

Seoul's Bolstered Defense Ambitions

Seoul is heavily investing in its defense capabilities. While the current government emphasizes that the US-South Korea alliance is central for the country's security, the long-term strategic challenge will be to balance carefully relations with the US, but also with China and other regional actors in an increasingly volatile security environment. Hence, the importance of global partnerships is growing.

By Linda Maduz and
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South Korea's (officially the Republic of Korea, ROK) defense developments have been increasingly notorious in recent years given their scale and reach. During the Moon Jae-in presidency (2017–2022), the country's defense budget increased by an average of seven percent each year, even while actively engaging in inter-Korean diplomacy efforts. The new conservative president, Yoon Suk-yeol, is continuing the commitment to a strong defense posture. Departing from his progressive predecessor, however, he emphasizes Seoul's alliance with the US as the central axis of its foreign and security policies. This involves a stronger focus on a deterrence- and sanctions-based approach *vis-à-vis* North Korea (officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK), resuming and ramping up joint military exercises with the US, and improving ties with Japan.

In South Korean domestic politics, where conservative and progressive presidencies regularly alternate, this policy shift might look like “business as usual.” However, Seoul's bolstered defense ambitions and recent US alliance-centered actions need to be seen in the context of a changing international environment. South Korea not only has to balance its relations with the US, but also with China, and regional actors, such as Japan and Australia, as well as, to a lesser extent, Europe. China's increased



US and South Korean soldiers take part in a joint drill at a training field near the demilitarized zone in August 2022. Kim Hong-Ji / Reuters

economic and military power combined with its political ambition to lead the region changes and challenges Asia's security order, of which the US-ROK alliance has been an integral part. The US' traditional security policy approach toward Asia, as developed during the Cold War, centered on deterrence and nuclear non-proliferation, hence the alliance's focus on the security threat posed by North Korea. In the current context, however, the US defines

China as the main security threat. Washington's strategic thought and action in the region extend to further domains today, resulting in a push to reshape alliances for its economic and technological competition with Beijing.

US-led initiatives such as the established Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or the more tentative “Chip 4” alliance – aimed at securing and investing in the global

semiconductor supply chain – intend to counter China’s influence in the maritime security and technology domains. They offer regional allies and partners new opportunities for collaboration. At the same time, they push countries like South Korea that have benefited from strong economic ties with China to take sides in the great power competition. Seoul is not part of the Quad and has been reluctant to commit to the “Chip 4” alliance. Strategic ambiguity, a prevalent concept during the Moon administration, will become increasingly difficult to manage as US-China competition extends into further domains. As such, South Korea’s defense trajectory, framed by its alliance with the US and compelled by the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, provides interesting insights into broader regional security developments.

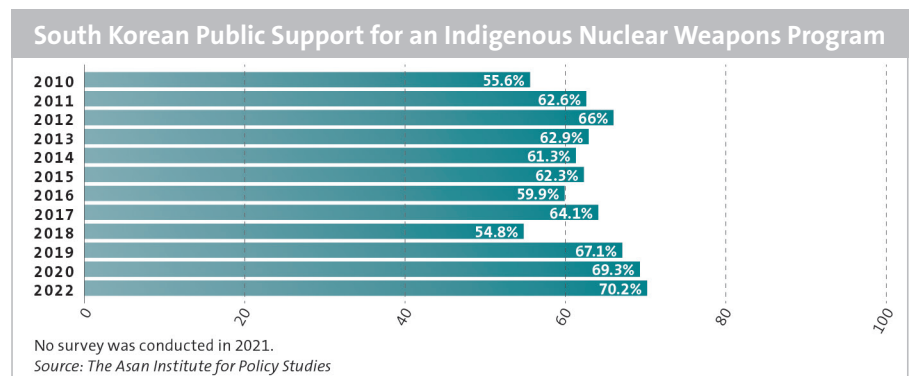
The US-ROK Alliance

The US and South Korea signed a mutual defense treaty in 1953, a few months after the armistice ended the Korean War hostilities. The formal alliance, in force since 1954, forms the basis for the placement of

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US military forces and resources on South Korean territory. Measured in terms of US active duty military personnel and US military sites present in a country, South Korea is the third most important US military ally after Japan and Germany. Other US military alliances in the region concluded in the early Cold War-context, with Australia, the Philippines, or Thailand, are in different orders of magnitude. Today, roughly 28,500 US forces are stationed in South Korea. They train and operate alongside South Korea’s 600,000 standing troops.

