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# SWP Comment

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## South Korea's Ever-Closer Relations with NATO

**Intersecting and Varying Motives of South Korea's Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol Administrations**

*Eric J. Ballbach*

Driven by both political camps in Seoul, relations between South Korea and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have deepened significantly since their initiation in 2005. While this intensified relationship was shaped to a large extent by geopolitical developments and increasing security concerns, it also reflects the respective priorities and motives of the different South Korean administrations. With another change in administration in South Korea looming, it is important to understand these priorities, and where and why the different administrations' motivations driving the country's relations with NATO intersect and diverge.

Relations between South Korea and NATO have grown ever closer since the initiation of a bilateral political dialogue in 2005. What makes this rapprochement particularly noteworthy is the fact that it is driven forward by both conservative and liberal administrations in the Republic of Korea (ROK). As South Korean politics is notoriously known for its division, vividly captured by the notion of *namnam galteung* (South-South divide), the motives driving Seoul's ever-stronger ties to and relations with NATO is in need of explanation. A comparison of South Korea's policies and strategies vis-à-vis NATO under the Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022) and the Yoon Suk-yeol administration (2022–2024) shows that while South Korea's relations with NATO are driven by external geopoliti-

cal developments, they also reflect the fluctuating priorities of the different administrations in Seoul. To avoid ruptures in the relationship between South Korea and NATO, understanding these motives and where and when they differ and/or overlap, is particularly essential now, as another change of government in South Korea is on the horizon following the impeachment and arrest of Yoon Suk-yeol in December 2024 and January 2025, respectively.

### **South Korea's evolving relationship with NATO: A snapshot (2005–2017)**

South Korea's relationship with NATO is the most recent one among the alliances' Indo-



Pacific partners, which also include Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Following a visit by then ROK Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon to NATO headquarters in December 2005 to address the North Atlantic Council as the first South Korean government official to do so, the two sides initiated a political dialogue in 2005. Early cooperation was driven primarily by increased operational cooperation in the context of the ROK's participation in the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan starting in 2001. At the 2006 Riga Summit, the ROK was designated as a Contact Country of NATO along with Japan, Australia, and New Zealand — a term used by NATO to describe countries outside NATO's then-existing partnership frameworks (such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council). The Riga Summit Declaration emphasised the increasing “political and operational value” of working with Contact Countries, such as the ROK. Since 2008, Contact Countries were referred to as “partners across the globe” and South Korea and NATO established a “High-Level Policy Consultation” meeting in the same year. As it became apparent that cooperation between NATO and its ‘partners across the globe’ would focus predominantly on practical cooperation, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, and on the development of bilateral relations with each partner country, after signing an MOU on information security in 2009, the ROK and NATO signed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Participation and Financing Agreements. As such, cooperation between South Korea and NATO in the context of the ISAF mission “created more institutional links, generating learning and coordination effects,” which, in turn, led the administrations of Roh Moo-hyun (2003 – 2008), Lee Myung-bak (2008 – 2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013 – 2017) to seek closer relations with NATO.

Especially during the Lee Myung-bak administration, which sought to transform South Korea into a more active and responsible member of the international community through the “Global Korea” campaign, Seoul signalled its interest in engaging with

NATO in technical cooperation, especially in the areas of non-proliferation, (anti-)terrorism, and (anti-)piracy. In 2012, South Korea formalised its relations with NATO by entering into an Individual Partnership Cooperation Programme (IPCP), which was later revised in 2017 and 2019, before it was upgraded to an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) in July 2023. The foremost goals of cooperation listed in the 2012 IPCP are the improvement of interoperability, creation of opportunities for scientific and technological exchange, and the development of capabilities through exchange and training. The priority areas of cooperation to achieve such goals included cyber defence, counter-terrorism, energy security, the Science for Peace and Security program, and disarmament and nonproliferation. Priority Cooperation Sectors with NATO thus clearly were more related to non-traditional security. However, following a three-day visit to Seoul by NATO Secretary General Rasmussen in April 2013 for talks with then-President Park Geun-hye and key government members to explore opportunities for expanding cooperation, South Korea entered into the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII) in 2014.

