

Rhetoric vs. Reality: Seoul & Washington's Strategic Alignment on Taiwan

By Clint Work

U.S.-China relations turned decidedly negative over the last decade, a trend that picked up speed in the last five years. Russia's war in Ukraine only accelerated it. In this context, the United States and its allies and partners regularly reaffirm the importance of a rules-based international order, emphasize the sovereign inviolability and territorial integrity of states, condemn the unilateral use of force to change the status quo, and link events in Europe with the Indo-Pacific and the risk of conflict over Taiwan in particular. Following Washington's lead, U.S. allies and partners increasingly have emphasized—individually and collectively—the importance of upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. South Korea, too, has followed suit.

Seoul's clearer strategic messaging and more pronounced lean toward Washington amidst U.S.-China strategic competition, although initiated under former President Moon Jae In, gained considerable momentum under President Yoon Suk Yeol. In the process, Seoul gradually adopted a more outspoken position regarding the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait in ROK strategy documents, U.S.-ROK bilateral alliance statements, and in U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral settings. Adopting a clearer rhetorical position on Taiwan in multiple formats and framing it in increasingly expansive terms—as a regional and global issue yet also directly linked to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula – are unprecedented steps for the ROK. It represents a sea change in Seoul's strategic signaling.

Nevertheless, there remain significant challenges in turning rhetoric into reality. Such signaling may help socialize the Korean public—which has shown increasingly negative views towards China—to the strategic shift underway. However, Seoul faces hurdles regarding the lack of domestic political consensus around such messaging, strategic limits in leaning too far towards the United States at the cost of its relationship with China, and risks in subordinating its fundamental national security priority of addressing a

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worsening North Korean threat to U.S.-China strategic competition. Moreover, the U.S.-ROK alliance faces a gap between such rhetoric and its political, military, and operational preparedness to navigate an actual conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan and the attendant risk of a simultaneous conflict in Korea. There is a lack of planning or consensus within the alliance regarding the strategic flexibility of United States Forces Korea (USFK) as well as South Korea and the alliance's potential role and responsibilities during such an event. These challenges are made even more urgent due to North Korea's own advancements.

This paper examines the issues above in several sections. The first section provides context by briefly reviewing a 2006 U.S.-ROK understanding regarding the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula. While deliberately vague, the understanding and the debates surrounding it catalyzed a broader joint vision study and strategic reconceptualization of the alliance. The second section focuses on the reemergence in the late 2010s of discussions about USFK's potential regional use and pressure by Washington on Seoul to embrace a wider role for the alliance amidst worsening U.S.-China relations. This section examines the Moon administration's subtle but real rhetorical shift in strategic signaling regarding China and Taiwan specifically, which picked up momentum once President Biden was elected but was tempered by Seoul's desire to maintain a degree of strategic ambiguity.

The third section shows how, in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine and growing tensions surrounding Taiwan, U.S. officials continued to discuss the potential use of USFK in regional contingencies. At the same time, the section traces how the Yoon administration gradually aligned its strategic signaling regarding the importance of peace and stability surrounding Taiwan with Washington's own and embraced the Indo-Pacific concept, doing so in unilateral, bilateral, and trilateral statements. The fourth section concludes with several interconnected risks related to the shift in strategic signaling examined here and highlights reasons for Seoul and Washington to enhance communication about the complex challenges they face and proceed with caution.

Section I: Contestation Leads to Alliance Transformation

In the early and mid-2000s, U.S. officials attempted to reshape and reconceptualize the U.S. force posture in Korea as part of the U.S. Global Defense Posture Review driven by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. During this period, officials in both the George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations—if for disparate reasons—sought to transform the alliance, contentiously debated a shifting division of labor on the peninsula, and USFK's strategic flexibility in regional

contingencies. Their clashing perspectives would test the institutional moorings of the alliance and prompt a joint study and reassessment of its overall strategic vision. It marked a contentious and transformative period, ultimately resulting in the maturation of the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹

1) An Agreement to Disagree on “Strategic Flexibility”

While U.S. and ROK officials eventually came to an understanding in 2006 regarding the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces, they deliberately kept its wording vague given the politically and strategically fraught nature of the issue. The understanding was included in the Joint Statement of the Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership (SCAP) on January 19, 2006. SCAP was a newly inaugurated ministerial-level consultative process, which signified “the growing reach and ambitions of the partnership between the United States and the Republic of Korea.” The salient portion of the statement read:

Regarding the issue of strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in the ROK, Secretary Rice and Foreign Minister Ban confirmed the understanding of both governments as follows: The ROK, as an ally, fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces in the ROK. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, the U.S. respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.²

The statement accurately reflected both allies’ positions as announced in prior public statements and closed-door discussions and did not include any specific rules or guidelines, leaving such details to be addressed as situations arose. South Korea’s main concerns were USFK’s potential deployment to a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan, South Korea being entrapped in such a conflict, and security on the peninsula being degraded as a result. According to various accounts, the Defense Department’s push for strategic flexibility envisioned USFK’s potential involvement in a Taiwan conflict. Despite the 2006 understanding, there was no guarantee Seoul could, in fact, prevent USFK’s deployment to such a conflict. There was little doubt, though, that if USFK were used that way it would, to one degree or another, involve South Korea.³

2) From Joint Vision Study to Comprehensive Strategic Alliance

New bilateral consultative bodies, like the Future of the Alliance initiative (FOTA), the Strategic Policy Initiative (SPI), and SCAP helped U.S. and ROK officials work through bilateral issues and sparked a joint vision study to

develop a future-oriented strategic framework for the alliance. While intense debates persisted within South Korea about strategic flexibility following the January 2006 understanding, alliance relations stabilized over the last two years of the Roh Moo-hyun administration. And, before the end of President Bush's second term, during which he overlapped with the newly inaugurated conservative administration of Lee Myung Bak, the leaders further stabilized relations. In April 2008, both presidents committed to develop the alliance into a strategic and future-oriented structure to better address the security environment of the 21st century.⁴

The Obama administration inherited these efforts, culminating in the June 2009 Joint Vision statement, which reaffirmed historical U.S.-ROK security ties yet nested them within a wider array of political, economic, social connections. Presidents Obama and Lee aspired to build "a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust." While alliance restructuring would continue and the ROK eventually aimed to take a lead role in the combined defense of Korea, the U.S. side reemphasized the U.S. force presence in South Korea remained essential without mentioning its extra-peninsular strategic flexibility.⁵

Instead, the 2009 Joint Vision statement focused on reassurance. It included the first ever public, U.S. presidential-level mention of the extended deterrence commitment to the ROK, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, and a commitment that ROK security would be "supported by an enduring and capable U.S. military force presence on the Korean Peninsula, in the region, and beyond." Rather than an insistence on expanding the scope of USFK's operations beyond Korea, the emphasis shifted to how the larger U.S. force posture in the region and globally would uphold Korea's security.

