

DEBUNKING THE KOREAN PENINSULA “ARMS RACE”: WHAT’S BEHIND SOUTH KOREA’S MILITARY FORCE DEVELOPMENT?

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ABSTRACT

Following a record number of North Korean missile launches, as well as tests by South Korea, assertions have been widely and uncritically made that Seoul is participating in an inter-Korean arms race. This paper challenges that paradigm by arguing that South Korea’s military acquisitions, displays, and testing of new weapons are better explained as proactive efforts to build military capabilities to support national security priorities in a broader context, rather than reactions to the threat from North Korea. While North Korea’s reasons for weapons testing are well-documented, South Korea’s military buildup in recent years has received far less attention. This paper examines drivers behind South Korea’s military investments and makes recommendations for how the Republic of Korea (ROK)-United States alliance could incorporate these capabilities into alliance military operations beyond simply deterring or defeating North Korea. To do so, it examines how broader drivers affect ROK strategic thinking, the demands this puts on the ROK military, and how those demands translate to specific defense acquisitions. With the start of a new ROK presidential administration, it is an opportune time for Seoul and Washington to coordinate approaches on capabilities development in ways that would benefit both countries in the years to come.

Key Words: South Korea, Arms Race, Military Spending, ROK-U.S. Alliance, Northeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

As missiles are launched into the waters around Korea, headlines repeatedly warn of an escalating and worrisome “arms race” between North and South Korea under the assumption that these launches are driven by a contest between the two for military advantage.^{1,2} Like many common turns of phrase, “arms race” is clear, compelling, and simplifies a complex reality. It is also very misleading in this case.³ Pyongyang’s reasons for testing new missiles are well-explored, revolving far more around countering the United States than South Korea. Even Kim Yo-jong recently emphasized the United States as the driver of North Korea’s arms development, downplaying South Korea as a justification.⁴ In contrast, the logic behind Seoul’s military buildup in recent years has received far less analytic attention. What attention has been applied largely has focused on the military balance on the peninsula and preparations for transition of Republic of Korea (ROK)-United States alliance wartime operational control (OPCON)—which are only part of the story.⁵

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Seoul's drive for new weapons systems is better explained as proactive efforts to build military capabilities to support national security priorities in a broader context, rather than just reactions to the North Korean threat. To support this argument, this paper analyzes how these drivers affect ROK strategic thinking, and the respective "demands" this puts on the ROK military. In turn this enables explanations of how Seoul's priorities for its military result in specific defense acquisitions. This paper then offers recommendations for how the ROK-U.S. alliance could incorporate these capabilities into a broader approach to alliance military operations while still maintaining robust deterrence towards North Korea. With the start of a new ROK presidential administration, now is an opportune time to coordinate approaches on capabilities development in ways that would benefit both countries in the years to come.

THE MISLEADING PARADIGM OF A KOREAN ARMS RACE

During the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), the ROK defense budget grew an average of 6.5 percent per year, putting the country on course to spend 50 percent more than Japan by 2025, a country with a larger population and economy.⁶ Alongside record numbers of North Korean missile launches and South Korea's own tests, this growth has helped prompt assertions that Seoul is participating in an inter-Korean arms race. This premise has been so often and broadly repeated that the "inter-Korean arms race" paradigm appears to be widely and uncritically accepted.⁷

Proponents of this paradigm point to Seoul's reactions to North Korea's weapons tests, arguing that Pyongyang's growing capabilities are the primary driver of ROK military investments. This viewpoint was particularly evident in September 2021, when the ROK tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) several days after North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and a new cruise missile.⁸ Similarly, in early 2022, North Korea resumed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches—paused since 2017—after which South Korea launched its own missiles and its first space launch using solid propellant.⁹ Though the ROK's development of a new space launch vehicle was obviously undertaken long before North Korea's resumption of ICBM testing, for example, this nuance is often glossed over in media accounts which focus

on narratives surrounding weapons tests and displays by North and South Korea as being reactions to each other, instead of critically examining the drivers of these programs.