### **Relations with NATO under the Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol administrations**

After the inauguration of the Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol administrations in 2017 and 2022, respectively, cooperation between NATO and the ROK intensified. While this has been shaped to a great extent by external developments such as the evolving geopolitical landscape and increasing threats posed by North Korea, it also reflects the varying priorities and sometimes differing and overlapping motives of the two South Korean administrations, which come from the two different political camps.

## NATO's motives

From NATO's perspective, the global challenges posed by China, Russia and other authoritarian countries require cooperation with partners across the globe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, what is seen by NATO as Beijing's support for Moscow, and North Korea's military support to Russia are seen as major demonstrations of this threat as well as an expression of the increasingly overlapping security dynamics in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Starting with the London Declaration issued in 2019, NATO has publicly described China as a "challenge". This characterisation became 'formal policy' in the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, issued during the Madrid Summit. The Strategic Concept also highlighted the "deepening strategic partnership" between China and Russia as a threat to NATO. In October 2024, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte described the deepening military cooperation between Russia and North Korea as a threat to both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security, stating that the deployment of North Korean troops is: a significant escalation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) ongoing involvement in Russia's illegal war, yet another breach of UN Security Council resolutions, and a dangerous expansion of Russia's war. It is against this background that NATO pushed for participation of NATO's IP4 partners in the last three summits.

## The Moon Jae-in administration: NATO cooperation under a Peace-First approach

The liberal Moon Jae-in administration, which took office in 2017, adopted a foreign policy that aimed to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula through inter-Korean dialogue and engagement with North Korea, as well as by engaging directly with the U.S. and China. For Moon, engagement with NATO thus had to be balanced with his administration's efforts to maintain dialogue with Pyongyang, framed as

complementary to peacebuilding efforts, rather than focusing on traditional defence and deterrence issues. While cooperation on issues such as non-proliferation or interoperability continued, the Moon administration particularly strengthened functional cooperation on topics such as science and technology, as well as defence against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) agents and cybersecurity in particular. To that end, the Moon administration launched the process for South Korea to join NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in 2019. Since 2021, the ROK has participated in NATO's annual cyber defence exercise Locked Shields, contributed to the "Malware Information Sharing Platform" (MISP), and co-operated on "emerging and disruptive technologies." As South Korea-NATO relations are also political, in late 2020 South Korea joined the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting for the first time, after which South Korea has participated regularly.

At the same time, however, the Moon administration was careful to avoid any direct military alignment with NATO that could provoke North Korea. NATO's emphasis on non-traditional security threats thus aligned with Moon's goals of strengthening South Korea's security without intensifying the threat of military conflict with North Korea. While Moon's administration sought to reduce military tensions with North Korea, it also recognised the importance of diversifying its foreign relations. This entailed reinforcing ties with key allies, particularly the U.S., and strengthening cooperation with the EU and its member states, as well as Southeast Asian countries and India in the context of the New Southern Policy.

Overall, the approach of the Moon administration aimed at balancing South Korea's security interests with its broader peace strategy, positioning the country as a responsible global actor committed to upholding international peace and security — without directly confronting North Korea, China, or Russia.

## **The Yoon Suk-yeol administration: NATO cooperation in the context of a more assertive foreign policy**

The conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration, which assumed power in 2022, represented a shift in South Korea's foreign policy toward a more assertive stance on defence and regional security issues. Already during his election campaign, Yoon's foreign policy team described its major foreign policy strategy in terms of transforming South Korea into a Global Pivotal State, representing a shift away from the previous Moon Jae-in government's heavy focus on inter-Korea relations to a foreign policy strategy "embracing greater roles and responsibilities for resolving regional and global challenges in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond," as noted by former Foreign Minister Park Jin. Although the Moon government sought to expand ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and India through the New Southern Policy, its focus on inter-Korea relations was criticised by the Yoon administration as limiting South Korea's broader regional and global agenda. The resulting policy reflected a more proactive approach to countering North Korea's military threats, as well as a desire to counter-balance the growing influence of China and Russia in East Asia. In contrast to Moon's emphasis on diplomacy with North Korea, Yoon has been more focused on strengthening South Korea's deterrence capabilities and aligning South Korea more closely with NATO's collective defence framework. For example, in February 2023, the ROK and NATO held a first round of military staff-to-staff talks in Seoul, during which they committed to holding annual military talks and establishing a military-to-military consultative body. In July 2024, NATO and the ROK signed an agreement on mutual recognition for military airworthiness certification, marking NATO's first such deal with an Asian country. In October 2024, Korea participated in the NATO Defence Ministers' meeting for the first time. As such, the

