
Korea-US Cooperation on Climate Change in the Pacific as Part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

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ABSTRACT In 2022, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States (US) released their Indo-Pacific strategies as major foreign policy statements.

While existing analyses of this topic focus on shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and their consequences for the US-China rivalry, there is less attention on implications for global challenges such as climate change. This study explores how the ROK and US can bolster climate change cooperation in the Pacific Islands region within the framework of their Indo-Pacific strategies. This analysis reveals that the ROK's readiness to assume an active role and the US' call for the involvement of "allies and partners" can shape future collaboration. This study also provides policy recommendations concerning possible pathways and potential areas for future collaboration.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, ROK-US, Climate Change, Pacific Islands

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The concept of the Indo-Pacific as a regional bloc and the strategic linkage of the two oceans is not entirely new.¹ In recent years, this concept has picked up significant political traction. As of September 2023, over a dozen countries and regional organizations in and out of the Indo-Pacific region, including the United States (US), Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, India, and ASEAN have unveiled versions of their own Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), making these strategies important parts of their respective foreign policies.

Scholars and pundits have provided an array of analyses of this trend. Their primary focus centers on the mounting concerns surrounding the potential change in power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and its implications for the US-China rivalry, an outlook that leans toward the Realism paradigm of international relations theory. On the other hand, a less highlighted aspect of these IPSs is that most aim to address global challenges at a regional level, ensuring the provision of "global public goods" in areas such as the global environment, public health, and digital infrastructure.

Among these global challenges, climate change stands out as a matter of shared interest, underscored by the UN secretary-general's closing remarks at the UN Climate Change Conference in the United Arab Emirates (COP28): "The world cannot afford delays, indecision, or half measures."² The far-reaching consequences of climate change and the urgency of the need to address it have drawn such attention that the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), a military agency that is usually fully occupied by traditional security issues such as deterring military conflict, runs a Climate Change Impact program to address the consequences of climate change for security.³ Reflecting this growing concern, numerous states have identified dealing with climate change as one of the main agenda of their IPSs.⁴

ROK-US Climate Change Cooperation in the Pacific

Against this backdrop, this article draws attention to the cooperation between the ROK and the US in the field of climate change. This focus largely stems from the observation that the two countries' policy

objectives outlined in their IPSs are notably complementary and mutually reinforcing. As emphasized by US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, widely regarded as the architect of the Biden administration's IPS,⁵ the US view is that maintaining the Indo-Pacific Order—the system of international rules, norms and institutions supported by Washington and its like-minded partner governments—inevitably requires a broad coalition.⁶ This requirement is even more acute in light of China's expanding influence, giving the US more reason to collaborate with "allies and partners" in this region. Meanwhile, the ROK aspires to be a "global pivotal state"⁷ and has expressed readiness to assume a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. Seoul is actively seeking opportunities to demonstrate its capacity for constructive engagement in the region.⁸

Furthermore, focusing on ROK-US bilateral cooperation does not exclude the possibility of multilateral collaboration on climate change. While this article concentrates on the two countries' relevant policies for research efficiency, bilateral cooperation between Seoul and Washington can take place within multilateral platforms and can further bolster multilateral efforts among "allies and partners."

To provide more targeted policy insights, the scope of this research is narrowed to Pacific Islands Countries (PICs). The rationale for this regional focus on PICs is threefold.

First, this region is a key area of engagement, alongside ASEAN, under the ROK and US IPSs. Second, numerous Indo-Pacific countries have recently paid attention to this region's escalating strategic significance, both as an arena of great-power competition and a vital maritime logistics corridor. Lastly, this region is among the most vulnerable in the world to climate change, facing existential threats from rising sea levels, increasing temperatures, and a surge in extreme weather events.⁹ Climate change already exerts its impact on this region, and individual Pacific countries' small size and limited access to resources exacerbates the issue, necessitating international collaboration.

This background leads to the possibility of the ROK and US partnering to tackle climate change in the PICs. Each nation's IPS will render useful insight into how the two countries can work together. To translate this inquiry to a more tangible

and practical outcome, this article examines policy documents by the governments of the ROK, the US, and PICs as well as the outcomes of important summit meetings. This will lead to some policy recommendations relevant to both the format of cooperation and some areas to prioritize.

Climate Change in the Indo-Pacific Strategies

Both the ROK and the US governments include responses to climate change as one of the major components of their IPSs and refer to the Pacific Islands region in the context of addressing climate issues.

