsibility of conventional military. Issues, including IUU fishing, climate change, environmental degradation, and natural disasters, inevitably affect economic sector, food and human security, and sustainable development. These challenges are able to transcend national boundaries and often exceed the capacity

of individual states. They require collaboration among allies, partners, and regional institutions remains essential to promote maritime security, environmental sustainability, human security, and long-term stability throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Theory of Complex interdependence

The theory of Complex Interdependence, developed by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, emerged as a significant alternative to the realist perspective in the study of International Relations. Whereas realism emphasizes the centrality of state sovereignty, military power, and interstate conflict in international politics, Keohane and Nye argued that contemporary international relations are increasingly characterized by cooperation, interconnectedness, and mutual dependence among states. They contended that the growing integration of countries through trade, communication, finance, and international institutions has fundamentally transformed the nature of global politics and expanded the range of actors influencing international outcomes (Keohane & Nye 1941).

A central characteristic of Complex Interdependence is the existence of multiple channels of interaction among societies. International relations are no longer conducted exclusively through formal diplomatic exchanges between governments. Instead, interactions occur through a wide variety of actors, including multinational corporations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), financial institutions, epistemic communities, and transnational social networks. These diverse channels create extensive linkages between states and societies, enabling political, economic, and social developments in one part of the world to generate significant effects elsewhere.

Keohane and Nye further argued that international politics does not operate according to a fixed hierarchy of issues. In contrast to the realist assumption that military security consistently occupies the highest position on the international agenda, Complex Interdependence recognizes the growing importance of economic, environmental, technological, and social issues. Challenges such as climate change, international trade, energy issue, cyber security, public health crises, and environmental degradation frequently require collective action and international cooperation because they cannot be effectively addressed through military means alone. As a result, states are increasingly compelled to cooperate across multiple issue areas and policy domains.

Another important part of the theory is the reduced utility of military force in relations among highly interdependent states. Although military capabilities remain an essential component of national power, their effectiveness may be constrained when states are deeply connected through economic and institutional relationships. Economic interdependence increases the costs associated with conflict and disruption, creating incentives for states to pursue diplomatic engagement, negotiation, and institutional cooperation rather than military confrontation. Therefore, international organizations and multilateral collaboration play

a crucial role in facilitating dialogue, establishing norms and rules, reducing uncertainty, and promoting collective resolution.

The theory also introduces the concepts of sensitive and vulnerable interdependence. Sensitivity refers to the extent to which changes in one state affect other states through policy adjustments while vulnerability concerns the costs that states incur when interdependent relationships are disrupted. These concepts illustrate that interdependence does not necessarily produce equal benefits for all participants. Asymmetric interdependence may emerge, allowing some states to exercise greater influence and leverage over others through economic, technological, or institutional relationships.

Complex Interdependence has become particularly relevant in the era of globalization, where international trade, global supply chains, digital connectivity, and transnational challenges have increased the level of interconnectedness among countries. The theory helps explain why cooperation frequently occurs even among strategic competitors and why international institutions' mechanisms remain important for managing common challenges and reducing the risks associated with interdependence.

In summary, Complex Interdependence provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving nature of international relations in an increasingly interconnected world. By emphasizing mutual dependence, transnational interactions, institutional cooperation, and the increasing importance of non-military issues, Keohane and Nye expanded the analytical scope of International Relations beyond the traditional realist focus on military power and security. Consequently, the theory remains highly influential in explaining contemporary global politics, particularly in areas, such as economic globalization, environmental governance, maritime security, and international cooperation.

Conclusion

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region is undergoing significant transformation as a result of changes in the international order and the evolving strategic policies of major powers. In the 2020s, alteration in U.S. defense strategy, China's expanding maritime zones in the South China Sea, and Japan's ongoing defense modernization efforts have substantially influenced the regional security environment. These developments reflect the increasingly dynamic and competitive nature of security within an evolving multi-polarization system.

