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Enhancing U.S.-South Korea Alliance Cooperation on China, Multilateralism,
and Military and Security Technologies

Jacob Stokes and Joshua Fitt



About the Authors



Jacob Stokes is a Senior Fellow for the Indo-Pacific Security Program at CNAS, where his work focuses on U.S.-China relations, Chinese foreign and defense policy, East Asian security affairs, and great-power competition. He previously served in the White House on the

national security staff of then-Vice President Joe Biden. Stokes has also worked as a professional staff member for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, an advisor for U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, and a senior analyst in the China program at the United States Institute of Peace. He is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



Joshua Fitt is an Associate Fellow with the Indo-Pacific Security Program at CNAS. He focuses on U.S. East Asian security strategy and specializes in Japanese and Korean peninsular affairs. Before joining CNAS, Fitt was a campaign field organizer during the 2018

midterm elections in the Upper Midwest, an earthquake and tsunami disaster relief volunteer with IsraAID in Japan, and an intern with the Council on Foreign Relations' Japan Program. He earned his BA in East Asian studies from Yale University.

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Executive Summary

The United States–Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) alliance has entered a critical phase. In 2023, the two countries will commemorate the 70th anniversary of signing their bilateral mutual defense treaty. This year also marks the first full year under national leaders President Joe Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol. After several challenging years in the two countries' relationship, ties are improving. Better alliance relations have, unfortunately, coincided with a deterioration in the regional and global security environment, specifically due to threats from North Korea, China, and Russia. This report examines the U.S.-ROK alliance as it adapts to the new regional context by exploring how the United States and South Korea can sustain and deepen their relationship in three vital policy areas: coordination on China, alignment in minilateral and multilateral settings, and defense technology collaboration.

Perhaps the biggest shift in alliance priorities in recent years has been the growing importance of the China challenge. During Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping's decade in power, Beijing has adopted a more muscular foreign policy. Both the United States and South Korea have reshaped their approaches toward China in response. ROK concerns about China have grown as Beijing shields Pyongyang and acts aggressively elsewhere in the region, including toward Taiwan. But South Korea's approach to China will continue to differ from that of the United States. The allies have divergent preferences regarding the speed, manner, and degree of partial decoupling with China. Moreover, South Korea's deep trade ties with China will continue to make it vulnerable to Chinese political and economic coercion.

More broadly across the region, the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategies of the Biden and Yoon administrations both place strong emphasis on multilateralism and more robust engagement with the region. The United States and South Korea have many opportunities to expand their cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula, including through the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship, engagement with the Quad (the United States, Australia, India, and Japan), deeper involvement with NATO and Europe, and other minilateral and multilateral relationships. Efforts along these lines are integral to the Yoon administration's vision of transforming South Korea into a "global pivotal state."

As South Korea prepares for a larger role on the international stage, it must also continue to keep pace with the evolution of North Korean and Chinese military capabilities. Over the past several decades, the South Korean defense industry has transformed from near-complete dependency on foreign hardware to becoming one of the world's top defense suppliers. The end of U.S.-imposed missile and weapons restrictions on South Korea in 2021 supercharged a series of defense technology modernization initiatives during former President Moon Jae-in's administration, which have continued under Yoon. Given Seoul's ambition to build an independent domestic defense industry, the opportunities for innovations driven by American and Korean collaboration on the scientific cutting edge, along with greater defense technology integration, are substantial.

In consideration of the above challenges and opportunities, the report recommends that U.S. and ROK alliance policymakers:

- Identify and build on overlapping priorities in the U.S. and ROK Indo-Pacific Strategies;
- Broaden the alliance to account for threats from China in addition to North Korea;
- Encourage Seoul's ambitions beyond the Korean Peninsula while also acknowledging the concomitant pressures of a larger global role—especially from Beijing;
- Take a bold approach to boosting U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation;
- Facilitate South Korea's deeper integration into minilateral coalitions with leading democracies;
- Create a defense technology development and acquisition roadmap for the alliance that strengthens both deterrence and stability;
- Deepen U.S.-ROK cooperation in the cyber and space domains;
- Negotiate a U.S.-ROK reciprocal defense procurement (RDP) agreement; and
- Jointly reexamine from first principles all options for bolstering allied nuclear deterrence, but be realistic about the negative consequences of drastic changes in capabilities and posture.

Introduction

The United States–Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) alliance has entered a critical phase. The two countries celebrated 140 years of diplomatic ties in 2022 and will commemorate the 70th anniversary of signing their bilateral mutual defense treaty in 2023.¹ This year also marks the first full year under President Joe Biden’s administration in Washington and President Yoon Suk Yeol’s administration in Seoul. It further signals the final transition from an earlier period of relations under U.S. President Donald Trump and ROK President Moon Jae-in during which bilateral rifts and geopolitical turbulence shook the foundations of the alliance to a degree not seen in decades. During the Trump-Moon years, both allies weathered the journey through a stretch of escalating military brinksmanship characterized by “fire and fury” rhetoric that threatened to engulf the Korean Peninsula in conflict. Next came a stint of frenetic diplomacy between Washington and Pyongyang that saw some breakthroughs but ultimately ended in failure. That was quickly followed by the upheaval of a global pandemic.

