

# Korea's Indo-Pacific Bridge: Forging a Path for ROK-Pacific Islands Partnership<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

By hosting the inaugural ROK-Pacific Islands Summit on May 29, 2023, South Korea bolstered its presence in cooperation efforts within the Pacific region, stepping into a space where major players are already deeply engaged. Although Korea has held foreign minister-level dialogues with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) since 2011, the 2023 summit marked a pivotal step in Korea's commitment to more profound engagement with the region.

This proactive outreach forms a strategic component of President Yoon Suk Yeol's Indo-Pacific Strategy, designed to reinforce Korea's role and expand its influence across

the region.<sup>2</sup> The ROK-Pacific Islands Summit showcased Korea's commitment to advancing its Indo-Pacific Strategy on both domestic and international fronts. Korea's active outreach to PICs has been warmly welcomed by both the countries themselves and key regional powers. The key challenge ahead is to build on these achievements and secure Korea's position as an emerging donor in a region where competition for aid influence is intensifying. Given this context, this brief provides an overview of ROK-Pacific Islands relations, examines the summit's achievements, and offers policy recommendations to support Korea's ongoing engagement with the PICs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This brief is based in part on sections of Choi et al. (2023).

<sup>2</sup> The Government of the Republic of Korea (2022), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Although French Polynesia and New Caledonia, which are French territories, are official members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), this study limits its focus to the 14 Pacific Islands countries commonly classified as PICs by the

## II. ROK-Pacific Islands Relations

### 1. Setting the Stage for Partnership

Korea's engagement with the PICs has a relatively short history. Unlike other major powers that established connections with the PICs around World War II, Korea began building relationships with these nations only after their independence. Diplomatic relations were first established with Tonga on September 11, 1970, followed by successive agreements with other newly independent PICs. Formal ties with Fiji and Papua New Guinea were established in 1971 and 1976, respectively, and to date, these remain the only PICs hosting resident Korean embassies. Korea's cooperation with the PICs took off in 1980 with fisheries agreements and gained further momentum in 1995 when Korea became a Dialogue Partner of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

Although PICs have been recognized as important partners in garnering support for Korea's positions at the UN, they remained a lower priority in Korean foreign policy up to the mid-2000s. A turning point came with the Lee Myung-bak administration's New Asia Initiative, which sought deeper partnerships with the PICs in areas such as resource development and climate change. In 2008, Korea launched the ROK-PIF Cooperation Fund (RPCF) to support capacity-building in the PICs. Initially funded at \$300,000 annually,

the RPCF has grown to \$1.5 million per year, reaching a cumulative total of \$12.4 million as of 2022. To further strengthen ties, the Lee Myung-bak administration hosted the inaugural Korea-Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Seoul on May 31, 2011. This first high-level dialogue with all PICs established the foundation for regular ministerial engagement, which was initially held every three years but shifted to a biennial format starting with the fourth session in 2021. In addition, Korea has consistently organized Senior Officials' Meetings (SOMs) with the PICs, fostering expanded cooperation in key areas such as climate change, marine and fisheries management, and development cooperation.

