

Transfer of wartime operational control authority (OPCON) between South Korea and US

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1. Summary

The transfer of operational control (OPCON) is of critical significance for the future growth of the Republic of Korea-United States alliance. The transfer of Wartime Operational Control (OPCON) will represent the Republic of Korea's (ROK) goal of self-sufficient national defense, which has been sought since the early 1970s. The establishment of a ROK-led command structure will also signify the evolutionary shift of the ROK–US alliance. The Republic of Korea will be able to take the lead in the ROK–U.S. combined defense system due to its overwhelming national power over North Korea, which is shown by possessing by its one of the world's greatest economies, a mature democracy, enhanced international status, national self-respect, and world-class military forces.¹

The transfer of wartime OPCON does not just include the transfer of operational control (OPCON) power from one party to another. It necessitates the dismantling of the Combined Forces Command (CFC), which has played a pivotal role in the deterrence and victory of war on the Korean Peninsula. If the CFC is disbanded, the ROK and US troops should not fight together but rather in parallel in the event of conflict. Nonetheless, even under a parallel command arrangement, they would strive to fight together in a coordinated manner, particularly at the level of operations.

The ROK Defense Minister and U.S. Secretary of Defense signed a resolution between the U.S. and the ROK regarding the guiding principles. According to the Combined Defense Guideline, the Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC) will be commanded by a four-star ROK general, with a four-star U.S. general serving as its deputy. Although the allies agreed on the phases for advancing toward the OPCON transfer, they did not agree on a precise timeline or target year. The decision to transfer wartime OPCON to South Korea will be made only after a three-stage evaluation and the fulfillment of necessary requirements. The United States is likewise committed to the planned return of operational control of South Korean troops during conflict to Seoul, but it will take time to establish the necessary circumstances. Before to transitioning the wartime OPCON to Future Combined Forces Command, all requirements outlined in the mutually agreed-upon Conditions Based OPCON Transition Plan (COTP) must be satisfied (F-CFC). The transformation of OPCON is a periodic job for a better national

¹ The Transfer of Wartime Operational Control in Korea: History, Risks and Tasks from a Military Perspective. (2010). The Korean Journal of International Studies. <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2010.12.8.2.327>

defense and stronger unified defense system, hence the OPCON transition will be dependent on conditions rather than a specific timeframe.²

They believe that timing is crucial. Knowing your opponent's timing and, more importantly, capitalizing on it when your opponent least expects it might be crucial to achieving success. When it comes to shedding light on the second- and third-order ramifications of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) on the Korean Peninsula, the timing is evidently essential for both political and military sides.³

In this work, I will use a qualitative case study approach as grounded research, to evaluate various but significant components of the issue in order to determine a timeframe within which this shift may occur based on the studied evidences. These factors will cover the motivations and objectives of the various political players in South Korea. In addition, I will examine the requirements that South Korea must meet in order to complete the transformation. By doing so, I am also able to incorporate the now changing and potential future relationship with the United States, the other major player influencing the path of this process. Lastly, I am able to assess the objectives of other parties, especially North Korea and China. These are the primary agents of change, and they may affect the conclusion of the transfer of wartime operational responsibility between the United States and South Korea. So, the issue is not if the transition is possible, but rather when it can occur if all prerequisites are met.⁴

2. Introduction

From the outset of the alliance, U.S. planners envisioned the command structure as a way to institutionalize a patron-client relationship with its smaller South Korean partner, including almost unilateral U.S. operational control (OPCON) over the ROK military. Yet, this was not meant to be permanent. Both U.S. and ROK officials saw the command architecture as evolving along a certain path. What started as a unilateral, U.S.-led structure developed into a bilateral, joint architecture, with the ROK finally assuming charge of its own defense.

The United States has had operational control of the ROK military for practically the whole of South Korea's existence as a sovereign nation. The agreement originated with the U.S. Army

² Kim S. (2020). U.S.–South Korea OPCON Transition: The Element of Timing. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/04/us-south-korea-opcon-transition-the-element-of-timing.html>

³ Guest Blogger. (2020b). U.S.-ROK OPCON Transition: The Element of Timing. Asia Unbound. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-rok-opcon-transition-element-timing>

⁴ Guest Blogger. (2020a). Military Considerations for OPCON Transfer on the Korean Peninsula. Asia Unbound. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/military-considerations-opcon-transfer-korean-peninsula>

Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945-48). General John R. Hodge, commander-in-chief of USAMGIK, and ROK President Rhee Syngman signed an executive agreement allowing South Korea to progressively acquire leadership of its own security forces shortly after the ROK was created on August 15, 1948. Two years later, on July 14, 1950, during the early stages of the Korean War, Rhee signed the Taejon Agreement, transferring leadership of all ROK military forces to General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of UN forces, for the duration of hostilities. As a prerequisite for the ratification of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty and the maintenance of U.S. troops in South Korea, Rhee approved the "Agreed Minute" to the treaty on November 17, 1954. It said ROK troops would operate under the operational control of the United Nations Command (UNC) while that command is responsible for the Republic of Korea's defense, unless after consultation it is determined that a change would best serve both mutual and individual interests.⁵

During the 1970s, the UN Command's (UNC) legal legitimacy and legality for protecting South Korea had grown more uncertain. In November 1978, the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) was founded as an independent body from the UNC. As the UNC continued to oversee the Armistice Agreement, the CFC and U.S.-ROK alliance assumed primary responsibility for the protection of South Korea. Formation of the CFC represented a continuous trend of deeper integration between the U.S. and ROK armies; a process fueled by both the U.S. desire to pass more off more of the defense responsibility to its partner as well as developments in South Korea's military capabilities.

Throughout the system, the United States remained dominant among relative equals. The vast bulk of ROK and American troops were put under the armistice as well as the future wartime OPCON of the CFC, led by the U.S. commander. This meant that ROK troops were distinct from CFC forces during peacetime, and Seoul accepted full responsibility for their training, maintenance, and equipping. South Korean troops would be put under CFC OPCON only upon the onset of war and the assent of the ROK president. The ROK president would relinquish operational authority of ROK troops to the CFC but not leadership. His command power to issue orders covering all element of military operations and administration, as well as his chain of command down to the lowest ROK unit commander, would remain intact. In contrast, operational control is derived from and hence a subset of command authority. It consists of transferring the power to assign duties to ROK troops already deployed by the ROK president

⁵ Work C. (2017). The Long History of South Korea's OPCON Debate. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/the-long-history-of-south-koreas-opcon-debate/>

and led by ROK officers to the CFC for a particular duration and purpose. Yet, the U.S. commander cannot modify the purpose of or deploy ROK soldiers beyond the South Korean president's designated area of authority. Neither can he split ROK units, alter their internal structure, distribute their supplies, administer discipline, or grant promotions.⁶

For progressives in the Republic of Korea, the concern extends beyond the specifics of the command architecture to what it symbolizes. For them, it represents South Korea's extreme reliance on the United States and its vulnerability to foreign pressures. Simply expressed, like the former president of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, and others, it is a question of sovereignty. They remain partially sovereign until they recover complete OPCON. This viewpoint is frequently condemned by both U.S. authorities and conservative South Koreans, yet it represents living historical memory and justifiable worries about current tendencies.⁷

With the conclusion of the Cold War, the last phase of this development began. At the time, U.S. policy called for the United States to transition from a leading to a supporting position within the alliance. Since then, however, the development has been plagued by a number of obstacles, including: the politically motivated split of OPCON into peacetime or armistice OPCON and wartime OPCON; conceptual swings from a combined command to a parallel command and then back to a combined command structure; and numerous delays in the process caused by electoral politics, among others. The ROK took over peacetime or armistice OPCON of its military in 1994, but the U.S. kept wartime OPCON inside a unified command architecture, despite the fact that the first North Korean nuclear crisis halted this process. In 2006, the allies formally decided to handover wartime OPCON to the ROK and construct a parallel command architecture consisting of two distinct, independent national commands: a lead ROK command and a supporting U.S. command. This problem reemerged in the mid-2000s. Nevertheless, a return of conservative political leadership in South Korea that was strongly opposed to OPCON transition, together with increasing U.S. worry about ceding authority in the face of a greater North Korean nuclear threat and China's steady rise to power, led to a change back to a joint arrangement and further postponement of OPCON transition from a fixed date to a conditions-based approach.

⁶ Work C. (2022). No More Delays: Why It's Time to Move Forward With Wartime OPCON Transition. <https://www.stimson.org/2022/no-more-delays-why-its-time-to-move-forward-with-wartime-opcon-transition/>

⁷ Bauer J.W. (2011). A Philosophical Case for OPCON transition on the Korean Peninsula. COMMENTARY, 1(60). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA536575.pdf>

Throughout the years, official agreements at the highest levels of the US and ROK governments, particularly the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, have defined the alliance's command architecture (MDT). The history and development of the US-ROK military command structure reveals the inherent push and pull at the core of the US-ROK partnership. Throughout time, the United States has urged the Republic of Korea to assume a more active role in its own defense and within the command structure of the alliance. Yet, U.S. officials have been as reluctant to cede excessive influence too early.

South Korean officials have actively pursued this goal because to their own developing capabilities, nationalism, and the necessity to hedge against a possible U.S. withdrawal. Despite their desire to achieve a greater degree of self-sufficiency and their occasional irritation with real and perceived U.S. restrictions on ROK agency, South Korean leaders have been hesitant to assume the lead role in the command structure too quickly or comprehensively, for fear of undermining the rationale for maintaining a U.S. presence and commitment.

This push-and-pull dynamic was visible in the foundation and growth of the alliance's command structure, and it persists to this day. Under the incoming conservative government of Yoon Suk-yeol, politics might likely intervene once again, given the present state of affairs. President Yoon has said that he wishes to accelerate the transfer of wartime OPCON, but that the safety of the people would be jeopardized if such a transfer weakens or erodes the joint defensive posture. This rhetoric is consistent with past conservative ROK governments that outwardly supported the OPCON transition but eventually threw doubt on it in order to delay its implementation.

By relocating the alliance's leadership to South Korea, the alliance would be better positioned to meet an expanding North Korean threat and a dynamic geopolitical environment marked by deteriorating US-China ties. Conducting an OPCON transition will need that Washington intensify alliance dialogue about the specifics of the U.S. extended deterrent commitment. The Yoon administration, like its predecessors, has demonstrated a keen interest in this matter. It would also need intensifying collaboration over what Seoul contributes to the equation of deterrence.

In addition, forging through with the OPCON transition would require Seoul to address its larger regional obligations in a much more tangible manner, including enhancing its relations with Tokyo and bolstering its collaboration with the UNC. In order to lead the alliance's

command structure on the peninsula, Seoul would have to take regional and multinational planning and operations far more seriously.

3. South Korean politics and the OPCON

Long-standing dispute has surrounded the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) to the South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Advocates of postponing the transfer emphasize that the transfer of wartime operational authority would result in the withdrawal of USFK and that South Korea lacks the capability to execute command independently. In addition, they have criticized the Roh Moo-hyun government for making a hasty choice that overlooked severe security realities by transferring wartime operational control.

Some conservatives believe the shift of wartime operational power began with the Roh administration's anti-American, self-reliant ideology and a populism dependent on nationalism. Former President Park Chung-hee was the first to address the question of wartime operational control, which he did in the late 1960s. The South Korean and American governments disagreed about how to respond to North Korea's commando attack on the South Korean presidential office, the Blue House, on January 21, 1968, and North Korea's seizure of the U.S. spy ship USS Pueblo two days later. This was due to the fact that the United States did not respond to the assault on the South Korean presidential office but resorted to DEFCON 2 in reaction to the capture of the USS Pueblo. Park requested a transfer of operational control to South Korea from the United States.⁸

Roh Tae-woo, the then-ruling liberal party's presidential candidate, reaffirmed the transfer of wartime operational responsibility as an official campaign commitment. The topic of transfer was discussed between South Korean and U.S. military officials, and on December 1, 1994, under the administration of Kim Young-sam, peacetime operational control was returned to South Korea. The Ministry of Defense devised a strategy in 1995 to press for the transfer of operational control during wartime by the year 2000.⁹

Conservatives assert that a wartime operational control transfer will result in a USFK reduction or withdrawal or would make it very difficult for the United States to deploy reinforcements during a possible war. Yet, the stationing of U.S. soldiers in South Korea is based on a bilateral

⁸ Work, C. (2014). South Korea: Dependence in the Age of OPCON. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/south-korea-dependence-in-the-age-of-opcon/>

⁹ Denney, S. (2014). South Korean Politics Drive OPCON Transfer. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/south-korean-politics-drive-opcon-transfer/>

mutual defense agreement and is unrelated to the transfer of wartime operational responsibility. Even if the transfer of wartime operational control is delayed, the strategic flexibility plan of the United States does not exclude the prospect of medium- to long-term reductions in U.S. soldier levels in South Korea. The conservative side in Korea wants the United States to consistently safeguard Korean security. In their opinion, South Korea should continue to depend on the United States' security guarantee in exchange for Seoul's growing contribution to the United States' international agenda. The most dependable tripwire to secure US participation in the case of an attack on South Korea, according to the conservatives. This school favors rigorous reciprocity and stresses the use of leverage such as food and fertilizer aid to remedy the negative conduct of the north. Conservatives feel that when North Korea does not agree with the direction in which the South attempts to steer it, a policy of planned neglect should be implemented since North Korea cannot exist without foreign help.¹⁰¹¹

The liberal or moderate progressive faction acknowledges that the ROK-U.S. alliance, as one of the world's most successful alliances, has contributed to South Korea's political and economic development. They expect the U.S. administration to take the lead in dismantling the Cold War structures that remain on the Korean peninsula, and they welcome a plan to initiate full-fledged diplomacy with the objective of a nuclear-weapon-free Korean peninsula and to negotiate diplomatic normalization in order to open a new chapter in Korean contemporary history. To expedite the creation of a peace settlement on the Korean peninsula and to ensure a more prosperous future for the ROK-U.S. alliance, liberals believe that wartime OPCON must be transferred on time. They believe that Korean wartime OPCON is a necessary requirement for the ROK to be recognized as a party directly involved in the 1950-1953 struggle with North Korea and, therefore, to be able to sign a peace agreement. Peace through strength and independent self-defense have been recurring themes in the liberal defense strategy of South Korea. In order to eliminate the public perception that they were soft on North Korea, South Korean liberals had political motivations for adopting a tough stance on national security. Even when liberal South Korean governments sought engagement with North Korea, they always backed up such efforts with a show of force designed to deter Pyongyang from conducting a disruptive military operation. The liberal presidents of South Korea have long maintained a

¹⁰ Kim T. (2010). The Korean Position on Alliance formation and the Change of Public Trust between Korea and the United States: The Cheonan Incident and the OPCON Issue. *International Journal of Korean Studies*, 14(2).

