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The Republic of Korea in the Arctic

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Summary

The Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea, has demonstrated its interest in the Arctic region, focusing on two main overarching priorities: economic interest and international diplomacy (via the Global Korea strategy). The ROK has repeatedly recognized the inherent sovereignty of the littoral states in its Arctic policies. While the ROK has historically looked to Russia as its principal Arctic littoral partner due to geography and the infrastructure the state has along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), Canada should actively pursue opportunities to collaborate with ROK as the two like-minded states already share pre-existing economic and defence ties.

Key Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

The “Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities of the Republic of Korea 2018-2022,” lays out the state’s vision, policy goals, and strategic directions for the Arctic. The ROK’s vision for the Arctic is one of economic opportunity with it contributing as “[a] Pioneer and Partner in Shaping [this] Arctic Future.”¹ The ROK’s Arctic Policy goals are to “Promote participation in Arctic economies,” “Increase participation in Arctic governance,” and to “Contribute to the international community and build capacity for addressing challenges in the Arctic.”² The four Strategic Directions are to achieve “Mutually Reinforcing Economic Cooperation”, be a “Responsible Partner in Arctic Cooperation,” make “Research Contribution[s] towards Addressing Common Challenges,” and “Capacity Building” in regard to Arctic knowledge building, training, and institutional frameworks.³ Nowhere in the 2018-2022 Framework is there a single mention of defence or security.

¹ Korea Maritime Institute Northern and Polar Regions Department, ed., *Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities of the Republic of Korea 2018-2022* (Korea: Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries of the Republic of Korea, 2019), 7 at http://www.koreapolarportal.or.kr/data/Policy_Framework_for_the_Promotion_of_Arctic_Activities_of_the_Republic_of_Korea-2018-2022.pdf.

² *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 7.

³ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 7.

The Framework explains that ROK efforts to increase economic cooperation in the Arctic were focused on fostering shipping and logistics, fisheries, and energy and resource development.⁴ A common thread throughout these is Russia is named as a key partner.⁵ The ROK identifies three keyways that it can advance the goal of being viewed as a “Responsible Partner in Arctic Cooperation.” They plan on achieving this goal through “building Arctic Partnerships,” “cooperation in the Arctic Council”, and highlight their “Participation in International Fora.” The work that the state has done with the Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic that it participates in with China and Japan,⁶ and the research they have done in relation to Arctic climate change are highlighted in the document.⁷

The end of the 2018-2022 Framework includes the ROK’s 2050 Polar Vision Statement, designed to “provide a long-term policy direction for Korea’s activities in both the Arctic and the Antarctic regions.”⁸ The Vision includes:

First, acknowledging the connection between the Regions and the Korean Peninsula, we promote the policies to preemptively respond to the effects of climate change on the Regions.

Second, we cooperate in further sustainable development and rational utilization of resources in the Regions.

Third, we foster future-oriented industries for the shared prosperity with the Regions of enormous potential.

Fourth, we enhance our national science capacity through innovation-driven research on the Regions and its resultant production of practical applications.

Fifth, recognizing that the Regions are a borrowed asset from the future generations, we join international efforts to protect the environment of the Regions.

Sixth, we extend the scope of interactions and build trust with the local communities of the Regions, including Arctic indigenous peoples, to preserve their social and cultural traditions as a common heritage of the humankind.

Seventh, we strengthen the capacity for polar activities by expanding the research infrastructure, including the 3rd research station in the inner Antarctic and nurturing of promising researchers and experts.⁹

The 2050 Polar Vision that ROK has laid out is in line with the government of Canada’s priorities in the Arctic and there are no points of immediate concern. ROK has simply underscored the importance of climate change, technological advancement, and scientific research in its long-term plan for both polar regions. Nowhere in either the 2050 vision or the 2018-2022 Framework is there a single mention of defence or security. Nor was the Arctic or Canada mentioned in the ROK’s current Defense Policy (updated in 2022).

Context: Literature Review

⁴ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 7.

⁵ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 7.

⁶ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 10.

⁷ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 11.

⁸ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 17.

⁹ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 17.