While an "arms race" with North Korea should not be seen as the primary driver of ROK arms acquisition, this does not mean that North Korea's advancements are or should be ignored by Seoul when developing its military capabilities. Instead, the threats posed by the growth of North Korea's ballistic and nuclear weapons programs should not be considered in isolation, but rather in conjunction with other drivers. For instance, the growing potential for a conflict in the Taiwan Strait may indirectly drive the ROK to invest more to maintain deterrence and defense against North Korea, because such a crisis could pull the United States' attention and capabilities away from the defense of the ROK.¹⁰ This could matter more for Seoul's defense requirements than any perceived or actual increase in North Korean capability.

BROADER DYNAMICS AND ROK STRATEGIC THINKING

South Korea's geography and history help frame and direct its approach to military capacity-building. With North Korea occupying its only land border, South Korea is effectively an island with a heavily export- and energy-dependent economy, making air and sea lines of communication vital to its survival and prosperity. Meanwhile, U.S.-People's Republic of China (PRC) great power competition and Russia's invasion of Ukraine bring echoes of the past that have deeply shaped Korean thinking on national security issues—for centuries, Korea was a central zone of contention for rivalries between larger powers and subject to constant foreign invasions.

Historical Involvement by Great Powers

The Korean Peninsula has a long history of military intervention by great powers. Koreans have often been forced to rely on a foreign power to help expel an invader, creating a strong historical impetus for the ROK to increase its own defense spending and military acquisitions. Though Japan's invasions of Korea and its occupation of the peninsula from 1910 to 1945 are more recent and vividly referenced by South Koreans, China has invaded and occupied Korea on many more occasions. As the Stimson Center's Yun Sun notes, there is a Korean saying that "Japan is the 100-year enemy, but China is the 1,000-year enemy."¹¹

In addition to China and Japan, Russia is an enduring regional concern for Seoul. Japan's occupation of Korea followed an intense rivalry with Russia for domination of the peninsula. More recently, Moscow played a key role in establishing North Korea as a separate state with both the means and the ideology to attempt to reunify the peninsula by force when it was divided at the 38th Parallel, and later helped build up its military capabilities—including its missile and nuclear programs. During the Korean War, Moscow's support for North Korea, and both U.S. and Chinese interventions were decisive to the outcome. The development of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and the tendency of Beijing and Moscow to see U.S. alliances as a challenge to their interests has all but guaranteed that Korea will remain a point of contention by great powers. For instance, Moon was quoted saying that South Korea needs to have defense capabilities not only to deter North Korea, but also to cope with its geopolitical position "stuck between great powers."¹² This enduring historical and geographic importance creates a complex security environment for the ROK.

U.S.-China Great Power Competition

Strategic competition with the PRC has become the dominant paradigm of U.S. foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, putting the ROK in an awkward strategic position between the U.S. as its longtime ally and the PRC as its largest trading partner.¹³ Though Washington has been cautious to avoid the appearance of forcing Seoul to "choose sides," Beijing has been more explicit—to the point of coercing Seoul not to align with Washington on key issues. For example, Beijing imposed unofficial sanctions that cost the ROK billions of dollars when Seoul allowed the United States to deploy a THAAD ballistic missile defense battery in 2017.¹⁴

Despite the potential for backlash from China, newly elected South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared he will pursue the ROK's own THAAD battery and take an overall stronger stance against the PRC, though the former commitment may be walked back.¹⁵ In doing so, he represents one of several perspectives in South Korea on how to respond to great power competition.¹⁶ That perspective argues that with other regional powers aligning their policies in multilateral forums such as the Quad, the ROK risks isolation by avoiding cooperation. On the other hand, an alternative perspective argues that U.S. coalition-building against China is a source of entrapment for the ROK, and that hedging and developing greater independence from the United States is thus a better course.¹⁷ Both perspectives, however, agree that the proactive development of greater ROK capabilities is necessary.

The ROK-U.S. Alliance

Changes in the ROK-U.S. alliance, and how the alliance is viewed from Seoul, are also a major factor in Seoul's decisions on defense investments. Whether progressives or conservatives are in office, Seoul has expressed for decades its desire to reduce its reliance on Washington for defense and for a more equal security partnership.¹⁸ This appears to be driven by a combination of factors, including a concern that Washington's will and/or capability to shoulder such a large proportion of the defense of the ROK may decline over time, and also the ROK's desire to be a more independent "middle power" actor capable of taking on a greater share of its own defense requirements while protecting its sovereignty and interests.¹⁹ For its part, Washington has intentionally and unintentionally fueled both of these factors.