¹¹ Experts address misconceptions about OPCON transfer. (2010). https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/427466.html

dual-track strategy of inter-Korean dialogue and military modernization, and the OPCON transfer problem has always been peripheral to South Korea's weapons program.¹²

Conservatives and liberals in South Korea have vigorously contested the question of wartime operational control. Despite the fact that transferring it would not result in the evacuation of U.S. forces from South Korea or the end of the American security guarantee, conservatives in South Korea see America's continued possession of wartime OPCON as valuable insurance against U.S. desertion. In contrast, liberals in South Korea regard OPCON transfer as important to obtaining complete national sovereignty and authority over the nation's self-defense, despite the fact that the South Korean president may effectively reject US OPCON of Combined Forces Command. This is because the U.S. commander cannot take OPCON during warfare without the agreement of both the U.S. and South Korean presidents. Nevertheless, OPCON transfer would not restore South Korea's complete sovereignty in the sense used by liberal lawmakers. Even after the transfer of OPCON, the commander of the alliance's warfighting command would remain subordinate to both Washington and Seoul. Misperceptions and misconceptions among South Korean conservatives and liberals over the implications of the transfer of wartime OPCON have transformed this military matter into a political dispute.¹³

South Korea's capacity to develop a more comprehensive and nonpartisan national security strategy is significantly hampered by the escalation of recurring political division in 2022. In addition to emphasizing Korea's common ideals with other leading liberal democracies, President Yoon Suk-yeol has promoted a strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance as a fundamental component of his foreign and defense policy.¹⁴

The opposition Democratic Party, which maintains a majority in the National Assembly, has effectively rejected any new legislation submitted by the Yoon government. The Yoon administration confronts formidable obstacles. Since January 2022, North Korea has maintained its exceptional provocations, such as its ongoing ballistic missile testing. Pyongyang has established a new nuclear policy that insists North Korea is a nuclear weapons state regardless of whether or not the international world recognizes this. North Korea is intensifying

¹² Park, S. N. (2021). Why South Korea's Liberals Are Defense Hawks. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/22/south-korea-slbm-liberals-defense-hawks/>

¹³ Kim L. (2021). A Hawkish Dove? President Moon Jae-in and South Korea's Military Buildup. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/a-hawkish-dove-president-moon-jae-in-and-south-koreas-military-buildup/>

¹⁴ Park, J. (2022). The Election of Yoon Suk-yeol and Implications for the United States: U.S.-ROK Economic and Technology Cooperation. The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR). <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-election-of-yoon-suk-yeol-and-implications-for-the-united-states-u-s-rok-economic-cooperation/>

its nuclear weapons development, which necessitates a revamp of South Korea's national security system due to increasing vulnerabilities and the introduction of new incentives. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has undertaken a substantial military expansion in response to China's economic growth. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has increased tensions in Taiwan. And China is aiming to become East Asia's dominant military force.¹⁵

The level of political animosity between the country's political left and right has severely damaged the likelihood of any serious bipartisan settlement. If entrenched party politics is a major hurdle to meaningful national security reforms, then the profound ideological division over South Korea's approach toward the North is another significant reason.¹⁶ One of the most controversial and, in many ways, destructive consequences of South Korean democracy has been North Korea's policy swings. South Korea has had both conservative and progressive presidents since 1987, including Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993), Kim Young-sam (1993–1998), Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013), Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), Yoon Suk Yeol (2022–present) and progressive presidents, including Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), Roh Mu-hyun (2008–2013), and Moon Jae-in (2017–2022). It is no longer taboo to engage with the North. Beginning with Kim Dae-jung's meeting with then-North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in 2000, four inter-Korean summits have taught South Koreans the highs and lows of summitry. In 2018, Moon's three meetings with Kim Jong Un first charmed the South Korean people. The failure of Trump's meetings with Kim in Singapore in June 2018 and Hanoi in February 2019 lowered expectations for a fundamental breakthrough.

Earlier administrations performed military evaluations, such as the Roh administration, which initiated discussions with the United States to restore full operational authority over ROK forces in order to emphasize the need of a more independent defense posture. Defense Reform Plan 307 of the Lee administration emphasized on the ROK military's interoperability, particularly in the wake of the 2010 North Korean strikes.¹⁷ During the Park administration, the Republic of Korea codified its so-called three-axis system to protect against North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The Moon administration kept the system but occasionally referred to it by a different name. The Kill Chain, Korea Air and Missile Defense, and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation form the South Korean three-axis system. The three-axis

¹⁵ On the Horizon 2023 | Asia | Wilson Center. (2023). <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/horizon-2023-asia>

¹⁶ Yosuke O. (2023). Seoul intensifies crackdown on North Korea spy rings. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Seoul-intensifies-crackdown-on-North-Korea-spy-rings>

¹⁷ Rhee S. (2011). From Defense to Deterrence: The Core of Defense Reform Plan 307. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

package is intended to deter North Korean strikes as effectively as possible using South Korea's counteroffensive strike capabilities and missile defense. Importantly, South Korea continues to depend on U.S. extended deterrence in the face of North Korea's developing nuclear capability. The effectiveness of South Korea's non-nuclear forces, including its three-axis system, depends on a number of factors, such as the ROK's ability to produce and deploy a much larger number of key ballistic missiles, such as the Hyunmoo-4 and the Hyunmoo-5, enhanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance or ISR assets, especially a constellation of microsatellites, and sustained defense budgetary support. Faced with a nuclear-armed North Korea, the Yoon government renewed the three-axis idea and pledged to enhance it.¹⁸ The South Korean government stated in October 2022 that it will invest \$21 billion between 2023 and 2027 to improve its three-axis military system, with the funds being assigned to around ninety-three separate defense research and procurement projects.¹⁹

The formation of a Joint Strategic Command, which would integrate South Korea's counterstrike capabilities under the three services by 2024, is a significant milestone under the Yoon administration. A single command would comprise Hyunmoo surface-to-surface missiles, air defense batteries like as Patriots, ISR capabilities, and SLBMs, however specifics remain restricted. Press accounts indicate that the new command would also handle cyber warfare activities and, in time, space-based capabilities.²⁰ The Ministry of National Defense formed the Strategic Missile Command under the army and the Missile Defense Command under the air force towards the end of the Moon administration. As the ROK improves its ISR capabilities, the military thinks that, in conjunction with a stronger U.S.-ROK extended deterrence, South Korea will be capable of countering the complete spectrum of North Korean threats. Improving South Korea's strike capabilities enhances deterrence, but if North Korea conducts a seventh nuclear test soon as is widely anticipated, South Korea will need to reconsider the most effective means of preserving deterrence. A strong U.S.-ROK alliance remains the most effective deterrent, but if Trump returns to the White House or a president with similar worldviews is

¹⁸ Doyeong J. (2023). South Korea's Revitalized "Three-Axis" System. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-koreas-revitalized-three-axis-system>

¹⁹ South Korea to invest USD21 billion on 'three-axis' system. (2022). Janes.Com. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-to-invest-usd21-billion-on-three-axis-system>

²⁰ Lee, D. (2022). South Korea to create new command that would control strategic weapons. Defense News. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2022/07/11/south-korea-to-create-new-command-that-would-control-strategic-weapons/>

elected, alliance cohesiveness and the feasibility of U.S. extended deterrence will be called into doubt.²¹

Equally important is the right to lay a greater focus on reforming and enhancing the current national security system in South Korea. In addition to being a "global pivot state", strengthening the country's fundamental partnership with the United States is a cornerstone of Yoon's national security strategy.

4. South Korean military developments according to the OPCON transition plan conditions

4.1 OPCON transition plan conditions

The transfer was first discussed by the ROK government in 1987. The presidential candidate at the time, Roh Tae-woo, raised the issue as a campaign pledge. After that, the US and ROK held Security Consultative Meetings (SCMs) and summits to discuss the time and circumstances for the transfer. The decision about the transfer of OPCON was made on April 7, 2012, as a consequence of the Secretary of Defense conference between the United States and the Republic of Korea.²² Nevertheless, due to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s repeated provocations, including such as nuclear testing, ballistic missile launches, and the sinking of the South Korean Cheonan warship, both parties needed to reevaluate the date. Later, at the 42nd SCM (2010), both the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State authorized "Strategic Alliance 2015"²³, postponing the transfer of OPCON until December 2015, in order to prioritize the stability of security situations on the Korean Peninsula.²⁴

The 46th SCM in 2014 was a crucial turning point in the OPCON transition. The United States and the Republic of Korea changed their policy to use the "condition-based approach"²⁵ to decide on the transfer. After that, neither party specified the particular date of the transfer.

²¹ Written briefing on the concluding remarks by the President of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Defense (尹 대통령, 외교부·국방부 업무보고 마무리 발언 관련 서면 브리핑 > 브리핑 > 대통령실 뉴스룸 > 대한민국 대통령실). (2023, January 11). 대한민국 대통령실. <https://www.president.go.kr/newsroom/briefing/GvCftpuP>

²² DailyNK. (2018). The 39th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué. https://www.dailynk.com/english/?kboard_content_redirect=42

²³ Guest Blogger. (2010). U.S.-ROK Strategic Alliance 2015. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-rok-strategic-alliance-2015>

²⁴ U.S., South Korea may delay command transfer—Obama. (2014). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-korea-usa-defence-idUKBREA3O0RI20140425>

²⁵ The 46th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting. (2014). https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/46th_SCM_Joint_Communique.pdf

Instead, the transfer would be carried out based on the circumstances. After that, at the 47th SCM, the "Conditions-Based OPCON Transition Plan" (COTP) was accepted. As an alternative strategy document to "Strategic Alliance 2015," COTP specifies the requirements and processes for the transfer. COTP indicates the following circumstances: 1) military capabilities to lead allied defense; 2) comprehensive reaction capabilities of allies to DPRK nuclear and ballistic missile threats; and 3) a stable security environment on the Korean peninsula and adjacent regions for OPCON transfer.²⁶ The first criteria requires the ROK armed force to have enough military and operational capability. The second suggests that the capacity of the US-ROK alliance seeks to create inclusive response capabilities, including US nuclear deterrence, against military threats such as nuclear forces and ballistic missiles. The last issue is whether the peripheral security settings are adequate for OPCON transmission. To achieve these requirements, the ROK government and military have been strengthening national defense capabilities and doing verification work with the US side.

The Republic of Korea government had escalated OPCON transfer operations as part of Defense Reform 2.0, which sought to boost military capabilities.²⁷ Since his inauguration, the Moon government had been emphasizing "self-reliant defense" and implementing Defense Reform 2.0. It is essential that the ROK obtain the key capacity for the OPCON transfer as soon as possible, and that the ROK military restructure the command organization. Defense Reform 2.0 aimed to boost national security capabilities by developing a Korean missile defense system, enhancing the monitoring and reconnaissance system, and revitalizing military industries. According to such efforts, the ROK hopes to gain the capabilities needed to take charge at CFC. These acts have an impact on the growth in military spending. Since 2017, the Moon government has boosted military spending by 7% per year on average.²⁸

This new increased budget was created to allocate funds for improving military capabilities for the OPCON transfer and developing response capabilities for nuclear forces and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). As a result, it demonstrates that the ROK government has been steadily boosting military spending in order to satisfy the COTP conditions for the OPCON

²⁶ Asaki, A. (2021). *The Wartime OPCON Transfer Issues and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*. http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/briefing/pdf/2021/briefing_e202109.pdf

²⁷ Lee Y. (2021). The 2022-2026 Mid-term Defense Plan for Successful Accomplishment of Defense Reform 2.0 and Building a Digitalized Strong Military. 국방정책 해외소개서비스 - 영문, 240. <http://www.kida.re.kr/frt/board/frtPcrMBoardDetail.do?sidx=366&idx=&depth=4&searchCondition=&searchKeyword=&pageIndex=1&lang=kr>

²⁸ Hong, K. (2005). The Strategic Linkage Between the ROK's Defense Reform 2020 and Changing Security Environment. STRATEGIC STUDIES, 12(35), 7-24.

transfer. Moreover, as part of the "condition-based approach," the US and the ROK have been validating the verification process via joint exercises and simulated games. The following are the three stages of joint verification and assessment of the Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC) mission capability:

1. Initial Operational Capability (IOC): It verifies and analyzes the minimal military capabilities required to carry out important F-CFC activities. The IOC recognizes the ROKA's competence to execute wartime OPCON power under the command of a designated South Korean 4-star General. The initial accomplishment of the capacity to use successfully a weapon, piece of equipment, or system with recognized specified qualities that is manned or operated by a properly trained, equipped, and supported military unit or force.
2. Full Operational Capability (FOC): Inspects and assess sufficient military capabilities for F-CFC key tasks. The FOC evaluation is the second step of a three-phase study to determine if South Korea is prepared to command the combined forces of the allies during a conflict. FOC assesses the South Korean Commander's capacity to assume responsibility for and manage the joint defensive posture of USFK and ROKA.
3. Full Mission Capability (FMC) This stage assesses and analyzes appropriate military capabilities for carrying out all important F-CFC duties. FMC evaluates the ROKA's material conditions to ensure that it can execute in all of its probable missions.

