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SRAD Director's Corner: Recognizing the Increasing Importance of the US-ROK Alliance

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Recognizing the Increasing Importance of the US-ROK Alliance

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ABSTRACT: My first essay as SRAD director sets the stage for the Strategic Studies Institute's research on the growing importance of South Korea to the US alliance system and security objectives across the Indo-Pacific region, provides reasons why South Korea may become commensurate with Japan as the region's primary US ally, and proposes ways the United States should leverage this reality to maximize this relationship and maintain a free and open Pacific. This important analysis challenges the orthodox view of South Korea as a self-contained problem set with little relevance to other regional security issues and explains its underappreciated connections to regional stability.

Keywords: South Korea, North Korea, Indo-Pacific (INDOPACOM), armistice agreement, security, nuclear, Russia-Ukraine War, national defense

June 2023 marks the 70th anniversary of the alliance between the United States and South Korea (Republic of Korea/ROK) and of the armistice agreement—a historic milestone by any measure, but one that should give us pause to recognize an opportunity. It is time to acknowledge the immense value of this relationship and to elevate the importance of the alliance to security concerns beyond Northeast Asia. To these ends, the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) has partnered with outside scholars to launch a yearlong effort to examine South Korea's growing importance to the US alliance system and security objectives across the Indo-Pacific region. The project will build novel perspectives on why South Korea may become commensurate with Japan as the region's primary US ally and how the United States should leverage this reality to maximize its relationship with South Korea and maintain a free and open Pacific. This important analysis challenges the orthodox view of Korea as a self-contained problem set with little relevance to other regional security issues and explains South Korea's underappreciated connections to regional stability.

A quick tour of the region and key data points contextualize SSI's assertion that South Korea is becoming more important to East Asian security. First and foremost, the *2022 US National Security Strategy* defines the

importance of a “free and open Indo-Pacific.”¹ Second, South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol’s administration, though not exactly anti-China, is more amenable to US security interests than the previous administration was.² December 2022 marked South Korea’s first *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, which outlines a security outlook that expands beyond the peninsula to become a “Global Pivotal State” and to reaffirm support for a “rules-based order built on the universal values including freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.”³ Aside from US and ROK strategic documents, we cannot deny the increasing relevance of South Korea, given its status as the world’s 10th-largest economy (fourth-largest in Asia), sixth-busiest shipping port, second-largest ship-building nation, and its rapidly expanding defense export industry that provides Ukrainian, Polish, Australian, and other customers an alternative to Western or Soviet-era weapons systems.⁴

While both the US and ROK governments see broader regional implications of the alliance, immediate threats on the peninsula persist. The past 12 months have seen an unprecedented increase in North Korean provocations and missile launches. Ostensibly a reaction to revitalized large-scale US-ROK military exercises, these launches demonstrate increased sophistication and capability in North Korea’s weapons program and simultaneously raise the temperature of regional relations. While these provocations seem confined to the peninsula at face value, their broader impact reverberates far beyond it. Many of the missile launches overfly or land in Japan’s exclusive economic zone, and the trajectory of the more successful tests suggests these missiles can reach the mainland United States.

Perhaps most concerning is the seeming inability of traditional diplomatic and deterrence measures to limit North Korea’s pugnaciousness. Other concerns are increased rhetoric in South Korea and Japan questioning the credibility of the United States’ nuclear deterrence and domestic ROK support for homegrown

1. Joseph R. Biden, *National Security Strategy: October 2022* (Washington, DC: White House, 2022), 37–38, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

2. Derek Grossman, “U.S. Cannot Count on South Korea’s Yoon to Line Up against China,” *RAND Blog* (blog), February 9, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/02/us-cannot-count-on-south-koreas-yoon-to-line-up-against.html>; and Joel Atkinson, “Don’t Mistake South Korea’s Yoon Suk-Yeol for a China Hawk,” *Diplomat* (website), August 27, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/dont-mistake-south-koreas-yoon-suk-yeol-for-a-china-hawk/>.

3. *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (Seoul: Government of the Republic of Korea, December 2022), 7–8, <https://www.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20230106093833927.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202304>.

4. “Indicators of Economy in South Korea,” *WorldData.info* (website), n.d., <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/south-korea/economy.php>; and Andy Hong, “2022 in Review: South Korean Arms Exports,” *Peninsula* (blog), December 22, 2022, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/2022-in-review-south-korean-arms-exports/>.

nuclear weapons.⁵ This area demands additional research to understand the implications and trade-offs inherent to nuclear agreements between allies. We must also consider how South Korea and the United States will manage the increasingly complex and delicate balancing act of defending against North Korean aggression and dealing with broader competition across the Indo-Pacific.

Domestic challenges in South Korea also warrant further research. Population decline and waning public support for conscripted service and reunification partly justify the ROK Ministry of Defense's technological reform initiatives focused on improvements and force-design modernization. Increased lethality and intelligence capabilities will ease the burden on end strength while furthering high-end capabilities. These capabilities also have implications for the Conditions Based OPCON Transfer and potential opportunities with changing US force posture. China's broader influence over the ROK economy and the degree to which China could punish South Korea over the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense system deployment (and potential future deployments) may also merit further inquiry as part of this effort.⁶

As Russia's war in Ukraine is in its second year, its effect on Indo-Pacific security concerns is evident. The triad of China, Russia, and North Korea—each seeking to further their own interests—is keenly aligned to thwart any US military presence in Northeast Asia. North Korea quickly recognized Russian claims to Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine and is also seeking weapons-for-food deals with Russia.

China likewise refuses to condemn Russian aggression, often repeating Russian talking points on the conflict—even going so far as to blame the West for provoking the crisis—and attempting to broker a ceasefire that mostly favors Russian interests.⁷ Additionally, China is surely studying the conflict as a preview to a potential Taiwan conflict. For example, noting the success of economic sanctions against Russia, China is taking action to insulate its economy from any possible future sanctions by reducing

5. Takahashi Kosuke, "Japan, South Korea Wonder: How Strong Is the US Nuclear Umbrella?," *Diplomat* (website), January 27, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/japan-south-korea-wonder-how-strong-is-the-us-nuclear-umbrella/>.

6. Kim Tong-Hyung, "China, South Korea Clash over THAAD Anti-Missile System," *Defense News* (website), August 10, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2022/08/10/china-south-korea-clash-over-thaad-anti-missile-system/>.

7. Carla Freeman, Mary Glantz, and Andrew Scobell, "What China's 'Peace Plan' Reveals about Its Stance on Russia's War on Ukraine," *United States Institute of Peace* (website), March 2, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/what-chinas-peace-plan-reveals-about-its-stance-russias-war-ukraine>.

dependency on external systems and creating conditions with other partners to constrain their ability to sign onto damaging sanctions.⁸

Given this brief backdrop, how does South Korea fit in, and what role can—and should—it play? This research should explore the nuanced ways the US-ROK alliance can support broader competition activities with respect to China and Russia as both countries become further entrenched in the Russia-Ukraine War.

Research addressing these and other areas will contribute to our understanding of the nuances of Northeast Asia in the context of competition. Given the disturbing patterns of Chinese, North Korean, and Russian military activity and the propensity toward miscalculations in the region, this understanding is critical. This brief essay does not cover every contingency or opportunity the US-ROK alliance presents. Instead, it sets the stage for important research on the topic as the Joint Force continues to march into this decisive decade.

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8. Bonny Lin, “The Ukraine Crisis: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), May 19, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ukraine-crisis-implications-us-policy-indo-pacific-0>.

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