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The U.S.-South Korea Alliance at an Inflection Point: What Should South Korea Do to Prepare?

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KIM, Ellen

Senior Fellow and Director of Academic Affairs at Korea Economic Institute of America

Dr. Ellen Kim is Senior Fellow and Director of Academic Affairs at KEI. Her research focuses on U.S.-Korea relations, North Korea, U.S.-China strategic competition, economic coercion, and critical minerals.

The U.S.-South Korea alliance is entering a period of significant transformation. For decades, its central purpose was to deter North Korean aggression and prevent another war on the Korean Peninsula. That mission remains essential, but the alliance now operates in a different strategic environment shaped by U.S.-China competition, Russia–North Korea military cooperation, new economic security challenges, emerging technologies, supply chain vulnerabilities, and growing tensions across the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, while U.S. strategic interests and expectations of South Korea are growing and U.S. officials are emphasizing greater reciprocity within the alliance, North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats have become increasingly more direct and multidimensional. The most important question, therefore, is how the U.S.-South Korea alliance should be redesigned in a rapidly changing security environment to strengthen South Korea’s security, reinforce alliance cohesion, and contribute to regional peace and stability.

North Korea’s Threat Is Growing While the Alliance’s Role Is Expanding

The reality facing the U.S.-South Korea alliance is that military risks on the Korean Peninsula have not diminished. North Korea has made nuclear weapons central to its national security strategy and continues to expand its nuclear arsenal and advanced missile capabilities. Its military cooperation with Russia adds a new

dimension; through the war in Ukraine, Pyongyang has gained exposure to modern warfare and accumulated operational experience and military technology related to drone warfare. It has supplied Russia with short-range ballistic missiles and large quantities of artillery ammunition while simultaneously seeking to improve the performance of its own missile systems. In short, North Korea is likely to continue strengthening its asymmetric nuclear capabilities on the Korean Peninsula, while its experiences in Ukraine increase the likelihood of limited military provocations against South Korea, including drone incursions and cyberattacks.

Meanwhile, U.S. national security strategy has broader priorities beyond the peninsula. The 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) places the U.S. mainland and the Western Hemisphere first, identifies deterring China as the key challenge in the Indo-Pacific, and calls on allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defense. South Korea is also viewed not simply as a traditional ally receiving U.S. protection but as a key partner capable of supporting U.S. strategy through its military capabilities and cooperation in defense industry, shipbuilding, semiconductors, and artificial intelligence.

The problem, however, is that the demand for deterrence against North Korea is growing even as U.S. strategic resources and attention are being diverted from the Indo-Pacific to other regions due to the wars in Ukraine and Iran. This does not necessarily mean the weakening of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. However, if Seoul assumes greater responsibility for peninsular defense, the role of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) expands to include regional missions, and the structure of the combined defense posture is adjusted all at the same time, these changes—even if they are individually reasonable—could together create unintended security gaps.

Alliance Modernization Cannot Become a Transfer of Risk

A central challenge for the U.S.-South Korea alliance will be how to manage the various changes taking place under the banner of “alliance modernization” in an integrated manner. The transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) concerns expanding the South Korean military’s capabilities and giving it the responsibility to lead the U.S.-South Korea combined force in defending the Korean Peninsula. Changes to the role of USFK are tied to the broader U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Diplomacy with North Korea concerns how to constrain and deter North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. These may appear to be separate policy areas, but maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula and across the Indo-Pacific region requires all three pillars to work together smoothly, like interlocking gears.

However, recent reductions in the duration and scale of U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises in an effort to resume dialogue with North Korea raise questions about whether these three pillars will be able to operate seamlessly. Amid growing concerns that South Korea could be sidelined in future U.S.-North Korea negotiations, questions about reciprocity within the alliance—as well as the longstanding alliance dilemmas of entrapment and abandonment—have also resurfaced. Moreover, all these developments raise a fundamental question about whether Seoul and Washington share the same objectives and strategic direction as they pursue alliance modernization.

Alliance modernization, therefore, cannot be assessed by examining each policy initiative in isolation. Seoul and Washington need a joint process to evaluate how the expansion of South Korea's defense responsibilities on the Korean Peninsula, changes in the U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific, and negotiations with North Korea could interact and collectively influence the overall deterrence posture on the Korean Peninsula. Even if each initiative is individually pursued in a sound manner, the two allies must carefully examine whether their cumulative effect when pursued simultaneously could weaken alliance deterrence.

In particular, it is important to understand that reducing North Korea's threat to the U.S. homeland is not the same as reducing its threat to South Korea. Whatever form future U.S.-North Korea negotiations might take, they must not produce an outcome that decreases risks to the United States while keeping South Korea's risks unchanged—or even increasing them. Just as stability on the Korean Peninsula is essential to regional stability, the latter is inseparable from the former as well. The success of U.S.-South Korea alliance modernization will ultimately depend on whether and how these changes can be carefully coordinated within a broader strategic framework that strengthens the security of both allies simultaneously.

Extended deterrence should be viewed through the same lens. At the sixth meeting of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) in June 2026, the United States and South Korea agreed to continue advancing bilateral cooperation in nuclear crisis consultation, intelligence sharing, conventional-nuclear integration, exercises, and strategic messaging. This institutional mechanism is important, but the credibility of extended deterrence cannot be guaranteed by the consultative mechanism alone; it should also be supported by the command-and-control system, military readiness, regular exercises, and demonstrations of political resolve that can convince North Korea that the United States and South Korea will respond quickly and consistently to any provocations.

Redesigning the U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Division of Roles and Strategic Reciprocity

The next step for the U.S.-South Korea alliance is to focus on adjusting roles and priorities to the changing security environment while ensuring that there are no gaps between them. South Korea should assume greater responsibilities for peninsular defense, while the United States must provide South Korea with capabilities that South Korea cannot easily replace, such as nuclear deterrence, intelligence, space, and cyber.

At the same time, the alliance should evolve beyond a military partnership into a more interdependent relationship that combines the two countries' technologies and industrial capacities in semiconductors, AI, shipbuilding, and defense production. South Korea is no longer a junior partner that solely depends on the United States for security; it has become a strong partner with strategic assets essential to the United States.

This same realism should guide North Korea policy. The shared objective should be to focus on changing Pyongyang's strategic calculus, rather than simply pursuing dialogue for its own sake. A combination of credible deterrence, pressure, and diplomatic incentives should be employed to create meaningful incentives for North Korea to return to negotiations.

Ultimately, the future success of the U.S.-South Korea alliance will depend less on how broadly its scope expands, but more on whether it can remain credible in deterring against North Korea, become more reciprocal in technology and industry cooperation, and become more pragmatic in managing the differences of interest between the two allies.

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