

European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific and Its Security Implications for South Korea

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유럽의 인도-태평양 지역 관여와 한국에 주는 안보적 함의

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Abstract With the increasing geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Indo-Pacific region, major European nations are intensifying their efforts to contribute to the establishment of a stable security environment in the Indo-Pacific. The engagement efforts of major European countries in the Indo-Pacific stem from the realization that maintaining a stable security environment in the Indo-Pacific is directly linked to the peace and prosperity of Europe. A stable Indo-Pacific security environment is equally crucial for South Korea's national interests and prosperity. If the competition and confrontation among nations in the Indo-Pacific region were to culminate in actual military conflicts, it could directly impact the security and economy of South Korea. With the ongoing reconfiguration of the international order in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea, aspiring to contribute positively to global peace and prosperity, must expand its role in sustaining regional stability. However, navigating this process requires a strategic approach that carefully considers South Korea's domestic and international security environment. As a middle power intricately affected by great power dynamics, South Korea must actively establish a foundation for multilateral cooperation, emphasizing flexibility in actions to safeguard national interests and enhance security. In the broader initiative to strengthen multilateral cooperation, collaboration with nations sharing common goals and values, both within and outside the region, is essential for South Korea. This analysis assesses the backdrop and prevailing trends of European engagement in the Indo-Pacific, anticipates potential opportunities and challenges, and outlines security implications for South Korea.

요약 국제사회의 지정학적·지정학적 주 무대로서 중요성이 높아지고 있는 인도-태평양 안보환경의 불안정성과 불확실성이 고조되면서, 대서양 세력인 주요 유럽국가들이 인도-태평양 지역의 역내 안보질서 유지를 위한 관여 노력을 기울이고 있다. 인도-태평양에 대한 주요 유럽국가들의 관여 노력은 인도-태평양의 안정적인 역내 안보환경 질서유지가 유럽의 평화와 번영에 직결된다는 현실 인식에서 기인한다. 안정적인 인도-태평양 안보환경 질서는 한국의 국익과 번영에도 직결된 핵심사안이다. 인도-태평양 지역에서의 영향력 확대를 위한 국가 간 경쟁과 대립이 군사적 무력충돌로 귀결될 경우, 인도-태평양 지역내 주요 전략적 요충지인 한국의 안보와 경제에 직접적인 타격을 줄 수 있다. 인도-태평양 중심의 국제질서가 재편되는 과정에서, 국제사회의 평화와 번영에 기여하는 글로벌 중추국가로서의 긍정적 이미지 제고를 지향하고 있는 한국은, 안정적인 역내 안보질서 유지를 위한 역할확대가 요구된다. 그러나, 이 과정에서 한국이 처해있는 대내외의 안보환경을 고려한 전략적 접근이 필요하다. 강대국 간의 역학관계로부터 자유로울 수 없는 중소국가의 입장에서 국익 및 국가안보 제고를 위한 행동의 유연성을 극대화할 수 있는 다자협력 기반구축 노력이 요구되며, 다자협력 강화 노력의 일환으로 공동의 목표와 가치를 공유하고 있는 역 내외 국가들과의 협력 및 연대강화가 필요하다. 특히, 한국을 포함한 인도-태평양 지역 국가들과의 협력 강화 노력을 기울이고 있는 유럽국가들과의 협력을 모색할 필요가 있다. 본고에서는 주요 유럽국가들의 인도-태평양 지역 관여 배경 및 동향을 살펴보고, 유럽국가들의 인도-태평양 지역 관여 과정에서 예상되는 기회와 도전요인을 평가한 후, 한국에 주는 안보적 함의를 제시한다.

Keywords : Europe, Indo-Pacific, Regional Security, International Order, Multilateral Cooperation

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1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, the United States, formerly a dominant global force, has experienced a diminishing influence, primarily due to the rise of China. The strategic competition between the U.S. and China, alongside the protracted Ukraine crisis, has escalated tensions among major powers, contributing to instability in the security landscape of the Indo-Pacific region[1].