On the one hand, content and rationale of the US-South Korea military alliance have been highly consistent in its almost 70 years of existence. Its main goal has been to deter a North Korean aggression and - in case deterrence fails – to help South Korea defend itself. The alliance has been described as one of the most militarily interoperable and cooperative bilateral relationships in the world. Unlike NATO, for example, whose framework would be difficult to replicate in a bilateral setting, the US-ROK alliance is not highly institutionalized, but it shares an in-



tegrated command structure, which the US-Japan alliance does not. The alliance has also continuously enjoyed broad domestic support on both sides of the Pacific.

On the other hand, the US-ROK alliance has changed since its early days. Shifting US policy priorities and budgetary constraints drove changes in the composition and number of US forces stationed in South Korea, including their gradual reduction. However, the continuous efforts of both allies to modernize and improve their respective armed forces led to the most fundamental changes in the alliance structure and their respective role in it. Challenges became more salient after the end of the Cold War, when a democratic and economically advanced South Korea started to ask for more autonomy and self-reliance within the alliance structure. The various aspects led to more openly expressed divergences starting in the 2010s.

Today, South Korea is able to take the lead in conventional deterrence and defense against North Korea while continuing to rely on the US for the provision of extended deterrence, which will remain a cornerstone of South Korea’s defense. The challenge therefore lies in developing greater independent capabilities without compromising the need for and scope of the alliance and its security guarantees. So far, it seems that Seoul has successfully achieved that balance by closely coordinating with the US on issues related to deterrence, missile and missile defense capabilities, cyber and space assets while also significantly investing in its own defense capabilities.

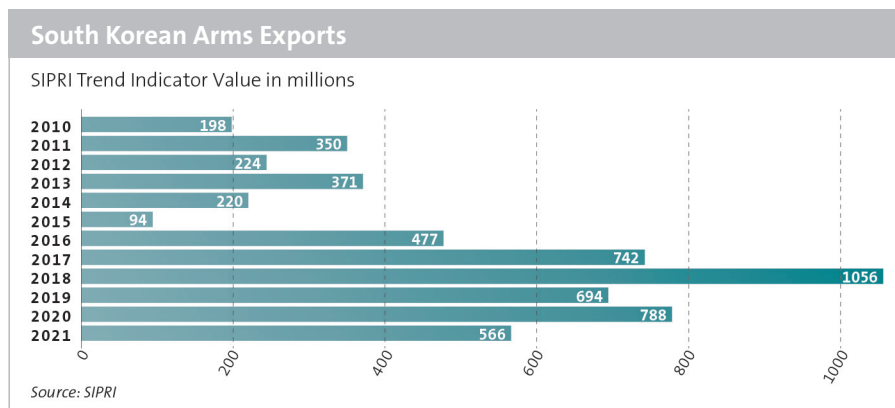
Seoul’s Defense Imperatives

The growing threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities re-

mains Seoul’s key focus when developing its conventional deterrence strategy. The strategy rests on three main pillars: the Kill Chain, the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system, and the Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) strategy. The Kill Chain encompasses preemptive strike capabilities intended to detect and destroy North Korean nuclear missiles prior to launch while the KAMD would serve to intercept incoming missiles. The third leg of this triad, the KMPR, uses similar platforms as the Kill Chain – notably intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities as well as ballistic and cruise missiles – but is aimed at taking out North Korea’s leadership in case of a nuclear attack.

All three legs of this strategy, sometimes dubbed the Korean K3, are still under development but have prompted significant investments in high technology conventional capabilities. These have notably featured space launch vehicles, advanced radar systems, and an array of missiles, including conventionally armed submarine-launched ballistic missiles – South Korea is the first non-nuclear weapon state to develop such a capability that is generally armed with a nuclear warhead –, long-range surface-to-air missiles intended for the KAMD system, and hypersonic cruise missiles. As such, Seoul pursues independent conventional capabilities aimed at responding to the North Korean nuclear threat. It also contributes further assets and takes on more responsibilities, which helps rebalance the US-ROK alliance. These efforts bring Seoul closer to taking back wartime operational control over its forces from the US, which has been a controversial issue in South Korean defense politics since the end of the Korean War.