The alliance’s weathering of that period and overall resilience reflect several sources of strength. One is the partnership’s deep history going back to the Korean War. Another source is the vast connections between the two societies at both the elite and popular levels. The alliance also benefits from extensive institutional links as well as the fact that Washington and Seoul are both liberal democracies with market economies. The greatest source of strength is their enduring mutual strategic interests in countering the threat from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and, increasingly, from the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Russian Federation (Russia).

Recognizing those strengths as well as the challenges the U.S.-ROK alliance had faced in recent years, the Biden administration came into office seeking to enhance alliances and partnerships—including with South Korea—as the focal point of its foreign policy strategy, both in the Indo-Pacific and globally.² Translating that agenda into action meant prioritizing early leader-level meetings. Moon was the second world leader to visit the White House in early 2021 shortly after President Biden took office.³ Biden then met with President Yoon in May 2022, marking the earliest U.S.-ROK leaders’ summit of any South Korean president’s term.⁴

Those meetings resulted in several outcomes, including a Special Measures Agreement on alliance burden-sharing, termination of the Revised Missile Guidelines that previously limited the range of South Korean missiles, a slate of

ROK investments into the United States, and agreements between the leaders to embark on a “new chapter” and upgrade the relationship to a “global comprehensive strategic alliance.”⁵ The momentum extended to the release of key strategic documents by each country, including the U.S. National Security, National Defense, and Indo-Pacific Strategies and the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁶ Those documents all expressed support for a peaceful, stable, and rules-based order in the region.

The improvement in U.S.-ROK alliance relations has coincided with a deterioration in the regional and global security environment. The Kim Jong Un regime in North Korea continues its provocative behavior by advancing its nuclear and conventional missile capabilities, adopting a law enshrining a new and aggressive nuclear employment doctrine, and, at the time of writing, preparing to conduct a seventh nuclear test.⁷ While Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping has made some diplomatic overtures toward other countries after he secured a third five-year term at the 20th National Congress of the CCP last October, Beijing has continued aggressive military patrols around Taiwan. Beijing’s diplomatic moves likely represent a tactical recalibration rather than a strategic shift of China’s foreign policy. Xi’s ambitious regional and global objectives and willingness to employ economic, political, and military coercion to achieve them persist. Meanwhile, Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine has demonstrated that the threat of large-scale conventional military aggression under the nuclear shadow is real. Moscow’s war in Ukraine has raised alarms globally about the potential for similar aggression by China in the Indo-Pacific, especially in light of the deepening China-Russia strategic partnership.

This report examines the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance in a dynamic moment marked by enormous security challenges as well as some new cooperation opportunities. While the alliance faces multiple challenges—not least, deterring North Korea—this report focuses on three areas that have been relatively understudied by policy and academic communities. First, it explores how the allies are responding individually and jointly to challenges posed by China. Second, it maps the agenda for alliance cooperation in minilateral and multilateral forums, particularly as Seoul looks to become what Yoon has called a “global pivotal state.” And third, the paper assesses the potential for joint efforts related to technology with military and security applications, building on earlier CNAS work on cooperation on civilian technologies.⁸ It concludes with recommendations for U.S. and ROK policymakers.

U.S.-ROK Seek Closer Coordination on China Policy

Perhaps the biggest shift in alliance priorities in recent years has been the growing importance of the China challenge. During Xi's decade in power, Beijing has adopted a more muscular foreign policy. Both the United States and South Korea have reshaped their approaches toward China in response. Washington has declared China to be the only country with both the intent to reshape the regional and global order and the power across every dimension to do it. The United States has further declared that "Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power."⁹ In South Korea, having marked 30 years of normalized ROK-China relations in 2022, the policy debate about China is likewise growing in importance and urgency, and potentially shifting away from legacy paradigms that prioritized partnership and economic engagement with Beijing and downplayed geopolitical differences.¹⁰ Yoon has criticized his predecessor, Moon, for trying to balance ties with Washington and Beijing and retain "strategic ambiguity" that would allow South Korea geopolitical autonomy and to avoid getting caught between the two major powers.¹¹

Seoul's change in approach reflects, to some degree, the ideological differences between the two major political parties, the liberal Democratic Party of Korea and the conservative People Power Party. But it is also partly related to Beijing's decision to improve ties with Pyongyang starting in March 2018.¹² North Korea was able to conduct missile tests in 2022 at an unprecedented rate in part because of China's, and to a lesser extent Russia's, backing and lax enforcement of U.N. sanctions. South Korean leaders have begun to assess that China helps fuel the threat from North Korea. China also staunchly opposes action that South Korea takes in conjunction with the United States to bolster deterrence against North Korea. These include improving missile defenses, deployment of U.S. strategic assets to South Korea, the resumption of large-scale U.S.-ROK military exercises, and security cooperation with Japan and other U.S. allies and partners.