Despite the alliance's institutions, Seoul's confidence in Washington's commitment to the defense of South Korea has waxed and waned since the signing of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953, helping foster a longstanding South Korean desire to reduce reliance on U.S. military support. South Koreans have been repeatedly reminded that U.S. domestic politics and other U.S. priorities always have the potential to affect the alliance. In particular, Washington's level of U.S. commitment could change with each president—meaning that the ROK could always be one election away from seeing a dramatic reduction in U.S. military presence and/or open questions about the conditions under which the U.S. would be willing to provide military support to the ROK. Though President Carter's plans to withdraw U.S. Forces from Korea were decades ago and ultimately stymied, potential for U.S. "abandonment" is still a factor in South Korean thinking on increased long-term defense investments.²⁰ The Trump presidency brought this factor back to the forefront, given his generally dismissive attitude toward alliances, his vocal demands for greater defense cost-sharing from Seoul, and reports that he was considering withdrawing U.S. troops from the ROK entirely.²¹

Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to pressure the ROK to focus its military modernization on meeting bilaterally established requirements for the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) of the defense of South Korea do have some effect on ROK defense spending, but also clearly show how ROK defense development priorities do not have an overriding focus on North Korea. Now codified in the Conditions-Based OPCON Transfer Plan (COT-P), these requirements are relatively narrow in scope and encompass

neither threats beyond North Korea, nor the strategic aspect of the military alliance beyond the peninsula.²² Though some commentators have argued that President Moon's defense buildup has been focused on meeting the requirements of OPCON transition, this is at odds with the reality of Moon's program priorities and defense budgets.²³ Indeed, even critics in the ROK have pointed out that many high-end platforms funded by Seoul—of the type that would be useful for regional missions—have nothing to do with requirements for OPCON transition while investments in some capabilities specifically for the ROK to play a greater leadership role in a war versus North Korea, continue to lag.²⁴

Outside of the focus on OPCON transition, Washington has been encouraging the ROK to take a more regional view of the alliance—often manifesting as pressure to develop trilateral security cooperation with Japan—while also repeatedly demonstrating that the ROK is only one of many U.S. allies and not the highest priority. Both of these trends—which have again been evident since the Biden administration took office—help to drive Seoul toward seeking more independent and regional military capabilities. The Biden-Moon summit in May 2021 put renewed emphasis on the non-security aspects of the U.S.-ROK alliance and surprised many observers with an evident tilt by Seoul toward aligning more openly with the United States.²⁵ Meanwhile, the AUKUS agreement between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, rightly or wrongly, can be interpreted in Seoul as indicating its lower priority as an ally—particularly since AUKUS will enable a nuclear-powered submarine force for Australia, despite Washington repeatedly rebuffing Seoul's requests for the same.²⁶

Economic and Political Drivers

For a democracy like the ROK, military spending and defense acquisitions must also navigate and be compatible with domestic politics. ROK administrations have frequently highlighted military development and arms sales as a source of growth for the economy. According to the ROK Agency for Defense Development (ADD), military research and development spending of \$34.3 billion resulted in a domestic economic impact of \$368.9 billion.²⁷ This perspective, in part, has been premised on taking advantage of spinoff effects, whereby South Korea's defense sector leverages the technology and resource-base of robust civilian industries.²⁸

ROK leaders are also aware that encouraging foreign purchases of Korean military technology helps grow the scale and sophistication of South Korea's defense industry. Put another way, independent defense capabilities are enabled by an independent defense industry, and an independent defense industry is much more affordable if other customers are helping to pay the costs. In just one recent example, the ROK signed a \$717 million-dollar defense deal in December 2021 to provide Australia with artillery, supply vehicles, and radars.²⁹ This type of deal is beneficial to the South Korean economy, and serves strategic purposes as a means of building relations and expanding influence.