Yoon administration has supported greater NATO involvement in the Indo-Pacific region and has also been more vocal in its support for NATO's stance on global security issues, including its condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Compared to the Moon administration, this signalled a more open shift towards an explicit alignment with Western security interests.

As the Yoon administration has sought to position South Korea as a more active participant in global security affairs, South Korea's cooperation with NATO was seen as a means to bolster the country's influence on the world stage and contribute to peace-keeping, counterterrorism, and global stability efforts. Yoon has emphasised South Korea's commitment to the liberal international order and its role in countering authoritarianism, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the challenges posed by China and Russia. Much more so than the Moon administration, the Yoon government attached a greater importance to ROK-NATO ties, reflecting the belief that this relationship can serve to boost the ROK's security and defence. In this respect, powerful actors and institutions, such as the Ministry of National Defence, consider NATO to be a crucial partner to confront the challenges posed by North Korea and other authoritarian countries. Yoon's administration has also placed greater emphasis on countering the influence of China and Russia in the region. China's growing military assertiveness and Russia's actions in Ukraine have led Yoon to seek closer ties with NATO as a means of balancing these regional powers. By cooperating with NATO, Yoon seeks to ensure that South Korea is better positioned to defend its interests and promote regional stability. This approach contrasts with Moon's more neutral stance toward China and Russia, reflecting a shift toward a more overt alignment with Western powers.

Against this background, cooperation with NATO has become a top priority for the Yoon Suk-yeol government, which has repeatedly highlighted the importance of ROK-NATO cooperation, including in the

Indo-Pacific strategy published in December 2022. The ROK opened an embassy to NATO, while Yoon Suk-yeol attended all three NATO summits during his time in office. Moreover, the Yoon administration prioritised the signing of the renewed ITPP signed at the Vilnius NATO summit in July 2023, which upgraded and marked a substantial departure from the dialogue-centred 2012 IPCP. While the IPCP mainly presented principles for and areas of cooperation, without detailed action plans and timelines, the ITPP covers comprehensive and concrete plans for cooperation over a four-year period (2023–2026). ITPPs therefore represent a stronger and more accountable commitment by both NATO and its partner countries to practical cooperation and the implementation of the cooperation objectives.

The ITPP reflects an evolving security landscape and need for deeper collaboration on both traditional defence and emerging global challenges. Specifically, the ITPP lists 11 areas of cooperation and contains tangible steps to be taken by both sides to implement cooperation in each area, with clear timelines up until 2026. It even indicates which departments of the South Korean government and of NATO are involved in the specific cooperation activities. As such, even in the case of a change of government in South Korea, the 2023–2026 South Korea-NATO ITPP will most likely remain the basis for interaction for the next two years, yet it is possible that a new administration will set different priorities within that institutional framework.

## Overlapping objectives

While South Korea's relations with NATO do reflect the different political priorities of the Moon and Yoon administrations, there has been consistency between the two administrations regarding a set of core issues. These critical overlaps ensured not only continuity in, but a further development of the relationship.

## The importance of the European market for South Korea's burgeoning defence industry

One of the major explanatory factors for South Korea's increasingly close relations with NATO during the presidencies of Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol was the shared objective of strengthening the domestic defence industry and the country's role as a major arms exporter. Closer cooperation with NATO member states was a crucial aspect of this strategy — and a shared objective of both the Moon and Yoon administration.