The successful effort to reconceptualize the U.S.-ROK alliance within a new joint vision helped to mature the alliance and softened debates about core military and security issues. Nevertheless, it also created a strategic alliance framework premised on increasing roles and responsibilities for both allies. Ironically, this would become more salient as U.S.-China strategic rivalry grew more intense, once again reawakening earlier discussions about the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea and a more expansive role for Seoul and the alliance as a whole.

Section II: U.S.-China Competition Increases, Seoul Subtly Shifts

In the late 2010s, discussions reemerged about USFK's potential use beyond the peninsula alongside pressure from the Trump administration on Seoul to embrace a wider role for the alliance amidst worsening U.S.-China relations. Although

hedging its position, the Moon administration initiated a subtle yet significant shift in Seoul's strategic signaling regarding China and Taiwan specifically, which was increasingly evident following President Biden's inauguration.

1) Strategic Flexibility as a Concept Reemerges

In June 2018, USFK opened its new headquarters at U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys in Pyeongtaek roughly 37 miles south of Seoul. It marked the completion of a southernly realignment originally envisioned in the early 1990s (if not much earlier) and initiated in 2003. With it came speculation that USFK and the alliance's military operations would expand beyond deterring North Korea to a broader regional security role.⁶ Such speculation made sense given developments over the previous decade and conditions in mid-2018.

Since the 2009 Joint Vision statement, which established a new strategic alliance framework but was still largely aspirational, U.S. and ROK leaders had made several concrete achievements. The U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) added a new economic pillar to the alliance, complementing its traditional political-military cornerstone embodied in the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. Meanwhile, Seoul had continued to adopt a greater burden in the alliance, improved and expanded its diplomatic relations with major and middle powers alike, and increased contributions to U.S. and multilateral security cooperation efforts. Moreover, after several delays, by mid-2018, the alliance once again was moving forward with the transition of the wartime OPCON from a U.S. to a ROK commander of the Combined Forces Command (CFC).

As before, the prospect for the ROK taking the lead in the alliance's combined command architecture, meant Seoul would have to expand its own capabilities and strategic vision. Moreover, further changes in the U.S. force posture could follow. Additionally, ongoing engagement with North Korea, which in the summer of 2018 was at its height, also opened the possibility for future changes both in the U.S. force presence and the alliance's purpose, depending on the course of negotiations with Pyongyang. Theoretically, if a new political relationship developed with Pyongyang and it were considered less of a threat, U.S. and ROK forces and the alliance itself could gradually be reconceptualized.

Yet a paradoxical aspect of the strategic alliance construct was that as Seoul took on a more robust role and expanded its capabilities on and off the peninsula—becoming a more attractive ally for Washington and widening the scope of the alliance—it also became more willing and able to limit Washington's ability to impose its strategic preferences. So, on the one hand, as USFK

opened its new headquarters at Camp Humphreys, ROK Minister of National Defense, Song Young-moo, observed that USFK's "new mission will be an important one to contribute not only to peace on the peninsula but also to world peace as a stabilizer in Northeast Asia." On the other hand, the Moon administration did not understand this to mean subsuming the alliance within a burgeoning U.S.-China strategic competition or agreeing to unrestrained strategic flexibility for USFK.⁷

The Moon administration's central priority was engaging Pyongyang, and Chinese involvement was critical in moving toward a more peaceful Korean Peninsula, particularly in fashioning a new political framework beyond the Korean Armistice. Furthermore, Seoul was already navigating Chinese economic coercion following deployment of a U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile-defense battery to South Korea.⁸ Consequently, for inter-Korean purposes and to prevent further economic loss, Moon administration officials focused on maintaining and even improving relations with Beijing and balancing between their U.S. ally and China.

In fact, one could observe elements of Roh Moo-hyun's earlier "balancer" concept in the Moon administration's "Three Nos" announcement in the fall of 2017. Ostensibly meant to normalize relations with Beijing after it had imposed various retaliatory economic measures, the Three Nos—no additional deployment of THAAD batteries, no South Korean integration into the U.S.-led regional missile defense system, and no trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan – was more of a signal to Washington that Seoul would not be pushed into a corner amidst a return to "Great Power Competition," as stated in the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy.⁹

As engagement with Pyongyang stalemated by mid-2019, differences between the allies became more apparent. For example, while Trump administration officials exerted pressure on Seoul to significantly increase financial contributions for the stationing of U.S. forces in Korea, they suggested revising the alliance's crisis management manual to expand the concept of crises warranting a joint response to include not only contingencies on the Korean Peninsula but also U.S. contingencies in the South China Sea and beyond. ROK officials reportedly opposed the revision.¹⁰ It was clear that despite having been repeatedly touted by U.S. and ROK officials, the strategic alliance construct had its limits. In 2020, as COVID shut down diplomatic engagement with North Korea and U.S.-China relations sharply deteriorated, U.S. officials critiqued such limits and pushed U.S. strategic preferences.