For Washington, a strengthening of both the alliance and South Korea’s own capabilities is a positive development given an



increasingly tense regional security environment. The lifting of missile restrictions has also further enabled South Korean defense capabilities. Certain sensitive technologies, however, remain off-limits, notably cooperation on naval nuclear propulsion. This issue has become more controversial since the US has agreed to help Australia develop a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) framework but denied South Korea the same opportunity (see [CSS Analysis no.300](#)). The Biden administration also preemptively closed any debates regarding the stationing of US nuclear weapons in South Korea – the last of which were removed in 1991. Moreover, a nuclear cooperation agreement with the US restrains South Korean ambitions to develop uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technologies, which can be used for the production of weapons-grade fissile material.

However, longstanding popular support in South Korea for an indigenous nuclear weapons program remains strong and public debates have been emboldened by Russia's coercive use of nuclear weapons in its war of aggression against Ukraine (see graphic on p.2). Some commentators are drawing the lesson that a domestic nuclear deterrent might ultimately be Seoul's only effective insurance against its nuclear-armed neighbor, reflecting doubts regarding US security guarantees in case of another Donald Trump-like presidency, for instance. Seoul's advanced civil nuclear industry, interest in and technical capacity to pursue dual-use capabilities such as nuclear naval propulsion, uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, and popular support for nuclear weapons all contribute to a policy of nuclear hedging, which depends heavily on the continued credibility of US extended deterrence. The alignment be-

tween the current US and South Korean administrations diminishes the prospects for South Korea embarking on a nuclear weapons pathway. However, such a pro-nuclear public discourse does highlight genuine concerns about the future given how North Korea is cementing its nuclear capabilities.

A Growing Nuclear Threat

After the failed Hanoi summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un in February 2019, diplomacy with Pyongyang fizzled out. Efforts by the Moon administration to sustain inter-Korean dialogue fell through and prospects to conclude a formal end-of-war declaration also failed to bear fruit. Since taking office in May, President Yoon has largely followed the conservative party's traditional approach to dealing with the North by de-prioritizing inter-Korean relations and placing the emphasis on strengthening the alliance with the US.

Ambitions to reduce North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal, restrain its fissile material production capacity or even gain better transparency over its developments are unlikely in the near future – let alone achieving complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization. Pyongyang has been developing its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, both quantita-

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tively and qualitatively. Kim's regime has focused notably on increasing its fissile material stockpile, estimated to be sufficient for about 45 to 55 nuclear weapons, and devel-

oping a wide arsenal of missiles, including short-range delivery systems that pose a threat to Seoul and Tokyo and long-range ones that can reach the continental US.

Since the start of 2022, Pyongyang has significantly increased the pace of missile testing, conducting more than 30 tests of various systems between January and August. These have demonstrated the regime's technical progress in terms of engine systems, maneuverability, and deployment speed. The diversity of systems tested also shows strides toward some of the strategic goals Kim Jong-un announced such as the development of hypersonic glide vehicles and a sea-based nuclear deterrent. Experts and officials alike are expecting North Korea to conduct a seventh nuclear test this year following an increase in activities at its nuclear test site. When – rather than if – it occurs, Pyongyang will be able to further improve its warhead design.

Pyongyang's nuclear deterrent guarantees the Kim regime's survival. As it grows in size and sophistication, it becomes increasingly difficult to envision a negotiation pathway where Kim agrees to relinquish his arsenal, especially given recent statements where he has vowed to "never give up" the country's nuclear weapons. North Korea's recently updated nuclear law even enshrines the status of nuclear weapons and adopts a policy of preemptive use in order to counter Seoul's KMPR strategy. Weakening international pressure and other nuclear crises have shifted the world's attention from the DPRK's nuclear build-up. Russia and China's refusal to apply further sanctions in response to missile tests is a further signal that the North's status as a de-facto nuclear-armed state is becoming a new normal.