Scholarly literature and ROK government publications reveal the state is enthusiastically embracing the Arctic as a region in which it can contribute, gather influence, and increase foreign ties. The ROK is actively participating in the Arctic, understanding the region has the potential to grow the Korean shipbuilding industry, offer new potential trade routes, and containing new natural resources.¹⁰ The Arctic is a step towards the ROK's national priority of pursuing a recognition of "global Korea."¹¹

The ROK has open the Dasan Arctic Science Station in Svalbard in 2002 joined the International Arctic Science Committee. In 2009 they commissioned the icebreaker *RV Araon*, in 2012 they signed the Svalbard Treaty, and in 2013 became an observer in the Arctic Council.¹² The ROK's first Arctic policy or "Master Plan" was released in 2013. The document is notable by being the first non-Arctic state national Arctic policy,¹³ laying out a coherent and comprehensive for the ROK in the Arctic.¹⁴ It seeks "to contribute to [the] sustainable future of the Arctic by enhancing cooperation with the Arctic states and relevant international organizations in the areas of science, technology and economy."¹⁵ The first Arctic Master Plan was designed to guide ROK actions from 2013 to 2017 and highlighted three issues for the state to devote its efforts—increase international cooperation, invest in new business areas, and focus on polar scientific research.¹⁶ The ROK's first Arctic Affairs Ambassador was appointed in 2015 and a pilot navigation of an Arctic sea route was undertaken by a Korean shipping company.¹⁷ In 2017, Korea's Shipowners' Association joined the Arctic Economic Council and the 9 Bridges Strategy was proposed. A Presidential committee on Northern Economic Cooperation was established.¹⁸ 2018 brought the second Arctic Master Plan and the 2050 Polar Vision.¹⁹ In 2019 ROK ratified the CAO Fisheries Agreement.²⁰

ROK has been a predictable Arctic partner since it achieved Observer status in the Arctic Council (2013) and both its Arctic Master Plans highlight the need to cooperative with the littoral states.²¹ and has The ROK has a reputation as being an incredibly active and diligent participant in the Council's working groups.²² The ROK

¹⁰ Nong Hong, "Non-Arctic States' Role in the High North: Participating in Arctic Governance through Cooperation," in *Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction*, eds. Myron H. Nordquist and Ronán Long (Leiden: Brill | Nijhoff, 2021), 317-8, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004422438_017.

¹¹ Julie Babin and Frederic Lasserre, "Asian States at the Arctic Council: Perceptions in Western States," *Polar Geography* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2019.1578290>."

¹² Korea Maritime Institute, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," Republic of Korea, December 2013, 3, http://library.arcticportal.org/1902/1/Arctic_Policy_of_the_Republic_of_Korea.pdf.

¹³ Carin Holroyd, "East Asia (Japan, South Korea and China) and the Arctic," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics*, eds. Ken S. Coates and Carin Holroyd (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 327, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20557-7_20.

¹⁴ Korea Maritime Institute, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," 4.

¹⁵ Korea Maritime Institute, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," 5.

¹⁶ Korea Maritime Institute, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," 5.

¹⁷ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 4.

¹⁸ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 4.

¹⁹ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 4.

²⁰ *Policy Framework 2018-2022*, 4.

²¹ Dongmin Jin; Won-Sang Seo; Seokwoo Lee, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," *Ocean and Coastal Law Journal* 22, no. 1 (2017): 95.

²² Julie Babin and Frederic Lasserre, "Asian States at the Arctic Council," 152.

believes it has a responsibility both as an Observer of the Arctic Council and a non-Arctic state to “promote environmental sustainability of the Arctic, and to encourage sustainable development in the Arctic region in conjunction with the Arctic nations.”²³ Due to the recognition that climate change first noticed in the Arctic will affect the globe, all states are responsible for monitoring climate change in the region.²⁴

In both government documents and academic literature, a major reason why the ROK has been so active in the Arctic is the expected economic potential in the region.²⁵ There are many ways that the state is expecting to benefit economically from the region, such as resource extraction, lowering the cost of transits via Arctic shipping routes, and increased demand for ROK’s shipbuilding expertise. ROK understands the region to be one of economic potential and a theatre in which to increase the country’s international profile.