Recognizing the pivotal role of the Indo-Pacific in shaping the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics, major European powers have redirected their focus to maintain security in the region. This shift stems from the understanding that the stability of the Indo-Pacific directly impacts Europe's peace and prosperity[2].

For South Korea, establishing a stable security order in the Indo-Pacific is imperative to safeguard its national interests and prosperity. Amid the ongoing restructuring of the international order, South Korea seeks to enhance its reputation as a global pivotal state that contributes to peace and prosperity. However, achieving this goal requires a strategic approach that takes into account both domestic and international security dynamics.

Given the complexities of managing relations with major powers as a middle power state, South Korea must lay the groundwork for multilateral cooperation to enhance flexibility in promoting national interests and strengthening security. It is crucial to strengthen cooperation and solidarity with nations that share common goals and values, both within and beyond the Indo-Pacific region. Of particular importance is the collaboration with Europe, which has shown a willingness to engage with countries in the Indo-Pacific, including South Korea.

This paper delves into the background and trends of Europe's involvement in the Indo-Pacific, assessing anticipated opportunities and challenges in Europe's engagement. Furthermore, it outlines policy implications for South Korea,

emphasizing the need for a strategic, multilateral approach that aligns with common goals and values to navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape.

2. Background of European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

2.1 Restoration of a Status as a Normative Power

Following the Cold War, the U.S.-led international order, centered around the Atlantic, weakened, prompting a shift in U.S. foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific. This transition posed challenges for Europe in maintaining its normative power on the global stage. Historically, Europe championed universal values, presenting itself as a normative power based on the decline of the Russian threat and a robust transatlantic alliance[3].

However, with the declining role of the United States and deepening U.S.-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, Europe faced a shifting security landscape. The strategic weight of U.S. foreign policy moved to the Indo-Pacific, impacting Europe's security perceptions. During the Trump administration, the U.S. held a negative view of the transatlantic alliance, deepening European distrust.

Efforts to restore the transatlantic alliance are ongoing during the Biden administration, but the U.S. maintains a consistent focus on the Indo-Pacific to counter China. Initiatives like QUAD, FIVE EYES, and AUKUS underscore U.S. efforts to build alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

As U.S. diplomatic and security focus intensifies on the Indo-Pacific, Europe's concerns about potential decoupling from the U.S. and the resulting security void grow. This anxiety is exacerbated by events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In response, Europe emphasizes strategic autonomy to establish its external identity and enhance its global standing[4].

The diminishing U.S. policy priority towards European security since the Cold War, coupled with increased uncertainty in U.S.-Europe relations, has driven Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy. While adopting equidistance diplomacy in the U.S.-China rivalry, Europe acknowledges the risks of overreliance on either power. Given the structural context of the U.S.-China strategic competition, Europe positions itself to play a mediating role.

To achieve strategic autonomy and expand its normative power, Europe recognizes the necessity of strengthening external capabilities through enhanced cooperation with regional partners, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Europe's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is seen as a crucial component of its broader pursuit of strategic autonomy, with the effectiveness of its efforts hinging on increased involvement in regional security.

2.2 China Factor

In navigating the Indo-Pacific landscape amid escalating U.S.-China competition, Europe adopts a balanced stance through equidistant diplomacy concerning China. Recognizing the challenges of sustaining this approach continuously, Europe's dual and pragmatic strategy stems from a clear understanding of economic interdependence with China.

Europe voices concerns about China's expanding influence, criticizing its aggressive efforts to undermine global public goods, disrupt regional power balances, and heighten security instability in the Indo-Pacific. The 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook designates China as both an economic competitor and systemic rival, emphasizing a critical approach. NATO, in its 2020 report 'NATO 2030: United for a New Era,' acknowledges China as a major threat to international security[5].

Despite reservations and negative views, Europe's dual approach is grounded in the practical acknowledgment of economic interdependence. As of 2022, China constitutes a significant

economic partner, with 10% of Europe's total exports directed toward China, ranking it as the second-largest export destination after the United States. Imports from China constitute 23% of Europe's total imports, surpassing the 13% share from the United States. Striking a balance between maintaining economic relations with China and contributing to Indo-Pacific security presents a diplomatic challenge for European nations[6].