ROK's readiness to play a bigger role

The ROK's IPS clearly recognizes the importance of regional cooperation on climate change and states its willingness to contribute to and to take a leadership role in this effort. The strategy establishes "lead[ing] regional cooperation on climate change and energy security" as one of its nine core lines of effort. It specifies regional carbon markets, zero-emission vehicles, green shipping, methane emissions reduction, climate-resilient infrastructure building, and clean energy as potential areas of cooperation for achieving the larger goal. Also, the ROK commits to "active contributive diplomacy to build resilience and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including responding to climate change and health threats" in the region. The SDGs are guidelines from the United Nations for significantly improving global human security by the year 2030. While identifying climate change as the PICs' major challenge, the Korean government pledges to "support the climate change response and low-carbon energy transition of the PICs vulnerable to climate change" through "green Official Development Assistance (ODA)."¹⁰

US call for a multilateral approach

On a similar note, the US IPS adopts combating climate change as one of the strategy's five objectives and emphasizes the need to collaborate with allies and partners in achieving the goal.¹¹ While emphasizing "our shared responses" and the aspiration to limit global warming to 1.5°C, the strategy identifies clean-energy technology investment and development, energy-sector decarbonization,

climate-aligned infrastructure investment, reducing vulnerability from climate change and environmental degradation, and critical infrastructure resilience as potential areas of cooperation. Regarding PICs, the strategy outlines "partnering to build resilience in the Pacific Islands" as one of its ten core lines of effort and presents some means to enhance climate resilience in the region, including building resilient infrastructure, addressing the region's infrastructure gaps, and facilitating transportation.

Building Momentum Through Summits

In their respective IPSs, the ROK exhibits an inclination to assume a more active role in addressing climate change in the region, while the US emphasizes a multilateral approach and engagement of allies and partners. Therefore, one can say that this alignment of intentions between the ROK and the US lays down a promising foundation for collaboration on addressing climate change. The momentum of such collaboration has gradually advanced through a series of major summit meetings, notably the ROK-US Summit and the Camp David Summit in April and August of 2023, respectively.

ROK-US Summit: Policy Alignment

The ROK-US Summit in April 2023 was the first summit between the two countries following the ROK's unveiling of its own IPS in late 2022. In the joint statement, the two presidents committed to galvanizing global action to address the climate crisis, expressing their deep concern regarding the matter. More importantly, they explicitly refer to climate change as one of the main areas of cooperation in multilateral fora in the section dedicated to cooperation in implementing their IPSs.

Throughout the joint statement, the direction of this collaboration becomes more evident. The joint statement refers to the need for increased cooperation in areas including sustainable development, climate resilience and adaptation, and energy security with Southeast Asia and the PICs. Also, in the same paragraph the presidents "reaffirmed their commitment to contribute to the Pacific including through the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative as well as the ROK's decision to host the first Korea-Pacific Islands Summit in May."¹²

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Camp David Summit: From Security to Regional Challenges

On the other hand, expanding trilateral cooperation among the US, Korea and Japan is ranked highly in the US' IPS. This effort came to fruition with the first-ever stand-alone trilateral summit at Camp David in August 2023, where the three leaders inaugurated a new era of trilateral partnership with the Camp David Principles and the joint statement titled "The Spirit of Camp David."¹³ While trilateral cooperation had previously primarily focused on security concerns, including responses to North Korea's provocations, the agenda has since expanded to encompass trade, development, emerging technologies, and humanitarian assistance along the way. This trend culminated at the Camp David Summit, where the three leaders committed "to expand our cooperation trilaterally and raise our shared ambition to a new horizon, across domains and across the Indo-Pacific and beyond."¹⁴

The three nations listed climate change as an item on their collaborative agenda and identified ASEAN and the Pacific Island region as key areas of engagement in such cooperation at a trilateral level. In the Joint Statement, the three countries reaffirmed their support to ASEAN and the PICs in the paragraph on climate resilience, pledging to coordinate capacity-building efforts in these regions.

Building Connections with Pacific Island Countries

As the momentum of cooperation builds between Seoul and Washington on climate change cooperation in the PICs, the ROK and the US have both held summits with PICs. Both countries' IPSs made sure that their policy towards Pacific Islands region would align with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,¹⁵ a long-term developmental roadmap agreed upon and endorsed by member countries of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) in July 2022.¹⁶ These summits with PICs contributed to consolidating such alignment. Moreover, during these summits, the ROK and the US released more detailed region-specific policies towards PICs, which in turn provide some useful insights for cooperation between the ROK and the US.

US-Pacific Island Country Summit: Pacific Turn

In September 2022, the US revealed its "Pacific Partnership Strategy," the first cooperation strategy for the region, at the first-ever US-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington D.C. The strategy lays out four main objectives: (1) a strong US-Pacific Islands partnership; (2) a united Pacific Islands region connected with the world; (3) a resilient Pacific Islands region prepared for the climate crisis and other 21st-century challenges; and (4) empowered and prosperous Pacific Islanders.¹⁷ President Biden pledged over US\$810 million for the region at this summit.¹⁸

Since climate change is the top priority for the region, the strategy dedicates one of its lines of effort to combating the climate crisis and building climate resilience in the Pacific. Among the list of items for future cooperation, climate finance, infrastructure, and disaster risk reduction stand out.