South Korea also perceives some direct threats to its security coming from China in addition to the indirect threat of Beijing enabling North Korea. South Korea and China have an ongoing dispute over their maritime border. Beijing's pursuit of its territorial claims in the West Sea/Yellow Sea have been restrained relative to PRC activities in the South and East China Seas.¹⁴ But China's stance toward disputes with South Korea could

become more forceful. The increased number of PRC fishing fleets trolling waters off the Korean Peninsula underscore the stakes of those territorial claims.¹⁵ Furthermore, China's joint military patrols and exercises with Russia in Northeast Asia—especially those that go through South Korea's air defense identification zone (ADIZ)—contribute to regional tensions. They also showcase that Beijing and Moscow are growing closer, even though China has sought to portray itself as neutral on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶

China's military assertiveness elsewhere in Asia, particularly mounting pressure on Taiwan, also drives ROK unease about



South Korean citizens watch North Korea test-fire two cruise missiles from the coast of Onchon on August 17, 2022, before a speech by President Yoon Suk Yeol to mark his 100th day in office. North Korea launched nearly 100 missiles in 2022 alone, more than in any other previous year.¹³ (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)

Beijing's ambitions to revise the regional order. Seoul worries that the United States responding to military aggression from China against Taiwan could occupy U.S. resources and attention, prompting North Korea to use that opportunity to attack South Korea. South Korean leaders also fear that U.S. involvement in a Taiwan contingency might entrap the ROK and force it to get involved too.¹⁷ To date, alliance managers have made little progress on developing a consensus on this issue.¹⁸ More broadly, a February 2022 poll found that 56 percent of South Koreans believe China will be the biggest threat to their country in 10 years, versus just 22 percent who voted for North Korea.¹⁹ ROK domestic security, governance, and cultural spats also contribute to tensions and fears about China dominating the region. These include allegations of covert PRC police stations in South Korea, disputes over cultural origins of traditional food and clothing, and ROK citizens showing support for pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong.²⁰

Seoul's Cautious Counterbalancing

Even in this context, however, Seoul will be cautious about the extent to which it will actively counter China or challenge its growing regional influence. South Korea will seek to avoid being seen as taking a hard anti-China stance due to its proximity to China, middle-power status, and relative vulnerability to PRC power. To that end, Seoul maintains an active program of high-level diplomacy with Beijing. This was on display during the visits of ROK Foreign Minister Park Jin to China in August 2022 and Li Zhanshu, then China's third-ranking leader and a close Xi confidant, to South Korea in September 2022.²¹ Last November, Yoon met Xi for 25 minutes on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali.²²

Seoul's need to focus on addressing the North Korea threat—where China could, at least in theory, move from enabling Pyongyang to exerting a more constructive influence—means South Korea will always try to retain some semblance of a constructive working relationship with Beijing.

In addition, Seoul's need to focus on addressing the North Korea threat—where China could, at least in theory, move from enabling Pyongyang to exerting a



United States Forces Korea personnel offload Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense systems from a C-17 at Osan Air Base in March 2017. Although the platform bolsters defense against North Korea's growing missile capabilities, its deployment in South Korea was met with an economic coercion and diplomatic retaliation campaign from Beijing. (Jeremy Larlee/U.S. Forces Korea)

more constructive influence—means South Korea will always try to retain some semblance of a constructive working relationship with Beijing.²³ Seoul's public positions on issues such as Taiwan or the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands will continue to be relatively muted compared with Washington's and Tokyo's. In August 2022, Yoon avoided an in-person meeting with then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi when she visited South Korea after her contentious trip to Taiwan, although the pair talked by phone. Separately, Yoon administration officials have said South Korea is not bound by the "three nos" assurances to China related to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system.²⁴ Those are: no deployment of additional THAAD batteries, no South Korean integration with U.S. regional missile defenses, and no trilateral security partnership with the United States and Japan.²⁵ However, the Yoon administration has thus far conspicuously avoided taking any action to violate them either, and doing so would mark a significant change in policy.

South Korea's economic and trade reliance on China serves as another constraint on Seoul's willingness to actively counterbalance Beijing. ROK policymakers are still smarting from the pain of China's economic coercion measures after Seoul's deployment of the THAAD system that cost the ROK \$7.5 billion in 2017 alone.²⁶ Some of the targeted industries, such as Korean cultural content, are only now starting to recover, while for others, such as the retail and hospitality chain Lotte

Group, the damage appears permanent.²⁷ South Korea's economic integration with China means the ROK's exposure to similar coercion campaigns in the future remains high. More than 23 percent of South Korea's exports went to China in the first half of 2022, and at least four major ROK industries—semiconductors, large-capacity batteries, rare-earth metals, and medical supplies—rely heavily on parts and raw materials imported from China.²⁸ The country's leaders will therefore maintain a degree of caution in developing their policies toward Beijing.

Growing Need to Align China Policies

Both allies' dynamic and evolving China policies will elevate the importance of coordination to address the regional and global challenges Beijing poses. In the diplomatic and security realms, the alliance will have to craft policies for bolstering extended deterrence as both conventional and nuclear threats in the region grow. Among other steps, the alliance will likely deploy more U.S. strategic assets in and around South Korea at a "level equivalent to constant deployment."²⁹ Those actions are justified, but China is likely to try to increase pressure on South Korea in response.

The allies appear to have different preferences about the speed, manner, and ultimate degree of decoupling with China.

