“Getting Asia Right” With a More Strategic US-South Korea Alliance

Leif-Eric Easley[1]
Ewha Womans University

Abstract

The US-South Korea alliance has historically focused on North Korea, but the critical long-term task is strategic clarity about China. Existing analyses overemphasize the role of contrasting leaders and parties in Seoul and Washington driving different approaches toward Pyongyang. This article explains predominantly shared US-South Korea interests in deterrence and peace and in addressing nuclear weapons, missiles, drones, cybersecurity, and human rights. Both countries would be better served by an “alliance first” strategy rather than protectionist trade policies or nationalist pursuits of autonomy. There is more agreement than previously recognized in Washington and Seoul regarding the “China challenge” involving technological competition, economic security, and freedom of navigation. Without greater leverage over Beijing, it will be difficult to address Russia’s military interventions and apply sanctions to clinch a security agreement with North Korea that would eventually allow economic engagement. Expanding the international scope of the alliance, including trilateral cooperation with Japan, will support a stable rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: China geopolitics, Economic security, Indo-Pacific security diplomacy, Trilateral cooperation with Japan, North Korea denuclearization, US-South Korea alliance

1 The author appreciates insightful conversations with Scott Snyder on the content of this article and thanks Yesun Kim and Jennifer Yaewon Lee for excellent research assistance. The title is inspired by the work of two mentors—Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage (Nye and Armitage 2007)—who passed away in spring 2025 (Glosserman 2025). They are deeply missed but their efforts live on in the policy relevant work of their students and colleagues.

Introduction

In 2022–23, North Korea conducted an unprecedented number of missile tests while the international community faced deadlock in diplomacy and denuclearization efforts with Pyongyang (Thomas-Greenfield 2024). In 2023–25, the Kim Jong-un regime increasingly aligned with Russia to profit financially and technologically from Vladimir Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. In September 2025, Kim and Putin stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Xi Jinping, watching a massive military parade at Tiananmen Square in an unprecedented show of trilateral solidarity. These developments have rekindled perennial debates about the effectiveness of the US-Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) alliance for dealing with North Korea. Concerns about the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella even led some in Seoul to discuss the possibility of South Korea developing nuclear weapons (Herzog and Sukin 2023). However, the alliance continues to be reinforced with political reassurance, advanced capabilities, and defense exercises for extended deterrence. A greater challenge than North Korea's latest missile launch or long-anticipated seventh nuclear test—or even Washington and Seoul's difficult negotiations over trade deficits and alliance cost-sharing—is how to address long-term, strategic challenges involving China. These issues include Beijing's deepening technological rivalry with competitors, growing revisionism versus the status quo order in Asia, and its enduring support of the Kim regime's political narrative, diplomacy, and economy (Easley and Chow 2024).

Conventional wisdom expects that US-ROK relations face greater difficulties when there is a hardline conservative leader in one capital and a pro-engagement progressive in the other (Snyder 2023). Yet, even when Washington and Seoul prefer different approaches, reasonable compromises can be reached if each ally compensates for the other's less-than-strategic tendencies that are the product of domestic politics rather than national interests. The progressive Moon Jae-in administration's strained but effective coordination throughout Donald Trump's first-

term North Korea policy—from "fire and fury" to personality-driven diplomacy—is testimony to the alliance's durability (Fuchs and Lee 2020). Joe Biden and Yoon Suk-yeol came to office from different sides of the political spectrum, but were closely aligned in responding to Pyongyang's provocations. Diplomatic deadlock with North Korea has been the product of the Kim regime's unwillingness to engage in negotiations since summitry with Trump collapsed (Easley 2020b). This could be attributed to North Korean disappointment in not being able to secure economic benefits without denuclearization, and then to its deepening self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic (UN OHCHR 2023). Others have argued that despite offers of humanitarian aid and economic cooperation, Yoon was too hardline on North Korea while increasing emphasis on the alliance and overcorrecting for the Moon government's unrequited efforts for peace and cooperation (Park 2025). Yoon's declaration of martial law in December 2024, leading to his impeachment and removal, was partially predicated on North Korean influence operations and worsened mutual distrust with Pyongyang.

What is lost in analytical contrasts of Moon's and Yoon's approaches is the consistency of North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons amidst the changing geopolitical environment on and around the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has focused its efforts on accelerating its tactical nuclear weapons capabilities, reflected in the claimed miniaturization of lower-yield nuclear warheads, missile tests of great diversity and intensity to practice evading missile defenses and preemptive strikes, and an updated doctrine threatening nuclear first-use and warfighting. In light of such threats, Yoon emphasized the need for strengthening extended deterrence. While the Biden administration was not in favor of redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, or of South Korea developing nuclear weapons of its own, it responded by increasing demonstrations of political will and defense capabilities via high-level visits and more complex military exercises, as well as creating the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to facilitate senior-level discussion on nuclear and strategic planning (US Embassy in the ROK 2025). This

reinforced commitment, with frequent consultations and greater visibility of strategic assets, was spelled out in the Washington Declaration (ROK MOFA 2023), and has thus far been continued by the second Trump administration and that of Yoon's successor, Lee Jae-myung.