Under the Moon administration, South Korea's defence budget increased annually by an average of 7 per cent each year. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the value of South Korea's military exports has more than tripled from \$1.2 billion (2011–2015) to \$3.8 billion (2016–2020) before skyrocketing to \$38 billion (2021–2023). In 2023, South Korea's defence industry, domestically known as "K-Bangsan," ranked second globally behind the U.S. in terms of the number of major arms export contracts, at 2,972 units compared to the U.S.'s 5,631 units. Already during the presidency of the Moon administration, South Korea exhibited the fastest growth among the world's top 25 arms exporters, increasing by over 176.8 per cent between 2017 and 2021.

With the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine, South Korea emerged as an even more attractive arms supplier to European countries, such as Poland or Estonia, which supplied weapons to Ukraine and are in need of replenishing their weapons stockpiles with modern weaponry. In July 2022, South Korea signed a \$12.4 billion arms agreement — the country's largest deal ever — with Poland, which included sales of 980 tanks, 648 K9 howitzers, and 48 FA-50 fighter jets. In November 2022, Norway ordered additional self-propelled K9 howitzers and K10 ammunition supply vehicles from a South Korean defence company, Hanwha Defense. President Yoon used his participation at the NATO summits

to push ahead defence deals with NATO member states. For instance, at his first NATO summit in June 2022, President Yoon said in a meeting with Polish President Andrzej Duda that he expects ongoing defence cooperation discussions between the two countries to make substantial progress. Shortly after the summit concluded, South Korea signed its arms export contract with Poland. At the same time, South Korea agreed to strengthen defence cooperation with Australia at a summit with the Australian prime minister and successfully exported \$2.4 billion worth of AS21 Redback infantry fighting vehicles to Australia in August 2023. At his second NATO summit in 2023, President Yoon met with Romanian President Klaus Werner Iohannis. The two countries announced shortly thereafter that they would seek to enhance ties and expand defence cooperation. By July 2024, South Korea had signed a \$920 million deal to export K9 howitzers to Romania. The two countries are also in talks over a potential \$14 billion deal for K2 tanks, Redback infantry fighting vehicles, and Cheongung-II SAM missiles.

### **Institutionalisation of functional cooperation**

Both the Moon and Yoon administrations sought to institutionalise South Korea's cooperation with NATO in particular areas and/or on specific topics. For instance, the Moon administration focused its engagement with NATO primarily on the participation in NATO's CCDCOE and the alliances' counterterrorism initiatives. While South Korea joined the CCDCOE during Yoon's term in office, the issue was initially pushed forward by the Moon administration in 2019 when it initiated the process by submitting its application to join the CCDCOE. According to an official of the former Moon administration, South Korea wanted to get access to NATO's intelligence, expertise, and capabilities in the area of cybersecurity to better protect itself against attacks originating from North Korea, China, and Russia. This view was shared to the

author by an advisor to President Yoon, who pointed to South Korea's cooperation with NATO through the CCDCOE as a "crucial element in the ROK's global network of cyber defence."

For the Yoon administration, this cooperation with NATO through the CCDCOE took on an additional importance as Chinese and Russian noncompliance with enforcement of the UN Security Council's proliferation sanctions against North Korea grew. It is noteworthy that cybersecurity cooperation is considered an important measure to cut off a crucial element in the financing of Pyongyang's weapons program. According to White House U.S. deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging technology, Anne Neuberger, nearly half of North Korea's missile program has been funded by illegal cyber activities. Building on an extension of the U.S.-ROK alliance into cyberspace and the establishment of a Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework to jointly deter and combat cybercrime by North Korea, the Yoon administration also viewed cybersecurity cooperation with NATO and its member states as an important addition to South Korea's ongoing efforts to curb North Korea's illicit revenue generation and weapons program development.