On economics and technology, South Korea will need to pursue an alternative to its old strategy of relying on the United States for security and China for economic opportunities given that those two areas are deeply intertwined. Both allies are seeking to reduce their reliance on China, especially for critical goods but also as an export market generally. They are both seeking a *partial* decoupling from Beijing. However, the allies appear to have different preferences about the speed, manner, and ultimate degree of decoupling with China. Some differences have already surfaced over subsidies for U.S. clean energy manufacturing in the Inflation Reduction Act; U.S. controls on selling semiconductors or production supplies to China; and South Korea's participation in the Chip 4 group, even though Seoul ultimately joined. These trends have led some South Korean officials and analysts to call for greater skepticism of closer U.S.-ROK cooperation on economic security to compete with China.³⁰

On the principles underlying the regional and global order, Washington and Seoul will have to work to stay in sync. Both countries want to avoid competition with China forcing Asia to cleave into formal or even *de facto* alliance blocs as part of a "new Cold War." But their views could diverge on how far to go to avoid that outcome if China's actions, both alone and in conjunction with partners such as Russia and North Korea, force the issue. Relatedly, while the United States and South Korea are both vibrant liberal democracies, the two are likely to place different emphases on democracy promotion in their diplomatic approaches. The Biden administration has made protecting and fostering democracy a central pillar of both its Indo-Pacific and National Security Strategies to a degree that has elicited criticism even from some U.S. observers. South Korea's diplomatic strategy—especially toward China—will likely focus more on interests than values. Finally, as South Korea carves out a larger role on the global stage, Seoul will face policy decisions related to China's role outside the Indo-Pacific.

U.S.-ROK Alignment on Minilateral and Multilateral Initiatives

Biden and Yoon have both put forward ambitious new agendas for their countries' roles in the Indo-Pacific. As part of advancing a new era of the U.S.-ROK alliance, the two countries have a wide array of opportunities to harmonize their policies beyond the Korean Peninsula, including through the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship, engagement with the Quad (the United States, Australia, India, Japan), deeper involvement with NATO and Europe, and other minilateral and multilateral relationships in the region. The United States cannot address the growing number of regional and global challenges by itself. Multilateral groupings allow the United States and its allies to jointly address challenges to the rules-based order.

The U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Relationship

The alliances with South Korea and Japan are among the United States' deepest and most consequential relationships in the world. In the past, the bilateral U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances have been augmented by ROK-Japan cooperation. However, the ROK-Japan relationship is often impaired by long-standing historical tensions stemming from Imperial Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910–1945. After decades of progress between South Korea and Japan, ties between the two countries took a significant turn for the worse in 2018 due to these tensions.³¹

All three countries have elected new leaders since then, which has provided an opportunity to reset trilateral relations. Through joint statements, strategy documents, and high-level meetings, the Biden administration has shown how deeply it values a renewed trilateral relationship.³² Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman have all recently held meetings trilaterally with their counterparts for the first time in years.³³ Yoon has repeatedly emphasized his support for a “future-oriented approach” to Japan, which signals he will prioritize current opportunities to collaborate, instead of focusing on enmity stemming from the past.³⁴



The USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) aircraft carrier and USS Annapolis (SSN-760) submarine participate in a trilateral anti-submarine exercise with Japanese and Korean counterparts (not pictured) in September 2022. The exercise was the first of its kind in five years, and was designed to bolster deterrence against North Korean submarine threats. (South Korean Defense Ministry/Getty Images)

The future of the trilateral relationship is still uncertain despite its importance and progress over the past year. Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio are both contending with low levels of domestic support that could hinder efforts to improve their bilateral relations.³⁵ Differences notwithstanding, the United States, South Korea, and Japan share visions of a liberal order in the Indo-Pacific and aim to see these ideals succeed globally. The historical and political headwinds are strong, but recent North Korean missile tests provide a stark reminder of just how dire the consequences of an uncoordinated trilateral relationship could be.³⁶

Quad and Quad-Plus

In the last five years, the Quad has been revived and now plays a central role in U.S. policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific. Given the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance and South Korea's standing as a liberal democracy in the region with a developed economy and a tech sector at the cutting edge, South Korea is noticeably absent from the grouping. The sensitive nature of the ROK-Japan relationship precludes formal South Korean membership in the Quad in the near term. And despite its momentum, the grouping is only beginning to prove that it can deliver on its promises, so it may be some time before the Quad considers expanding its ranks.

However, the opportunities stemming from ROK involvement in the Quad as an observer are noteworthy. South Korea already consults bilaterally with Quad countries on a number of Quad issues, but it could be integrated into Quad cooperation more directly.³⁷ South Korea is a natural partner in many of the initiatives laid out through the Quad's working groups, and Yoon himself identified his interest in the vaccine, climate change, and critical and emerging technology working groups on the campaign trail.³⁸

NATO and G7-Plus

Amid growing conversations about Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea joined Australia, Japan, and New Zealand in attending the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid for the first time as nonmembers.³⁹ The summit served as an opportunity for the current leaders of the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral to meet for the first time, and South Korea subsequently set up a diplomatic mission to NATO in November 2022.⁴⁰ The presence of the new Indo-Pacific participants is indicative of an early lesson of the war in Ukraine—the need for close coordination among like-minded countries in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. From Washington's perspective, the united response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine will

affect Beijing’s calculations of the likely costs of invading Taiwan. Stronger ROK-NATO coordination is also likely to strengthen the resiliency of both parties to threats such as supply chain disruptions and cyberattacks. Therefore, South Korea’s participation sends a strong signal to both Russia and China that revisionist actions will be met with global consequences.

The conciliatory atmosphere between South Korea and Japan at the 2022 NATO summit contrasted with the 2021 G7 summit in Cornwall, where South Korea attended as a guest, represented by then-President Moon. The G7 summit’s agenda focused on COVID-19 recovery and climate change, both areas where South Korea has much to contribute.⁴¹ However, there was no leader-level meeting with then–Prime Minister of Japan Suga Yoshihide due to the high level of ROK-Japan tensions at the time.⁴² As Japan will host the 2023 G7 summit in Hiroshima, Tokyo will have an opportunity to extend an invitation to Seoul.