However, North Korea has also taken deliberate steps to deprioritize, devalue, and even deconstruct inter-Korean institutions, communication channels, and symbols of reconciliation. It rebranded or dissolved government agencies once tasked with managing inter-Korean dialogue. Military and diplomatic hotlines have been shut off, rail links and roads cut, and confidence-building overtures ignored. North Korea has labeled South Korea a hostile enemy state, declared itself an irreversible nuclear power, and claimed no interest or utility in inter-Korean exchanges (Kim 2024). These acts come as Pyongyang seeks to extract maximum benefit from its increased military cooperation with Moscow, for which it is suspected of receiving not only fuel, food, and financial remuneration, but also weapons technology and opportunities to upgrade its defense-industrial base. This transactional relationship was sealed in June 2024 when Kim and Putin signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in Pyongyang. While the Lee Jae-myung administration may be in the political lineage of engagers like Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in, it is more likely to be cautious and pragmatic due to North Korea's hardening positions.

A maxim of US-South Korea alliance cooperation is that Washington and Seoul need to be on the same page regarding North Korea. This includes making progress toward denuclearization, pursuing economic engagement while enforcing sanctions, and promoting human rights. The common assumption of Pyongyang as a "problem" provides an analytical frame that leaves Washington and Seoul on the hook for a "solution," but then the alliance tends not to receive the credit it deserves for deterring North Korea because denuclearization is nowhere in sight. Yet, as long as North Korea is deterred, dealing with Pyongyang is actually not the hardest question for the alliance. The more serious long-term conundrum is getting on the same page about the People's

Republic of China (PRC). A calibrated approach toward Beijing is the imperative from which coordination with Japan and the broader region, especially regarding North Korea, will follow.

Washington and Seoul need a whole-of-alliance deliberation on how to deal with the China challenge. Toward that end, this article proceeds as follows. The first section identifies significant overlap in US and ROK national interests for maintaining and strengthening the alliance with shared strategic concepts. The second section examines how US and South Korean policymakers, analysts, and public opinion are increasingly aligned on technology and economic security, freedom of navigation and regional stability, and the defense of international order against North Korean and Russian violations. The third section analyzes Seoul and Washington's progress toward realizing a more strategic alliance, despite leadership changes in both capitals and in Tokyo. The article concludes that the allies can better embed their policies in the rules-based order in Asia, supported by a global network of like-minded partners.

Alignment of US and South Korean Interests

While in opposition, the now-ruling South Korean Democratic Party criticized the Yoon administration for putting too many eggs in the alliance basket and not enough toward the diplomatic engagement of North Korea and China (Lee 2023). After Trump's return to the White House, unpredictable and legally dubious tariff policies have shaken Seoul's confidence in Washington. Yet US-South Korea interests are much more aligned than daily commentaries in both capitals suggest. South Korea's security interests often lead to more emphasis on peace since it shares the peninsula with, and is within range of artillery fire from, North Korea. However, leaders from both sides of the South Korean political spectrum are serious about defense and deterrence. The Achilles' heel of the alliance is divergence on regional roles, a problem

that policymakers in the Moon administration did not seem to fully appreciate. South Korea often takes a cautious approach to regional issues to avoid offending Beijing (Easley and Park 2018), but the US expects Seoul to engage more in alliance cooperation beyond the peninsula.

Interestingly, Seoul's and Washington's policy disagreements arise more in the consultation phase than in implementation. Moreover, their differences are usually exaggerated in day-to-day media coverage. Although international laws and norms are contested not only by pariah regimes, but also by controversial US enforcement activities involving tariffs, drug-smuggling vessels, and Iranian nuclear sites, the US and South Korea broadly agree on a rules-based order for common security and shared prosperity. Public opinion polls show that a majority of both South Koreans and Americans see their alliance as based on shared security interests and values such as human rights and democracy (Friedhoff and Park 2021). A majority of the American public and the vast majority of bipartisan policy elites favor US-South Korea cooperation on the North Korea issue (Stangarone and Kim 2021). Eight out of ten South Koreans also believe that the alliance supports South Korea's security from Chinese pressure or attack (Lee 2019), and their views of China have become more unfavorable than those toward Japan (O. Lee 2021; Kim 2021b).

The allies' national interests are largely aligned on China. While Seoul is more inclined to take a conciliatory approach toward Beijing due to its economic dependence on and geographic proximity to its overwhelmingly larger neighbor, current policy differences with Washington are overstated. Public opinion in both countries is very similar in seeing China as an economic and security threat (Friedhoff and Park 2021). South Korean progressives are not so much pro-China as they are pro-autonomy. US populists, on the other hand, are not anti-alliance, but rather pro-burden sharing. These differing priorities produce friction on alliance issues, from the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiations on cost sharing for US troops stationed in Korea to Seoul

seeking Washington's endorsement for South Korea to complete the nuclear fuel cycle with enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. But putting domestic political rhetoric aside, China poses greater risks to South Korea's autonomy than the US (Yeo 2020), while South Korea is not free-riding on the alliance, even if its preoccupation with Pyongyang obstructs its off-peninsula contributions. Both allies need to be more reflective, less ad hoc, and more strategic to see their cooperation in the context of long-term national interests.

Prioritizing the US-South Korea alliance will allow Washington and Seoul to avoid the worst tendencies in their policies, such as counterproductive American tariffs or unnecessary Korean deference to Chinese interests. This is especially the case with North Korea. The "denuclearization first" approach of the United States tends to over-rely on sanctions, risk unwanted escalation with military pressure, and lose focus if a so-called "big deal" is not achieved. Meanwhile, South Korean progressives' "peace first" or coexistence inclinations and forward-leaning posture on engagement are easily rejected or exploited by Pyongyang while North Korea demonizes and refuses to deal with South Korean conservatives. Domestic political polarization also leaves South Korea susceptible to wedge-driving by the Kim regime.