A rather public disagreement occurred when the ROK Ambassador to the United States, Lee Soo-hyuck, said he felt pride in South Korea being able to “choose” between Washington and Beijing without being forced. In response, David Stilwell, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said “Korea made a choice back in the ‘80s,” when it chose democracy over authoritarianism.¹¹ Other U.S. officials, like Randall Shriver, formerly Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, observed a “donut hole” in the strategic alliance concept insofar as the alliance went global before going regional. Left unaddressed, he cautioned, that trend would “threaten the relevancy” of the alliance.¹² Similarly, Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun told lawmakers during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on competition with China that the alliance would have to hold a “strategic discussion” about its long-term future.¹³

Looking back a decade, the Joint Vision statement had been critical to advancing the alliance beyond the growing pains of the early- to mid-2000s by establishing a strategic alliance concept. That concept tempered geostrategic differences by nesting them within broader and deeper areas of cooperation but did not obviate them. Ironically, the very terms of the strategic alliance concept required the allies to confront these differences. And, as the international environment quickly evolved amid worsening U.S.-China relations, such differences were bound to reemerge, particularly regarding an expanded role for USFK and the alliance in regional contingencies.

For instance, a special report produced by the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) in mid-2020 stated U.S. forces in Korea were far too concentrated and “grossly inadequate for either hypercompetition or armed hostilities” with China. However, over time, South Korea—like Japan—would provide the United States with “a potential strongpoint with myriad options for a widely distributed Joint Force enabling grid,” the report noted. South Korea, it continued: “provides for US presence on the Asian mainland, and it is well within the PRC’s anti-access/area-denial umbrella. South Korea has enormous potential for affecting outcomes on the Asian mainland and well outside of the Korean peninsula in the wider Indo-Pacific.” Although produced by a U.S. Army think tank and not official U.S. policy, the report raised concerns in Seoul that it reflected U.S. thinking.¹⁴

Days later, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said he wanted to pursue more rotational force deployments into different theaters, as it would give the U.S. “greater strategic flexibility in terms of responding to challenges around the globe.” Korean observers quickly speculated such changes would apply to USFK, either resulting in force reductions (given differences over cost-sharing)

or its transformation into a rapid deployment force taking on broader missions beyond defending the host country.¹⁵ Reinforcing Esper's message, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific affairs David Helvey stated in early September 2020 that U.S. forces were "heavily concentrated in Northeast Asia" and Washington would "like to be able to make our presence more geographically distributed, more operationally resilient," in the face of threats from China and elsewhere. Consciously or not, Helvey echoed themes from the SSI report: "Maybe, the future is going to be less about bases and more about places—being able to operate across a multiplicity of locations, which give us the flexibility and the agility to respond to a variety of different threats and challenges." Helvey and others envisioned a networked array of alliances interconnected both in concept and operations.¹⁶

Much like Rumsfeld's earlier vision from the mid-2000s, these ideas remained aspirational. Nonetheless, conditions had evolved to make the vision more likely. The strategic environment was more fluid and there were more urgent questions about the adequacy of and need to rethink the U.S. regional force posture. Additionally, the completion of U.S. realignments in Korea and steady advance of U.S. and ROK capabilities opened new possibilities that had not existed before. Still, there remained very limited public mention of deploying of U.S. forces in Korea to a crisis over Taiwan and no alliance joint statements included any specific mention of Taiwan. The implication was there, but significant short and long-term political obstacles remained. With the 2020 presidential election in full swing, the alliance bogged down in various disagreements, and the Moon administration very clear in its stance, initiating a significant strategic realignment was not viable.

2) Strengthening the Alliance & Leaning Away from Strategic Ambiguity

Biden came into office intent to stabilize and strengthen U.S. alliances after four tumultuous years yet also more systematically implement the Trump administration's China policy. Although the Biden administration shied away from mentioning U.S. "strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region" and browbeating allies regarding their lack of burden-sharing and strategic buy-in, it was no less intent on confronting China as the "only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."¹⁷ In the process, it worked to align allies like Tokyo and Seoul more tightly with U.S. strategic objectives and gain greater fidelity from them in upholding the so-called rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific, including through collective signaling over Taiwan.

Japanese officials were increasingly concerned and outspoken about Chinese assertiveness toward Taiwan and the need to better understand U.S. thinking regarding a Taiwan contingency.¹⁸ And Biden administration officials, like other U.S. administrations before them, prioritized establishing alignment with Tokyo. As a result, the March 16, 2021, Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2), provided a long list of Chinese behaviors concerning both governments and “underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”¹⁹ More importantly, in the April 16 U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement, President Biden and then Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide underscored “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.”²⁰ These statements were, in a way, an outgrowth of the broader, decade-plus evolution in Japan’s foreign and national security policy and the U.S.-Japan alliance, driven in part by growing concern regarding China’s rise and assertive behavior in the region.

Still, Taiwan’s inclusion in the April 16 leader-level statement – the first time in 52 years that Japan had mentioned Taiwan in a joint statement with the United States – meant Japan “had crossed the Rubicon,” according to former Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Yukio Takeuchi.²¹ However, joint statement or not, U.S. bases and forces in Japan would almost certainly be involved in a military contingency between the United States and China over Taiwan. Consequently, there was growing discussion about Japan’s need to better prepare and develop options around which bases and facilities would be available to U.S. forces; how Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) would provide support for U.S. operations or jointly participate therein; and how the SDF would best defend Japanese territory under such circumstances.²² The joint statement was a notable move to socialize the idea that the U.S.-Japan alliance had a stake in Taiwan, at least on a topline, strategic level, but it left much to be done. The same considerations applied to USFK, the ROK military, and the U.S.-ROK alliance. And similar signals soon followed, with U.S. officials speaking openly and more specifically about the interconnections between USFK, the alliance, and regional contingencies.

During his May 2021 testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee, USFK Commander General Paul LaCamera stated the alliance was “squarely focused on the immediate threat from North Korea,” but “constantly updates its posture and plans as the security environment evolves.” He continued: “Given the global role of the U.S. military and, increasingly, the international reach of the South Korean military, opportunities are emerging for Alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula. United States Forces Korea forces are uniquely

positioned to provide the Commander USINDOPACOM a range of capabilities that create options for supporting out-of-area contingencies and responses to regional threats.”²³ Although he did not specifically mention Taiwan in this instance, it came up during the back and forth with various senators, particularly regarding the potential for simultaneous conflict in Taiwan and Korea.²⁴

Days later, in their May 21 U.S.-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement, Presidents Biden and Moon crossed their own discursive Rubicon when they emphasized “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” Taiwan’s inclusion, like that in the previous month’s U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement, was a significant development for the U.S.-ROK alliance.²⁵ It also tracked with a subtle but noticeable tilt by the Moon administration from equidistance in U.S.-China relations back toward Washington, which had begun late in the Trump years but picked up momentum with Biden in office.²⁶ Nonetheless, the limits of Seoul’s tilt – particularly as it applied to Taiwan – became clear soon after the statement’s release. ROK officials quickly downplayed its significance.