### 2. Trade and Investment

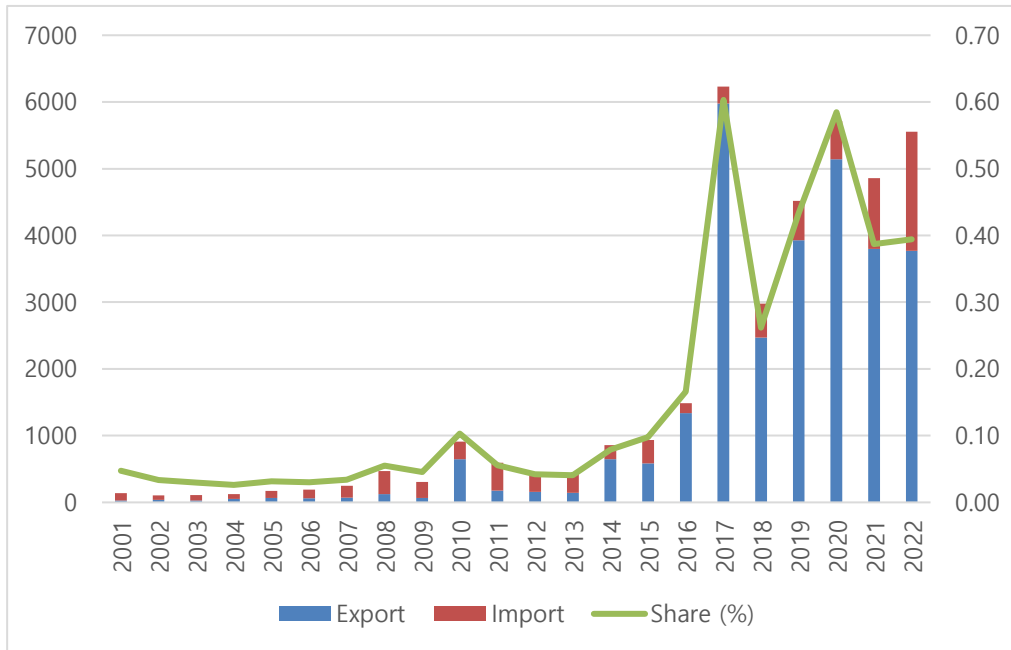
Despite Korea's gradual outreach to PICs, broader development of ROK-Pacific Islands relations has remained limited. In 2022, Korea's trade with the PICs amounted to \$5.54 billion, representing 0.4 percent of its total exports and imports (Figure 1). Additionally, Korea's investment in the PICs was estimated at \$4.12 billion in 2022, making up only 0.5% of its total overseas investment (Figure 2). Limited economic cooperation has largely been driven by the small and dispersed economies of the PICs, resulting in high logistical costs and restricted accessibility.

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United Nations.

**Figure 1. Korea's Trade with the PICs (2001-2022)**

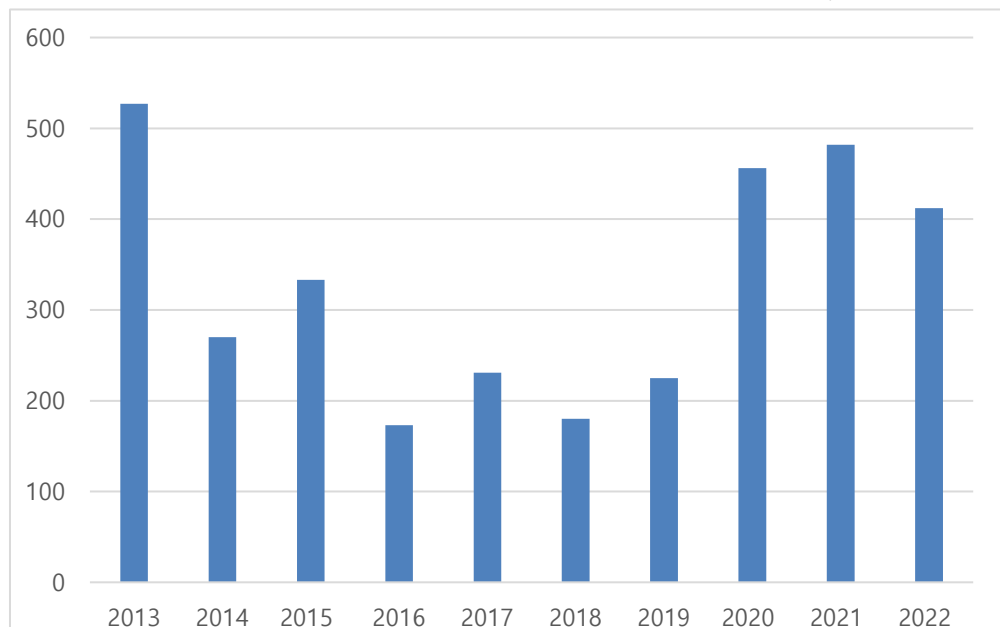
(Unit: million USD, %)



Note: Total trade with 12 out of the 14 Pacific Island Countries, excluding Niue and the Cook Islands.  
 Source: IMF DOTs (accessed on September 14, 2023).