An "alliance first" approach reduces the risks of Washington and Seoul falling into these various traps. The US-South Korea alliance is not made more vulnerable by an engagement-oriented or hardline policy on North Korea. Rather, the alliance is put under stress when one ally pursues engagement while the other wants to increase deterrence. South Korea is not always so pro-engagement, and there have been cases such as after North Korea's 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, where the US had to ask Seoul to be more restrained (Bermudez 2011). Similarly, South Korea under President Moon helped redirect the Trump administration away from a "bloody nose strike" against North Korea (Cha and Katz 2018). Better alliance coordination could help both sides maintain deterrence while staying engaged in measured, step-by-step diplomacy under clear strategic goals.

What are often portrayed as conflicting priorities in dealing with North Korea are actually simultaneously necessary objectives. An accountability strategy is needed for deterrence and denuclearization while engagement is needed for peace and humanitarian assistance. These goals are not in absolute disagreement, but challenges arise with sequencing and managing trade-offs. Like his predecessor, Yoon highlighted the importance of peace on the Korean Peninsula and in Asia. However, he maintained that peace is not only the absence of conflict and the presence of sustainable economic development, but must also be based on North Korea's denuclearization and the international protection of human rights. He pledged that Seoul would deal with Pyongyang multilaterally while increasing Korean contributions to global public goods as a "global pivotal state" (Yoon 2022). With a sustained "alliance first" approach, such efforts could have produced more positive outcomes. Yoon's undemocratic domestic actions ironically allowed autocratic North Korea to shift blame onto Seoul's foreign policy.

Conceptual clarity can be a foundation for alliance cooperation. Words matter to keep policymakers on the same page and avoid misguided or even self-defeating policies. For instance, despite the claims of some South Korean politicians and officials, Seoul is not a mediator between the US and North Korea. It is an interested party and important actor that cannot be an arbiter because it is a US ally (Talmadge 2019). As South Korea and the US are integrated security and economic partners (Snyder 2020), Seoul could assume the role of a market facilitator that helps the US and North Korea set reasonable asking prices for matching reversible and irreversible steps. In Trump's transactional logic, Seoul might be called upon to help pay for the implementation of a new deal with Kim. But South Korea must not be treated as a diplomatic ATM (Lankov and Ward 2025), because it is a primary stakeholder on the Korean Peninsula.

Some analysts have quipped that Seoul's Sunshine policy (CRS 2001) of the early 2000s changed South Korea more than the North by

reducing the sense of threat from Pyongyang. With North Korean attacks on South Korea's naval vessel *Cheonan* and the offshore island Yeonpyeong in 2010, followed by years of aggressive nuclear and missile development, those threat perceptions rebounded. Then Moon sought to change those perceptions by persistently pursuing peace on the peninsula, and North Korea briefly allowed inter-Korean relations to improve. Nonetheless, the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) of September 2018 (ROK MOFA 2018) may have been less of a turning point for inter-Korean reconciliation than for reducing South Korean threat perceptions, especially since it was not fully implemented by North Korea, partially suspended by Yoon, and ultimately renounced by Pyongyang.

North Korea remains the primary physical threat to South Korea, but another important part of the dynamic is how South Korea's global economic and soft power successes threaten the Kim regime's legitimacy (Easley 2017). Diplomacy can try to smooth over these frictions, but South Korean policy will lose strategic clarity if it downplays the North Korean threat. In moves that were later reversed by Yoon, the Moon administration dropped certain terminology considered provocative by the Kim regime such as "kill chain" technology (Noh 2019), moved away from designating North Korea as the "enemy" (Song 2019), and discussed the concept of "threats from all directions" (ROK MND 2018). This conceptualization risked misreading the regional security landscape by underestimating the threat from North Korea, mischaracterizing challenges from China, and mismanaging the relationship with Japan (Glosserman and Snyder 2015). If such trends continued, they could have produced the misimpression that Seoul was accepting Pyongyang's perceptions and penchant for scapegoating regional powers, adversely affecting the US-ROK alliance, deterrence of North Korea, and coordination with Tokyo. President Lee's pragmatic diplomacy appears to incorporate lessons to avoid such pitfalls (ROK MOFA 2025).

Yet strategists in Seoul continue to overlook the fact that the Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and South Korea is not only

about North Korea (United States Forces Korea 1953). Pyongyang is understandably the short- to medium-term focus among regional security issues, but the rising and long-term risks emanate from Beijing. Washington and Seoul thus need to precisely define the China challenge in alliance terms. For example, the allies should decide whether to revise military operational plans (OPLANs) to include classified contingencies regarding China. For the US, the alliance is key for maintaining presence in Asia and a regional architecture that is not dominated by China. The alliance also helps South Korea defend its autonomy and punch above its weight internationally (Easley 2020a). The North Korean challenge is in many ways subsumed by the China challenge, and without the alliance, Washington and Seoul would both be in a weaker position vis-à-vis Beijing.