The United Nations

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions have been instrumental in placing global pressure on Pyongyang to back away from its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.⁴³ However, China and Russia still use their veto powers as permanent members of the UNSC to block important resolutions seeking to punish and deter further provocations from Pyongyang.⁴⁴ The most recent example of this—the failure of a May 2022 resolution to pass, despite a 13-2 vote in its favor—demonstrates the UNSC’s shortcoming in resolving the threat from North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. Washington and Seoul should still advance their priorities related to North Korea through the United Nations framework where possible but must also look for more effective multilateral opportunities to make progress on the issue.

Regional Multilateral Organizations

There are several Indo-Pacific multilateral organizations where neither the United States nor South Korea is the leading voice, but membership is essential to meaningful partnership in the region. These include the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). EAS and ADMM-Plus in particular are critical venues for ensuring regional peace and stability through large-group diplomacy, though the membership of Russia and China in both forums has created challenges in recent years.⁴⁵

Membership in the groupings is part of a commitment to uphold ASEAN centrality, the principle that ASEAN member states are the masters of their own geopolitics and ASEAN as an institution is fundamental to the diplomatic architecture of Southeast Asia. The concept of ASEAN centrality is critical to both the United States’ and South Korea’s understandings of the region, because in a free and open Indo-Pacific, national sovereignty is paramount and countries are free to choose their own partners. The Yoon administration’s concept of developing South Korea as a global pivotal state evolved from his predecessor’s New Southern Policy, which highlighted the need for deeper ROK-ASEAN ties. South Korea’s 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy maintains this emphasis on ASEAN, and the Biden administration too sees a strong ASEAN as essential to Indo-Pacific prosperity.⁴⁶

Advancing a Network of Security Ties

While the U.S.-ROK alliance remains the “linchpin for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific,” building stronger defense ties with other Indo-Pacific countries is critical to Seoul’s mission of transforming South Korea into a “global pivotal state.”⁴⁷ The growth of a security web architecture where U.S. allies and partners have deep ties with one another aids Washington’s efforts to evolve beyond an outdated “hub and spokes” model of alliances in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁸ Australia and the Philippines are two significant nodes within this growing network connected to South Korea.

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In late 2021, South Korea and Australia marked 60 years of diplomatic ties by declaring their relationship a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” and finalizing a deal for approximately \$700 million worth of Korean defense equipment.⁴⁹ At a subsequent meeting between the countries’ defense ministers, the officials discussed expanding combined military exercises and continuing coordination through the 2+2 dialogues that have been

taking place every other year since 2013.⁵⁰ Also, South Korea has offered to provide Australia with submarines to bridge the gap between its current aging fleet and the future acquisition of a new class of nuclear-powered subs under the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) agreement.⁵¹ Furthermore, South Korea and Australia's shared experience of being targeted by Chinese economic coercion provides additional opportunities to discuss lessons in economic resiliency that would be useful to other potential targets of Beijing's coercive policies.

The growth of a security web architecture where U.S. allies and partners have deep ties with one another aids Washington's efforts to evolve beyond an outdated "hub and spokes" model of alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

South Korea and the Philippines solidified their formal bilateral defense ties in 1994, when Seoul and Manila inked a memorandum of understanding on logistics and defense industry cooperation. Recently, the Korean and Philippine defense ministers held their second Joint Defense Cooperation Committee Meeting to discuss South Korea's role in the Philippines' military modernization program and mutual concerns related to the South China Sea and North Korea.⁵² As part of its modernization efforts, Manila has purchased two guided missile frigates and 12 FA-50 fighter jets from South Korean defense companies.⁵³ In October 2022, Korean observers attended the joint U.S. and Philippine Marine Corps KAMANDAG exercise for the first time.⁵⁴ As two close U.S. Indo-Pacific allies outside of the Quad with long-standing historical defense and economic ties, South Korea and the Philippines are natural partners with potential for an even closer relationship.

U.S.-ROK Cooperation on Military and Security-Related Technologies

The end of long-standing missile and weapons restrictions on South Korea in 2021 added momentum to a cascade of defense technology modernization initiatives started during the Moon administration. Seoul began implementing new approaches to military technological development, doctrinal adoption, budgeting, and public-private cooperation.⁵⁵ These efforts have continued and expanded

under the Yoon administration as South Korea seeks to achieve a greater degree of military autonomy, become a leader in cutting-edge defense technology, and keep pace with the advancement of North Korean and Chinese military capabilities.⁵⁶ The ROK also wants to field the capabilities necessary to support its Three-Pillar System defense policy—consisting of Kill Chain, Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR)—that is designed to deter and defend against conventional and nuclear threats from North Korea.⁵⁷

Seoul's ambitious goals cannot be achieved alone. After more than 70 years of close defense and security ties, the United States and South Korea will need to continue to work together to achieve their mutual objectives. Nevertheless, as close as the U.S.-ROK relationship is, there are still some long-standing points of contention. Washington's and Seoul's priorities will never be completely the same, and the ability of the relationship to produce results depends on leadership, political will, and current events. Still, with advancements driven by American and Korean innovation on the scientific cutting edge and Indo-Pacific strategies relying heavily on greater defense technology integration with allies and partners, U.S.-ROK cooperation on military and security-related technologies will remain extensive and impactful.