Korean officials told their Taiwanese counterparts, who publicly expressed gratitude for the May 21 statement and privately inquired about it, not to overinterpret it. It was, ROK officials counseled, merely a “diplomatic statement,” and “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” was an expression that Beijing itself regularly used. The ROK foreign minister echoed the sentiment, saying the statement’s language included “very general expressions,” with his vice foreign minister reiterating Beijing “will highly appreciate the fact that South Korea did not directly mention China.”²⁷ Unlike Japan, which had begun to regularly include mention of specific Chinese actions in their documents and U.S.-Japan joint statements, Seoul’s position was defined more by what it would not openly say.

This contrast became more apparent as Japanese officials became outspoken – in various multilateral, bilateral, and unliteral statements – that China should not unilaterally change the status quo by force in the region and should resolve cross-Strait differences by peaceful means; democracies like Japan and the United States should stand up to China and back Taiwan; and even that Japan should join the United States in defending Taiwan. In July, Japan’s Ministry of Defense referenced stability around Taiwan for the first time in its annual defense report, the contents of which are closely watched for indications of the broadening of Japan’s military and security role in the region. And in August, representatives from the LDP and Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party held security talks online for the first time.²⁸ On the contrary, like officials in his administration, President Moon maintained a studied distance from the issue.

During a press conference alongside Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in December 2021, a reporter asked Moon about the Australian Defense Minister's recent comment that it would be inconceivable for Australia not to join the United States in some kind of operation to defend Taiwan and if, as a U.S. ally, it would also be inconceivable for South Korea not to join in some kind of defense of Taiwan. Moon did not answer the question directly, instead reading from prepared notes and stressing the importance of "a peaceful management of the cross-Strait issues" and that Seoul wanted "a [harmonized] relationship" between Washington and Beijing.²⁹

Alongside conflict on the Korean Peninsula, a possible conflict over Taiwan represented the apogee of a regional crisis. Seoul, regardless of the political stripe of the administration in power, prioritized preventing the former. Shifting too much emphasis onto the latter would detract from Seoul's ability to focus on its main priority. Furthermore, Seoul and Washington's regional visions were not in complete alignment. Overly emphasizing a crisis scenario related to Beijing's core interest in Taiwan obfuscated this critical fact and could undermine efforts to build connections between respective U.S. and ROK visions in other areas.

For example, Moon's New Southern Policy was simultaneously meant to alleviate Seoul's economic dependence upon Beijing yet also chart a regional course not wholly subsumed by Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Nonetheless, U.S. and ROK working-level officials had been working to better align their regional perspectives by framing cooperation around a commitment to common principles and shared positive values rather than outright confrontation with China's assertiveness and illiberal approach. Key manifestations of this effort were the 2019 Future Defense Vision of the Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. Alliance and the U.S.-ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy New Southern Policy Dialogue, initiated in August 2020 and released as a joint fact sheet on the Trump administration's final day in office.³⁰

These efforts continued once Biden was in office, with language from those earlier documents appearing in the May 21 U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement and in other alliance documents, including reference to common principles like: respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with internationally established laws and norms; and adherence to international rules and norms, including those of free access, navigation, and overflight, including in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Although these principles had clear implications for China's assertiveness in the region and toward Taiwan specifically, they remained on a

general level. Additionally, the allies continued to highlight in more concrete terms a diverse array of other non-traditional security challenges around which they aimed to strengthen and expand cooperation in conjunction with other multilateral partners.

Yet, despite these common principles and expanded areas of cooperation, full strategic alignment eluded U.S. and ROK officials for political reasons as well as Korea's unique geopolitical vulnerabilities. Moon's hopes for historic inter-Korean rapprochement were dashed following the failure of the Hanoi Summit. Yet his administration kept alive the prospect for a return to engagement with Pyongyang, whether by dogged pursuit of an end-of-war declaration (which frayed nerves in Washington and received little uptake in Pyongyang) or by seeking the Biden administration's reaffirmation of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and Singapore Joint Statement as a basis for diplomacy and dialogue. In fact, receiving such reaffirmation in the May 2021 joint statement likely contributed to Moon's willingness to include mention of Taiwan, not as a fundamental strategic realignment on Seoul's part but as an instrumental rhetorical tradeoff.

As he approached the end of his term, Moon held firm as a matter of legacy and for a progressive successor—were they to prevail in the 2022 South Korean presidential election—to pursue a similar agenda. Preventing further degradation of the security environment in Korea was a primary objective and leaving the door open for engagement was considered the means to do so.

Section III: From Ambiguity to Alignment in Strategic Signaling

Moving into 2022, however, the political and strategic environment shifted considerably due to several key factors, sharpening the strategic calculus around where the U.S.-ROK alliance, U.S. forces in Korea, and Seoul itself stood in relation to worsening U.S.-China relations and Taiwan. In this context, the newly inaugurated Yoon Suk Yeol Administration leaned considerably into the U.S.-ROK alliance and improved Seoul-Tokyo ties, and progressively if fitfully aligned its strategic messaging on China and Taiwan in ROK unilateral, U.S.-ROK bilateral, and U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral statements.

