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South Korea, Australia forge closer military ties

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is in Australia on a four-day visit—the first in-person trip to Australia by a head of state since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the visit nominally marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations, it is a significant boost to strategic and economic ties between the two countries.

With Washington aggressively ramping up tensions with Beijing, both Australia and South Korea are formal military allies of the United States and host US military bases. South Korea houses some 28,500 American military personnel and is integrated into US anti-missile systems aimed against China. The US has basing arrangements for US Marines, warplanes and warships in Australia, which also hosts critical facilities, such as the Pine Gap base in central Australia, that are essential to US military operations throughout Asia and the Middle East.



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South Korean President Moon Jae-in, center, lays a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier during a visit to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Australia on Monday, December 13, 2021. (Lukas Coch/Pool Photo via AP)

Together with the US, Japan and India, Australia is a member of the quasi-military alliance known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or “Quad,” which the Biden administration has strengthened this year. In addition, the AUKUS pact signed earlier this year with the US and the UK includes the provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

South Korea is not part of the Quad or AUKUS, but would quickly be involved in any US war against China. Moon declared that his visit had “nothing to do with our position over China,” yet the strengthening of strategic ties with Australia inevitably draws South Korea more closely into the web of US military alliances and strategic partnerships in Asia developed by Washington in preparation for conflict with China.

Moon met with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Monday and formally elevated ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. While the South Korean president was careful not to raise tensions with China, his country’s largest trading partner, he did signal support for AUKUS—which is unmistakably aimed against Beijing.

Asked about AUKUS, Moon declared: “This is a decision made by Australia as a sovereign nation, and we respect that. Australia is making efforts for peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.” The aggressive character of the AUKUS agreement is betrayed, however, by the supply of attack submarines whose only purpose is to operate for long periods at great distances from Australia—in waters close to the Chinese mainland.

Significantly, in a joint statement, Moon and Morrison repeated Washington’s propaganda directed against China’s maritime and territorial claims in the strategic South China Sea. They called for “adherence to international law in the maritime domain” and “upholding freedom of navigation and overflight... in the context of increasing risks of instability in the maritime domain.”

The US has routinely heightened “the risks of instability” by carrying out provocative “freedom of navigation operations”—deliberately sending US warships into territorial waters claimed by China around islets under its control in the South China Sea. These waters are not only the strategic lifeline for China’s trade with the world, but sit adjacent to its sensitive naval bases on Hainan Island.

At the same time, Moon said South Korea would not join the Biden administration’s latest diplomatic attack on China—the US boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics that has been joined by Australia and a handful of other countries. He said his administration was “not even considering a boycott measure.”

Nevertheless, the military content of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries was clear from agreements signed by the leaders. These included a \$A1 billion deal for the South Korea defence giant Hanwha to establish a factory in Geelong, Australia to build 30 self-propelled howitzers and 15 armoured ammunition resupply vehicles for the Australian army.

The military contract is the largest ever with an Asian country, and both countries have an eye on its extension to other weaponry. Hanwha will partner with the Australian government to create an Armoured Vehicle Centre of Excellence in the Geelong region and is bidding for a \$30 billion contract to build new infantry fighting vehicles for the Australian Army.

Morrison and Moon also signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation on stable supply chains for critical minerals, saying it was “important not only for the two countries, but also for the global economy.” Moon declared: “Australia, the world’s richest country in mineral resources, and Korea, a major producer of batteries and electric vehicles, play an important role in the global supply chain.”

The issue of global supply chains has emerged not only as a result of the impact of COVID-19 around the world, but also from heightened US-China tensions. China is the world’s top producer of rare earths, accounting for 90 percent of production. These are essential for the manufacture of sophisticated military hardware, as well as commercial goods. The US military has been pushing to secure essential strategic items, including rare earths.

While the rare earths found in mineral sands are not “rare” as such, their production is very expensive. The *South China Morning Post* reported in March that the Australian rare earth producer ASM had closed a deal with two regional governments in South Korea to build its first processing plant for critical minerals. The factory will be built near major Korean manufacturing companies—including LG Chemical and Samsung SDI—and will begin by producing high-purity neodymium-iron-boron powder and titanium powder.

The very fact that Moon travelled to Australia in person with his accompanying party of officials also underscored the determination of both governments to press ahead with their irresponsible policy of “opening up,” even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spiral out of control. The highly-infectious Omicron variant has already gained a foothold in both countries.

As of today, the Morrison government has opened Australia’s borders to international workers and students after a token two-week “pause” in response to the Omicron variant. Travellers from Japan and South Korea were also subject to the “pause,” which has now been lifted. The opening of the borders flies in the face of warnings from health experts that the end of restrictions will inevitably lead to an acceleration of infections, hospitalisations and deaths.

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