A Chunma air defense system is used during an anti-drone drill in December 2022 in Yangju, South Korea, about 10 miles from the border with North Korea. These exercises occurred three days after the ROK military failed to shoot down North Korean drones that violated South Korea's airspace for the first time in five years. (South Korean Defense Ministry/Getty Images)

Dialogues and Mechanisms

The following are among the most important mechanisms through which the United States and South Korea advance bilateral defense technology cooperation.

Dialogue/ Mechanism	Description	Meeting Frequency	Inception	Recent Developments
United States– Republic of Korea (ROK) Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meetings (“2+2”)⁵⁸	An opportunity for foreign and defense ministers to bilaterally set priorities for cooperation among their agencies.	Approximately once every two years.	July 2010, on the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War. ⁵⁹	At the March 2021 meeting, officials emphasized the importance of nuclear energy, space, and cyber cooperation.
Security Consultative Meeting (SCM)⁶⁰	The premier U.S.-ROK defense consultation mechanism, led at the defense secretary level. The SCM is where the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the Korean Ministry of National Defense (MND) establish priorities based on their common threat picture and plan future cooperation. Many other bilateral defense mechanisms have been launched under the auspices of the SCM, including the Military Committee Meeting (MCM), Technology Cooperation Subcommittee (TCSC), and U.S.-ROK Space Cooperation Working Group (SCWG).	Annual	1968. Originally called the “Annual ROK-U.S. Defense Official Meeting.” ⁶¹	At the 54th meeting of the SCM in November 2022, Secretary Lloyd Austin and Minister Lee Jong-Sup pledged to expand cooperation on quantum, electronic warfare, artificial intelligence (AI), directed energy, and 5G/6G.
Military Committee Meeting (MCM)⁶²	An opportunity to discuss peninsular and regional security updates, led by the U.S. and ROK chairmen of the joint chiefs of staff. The findings of the MCM inform the upcoming SCM.	Annual	1978	The 47th MCM occurred in October 2022, shortly before the SCM. It was the first in-person meeting between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley and his Korean counterpart, General Kim Seung-kyum, since Kim took office in July 2022.
The Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG)⁶³	An interagency forum in which Washington and Seoul discuss issues related to deterrence strategy and policy. It does not have a regular meeting schedule and has instead convened at times of heightened threat from North Korea.	Irregular. Meetings occurred in 2016 (inaugural), 2018, and 2022. ⁶⁴	December 2016	In response to the drastic uptick in North Korean missile tests, the EDSCG met for the first time in four years in September 2022. The reactivation of the EDSCG sent a strong message of alliance unity in the face of threats.

Dialogues and Mechanisms, continued

Dialogue/ Mechanism	Description	Meeting Frequency	Inception	Recent Developments
Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD)⁶⁵	A bilateral meeting with a comprehensive scope. The U.S. delegation is typically led by either the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs or deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia, and the ROK delegation is typically led by the deputy minister for national defense policy.	Typically twice a year until 2022, when it convened once. ⁶⁶	2012	The 21st KIDD convened in August 2022 amid a spate of North Korean missile tests unprecedented in frequency. Both sides shared assessments of Pyongyang's activities. They also committed to exploring further U.S.-ROK collaboration on space, quantum, cyber defense, AI, and 5G/6G. ⁶⁷
The Technology Cooperation Subcommittee (TCSC)⁶⁸	A bilateral channel of science and technology collaboration between DoD and the ROK Ministry of National Defense. The TCSC has working groups devoted to a range of topics and is housed under a subcommittee of the SCM.	Varies by working group.	1990	Washington and Seoul have agreed to host an annual TCSC Technology Forum. Each forum will have different topics, starting with space situational awareness.
The U.S.-ROK Space Cooperation Working Group (SCWG)⁶⁹	A forum for coordinating bilateral space policy and technology development between the two countries' defense agencies.	Twice a year (18 meetings between 2013 and 2022).	2013	At the April 2022 meeting, the SCWG established the "ROK-U.S. Space Policy Joint Study," which is designed to facilitate projects that improve interoperability through enhanced cooperation in the defense industrial space.
Bilateral military exercises and training	The U.S. and ROK militaries regularly hold joint exercises and trainings. Between 2017 and 2020—coinciding with renewed efforts at diplomacy with North Korea—joint exercises were scaled down. ⁷⁰ Now, exercises are being recalibrated to the increased threat level from North Korea. The exercises provide U.S. and ROK militaries with opportunities to increase readiness and boost interoperability.	Exercises are typically annual.	The first U.S.-ROK combined military exercise took place in November 1955. ⁷¹ There have been many iterations since. The latest major exercise, Ulchi Freedom Shield, was held for the first time in its current format in August 2022. ⁷²	The August 2022 Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise was an opportunity for the U.S. and ROK militaries to test joint operational responses to attack scenarios using a combination of field exercises and computer simulations. ⁷³

Conventional and Next-Generation Defense Technology Sharing

Within U.S.-ROK conventional and next-generation defense technology sharing, cooperation on military hardware, space, and artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber are three of the most consequential lines of effort. They represent areas that will have a profound impact on alliance military capabilities.