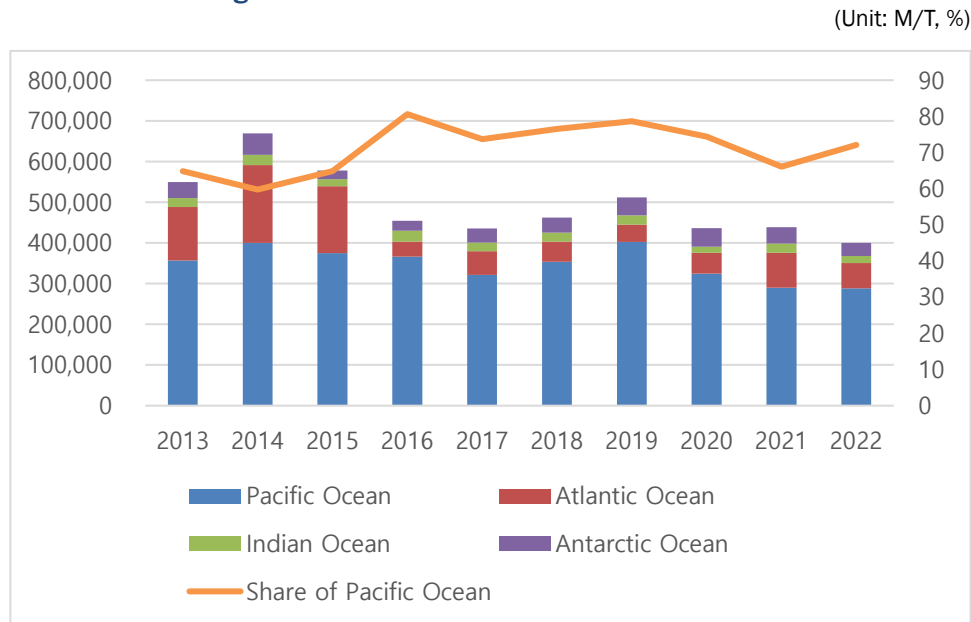
**Figure 2. Korea's Investment in the PICs (2001-2022)**

(Unit: million USD)



Note: Total trade with 12 out of the 14 Pacific Island Countries, excluding Niue and the Cook Islands.  
 Source: Korean EXIM Bank (accessed on November 2, 2023).

Figure 3. Korea's Distant-Water Catch Status



Source: Marine and Fisheries Statistics System of Korea (accessed on November 2, 2023).

Although the PICs make up a small portion of Korea's overall trade and investment, they are critical to Korea's fishing industry, supplying over half of Korea's distant-water catch from the Pacific. Korea has established fishing agreements with Tuvalu, the Cook Islands, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati (all since 1980), as well as Papua New Guinea (since 1992), focusing primarily on skipjack tuna. While Korea's overall distant-water catch has been declining since 2019, the Pacific region still accounts for more than 70% of the total (Figure 3).

### 3. Development Cooperation

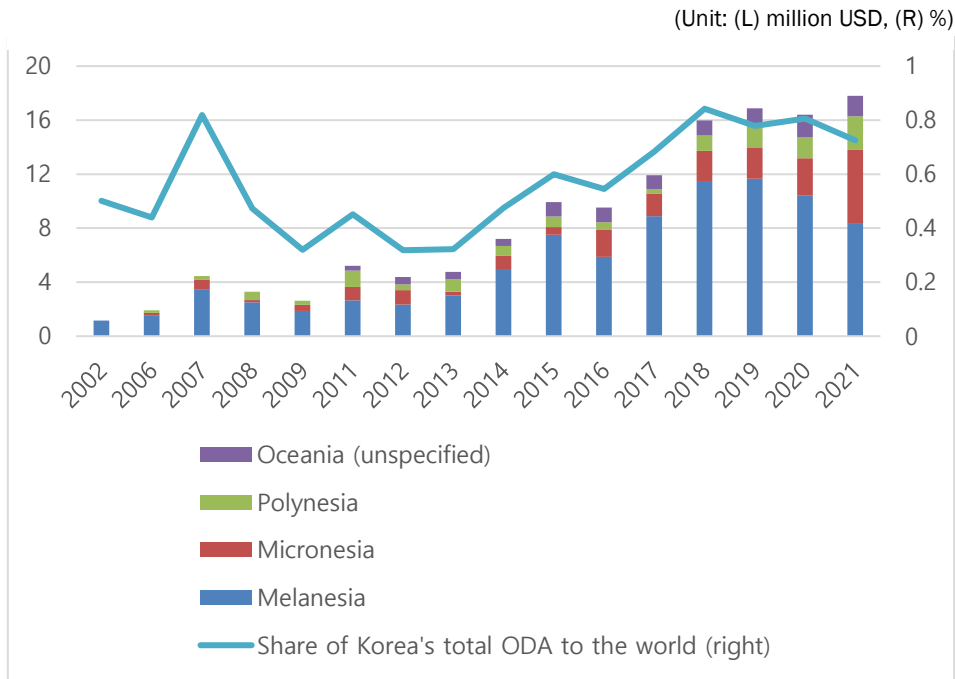
Alongside the RPCF, Korea has steadily increased its Official Development Assistance