The US and ROK confirmed the IOC procedure during the Joint Command Post Training in August 2019²⁹ and the Military Committee Meeting (MCM) in October 2019³⁰ among the three phases. The exercise was carried out for the first time, with the ROK Army general serving as CFC commander and the US Army general serving as vice commander at the Combined Command Post Training. The training and verification work was done by replicating circumstances in which the ROK commander might use OPCON. During the 51st SCM, the defense secretaries of both nations examined the MCM verification findings and decided to resume the FOC verification procedure in 2020. Unfortunately, because to the COVID-19

²⁹ Combined Command Post Training of S. Korea, US Under Way. (2019). http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=147347

³⁰ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Public Affairs. (2022). Readout of 47th Republic of Korea and United States Military Committee Meeting Between Cha. Joint Chiefs of Staff. <https://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/3194018/readout-of-47th-republic-of-korea-and-united-states-military-committee-meeting/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.jcs.mil%2FMedia%2FNews%2FNews-Display%2FArticle%2F3194018%2Freadout-of-47th-republic-of-korea-and-united-states-military-committee-meeting%2F>

pandemic, the joint exercise has been postponed and scaled down; hence, the second step is likely to be delayed. Additionally, if military provocations by the DPRK occur, they may have an influence on the verification effort. For these reasons, it is necessary to consider the second and third COTP requirements in addition to the first: military potential comprehensively.

4.2 South Korean military developments according to the OPCON transition plan conditions

Despite years of diplomatic and political work, North Korea continues to be a persistent and intractable danger. South Korea's military procurement projects continue today in direct reaction to this enduring security issue. South Korea has made significant financial investments over the course of the previous several decades in the research and development of new capabilities. These projects include those aiming to increase domestic production, promote collaboration with foreign governments, embrace new technology, and combat the expanding stockpile of weapons held by North Korea. In spite of President Moon's attempts to improve relations with North Korea, these efforts have persisted. South Korea is now increasing its military might to an adequate level in order to be able to defend itself against threats coming from any direction across all areas and operational domains. In addition, the Republic of Korea armed forces are keen to contribute to an alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States that is powerful, mutually complementary, and designed to improve deterrence and territory defense. Meanwhile, South Korea seeks to reinforce its role on the world scene by expanding its contributions to foreign deployments and out-of-area operations. This is part of South Korea's effort to strengthen its position on the international stage. It provides active support for global reactions against challenges to the rules and order of international relations.³¹ In South Korea the idea that the two objectives of national and international-oriented security are complementary has a lot of support. Considering the shifting nature of the threat landscape, South Korea's primary concern is strengthening its armed forces via the implementation of comprehensive defense reforms. Defense Reform 2.0 was initiated at the beginning of the Moon Jae-in administration to improve the defense reform plan approved by the previous government. This plan intends to make the Republic of Korea Armed Forces a more mobile and destructive force. Defense Reform 2.0 places a significant emphasis on training the army for future challenges.³² This is in contrast to earlier reforms, which placed a tighter focus on protecting

³¹ Pardo, R. P. (2022). South Korea as a “global pivotal state”: The role of partners.

³² Chun, I.-B. (2017). Korean defense reform: History and challenges. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/korean-defense-reform-history-and-challenges/>

against and discouraging potential attacks from North Korea. The strong relationship that the Republic of Korea has with the United States serves as an extra impetus for reform. Under the auspices of a Future Combined Command, Seoul's long-term goal is to assume leadership of combined ROK-US military operations. South Korea's capabilities to deter and respond to the threats posed by weapons of mass destruction are a primary focus of the force enhancement programs. These programs are designed to strengthen South Korea's capabilities in the following areas: strengthening its capabilities for situational awareness and ensuring that the Armed Forces are able to conduct rapid and decisive joint operations across all operational domains. Therefore, the efforts to transform the Armed Forces into a military structure that is centered on advanced science and technology will continue. These efforts include surveillance and reconnaissance systems that are based on artificial intelligence, hyper-connected intelligent command and control, stealth-based platforms, and combined manned and unmanned combat systems.

The first and most important premise of South Korea's defense strategy is to establish a strong posture against omni-directional security threats. These are dangers that may come from any direction and can occur in any location or domain.³³ This indicates that the Republic of Korea Armed Forces intend to use deterrence and swift and decisive response in the event that a provocation takes place, not just by North Korea but also by any other participant. South Korea's military wants to be able to respond more effectively to traditional and non-traditional security threats in the region and beyond, and this is one of the country's primary goals. Moreover, the military forces of the Republic of Korea will play a responsible role as a member of the world community and will participate more often to foreign deployments and operations that take place outside of the country. The Republic of Korea is also working to strengthen its relationships with other countries, including India, ASEAN, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.^{34,35} Enhance defense capabilities to take the lead in national defense; fully utilize technology based on the advances of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; and gain nationwide support by meeting the demands of the nation and society are the three pillars upon which the

³³ Ministry of National Defense. (2018). 2018 Defense White Paper (p. 45). https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_201908070153390840.pdf

³⁴ Botto, K. (2021). South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties With India and ASEAN. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean-pub-85572>

³⁵ NATO. (2023). Relations with the Republic of Korea. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50098.htm

defense reform that is being pursued by the government of Moon Jae-in is based.³⁶ Since these aims are consistent with the reform programs of past administrations, continuity will be maintained as a result. Because the majority of the defense experts in the new South Korean government led by President Yoon Seok-yeol previously served under Moon Jae-in, and because the defense reform programs involve long-term budgeting and implementation, the current Ministry of National Defense (MND) is expected to maintain the same defense strategy and structure. This is because the defense reform programs involve long-term budgeting and implementation.

The transition of OPCON requires South Korea to acquire crucial capabilities in conjunction with the current defense reform in order for it to be able to lead the unified defense posture and successfully oppose North Korean ballistic missiles.³⁷ This task is achievable but will take some time to accomplish. The organization of the Republic of Korea Armed Forces will shift from being one that is based on personnel to one that is centered on advanced weapon systems. Building a military that is supported by cutting-edge technology, developing a defense infrastructure that is super-connected, super-intelligent, and super-converged, and innovating South Korea's existing military in order to better prepare for conflicts in the future are all components of South Korea's smart defense strategy.

South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration, which is in charge of improving the nation's defense capabilities and fostering the defense industry³⁸, announced a long-term Defense Technology Plan on April 18, 2022.³⁹ This plan lays out strategies to secure and develop core technologies for future advanced weapon systems. The plan's announcement was made by the administration in charge of improving the nation's defense capabilities. The Defense Acquisition Program Act mandates that measures be taken to improve the competitiveness of the military sector, with the ultimate goal of preserving the nation's ability to provide for its own defense.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the Defense Science and Technology Promotion Policy of 2019 presented eight fields of defense technology to concentrate on in order to support

³⁶ Ministry of National Defense. (2018). 2018 Defense White Paper (p. 53). https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_201908070153390840.pdf

³⁷ United States Department of Defense. (2017). Joint Communique of the 49th ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20171028003000315>

³⁸ Sarah Jeong. (2021, August 31). South Korea's Defense Capabilities and Acquisition Programs | Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/south-koreas-defense-capabilities-and-acquisition-programs>

³⁹ Press release | Defense Acquisition Program Administration. Defense Technology Plan (국방기술기획서 발간) (2022). <https://www.dapa.go.kr/dapa/na/ntt/selectNttInfo.do?bbsId=326&nttSn=41112&menuId=678>

⁴⁰ Korea Law Translation Center. (2020). Defense Acquisition Program Act, amended by Act No. 17165. https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=54104&type=part&key=13

these goals. These fields are as follows: artificial intelligence-based surveillance and reconnaissance; hyper-connected intelligent command and control; high-speed and high-power precision strikes; stealth-based platforms; combined manned and unmanned combat systems; personal combat systems using advanced technology; and cyber capabilities for active response.⁴¹

The Republic of Korea Military Forces are developing a critical force to prevent and react to nuclear and missile threats by establishing the Weapons of Mass Destruction Response System. As a result of North Korea's ongoing efforts to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities, South Korea's national security is facing an increasingly grave danger. The so-called "Three-Axis" system is one of the primary reaction measures that have been implemented by the government of Yoon Suk-yeol. The Three-Axis system is South Korea's military policy to confront the escalating nuclear and missile threats posed by North Korea.⁴² It was developed in the aftermath of North Korea's fifth nuclear test in 2016. South Korea's Three-Axis system is a military system that is designed to track, detect, and eliminate an adversary's ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD).⁴³ The goal of South Korea's Three-Axis defense system is to defend its territory by developing a Kill Chain to preemptively strike the source of an attack, intercepting the incoming missile strikes using the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and employing the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) campaign to eliminate the adversary's command-and-control by neutralizing its leadership and military facilities. The Armed Forces of South Korea are continually acquiring multi-layered defensive capabilities, such as those to defend against ballistic and aircraft attacks and to intercept long-range artillery fire.⁴⁴

The first axis is a "Kill Chain," which is a preemptive attack on the enemy's ballistic missiles or other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Kill Chain is designed to preemptively eliminate the threat of an attack by North Korea to launch a ballistic or nuclear-loaded missile targeting South Korea by initiating a precision strike against North Korea's military assets, such as missile silos, before the missile is launched. This is done in the event that there are signs of an imminent

⁴¹ Ministry of National Defense. (2020). Defense Science & Technology Promotion Policy 2019-2033. https://mnd.go.kr/user/mnd/upload/pblict/PBLICTNEBOOK_202106300300426680.pdf

⁴² Doyeong J. (2023). South Korea's Revitalized "Three-Axis" System. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-koreas-revitalized-three-axis-system>

⁴³ Panda, A. (2022). South Korea's "Decapitation" Strategy Against North Korea Has More Risks Than Benefits. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/15/south-korea-s-decapitation-strategy-against-north-korea-has-more-risks-than-benefits-pub-87672>

⁴⁴ Doyeong J. (2023). South Korea's Revitalized "Three-Axis" System. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-koreas-revitalized-three-axis-system>

attack by North Korea to launch a ballistic or nuclear-loaded missile targeting South Korea. In 2013, just a few months before North Korea conducted its third nuclear test, Kill Chain was unveiled. The MND anticipates that all of the weapon systems and military assets needed for the Kill Chain will be fully deployed by the middle of the 2020s. Furthermore, the MND intends to complete the detection, identification, decision, and strike processes in less than thirty minutes in order to maximize the effectiveness of the Kill Chain.⁴⁵

The second axis is known as "Korea Air and Missile Defense," or KAMD for short, and it is a multi-layered missile defense system that is used to intercept missiles that have been launched. It is able to detect missiles fired in the direction of the ROK at an early stage and then intercept them as they enter their final phase of flight. In the event that the preemptive strike against the North Korean missiles carried out by Kill Chain is unsuccessful, early warning radar will attempt to detect the incoming missiles. This will allow missile interceptors such as the guided-missile destroyer and surface-to-air missiles to take them out before they can launch their attack.⁴⁶ It is possible to link its command and control system with the real-time strike system, which will allow for the integration and transmission of surveillance and reconnaissance information via the Military Satellite Communications System, the Tactical Information Communication Network, and the Joint Fire Operating System Korea. KAMD will consist of medium-range surface-to-air Patriot missiles (PAC-2 and PAC-3), as well as medium-range and long-range surface-to-air missile systems that were constructed in-country. While the L-SAM has undergone testing, its deployment is not expected to occur until the year 2027.⁴⁷ In addition to the PAC-2 and PAC-3 systems, the United States has also installed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. Both the United States and South Korea have plans to enhance THAAD in order to improve its compatibility with Patriot systems.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Jun J. (2016). *3 military systems to counter N. Korea: Kill Chain, KAMD, KMPR* - *The Korea Times*. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/12/205_217259.html

⁴⁶ *U.S. and Allied Ballistic Missile Defenses in the Asia-Pacific Region* | Arms Control Association. (2019). <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/us-allied-ballistic-missile-defenses-asia-pacific-region>

⁴⁷ Newdick, T. (2022). *South Korea's New Anti-Ballistic Missile System Downs Targets In Tests*. *The Drive*. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/south-koreas-new-anti-ballistic-missile-system-downs-targets-in-tests>

⁴⁸ Kim, B. (2022). *South Korea inks largest arms export deal with UAE for missile interceptor*. *Defense News*. <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2022/01/18/south-korea-inks-largest-arms-export-deal-with-uae-for-missile-interceptor/>

The third axis, referred to as "Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation" (KMPR), entails attacking Pyongyang as a form of retribution for a first strike on South Korea carried out by North Korea using either nuclear or conventional weapons. It eliminates the North's command-and-control system, which is based on the principle of deterrence by punishment, and it targets the North Korean leadership, including Kim Jong-un, by attacking his probable hideouts and military bunkers.⁴⁹

South Korea has created a number of different cruise and ballistic missile systems in order to improve its attack capabilities. Its cruise missile capabilities include ground-, sea-, and air-launched variations of the Haesong- and Hyunmoo-series.⁵⁰ These variants include longer-range land-attack cruise missiles in addition to shorter-range anti-ship and anti-aircraft weapons. The United States and South Korea reached an agreement during their summit in May 2021 in Washington, D.C., to do away with the missile restrictions that had been in place for the previous 40 years and had limited the maximum range and payload of South Korea's ballistic missiles.⁵¹ Prior to this, the criteria had been altered on four other occasions: in 2001, 2012, 2017, and 2020 respectively. By the end of the year 2022, South Korea had perfected their road-mobile Hyunmoo series, which included both short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. South Korea became the first state without nuclear weapons to achieve the capability to fire ballistic missiles from submarines in 2021, when it successfully tested a sea-based version of the Hyunmoo missile.⁵²

Furthermore, South Korea is modernizing the various components of its military forces. As a prerequisite for future joint operations and as a preparation for the transfer of wartime operational control, the ROK Army is in the process of reforming its units in order to strengthen their capabilities to carry out fast decision operations.⁵³ Its reorganization is intended to increase the surveillance and striking ranges, as well as the force's survivability, mobility, and combat capabilities, with the end goal of decreasing the number of operational personnel that are

⁴⁹ Park B. (2016). *S. Korea unveils plan to raze Pyongyang in case of signs of nuclear attack*. Yonhap News Agency. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20160911000500315>

⁵⁰ *Missiles of South Korea*. (2021). Missile Threat. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/south-korea/>

⁵¹ US-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement, 2021

⁵² Dahlgren, M. (2021). *South Korea Tests First Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile*. Missile Threat. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/south-korea-tests-first-submarine-launched-ballistic-missile/>