MILITARY HARDWARE

South Korea strives to achieve greater autonomy in military hardware production by relying on its major domestic producers.⁷⁴ However, recent deals for U.S. precision-guided munitions and anti-submarine torpedoes underscore the importance of South Korea's defense acquisition relationship with the United States for shoring up the ROK's conventional capabilities.⁷⁵

SPACE

From 1979 until 2021, limitations on South Korean missile ranges prevented Seoul from developing extensive space capabilities.⁷⁶ Now, South Korea can develop ballistic missiles that can travel farther than 800 kilometers and solid-propellant rockets that are better suited to launching spacecraft than the previously permissible liquid-propellant rockets. After a failed first launch, South Korea successfully placed satellites into orbit in 2022 on a domestically produced rocket, becoming only the seventh country to have ever done so.⁷⁷ Seoul is also pursuing Space Situational Awareness (SSA) capabilities, which are essential for other space-enabled capabilities, including surveillance, reconnaissance, and object warning systems.⁷⁸ The U.S. Space Force and ROK Air Force signed a memorandum of understanding on policy and information consultation in 2021, which was bolstered the following year by an SSA pact signed during the 2022 meeting of the U.S.-ROK Space Cooperation Working Group (SCWG).⁷⁹ And in December 2022, the U.S. Space Force opened its first overseas component field command as part of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). It will provide a platform for expanded cooperation on military space-related issues between USFK and the ROK Armed Forces.⁸⁰

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND CYBER

Emerging AI technology has significant implications for integration with military systems, from unlocking capabilities in the cyber domain to achieving peak levels of operational effectiveness in the real world. An AI-enabled unmanned aerial vehicle can provide more advanced surveillance data, which might help reduce the chance for miscalculations in the event of a conflict with North Korea.

Additionally, South Korea is under constant attack by world-class North Korean cyber units and must better detect vulnerabilities and infiltrations. South Korean advancements in AI have been impressive, but they still trail the United States in some areas such as image recognition and integration with other defense technology systems.⁸¹ Joint statements after major bilateral meetings often reference the need for stronger U.S.-ROK AI and cyber cooperation, although there has been little tangible progress.⁸²

South Korea's Nuclear Debate

Mounting threats from North Korea and China are driving South Korean concerns about U.S. extended deterrence across the conventional and nuclear domains. In response, ROK policymakers and analysts are considering a range of options for the most sensitive military technology of all: nuclear weapons.⁸³ The debate revolves around four options, namely deploying additional U.S. strategic assets in and around the Korean Peninsula, returning U.S.-controlled tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea, setting up a nuclear-sharing arrangement similar to what the United States has with its NATO allies, or even South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons. In a separate but related debate, during the Moon administration, ROK officials voiced a desire to acquire or build nuclear-powered submarines. That eventually led to questions of whether South Korea could benefit from the "AUKUS model," through which London and Washington are helping Canberra acquire nuclear-powered submarines (along with other advanced capabilities).⁸⁴ South Korea already possesses its own submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) and is the first nonnuclear weapons state to do so.⁸⁵

South Korea's consideration of nuclear options also reflects a desire for greater autonomy within the alliance and the perceived national prestige associated with nuclear capabilities.

Divergences within the alliance over nuclear capabilities have surfaced publicly in recent months, sometimes in a messy fashion, demonstrating the real pressures that exist in this area.⁸⁶ Seoul wants options to assuage its extended deterrence concerns, signal resolve to Pyongyang, and generate leverage for future negotiations. South Korea's consideration of nuclear options also

reflects a desire for greater autonomy within the alliance and the perceived national prestige associated with nuclear capabilities. Washington is extremely cautious about, if not outright opposed to, a change in policy given the many predictable negative consequences of Seoul pursuing its own nuclear capabilities. These would include bilateral and multilateral diplomatic rifts related to the nuclear proliferation implications, diversion of scarce defense funding from conventional capabilities, and a shift of alliance attention away from countering Pyongyang. U.S.-ROK alliance managers will have to work diligently to build a common and durable approach to nuclear capabilities and high-end strategic deterrence going forward.

Policy Recommendations

The U.S.-South Korea alliance has started a new chapter. As part of this era, alliance managers in the executive and legislative branches in Washington and Seoul should consider the following recommendations related to the areas of China policy, multilateralism, and military and security technology.

Identify and build on overlapping priorities in the U.S. and ROK Indo-Pacific Strategies.

There is significant overlap between the nine core lines of effort of the Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy and the five objectives of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁸⁷ In meetings with counterparts, the allies should prioritize finding shared objectives and developing concrete initiatives to advance those common aims.

Broaden the alliance to account for threats from China in addition to North Korea.

Pyongyang remains the direst threat for Seoul and should continue to drive the majority of alliance activities. At the same time, however, Beijing's rapid military modernization and aggressive actions around the region will have repercussions for Seoul's security. The allies should, quietly but urgently, write or revise wartime operation plans (OPLANs) to address two categories of contingencies related to China: The first are contingencies created by PRC aggression in other places, such as Taiwan or in the South China Sea, that could create opportunities for simultaneous aggression from North Korea. The second are contingencies on the Korean Peninsula and/or its adjacent waters where ROK or allied forces could face Chinese forces—whether People's Liberation Army, China Coast Guard, or maritime militia—directly.⁸⁸

Encourage Seoul's ambitions beyond the Korean Peninsula while also acknowledging the concomitant pressures of a larger global role—especially from Beijing.