Nonetheless, government funding for other industries contributes more to economic growth than military investments,³⁰ and the ROK must balance defense spending with other domestic priorities. In 2021, for instance, heightened defense spending within the Moon administration's record spending plan was still less than 10 percent of the budget overall.³¹ During the election, likewise, neither foreign policy nor defense spending were major issues. Instead, domestic issues like affordable housing and gender dynamics were at the forefront.

IMPACTS ON ROK STRATEGIC THINKING ON DEFENSE INVESTMENT

The foreign and domestic drivers detailed above have resulted in broad agreement in the ROK that elevated military capabilities are necessary beyond those needed to deter and defend against a North Korean attack. ROK Defense White Papers and statements by ROK leaders show the impacts on strategic thinking and the demands placed on the ROK Armed Forces.

First published in 1988, ROK Defense White Papers (DWPs) are released every two years, resulting in two to three reports per administration. Table 1 focuses on white papers released since 2012, covering the last decade of ROK defense policy, showing how ROK strategy has changed over time while maintaining a focus on the current environment. Table 1 shows how each DWP describes the ROK's security environment in general and specific to Northeast Asia.

Table 1. ROK Defense White Papers 2012-2020

	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Administration	Lee	Park	Park	Moon	Moon
Security Environment	Challenges that pose threats to our national security are likely to further increase ³²	The threat to security...has never been greater ³³	A security situation unprecedented in its complexity and severity ³⁴	There are various security threats coming from all directions ³⁵	Extremely complex and grave, both internally and externally ³⁶
Northeast Asian Security Environment	Anxiety over security due to competition for regional ascendancy continues ³⁷	A growing arms race has intensified among the countries of Northeast Asia ³⁸	Northeast Asian countries are building up their military strength in an attempt to achieve military superiority ³⁹	Potential threats are expected to increase as the regional powers vie for wider influence in the region and engage in an escalating arms race ⁴⁰	China and Russia are strengthening strategic solidarity while countries including Japan are continuously strengthening military power ⁴¹

Over the past decade, DWPs have consistently identified a dangerous security environment surrounding the ROK. In 2012, the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013) couched positive trends in regional economic and political cooperation with worries about increasing tensions over history, territorial disputes, and maritime demarcations⁴² Although his administration did not identify a regional arms race, it did note bilateral competition between China and Japan to increase their naval and air force capabilities.⁴³ During the Park administration (2013-2017), however, a *regional*—not inter-Korean—arms race was explicitly identified in both the 2014 and 2016 white papers. Under the Moon administration, discussion of an arms race was limited in comparison, but heavy emphasis was placed on the development of “omnidirectional” capabilities, indicating that the regional security calculus remained similar.

As a result, every DWP has included an emphasis on developing “future-oriented” defense capabilities, but only North Korea is explicitly identified as a driver of defense

preparations. This does not mean that ROK defense acquisitions are solely focused on North Korea. Instead, this omission is designed to avoid antagonizing and drawing criticism from foreign and domestic audiences. Explicitly identifying the PRC, Russia or even Japan as justifications for defense programs, or increased defense spending in general, would create unnecessary political risk when Seoul can instead easily blame Pyongyang’s provocative behavior and weapons testing. The premise that South Korea is not merely responding to threats from North Korea is supported by statements from ROK leaders. Moon, for instance, said in February 2022 that “...the geopolitical position of the Korean Peninsula itself always [presents] an environment with grave security [concerns]...We need to have the power to protect ourselves under any circumstances.”⁴⁴

Having established the broader drivers of ROK arms acquisition and impacts on ROK strategic thinking, this paper can turn to the additional demands being placed on the ROK military (Table 2).

Table 2. Demands Placed on the ROK Military

Demand	Explanation
1. Develop multiuse capabilities that are not limited to countering the threat from North Korea	While the ROK cannot directly cite countries like China as potential adversaries, it can develop multiuse (or omnidirectional) military assets while citing the North Korea threat.
2. Increase power projection capabilities	The ROK's desire for a broader regional and international presence, alongside worldwide economic interests, requires increased power projection capabilities. Without military bases abroad, long-range naval, air, and missile assets are necessary.
3. Decrease manpower required to operate key military assets without reducing deterrence or capabilities	The ROK's demographic trends, alongside desires for top-tier air and maritime capabilities with regional reach, require a reduction in personnel, downsizing of the legacy ground forces, and reduced reliance on large numbers of short-term conscripts.
4. Improve <i>independent</i> military capabilities that are not reliant on the United States	Whether operating unilaterally or alongside the United States beyond the Korean Peninsula, greater independent military capabilities are necessary.

