



BEYOND SUBMARINES: THE STRATEGIC PATHWAY OF SOUTH KOREA-CANADA DEFENSE COOPERATION

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South Korea and Canada have entered a new phase of defense cooperation, with submarine partnerships and high-level policy exchanges bringing this transition into sharper strategic focus. Hanwha Ocean remains among [the finalist for the Canadian Patrol Submarine Project \(CPSP\)](#), a major initiative to replace aging submarines with up to 12 new vessels by the mid-2030s. In February 2026, [the ROK-Canada Foreign and Defence \(2+2\) Ministerial Meeting](#) in Ottawa marked a higher level of institutional engagement, as both sides signed an Agreement on the Protection of Military and Defence Classified Information and agreed to initiate negotiations toward a broader Defence Cooperation Agreement.

Attention remains focused on this single submarine deal, requiring caution before rushing to broader institutionalization. Yet recent vice-ministerial talks and the public conference underscore growing recognition of CPSP as a potential bridge to Arctic security, polar operations technology, and maritime surveillance with unmanned systems. The key challenge ahead lies in moving beyond project-specific wins through sustained high-level policy dialogues and industry forums to systematically link both nations' strategic environments, policy priorities, and industrial strengths into a medium- to long-term cooperation framework.

Institutional foundations

South Korea and Canada elevated ties to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) in 2022 to mark 60 years of diplomatic relations, gradually expanding defense and security cooperation. In defence

industry terms, the 1996 arms cooperation MOU was revised to cover joint development, testing and evaluation, logistics support, and personnel exchanges; this built on a 2023 defense R&D MOU and a 2024 agreement between Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) and Canada's Commercial Corporation (CCC) for procurement cooperation.

These steps reflect a shared intent to manage defense industry ties beyond one-off deals, with stable mechanisms in place. The February 2026 2+2 meeting [signals](#) movement beyond incremental MOUs toward more formalized arrangements. The classified information agreement and the launch of negotiations on a Defence Cooperation Agreement provide a clearer legal and strategic basis for interoperability, sensitive technology exchange, and long-term industrial collaboration.

This momentum reflects how Korea and Canada are responding to and selectively leveraging shifts in the US-led strategic environment, alongside their own industrial interests. Amid prolonged US competition with China and Russia, Korea offers Indo-Pacific shipbuilding, defense manufacturing, and maritime technology strengths, while Canada leverages its Arctic domain for surveillance, territorial defense, and strategic maritime access. Submarine collaboration emerges at this intersection, serving as a starting point for potential growth.

Strategic frameworks

Framed explicitly as cooperation between middle powers navigating strategic competition and technological disruption, South Korea–Canada defense ties can advance along two complementary axes: integrated deterrence and integrated innovation.

Integrated deterrence

Integrated deterrence links each nation's security capabilities through alliance networks, enabling regional and global deterrence postures. Both countries maintain alliances with the US, with security interests linking North Korea threats to Arctic sea lane defense; they recognize Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security as interconnected, spurring joint efforts in maritime security, UN peacekeeping, and sanctions enforcement.

- Alliance networking has gained traction, reinforced by the 2026 ministerial emphasis on linking Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security. With NATO deepening engagement with its Indo-Pacific Partners (IP4), Canada can bridge NATO-Indo-Pacific gaps while Korea connects Indo-Pacific-Arctic domains. The ongoing war in Ukraine has accelerated linkages between European and Asian security, sharpening the strategic relevance of Korea's Russia sanctions participation and Canada's engagement in Asian security, [reinforced](#) by a new classified military information protection agreement.
- Complementary roles activate this deterrence: Korea at the Indo-Pacific front, Canada in the North Atlantic and Arctic, connected through alliance coordination mechanisms. Canada's [Operation NEON](#) involvement and Korea's RIMPAC exercises with the US have built interoperability, alongside [Canada's participation](#) in the UN Command (UNC) staffing.
- In terms of capabilities, both countries possess complementary strengths. Korea brings shipbuilding-manufacturing prowess and advanced conventional capabilities; Canada offers Arctic deployment experience, Five-Eyes intel assets, and air-maritime patrol strengths. Pairing Korea's polar submarine tech with Canada's Arctic ops support, plus Korea's missile defense-space-cyber advances and Canada's [NORAD](#) modernization, strengthens layered deterrence by combining intelligence sharing with technological collaboration.