The US held the second summit in September 2023. The leaders reaffirmed the US' commitment to this region and reviewed the progress of what was agreed on the previous year. They also decided to hold the Summit biannually. On the climate change front, progress on an early warning system and disaster preparedness were reported. Also, initial funding for the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF), the Pacific-based regional fund dedicated to community resilience-building, was announced at the summit.¹⁹

ROK-Pacific Islands Summit: A New Player Willing to Engage

The first summit meeting between the ROK and the PICs took place in Seoul in May 2023. This inaugural summit marked a significant milestone in ROK-PIC relations, considering the history of interactions between the two regions. Even though the ROK has held the status of a Dialogue Partner of the PIF since 1995 and established the ROK-PIF Cooperation Fund in 2008, no summit-level meeting had taken place, nor had there been a region-specific policy towards the Pacific Islands before May 2023.

The primary purpose of the summit was to identify the intersection between Korea's IPS and the PICs' 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and translate this into tangible cooperative projects. To this end, the leaders released the decla-

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ration "A Partnership in Pursuit of Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity for a Resilient Pacific" and a related Action Plan.

The summit agenda centered on climate concerns. During the leaders' meeting, the two sides agreed to further strengthen cooperation in climate change, the environment, and disaster risk and resilience.²⁰ Furthermore, the Korean government committed to double its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the region, which was around \$20 million in 2023, by 2027 and announced its intent to open additional diplomatic missions in this region. More specifically on climate change, the declaration heavily adopted the PIC's well-known stance in international climate negotiations. This stance includes endorsement of the 1.5°C target, a call for simplified access modalities to climate change finance, and a request for advances in setting an ambitious goal for climate finance as well as in loss and damage fund negotiations. The Action Plan sets out five areas of interest related to climate change: climate change cooperation, enhancing climate prediction services, green energy supply, forest cooperation, and capacity-building for greenhouse gas inventory.

As follow-up measures of the Summit, the ROK established diplomatic ties with Niue, finally concluding diplomatic relations with all the PICs. Additionally, it announced the opening of a diplomatic mission in the Marshall Islands by 2024.²¹ Moreover, the Action Plan for IPS released by the ROK in December 2023 identified concrete target projects in the Pacific Island region, such as the Tina River hydropower project in the Solomon Islands, the ocean thermal energy conversion project in the Marshall Islands, and the early flood warning systems in Fiji.²² The ROK also followed up on the progress made in Seoul with a second summit-level meeting in September 2023 in New York. It was a diplomatic signal confirming that the ROK was committed to the partnership with the PICs.

Policy Recommendations: Invigorating New Avenues of Cooperation

With the review of policy documents and outcomes of the summit meetings in mind, this research identifies several avenues for ROK-US cooperation on climate change in the Pacific Island region.

This policy recommendation is comprised of two components: the first focuses on potential platforms for coordination, and the second explores possible areas for initiating the cooperation.

Platform: Leveraging bilateral and multilateral possibilities

When it comes to the coordination platform, to maximize efficiency and minimize redundancy, the ROK and the US should leverage existing bilateral and multilateral platforms for policy alignment. In this context, it is encouraging that the cooperation between the implementing bodies of development assistance, the Korea Overseas International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), has recently strengthened. KOICA and USAID signed a three-year MOU on enhancing donor collaboration in April 2023. Additionally, USAID announced its intention to establish a permanent presence at the US Embassy in Seoul.²³ Moreover, USAID's opening of a USAID/Pacific Islands Mission in Fiji in August 2023, coinciding with the location of KOICA's regional office, coupled with the two organizations' history of successful partnerships in other parts of the world, is expected to bolster cooperation in the Pacific Island region.²⁴

Exploring promising new avenues that utilize a multilateral format can facilitate both bilateral cooperation and offer potential for broader collaboration. PBP and ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation can be considered for coordinating platforms that can serve such objectives.

The US launched the PBP initiative in collaboration with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom in June 2022. This "inclusive and informal mechanism" aims for "more effective and efficient cooperation in support of Pacific Island priorities" in line with the PIF's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.²⁵ Although the ROK was not among the founders of the PBP, the ROK officially announced its admission into the PBP in September 2023. The ROK and the US have at their disposal an avenue to channel more resources towards addressing climate change or developing a new joint flagship initiative within this flexible platform.