(ODA) to the PICs, reaching nearly \$20 million in 2021. The majority of this aid has been directed toward Melanesia, which received 46.8% of Korea's total ODA to the region in 2021, followed by Micronesia (30.8%) and Polynesia (14%) (Figure 4). Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea have been the primary recipients (Figure 5).

Sectorally, Korea's ODA to the PICs has focused on health (17.76%), agriculture/forestry/fisheries (12.78%), public policy and civil society (11%), and environmental support (10.62%).<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on agriculture and fisheries reflects the strategic role of marine cooperation in Korea-PIC relations. The remaining three sectors – health, public policy and civil society, and environment – are

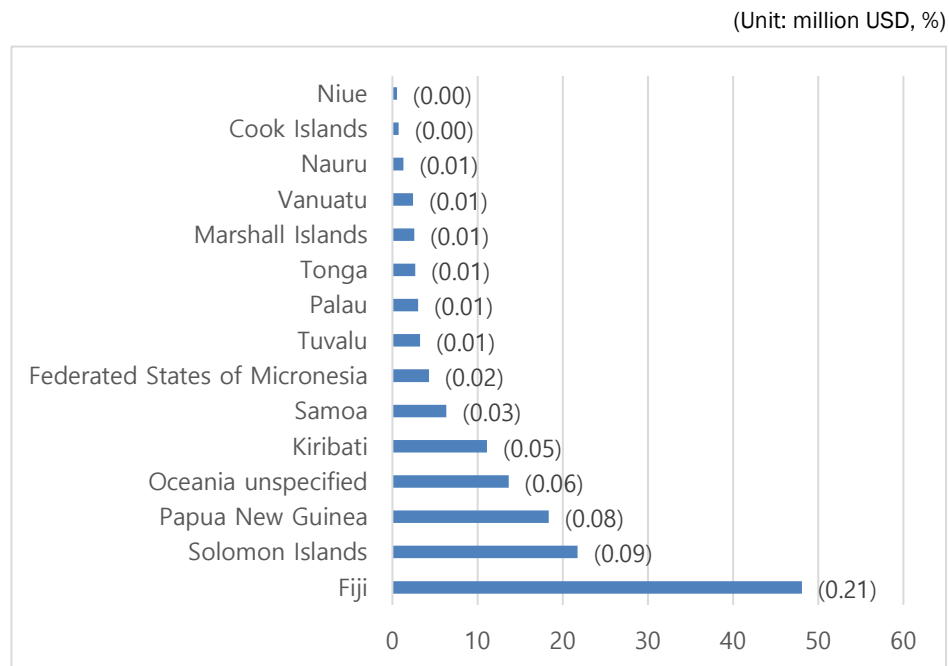
<sup>4</sup> ODA Korea (accessed on September 18, 2023)

**Figure 4. Korea's ODA to the PICs (2002-2011)**



Source: OECD Stat (accessed on September 14, 2023).