Due to being a top energy importer – mostly from the Middle East which “poses a threat to the country’s energy security,”²⁶ the ROK has stated interest in diversifying its markets. The ROK is pursuing policies related to resource diplomacy since the 2000s due to the large quantity of energy resources the state has to imports, for example in 2013 ROK imported 95.7% of its energy supplies from overseas.²⁷ ROK policy highlights the Arctic as a new source of energy for importation.²⁸

The ROK is extremely interested in its polar shipping and shipbuilding, with the emphasis placed on the NSR. The state’s interest in the NSR is one of the reasons why ROK’s Arctic strategies have so strongly targeted Russia as a partner, and this partnership has been seen as successful for Russia due to it helping advance and legitimize resource extraction and transport in the Russian high north.²⁹ Due to ROK’s status as a world leader in shipping and shipping technology,³⁰ the state’s push into this sector of Arctic development is significant. The ROK shipbuilding industry has already started to profit from increased demand for icebreakers, and ships with icebreaking capabilities with the gradual increase of traffic through the NSR, and this demand is expected to continue to increase as the number of transits increase.³¹ The ROK is hoping to further develop “an industry specializing in Arctic navigation technology, specifically surrounding the various icebreakers, tankers, and

²³ Dongmin Jin; Won-Sang Seo; Seokwoo Lee, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," 96.

²⁴ Dongmin Jin; Won-Sang Seo; Seokwoo Lee, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," 96.

²⁵ Eunji Kim and Anna Stenport, "South Korea’s Arctic Policy: Political Motivations for 21st Century Global Engagements," *The Polar Journal* 11, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2021.1917088>.

²⁶ E E Krasnozhenova et al., "The Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 625, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/625/1/012011>.

²⁷ Hyun Jung Kim, "Success in Heading North?: South Korea’s Master Plan for Arctic Policy," *Marine Policy* 61 (November 2015): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2015.08.002>.

²⁸ Tina Park, *The Republic of Korea’s Interests & Priorities in the Arctic* (Ontario: NAADSN, 2021): 2, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Park-ROK-policy-primer.pdf>.

²⁹ Bongchul Kim, "A Research on the Establishment of New Korea-Russia Bilateral Cooperation Law for the Sustainable Arctic Development," *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia* 19, no. 1 (July 31, 2020): 87, <https://doi.org/10.17477/JCEA.2020.19.1.084>.

³⁰ E E Krasnozhenova et al., "The Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," 1.

³¹ Young Kil Park, "Arctic Prospects and Challenges from a Korean Perspective," in *East Asia-Arctic Relations: Boundary, Security and International Politics*, ed. Kimie Hara and Ken Coates (Ontario, Canada: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2014), 51.

icebreaking technologies.”³² Thus, the ROK has a strong and vested interest in ensuring that the NSR stays open and accessible to the international community.³³

In addition to the increased demand for the Korean shipbuilding expertise and industry, the ROK is eager for a potential shipping route that would allow Korean companies to get goods to the European market quicker, cheaper, and safer when compared to the traditional shipping routes.³⁴ The ROK has been using the NSR since 2009 with a high degree of success and an increasing number of voyages being conducted.³⁵ The ROK has signaled that it wants to be not only involved in polar shipping going forward but an industry leader in polar shipping.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

There are close economic and diplomatic ties between Canada and the ROK. The ROK is the seventh largest trading partner for Canada.³⁶ While Canada does not identify the ROK specifically in its Arctic policy documents, the state is singled out in the Canadian Indo-Pacific Strategy which identifies the ROK as a partner for Canada due to sharing strong strategic interests and bilateral relations.³⁷

In *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), Canada declared its intention to “[c]onduct joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners and support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO.”³⁸ The ROK is an established partner of Canada and the two already have an established working defence relationship due to Canada’s efforts to “maintain regional peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and to uphold the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region”³⁹ and established the Canada-Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022.⁴⁰ The two countries have many areas that focus on keeping the Arctic a place of low tension while working on advancing the national interests of both states and preventing ROK from becoming closer with Russia.