2.3 Economic Security

The understanding that maintaining a stable security environment in the Indo-Pacific is directly linked to Europe's economic security is a significant driving force behind Europe's engagement in the region. While perceptions of the geographical scope of the Indo-Pacific differ among countries and regions, Europe typically considers a vast area from East Africa to the Pacific. Europe highlights the importance of the region, as it is home to more than 60% of the world's population, contributes to about 60% of global GDP, and holds substantial growth potential.



Fig. 1. Geo-demographic and Geo-economic Figures of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific's significance is further underscored by its role as a critical hub for global trade, with four out of Europe's top ten trading partners (China, Japan, South Korea, India) located in the region. Approximately 70% of Europe's external trade and 60% of its foreign

direct investment occur in the Indo-Pacific, accounting for over 60% of global trade[7].

Europe's involvement in the Indo-Pacific is not only driven by the desire to expand its influence and enhance its normative power globally but is also connected to the realization that maintaining a stable security environment in the Indo-Pacific is crucial for global supply chain stability and economic security.

3. Europe's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

3.1 Efforts to Engage in the Region

Europe actively pursues a diplomatic approach in the Indo-Pacific, recognizing the region's significance. This strategic focus extends to individual countries, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK, as well as collaborative efforts at the European Union and NATO levels.

France, notably the first European nation to announce an Indo-Pacific strategy, actively engages in the region driven by its direct interests. With approximately 70% of its Exclusive Economic Zone in the Indo-Pacific, France hosts a substantial population and military presence in the area. The country's economic interests in the region are considerable, contributing significantly to Europe's external trade. France's Indo-Pacific strategy is designed to enhance regional security, foster partnerships, and address challenges such as environmental issues. France not only leads in its national Indo-Pacific approach but also influences the broader European Union's engagement policy, reflecting its commitment to building independent capabilities. France has been instrumental in promoting European cooperation to strengthen autonomous foreign and security policies, emphasizing a reduction in Europe's security dependence on the United States. This

commitment aligns with France's pursuit of strategic autonomy through active involvement in the Indo-Pacific[8].

Germany, the second European nation formalizing its Indo-Pacific involvement in September 2020, addresses escalating regional tensions. Recognizing the region's growing strategic importance amid U.S.-China competition, Germany releases guidelines to contribute to stability. Unlike France, Germany employs cautious language, emphasizing guidelines rather than a strategy to avoid negative connotations regarding China. With a focus on economic and security interests, Germany diversifies trade and enhances cooperation with ASEAN. Joining the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy in Asia in August 2021, Germany deploys frigates to safeguard maritime routes, emphasizing freedom of navigation[9].

The Netherlands, in its guidelines for strengthening cooperation in the Indo-Pacific released in November 2020, underscores the importance of its relations with the region. Identifying China's assertive policies as a key challenge affecting regional security, the Netherlands, despite its significant economic dependence on China, is cautious and actively seeks economic and security cooperation with regional partners[10].

The UK, having left the European Union, positions the Indo-Pacific as essential for realizing its role as a Global Britain. The country actively engages in diplomatic efforts, especially with Commonwealth nations and non-European countries, underlining its commitment to security, defense, development, and foreign policy. The UK anticipates the Indo-Pacific becoming the geopolitical and geoeconomic center by 2030, emphasizing cooperation with regional nations and active participation in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy[11].

The European Union, in September 2021, introduced its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing active participation in maintaining regional stability, security, prosperity,

and sustainable cooperation. Recognizing the Indo-Pacific's significant relevance to Europe, the EU highlights the application of its global governance principles, such as multilateralism, rule-based international order, human rights, and democratic values, in the region. The EU expresses concerns about China's expanding influence, emphasizing the need for cooperation among nations to address challenges posed by China[12].

Italy, in its 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy, emphasizes the importance of EU's joint efforts and its identity as a Mediterranean country connecting the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific. Italy actively promotes multilateral cooperation with regional countries to contribute to maintaining a stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific[13].