⁵³ Ministry of National Defense. (2020). *Defense White Paper 2020* (p. 64). https://mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202301171100181360.pdf

necessary.⁵⁴ In addition to developing strong cruise and ballistic missiles with high levels of accuracy, as was just noted, the Army is also working to improve its armored and mechanized combat capabilities in order to engage in high-speed maneuver warfare. The South Korean Army is currently in the process of developing technologies such as reconnaissance, attack drones, and operation support robots which will be coupled with manned and unmanned combined combat systems in order to improve the Army's capacity to respond quickly, carry out decisive operations, and protect its soldiers. South Korea is introducing a counter-battery radar-II, 230mm Multiple Launch Rocket System, known as Chunmoo, which has a launchpad that is capable of simultaneously firing multiple rockets, with the intention of locating and destroying targets in a timely manner while maintaining a high degree of accuracy.⁵⁵ In addition to that, it is going to create a new small counter-battery detection radar-III that is able to identify the location from where a shell was shot. The K9 self-propelled cannon is going to get an upgrade that will allow it to autonomously load rounds. This will cut down on the amount of troops needed while also allowing for quicker and more devastating firing.⁵⁶

The Navy of the Republic of Korea is enhancing its existing capabilities and purchasing additional destroyers, frigates, and next-generation submarines as well as maritime patrol aircraft and maritime operations helicopters in order to respond to a variety of surface, subsurface, and aerial threats and maintain maritime dominance around the Korean Peninsula.⁵⁷ This will allow the Navy to maintain its position as the preeminent maritime power in the region. Most notably, South Korea intends to replace its aging frigate and patrol ships with a modern frigate that weighs more than 3,000 tons and boasts improved long-range operational and combat capabilities, including ship-to-ship, anti-aircraft, and anti-submarine guided missiles. This development is among the most notable of South Korea's naval modernization plans. In addition to this, the Navy is going to create a 6,000-ton destroyer and get an extra Aegis destroyer, which is the primary battleship of the mobile fleet (KDDX). The Navy plans to

⁵⁴ Ministry of National Defense. (2020). *Defense White Paper 2020* (p. 134). https://mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202301171100181360.pdf

⁵⁵ K239 Chunmoo Multiple Launch Rocket System, South Korea. (2023). *Army Technology*. <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/k239-chunmoo-multiple-launch-rocket-system-south-korea/>

⁵⁶ Kajal, K. (2022). *South Korea approves funding for K9A2 SPH*. Janes.com. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-approves-funding-for-k9a2-sph>

⁵⁷ Ministry of National Defense. (2020). *Defense White Paper 2020* (p. 65). https://mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202301171100181360.pdf

purchase utility helicopters as well as high-speed landing boats in order to enhance its capability for high-speed amphibious operations.⁵⁸

A space operations squadron has also been established by the Air Force in order to conduct surveillance, and a reconnaissance wing has been established in order to integrate and operate the current reconnaissance capabilities in the most effective manner. The Republic of Korea Air Force Satellite Surveillance Control Unit was South Korea's first space unit, and it was founded in 2019. In 2020, the unit's name was changed to the ROK Air Force Space Operations Unit. In the year 2020, an indigenous military communications satellite was successfully launched which makes both the Army and the Navy ready for space operations.⁵⁹ In order for preparations for space warfare to be successful, there must be well-defined leadership and enforcement mechanisms. In 2018, South Korea updated its Basic Plan for the Promotion of Space Development to provide guidelines for the development of military reconnaissance satellites and space threat surveillance systems. These guidelines were included in the plan's title as Basic Plan for the Promotion of Space Development.⁶⁰ In accordance with the 2022 Space Development Implementation Plan, South Korea will go on with the acquisition of space assets in order to push its space capabilities to a higher level of power.⁶¹ Both a space surveillance system and a high-power laser satellite tracking system are envisioned to be developed as part of South Korea's overall defensive strategy. The latter is expected to begin operations in the early 2030s and will make use of radar to keep track on satellites and other objects in space that are located above the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, South Korea intends to construct a satellite navigation system that will be able to offer information about position, navigation, and imagery. By the year 2030, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration intends to have invested 1.6 trillion Korean won (\$1.4 billion) in the research and development

⁵⁸ Song, S. (2022). *S. Korea launches new 8,200-ton Aegis destroyer, Jeongjo The Great*. Yonhap News Agency. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220728003000325>

⁵⁹ Frackiewicz, M. (2023). *South Korea's Military Satellites: Enhancing the ROK's Defense and Security in the Space Domain – TS2 SPACE*. <https://ts2.space/en/south-koreas-military-satellites-enhancing-the-roks-defense-and-security-in-the-space-domain/>

⁶⁰ Park, S. (2022). *[Asia in Space] South Korea maps out 2023-27 space development plan*. SpaceRadar. <http://www.spaceradar.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=583>

⁶¹ Ministry of Science and ICT. (2022). *Korea to invest 734 billion won(610million dollars) in space technology*. <https://www.msit.go.kr/eng/bbs/view.do?sCode=eng&mId=4&mPid=2&pageIndex=2&bbsSeqNo=42&nttSeqNo=647&searchOpt=ALL&searchTxt=>

of fundamental technologies such as satellites and launch vehicles for the purposes of communication, surveillance and reconnaissance, and navigation.⁶²

The Republic of Korea Armed Forces place a strong emphasis on the significance of having capabilities for observation and reconnaissance, command and control, and communication in order to be successful in war and deter an aggressor at an early stage.⁶³ In order to improve battlefield recognition and visualization, South Korea is in the process of purchasing military reconnaissance satellites, multipurpose satellites, medium-altitude reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), multisource video convergence systems, thermal observation devices, and multi-functional observation devices. The High and Medium-Level Unmanned Reconnaissance Vehicles (HUAVs) will permit 24-hour observation, while the Arirang-6 military reconnaissance satellite will offer visual intelligence on activities taking place on the Korean Peninsula. The Republic of Korea Military Forces plan to sabotage enemy unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by interfering with or manipulating the navigation information they use by mass manufacturing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and creating an unmanned aerial vehicle response system.⁶⁴ The Republic of Korea Armed Forces will be able to better maintain an early warning posture against North Korea with the assistance of these technologies, as well as better prepare for military activity in South Korea's airspace and oceans. The C4I system of each branch of the South Korean military forces, as well as the Allied Korea Joint Command and Control System and the Korea Joint Command Control System, are all being improved by the South Korean government.⁶⁵ It is very necessary to have the capacity to command and control troops that can integrate and distribute detection and identification data as well as connect them to striking systems. Hence, even at the level of tactical units, the Republic of Korea Armed Forces are making efforts to increase their situational awareness on the battlefield. This necessitates the development of capabilities for the transfer of information that are both high-speed and high-volume, as well as enhancements to interoperability during combined and joint operations. The Republic of Korea Armed Forces and the United States Combined Forces

⁶² Yunhwan Chae. (2023). *S. Korea to develop microsatellite system by 2030*. Yonhap News Agency. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230209002300325>

⁶³ Ministry of National Defense. (2020). *Defense White Paper 2020* (p. 131). https://mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202301171100181360.pdf

⁶⁴ Yoon, S. (2023). *How to Respond to the New North Korean Threat From UAVs - 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea*. 38 North. <https://www.38north.org/2023/01/how-to-respond-to-the-new-north-korean-threat-from-uavs/>

⁶⁵ Ministry of National Defense. (2018). *Defense White Paper 2018* (p. 124-125). https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_201908070153390840.pdf

are now modernizing their combined tactical data connections and air-to-ground communications radios as part of an upgrade to their digital tactical data lines.⁶⁶

In addition, the Republic of Korea military forces have the goal of improving its cyber security and resilience in light of the fact that harmful cyber operations are becoming more complex. The year 2019 saw the announcement of South Korea's first National Cybersecurity Strategy, which serves as the primary guiding principle for the nation's cybersecurity strategy.⁶⁷ The Ministry of National Defense is in charge of guiding the formulation of medium- to long-term development objectives and plans, in which all relevant agencies and ministries are actively engaged (MND). These efforts include the use of artificial intelligence to improve the functionality of the cyber operation system, the development of a cybersecurity mission execution system, the cultivation of specialized and elite cyberwarfare professionals, the advancement of cyber-attack response capabilities, and the strengthening of international cooperation on issues pertaining to cybersecurity.⁶⁸

Long ago, South Korea began devoting a greater percentage of its GDP than two percent to its military budget. This level of spending has been maintained despite the difficulties and crises that have been experienced in the economy. In point of fact, governments in Seoul have stayed fairly constant in raising the military budget even in periods when the economy has been in a state of decline.⁶⁹ A large and ever-increasing portion of the funds that are allotted to the military are put on force enhancement initiatives, which might include things like research and development (R&D). In the past, administrations that were governed by the Democratic Party raised the proportion of GDP that was spent on defense with the goal of lessening the ROK's reliance on other countries' militaries and improving its capacity to defend itself. In general, although liberal and conservative administrations have taken quite different approaches to domestic and international policy, there has been a continuing trend toward military reform and an increase in the amount of money that is allotted to the defense budget. The present

⁶⁶ Ministry of National Defense. (2020). *Defense White Paper 2020* (p. 132). https://mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202301171100181360.pdf

⁶⁷ National Security Office. (2019). *National Cybersecurity Strategy*. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/National_Strategies_Repository/National%20Cybersecurity%20Strategy_South%20Korea.pdf

⁶⁸ Kim, S. J. & Bae S. (2021). Korean Policies of Cybersecurity and Data Resilience - The Korean Way With Data: How the World's Most Wired Country Is Forging a Third Way. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/17/korean-policies-of-cybersecurity-and-data-resilience-pub-85164>

⁶⁹ World Bank Open Data. (2021). Military expenditure (% of GDP)—Korea, Rep. World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org>

conservative government and any future governments will need to have a conversation on how to sustain enough expenditure on military, given the current state of the economy, the domestic financial situation, the pressures placed on social programs, and the changing demographics.⁷⁰

The government of South Korea is continuing its efforts to transform the country's armed forces into a technology-driven, future-oriented fighting force. The ministry intends to conduct research and development on cutting-edge technology including stealth detection radar, hypersonic missiles, and military autonomous robots in the near future. Additional work will be put into the research and development of micro-satellite systems, satellite navigation systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for the purpose of bolstering surveillance and reconnaissance forces, long-range surface-to-air missiles (L-SAM) and long-range artillery interception systems, iron domes designed in the Korean style⁷¹ for missile defense, and high-power, long-range guided weapons.⁷²

On December 24, the National Assembly's plenary session approved the 2023 military budget, according to the Ministry of National Defense. The budget for enhancing military power's defensive capacity increased to 16.92 trillion won, an increase of 1.3% from 2022. The budget for maintaining military force increased to 40.1 trillion won, an increase of 5.7% from 2022.⁷³ For the purpose of fending off North Korean nuclear and missile threats, the Ministry of National Defense will work to significantly improve military capabilities. In the meantime, investments will be focused on high-tech industries in order to adapt to the future military market and significantly advance domestic technology. These high-tech domains include subjects like manned and unmanned hybrid warfare execution, ultra-highspeed and high-power precise strikes, and other cutting-edge technology.

⁷⁰ Lee, C. M. (2021). South Korea's Military Needs Bold Reforms to Overcome a Shrinking Population—Demographics and the Future of South Korea. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/29/south-korea-s-military-needs-bold-reforms-to-overcome-shrinking-population-pub-84822>

⁷¹ Choi, C. (2022). Military to build 'Korean Iron Dome,' enhance strike capability. The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210902000845>

⁷² Lee, Y. (2021). *The 2022-2026 Mid-term Defense Plan for Successful Accomplishment of Defense Reform 2.0 and Building a Digitalized Strong Military*. Issue 240. <https://www.kida.re.kr/cmm/viewBoardImageFile.do?idx=32670>

⁷³ Kwon, K. (2023). Defense budget for 2023 fixed at 57.0 trillion won, up 4.4% over the previous year. https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/boardList.action?command=view&page=1&boardId=I_8576246&boardSeq=I_10319276&titleId=null&id=mndEN_020600000000&siteId=mndEN

4.3 North Korean threat to the OPCON

The type and extent of provocations have evolved as a direct result of North Korea's activities in the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the expansion of its armed forces, and the performance of military provocations as well as large cyberattacks. Since September 2021, when the dictatorship in Pyongyang stepped up the speed and scope of its arms development, the nuclear and missile capabilities of North Korea have emerged as the most significant obstacle for South Korea to overcome. This is especially the case now. This includes the development of tactical nuclear weapons, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) with a range of 15,000 kilometers, a new submarine, hypersonic glide vehicles, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets in accordance with the plan that was laid out by the leader of North Korea in January 2021.⁷⁴

It has been proved that North Korea has missiles that are capable of traveling far enough to reach deep into the continental United States; however, it is unknown whether or not these missiles are able to survive reentry into the atmosphere of Earth upon arrival. The launch of a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile was reportedly carried out by North Korea in order to validate the dependability of the weapon and the preparedness of the country's nuclear forces for battle.⁷⁵ It is one of three types of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that North Korea has developed; the other two are the Hwasong-14 and the Hwasong-17. All three of them use liquid fuel, and North Korea has claimed that they are all nuclear-capable.⁷⁶ North Korea displayed roughly a dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at a military parade at the beginning of this month, which was an unprecedented quantity that showed progress in the country's efforts to mass-produce formidable weapons. Experts suggest that some of the missiles were likely a variant of a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that North Korea has been striving to build over the last several years. Among them were large canister-

⁷⁴ KCNA Watch. (2021). On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK. KCNA Watch. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/>

⁷⁵ Kim, H.-J. (2023). N. Korea makes fresh threats, US bombers fly after ICBM test. AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-us-national-security-council-south-korea-north-d6781836ad90388ca62381368712017b>

⁷⁶ Missile Threat. (2022). Missiles of North Korea. Missile Threat. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/>

sealed missiles. Solid-fueled systems make it possible for missiles to move more freely on the ground and accelerate the rate at which they may be launched.⁷⁷