South Korean policymakers must grapple with the tension in their ambitions to become a global pivotal state: For Seoul to carve out a larger and more influential role on the world stage, the country will have to adopt policies on a range of issues that could put it at odds with Beijing. South Korea cannot be pivotal, in a constructive sense, for the Indo-Pacific or the world while constantly hedging and being hyperconscious of China's sensitivities.

Take a bold approach to boosting U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation.

Seoul should, with Washington's strong support, make the most of the current opportunity to set aside historical disputes and improve ties with Japan. Most importantly, the ROK should fully normalize cooperation with Japan under the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). In return, Japan should invite South Korea to the May G7 meeting in Hiroshima as part of a G7-Plus. Over the next year, the two powers should work toward releasing a forward-looking statement on bilateral relations that focuses on the shared values of their two countries. In addition, the United States should encourage South Korea to identify and pursue opportunities for synergy with Japan's growing contributions to regional security instead of viewing them with unease. All these steps will surely mean political risk for the Yoon administration. But allowing historical disputes to further fester poses a major strategic risk because it divides two major democratic countries in East Asia.

Facilitate South Korea's deeper integration into minilateral coalitions with leading democracies.

Washington should support Seoul's ambitions to work more closely with major democracies, including as an informal aligned country or part of "plus" formats for the G7, NATO, and the Quad. U.S. support should be targeted toward those areas where South Korea has special capabilities and/or political will to contribute, similar to South Korea's role as a co-host for the 2023 Summit for Democracy.⁸⁹ In addition, Washington and Seoul should look for opportunities to work together in multilateral institutions toward specific ends, especially where traditional processes are blocked. The November 2022 Joint Statement from the United States, South Korea,

and a dozen other U.N. member states condemning North Korea's latest ballistic missile launch provides a model.⁹⁰ It called out inaction from the U.N. Security Council, a reference to China and Russia shielding North Korea from condemnation.

Create a defense technology development and acquisition roadmap for the alliance that strengthens both deterrence and stability.

The allies should compare their respective defense technology development and acquisition priorities to determine where they might overlap. South Korea will continue to seek capabilities to support its Three-Pillar System defense policy. The United States should identify ways to sell, co-produce, or share defense technologies relevant to the Three-Pillar System, while steering away from military capabilities that could lead to rapid escalation in a crisis.⁹¹ In addition, once the AUKUS partners announce the results of their first 18 months of work, Washington should brief Seoul on the advanced capabilities line of effort (not the nuclear-powered submarines). There is likely to be substantial overlap across several areas. One possibility is AI and autonomy. The Korea Research Institute for Defense Technology Planning and Advancement has identified 30 AI-enabled weapons systems critical for South Korea to adapt to its threat environment.⁹²

Deepen U.S.-ROK cooperation in the cyber and space domains.

The alliance faces uniquely potent threats from North Korea and China in the cyber and space domains, and both countries should prioritize joint efforts to bolster their capabilities in those high-technology areas. Washington and Seoul have already made valuable steps in this direction. Memorandums of understanding on cyber issues between the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Cyber Command and their Korean counterparts provide a foundation for future cooperation.⁹³ Next steps in this area should include the U.S. providing additional technical assistance to ensure the ROK has the most cutting-edge tools available for cyber defense, including those that rely on AI, and enhancing threat information-sharing bilaterally and trilaterally with Japan. In space, the activation of a U.S. Space Force component field command for U.S. Forces Korea was a useful step and should provide a platform for more extensive cooperation on military space-related issues.

Negotiate a U.S.-ROK reciprocal defense procurement agreement.

The Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment and the Korean Defense Acquisition Program Administration should enter into an RDP agreement, which would remove barriers to greater defense supply chain integration between the United States and South Korea. The United States has 28 RDPs with many NATO and Indo-Pacific allies as well as some close partners such as Egypt, Switzerland, and Israel.⁹⁴ An RDP agreement with South Korea would enable greater interoperability, mutual logistics support, and exchange of defense technology by establishing a framework for procurement based on transparency and fairness.⁹⁵

Jointly reexamine from first principles all options for bolstering allied nuclear deterrence, but be realistic about the negative consequences of drastic changes in capabilities and posture.

As part of the process of revising their Tailored Deterrence Strategy, U.S. and ROK officials should conduct a joint study of all potential options for bolstering nuclear deterrence and avoid dismissing any of them without reexamining each, starting from first principles.⁹⁶ In doing so, however, alliance managers must also be clear-eyed and direct about the diplomatic, operational, technical, and budgetary obstacles and consequences that come with each option.⁹⁷ With a full accounting of all those factors, incremental changes to the alliance's nuclear deterrence posture will likely be better than radical ones across nearly every conceivable metric. But that determination should be made only after reassessing all options together as allies.

Conclusion

As the U.S.-ROK alliance turns 70, both Washington and Seoul have emerged from a period of turbulence with an understanding that the pact is as vital as ever. The current moment marks the beginning of a new chapter in the alliance—one that could be characterized either by seizing the opportunities at hand or by forfeiting chances to achieve shared objectives. Working together on policy toward China, on minilateral and multilateral initiatives, and on military and security technologies will be essential for maximizing the promise of the alliance in the coming years. As threats emanating from Pyongyang, Beijing, and Moscow mount, the United States and South Korea must rise to the occasion and work in unison for the sake of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, in the Indo-Pacific, and across the globe.

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