Broadening Horizons

In reaction to an increasingly volatile security environment, including the growing nuclear threat from the North, Seoul not only wants to step up its role in the region, but also globally. Strengthening its partnership with NATO forms part of the strategy.

Yoon's first presidential trip abroad took him to the NATO Summit in Spain this June. Seoul and Tokyo, along with Canberra and Wellington, were invited to join the Summit as Asia-Pacific partners. This was significant given the alliance's decision to take a stronger stance on China, defining it in its formal mission statement as a "systematic challenge." South Korea now plans to set up a diplomatic mission at

NATO Headquarters in Brussels, like the other three countries. Moreover, Seoul was the first Asian state to join the Estonia-based NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, the NATO-accredited cyber defense hub that provides expertise in the field of cyber defense research, training, and exercises.

South Korea under Yoon also seeks to expand “the breadth of diplomacy in the EU,” for which it is – like for NATO – an interesting partner in domains such as cybersecurity, but also beyond. Cooperation under the EU-ROK strategic partnership, which has existed since 2010, also includes digital and ocean governance. An example is the finalization of adequacy talks last December, allowing for the free and safe flow of personal data between Brussels and Seoul. The EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy of September 2021 also lays out areas for increased future cooperation and refers to South Korea as a “like-minded” partner. This resonates with efforts by Yoon to push the country’s role as a liberal democracy that collaborates with other countries to support a rules-based international order.

Strong alignment with European and US positions became visible following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier this year. South Korea joined international sanctions against Russia and promised 100 million USD in humanitarian assistance for Ukraine. In return, Russia designated South Korea as an “unfriendly nation.” Another effect of the war in Ukraine is the strengthening of South Korea’s position as an arms exporter. Arms exports and imports with NATO states have risen over time, serving Seoul’s interest to decrease its dependence on the US and strengthen its own defense industry. Having increased its arms exports more than any

other country in the past five years, it is today the world’s eighth largest arms exporter (see graphic on p.3). South Korea concluded its hitherto biggest arms deal this July with Poland, including more than 1600 tanks and armored howitzers, and 48 fighter jets.

Seoul’s active positioning in the Western camp and its boosting of ties with NATO and EU members help it strengthen its alliance with the US. The successful management of its ties with the US decisively

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shapes Seoul’s security and prosperity, but the same is true for its ties with China. South Korea depends on China not only for its economy, but also for a resolution of the Korean conflict. State-backed Chinese media warn against participation in the NATO Summit and a broader partnership with the organization, perceived by Beijing as global, Cold War-style efforts to contain it. This arguably raises more concerns and dilemmas in South Korea when compared to other Asia-Pacific states. Seoul does not easily fit in or align with the emerging US-led or -promoted cooperation formats in the region. This is a consequence of its strong ties with China, on which public opinion only turned negative over the past few years, but also of its complicated relationship with its former colonial power, Japan. Strong global partnerships do alleviate but not solve the dilemma.

Outlook

South Korea’s longstanding balancing act between its security interests, dependent on its alliance with the US and pressed by

an increasingly capable and nuclear North Korea, and economic interests, bound by its key trade relationship with China, will become more difficult to manage in the coming years. The Yoon administration is already faced with challenges at the heart of this dilemma, notably on whether to join the “Chip 4” alliance, how to ensure the permanent deployment of a THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense unit, as well as the potential acquisition of further units from the US, which China firmly opposes.

The US-ROK alliance has prevailed over the last seven decades of political, economic, and strategic changes on both sides of the Pacific. Yet the last several years, shaped by Trump’s open disdain for the alliance, the failure of denuclearization talks, growing public support for a domestic nuclear weapons program, and China’s increasingly widespread influence over the Asia-Pacific region, are putting pressure on the US-ROK relationship. Uncertainty about domestic political changes in the US that could result in another Trump-like president and the risks of ignoring Chinese security threats – including the prospect of a Taiwan invasion scenario where Seoul would be hard-pressed to stay neutral – weigh heavily on the alliance’s future.

For more on Military Doctrine and Arms Procurement, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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