North Korea may have dozens of nuclear warheads. The issue that has to be answered is whether or not they are compact enough to be carried by a missile. Six underground nuclear tests explosions have been carried out by North Korea so far as part of its efforts to develop warheads that can be mounted on missiles. There is a broad range of uncertainty over the number of nuclear weapons possessed by North Korea, with estimates ranging anywhere from 20 to 60 or maybe even more.⁷⁸ In light of the fact that North Korea has been working on its nuclear and missile programs for such a long time, some people are of the opinion that the nation has probably already constructed miniature nuclear bombs that can be installed on rockets.⁷⁹ The North Korean government claimed that it carried out its sixth nuclear test in 2017 by detonating a thermonuclear weapon designed to be carried by ICBMs. It caused a tremor with a magnitude of 6.3, and according to some analyses, the estimated explosive output was between between fifty and one hundred and forty kilotons of TNT.⁸⁰ The Yongbyon complex in North Korea has production facilities for both plutonium and highly enriched uranium, which are the two primary components required to construct nuclear bombs. Plutonium plants are often rather huge and produce a significant amount of heat; as a result, they are quite simple to identify. Uranium enrichment plants, on the other hand, are more smaller and more adept at evading the detection of satellite cameras. In addition to the plant that is already operating at its Yongbyon complex, it is suspected that North Korea is operating at least one more clandestine uranium enrichment facility.⁸¹

The recent events that have taken place on the Korean Peninsula have been particularly concerning. Since 2006, North Korea has accelerated its attempts to develop nuclear weapons

⁷⁷ Kim T.-H. (2023). Kim Jong Un shows off daughter, missiles at N. Korean parade. AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-north-korea-government-kim-jong-un-united-states-d5bb73116705610eca6cec2210dd4303>

⁷⁸ Kristensen H.M. & Korda M. (2022, September 8). Nuclear Notebook: How many nuclear weapons does North Korea have in 2022? Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2022-09/nuclear-notebook-how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-north-korea-have-in-2022>

⁷⁹ Panda, A. (2017). US Intelligence: North Korea May Already Be Annually Accruing Enough Fissile Material for 12 Nuclear Weapons. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/us-intelligence-north-korea-may-already-be-annually-accruing-enough-fissile-material-for-12-nuclear-weapons/>

⁸⁰ Klug F. (2017). North Korea conducts 6th nuclear test, says it was H-bomb. AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-us-news-ap-top-news-north-korea-earthquakes-edd942c7344c43a7bf12ce94ddef0c3a>

⁸¹ Heinonen O., Makowsky P., & Liu J. (2022). North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Center: In Full Swing - 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea. 38 North. <https://www.38north.org/2022/03/north-koreas-yongbyon-nuclear-center-in-full-swing/>

and missiles, and the years 2016 and 2017⁸² as well as 2021 and 2022⁸³ have seen particularly notable advancements in this endeavor. In a timetable somewhat dissimilar to this one, South Korea's plans for the development of missiles have likewise made significant progress. Both North and South Korea have established employment policies that involve preemptive strikes, which allow for attacks on adversary targets if an incoming danger seems to be imminent. Given the North's concerns about its security and the fact that both sides see the other as being hostile, the likelihood of war as a result of this development is greatly increased. Ultimately, the Korean Peninsula's arms race contributes to the escalation of tensions between the two Koreas and decreases the likelihood that both sides will engage in negotiations to control conventional armaments and lessen the threat from nuclear weapons.

North Korea fired more than 90 missiles in 2022, setting a new record for the most missiles launched in a single calendar year.⁸⁴ On the other hand, in comparison to the scope of North Korea's acts, the Republic of Korea's (ROK) countermeasures have been very moderate under President Yoon. The lack of any kind of inter-Korean talks since 2019 has led South Korea to revive and conduct a series of US-ROK large-scale, live-fire joint military exercises. These exercises had been scaled back since 2018 in favor of peace talks under the previous administration of Moon Jae-in, but South Korea has decided to revive them in response to the lack of any kind of inter-Korean talks. When North Korea began to conduct its own operational live-fire training, further exercises were added to the schedule. In November 2022, one of North Korea's missiles crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) and headed for South Korean territorial seas. In response, South Korea fired a missile into North Korean territorial waters, although it went only as far as the first missile had which was a proportionate reaction.⁸⁵

Throughout history, there has never been an even level playing field when it comes to the military engagements that have taken place between the two Koreas. In its ongoing efforts to gain a military advantage over South Korea, North Korea routinely violates international rules and norms. On the other hand, South Korea adheres to international rules and norms, which restricts the ways in which it can react to the increasingly provocative actions of the DPRK. Except for the time when South Korea and the United States moved their enormous armed forces right up to its nose, North Korea has seldom apologized for the provocations it has carried

⁸² North Korea's Nuclear and Ballistic Missile Programs. (2019). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1092444.pdf>

⁸³ North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs. (2023). <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/IF10472.pdf>

⁸⁴ Sang-Hun, C. (2023). North Korea Launches Missile as Japan Issues Brief Evacuation Alarm. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/north-korea-missile-launch.html>

⁸⁵ South hits back as North Korea fires most missiles in a day. (2022). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63481183>

out.⁸⁶ In essence, South Korea loses valuable lives of its troops and even civilians in extreme circumstances as a result of its compliance with international order, while North Korea wins its success in domestic politics as a result of its violation of international rules. Notwithstanding this, North Korea continues to accuse South Korea of instigating conflict, even when South Korea's response is measured and restrained. In addition, North Korea has persistently disregarded the decisions of the United Nations Security Council and has carried on with the development of its nuclear weapons program. In the meanwhile, South Korea has made a significant number of concessions over the course of the last several years in an effort to facilitate a disarmament process. For instance, joint military drills between the United States and the Republic of Korea have been canceled at times or scaled down to the level of simulations and tabletop exercises; further accommodations have been made for North Korea to participate in the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics.⁸⁷ Yet, even the peace effort that was launched in 2018 by former President Moon Jae-in was not successful in producing long-term progress toward the de-nuclearization of the North. And previous discussions, both multilateral and bilateral, including the Six Party Talks⁸⁸, trilateral talks between South Korea, North Korea, and the United States, and bilateral talks between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, have all resulted in failure.⁸⁹

In 2019, after diplomatic efforts with the then-president of the United States, Donald Trump, failed, Kim accelerated the development of short-range, solid-fuel, nuclear-capable missiles meant to attack vital targets in South Korea, including US military facilities there.⁹⁰ Included in these so-called tactical nuclear weapons are numerous rocket launchers with a 600 millimeter caliber that North Korea refers to as super-large. The weapon in question is referred to as a short-range missile system by South Korea.⁹¹ Other new North Korean short-range weaponry include missiles that seem to have been fashioned after the Russian Iskander mobile ballistic

⁸⁶ Friedman, U. (2018). The 'God Damn' Tree That Nearly Brought America and North Korea to War. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/axe-murder-north-korea-1976/562028/>

⁸⁷ BBC News. (2018). South Korea: Trump agrees to suspend military drills during Olympics. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42570102>

⁸⁸ Collins, L. 25 Years of Negotiations and Provocations: North Korea and the United States. CSIS Beyond Parallel. <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/25-years-of-negotiations-provocations/>

⁸⁹ Council on Foreign Relations. (n.d.). Timeline: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations>

⁹⁰ EveryCRSReport.com. (2020). North Korea: A Chronology of Events from 2016 to 2020. <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R46349.html>

⁹¹ Kim, S. Y. (2023). (3rd LD) N. Korea fires 2 short-range ballistic missiles toward East Sea: S. Korean military. Yonhap News Agency. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230220000953325>

system or superficially resemble the United States MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System.⁹² Both of these systems are mobile ballistic systems. These missiles are meant to be highly maneuverable and to fly at low altitudes after being launched from land-based vehicles. This should, in theory, give them a higher chance of beating the missile defense systems used by South Korea and the United States. Guam, a significant military base for the United States in the Pacific, is within range of North Korea's Hwasong-12 missile, which has an intermediate range and is capable of delivering nuclear weapons. It has been working on creating a family of mid-range Pukguksong missiles that use solid fuel and are meant to be launched from submarines or ground vehicles.⁹³

In South Korea, there are two radically divergent political positions on North Korean disarmament. The first is that North Korea's nuclearization is designed for discussions with the international community, particularly with the United States, and that therefore, disarmament is truly attainable. The other point of view is that since nuclear weapons have become the foundation for the existence of the regime, denuclearization is impossible, and as a result, any dialogue is pointless. This is the view that is held by some.⁹⁴ There is a lack of consensus among the general public regarding which nation should take the lead in the denuclearization of North Korea. At one point in time, it was believed in South Korea that China was the key because Chinese support is essential to North Korea's ability to maintain its regime and continue development of nuclear weapons in spite of international sanctions. This belief originated from the fact that China is the country that has the most influence over North Korea. These hopes, however, have been dashed by China's pressure on South Korea over its deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)⁹⁵ and the nation's repeated failures in the Six Party Talks⁹⁶. On the other hand, some people in South Korea are of the opinion that North Korea does not plan to deploy its nuclear weapons on South Korea even if it already has such

⁹² Delory, S., Bondaz, A., & Maire, C. (2023). North Korean Short Range Systems: Military consequences of the development of the KN-23, KN-24 and KN-25. HCoC.

⁹³ Diepen, V. H. V. (2021). North Korea's "New Type Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile": More Political Than Military Significance - 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea. 38 North. <https://www.38north.org/2021/10/north-koreas-new-type-submarine-launched-ballistic-missile-more-political-than-military-significance/>

⁹⁴ Dalton, T., Friedhoff, K., & Kim, L. (2022). Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons.

⁹⁵ Meick, E., & Salidjanova, N. (2017). China's Response to U.S.-South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and its Implications. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Report_China%27s%20Response%20to%20THAAD%20Deployment%20and%20its%20Implications.pdf

⁹⁶ Bajoria, J., & Xu, B. (2013). The Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program>

weapons. In September 2017, the president of South Korea at the time, Moon Jae-in, condemned nuclear development in North Korea as nothing more than a negotiating tactic.⁹⁷ This belief is, however, becoming less prevalent as a result of North Korea's ongoing drills to practice using nuclear-tipped tactical weapons against a variety of targets located within South Korea.

After President Yoon's victory in the presidential election in 2022, North Korea ramped up the severity of the nuclear threats it issued to South Korea. Political adversaries have referred to Yoon as the "Korean Trump," and they have said that the election of Yoon will lead to conflict with North Korea.⁹⁸ Yoon's approach to North Korea revolves primarily around the concept of a principled response. In the event that North Korea changes its course and resumes dialogue with the international community, South Korea is prepared to offer its full support. Yet, South Korea is prepared to take a stance against North Korea's threats and offensives in the event that they persist. When it comes to discouraging North Korea's use of nuclear weapons, Yoon has positioned himself as a staunch supporter of the strategy of prolonged deterrence. Yoon emphasized that he would try to promote US-ROK collaboration while adhering to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime while running for office. Yoon opposes the redeployment of nuclear weapons in Korea as well as nuclear sharing in the pattern of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Yoon's views, along with those of the South Korean people, are shifting, as a result of North Korea's escalating provocations, both in terms of their frequency and the methods used, as well as the language used, which threatens nuclear war.⁹⁹

The Yoon government believes that the most effective response to the expanding nuclear and missile capabilities of the North is to improve their extended deterrent posture. Yet the trust of the South Korean people in the commitment of the United States is still being called into doubt. This is done by referring to facts such as the long-delayed upgrading of US nuclear capabilities, as well as previous actions of the United States, such as when former United States President Donald Trump regularly threatened to remove US troops from South Korea, the departure of

⁹⁷ 장재용. (2017). "All citizens are nuclear hostages" vs. "Still oppose tactical nuclear weapons" (野 "전 국민이 핵인질" vs 與 "그래도 전술핵 반대"). MBC NEWS. https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2017/nwdesk/article/4411121_30212.html

⁹⁸ Yim, H. (2022). Is Yoon Suk-yeol the South Korean Trump? The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220228000935>

⁹⁹ Ernst, M., Kim, T., & Pardo, R. P. (2022). The Foreign Policy of President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol: What to Expect. <https://brussels-school.be/publications/other-publications/foreign-policy-president-elect-yoon-suk-yeol-what-expect>

the United States from Afghanistan, and the measured reaction of the United States to the conflict in Ukraine.¹⁰⁰ There are also concerns over the degree to which the United States and the Republic of Korea collaborate on the planning and implementation of extended deterrence activities. Recent statements made by President Yoon indicated that the United States and the Republic of Korea will participate in joint nuclear drills; however, when President Biden was later questioned on the veracity of these statements, he simply stated, "No." This disparity has sparked controversy, and it is causing an increasing number of people in South Korea to worry whether or not the United States would put an American city in danger in order to protect Seoul in the event of a crisis on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁰¹

It was claimed that President Yoon brought up the idea of South Korea possessing nuclear weapons during his New Year's Policy Briefing on Foreign Affairs and National Defense that he gave on January 11, 2023. This was the very first time that the President of the Republic of Korea had ever used the terms such as tactical nuclear deployment or nuclear armament in any of his speeches.¹⁰² Nevertheless, a thorough reading of President Yoon's statements reveals that he was not truly indicating that South Korea was going to seek nuclear weapons. This is obvious from the fact that President Yoon did not provide any such indication. Instead, he proposed this alternative course of action as a means to underline the necessity to reinforce extended deterrence and raise it to the level of joint planning and execution. This was done so as a method to highlight the need of preventing a nuclear conflict. In the past, it was impossible for the president of South Korea to use such words. This was the case regardless of how severe the nuclear danger became. It is very evident that this is no longer the case.¹⁰³ Yet this move is not only a statement to the DPRK about the ROK's beliefs; it is also a message to the international community. In addition to this, it expresses to the United States South Korea's long-held displeasure with the lack of openness in American decision-making over the possible use or non-use of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. This is done on behalf of South Korea.

¹⁰⁰ Hancocks, P. (2023). Why are South Koreans losing faith in America's nuclear umbrella? CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/21/asia/us-nuclear-umbrella-south-korea-analysis-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>

¹⁰¹ Choi, S.-H., & Hunnicutt, T. (2023). Biden says U.S. not discussing nuclear exercises with South Korea | Reuters. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-us-eye-exercises-using-nuclear-assets-yoon-says-newspaper-2023-01-02/>

¹⁰² Choe, C. (2023). In a First, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear-weapons.html>

¹⁰³ Sukin, L., & Herzog, S. (2023). The Dueling Nuclear Nightmares Behind the South Korean President's Alarming Comments. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/01/25/dueling-nuclear-nightmares-behind-south-korean-president-s-alarming-comments-pub-88879>

South Koreans are getting increasingly desperate and eager to play some part in planning and operations, despite the fact that the United States will always maintain exclusive authority over the use of nuclear weapons produced by the United States.