**Figure 5. Korea's ODA to the PICs by Country (Cumulative, 2002-2021)**



Note: The percentages in parentheses indicate each country's share of Korea's total ODA to the world based on gross disbursement.

closely aligned with the challenges faced by the PICs, such as climate change and limited social infrastructure. This alignment indicates

that Korea's aid to the PICs effectively addresses their development needs. Most ODA

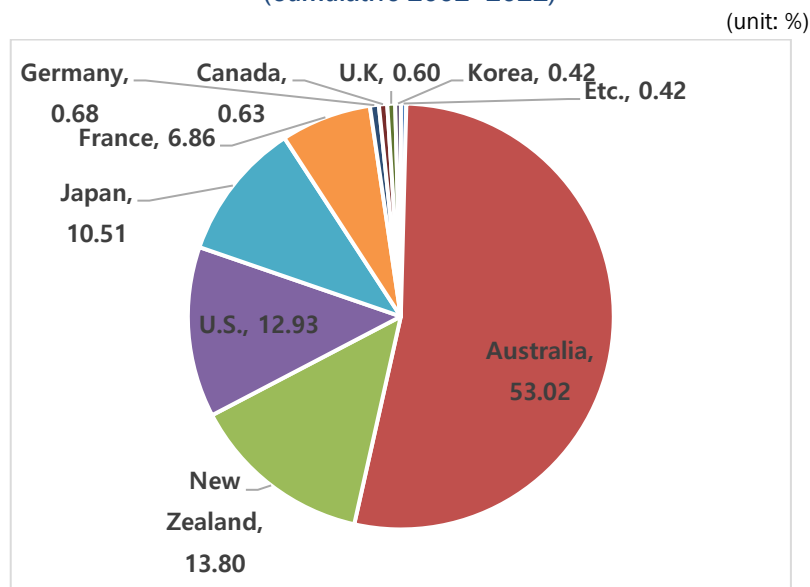
initiatives have taken up a project-based approach (71.7%), with multilateral aid comprising about 7%. The focus on multilateral aid likely reflects development challenges in the PICs, such as high procurement costs, which have led to active collaboration with international organizations.

From 2002 to 2021, Korea provided a total of \$140 million in aid to the PICs, accounting for 0.42% of the total aid from OECD DAC members and placing Korea ninth among DAC member donors in the region. However, this figure is considerably smaller than the contributions from the top five donors – Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Japan, and France – each of whom has contributed over \$2 billion, collectively representing more than 97% of total aid to the PICs (Figure 6).

Korea’s relatively limited support for the PICs reflects its “select and concentrate” approach under the Country Partnership Strategies (CPS), which designates priority countries every five years and allocates 70% of ODA projects toward these nations. Except for the Solomon Islands, which was a priority partner from 2011 to 2015, no other PICs have been included in the CPS list. Furthermore, Korea’s historically lower strategic interest in the Pacific, compared to other major donors, has contributed to its modest engagement in the region.

Countries like Australia and New Zealand see the stability of the Pacific as critical to their own national security, which has led them to support PICs’ economic self-reliance and security since their independence. Similarly, the United States has focused on governance and

Figure 6. Proportion of ODA to the PICs by DAC Member States (Cumulative 2002–2021)



Note: The percentages indicate each country’s share of total ODA to Pacific Island Countries among DAC member states, based on gross disbursement.  
Source: OECD Stat (accessed on September 14, 2023)

security in the PICs, especially within Compact of Free Association (COFA) countries, while Japan has supported development in the PICs to secure marine resources and bolster support for its UN Security Council reform efforts. China has also deepened its ties with the PICs to gain an edge in its diplomatic competition with Taiwan and, more recently, to advance its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across the region.

In contrast, Korea has viewed the PICs primarily as a destination for distant-water fishing and a voting bloc in international forums. Korea's limited diplomatic presence – having only two embassies in the region (in Fiji and Papua New Guinea) – underscores its relatively low strategic interest, compared to other countries' expansive networks. This limited strategic interest has also kept Korea's engagement with the PICs primarily focused on development assistance, in contrast to other major countries that pursue broader partnerships encompassing trade, infrastructure, security, and labor mobility.