1) A Shifting Political & Strategic Environment

One key factor moving into 2022 was that Yoon Suk Yeol of the conservative People Power Party narrowly defeated the progressive Democratic Party's candidate Lee Jae-myung in the ROK presidential election. President Yoon entered office in May 2022 with several national security and foreign policy

priorities. He stressed “peace through strength,” which emphasized deterrence before dialogue in inter-Korean relations. He committed to strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance, participating in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and reinforcing U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation. Yoon abjured Moon’s strategic ambiguity for greater strategic clarity regarding where the ROK stood amid U.S.-China competition and aimed to broaden the aperture of ROK foreign relations and national security beyond North Korea by adopting a more robust role for South Korea as a so-called global pivotal state.³¹ Yoon and his administration would also progressively adopt a more outspoken position regarding Taiwan than any previous ROK leadership.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was another critical factor. Following the invasion, the United States hastened its effort to build connective tissue between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, and U.S. allies and partners—individually and collectively—increasingly began to link the two regions.³² Not only did U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific begin to show fidelity toward NATO and European security, but NATO as a body and its individual member states showed greater interest in the Indo-Pacific. The acceleration of geopolitical and strategic linkages between the two regions manifested in more robust messaging regarding the sovereign inviolability and territorial integrity of states, the condemnation of the unilateral use of force or coercion to change the status quo, and discourse about the importance of upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Actual Russian revanchism in Ukraine pointed to potential Chinese revanchism regarding Taiwan.³³

Another important factor in 2022 sharpening the strategic calculus around where the U.S.-ROK alliance stood in relation to broader U.S.-China relations and Taiwan specifically was North Korea’s unprecedented number of missile tests and new nuclear policy law.³⁴ Whereas Yoon’s shift in the trajectory of the ROK’s foreign and national security policy and Russia’s war in Ukraine tightened strategic messaging between Washington and Seoul, Pyongyang’s advancing capabilities had a chastening effect. North Korea’s development of tactical nuclear weapons and apparent willingness to use or threaten use of nuclear weapons severely heightened concerns in Seoul about alliance decoupling and the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment. Consequently, the Yoon administration doggedly sought additional reassurances from Washington and sparked more overt public debate about South Korea’s own nuclear armament than ever before.³⁵ Most importantly, North Korea’s advancements highlighted that no matter how much Seoul looked to expand its strategic vision, its immediate priority remained on the peninsula.

Seoul had to grapple with the fact that North Korea's advancing capabilities made the U.S. security guarantee less credible or effective on its own terms. Simultaneously, Washington's growing focus on China and a potential conflict over Taiwan could subordinate Seoul's priorities to wider U.S. imperatives and further reduce Washington's capacity to fulfill its commitments to the ROK, particularly if a simultaneous conflict broke out on the peninsula. Not only could U.S. resources, slated for Korea, be drawn to a crisis elsewhere, but U.S. forces or assets already in Korea might be pulled away. At the same time, Seoul might be pressured to provide support for off-peninsular operations – based upon its own discursive alignment with Washington – while having to bear an even greater burden at home. The dynamics surrounding these various factors have played out over the last 18 months.

2) The Taiwan-Korea Linkage & Yoon's Studied (if Fitful) Strategic Alignment

Shortly after his inauguration, Yoon held his first summit with Biden on May 21. In their joint statement, both leaders reframed the alliance as a “global comprehensive strategic alliance,” adding a new rhetorical rung to the comprehensive strategic alliance concept established in 2009. And both leaders reiterated “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as an essential element in security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”³⁶ By linking peace and stability surrounding Taiwan to the entire Indo-Pacific, Yoon took a step beyond Moon's earlier position, showing a willingness to nest the issue within a larger strategic aperture. Nonetheless, showing Seoul's caution, the U.S.-ROK statement did not mention China by name nor any specific Chinese actions, unlike the Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders' Statement released two days later.

However, Seoul and the alliance's evolving messaging was soon reiterated in other forums. Notably, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, ROK defense officials said they would “normalize” relations with Tokyo and the South Korean, Japanese and U.S. defense chiefs together announced they would strengthen trilateral security cooperation, including publicly conducting missile defense exercises to send a message to North Korea.³⁷ Moreover, in their joint press statement, the three chiefs “emphasized the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” marking the first time such rhetoric was included in an official trilateral statement.³⁸

Similarly, in July, Gen. LaCamera emphasized that while North Korea remained the alliance's primary concern, he saw “opportunity for the alliance to extend its reach and become a global comprehensive strategic alliance, beyond the

Korean Peninsula,” and that the alliance provided “strategic depth” and “legitimacy” to deal with any global challenges. Gen. LaCamera underscored a need to expand the bilateral alliance into a “multinational” and “multidimensional coalition,” that would “enable us to better deter DPRK and maintain a rules-based international order with an eye on China and Russia.”³⁹ U.S. and ROK officials had long grappled with the fact that the peninsular environment was a very crowded battle space, which lacked strategic depth; a key challenge when planning for how to deter an evolving North Korean threat or operate in a conflict on the peninsula. LaCamera’s rhetoric inverted the logic because the alliance itself was being reframed for broader purposes. As much as Yoon, too, had begun to embrace a more expansive role for the ROK, the rhetoric surrounding that effort also risked subsuming South Korea’s immediate security concerns. Indeed, the tensions inherent in the alliance and Seoul’s strategic realignment became more apparent surrounding Nancy Pelosi’s controversial visit to Taipei in August.

In the run up to and after Pelosi’s visit, the PRC conducted extensive military tests and exercises surrounding Taiwan and beyond and sent strong diplomatic signals expressing its displeasure.⁴⁰ With tensions high, Pelosi visited Seoul following her time in Taipei. Instead of meeting her in person, Yoon opted to speak with Pelosi over the phone. The decision was based, his spokesperson said, “on a thorough consideration of our country’s national interest,” leading many to speculate he was trying to avoid angering Beijing.⁴¹

When asked what the implications of a conflict over Taiwan would have for the peninsula and South Korea, Gen. LaCamera remarked that “what starts locally becomes regional and global pretty quickly” and could have second and third-order effects elsewhere. Although he avoided detail and stressed his primary function was to defend the Korean Peninsula, his remarks were picked up and amplified in Korea.⁴² Though a seemingly obvious geopolitical observation, LaCamera’s remarks added a new angle to how U.S. commanders usually spoke about conflict in Korea. Historically, they spoke of how conflict in Korea likely would spillover elsewhere. Indeed, LaCamera himself noted as much. However, in observing that a conflict over Taiwan would reverberate elsewhere and required U.S. commanders to do contingency planning, it suggested the opposite: conflict elsewhere would pull in the peninsula and U.S. and potentially alliance forces. Putting it more explicitly, Gen. (Ret.) Robert Abrams, who had led USFK from 2018-21, told Radio Free Asia the United States would preserve “all options” in deciding what forces to use in the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan, “including those assigned to the USFK.”⁴³ Biden’s

statement and the current and former U.S. commanders' observations caused concerns and harried commentary within South Korea and efforts by ROK officials and President Yoon himself to tamp it down.