After the successful launch of more than 90 cruise and ballistic missiles in 2022, including its newest and biggest Hwasong-17 ICBM, North Korea wrapped up the year by deploying five rudimentary and unarmed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into South Korean airspace on Gangwha Island and on the outskirts of Seoul¹⁰⁴. One of the unmanned aerial vehicles even entered the no-fly zone that guards the Yongsan Presidential Office. The infiltration has had a significant influence on the political climate, which raises the issue of what constitutes an acceptable and proportionate reaction, despite the fact that these UAVs are technically straightforward and do not provide a significant direct danger. In addition, as a result of this intrusion, flaws in the integrated air defense system of the military of the Republic of Korea have been exposed, and it is clear that anti-UAV combat capabilities need significant advancement.¹⁰⁵ Because of the recent actions taken by the North, President Yoon has given an order to the Ministry of National Defense (MND) to expedite the construction of a specialized joint UAV unit, which is already part of the plans for military reform. In addition, he has given orders to the MND to speed up the development of anti-UAV weaponry systems, despite the fact that it is expected that the new unit would initially rely on the Vulcan and Biho complex anti-air defense system.¹⁰⁶

In the event that North Korea deploys armed UAVs, the Republic of Korea's armed forces will be confronted with a different kind and pattern of military threats. In the 2023-2027 Defense Mid-Term Plan, adjustments need to be made in order to include the development of countermeasures against North Korean UAV assaults. When it comes to sensors and interceptors, the design of the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system cannot be simply modified to cope efficiently with smaller unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). UAVs have become more important in contemporary warfare, as the conflict in Ukraine has shown. These unmanned aerial vehicles have the capacity to carry out extensive, low-scale strikes against

¹⁰⁴ Ji, D. (2023). S. Korean military admits N.Korean drone entered presidential office no-fly zone. The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230105000600>

¹⁰⁵ Jung, M. (2022). President orders military to expedite launch of drone unit following failure against NK drones. The KoreaTimes. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/12/205_342481.html

¹⁰⁶ Kwon, H. (2023). After S. Korea's drone defense shield fails, Yoon goes on the offensive. Hankyoreh. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/1074974.html

administrative, industrial, and infrastructure targets, in addition to military command centers. Nevertheless, in addition to just purchasing additional unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or even creating stronger anti-UAV defenses, urgently needed operational and tactical changes are required to fill the gaps in the Republic of Korea's air defense network. The addition of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to North Korea's already quickly developing nuclear and missile programs is significant. The intrusion that took place in December of last year has brought attention to the subject that unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) provide high risk since they endanger both civilian and military targets, one of which is the United States Forces Korea (USFK) base located at Camp Humphries in Pyeongtaek. It's possible that the United States Forces in South Korea and the Republic of Korea Armed Forces may have to resort to cyber and space operations in order to fight North Korean UAV assaults. In point of fact, figuring out precisely how to counteract this ever-evolving danger is still a pressing and difficult problem that has not been addressed.

As North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile capabilities and openly threatens South Korea, the government of South Korea should move quickly to finish revitalizing the Three-Axis system and deploy additional military assets to fill the gap and address the vulnerabilities mentioned above. In order to reinforce Kill Chain, it is necessary to implement monitoring and reconnaissance technologies that are more complex and sophisticated. To increase its defensive capability against North Korea's developing ballistic missile program, the government ought to carry out a comprehensive check and make modifications to KAMD. This should include enhancing early detection as well as the addition of interceptors for the boost phase and the midcourse phase.

4.4 China's role

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has strengthened significantly as a consequence of China's expanding economic might. Tensions in the area around Taiwan have increased as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition, China is intent on achieving its goal of becoming the dominant military force in East Asia. But South Korea is concerned about more than simply the typical dangers to national security. Free trade, foreign sources of oil and natural gas, and international supply networks are all very important to Seoul's economy. As one of the world's leading makers of semiconductors, South Korea recognizes that the rising decoupling between the United States and China, as well as the push by the United States government to establish its own semiconductor fortress, places South Korean

companies in the heart of a new fault line.¹⁰⁷ The Republic of Korea has to reevaluate its national security measures and be ready for a level of economic and technological competitiveness that has never been seen before.

Asia is a vital force in driving the global economy and a centre for innovation, but it also has the largest number of military hotspots in the world, a growing weapons race, and deep nationalistic and ideological disagreements. And South Korea is located either directly on or in very close proximity to some of the most significant geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geotechnological fault lines in the area. There is no other place in the world that is both a facilitator and a disrupter simultaneously to the degree that this region is. The decoupling of the economies of the United States and China, rising rivalry in high-tech fields, and the need for new global standards are all factors that are fueling the growing politics of important economic and technical policy. Given that South Korea is situated smack dab in the heart of these expanding fault lines between the United States and China, it is arguable that there is no other major Asian actor that confronts such an intimidating scenario.¹⁰⁸

The Republic of Korea (ROK) is confronted with significant dangers, such as North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal and increasingly sophisticated ballistic missile program, growing geopolitical threats triggered by China's dispute of U.S. military supremacy in the Western Pacific, the decoupling of the U.S. and Chinese economies in conjunction with the South Korean economy's overdependence on the Chinese market and the need for more resilient and reliable global supply chains, and growing uncertainty brought on by worsening global economic.¹⁰⁹

Since the conclusion of the Second World War, South Korea has maintained a strong alliance with the United States; yet, over the course of the last three decades, it has gradually grown closer to China. China, which has been engaged in a fierce turf battle with the United States for dominance in the area, and South Korea, which is a major cog in the US's regional alliance system in Asia, have been gradually increasing their strategic collaboration in recent

¹⁰⁷ Dr Chang, Y. H. Dynamics of the U.S.-China-Korea Triangle in Times of Decoupling. <https://www.kas.de/documents/262738/262787/KAS+Dynamics+of+the+U.S.-China-Korea+Triangle+in+Times+of+Decoupling.pdf/bb5e110f-b934-c478-a738-353c0199836b?version=1.1&t=1622167804574>

¹⁰⁸ Moon, C., & Lee, S. (2022). South Korea's geopolitics: Challenges and strategic choices. *Melbourne Asia Review*. <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/south-koreas-geopolitics-challenges-and-strategic-choices/>

¹⁰⁹ Moon, C., & Lee, S. (2022). South Korea's geopolitics: Challenges and strategic choices. *Melbourne Asia Review*. <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/south-koreas-geopolitics-challenges-and-strategic-choices/>

years.¹¹⁰ South Korea is a critical cog in the US's regional alliance system in Asia. The traditional view of international relations would imply that South Korea should aim to balance itself against China in order to protect its interests; nevertheless, Seoul has opted to bandwagon instead of pursuing this course of action. The term "bandwagoning" refers to aligning oneself with the source of the danger, in contrast to the term "balancing," which refers to allying with other nations against a shared threat.¹¹¹

An in-person meeting with the Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, was granted to former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi when she was on a tour of Asia in August 2022. The encounter took place in Tokyo. In contrast, the reception that Pelosi received in Seoul from South Korea was mild at best. It was stated that President Yoon Sook-yeol of South Korea graciously declined the opportunity for Pelosi to meet with him, and that the two leaders simply spoke on the phone to share pleasantries with each other.¹¹² A few days after the visit of Representative Pelosi, the Foreign Minister of South Korea, Park Jin, traveled to China for a three-day trip. While there, he met with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in the city of Qingdao, located in eastern China. It is difficult to overlook the significance of the two instances even though they may be seen as being part of routine diplomatic activities among sovereign states. Such trips and calls by diplomats and high-profile political figures are subjected to more rigorous scrutiny as a result of the rapidly escalating geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific and the crisis that is now unfolding in Taiwan.¹¹³

It is impossible to ignore the significance of the meeting's timing given that it took place during Yoon's administration first official's trip of this level to China. Relations between China and the United States have become worse as the issue on the other side of the Taiwan Strait has grown more serious. Washington is eager to strengthen its security partnerships with Seoul and Tokyo and show a unified democratic front against a Beijing-Moscow axis; but, the friendly relationship that South Korea maintains with China only makes the situation

¹¹⁰ Yuan, J. (2022). Mutual Respect? China-South Korea Relations at 30. Asia-Pacific Leadership Network. <https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/mutual-respect-china-south-korea-relations-at-30>

¹¹¹ Maduz, L. (2023). Explaining Korea's Positioning in the US-China Strategic Competition. In S. A. Grano & D. W. F. Huang (Eds.), *China-US Competition: Impact on Small and Middle Powers' Strategic Choices* (pp. 247–273). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-15389-1_10

¹¹² Kim, A. (2022). Was Pelosi 'snubbed' in South Korea? The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220808000794>

¹¹³ Top Chinese, South Korean diplomats pledge closer ties. (2022). AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-beijing-xi-jinping-foreign-policy-south-korea-dc64653d52edc0cbbceb7c85529be24a>

more complicated.¹¹⁴ In spite of the fact that China recognizes South Korea's strong relations with the United States, it has been pressuring South Korea to pursue a foreign policy that is more autonomous in the hopes of luring it over to its camp. China also pushes South Korea and North Korea to avoid being swayed by external factors.¹¹⁵

Threats to South Korea's national security as well as its economy have persisted throughout the country's history. Even very little tremors in the world's energy markets are enough to send massive shockwaves through the South Korean economy. This is because South Korea, like Japan, is completely dependent on oil and natural gas imports from other countries.¹¹⁶ The oil embargo that was imposed by OPEC in the early 1970s, the onset of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and the global financial crisis that occurred in 2008 all had a substantial influence on the economic wellbeing of South Korea. The sheer magnitude and quick convergence of significant military, economic, and technical threats are two aspects that distinguish the 2020s from previous decades. Integrated circuits, automobiles, cargo ships, and electric batteries make up the vast majority of South Korea's primary exports, and they are all strongly reliant on global supply networks.¹¹⁷

China is South Korea's most important trading partner, giving China significant economic power over South Korea. As a direct result of the United States' decision to withdraw from the much-touted Trans-Pacific Partnership, South Korea has become even more reliant on China.¹¹⁸ Because both South Korea and China have economies that are heavily dependent on exports, they will not welcome any more interruptions to their supply chains. This is particularly true in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic and at a time when the global economy is already faltering due to the crisis between Russia and Ukraine.

Aside from the issue of North Korea, an overwhelming majority of people in South Korea are of the opinion that China is one of the most significant dangers to the country's national security. The belligerent military posture adopted by China, which includes increasing

¹¹⁴ Lee, J. J., & Shidore, S. (2022). The Folly of Pushing South Korea Toward a China Containment Strategy. Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. <https://quincyinst.org/report/the-folly-of-pushing-south-korea-toward-a-china-containment-strategy/>

¹¹⁵ South China Morning Post. (2023). South Korea, under pressure from China, is moving closer to the Quad. Yahoo Finance. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/south-korea-under-pressure-china-093000296.html>

¹¹⁶ Stangarone, T. (2023). Russia and the US add to South Korea's economic challenges. East Asia Forum. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/01/27/russia-and-the-us-add-to-south-koreas-economic-challenges/>

¹¹⁷ South Korea (KOR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity. (2023). The Observatory of Economic Complexity | OEC. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kor>

¹¹⁸ Grabow, C. (2022). 5 Years Later the United States Is Still Paying for Its TPP Blunder. CATO Institute. <https://www.cato.org/blog/5-years-later-united-states-still-paying-tpp-blunder>

incursions into the air defense identification zone (KADIZ) of South Korea, is one factor that has led to increased fears over the expansion of Chinese military might. After China had declared an extension of its own air defense identification zone that comprised a South Korean-held island located south of Jeju Island after the ROK increased the its zone in December 2013.¹¹⁹ Since then, the PLA has conducted a number of incursions into the KADIZ, often with the assistance of Russian military planes and bombers. The KADIZ in the Eastern Sea was invaded by four aircraft on May 24, 2022: two bombers from the PLA Air Force, two bombers from the Russian Tu-95 fleet, and two fighters. This took place barely two weeks after the Yoon administration took office.¹²⁰

The antagonistic views that South Korea has toward China are not just motivated by concerns about its own national security or economy. Following the fourth nuclear test conducted by North Korea in January 2016, South Korea made the decision in July 2016 to deploy the United States missile defense system known as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). In response, China retaliated with a partial economic boycott, restricting market access to South Korean goods and services and preventing Chinese tourists from traveling to South Korea. The decision to sign the so-called Three No's agreement was made by the Moon administration in July of 2017. This agreement stipulates that there will not be any further deployment of THAAD batteries, no participation by the ROK in a regional missile defense system led by the United States, and no formation of a trilateral military alliance involving the United States, South Korea, and Japan.¹²¹ When the Yoon administration took office, Seoul made a statement that the THAAD problem was not open to discussions with China since it was solely the responsibility of South Korea and the United States.¹²²

A world with several poles is inherently unstable and more prone to devastating conflicts. Bandwagoning is a strategy that will be used by smaller governments like South Korea when they are in a position where they are trapped between two large powers. These states will do this because they want to protect their national interests. As a consequence of this, South Korea has chosen to accommodate China rather than to balance against it. It is an act of

¹¹⁹ South Korea's Inevitable Expansion of its ADIZ. (2014). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-koreas-inevitable-expansion-its-adiz>

¹²⁰ Smith, J., & Shin, H. (2022). South Korea Scrambles Jets After Chinese, Russian Warplanes Enter Air Defence Zone. US News & World Report. [//www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-05-24/south-korea-scrambles-jets-after-chinese-russian-warplanes-enter-air-defence-zone](https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-05-24/south-korea-scrambles-jets-after-chinese-russian-warplanes-enter-air-defence-zone)

¹²¹ Abrahamian A. & Son D. (2017). Moving On: China Resolves THAAD Dispute with South Korea - 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea. 38 North. <https://www.38north.org/2017/11/abrahamianson110917/>

¹²² Pres. Office: THAAD Issue Not Up for Negotiation. (2022). http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=171664

bandwagoning with, rather than against, China in order to share the economic advantages, and thus acknowledges that China is the more powerful foe from a military and economic standpoint. South Korea perceives a great deal of economic potential as a result of China's ascent, and it wants to capitalize on these prospects. This is in contrast to the military danger that is connected with China's rise.¹²³ Amid the intensifying competition between the United States and China, this is something that even the United States is aware of and recognizes as a significant threat to the national security of South Korea.