The China Challenge

US-China relations have been exacerbated by trade tensions, cybersecurity incidents, rare earths export controls, fentanyl precursors, recriminations over the pandemic, and nationalist media coverage. Competition over international economic security involves standards-setting and enforcement, but especially focuses on technology. On the regional security level, the China challenge encompasses unimpeded navigation and stability in the South China Sea, around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and across the Taiwan Strait. It also includes China's sanctions enforcement and violations regarding North Korea (Easley and Park 2016). Lastly, in terms of global governance and the rules-based order, the China challenge involves competing political institutions, norms, and human rights values, as well as positioning on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

These issues narrow strategic options for South Korea, which is locked between its security ally and its largest trading partner. The Korean acronym, "안미경중" (*anmigyeongjung*), is shorthand for the

dilemma of relying on Washington for security and Beijing for economic growth. During the Moon administration, US policymakers perceived a lack of support from Seoul in dealing with Beijing; this changed with the advent of the Yoon administration, but now some in Washington are concerned that the Lee administration will exercise greater caution regarding alignment with US policy on China. Under Moon, there may have been "strategic ambiguity" in South Korean foreign policy, but at the working level and day-to-day implementation of policy, there was tactical clarity. It could be argued that under Yoon, there was greater strategic clarity, until his self-defeating martial law declaration. Under Lee's strategy of pragmatism, there could be more tactical ambiguity, whether on follow-through regarding supply chains or being vocal on regional security.

South Korean companies are also key actors, as the days of complementary economic structure between China and South Korea have largely passed (Zhang and Wu 2025). South Korea no longer enjoys large trade surpluses with China, and Korean firms do not benefit as much from outsourcing manufacturing to cheaper Chinese labor and factories. Indeed, there are frictions concerning intellectual property breaches as Chinese corporations rapidly catch up to the technological prowess of South Korean competitors. The dream of South Korean conglomerates securing large market shares in China is possibly over because lower-cost Chinese rivals have already captured the market, and Chinese industrial champions are now going after the market shares of Samsung, Hyundai, and Kia abroad.

South Koreans were uncertain about the US "Strategic Approach to the PRC" (National Security Council 2020) and initiatives that put pressure on Seoul to reduce trade reliance on, and supply chain interdependence with, China. South Korean companies were concerned about implementation of the US Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) Act of 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and export controls and other onshoring measures aimed at boosting domestic production (Luck, Murphy and Lim 2025). The informal "Chip

4 alliance" among South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the US aims to ensure the stability and resilience of semiconductor supply chains, but Seoul remains cautious about disrupting trade links with China.

Even before Trump's tariffs, US-South Korea bilateral relations had to cope with tensions between economic resilience policies and protectionism. Especially in light of pandemic disruptions and cases of Chinese economic coercion, the goal of increasing resilience by strengthening supply chain networks took on greater urgency. Rather than decoupling from China, many countries are seeking to de-risk and diversify their supply chains. American experts argue the US has been promoting multilateral cooperation rather than containing China (Green 2012), but that during the Moon administration South Korea was abstaining from multilateral efforts with the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Scholars also observed that Seoul's "strategic ambiguity policy" gave it less, not more, leverage with China (S.H. Lee 2021). The US-South Korea security alliance, however, has long been complemented by economic and technological interdependence, and such efforts are not explicitly anti-China but rather aimed at reducing vulnerabilities to economic coercion and supply chain disruption, as seen in the South Korean decision to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). As the Trump administration has turned away from free trade, South Korea may have a growing interest in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to continue regional economic architecture-building.

US and South Korean regional strategies remain mostly aligned. In May 2022, Biden hosted Southeast Asian heads of state at the White House, met South Korea's new president Yoon in Seoul, visited Tokyo for a Quad summit with the leaders of Japan, Australia, and India, and launched IPEF. The May 2022 Yoon-Biden summit was the earliest meeting for a newly elected South Korean leader, also notable for the US president traveling before hosting in Washington and making Seoul the first stop in Asia. Many Biden-Yoon policies remain on the books in both countries, despite Trump and Lee's different diplomatic styles and political priorities. Lee continues to prioritize the alliance, and to

the surprise of his critics, chose to expand cooperation with Tokyo while being cautious about diplomatic gestures toward Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing.

China has not yet given up all its economic coercive measures against South Korea regarding the USFK Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense deployment (Wong, Easley, and Tang 2023). When the US and South Korea decided to deploy THAAD in 2016–17 to counter North Korean missiles, China voiced concern over the radar's ability to peer into its territory. China's subsequent economic pressure against Korean businesses and industries imposed costs of over $20 billion (Sutter and Limaye 2020). However, while Seoul struggled through the THAAD dispute, Washington did not take economic measures to support Seoul, leaving many South Korean experts uncertain of US assistance in the event of future coercion by Beijing. Such abandonment fears can undermine alliance cooperation, especially as China and North Korea seek to drive wedges between the US and its partners.

From a strategic standpoint, it is worth noting that Beijing also incurred damage from the THAAD dispute by harming its diplomatic ties with Seoul and thereby further encouraging US-South Korea security cooperation (Ernst 2021). Arguably, Beijing's economic coercion failed because Seoul refused to cave in to pressure (Wong, Easley, and Tang 2023). China, however, still disrespected and punished South Korea for the THAAD dispute, for example by stymieing Korean pop-culture exports in China or cold-shouldering South Korea's diplomats for years, including pausing the South Korea-China Vice Foreign Ministerial Strategic Dialogue (Cheng 2018). In November 2022, Xi held a summit with Yoon on the sidelines of the G20 after securing a norm-busting third term at the Communist Party Congress, but Beijing remained cool on cooperating with Seoul. Some Chinese scholars argued South Korea should keep its "choice avoidance" strategy, and the *Global Times* went as far as saying that stability for South Korea requires China's cooperation "if Seoul does not want to end up like

Ukraine" (Lee 2022). The Yoon administration, however, stated it was not bound by the Moon administration's "Three Nos" policy—no additional THAAD batteries, no Asia-wide missile defense network, and no trilateral alliance with Japan—indicating a shift away from "strategic ambiguity" toward greater clarity on the US-China rivalry (Gong 2022).