### III. ROK-Pacific Islands Summit: Forging Deeper Ties

The ROK-Pacific Islands Summit, however, marked a pivotal step in strengthening Korea's partnership with the PICs. At the summit, leaders of Korea and the PICs issued a joint declaration, pledging to deepen cooperation in

areas of mutual interest, including sustainable development, climate resilience, disaster risk management, marine and fisheries resources, and people-to-people exchanges. President Yoon Suk Yeol emphasized the PICs as vital partners in Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy and committed to aligning this strategy with the PIF's "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent" to foster mutually beneficial collaboration.<sup>5</sup>

To advance these goals, President Yoon announced plans to double Korea's ODA budget for the PICs by 2027, alongside a gradual increase in the RPCF to implement projects aligned with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Korea and the PICs also adopted an Action Plan focusing on three main themes: Resilience, Reinforcement, and Revitalization (refer to Appendix 1).

*Resilience* emphasizes strengthening climate and disaster resilience through 12 measures. In climate resilience, Korea committed to cooperation on climate change response and forecasting capabilities, sustainable marine and fisheries management, eco-friendly energy supply, and forest and greenhouse gas management. For disaster resilience, plans include enhancing infectious disease response, advancing disaster safety technologies, and establishing marine meteorological forecasting and early warning systems.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the President (2023a)

**R***einforcement* focuses on unlocking the Pacific’s potential through capacity-building, encompassing 18 measures. Key initiatives include expanding ODA to the PICs, increasing the RPCF, and sharing best practices in areas such as tailored economic policy models, marine resource management, and healthcare system improvement.

**R***evitalization* focuses on strengthening partnerships by enhancing connectivity in the post-COVID-19 era through 13 measures. These include developing aviation and maritime infrastructure, improving ICT connectivity, establishing the ROK-Pacific Islands Framework for Trade and Investment Promotion, and supporting e-commerce. The plan also outlines efforts to increase “human, physical, and digital connectivity” across the PICs, fostering greater exchange and collaboration between Korea and the region.

**P**resident Yoon has also held bilateral meetings with leaders of the PICs and pledged to strengthen tailored support aligned with each country’s specific needs. The standout achievement of these meetings was the establishment of diplomatic relations with Niue, the last PIC with which Korea previously had no official ties. In addition, several side events held alongside the summit – such as the Korea-Pacific Islands Digital Ministers’ Meeting, the Korea International Cooperation Conference on Oceans and Fisheries and Seminar on Promoting Forest Investment and Cooperation

in the PICs – are expected to further enhance high-level exchanges and private sector engagement between Korea and the PICs.

**T**he Summit and Action Plan were meant to usher in a new chapter for the ROK-Pacific Islands Partnership. However, follow-up actions have not fully met these ambitious goals. While some ministries, particularly the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, have initiated steps to implement the Action Plan – such as the reconstruction of the Makogai Aquaculture Research Institute – progress has been slow. For example, despite the announcement of plans to open a new embassy in the Marshall Islands in 2023,<sup>6</sup> the Korean government has yet to achieve this. To fully realize the partnership’s potential, Korea must accelerate these initiatives by coordinating efforts and resources across ministries to effectively achieve the Action Plan’s objectives.

### III. Policy Recommendations

**G**iven that most PICs are small island developing states (SIDS) with limited capacity to manage the recent influx of development aid, Korea should align its efforts with the PIF’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. At the PIF Leaders’ Summit in November 2023, PIC leaders announced an implementation plan for the “2050 Strategy,” with the PIF Secretariat planning to coordinate donor project proposals with this plan. To support this alignment, Korea should identify and propose

<sup>6</sup> Korea.net “Diplomatic missions to be added in 12

countries by next year” (Nov. 9, 2023)”



projects that directly contribute to the strategic goals of the “2050 Strategy.”

**W**ith Korea’s aid resources more limited than those of major donors, it is essential to optimize the impact of its budget and resources. First, Korea should move from sporadic project implementation to a more systematic approach by consolidating ministry-specific ODA projects into key focus areas. Second, Korea should focus on priority sectors such as maritime and fisheries, climate resilience, healthcare, and gender equality, while establishing strategic partnerships with key PICs. Fiji, which already hosts a Korean embassy and KOICA office, could serve as a central hub for Korea’s Pacific operations. Designating Fiji as a logistical and administrative center would boost project efficiency, lower procurement costs, improve monitoring, and deepen stakeholder engagement across the region. Expanding resources for the Fiji office would further support Korea’s presence, allowing for gradual outreach expansion across the Pacific as needed.