The danger that is presented by North Korea is the second crucial issue to consider while attempting to get an understanding of the developing strategic partnership between South Korea and China. Yoon, in contrast to his immediate predecessor, is a hawk when it comes to North Korea. During his campaign for the presidency, he pledged to deal with North Korea in a firm manner. The actions that Pyongyang is doing to grow its nuclear weapons as well as its missile delivery systems are giving Seoul significant cause for worry.

A third concern is whether or not South Korea would join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, often known as the "Quad", which is an alliance consisting of the United States of America, Japan, India, and Australia that was formed in large part to compete with China. Yoon made a commitment to seek official membership in the Quad throughout the course of his election campaign, and his advisors originally lobbied for South Korea to become a member of the Quad as well. However, it would seem that the administration is now content with a less formal and more issue-by-issue style of collaboration with the Quad on a subset of issues, such as climate change and vaccinations, rather than pursuing complete integration.¹²⁴ This course of action would enable Seoul to collaborate with the Quad while avoiding involvement in the possible militarization of the group against China.

Last but not least, the Yoon administration has expressed opposition to the United States' strategy of cutting China off from supply chains for semiconductors. Since the beginning of 2022, the United States has been working to attract other key semiconductor centers across the world, notably South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, which are known collectively as the "Chip 4" together with the United States. This is part of the United States' drive to create a chip supply chain that does not include China. However, the effort has gone slowly and has not made much

¹²³ Kim H. (2022). The China Policy of the Yoon Government and South Korea-China Relations. *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, 31(1), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.33728/IJKUS.2022.31.1.003>

¹²⁴ Kim H. (2022). The China Policy of the Yoon Government and South Korea-China Relations. *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, 31(1), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.33728/IJKUS.2022.31.1.003>

headway in agenda-setting owing to considerable pushback within the group to its anti-China approach, particularly from Seoul. This resistance has caused the initiative to develop more slowly than expected.¹²⁵

The Seoul capital recognizes Beijing's unique influence on the North Korean regime. South Korea would prefer that China put that leverage to good use rather than letting it sit idle while North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems continue to increase in quantity and complexity. During their discussion in Qingdao, the South Korean foreign minister urged that his Chinese counterpart utilize Beijing's influence over Pyongyang to get Pyongyang to return to talks on its nuclear weapons development. This proposal was made to the Chinese foreign minister by the South Korean foreign minister. Pyongyang cannot be brought to the negotiating table without Beijing's participation, which is something that Seoul is well aware of.¹²⁶ Beijing is the driving force behind this structure, which remains the greatest choice for dealing with the nuclear danger posed by North Korea despite the fact that the six-party negotiations have stagnated. It is interesting to note that China and the United States are on the same side at one of the few diplomatic tables that exists, and that table is the six-party talks.

South Korea is reliant on China to convince North Korea to resume talks, and it is reliant on the United States military and its weaponry to protect itself from the threat presented by North Korea. As a result of this, the Yoon administration is eager to strengthen security relations with the United States and Tokyo and move away from the policy of strategic ambiguity that his predecessor upheld.¹²⁷

It is possible that South Korea's aim to maintain its legally bound engagement with the United States is shown by the decision to delay the handover of wartime operational control (OPCON) from South Korea to the United States. The tremendous trust that South Korea has in the role that the alliance plays as the backbone of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula is reflected in the decision to keep the present security structure in the shape of Combined Forces Command. If the transfer of wartime OPCON had gone forward as planned, it would have been

¹²⁵ Baek B. (2022). Korea still balks at joining US-led chip alliance. TheKoreaTimes. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2023/04/419_333648.html

¹²⁶ Jo H. (2022). Korea and China foreign ministers discuss regional security, supply chain, North Korea's provocations. Asia News Network. <https://asianews.network/korea-and-china-foreign-ministers-discuss-regional-security-supply-chain-north-koreas-provocations/>

¹²⁷ Scott, D. (2023). Tilting to US, S Korea ends era of 'strategic ambiguity'. Asia Times. <https://asiatimes.com/2023/02/tilting-to-us-s-korea-ends-era-of-strategic-ambiguity/>

necessary to devise a whole new strategy for defending the Korean Peninsula from potential threats. The delay, which uses North Korea's growing security concerns as its explanation, also serves as a message that China should endeavor to persuade Pyongyang to lessen North Korea's threats of provocation if it wants reduced U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula. This message is sent in conjunction with the justification that the postponement was necessary.¹²⁸

The assertiveness of China is a concern for Seoul, and South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy addresses this concern. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy addresses this concern in a number of ways, including by upholding the rules-based order, demonstrating support for peace and stability in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and opposing unilateral attempts to change the status quo by coercion or force. However, Seoul does not expressly identify China in any of its publications, and the overall tone of its statements towards China is noticeably more conciliatory than that of materials produced by Washington and other highly bellicose countries such as Tokyo.¹²⁹

South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, in general, indicates a strong drive to maintain cordial ties with China based on constructive engagement rather than confronting China, despite South Korea's mistrust and fear of China. This is because South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy was developed in response to the United States' pivot to the Indo-Pacific region. A strategy that is antagonistic toward China is counterproductive to South Korea's broad geostrategic economic and security objectives, which is perhaps the most obvious reason for the country's seeming reluctance to provoke Beijing.¹³⁰ Contrary to several of its neighbors, South Korea has no territorial claims against China, and the lack of any potential for direct military confrontation has kept tensions in its security ties with China to a minimum.

In the future, South Korea will undoubtedly make efforts to restore its ties with Japan while also attempting to strike a better balance in its relationships with China and the United States. The United States of America and Japan are eager to prevent South Korea from moving any deeper into the camp of the Chinese government, and they want the Yoon administration to make a commitment on the Indo-Pacific front. South Korea recognizes that it can ill-afford a confrontational attitude toward China and recognizes that it must stay in China's good books

¹²⁸ Ross, R. S. (2021). China Looks at the Korean Peninsula: The 'Two Transitions'. *Survival*, 63(6), 129–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.2006455>

¹²⁹ Cha S. (2022). South Korea Barely Mentions China in New Indo-Pacific Strategy. *Yahoo News*. <https://news.yahoo.com/south-korea-barely-mentions-china-055333326.html>

¹³⁰ The Government of the Republic of Korea. Strategy for a free, peaceful, and prosperous INDO-PACIFIC REGION. <https://www.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20230106093833927.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202304>

in order to survive. Despite the fact that it will want to re-enhance its connections with the US, South Korea will strive to do so. The concerns that South Korea has about adopting a policy of "containment" toward China extend far beyond the field of national security and into the areas of the economy and technology. It is possible that severe economic stagnation may result from joining efforts led by the United States to decouple from China and isolate China from global supply networks. This might be caused by unrecoverably huge trade imbalances. South Korea's economy is one of the most reliant on China's of any in the world.¹³¹ Exports make for more than forty percent of South Korea's total national revenue, with China taking the lion's share of those exports by a significant margin, consuming twenty-five percent of the overall amount. Without its trade with China, South Korea would have a significant imbalance as well as a slowdown in its economic growth. South Korea has a lot more to lose from commercial disagreements with China in comparison to other nations like the United States and Japan, who depend less on China for their trade and have robust domestic markets. China's role in South Korea's economy has evolved to the point where it is essentially irreplaceable.¹³²

Because of the significance of the Chinese market to South Korea's internationally competitive semiconductor sector, the relevance of South Korea's trade cooperation with China has been elevated. The value of South Korea's semiconductor exports accounts for one fifth of the country's entire trade revenue¹³³, and China buys forty percent of those exports.¹³⁴ The events that have transpired so far are only the prologue. The manufacture of chips in South Korea is dependent on rare earth materials, and an overwhelming majority of those imported rare earth minerals originate from China.¹³⁵ The percentage of rare earth minerals imported from China is around 60%.¹³⁶ South Korean technology behemoths such as Samsung and SK Hynix built facilities and manufactured the vast majority of its memory chips in China over the course of many decades due to China's geographical closeness, abundant resources, and low-cost labor.

¹³¹ Yoon Y. (2022). South Korea Excessively Dependent on China for Certain Items. Businesskorea. <http://www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=96007>

¹³² Kim H. (2022). The China Policy of the Yoon Government and South Korea-China Relations. *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, 31(1), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.33728/IJKUS.2022.31.1.003>

¹³³ Stangarone T. (2023). The Role of South Korea in the U.S. Semiconductor Supply Chain Strategy. The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR). <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-role-of-south-korea-in-the-u-s-semiconductor-supply-chain-strategy/>

¹³⁴ Jeong J. (2022). Korean chip exports to China rise thirteenfold in 21 years. KED Global. <https://www.kedglobal.com/economy/newsView/ked202208220014>

¹³⁵ Korea on track to cut dependency on China for rare earths—The Korea Times. (2022). https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2022/06/488_331765.html

¹³⁶ Korea on track to cut dependency on China for rare earths—The Korea Times. (2022). https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2022/06/488_331765.htm

At least for the time being, South Korea seems to have arrived at the conclusion that the economic advantages that accrue from China much exceed the security problems that are presented by it. In addition, South Korean security planners do not believe that China will ever have a reason to invade or militarize the Korean Peninsula in the future. Because of this, South Korea does not regard itself as a victim of Chinese aggression. At the same time, South Korea will work to establish a buffer zone against China as a kind of certainty, and in this context, it will try to strengthen its security ties with the United States and Japan. It is possible that it will do so, using the danger posed by North Korea as an excuse, which even China cannot refute. Despite Russia's strong ties to China, South Korea will support the United States and the rest of the democratic world whenever and wherever it is essential to do so, just as it did when it imposed economic sanctions against Russia as soon as it invaded Ukraine. South Korea is consolidating its position in an effort to play the long game in one of the most unstable areas in the globe. A nuclear-armed North Korea is one area in which the interests of the United States of America, China, Japan, and South Korea match; hence, South Korea will seek increased collaboration with all three of these countries on this front.

5. Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC) and US commitment

For many decades, the United States and the Republic of Korea have been engaged in discussions on the transfer of OPCON. The Republic of Korea has set the completion of the self-reliant defense as the ultimate aim for its national security. As part of their efforts for the condition-based approach, the United States of America and the Republic of Korea have been conducting joint exercises and simulation games to validate the verification process. The United States and the Republic of Korea have previously confirmed the IOC process at the Combined Command Post Training that took place in August 2019 and at the Military Committee Meeting (MCM) that took place in October 2019. The FOC verification process was planned to be done in 2020; however, because of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the joint exercise has been postponed and scaled down.

The FOC test was just partly finished, and as a result, it was deemed to be insufficient and must be carried out once again. ROK authorities voiced their disapproval of the requirements for OPCON transfer, stating that they were overly strict and should be revised.¹³⁷ The Moon government actively pursued having the FOC test moved to the year 2021 as soon as possible.

¹³⁷ Park B. (2020). Conditions for OPCON transfer are excessive, S. Korean analyst says. Hankyoreh. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/958834.html

The administration of President Trump disagreed, stating that neither side was prepared and that improving the preparedness of the joint defense was more important than transitioning OPCON.¹³⁸ The procedure was restarted when Joe Biden became president in 2021, which marked the beginning of a new phase. According to the first round of reports, senior officials in the Biden administration anticipated a date between 2025 and 2028 for the end of the wartime OPCON.¹³⁹ The FOC test was supposed to take place in 2022, and a complete collaborative analysis of specific rewrites to the COTP as well as a bilateral evaluation of important ROK and alliance capabilities were also supposed to take place by the time the 54th SCM came around in 2022.¹⁴⁰

On the 14th of August in 2022, General Ahn Byung-Seok, the deputy commander of the South Korea-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), was leading the ongoing Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise. This was an opportunity for a key test of Seoul's capabilities to retake the OPCON from Washington. This was the first time that South Korea was leading the entirety of a major combined military exercise with the United States, albeit in a simulated scenario to undertake the full operational capability (FOC) assessment.¹⁴¹ In addition, all parties reaffirmed the need of increasing the number of combined exercises and training sessions, and they acknowledged the significance of getting back to doing large-scale field exercises. As a result of this, the leaders came to the conclusion that the Freedom Shield 23 (FS23) exercise, which took place in March of this year, was a successful demonstration of Alliance preparedness and capabilities.¹⁴² They were also in agreement over the need of carrying out realistic combined exercises and trainings during the later part of the calendar year.