Nonetheless, Seoul's economic and security dilemma remains (J.B. Lee 2021), and South Korea is often hesitant to join multilateral mechanisms with other democracies out of fear of offending China. Yet it is in Seoul's interest not to opt out of the coalitional diplomacy among democracies since it would be more difficult to deal with Beijing alone (Stokes and Fitt 2023; Richey and Ohn 2024). While China's role on the Korean Peninsula is marked with Sinocentric ambitions (Rozman 2021), multilateral efforts are crucial for strengthening the normative environment and cultivating international support for Seoul. It may thus be helpful for the US-South Korea alliance to pursue regional and global objectives that increase Seoul's alignment with other democratic partners (Harris and Lee 2021).

Beijing is engaged in increasingly assertive behavior regarding its territorial claims. China has built up and militarized islands in the South China Sea, regularly sends air and maritime vessels to contest Japan's control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and conducts ever more provocative military flights and drills around Taiwan. While these gray-zone tactics are at the forefront of US concerns when it comes to regional security in Asia, Seoul faces similar challenges, as Beijing has built steel structures supposedly for aquaculture in the overlapping PRC and ROK Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Yellow Sea.

During his administration, Yoon asserted that, like North Korea, Taiwan is a global issue (Kim, Park, and Shin 2023). Yoon said that Seoul will clearly be on the US side, but if China attacks Taiwan, there will likely be regional conflict with both China and North Korea (KBS World 2022). Washington thus needs to work closely with its partners on contingency planning. Lee Jae-myung has since implied that South Korea will stay out of a cross-Strait contingency, famously stating before

becoming president that he would say "*xie xie*" to both China and Taiwan without taking sides. While this may seem like a pragmatic option to many in Seoul, to some in Washington (like Undersecretary of Defense Elbridge Colby), South Korea's unwillingness to support the US could be an alliance-breaker.

The 2021 US-Japan joint leaders' statement explicitly mentioned the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, which elicited objections from the Chinese embassy in Washington (Brunnstrom et al. 2021). On the other hand, the 2021 US-South Korea joint statement (ROK MOFA 2021) focused on regional stability in more general terms even though it did mention Taiwan for the first time. A few days after the summit, however, South Korean officials made clarifying remarks (Kim 2021a) in an effort to assuage Beijing. While the 2022 Biden-Yoon joint statement outlined areas of US-South Korea functional cooperation in detail and identified human rights as a foreign policy priority, it did not mention China by name (White House 2022). Biden clearly wanted democracies to do more together, but Asia includes a wide range of governance systems, and American soft power for promoting values is diminished by political divisions at home and reduced support for international development and institutions.

To cope with that regional diplomatic landscape, Seoul actively pursued deeper cooperation with ASEAN under the Moon administration's "New Southern Policy" and Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Moon administration's efforts resulted in ASEAN-ROK dialogue on environment and climate change, as well as boosting South Korean investment in Southeast Asia and India by 73% (Kim 2022). In 2024, the ASEAN-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) further upgraded multilateral ties (ASEAN 2024). A Plan of Action that outlines goals of the ASEAN-ROK CSP for 2026–2030 includes freedom of navigation and overflight, a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, and increased trade and investment (ASEAN 2025). However, Seoul's diplomacy with South and Southeast Asia tends to avoid direct mention of shared concerns

about China in terms of security or forms of governance.

The Yoon administration was vocal about North Korean human rights (ROK MOU 2024), but less so about human rights in the PRC. Seoul's restraint arguably allowed it to host a long-delayed China-Japan-Korea (CJK) summit, but it is unclear whether South Korea will be able to leverage further CJK trilateral cooperation following the Joint Declaration released in May 2024 (ROK MOFA 2024). Meanwhile, Beijing and Pyongyang are identifying the US as a common threat and presenting a united front against US military activities in the region, specifically US-South Korean combined exercises (Ng 2021). China and North Korea might also coordinate their provocations against Taiwan and South Korea (Cho and Mastro 2022). In addition, PRC-Russia combined exercises entered South Korea's air defense identification zone (KADIZ) multiple times without notice, including violation of airspace near Dokdo.

Another important regional issue is Beijing's economic leverage over Pyongyang. In early 2017, China's exports to North Korea increased despite a drop in North Korea's exports to China after new United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. Beijing and Moscow continue to support Pyongyang's bypassing of sanctions, such as by vetoing a UNSC resolution that would have imposed further sanctions in 2022. China also still accounted for over 90% of North Korea's official total trade in 2023 and 2024 (Sokolin 2025). Meanwhile, trade with Russia has increased in violation of sanctions and without transparent statistics, giving Pyongyang all the less incentive to accept South Korean overtures or take steps toward denuclearization.

Pursuing North Korea's denuclearization is further complicated by China's tendency to exploit issue linkage in its foreign policy, including use of the North Korea issue as leverage against broader US regional agendas (Hwang 2022). At best, China's concepts of stability and influence lead it to provide material support for North Korea despite its interest in North Korean denuclearization. At worst, China is propping up one of the world's most human rights abusing regimes, enabling an

international security threat, and getting in the way of peaceful integration on the Korean Peninsula.