### **The diversification of foreign relations**

The first as well as the prospects from Trump's second presidency, Chinese sanctions against the ROK in the context of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense issue in 2017, and an increasing U.S.-China conflict has also helped draw South Korea and NATO closer — both under the Moon and Yoon presidencies. After all, the objective of diversifying foreign (economic and security) relations was at the heart of both the Moon administration's New Southern Policy and the Yoon administrations "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region." As such, NATO and its member states emerged as important cooperation partners. While the Yoon administration

sought strategic clarity by placing the alliance with the U.S. at the centre of the country's foreign and security policy, the repeated attendance of President Yoon at three consecutive NATO summits demonstrates South Korea's desire to strengthen comprehensive cooperation with NATO allies outside of the Indo-Pacific region in face of what is often described as the New Cold War era. As such, Yoon's attendance at the previous NATO summits was designed principally to bolster South Korea's position as a key contributor to global defence leadership in the democratic world in the face of a rising tide of authoritarianism represented by China and Russia.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The relationship between South Korea and NATO has significantly evolved over the past two decades. Under the administration of Moon Jae-in, South Korea's cooperation with NATO was characterised by a more cautious approach with a specific focus on the development of non-traditional security cooperation in areas such as cyber defence and counterterrorism. Overall, Moon's administration sought to balance South Korea's security needs with the desire to avoid escalating tensions with North Korea and China.

In contrast, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has taken a more assertive stance, focusing on strengthening South Korea's defence posture and expanding its cooperation with NATO, including on more traditional military and security matters. Yoon's administration has prioritised countering North Korea's military threats, reinforcing ties with the U.S. and Western allies, and positioning South Korea as a key player in global security efforts. This shift not only reflects broader changes in the geopolitical landscape and South Korea's evolving role in the international order, but also the Yoon administration's strategic focus on a more global role for South Korea.

As such, while both administrations shared common security concerns, their

approaches to NATO reflect their differing priorities and strategies in navigating complex regional and global dynamics. At the same time, however, the two political camps did share a set of objectives, which have been instrumental in stabilising cooperation beyond changes in government. With another change in administration in South Korea on the horizon, both sides should now focus on taking the required steps to ensure stable cooperation in the future.

## Ensuring the implementation of the ITPP

With the ITPP, NATO and the ROK have agreed on a resolute and comprehensive agenda for cooperation in the coming years. However, ensuring implementation of the ITPP requires not only consensus about its validity and utility by NATO and the ROK, but also within South Korea. Against this backdrop, it is essential that cooperation with NATO is generally supported by both political camps in South Korea. While the Yoon government has upgraded Seoul's ties with NATO to an unprecedented level, all previous administrations in Seoul — liberal and conservative — have successively enhanced ties with the alliance since the inception of relations in 2005. The major difference is that liberal governments tend to focus more on non-traditional security issues as well as diplomacy rather than deepening military cooperation and ties. In a country that is known for its deep-seated political division, this is a development that should not be underestimated. Overall, the growing consensus among South Korean foreign policy and security elites regarding cooperation with NATO stems from multiple factors, most notably the shared perception that:

- North Korea poses a continuously increasing security challenge,
  - functional cooperation with NATO brings tangible benefits, and
  - cooperation with a diversified set of partners is required in an era of “polycrises.”
- Against this background, it is highly likely that cooperation between the ROK



and NATO will continue to develop in case of a change in government in Seoul. Nonetheless, NATO and its member states should continue to underscore the importance of this cooperation to both political camps in Seoul and ensure that discussions on the implementation of the ITTP are reconvened as soon as possible.

## Prioritisation of cooperation areas

As the ITTP presents a wide-ranging agenda for cooperation, it is important to prioritise cooperation areas that will not only create tangible wins for both sides, but that will be supported by both political camps in Seoul. This will help maintain the momentum of bilateral cooperation, especially in times of domestic political turmoil and a likely change of government in South Korea. Against the background of the above discussion, cybersecurity and cooperation in the defence industry seem particularly promising. Given that the two sides already cooperate in these areas, it will be easier to implement practical cooperation activities. Indeed, defence industrial cooperation was an important topic during the NATO-IP4 talks in Vilnius, and ROK arm sales and industrial cooperation with Poland, in particular, underscore Seoul's positive contribution to European security. Moreover, when Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea joined the NATO defence ministers' meetings in mid-October 2024, they agreed to bolster joint efforts to boost cyber defences, defence production and innovation, counter information manipulation, and harness technology, including artificial intelligence. This prioritisation of particular cooperation areas will help ensure long-term stability in ROK-NATO relations.



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