During the 54th Security Consultative Meeting, the US Secretary of Defense and the South Korean Minister of Defense assessed the present security environment in and around the

¹³⁸ US puts processes for OPCON transfer scheduled for 2021 on hold. (2020). Hankyoreh. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/967011.html

¹³⁹ Yun S. (2021). Conditions of OPCON transfer to be met in 2025 at the soonest, US says. The DONG-A ILBO. <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20210218/2444749/1/Conditions-of-OPCON-transfer-to-be-met-in-2025-at-the-soonest-US-says>

¹⁴⁰ 53rd Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique. (2021). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2858814/53rd-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F2858814%2F53rd-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue%2F>

¹⁴¹ Song S. S. Korean military leading key exercise with U.S. in step toward OPCON transition. Yonhap News Agency. from <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220824005700325>

¹⁴² Freedom Shield 23 Set To Begin. (2023). United States Forces Korea. <https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/3317645/freedom-shield-23-set-to-begin/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.usfk.mil%2FMedia%2FPress-Products%2FPress-Releases%2FArticle%2F3317645%2Ffreedom-shield-23-set-to-begin%2F>

Korean Peninsula and the region, and they discussed cooperative measures between their respective countries. Both parties have underlined their worry with the DPRK's continuous attempts to build nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, as well as its escalating rhetoric regarding the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and its proliferation operations. They pointed out that these acts create significant difficulties to the international community and are becoming an increasingly grave danger to the safety and stability of the area and the whole planet. In the Joint Communique, Secretary Austin reaffirmed the steadfast commitment of the United States to provide extended deterrence to the Republic of Korea by deploying the entire spectrum of United States defense capabilities. These capabilities include nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities, as well as advanced non-nuclear capabilities. The phrase "Extended Deterrence" was initially used for the first time in a joint statement that was issued by the United States and South Korea immediately after a nuclear test that was conducted by North Korea in 2006.¹⁴³ He said that any nuclear assault on the United States or its Allies, including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, is unacceptable and would result in the end of the Kim regime. They committed to continue strengthening the capabilities, information sharing, and consultation process of the Alliance, as well as cooperative planning and execution, in order to deter and react to the increasingly dangerous nuclear and missile threats posed by the DPRK. Both leaders also reiterated the resolve of the United States to deploy strategic assets of the United States to the Korean Peninsula in a timely and coordinated way as required, to increase such measures, and to find additional methods to strengthen deterrence in the face of the DPRK's disruptive activities.¹⁴⁴

But there is an additional concern over a different matter, and that is the attitude of the United States on the "No First Use (NFU)" policy, which has been the topic of discussion as of late. The United States has maintained the stance that it does not rule out the potential of a preemptive use of nuclear weapons to fight an enemy's impending nuclear strike and to strengthen deterrence by keeping the adversary uninformed of when the United States would use nuclear weapons. However, the government of President Joe Biden views nuclear weapons not as a weapon to be utilized, but rather as a way to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. As a result, the NFU is allegedly being reconsidered. If the NFU were to become

¹⁴³ The 38th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué. (2006). <https://www.nukestrat.com/korea/JointCommunique2006.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ 54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué. (2022). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3209105/54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communique/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3209105%2F54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communique%2F>

an official policy of the United States, North Korea may get the impression that the United States' commitment to extended deterrence is weakening. This would put South Korea in a position where it would be dependent on North Korea's goodwill for its continued existence.¹⁴⁵

It was reaffirmed in a "2+2" joint statement that was made in October 2016 by the United States and South Korean Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense that the United States maintains the view that any use of nuclear weapons by North Korea would be met with a response that is both effective and overwhelming. During the 2+2 discussion, all parties came to the conclusion that it would be beneficial to create a new Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG).¹⁴⁶ The Trump administration and the Moon government reached an agreement in 2018 to institutionalize the dialogue. In recent years in Seoul's political circles, discussions concerning nuclearization have been increasingly prominent as a topic of discussion.¹⁴⁷

Recent statements made by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol concerning the country's potential future development of its own nuclear weapons prompted United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to make a trip to South Korea to bolster extended deterrence pledges made by the United States.¹⁴⁸ Although the tour represented some movement in the right direction, there is still more that can and should be done. To be more specific, in order for the administration to keep the momentum going after Secretary Austin's trip, they should develop a multiyear plan for integrating more tabletop exercises (TTX) and scenario-based discussions into consultations, conduct a classification review, develop a joint crisis management playbook, and better prepare for potential future proliferation scenarios.¹⁴⁹

Reaffirming steps to boost the implementation of U.S. extended deterrence was a cooperative effort between Secretary Austin and Minister of National Defense Lee Jong-Sup. These measures include efforts to improve information sharing, joint planning and execution, and

¹⁴⁵ Einhorn, R. (2021). *No first use of nuclear weapons is still a bridge too far, but Biden can make progress toward that goal*. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FP_20211020nfu_einhorn.pdf

¹⁴⁶ Joint Statement of the 2016 United States—Republic of Korea Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting. (2016). U.S. Department of State. [//2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/10/263340.htm](https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/10/263340.htm)

¹⁴⁷ Brewer E. & Dalton T. (2023). South Korea's Nuclear Flirtations Highlight the Growing Risks of Allied Proliferation. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/13/south-korea-s-nuclear-flirtations-highlight-growing-risks-of-allied-proliferation-pub-89015>

¹⁴⁸ Special contribution by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. (2023). Yonhap News Agency. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230130008500325>

¹⁴⁹ Hartigan, K. (2023). Future Steps for U.S.-ROK Extended Deterrence Consultations. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-steps-us-rok-extended-deterrence-consultations>

Alliance consultative mechanisms.¹⁵⁰ Even if Secretary Austin and Minister Lee finally affirmed that the Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC) TTX would go ahead, the public debate that has taken place over the course of the last several months on whether or not this TTX was truly occurring cannot continue.

The remarks made by the President of Yoon compelled the Biden administration to take action. In the future, it will not be possible for the United States to afford to remain complacent. The United States cannot avoid having painful talks with its partners about how to react to nuclear threats as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made it very evident. This is not only a concern between the United States and the Republic of Korea, and the sooner the administration recognizes that it is going to have to adjust the way that it prepares, consults, and functions with its allies when it comes to nuclear weapons and the dynamics of escalation, the better off everyone will be.

Both countries also engaged in extensive dialogue over their respective strategies to effectively deter and react to the DPRK's nuclear and missile threats. These strategies include the United States' Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the Missile Defense Review (MDR), and the Republic of Korea's (ROK) reinforcement of the 3K Defense System in November 2022. During the 54th SCM, the Secretary and the Minister brought up the efforts that have been made to strengthen the Alliance's missile response capabilities and posture by establishing the two subordinate groups under the DSC. These efforts include the newly established Counter-Missile Working Group (CMWG) and the reactivated Program Analysis Working Group for the U.S.-ROK Missile Defense (PAWG) in response to increasing missile threats from the DPRK.¹⁵¹

Both the Secretary of Defense and the Minister of National Defense have reaffirmed that the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) is to continue to play an important role in preventing armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula and in promoting peace and stability in Northeast Asia, It was repeated that the United States has an unwavering commitment to the joint defense of the Republic of Korea and it was stated that the United States is committed to maintaining

¹⁵⁰ Joint Statement: Minister of National Defense Lee Jong-Sup and U.S. Secretary of Defense. (2023). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3282748/joint-statement-minister-of-national-defense-lee-jong-sup-and-us-secretary-of-d/><https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3282748/joint-statement-minister-of-national-defense-lee-jong-sup-and-us-secretary-of-d/>

¹⁵¹ 54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique. (2022). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3209105/54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communique/><https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3209105/54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communique/>

existing USFK force levels in order to protect the ROK. The Indo-Pacific area is the priority theater for the US and he noted the increasing frequency and intensity of U.S. strategic asset deployments as visible proof of the U.S. resolve to protect the ROK. This is consistent with the Presidents' agreements to strengthen rotational deployments of U.S. strategic assets in and around the Korean Peninsula.¹⁵²

General Paul J. LaCamera, Commander of the United States and Republic of Korea Combined Forces Command (CFC), provided a report on the outcomes of the U.S.-ROK MCM to the Secretary of Defense and the Minister of National Defense. They agreed to enhancing combined defense capabilities against threats from the DPRK, strengthening the nuclear and WMD deterrent and reaction posture of the CFC, conducting the methodical and steady transfer of operational control (OPCON), and updating relevant operation plans (OPLANS). In addition, the two leaders came to the conclusion that great progress had been made in successfully reacting to a wide range of security problems as a result of changes to the strategic environment.¹⁵³

Before talking about FOC certification, the Secretary and the Minister agreed to finish the bilateral evaluation of Conditions #1 and #2 capabilities and systems and to review the overall status of acquiring bilaterally agreed-upon levels of capabilities and systems. They also noted that all assessment tasks satisfied the criteria following the successful Full Operational Capability (FOC) assessment of the F-CFC. They also committed to completing the bilateral evaluation of Conditions #1 and #2 capabilities and systems and to reviewing the overall status of acquiring bilateral approved-upon levels of capabilities and systems before discussing FOC certification. They also verified the progress of the joint evaluation of the ROK's essential military capabilities and the Alliance's comprehensive response capabilities against DPRK nuclear and missile threats, and they judged that substantial progress had been achieved in meeting the criteria for the transition. This was done in order to certify that significant progress had been made in meeting the requirements for the transition. Both the

¹⁵² 54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique. (2022). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3209105/54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3209105%2F54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue%2F>

¹⁵³ 54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique. (2022). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3209105/54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3209105%2F54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue%2F>

Minister and the Secretary were in agreement that the OPLAN planning process should include further management of bridging and enduring capabilities.¹⁵⁴

During the Conditions-based Operational Control (OPCON) Transition Working Group (COTWG), both parties acknowledged the progress that had been made toward the transition of wartime OPCON to the Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC). They also reaffirmed their mutual commitment to meeting the three conditions outlined in the bilaterally approved Conditions-based Operational Control Transition Plan (COTP), as well as to strengthening Alliance combined defense capabilities. In particular, both leaders agreed that it was necessary to acquire capabilities and systems that had been given bilateral approval before suggesting that the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) get Full Operational Capability (FOC) Certification. In light of these findings, the two parties have committed to maintaining their forward momentum until the 55th SCM, which is planned to take place in the fall of 2023.¹⁵⁵

Now, more than ever, it is imperative that South Korea deepen its relationship with the United States. It is imperative that concrete measures be taken to assure the United States' security commitment, which should include a more robust deterrent. Only until South Korea is consistent in both its words and its actions will it be able to expect this of the United States. Given that having the capacity and means to counter North Korean nuclear and missile threats is essential to extended deterrence, South Korea should request that the United States relocate its tactical nuclear weapons. Additionally, it should form a Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) with the United States as a consultative group that determines the deployment and operation of nuclear weapons. This could be done in a manner that is comparable to the arrangement that exists between the United States and its European allies.¹⁵⁶ In spite of the fact that the United States may be hesitant, it is vital to obtain the participation of the United States by

¹⁵⁴ 54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique. (2022). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3209105/54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3209105%2F54th-security-consultative-meeting-joint-communicue%2F>

¹⁵⁵ Joint Press Statement for the 22nd Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue. (2023). U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3360919/joint-press-statement-for-the-22nd-korea-us-integrated-defense-dialogue/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3360919%2Fjoint-press-statement-for-the-22nd-korea-us-integrated-defense-dialogue%2F>

¹⁵⁶ The Troubled ROK-U.S. Alliance. (2022). The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/the-troubled-rok-u-s-alliance/>

placing an emphasis on the need of taking actions that are consistent with the altered security environment.

Joint military exercises might serve as a platform for broader international collaboration in the future. To re-establish the lead-support relationship and demonstrate the Korean military's operational capabilities, as well as to construct and run a future military headquarter commanded by a Korean four-star general, an accurate evaluation procedure is required. The most significant instrument and mechanism in this process is joint military drills. This procedure must be carried out by Korea and the United States, and it must be rigorously assessed across numerous categories or check points. Joint military exercises must be extended, not reduced to accelerate OPCON transfer.¹⁵⁷

6. Discussion

My finding is that South Korea is actively moving toward completing the OPCON transfer during the conflict, and its behavior supports this hypothesis. The research hypothesis is supported by the literature review and analysis of the research topic. In this case study, I used the a qualitative case study approach to assess and determine how the different components, as well as their goals and motivations, are assisting in the successful completion of the OPCON transfer.

Launch of comprehensive Defense Reform 2.0 and its eventual continuation with other long-term military improvement initiatives provide the first important piece of evidence supporting my theory. It places a strong focus on preparing for upcoming challenges, which is consistent with taking control of joint ROK-US operations. The US is another force behind the reform. It is difficult to see this as anything other than a step toward the conclusion of the transfer of OPCON, making it a "doubly decisive".

The Yoon government's initiative to upgrade the Three-Axis System and add key domestically developed ballistic missiles as a conventional deterrence, can be viewed as "doubly decisive". It represents a significant development in the deterrence aspect, even though South Korea still relies on US nuclear deterrence.

South Korea's attempts to accommodate China rather than counterbalance it tells us two things. On the one hand, since it is aware that China has influence over the DPRK, it strives to win

¹⁵⁷ Hong K. (2022). Resumption of ROK-US Joint Military Exercises and Reinforcement of ROK-US-Japan Security Cooperation. <https://koreaonpoint.org/view.php?id=126>

China for itself against North Korea. Although South Korea relies on the US, it can be said that the ROK is less eager to join a US regional alliance against China. By examining the facts, it can be seen as more of a "smoking-gun" as we are aware that the transfer of OPCON is the primary objective. These efforts are made to improve the security environment to protect against DPRK provocations.

The relationship between South Korea and China can be seen as a "smoking gun" by examining the evidence from an anti-hypothesis point of view (South Korea is not progressing in meeting the requirements of the transfer of OPCON). But it fails in this sense because the evidence shows that South Korea is only doing this for the benefit of transfer of wartime control and not against its alliance with the US and its values, principles, and beliefs. Therefore, the evidence continues to support the initial theory that South Korea is steadily moving toward the transfer.

7. Conclusion

A number of important actions have been done by the US and ROK to hasten the OPCON transfer. The South Korea is now facing geopolitical, geoeconomic, and technical dangers that are unparalleled in its history in terms of their combined extent and severity. The country's command and control systems must be updated and improved; its military must become a technology-driven, future-oriented fighting force; its relationship with the United States must be strengthened; and more resilient supply chains strategies must be developed. Such measures would aid Seoul in addressing the converging crises that are right on its doorstep, such as the crisis from North Korea which is fully nuclear capable, growing spillovers from the U.S.-China rivalry, significant economic disruptions, and deteriorating global technological competition.

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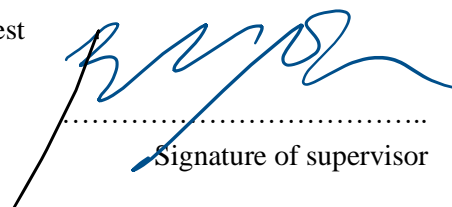
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Level of program (Bachelor's/Master's):	Master's
Type of program (part-time/full time):	Full time
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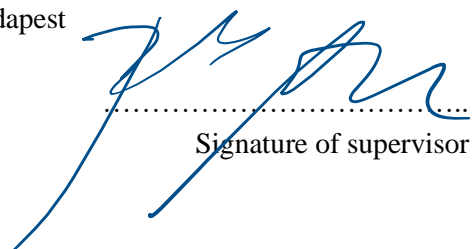
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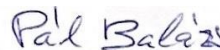
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