

Australia-South Korea “2+2”: Meeting in the Middle? by Euan Graham

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One week ago – a long time in politics – the South Korean and Australian foreign and defense ministers held a [“2+2” meeting](#) in Sydney. This high-level biennial conclave for the first time included a detailed blueprint for progressing the bilateral defense and security partnership. That the 2+2 barely registered in Australia’s news-cycle should not surprise, given subsequent events. South Korea’s media showed more interest but mainly to criticize ministers for travelling overseas during national audit hearings. Australia struggles for foreign policy attention in South Korea due to the absorption of bandwidth by the ever-present North Korean drama and great power machinations in Northeast Asia.

Should we care about the bilateral security relationship with South Korea? Is this meeting of distant middle-power minds destined to under-perform against the proven functionality of ANZUS, and the potential of Canberra’s budding ties with Japan and India? Or even Singapore, recently upgraded to the status of [Comprehensive Strategic Partner](#).

For starters, Australia’s defense and security relationship with Seoul matters because war on the peninsula is the most plausible scenario under which the Australia Defense Forces (ADF) could again be involved in a land conflict in East Asia. You won’t find that mentioned in the 2+2 Joint Statement or blueprint but it is implicit in Australia’s continuing contribution “to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula by participating in ROK-US combined exercises as a sending state of the United Nations Command.”

Second, South Korea is important in its own right. As the 13th-largest economy with the 10th-highest military spending its strategic orientation matters for the stability of Australia’s wider region. As a US treaty ally and democracy its pro-Western direction appears outwardly clear. Yet President Park Geun-hye’s conspicuous appearance at China’s military parade alongside Xi Jinping (and Putin), symbolically amplified by the presence of fellow Korean, Ban Ki-moon, could be construed as flirting with an older, tributary alignment. It didn’t look good. But the temptation this presented to cock a double snook against Pyongyang and Tokyo was perhaps irresistible for President Park, domestically rewarded by a bounce in her approval ratings. I further suspect that, at some level, Park’s Blue House advisers draw from a historical memory that Korea knows how to manipulate the “invisible social contract” of tribute to its benefit.

Canberra, of course, has limited influence on the path Seoul chooses to tread among the United States, Japan, and China. But Australia is the only country with which South Korea has a 2+2 apart from the United States. Seoul’s decision to inaugurate an annual bilateral Strategic Dialogue therefore gives Canberra a discreet vantage point from which to counsel a fellow US ally. South Korea lacks a strategic tradition much beyond the US alliance, and policy choices can be easily distorted in Northeast Asia’s zero-sum, nationalistic cauldron. Seoul aspires to play a balancing role, but this is a tough ask in a tough neighborhood.

Third, South Korea matters as a provider of international security goods. The Joint Statement acknowledges an existing basis for bilateral security cooperation in peacekeeping, counter-piracy operations and the search for MH370. Australia’s ambition of drawing out Seoul’s gaze further beyond the DMZ is apparent throughout the 2+2 documents. Meaningfully for Australia’s immediate interests, the blueprint includes a section dedicated to bilateral cooperation on Pacific Islands Countries, as well as pledges to work together on space and cyber security, law enforcement, border security, crisis management and maritime safety.

Fourth, South Korea is a fellow enthusiast for middle power diplomacy. At the 2+2, Australia welcomed strong Korean leadership as the current coordinator of the MIKTA grouping, comprising of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia. MIKTA is an aspirants’ club, but under South Korea’s stewardship defense representatives from all five countries met for the first time at last week’s Seoul Defence Dialogue. Canberra and Seoul are also members of the region’s key multilateral frameworks, including the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus – the latter acknowledged in the Joint Statement “as a means of enhancing practical military cooperation.”

Fifth, Korea is an inter-operable bilateral defense partner for Australia. An MoU on defence cooperation was signed in 2011. The blueprint commits to increased joint exercises, training, and staff exchanges in both directions. Canberra sent a strengthened contingent to a recent US-South Korea command post exercise. The two navies will hold a bilateral anti-submarine warfare exercise every two years. South Korea is likely to be invited to next year’s *Pitch Black* air exercise over northern Australia, where US aircraft flying directly from Korean bases have already participated.

There are limits to this. In the maritime domain, the 2+2 Joint Statement puts down a marker for Australia and South Korea to cooperate on freedom of navigation and overflight. However, diluted language on the South China Sea smacks of compromise between Australia’s more forward position and Seoul’s reluctance to antagonise China, reflecting the priority it assigns to Beijing as a pressurising agent on Pyongyang.

The faith that Seoul has placed in China to deliver on North Korea may be optimistic, but the reality is that South Korea's capacity for external partnership will remain constrained for as long as North Korea monopolizes and sometimes distorts its strategic attention.

That myopia can ultimately only be corrected through reunification, as President Park fundamentally grasps. Until then, the Australia-South Korean partnership is unlikely to deliver in full on last week's ambitious agenda. Still, the 2+2 is a significant vote of faith in our value as a trusted partner. It would be a pity if this politically distracting week in Canberra obscured that opening.

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