In the wake of these statements, President Yoon, like President Moon in December 2021, did not directly answer a question about whether South Korea would help the United States if China attacked Taiwan. Rather, he stressed Seoul's central concern under such circumstances would be possible North Korean aggression either in coordination with or independent of Chinese actions. In other words, Yoon highlighted the potential for a simultaneous conflict scenario, a subject of increasing focus within the U.S. foreign policy establishment and think tank community. In an obvious sense, Yoon's comments affirmed that a conflict over Taiwan would indeed directly affect South Korea. Yet his emphasis remained on how it would reinforce Seoul's need to keep its focus at home, not look elsewhere.⁴⁴

To assuage public concerns, ROK Vice Defense Minister Shin Beom-chul, too, reiterated USFK's "top priority" remained North Korea. He noted that while the alliance had consultative mechanism in place to communicate about regional contingencies, no such communication had yet occurred, and he could assure ROK "citizens that we will ensure consultations would not move in a direction that undermines security on the Korean Peninsula."⁴⁵ Shin was correct the alliance had consultative mechanisms, some of which originated during the earlier debate over strategic flexibility in the mid-2000s. However, there was no guarantee consultations would prevent a degradation of security in Korea. The regional contingency itself would have that effect.

Nonetheless, despite a lack of in-depth operational discussions or planning within the alliance for a Taiwan contingency and the sudden uptick in public concern whenever the issue arose, the allies continued to align their topline strategic messaging. Importantly, this increasingly occurred in a trilateral context. In October, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, ROK First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyundong, and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Mori confirmed the importance of the peace and stability of Taiwan Strait. Although not supporting Taiwan's independence, Sherman stressed they would ensure there was peace, adding, "we will be doing whatever we can to support Taiwan and to work with Japan and with the Republic of Korea to ensure that Taiwan can defend itself."⁴⁶ Such messaging became more pronounced during the ASEAN and East Asian Summits in November.

On November 13, Yoon, President Biden, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida released their Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific, pledging to “align our collective efforts in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific, that is inclusive, resilient, and secure.” The free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) phrasing marked a new normative layer to Seoul’s messaging. Furthermore, the statement emphasized the three leaders’ “basic positions on Taiwan remain unchanged” and reiterated “the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community.”⁴⁷ Though elements of the phrasing were consistent with previous statements, it was the first-ever reaffirmation of the ROK’s position on Taiwan in a trilateral leader-level statement. Moreover, linking Taiwan to the security and prosperity of the international community (beyond just the Indo-Pacific) indicated one more step in Seoul’s willingness to move more clearly toward the United States in the hardening of geopolitical lines by framing it as a global issue.

3) Seoul Embraces & Annunciates the Indo-Pacific Concept

Around the Phnom Penh meeting, Yoon and other high-level ROK officials previewed Seoul’s own forthcoming and much anticipated Indo-Pacific Strategy, with rhetoric marking a more assertive ROK. Yoon noted: “Peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region is directly connected to our survival and prosperity.” Historically, ROK presidents expressed a more inward linkage, framing security and stability on the Korean Peninsula as central to regional peace and stability. Yoon’s remark inverted the connection, consistent with how U.S. officials had increasingly framed it. Without mentioning China or Taiwan directly, Yoon also reiterated that “unilateral change of the status quo by force should never be tolerated.”⁴⁸

Nonetheless, some U.S. observers still felt Seoul did not embrace strongly enough that China’s assertive behavior in the region was a shared problem rather than just a U.S. problem.⁴⁹ Yet, with the formal release of the ROK’s Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region in December, the Yoon administration’s gradual but pointedly evolving messaging regarding Taiwan, the Indo-Pacific, and South Korea’s place therein came into starker relief. The strategy laid out nine core lines of effort, including expanding comprehensive security cooperation in the region, the opening portion of which stated:

First, we will deepen maritime security cooperation in the region. The Indo-Pacific is a region inter-connected by oceans, thus rendering it essential that nations work closely together to protect sea lanes, counter piracy, and secure safety of navigation. In this regard, peace, stability,

and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, which constitutes strategically important sea lines of communication, must be respected. We also reaffirm the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and for the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁰

The phrasing built upon yet marked a critical evolution of Seoul's diplomatic signaling over the previous year. It also echoed what U.S. defense and military officials had been saying with greater frequency and specificity about the interconnectedness of security within and between regions. By directly linking peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait to the peace and stability of Korea and of the entire Indo-Pacific, Seoul was now framing security in similarly indivisible terms.

Even so, Seoul's new strategy tried to achieve balance vis-a-vis China. Although Seoul sought "a sounder and more mature relationship" with Beijing—diplomatic language signaling the ROK would not give in to Chinese demands—China was "a key partner for achieving peace and prosperity" in the region. The strategy went on to stress the importance of trilateral cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing, noting it sought "to contribute to regional peace and stability by harmoniously developing ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation and ROK-Japan-China cooperation."⁵¹ Nonetheless, despite trying to maintain such a balance, Yoon's priorities in the spring of 2023 centered on the first of those two triangles. In March, he announced Seoul would no longer demand Japanese companies compensate Korean victims of forced labor, leading to the first bilateral meeting between Korean and Japanese leaders in a dozen years and paving the way for improvements in U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral relations.⁵² ROK and U.S. officials, meanwhile, focused on strengthening the U.S. extended deterrence commitment and Yoon's upcoming state visit to Washington. And, the week before the ROK and U.S. presidents released the Washington Declaration and established the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), Yoon stated explicitly what ROK, alliance and trilateral documents had been steadily signaling over the previous year regarding Taiwan.