This leads to the third part of the China challenge concerning the rules-based and values-preserving order. Beijing's human rights violations include technologically sophisticated limitations on political expression and social organization, suppression of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, persecution of Uighurs in Xinjiang, forced cultural assimilation in Tibet, and crackdowns on actors who criticize Xi or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since the CCP is itself hostile to democratic values, there is little expectation that Beijing will deal with North Korea with human rights in mind. From Seoul's perspective, rules and standards are needed for delivering humanitarian assistance, strengthening inter-Korean engagement, and encouraging people-to-people exchanges. China, however, does not demand such standards and abstains from criticizing Pyongyang's political institutions and human rights violations (US Department of State 2020). This makes it difficult for any political actor to incentivize North Korean policy improvements in a process of engagement, much less hold the Kim regime accountable.

China's growing and often controversial international role affects other countries' domestic politics in ways that can complicate cooperation, and the ROK is no exception. South Korea's public opinion of China has soured over numerous spats between South Korean and Chinese netizens as well as Seoul's heightened threat perception of Beijing (The Economist 2021). According to the Pew Research Center, by 2020 75% of South Koreans held negative views of China, which was more than double the 37% in 2015 (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2020), demonstrating the effects of Beijing's THAAD-related economic coercion. In a 2021 survey, South Koreans gave China a mean score of 3.1 on a 0–10 scale (0 being least favorable and 10 most favorable) while Japan received 3.2 and North Korea 2.8 (Friedhoff 2021). Moreover, while South Koreans currently perceive North Korea as the main threat to their national security, studies reflect an opinion that Pyongyang will become

a lesser threat in 10 years, to be surpassed by China (Dalton, Friedhoff, and Kim 2022). In one survey conducted in 2025, South Korea was the only country where the share of adults with a favorable view of China dropped significantly compared to 2024, from 25% to 19% (Silver et al. 2025). Another 2025 survey put unfavorable attitudes toward China at 80% among respondents in their 20s, suggesting such perceptions may persist in the next generation (D.R. Lee 2025). Unfavorable views of China are prevalent among Koreans in their 20s and 30s as they are rethinking Beijing's role in the world (Shin, Gordon, and Kim 2022). Many in the region acknowledge the increasing economic and geopolitical power of the PRC but do not see Beijing as a responsible or trustworthy partner (ISEAS 2025), with most South Koreans (90.8%) seeing China as "the least trusted country" (Yoo, Jung, and Park 2022).

Anti-China sentiment in South Korea gave Yoon room to stand up to Beijing, despite China's economic importance. Yoon claimed that the Moon government pursued policies "skewed toward China, but most South Korean people, especially younger ones, do not like China" (Yoo, Jung, and Park 2022). Yoon perhaps attempted to stay popular on foreign policy because he faced severe domestic political challenges; his electoral victory was razor-thin, and the opposition continued to strengthen its control over the National Assembly. The People Power Party (PPP) proposed legislation to curtail Chinese residents' voting rights in local elections (Kang 2023), reflecting a growing suspicion toward and politicization of China, as Korean politicians attacked each other for being soft on Beijing. Yoon's martial law attempt was in part justified by himself and his supporters by claiming election meddling and espionage by North Korea and China. Such conspiracy theories were popular in far-right YouTubers' content, which Yoon was accused of consuming (Choe 2025).

Amidst domestic political drama, the war in Ukraine was a wake-up call of threats to international order (Richey and Easley 2022). While not a formal trilateral alliance, China and North Korea are clearly supporting Russia (Easley 2025a). It is not an option for South Korea

to seek neutrality in the US-China competition, not only because it relies on the US alliance for security but also because its economy relies on the international order. It is also not possible for Seoul to stay out of a Taiwan conflict, because Beijing complicates Seoul's ability to deal with Pyongyang and the kind of China that invades Taiwan is not the kind of China that is going to help South Korea on North Korea. "Getting Asia right" is not a question of containing China, but rather a matter of upholding a rules-based international order (Kang 2022).

A More Strategic Alliance

During Lee Jae-myung's August 2025 visit to Washington, he reaffirmed South Korea's approach to diplomacy as pragmatic and driven by national interests. He emphasized the importance of the US-South Korea alliance and said he is committed to opening a new chapter for the alliance based on mutual trust, prosperity, and advanced technology. Lee mentioned that South Korea is the largest greenfield investor in the US and suggested that South Korean firms can bring a "renaissance" to the American shipbuilding industry. He also expected further cooperation with Washington on energy and critical minerals. He pledged to increase South Korea's defense budget, and disavowed the old idea of relying on the US for security while relying on China economically. Lee said that given the level of confrontation between the liberal democratic camp and the countries led by China, as well as the reorganization of supply chains, South Korea cannot help but choose the United States (CSIS 2025).

On inter-Korean relations, Lee highlighted South Korea's enduring commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and promised to engage Pyongyang while firmly responding to provocations. Lee stated that he and Trump had agreed to work closely to establish peace and achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, although no joint statement was published after the August 2025 summit with such

language. During the session in front of reporters, Trump exhibited a preoccupation with Kim Jong-un, arguably resulting in an unproductive focus on personal diplomacy at the expense of addressing North Korean denuclearization and coordinating policies toward China.