In addition, conflicts and crises occurring beyond the Asia-Pacific region, including the Russia–Ukraine War and tensions in the Middle East, have generated significant indirect effects on regional maritime security. These incidents have disrupted maritime trade routes, affected global supply chains, and increased uncertainty in international energy market. Rising costs of oil and vulnerable Sea Lines of Communication have highlighted the interdependence between regional maritime security and broader

geopolitical situations. Consequently, maritime security can no longer be viewed as a solely regional framework, and it must be considered in the context of an interconnected global system.

Outstandingly, strategic competition between the United States and China continues to shape the regional security environment. Although both major powers seek to manage tensions through mechanisms focused on strategic stability and deconfliction, geopolitical rivalry has still remained defining feature of security in the Asia-Pacific. Recent adjustments in 2026 U.S. defense strategy emphasize greater burden-sharing among allies and partners, encouraging them to enhance self-reliance defense capabilities, increase defense expenditures, and expand defense-industrial cooperation. The strategy implies a significant message to Asia-Pacific allies who have long relied on American security guarantees.

The Republic of Korea faces the strategic challenges which require reassessing and adapting its role within the complex regional order. Since the Korean War, the U.S. – Korea alliance has served as a cornerstone of the Republic of Korea's national security. The strong alliance has contributed significantly to support Korean maritime trading and military power, and to protect Korean sovereignty from neighboring countries which far superior to Korea. However, the contemporary security environment requires the Republic of Korea to strengthen its own capabilities while simultaneously adapting to an increasingly complicated, competitive, and interconnected world order.

The changing international relations in globalization era and technological advancement can be obviously analyzed through the theory of Complex Interdependence developed by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye. The theory emphasizes the growing interconnectedness of states, the importance of international cooperation, and the increasing significance of non-military issues in geopolitics. It further suggests that elements of both realism and liberalism coexist within the contemporary international system, where military power, economic relations, technological development, diplomatic engagement, and institutional cooperation interact to shape state behavior and regional security outcomes.

In accordance with the Complex Interdependence theory, the Republic of Korea, as a middle power, is able to contribute to maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region through two key approaches. Firstly, South Korea should focus on strengthening its independent capabilities. Capacity building is essential for not only safeguarding national interests but also supporting long – standing allies that still require assistance. The approach is obviously significant to regional stability in terms of the balance of power. By preserving a balance of power, states can deter aggression, reduce the risk of conflict, and sustain strategic stability within the international system. In the region characterized by geopolitical competition, the balance of power is particularly important because it shapes alliance structures, defense policies, and security cooperation among states. Regional maritime security can be regarded as an outcome of regional states respecting each other and implementing their international policies in accordance with international law and regulations, especially 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982 UNCLOS) (Kun, 2019).



Secondly, South Korea should actively build trust with other states, organizations and agencies in the region through constructive collaboration. Security measures, law enforcement, and international cooperation with regional partners are crucial for addressing maritime threats. According to the theory of Complex Interdependence, contemporary security issues can no longer be resolved solely through military power. Sustainable solutions require collaboration and support across multiple sectors in order to achieve a holistic and effective approach. The example is non - traditional challenges including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, transnational crime, climate change, and natural disaster. They are inherently transnational in nature and cannot be effectively addressed by any single state. Both governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations are essential for overcoming contemporary challenges. When a rules-based maritime order is properly supported, regional countries will also be able to enhance maritime trade safely through sea lines of communication. Those are supporting and collaborative roles of the Republic of Korea in promoting safety and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