When asked about increased Chinese pressure on Taiwan, Yoon told a reporter that "these tensions occurred because of the attempts to change the status quo by force, and we together with the international community absolutely oppose such a change." He continued: "The Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue."⁵³ Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, immediately responded to Yoon's remarks, saying the blame for the recent tensions fell on

separatist activities by Taiwanese independence elements aided by outside forces and dismissed the comparison between Taiwan and North Korea. Taiwan, he said, was not a sovereign state or United Nations member like the two Koreas but solely a matter of China's own affairs and Seoul should respect the "One China" principle.⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, Yoon's remarks were welcome in Washington and Taipei, with speaker of Taiwan's parliament and strong proponent of Taiwanese independence, You Si-Kun, praising ROK and Japanese leaders for calling Taiwan a global issue and opposing a change to the status quo by force. "The crescent of defense formed by Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines will, with American support, be a key stabilizer of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region," You stated.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the diplomatic spat between Seoul and Beijing only grew worse.

In June, at meeting with Lee Jae-myung, leader of the main opposition Democratic Party, China's ambassador to South Korea, Xing Haiming, voiced what many saw as the strongest criticism yet of Seoul's effort to tighten relations with Washington. Lee himself used the meeting at the ambassador's residence to say South Korea actively supported the "One China" principle and further criticize Yoon's foreign policy not only for pushing improved ties with Tokyo but also, he suggested, for worsening relations with Beijing. Xing followed Lee by saying "China isn't to blame for strained Seoul-Beijing relations." Rather, "external factors," like the changing international landscape, and U.S. pressure against China were challenging Seoul-Beijing relations. He continued: "Some are betting that the US will win, and China will lose, but this is clearly a misjudgment. I can confirm that those who bet on China's defeat at this moment will surely regret it."⁵⁶ The ROK foreign ministry and presidential office firmly criticized Xing for meddling in South Korea's domestic affairs.⁵⁷

Even though Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy and ROK officials' statements indicated Seoul wanted stable relations with Beijing, such diplomatic quarrels and the Yoon administration's overall strategic messaging and China's reaction to it revealed a growing gap. Amid deteriorating relations, the Yoon administration released its new national security strategy, which reinforced signaling that Seoul sought stronger alignment with Washington and Tokyo and emphasized cooperation with them on multiple levels within the Indo-Pacific. Unlike the previous three ROK administrations' strategies, it did not refer to Beijing as a "strategic cooperation partner."⁵⁸ And, if actions spoke louder than words, Yoon's several bilateral and trilateral meetings with both President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida, compared to his one meeting with Xi Jinping in November 2022 on the sidelines of the G20 summit, reinforced the point.

At the time of writing, the trilateral Camp David summit on August 18 represents the latest stage of the developments examined here. As the first ever stand-alone summit between U.S., ROK, and Japanese leaders, the summit was historic, with the three sides establishing significant new understandings and commitments. Yet these commitments represented an effort to try to institutionalize existing trend lines. In addition to regularizing and institutionalizing annual leader-level meetings, the three sides committed to do the same with their respective foreign ministers, defense ministers, commerce and industry ministers, and national security advisors. Such consultations already occur, but institutionalizing regular meetings like these would mark a new level of coordination and commitment to the trilateral relationship. Similarly, as a counter to North Korea's nuclear and missile advancements, the three sides committed to establishing a multi-year trilateral exercise framework, including annual, named, multi-domain exercises and improved cooperation on ballistic missile defense through enhanced, real-time data sharing. Like consultations, such exercises have already occurred, but if they are implemented and deepened as laid out at Camp David, it would mark a notable development.⁵⁹

More notable, however, was the apparent attempt to further align broader strategic messaging regarding the Indo-Pacific in general but also signaling toward China and Taiwan specifically. The three sides committed to initiating a trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to focus on coordinating the implementation of their respective approaches to the region, with emphasis on Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island nations. The leaders' joint statement at Camp David, like various trilateral statements released over the previous year, also reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community. Yet preceding that now-common phrasing—but unlike all such previous trilateral statements—the Camp David joint statement included explicit mention of China's "dangerous and aggressive behavior" in the maritime domain.⁶⁰ Although bilateral U.S.-Japan statements had included such language before, it was the first time Seoul agreed to it. Finally, in their "Commitment to Consult," the three leaders committed their governments to trilaterally consult with in an expeditious manner, to coordinate their responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting our collective interests and security.⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, China and North Korea – and the opposition party in South Korea—quickly characterized the move as the creation of a *de facto* alliance or Asian NATO. However, this grossly overstated reality. Surely the commitment to consult represented the latest, noteworthy stage in Washington's

longstanding effort to connect its respective alliances and encourage Tokyo and Seoul to recognize and increase their role in addressing mutual security interdependencies. Indeed, this effort went back to a short-lived discussion in 1954 about creating a Northeast Asian Treaty Organization (NEATO), consisting of Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei.⁶² Nevertheless, the commitment made at Camp David was far from establishing a trilateral alliance. Half of the commitment to consult document stated what it was not, namely, a replacement for each respective bilateral mutual defense treaty.⁶³

Still, critics in Beijing, Pyongyang, and Seoul were right to see the writing between the lines. While the commitment to consult did not explicitly mention China or Taiwan, the implication was clear. There are numerous regional challenges, provocations, and threats the three countries face. A potential conflict over Taiwan is chief among them. And, as the above analysis shows, Seoul and the U.S.-ROK alliance have increasingly and with growing specificity, signaled rhetorical alignment regarding China as a strategic threat as well as the interconnection between events surrounding Taiwan and their own interests and security. However, rhetoric and strategic signaling is one thing. Genuine strategic commitment and institutionalized operational planning is quite another.

Section IV: Concluding with Caveats & Caution

Despite the notable and increasing alignment in strategic signaling examined here, there are several interconnected reasons for Seoul and Washington and the U.S.-ROK alliance to proceed with caution.

First, Seoul and Washington have increasingly aligned their strategic messaging but do not share the same vulnerabilities, beginning with economic issues. The Biden administration's China policy is posing distinct challenges for Seoul, particularly its blurred fusion of economic and national security. The Biden administration has adopted an industrial policy and significant public investments to improve the U.S. economy at home and strengthen America's ability to compete with China and other autocratic nations abroad. It has crafted a narrative about its economic statecraft that is inclusive of U.S. allies and partners and supports democratic values. Nevertheless, its targeted and strict export controls, national security guardrails connected to U.S. subsidies, and drive to form various mini-lateral groupings around the concept of economic security, which lack the same tangible benefits and binding commitments of traditional trade agreements, have resulted in misunderstanding and difficult choices for allies like Seoul.