All four of these demands are proactive rather than reactive, since despite a challenging security environment, there is not currently an existential threat that the ROK military has the lead for dealing with. With an all-out North Korean ground offensive implausible in the face of South Korean and U.S. conventional military superiority, the only truly existential threat the ROK faces is potential North Korean nuclear strikes—a narrow and extreme challenge for which the U.S. extended deterrent “nuclear umbrella” is still relied upon. In turn, this emphasizes that the ROK’s arms acquisitions are resource-driven rather than requirement-driven: the ROK is investing what resources it reasonably can commit given its domestic context to developing desired future capabilities. This adds credence that recent North Korean missile tests and a peninsular arms race are not the primary driver of ROK arms acquisition.

SPECIFIC ROK DEFENSE ACQUISITIONS

An examination of specific ROK defense acquisitions, including developmental capabilities, supports a focus on broader drivers. This section analyzes the ROK’s defense

reform efforts and future capabilities, including how specific developmental assets are connected to the demands established in the previous section.

ROK Reform Efforts

In recent years, the ROK has implemented a series of top-down defense reform efforts. In 2005, President Roh Moo-hyun initiated Defense Reform 2020, which sought to develop a smaller, more technologically-advanced force. According to retired ROK lieutenant general Chun In-Bum, this effort envisioned “a more capable South Korea in the face of a rising China and a normalized Japan.”⁴⁵ For their part, Presidents Lee and Park continued modernization efforts, but the scale and nature of those efforts were less broad and ambitious than that of previous and subsequent administrations, in part due to the need to react to escalating North Korean aggression by scaling back some of the focus on regional military capabilities.⁴⁶ In 2018, Moon unveiled Defense Reform 2.0, which emphasized Fourth Industrial Revolution technology and cites omnidirectional security threats.⁴⁷ These reform efforts are key to understanding the drivers of ROK defense investments because they connect

a specific expenditure of limited domestic resources with a range of desired future capabilities, emphasizing the proactive nature of ROK defense spending rather than its reactivity to North Korean developments.

In addition, analysis of these reform efforts shows how unfavorable demographic trends, which are decreasing available manpower for the ROK military, also factor heavily into both the increased costs of defense investments and the types of advanced new equipment being acquired. These reforms exchange cheap, short-term conscript manpower for more reliance on expensive advanced hardware and manned by a larger proportion of long-term volunteer professional personnel, in a way that could actually reduce the capacity of a much smaller ROK Army to decisively win a ground war with North Korea.⁴⁸ Establishing and maintaining this shift from personnel quantity to quality

requires increased investments in training, benefits, and pay, costs that arguably have still not been fully factored in given the huge scope of the looming demographic crisis facing South Korea.⁴⁹

Future ROK Capabilities

The specific acquisitions and changes made to the ROK military also reinforce that a bilateral arms race with North Korea is not the overriding explanation for ROK force development. There are several specific categories of developmental assets that this section focuses on: ballistic and cruise missiles; naval assets; missile defense capabilities; and surveillance, reconnaissance, and satellite capabilities. Tables 3-6 list a sample of specific assets relevant to these categories, their purpose, and the demand they fulfill for the ROK.

Table 3. Ballistic and Cruise Missiles

Asset	Purpose	Demands Fulfilled (from Table 2)
<i>Hyunmoo</i> 2B Short Range Ballistic Missile ⁵⁰	Short-range, solid-fueled ballistic missile with a range of 500-800 km	1, 2, 3, 4
<i>Haeseong</i> III Land Attack Cruise Missile ⁵¹	Submarine-launched land-attack cruise missile with a range of 1,500 km	1, 2, 3, 4
<i>Hyunmoo</i> 3D/4 Land Attack Cruise Missile ⁵²	Developmental land-attack cruise missile with a potential range of 3,000 km	1, 2, 3, 4

In May 2021, Seoul and Washington agreed to end bilateral guidelines restricting ROK missile and rocket development, which had been gradually relaxed but still reportedly maintained some restrictions on range and warhead weight and prevented ROK solid-fuel space launch vehicles.⁵³ As the guidelines were eased and then dropped, the ROK moved quickly to field a diverse roster of indigenously-developed capabilities that fulfill two of the demands identified by this paper: multiuse capabilities not limited to countering North Korea, and improved independent military capabilities.