Reference

- Allison, G. T. (2017) Destined for War: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?. Center for the National Interest.
- Brunk, I. W., & Hakimi, M. (2022). Russia, Ukraine, and the future world order. Scholarship Archive. Cambridge University Press.
- Carra, G. (2026, May 8) Strait of Hormuz Closure 2026: What It Means for Your Supply Chain and Shipping Routes. Cara Globe <https://carraglobe.com/strait-of-hormuz-closure-2026/>
- Hale, E. (2026, March 12). Southeast Asia shuts offices, limits travel as oil crisis deepens. Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/12/southeast-asia-shuts-offices-limits-travel-as-oil-crisis-deepens>
- Information Fusion Center (2022). 2022 Annual Report. <https://www.ifc.org.sg>
- Jervis, R. (1998) Realism in the study of world politics. 52(4) (pp.971-991) International Organization. The MIT Press.
- Johnson, J. (2026, April 8) Japan's defense spending to reach 1.9% of GDP this fiscal year. The Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2026/04/18/japan/japan-defense-spending-gdp/>
- Katz, Y. (2026, May 29) The US-Israel alliance reached a military peak, but its political future is under threat – analysis. The Jerusalem Post. <https://www.jpost.com/american-politics/article-897441>
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1941). Realism and complex interdependence. power and interdependence (2nd ed). Harper Collin Publishers.
- Kun, L. C. (2019). A paradigm shift: ROK grand strategy and maritime security. enhancing maritime security cooperation for peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific. Republic of Korea Navy.
- Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification (2026). 2026 Unification white paper.
- Ri, P. H. (2026, Jan 26) President Lee calls self-reliant defense 'most basic of basics'. Korea.Net. <https://www.korea.net/Government/Current-Affairs/National-Affairs/view?affairId=2796&articleId=286358&subId=175&viewId=76322>
- Rose, G. (2026, May 20). Iran as Vietnam, Ukraine as Korea. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>
- Sakamoto, S. (2024) What are China's aims with the ten-dash line in the south China sea?. Kobe University.

- Shin, M. (2026, January 26) US Defense Strategy Signals Shift in Korea Defense, Pushing Seoul to Lead. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2026/01/us-defense-strategy-signals-shift-in-korea-defense-pushing-seoul-to-lead/>
- Shon, Y. (2016, March). South Korea's drive for middle-power influence. https://www.globalasia.org/v11no1/cover/south-koreas-drive-for-middle-power-influence_yul-sohn
- Takahashi, K. (2025, December 30). Japan Approves Record Defense Budget for Fiscal Year 2026. Naval News. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/12/japan-approves-record-defense-budget-for-fiscal-year-2026>
- Tewari, S., Guinto, Joel, & Rawnsley, J. (2026, March 25). Marcos promises 'flow of oil' as Philippines declares energy emergency. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3ex8ez3717o>
- Till, G. (2018). Sea power a guide for the twenty-first century, Routledge.
- Tsailas, D. N. (2025). Risks and threats in the 21st century maritime security. 6(1) (pp. 106-144) Security Science Journal. Institute for National and International Security.
- United Nations (1997). 1982 The United Nations convention on the law of the sea. New York. United Nations.
- United Nations (2026). Do you know all 17 SDGs?. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- United Nations Development Programme (2025, January 9). 20th Anniversary of the Indian Ocean Tsunami: UNDP, Government of Japan and Ministry of Interior strengthen tsunami preparedness and response in local and national policies. <https://www.undp.org/thailand/press-releases/20th-anniversary-tsunami>
- United Nations Development Programme (2025, May 26). Emerging Non-Traditional Security Threats: Current Realities and Challenges for Strategic Planning and National Governance toward 2030, with a Vision to 2045. <https://www.undp.org/vietnam/news/emerging-non-traditional-security-threats-current-realities-and-challenges-strategic-planning-and-national-governance-toward-2030-vision>
- United States Department of War (2026). 2026 National defense strategy: restoring peace through strength for a new golden age of America.
- Urbina, I. (2020, September 10). The origin of North Korea's 'ghost boats'. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200909-the-origin-of-north-koreas-ghost-boats>
- Vahn, G. P. (2026, April 7). South Korea allows refiners to swap delayed crude for immediate SPR supply. S&P Global. <https://www.spglobal.com/energy/en/news-research/latest-news/refined-products/040726-south-korea-allows-refiners-to-swap-delayed-crude-for-immediate-spr-supply>