NATO, in its 2022 strategic concept, mentions the Indo-Pacific as an area of interest for the first time, underlining the necessity for NATO to expand its role in the region. Emphasizing cooperation with key partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, NATO envisions reinforcing alliances and networks for the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific.

Table 1. European Policy Documents on the Indo-Pacific

Country	Title (Year)
France	The Indo-Pacific Region: A Priority for France(2019) France's Indo-Pacific Strategy(2022)
Germany	Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific(2020)
Netherlands	Indo-Pacific:Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in ASIA(2020)
UK	Global Britain in Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development and Foreign Policy(2021)
EU	EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific(2021)
Italy	The Italian Contribution to the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific(2022)

In summary, Europe's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is marked by the proactive policies

of individual countries, especially France and Germany, and collective efforts at the European Union and NATO levels. These efforts reflect a growing recognition of the Indo-Pacific's strategic importance, with a focus on maintaining stability, security, and prosperity through diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation.

3.2 Main Traits

Before the formal announcement of a document outlining Europe's Indo-Pacific engagement, security cooperation has been consistent, with an anticipated emphasis on the region in future foreign and security policies. Despite varying threat perceptions among European nations, there is a consensus on the importance of a stable Indo-Pacific for Europe's peace and prosperity. Policies, whether at the individual or EU level, share commonalities.

Firstly, there's a shared emphasis on maintaining a multilateral order. Rooted in historical contexts since the 17th century, Europe sees multilateralism as ideal for international order, aiming to prevent a diminution of its role in the reconfigured Indo-Pacific. Cooperation through multilateralism is deemed essential to enhance Europe's prominence in the region.

Secondly, Europe stresses maintaining regional order based on international law and norms, using normative power to showcase a distinct strategy from the assertive U.S. stance against China. By promoting values like human rights, openness, inclusivity, market economy, and democracy, Europe seeks to mitigate regional instability arising from U.S.-China strategic competition, emphasizing a rule-based international order.

Thirdly, Europe participates in the U.S.-led coalition countering China's assertive influence. While critical of China's actions undermining the rule-based international order, Europe balances this with the acknowledgment of economic interdependence.

Fourthly, Europe acknowledges both conventional and unconventional security threats, underscoring the gravity of emerging challenges such as cybersecurity, maritime security, crisis management, counter-terrorism, disinformation, and climate change. Emphasis is placed on collaborating with regional nations to effectively address these issues.

Moreover, Europe projects and sends military forces to the Indo-Pacific in order to counter security threats, underscoring the constraints of normative and diplomatic methods. Military collaboration, particularly in maritime security, seeks to bolster Europe's standing as a major player in the region. This comprehensive approach demonstrates Europe's dedication to tackling various challenges and amplifying its role in the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape.

3.3 Key Security Issues

A notable aspect of Europe's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region is the emphasis not only on traditional security threats like disarmament and nuclear proliferation but also on the cooperation necessity in emerging security fields characterized by transnational elements, such as cybersecurity, maritime security, climate change, and advanced technologies. Europe's interest in addressing various emerging non-traditional security threats in the Indo-Pacific region reflects an awareness that it presents a favorable opportunity for Europe, as a normative power in the international community, to highlight its strengths in contributing to the maintenance of security and order in the Indo-Pacific security environment. The transnational nature of emerging security threats extends beyond specific countries and regions, making intergovernmental solidarity and collaboration essential. Leveraging its identity and experience as a transnational regional integration body, such as the European Union, Europe perceives itself as capable of playing a leading role in addressing emerging security threats with a strong transnational

character.

As the U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific region, and solidarity against Russia and China becomes more visible following the Ukraine crisis, Europe is increasingly aware of the emerging security threats posed by these nations. Concerns about maritime security, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, disinformation, and emerging technologies from China and Russia are growing in Europe. These perceptions are reflected in European policies and strategies related to the Indo-Pacific, the EU's Strategic Compass, and NATO's new strategic concept. Europe recognizes that addressing these non-traditional security threats with a transnational character requires essential cooperation and solidarity among nations.