The former is clear from the range of the *Haeseong* III and *Hyunmoo* 3D/4, which stretch far beyond the Korean Peninsula. Likewise, having independent ballistic and cruise missile capabilities allows the ROK to deter threats regardless of U.S. commitment and reduces reliance on the U.S. missile umbrella.

When considering the drivers of South Korea strategic-level capabilities, it is also worth examining ROK public opinion. Support for a domestic nuclear arsenal is robust, with the Chicago Council finding that 71 percent of respondents favor the development of nuclear weapons. Notably, “Threats other than North Korea” were a main driver for this support, demonstrating popular support for developing strategic capabilities beyond those needed to deter and defeat North Korea and further supporting the premise that an inter-Korean “arms race” is not the primary driver of ROK interest in expanded military capabilities.⁵⁴

Table 4. Naval Assets

Asset	Purpose	Demands Fulfilled (from Table 2)
CVX-class Aircraft Carrier ⁵⁵	Protect maritime sovereignty, elevate national stature, protect international interests	1, 2, 4
Daegu-class Frigates ⁵⁶	Replace aging vessels, improve anti-submarine capabilities	1, 2, 4
Changbogo-III Submarines ⁵⁷	Increase underwater defense capabilities, power projection	1, 2, 4
Underwater Mine Disposal Vehicles ⁵⁸	Remove mines from major ports, sea lanes, and beaches	1, 2, 4

South Korea's improved naval capabilities will fulfill a diverse set of demands for the ROK Armed Forces. All assets listed in Table 4 are clearly multiuse, and many will increase naval power projection and improve independent capabilities. For instance, the ROK's development of an indigenous aircraft carrier is hardly the most efficient means to project airpower to counter neighboring North Korea—making it a confusing acquisition for those not accounting for broader

drivers.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, China has also sharply increased its mine-laying capabilities, a likely driver of the ROK's underwater mine disposal vehicles more so than North Korea's long-established mining capabilities.⁶⁰ Lastly, both North Korea and China have large submarine fleets, making investments in anti-submarine defenses effective towards both potential threats.

Table 5. Missile Defense Capabilities

Asset	Purpose	Demands Fulfilled (from Table 2)
Indigenous Iron Dome ⁶¹	Short-range rocket defense	4
L-SAM Interceptor ⁶²	Ballistic missile interception	1, 4

In addition to improved ballistic missile capabilities, the ROK has also sought to improve its ballistic missile defenses, with an emphasis on "omnidirectional" capabilities. While Seoul directly cites North Korea's improved capabilities as the driver of this arms acquisition, it is very unlikely that Pyongyang is the only threat in mind given larger regional efforts to improve missile arsenals, particularly by China. The clear exception to this regional outlook are efforts to develop an indigenous "Iron Dome" to protect against North Korean artillery rockets and smaller missiles. In any case,

ROK indigenous development of missile defenses is driven, in part, by regional considerations instead of purchasing or requesting deployment of U.S. systems. The criticism from Russia and China for accepting the deployment of a U.S. THAAD missile battery, as well as the economic punishment orchestrated by Beijing, underscores that U.S. systems lead to undesired regional reactions—meaning that the ROK will favor indigenously developed missile defense systems, even if U.S. systems would be a more efficient way to meet the threat from North Korea.