While ROK is not mentioned directly in either SSE or Canada’s Arctic Northern Policy Framework (ANPF), there are several areas of opportunity that could be fostered between the two countries. As noted in the ANPF,

³² Tina Park, *The Republic of Korea’s Interests & Priorities in the Arctic*,” 3.

³³ Nong Hong, “Non-Arctic States’ Role in the High North,” 312-3.

³⁴ Carin Holroyd, “East Asia,” 324.

³⁵ Young Kil Park, “Arctic Prospects and Challenges from a Korean Perspective,” 49-50.

³⁶ Global Affairs, “Canada-the Republic of Korea Relations.”

³⁷ Government of Canada, “Canada-the Republic of Korea Relations.”

³⁸ National Defence, *Strong Secure Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2017): 80, <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

³⁹ Global Affairs Canada, “Canada-the Republic of Korea Relations,” Government of Canada, May 17, 2023, https://www.international.gc.ca/country-pays/republic_korea-republique_coree/relations.aspx?lang=eng.

⁴⁰ Global Affairs Canada, “Canada-the Republic of Korea Relations.”

Canada wants to “enhance bilateral cooperation with Arctic and key non-Arctic states and actors.”⁴¹ The ROK is a key non-Arctic partner due to their record of embracing Arctic multilateralism, commitment to Arctic scientific research, existing ties to Canada, and like-minded values. ROK would benefit Canada by providing a trusted source for world class shipbuilding and at the same time furthering the economic cooperation between the two states — the Canada-Korea Free Trade Agreement is the only bilateral free trade agreement Canada has in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴²

Issues of Divergence or Concern

Russia is clearly highlighted as the primary partner for ROK in the Arctic. A good example of the bilateral connection between Russia and the ROK is the highly touted ‘Nine Bridges’ project,⁴³ building cooperation on the issues of energy, railways, health, fisheries and agriculture, shipbuilding, navigational investment, tourism, and innovation platforms.⁴⁴ In comparison, Canada is not mentioned by 2018-2022 Framework.

The legitimacy of the Arctic Council is acknowledged in ROK policy, as is the rights of the Arctic Coastal States, but due to the limited role that the non-Arctic states are able to play in the forum, the country is a strong advocate and active member in the “Asian Arctic Club.” Here, the ROK has actively promoted the increased role of non-Arctic States and an Arctic governing structure that is not limited by geographic proximity.⁴⁵ The idea of non-Arctic states establishing their own forum — a forum that could possibly compete with the legitimacy of the Arctic Council — is a well-established concern from the perspective of the Arctic Coastal states.⁴⁶ An additional concern is that this potential alternative forum would not share the priorities of the Arctic States and also has the possibility of ignoring the rights of the northern indigenous peoples.⁴⁷ This concern was aggravated in 2021 by the Korean Observer Statement for the 12th Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council. It stated: “We hope that the Arctic Council will gradually evolve into a more open and inclusive organization so that observer states can make greater contributions to the Council’s activities. An Icelandic proverb says, ‘On thin ice everybody has the same strength.’”⁴⁸ Canada has a vested interest in keeping the Arctic Council governed by the member states, at odds with ROK demonstrations of its willingness to create other fora when the existing forum does not suit its own national goals/purpose.

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⁴¹ Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, *Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2019): 38, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1560523306861/1560523330587>.

⁴² Global Affairs Canada, “Canada-the Republic of Korea Relations.”

⁴³ “South Korea,” *The Arctic Institute*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/south-korea/>.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, “Outcome of 19th Korea-Russia Policy Consultation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea, August 24, 2021, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=321812.

⁴⁵ “South Korea,” *The Arctic Institute*.

⁴⁶ Julie Babin and Frederic Lasserre, “Asian States at the Arctic Council,” 148-9.

⁴⁷ Julie Babin and Frederic Lasserre, “Asian States at the Arctic Council,” 148-9.

⁴⁸ Republic of Korea, “REPUBLIC OF KOREA’S COMMITMENT ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THEARCTIC,” 2.

POLICY BRIEF



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