**E**nhancing cooperation with international organizations and other donors is also vital for resource optimization and risk management. In line with its Indo-Pacific strategy, which emphasizes partnerships with like-minded countries, Korea should expand its global network by fostering strategic collaborations with major regional donors. Korea could enhance its multilateral engagement by supporting the U.S.-led Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) framework while also strengthening bilateral

and mini-lateral cooperation with countries closely connected to the PICs. For example, platforms such as the Australia-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue offer Korea and Australia the chance to discuss PIC policies, share case studies, and explore new avenues for cooperation. The growing interest in trilateral cooperation among Korea, the U.S., and Japan also highlights the potential for regular policy dialogues to strengthen collaborative efforts in the Pacific.

**T**o build a sustainable foundation for its partnership with the PICs, Korea should strengthen its diplomatic outreach by increasing embassy staff in the PICs and gradually expanding its diplomatic capacity in the region. Holding regular summits – ideally every three years – would help maintain momentum, facilitate periodic reviews of action plan implementation, and allow for the reassessment of priorities. People-to-people exchanges are equally important; regular Track 1.5 or 2.0 dialogues on maritime, fisheries, and climate issues would enable experts to identify and develop cooperative projects. Enhanced collaboration with the South Pacific Tourism Organization’s (SPTO) Korea branch could boost tourism and cultural exchanges. Recognizing the importance of youth engagement, it is essential to expand scholarships, training programs, and youth exchange initiatives. Finally, investing in scholarships and research funding for Pacific Studies in Korea would help build a strong pool of Korean experts on the Pacific region, addressing the current lack of research on the PICs in Korea. **KIIP**

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## Appendix 1.

Tasks	Measures
Resilience: Strengthening climate and disaster resilience for a sustainable future	
Strengthening Climate Resilience	Climate Change Cooperation
	Enhancing Climate Prediction Services
	Marine and Fisheries Observation and Analysis
	Marine and Fisheries Resources Protection and Ecosystem Restoration
	Green Energy Supply
	Establishing Joint Biodiversity Research and Specimen Storage
	Forest Cooperation
Strengthening Resilience to Infectious Diseases and Disasters	Capacity-building for Greenhouse Gas Inventory
	Consulting on Infectious Disease Control Systems
	Transfer of Disaster Safety Technologies
	Establishment of Marine Weather Prediction and Early Warning Systems
	Development of Decision-Ready Tools to Support Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning
Reinforcement: Reinforcing the potential of the Pacific through capacity-building	
Expanding Development Cooperation	Expanding Development Cooperation (doubling the scale of ODA by 2027)
	Strengthening the Management of the ROK-PIF Cooperation Fund
	Provision of Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF)
Reinforcing Capabilities	Knowledge Sharing Program
	Strengthening IUU Fishing Response Capability
	Training of Human Resources in Marine and Fisheries
	Development of Marine Waste Management Systems
	Fishing Villages Development Project
	Korea-Fiji Cooperation Center on Oceans and Fisheries
	WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement
	Capacity-building on Maritime Security
	Health Ministerial Conference
	Training Medical Professionals
	Strengthening Healthcare System
	Promoting Access to Healthcare Services
	Improvement of Agri-food Productivity and Distribution Structure
Saemaul Undong ODA Project	
Saemaul Geumgo ODA Project	
Revitalization: Strengthening partnership by revitalizing connectivity in the Post-COVID-19 Era	
Strengthening Human, Physical and Digital Connectivity	Promoting Connectivity (air and sea transportation)
	Promoting ICT Connectivity
	MOU of Understanding on Establishing a Framework on Trade and Investment Promotion
	Strengthening Policy Capabilities for Supporting SMEs
	Enhancing E-commerce Opportunities for Pacific MSMEs
Promoting Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges	Digital Ministerial Conference
	Expanding Invitation Programs
	Supporting Development of the Sports Field
	General Training Session (e.g. nurturing marine fisheries experts)
	Strengthening Marine and Fisheries Networks
	Exchanges of Journalists
	Strengthening Diplomatic Infrastructure (opening additional diplomatic missions in the PICs)
Strengthening Diplomacy with Pacific Islands	

Source: Office of the President, Republic of Korea. 2023b.