4. Future Prospects: Challenges and Opportunities

Europe's involvement in the Indo-Pacific security landscape encounters intricate challenges despite concerted efforts by individual nations, the European Union (EU), and NATO. Structural impediments, including divergent threat perceptions, varying prioritization of security concerns, and differences in military capabilities among European nations, create obstacles to cohesive policy decisions.

The differing perceptions among European Union member states regarding the Indo-Pacific region hinder the cohesive policy pursuit of the EU in the Indo-Pacific. The unanimity principle constrains flexibility, particularly concerning personnel and military deployment, as Eastern European nations may prioritize different security issues, influencing decision-making dynamics.

Geographical distances present challenges to sustained cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries. Limited military capabilities for consistent long-range operations raise concerns about

potential security vacuums in Europe, especially as the imperative to fortify defense capabilities for Indo-Pacific engagement grows. Only a few European countries have the capability for long-range operations.

The overlap between NATO and EU roles in Indo-Pacific security further complicates matters. Tensions arise due to the EU's pursuit of independence from the U.S.-led NATO. Prominent nations such as France and Germany advocate for enhancing EU capabilities independently. Ongoing coordination challenges lead to areas of overlap.

Europe's strategic ambiguity on key Indo-Pacific issues also introduces additional complexity. Europe's clarity in policy directions is essential to enhance cooperation with U.S.-led strategies and foster collaboration with regional countries, particularly on sensitive matters such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Coordinating with the U.S. on its China policy encounters challenges due to diverse perspectives within Europe. Varied views on China, spanning from considering it a partner to a competitor or even a rival, impede the establishment of relationships with U.S.-led collective security regimes like AUKUS, QUAD, and FIVE EYES—crucial for active participation in Indo-Pacific efforts.

In summary, Europe's engagement in Indo-Pacific security grapples with multifaceted challenges, necessitating adept navigation of geopolitical complexities, effective coordination with regional partners, and the resolution of structural constraints while striking a balance between diplomatic and hard power considerations.

5. Conclusion:

Security Implications for South Korea

Europe is set to sustain its involvement in the Indo-Pacific, persisting in efforts to enhance collaboration with regional nations. As Europe

dedicates itself to amplifying influence through partnership with the U.S. and managing China's role, its commitment remains unwavering.

Recognizing the evolving dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea must adopt a judicious approach as a middle power to advance national interests. Enhancing South Korea's standing on the global stage requires the establishment of a robust multilateral diplomatic foundation, entailing collaboration with nations sharing similar principles. Prioritizing the enhancement of relations with European countries actively involved in Indo-Pacific security is of utmost importance. It is essential to customize cooperation strategies, considering the diverse perspectives and capabilities of European states, while also exploring coordination mechanisms within the U.S.-ROK alliance and trilateral cooperation involving the U.S., Japan, and South Korea.

South Korea ought to underscore its role as a pivotal actor in upholding a stable regional order by adhering to international law and norms. It is crucial to strike a delicate balance in the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, positioning South Korea as a responsible stakeholder without aligning with any specific power bloc.

In order to avert military conflicts stemming from interstate competition for heightened influence in the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea ought to assume a more proactive stance in shaping a cooperative security framework. As it expands its role, South Korea should actively seek collaboration with Europe while concurrently embracing a more assertive leadership role.

Moreover, in order for South Korea to establish itself as a reliable ally and partner in the Indo-Pacific, it is imperative to undergo a paradigm shift in its national security strategy. Until now, South Korea's national security strategy and defense policy have primarily evolved with a focus on addressing the threat from North Korea within the Korean Peninsula. However, for South Korea to effectively expand

its role as a global pivotal state, its national security strategy and defense policy must also prioritize the conceptualization and capacity-building for addressing various security threats emerging beyond the Korean Peninsula, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The formation of meaningful alliances necessitates a dedicated commitment supported by capabilities, with policy attention concentrated on constructing a stable regional security order.

The Indo-Pacific strategy South Korean government recently announced is being concretized at the level of each government department through implementation plans. The specific details of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy being developed by each government department should encompass content related to South Korea's role expansion and specific methods and means for cooperation with European nations.

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<Research Interests>

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