While the United States has articulated an integrated deterrence framework, its more immediate effect has been to prompt allies to reassess their own roles and complementarities. In this context, Korea's advanced shipbuilding capabilities and Canada's Arctic access and sustainment capacity have come to be viewed as mutually reinforcing, allowing both countries to contribute to a connected deterrence posture spanning the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic.

Integrated innovation

Integrated Innovation means jointly creating capabilities for future security via defense industry and military science-tech collaboration, centering on dual-use Fourth Industrial Revolution tech like AI, unmanned systems, underwater, and polar domains. The [defense R&D MOU](#) provides the base for such ties, enabling phased joint research and information exchanges.

- Polar joint operations tech ranks high. Canada's "[Our North, Strong and Free](#)" ramps investments in early warning, remote surveillance, and forward bases; Korea's "[Polar Vision 2050](#)" expands icebreaker building, polar route safety, and climate surveys. Shared dual-use focus enables joint eco-friendly icebreakers, polar drones, and satellite-vessel comms projects.
- Canada leads in deep learning foundational research, Korea in AI applications—prime for military intel analysis, cyber defense, and command-control uses.

[Korea's NATO Cyber Defence Centre membership](#) as Asia's first and North Korea cyber threat cooperation talks underscore this.

- Maritime surveillance blending autonomous unmanned and underwater tech shows promise. Korea holds IMO Mass 3 autonomous shipping proofs, ocean sensors, and AI; Canada brings Arctic unmanned ops experience, underwater data, and know-how. Merging these with Canada's National Research Council Arctic domain awareness systems could yield next-gen underwater surveillance and Arctic patrol-anti-sub solutions.

Beyond discrete tech deals, integrated innovation builds alliance-level tech linkage structures with strategic weight, while remaining interoperable with US-led defense innovation networks. This elevates Korea and Canada from demand-side players to co-designers in key domains, fusing security-industry gains to seed a broad Indo-Pacific-Arctic tech ecosystem.

Phased development model

A three-stage model—industrial alignment, technological integration, strategic institutionalization—can drive effective Korea-Canada defense industry progress.

Stage 1: Industrial alignment. Start with CPSP-led optimization of local industry links, via [Hanwha Ocean-Canadian firm partnerships](#) for production-procurement chains and [Industrial and Technological Benefits \(ITB\)](#) compliance through investment-tech transfer. Leverage forums like the Joint Defence Materiel Committee and CCC-DAPA MOU for G2G coordination amid procurement differences, protectionism, NATO standards, and interoperability hurdles.

Stage 2: Technological integration. Build on the R&D MOU for joint AI, polar unmanned recon, and next-gen submarine detection development-testing, eyeing third-country markets. Address IP, export controls, budgets, and requirements flux via Agency for Defense Development (ADD) – Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) ties, industry-academia-military consortia, cross-testing, and multilateral efforts to ensure interoperability and standards.

Stage 3: Strategic institutionalization. Link defense industry to security strategy via high-level mechanisms and 2+2 foreign-defense dialogues. Tackle policy continuity, divergent security contexts, and third-country sensitive tech approvals by elevating the materiel MOU, sector-specific talks, and public-private governance for stability.

Partnership vision

The submarine deal launches Korea-Canada defense industry ties with [long-term strategic partnership](#) potential, as both redefine their regional and functional roles within alliance frameworks. In an era of strategic asset redistribution and alliance recalibration, they fill gaps across Indo-Pacific and Arctic while co-designing deterrence-innovation as middle powers.

Geographic distance and institutional-cultural differences pose hurdles, but post-2022 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership [progress](#) in agreements-dialogues has built foundations. Shared

Arctic-Indo-Pacific stakes and global supply chain-security linkages broaden common ground. Ultimately, recent institutionalization efforts indicate that Korea and Canada are transitioning from transactional arms trade toward structured joint security design and technology co-creation within alliance frameworks.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.