Table 6. Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Satellite Capabilities

Asset	Purpose	Demands Fulfilled (from Table 2)
VTOL drones for maritime surveillance ⁶³	Increase maritime surveillance capabilities	1, 2, 3, 4
Maritime surveillance radar ⁶⁴	Increase maritime surveillance capabilities	1, 2, 3, 4
Indigenous satellite constellations ⁶⁵	Increase surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities	1, 2, 3, 4

To decrease reliance on U.S. systems and navigate elevated concerns about air and naval incursions, the ROK is developing improved surveillance, reconnaissance, and satellite capabilities. In a press statement, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) noted that a new indigenously-developed radar system's "successful development is expected to strengthen our Navy's defense capabilities against security threats from all directions..."⁶⁶ This likely reflects a heightened Chinese military presence in the West (Yellow) Sea, including a 2021 incident in which China sent a warship past the self-imposed boundary line near the ROK's Baengnyeong island.⁶⁷ Chinese naval and coast guard vessels have also repeatedly crossed into the ROK's territorial waters under the guise of policing their fishing fleet—and confrontations between the ROK Coast Guard and Chinese fisherman have often turned violent.⁶⁸ This puts a premium on maritime surveillance capabilities that can track and monitor incursions in real time.

Meanwhile, the development of ROK solid-fuel space launch vehicles and an independent advanced surveillance satellite constellation bring top-tier regional and global capabilities that other intelligence collection platforms do not, though they would also have utility for monitoring North Korea.⁶⁹ The massive investments necessary to develop such a capability would not make sense purely in the context of an "arms race" with North Korea, given how primitive North Korea's satellite capabilities are and the other options the ROK has available to improve its ability to surveil its close neighbor.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With a new ROK administration in office, the time is ripe to discard narratives of an "arms race" with North Korea or wartime OPCON transition requirements as the overriding drivers of ROK military investments. Clearly, the ROK must improve its capabilities as part of a ROK-U.S. alliance approach to deter and defeat the growing threats posed by North Korea's accelerated weapons development—but it must do so while also developing military capabilities suitable for roles beyond North Korea. This is especially relevant given Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has highlighted the dangers of non-nuclear military aggression backed by nuclear weapons and reinforced the drivers identified by this paper.

There was a time when it was appropriate for Washington to press Seoul in detail on defense acquisitions as part of wartime operational control, particularly when plans for a "supporting to supported" structure would have ROK forces operating largely independently from U.S. forces.⁷⁰ That time has now passed, given that the alliance plans on the retention of a combined ROK-U.S. headquarters—with a South Korean commander—as the post-transition arrangement, and that the alliance is increasing its focus beyond North Korea.⁷¹ It is time to move beyond COT-P, and its focus on requirements for wartime operational control transition, as the central frame of reference for ROK-U.S. South Korea's defense procurement and overall military force development. Washington should open a new format of bilateral dialogue with Seoul on force development, embracing and encouraging development of ROK capabilities beyond the North Korea challenge, rather than casting them as a distraction from OPCON transition.

For its part, Seoul should engage in a transparent cost-benefit analysis on these acquisitions, including an explicit dialogue with Washington to address issues such as interoperability to maximize the strategic and operational value of its acquisitions. New indigenously-developed air and missile defense hardware, for example, will be beneficial for meeting threats from North Korea—as well as China, and even Russia—but will be vastly more effective with the capacity to share data in real time with U.S. systems in a crisis or war. A light aircraft carrier program, though ambitious, costly, and inefficient for countering North Korea, may prove worth the costs by increasing South Korea’s capacity regionally and globally, and could easily incorporate technologies that allow it to operate with multinational task forces. In contrast, developing a nuclear-powered submarine force, with all the attendant economic and political costs, would probably not add significant military value in comparison to the vast price.

In addition, as the ROK military’s capability to perform missions beyond North Korea continues to grow rapidly, Seoul and Washington should develop bilateral and multilateral military plans and exercises that expand the scope of the alliance’s military cooperation—despite the likely push-back from Beijing. Whether or not Seoul and Washington will soon agree to explicitly address threats from the PRC, such as via military exercises focused on countering PRC coercion or incursion, this should be the long-term goal. Pretending that South Korea capabilities developed more for their regional and global utility are part of an “arms race” with North Korea may be politically expedient in the short term, but ultimately such capabilities will be far less useful—to the ROK, to the alliance and to the common interests—if this political “cover story” interferes with the operational and strategic preparation for their use.

The sooner that Seoul’s decisions about defense capabilities development are made, explained, and implemented in a broader alliance context alongside elevated deterrence against North Korea, the better it will be for both U.S. and South Korean national interests in the years ahead.

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