While South Korea is well-situated to benefit—potentially handsomely—from some of these measures, it remains unclear how they will play out. Depending on the course of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the policy could be upended or take on an even more restrictive and America-first slant. Seoul has been dogged in public and private forums expressing its concerns and, in its Indo-Pacific strategy notes it “will also work with others to prevent the overwhelming dominance of security concerns over economic issues.”⁶⁴ Such messaging could apply to Beijing’s outright economic coercion as well as Washington’s “de-risking” measures. As is well known, South Korea is far more dependent on China economically and therefore faces different challenges regarding the pace and extent to which it can reduce such dependence. Furthermore, recently Washington has eagerly sought to put a floor under the deterioration of its relationship with Beijing.⁶⁵ The Yoon administration, too, must place limits on the strains in its relationship with Beijing.⁶⁶

Second, South Korea must be careful its own core national security interests do not become overly subordinated to growing U.S.-China strategic rivalry. The Moon administration was more outspoken in seeking to maximize its autonomy, improve inter-Korean relations, and oppose being forced to choose one side or the other. Still, it faced growing pressure from the Trump administration to align its broader strategic vision with Washington’s and, on the terms of its own ambitious effort to carve a more robust international profile, began to lean toward a more U.S.-oriented strategic alignment by the end of Moon’s term. For its part, the Yoon administration has gone about systematically undoing Moon’s security policy, opting to strongly emphasize deterrence—and confrontational rhetoric—toward North Korea rather than engagement and diplomacy. Simultaneously, it has sought to broaden the aperture of ROK foreign relations and national security beyond North Korea, by adopting a more robust role for South Korea as a global pivotal state based upon a strong U.S.-ROK alliance.

To address its central national security concern, the Yoon administration fervently pushed for and received the most notable advancement yet in the U.S. extended deterrence commitment with the Washington Declaration and establishment of the NCG. In the process, however, it increasingly embraced an Indo-Pacific concept, which tracks closely though not entirely with Washington’s own, including in its strategic signaling toward China and Taiwan. U.S. policymakers may see the establishment of the NCG as allowing the alliance to shift more of its focus and priorities in the direction of China and have increased expectations on South Korea to do the same, again, based on Seoul’s own rhetoric and signaling. As Scott Snyder argues, overly prioritizing China as the main challenge for the alliance may bring with it the temptation to

subordinate the North Korean issue to the China issue or situate North Korea itself as a subcomponent of the China challenge, holding China as overly responsible for enabling North Korea and starkly limiting other avenues for dealing with Pyongyang.⁶⁷

Moreover, North Korea itself may perceive the alliance's apparent shift in focus to China issues as a chance to opportunistically test it through a lower-level act of aggression in the shadow of its more advanced nuclear and missile capabilities and offensive nuclear policy. If Washington's focus in that moment centers more on restraining Seoul than taking punitive measures against Pyongyang—as it has before⁶⁸—the newly strengthened U.S. extended deterrence commitment and fledgling NCG may appear ineffective before being institutionalized. This could spark fissures in the alliance, reawaken fears in South Korea regarding U.S. credibility and increase its need to redirect its attention closer to home, and lessen its appetite for leaning too far toward addressing broader regional threats.

Third, U.S. commanders state that USFK would likely play some sort of support role for regional contingencies and the ROK explicitly linked its own peace and stability to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. However, the alliance faces a stark gap between such rhetoric and its preparedness to navigate a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan and the attendant risk of a simultaneous conflict in Korea. There remains a lack of planning or consensus within the alliance (and within each country) regarding the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea as well as over South Korea's potential role and responsibilities during such a scenario. It is unclear what, if any role U.S. forces based in Korea would or could play during a Taiwan conflict. The alliance has, to be fair, gradually expanded the scope of exercises beyond the Korean Peninsula, and U.S. and ROK officials have pledged to collaborate to ensure their respective strategies and postures promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific through bilateral exercises and training and trilateral and multilateral cooperation with partners throughout the region, including with U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation advancing on several fronts. Nevertheless, the alliance can and should focus greater attention on the potential for a conflict over Taiwan occurring alongside one on the peninsula.

The alliance cannot operate as though Korea exists in a strategic vacuum. The war in Ukraine—lessons from which have been used in combined exercises on the peninsula—shows the difficulty of military support and resupply and is already leading to reported drawdowns in U.S. stocks in Korea, and pressure on Seoul to provide more of its own munitions has grown. In the case of a

conflict over Taiwan, with the attendant risk of a simultaneous one in Korea, far more intense pressures would occur, which raise numerous difficult questions for policymakers and defense planners alike. It is apparent the United States itself is not prepared for a conflict over Taiwan.⁶⁹ U.S. officials say that often the maps used for table-top exercises involving a conflict over Taiwan do not even include the Korean Peninsula.⁷⁰ Furthermore, according to analysts who have closely examined a possible Taiwan conflict, the belief among some is that not much overt allied support would be provided.⁷¹ Having more transparent and regular discussions and consultations about such a Taiwan conflict or simultaneous conflict scenario would shed greater light on the types of support the U.S. could and could not bring to bear, reinforce the degree to which Seoul needs to take a more robust role, but also highlight the critical role of multilateral partners, including Tokyo and key UN Sending States that have shown increased interest and presence in the United Nations Command (UNC).

However, it must be acknowledged this is an exceedingly delicate issue to be approached in a cautious manner. It has caused fissures in the alliance before and raises multiple concerns whenever it is discussed. To a degree, it would be important to demonstrate that certain consultations and preparation were occurring, which could have a deterrent effect all its own and socialize alliance officials and the broader public to communicate in a measured way about such difficult issues. Washington, Seoul, and the alliance should not continue to increase strategic signaling about Taiwan without being prepared to answer the call in an actual contingency. But they also must not allow such preparations to catalyze the very security dilemmas they aim to preclude. In fact, when one begins to think through the manifold complexities, costs, and enormous escalatory risks posed by a conflict over Taiwan or a simultaneous conflict over Taiwan and in Korea, it makes clear how much more emphasis needs to be placed on diplomacy and reducing tensions.

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