As previously discussed, the prospects for cooperation within the ROK-US-Japan trilateral framework can be promising with its growing

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level of institutionalization after the Camp David Summit.²⁶ An illustrative example of this is the first Trilateral Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue in October 2023, in which the three countries focused on aligning priorities and policies in international development and humanitarian challenges. In this inaugural meeting, the three countries explicitly emphasized their commitment to operating within the frame of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The outcome document highlighted the joint objectives, including the "ambition to achieve our 2030 climate goals" and their resolve "to coordinate diplomacy to support vulnerable people affected by conflict, climate-induced emergencies, and other disasters."²⁷ Additionally, the document states that the three countries are "determined to work closely with Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Islands Forum as the region's leading institution, consistent with the Pacific Way."²⁸ Given that, this article assesses that ROK-US bilateral cooperation, ROK-US-Japan trilateral cooperation, and the PBP can function in a mutually reinforcing manner.

On the other hand, it remains to be seen how this collaboration between Seoul and Washington will influence their respective stances on Pacific island-related issues at the annual UN Conference on Climate Change (COP), the premier platform of international climate negotiation. As seen in the remarks of Marshall Islands' chief delegate Sayd Samuel Silk at COP28—"We will not go silently to our watery graves"—the PICs are vocal in advancing topics such as the loss and damage fund.²⁹ If both the ROK and the US are willing, the two countries can identify ample opportunities for collaborative efforts within the COP framework, adopting favorable positions on PIC-led issues.

Areas of Priorities: Disaster Risk Reduction, Forest Management, and Resilient Infrastructure

Considering the review of the official policy papers of the ROK and the US, as well as the needs of the PICs reflected in the region's strategic documents, although there are many promising areas for climate change cooperation, a few stand out: disaster risk reduction, forest management, and resilient infrastructure.

Regarding disaster risk reduction, it is noteworthy that both the ROK and the US have allocated

resources to enhance the Pacific region's capabilities in predicting and preparing for potential disasters. The ROK has played an active role in developing the Pacific-targeted climate prediction tool known as PICASO (Pacific Island Countries Advanced Seasonal Outlook), and is committed to improving the tool and offering training programs to working-level climate officers in PICs.³⁰ Similarly, the US has been strengthening early warning systems in the area, with USAID providing \$12.2 million to bolster disaster preparedness and capacity-building endeavors across the Pacific Islands.³¹ Consequently, mutual collaboration in this field, based on each country's earlier commitments, can serve as a starting point for the development of joint projects in the near future.

Forest management is another potential area for partnership between the two countries. The US Department of Agriculture is providing \$8.5 million in funding for urban community forestry and invasive species science and management activities in the Freely Associated States.³² The ROK also highlighted its commitment to forestry cooperation in response to the climate crisis facing PICs during the PBP ministerial meeting in September 2023.³³ If the ROK and the US can forge some joint projects in forest management through the PBP, it will set a good example in this newly initiated platform.

Finally, both the ROK and the US should consider collaboration in building resilient infrastructure in the Pacific Island region. Notably, the US has experience in forging the US-Japan-Australia partnership to finance a major construction of an undersea fiber optic cable in Palau.³⁴ Given Korea's expressed intention to provide highly concessional loans for the region's infrastructure, ROK-US joint initiatives for climate-resilient infrastructure can be investigated further.

Conclusion: Toward a Complementary Partnership

This article explored the potential for ROK-US climate change cooperation within the framework of each country's IPS, focusing on possible cooperative initiatives in the Pacific Island region. Examination of government policy papers and outcome documents from summit meetings involving the

ROK, the US, and the PICs suggests notable alignment in policies and priorities of collaboration, with growing momentum of cooperation.

Considering the commitments and priorities expressed by the two governments, the ROK and the US's IPSs have opened new avenues of climate change cooperation, and both governments should harness this opportunity to more effectively serve the objectives of their IPSs. This partnership will be mutually beneficial, leveraging complementary aspects of the two countries' strengths. The US's extensive experience of cooperation and institutional networks in the region as well as people-to-people ties stemming from the Pacific diasporas living in the US can compensate for the ROK's comparative inexperience in cooperation with the

PICs. On the other hand, given the suspicion of many Pacific islanders that US interest in the region is largely motivated by America's strategic competition with China, and the doubts this creates about the sincerity and staying-power of US engagement,³⁵ the partnership with the ROK can be an asset. South Korea is relatable to the PICs as a country that has transitioned from being a recipient country to a donor. Korea also carries no historical baggage from having been a perpetrator of war or colonization. The ROK can therefore contribute to garnering more credibility from the PICs while helping the partnership gain a more nuanced understanding of the needs and development visions of the PICs. The US, Korea and PICs all stand to benefit from the new potential for cooperation.

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