Trump's aggressive tariff threats, part of a reshaping of American trading relationships with allies and rivals alike, have distracted policymakers from managing alliances and addressing geopolitical rivalries. South Korea negotiated down the rates of Trump's threatened tariffs. However, the promise of South Korean investments in US-based manufacturing—on the order of $350 billion—was complicated by an immigration enforcement incident. In September 2025, in the largest immigration raid since Trump's second inauguration, more than three hundred South Korean citizens helping construct an LG-Hyundai electric vehicle battery factory in Georgia were arrested. Although they returned to South Korea without formal deportation or being banned from re-entry, the incident damaged Korean public opinion and had a chilling effect on the business community (CRS 2025). Negotiating the new bilateral trade framework was further complicated by operationalizing the details of Trump's demands while Seoul sought flexibility on the scale and speed of investments and assurances regarding foreign exchange risks and regulatory continuity.

For Washington and Seoul to adapt their alliance to the fast-changing geopolitical and geoeconomic environment, policymakers need to be on the same page about China and North Korea. Implementing a shared strategic vision will involve greater analytical precision, deepening trilateral coordination with Japan, and expanding the scope of alliance cooperation to address pressing global challenges according to shared values and interests. By prioritizing the alliance, each side can also help mitigate the short-term errors or counterproductive policies of the other. For example, Seoul did not immediately retaliate against Trump's tariffs or respond nationalistically to the immigration raid in Georgia; instead, it pursued mutually beneficial investment projects and sought cooperation on visa policies. Many Americans then recognized that US immigration

policies need to be updated to support economic policies, which should dovetail with security strategies, including the alliance with South Korea (Sherman 2025).

To strengthen their alliance, the US and South Korea need more coherent approaches toward China. The Biden administration's China strategy could be summed up as "invest, align, compete" (Asia Society Policy Institute 2022), whereas the Trump administration has pursued tariffs, selective decoupling, and negotiation, while pressuring allies economically at the risk of eroding support geopolitically. The Yoon administration's Indo-Pacific strategy stated that "with China, a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region, we will nurture a sounder and more mature relationship as we pursue shared interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity, guided by international norms and rules" (ROK MOFA 2022b). But Beijing still partially retained its post-THAAD economic coercive measures, grey zone tactics in the Yellow Sea, and diplomatic cold shoulder toward Seoul.

Upon taking office, the Lee administration changed ROK foreign policy less than expected (Easley 2025b), maintaining a focus on mutual respect and reciprocity, but perhaps emphasizing the pragmatic pursuit of interests over being vocal about international norms and rules. By potentially bringing together Trump and Xi, the autumn 2025 APEC summit in Gyeongju provides Lee an opportunity to turn the corner with Beijing without deprioritizing the alliance with Washington. Staying clear-eyed about China means not scapegoating or exaggerating the threat, while not underestimating Beijing's capabilities and intentions. It makes sense to seek partners in Beijing on stability and denuclearization, but the US-South Korea alliance should have no illusions about the Chinese Communist Party's self-interest in maintaining division on the Korean Peninsula and trying to weaken the US in the region (Mastro 2021). To improve leverage over North Korea, it is essential to prevent China from short-circuiting sanctions, inter-Korean engagement, and US-ROK-Japan cooperation.

The US and South Korea could conduct a strategic review of their alliance, hold detailed conversations on possibilities and types of economic assistance for North Korea, and coordinate incentives and demands (KEIA 2021). While continuing to maintain the capabilities and conduct the defense exercises necessary for deterrence, the allies also need to strengthen combined responses for emerging threats. Seoul and Washington recognize dangers posed not only by North Korean reconnaissance drones but also by armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and naval drones that Pyongyang claims to be arming with tactical nuclear weapons (Van Diepen 2023). The Kim regime's drone capabilities are no longer aspirational bluster after integrating technology and warfighting experience acquired from Russia's war against Ukraine. The US-ROK alliance is also far from adequately addressing cyber threats, despite mounting evidence of North Korean and Chinese hacking operations against South Korean government platforms and the severe breach of US telecommunications networks during the "Salt Typhoon" attacks (Rashid 2025; Neuberger 2025).

It is crucial to recognize that the future of South Korea's military transformation is regional, not just North Korea-focused. While South Korean officials say the government and military are preparing to deal with China, including air and sea incursions, they are careful not to talk about it in public. For clarity in regional strategies, the alliance should adopt a national security concept (Dohner et al. 2021) that integrates their various partnerships for protection against assertive Chinese influence (Brooks and Leem 2021). This includes pursuing joint R&D programs for AI, 6G, big data, maritime domain awareness, outer space, biotechnology, and quantum computing. What the US needs is an all-of-South Korea alliance, including on economic security and technology, expanding on how South Korea joined IPEF and is building semiconductor and battery plants in the United States. Seoul, meanwhile, needs reassurance from Washington that there will be no unilateral drawdown of US forces in South Korea and that a new bilateral economic framework will provide stability for trade, investment, and technological

cooperation.

Washington and Seoul's strategies in Asia would be severely handicapped without close cooperation with Tokyo. Under the framework of US integrated deterrence, the three countries can take a comprehensive, united approach to address various threats and challenges (US DOD 2022). But this is complicated by enduring irritants between Japan and South Korea (Easley 2022), such as wartime labor and other history issues (Arrington and Yeo 2019), the Dokdo islets claimed by Japan as Takeshima (Roehrig 2021), and the release of treated water from the tsunami-damaged Fukushima nuclear plant (Baek and Jarvis 2024). The Yoon administration understood the need to be sensitive about history without being hostage to it, and was willing to do more trilaterally with Tokyo.

Biden, Yoon, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met on the sidelines of the November 2022 ASEAN meetings in Cambodia and issued a joint statement agreeing to share real-time warning data of North Korea's missile launches (ROK MOFA 2022a). In addition to intelligence sharing, the three governments deepened security cooperation in terms of maritime exercises, anti-submarine capabilities, and contingency planning. In May 2023, the three leaders committed to advancing economic security cooperation and tightening sanctions against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, and reflected those goals in the Hiroshima G7 Communiqué (Japan MOFA 2023). The US, South Korea, and Japan were also encouraged to pursue more concerted trilateral cooperation on confronting Chinese economic coercion, reforming the World Trade Organization (WTO), and working together on infrastructure investment projects supported by the Development Finance Corporation (Fujisaki et al. 2021). The three governments looked to expand environmental and energy partnerships in the Mekong sub-region as part of their broader Indo-Pacific strategies (ROK MOFA 2022a). Finding a way forward on WTO reform and development cooperation might be made more difficult, but also more important, after Trump 2.0 tariffs and restructuring of USAID.

At a historic summit at Camp David in August 2023, the US, South Korea, and Japan expanded the trilateral partnership, based on the shared norms and values of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. The three leaders agreed on a commitment to consult, to regularize various trilateral meetings, and to coordinate responses to regional threats and provocations. The Camp David joint statement reaffirmed "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community," and called for a "peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues" (White House 2024). In July 2024, the three defense ministers signed a memorandum on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework (TSCF), further institutionalizing trilateral security cooperation (US DOD 2024). To continue enforcement of Security Council sanctions on North Korea after Russia vetoed the renewal of the UN panel of experts, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo supported the new Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team.

The Lee administration has notably continued cooperative relations with Japan as well as trilateral coordination. Lee met Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba within his first month in office at the June 2025 Canada G7 Summit, and, in a first for a South Korean leader, visited Tokyo before Washington to hold a standalone summit with Ishiba before meeting Trump. The 60th anniversary of normalized South Korea-Japan relations involved events with high-level political participation, celebrating people-to-people exchanges and functional cooperation. Trilateral foreign ministry meetings and military exchanges—including annual Trilateral Chiefs of Defense (Tri-CHOD) meetings—were held as planned. Trilateral multi-domain defense exercises continued as well, with the third round of the Freedom Edge drills in September 2025 (M. Lee 2025). Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo sought to advance defense interoperability, critical and emerging technologies, and a trilateral secretariat for institutionalizing and implementing cooperation.

Before leaving office, Ishiba visited Busan for a third summit with Lee, highlighting the endurance of "shuttle diplomacy" that was

reestablished under Kishida and Yoon. Ishiba's likely successor, Sanae Takaichi, may take more conservative positions on North Korea and history issues than Seoul would prefer, but US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation should remain a priority. A trilateral foreign ministers' joint statement said the three countries are committed to the "complete denuclearization of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (US Department of State 2025), rather than the more diplomatic phrasing of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. The statement reiterated previous trilateral language regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan, indicating the Lee administration's alignment with US Indo-Pacific priorities.

Instead of considering off-peninsula coordination as payment of alliance dues, South Korea-US cooperation can become more embedded in multilateral processes such as Quad working groups with Australia and India, AUKUS Pillar II technology cooperation, and other cross-regional security activities that could be less controversial for Seoul than alleged anti-China coalitions. In May 2022, South Korea joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, the second Asian country to do so after Japan. Yoon also attended NATO summits in June 2022, July 2023, and July 2024, along with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, to increase US allies' support of Ukraine in its resistance against Russian aggression. At their summit marking the 70th anniversary of the US-South Korea alliance, Biden and Yoon jointly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine (US Embassy in the ROK 2023). This demonstrated efforts to fit each country's Indo-Pacific approach into a larger strategy of international order defense, including by increasing cooperation through NATO-IP4 (NATO 2025).

In the process of enhancing its trade networks, South Korea can overcome its old strategic flexibility and entrapment concerns. For example, the angst in South Korea in early 2020 over a possible maritime security mission to the Strait of Hormuz demonstrated the sensitivities over alliance pressure and comparisons to the US-Japan alliance. The protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) for

trade and energy security is clearly in the interest of a middle power and major trading state. At issue is not only maritime security but also sanctions enforcement, as demonstrated by Iran's extortionary seizure of a South Korean tanker and its crew in early 2021 (Bozormehr and Song 2021). South Korea is now a significant enough player that it has to move its own geopolitical chess pieces, rather than just play for business opportunities under the top table of international politics. Freedom of navigation deserves a similar level of South Korean government attention as stability along the DMZ.

Conclusion

By getting on the same page about China, the US-South Korea alliance can align long-term priorities, despite different parties and presidents taking office in Washington and Seoul. Paths to more successful policy involve better alliance coordination, while paths to failure involve divergence between allies. Domestic political polarization is a potential threat to the alliance, as swings in leadership can produce "America first" policies or Korean nationalist autonomy campaigns (Snyder 2023). Basing strategy on a strong alliance foundation is not only prudent but also produces more effective and sustainable foreign policy, especially while including trilateral initiatives with Japan. Multilateral talks with Pyongyang are worth pursuing, but even when the Kim regime is willing to reengage, political leaders will be sorely disappointed with efforts to compartmentalize North Korea as an issue for cooperation with Beijing. Washington and Seoul should not wait for US-China relations to improve to deal with North Korea; they cannot allow national interests to be hostage to getting along with Beijing. The US and South Korea must instead strategically upgrade their alliance beyond the peninsula in order to "get Asia right" and "go together" in the Indo-Pacific.

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