

U.S. Policy of the New South Korean Government: Outlook and Implications

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The 20th South Korean presidential elections held in 2022 broke the pattern of the incumbent government remaining in power for two consecutive terms that had continued since the 1987 elections. The conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol won the presidency after just five years of the relatively progressive Moon Jae-in administration. The incoming Yoon government is expected to bring significant changes to the country's diplomacy and security policy as the individual leadership of the president is especially strongly reflected in these areas. The conservative party in South Korea has traditionally emphasized the U.S.-ROK alliance. Likewise, the Yoon administration has also stressed its intent to actively utilize the alliance as a security asset in the process of seeking security and peace on the Korean peninsula. The '110 Key National Tasks' announced on May 3 clearly demonstrates this approach. Regarding the U.S., the Yoon government has stated the strengthening of a comprehensive strategic alliance, a partnership to enhance South Korea's global status, and close bilateral coordination to solve the North Korean problem as its main policies.

The global diplomatic and security environment on the Korean peninsula is as perilous as ever. Tensions between the U.S. and China are intensifying, and the repercussions may be most serious for countries in Northeast Asia. Competition between major great powers is expected to heighten following the war in Ukraine. Moreover, economic security is becoming more important, while problems such as climate change and the environment that are impossible for any one country to solve have emerged as immediate challenges confronting the entire international community. South Korea and the U.S. closely share common values such as democracy, a market economy, institutional efficiency, international law, and human rights. The U.S.-ROK alliance over the past 70 years is considered to be an exceptionally successful

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alliance unprecedented in world history. The Yoon administration must seek to continue these past accomplishments while also securing greater autonomy vis-à-vis the U.S. by leveraging the strengths of a conservative government.

Keywords: Yoon administration, Practical diplomacy, ROK-US alliance, Comprehensive strategic alliance, Global Pivot State

I . Introduction

There have been eight presidential elections under the so-called '1987 regime' since South Korea's democratization. On May 10, Yoon Suk-yeol was elected as the 20th president of South Korea. Over the past 30 years, following the first direct presidential election held in 1987, the South Korean public has displayed a tendency to elect a government for two terms, similar to politics in the U.S., even though South Korea has a single-term presidency. In other words, South Korea has initially chosen either a progressive or conservative president and then elected a president from the incumbent party in the following election, repeating the pattern of voting for a turnover of power by electing a president from the opposite end of the political spectrum every ten years. But beginning this year, a conservative administration will govern after only five years of a progressive government. This deviation from the two-term voting pattern has occurred for the first time in almost 30 years, which indicates that the public was extremely dissatisfied with the policies of the Moon administration. The views and judgment of the president have a greater influence on the areas of diplomacy and security compared to other issue areas. Therefore, it is expected that the diplomacy and security policies of the Yoon administration will differ considerably from the previous five years.

Under the Moon government, the security situation on the Korean peninsula experienced extreme shifts in both directions. For example, there was an intense fear of another military conflict when concern about a crisis on the Korean peninsula was at its peak in 2017. The situation swung to the opposite extreme in 2018, however, as the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics led to an unprecedented summit meeting between the leaders of the U.S. and North Korea. In particular, it was hoped that considerable progress could be made on North Korea's denuclearization and the peace process of the Korean peninsula when two U.S.-North Korea summit meetings and three inter-Korean summit meetings were held in quick succession.¹ A dramatic change to the chronic state of confrontation between the two Koreas was hoped for.² But North Korea has currently

firmly closed its avenues of dialogue with the international community, and the prospect of denuclearization has dimmed. Which policies should the Yoon administration consider and choose in order to solve the diplomatic and security issues that the Moon government is leaving behind?

International factors strongly impact the Korean peninsula. As with the Korean war, the security environment that has been fostered and structuralized on the Korean peninsula significantly reflects the international security environment. Global factors such as the U.S.-ROK alliance, North Korea-China relations, the security order in Northeast Asia, and trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan are closely intertwined to create a situation that is difficult to explain with the inter-Korean conflict alone. As a consequence, the South Korean government cannot pursue denuclearization and peace on the Korean peninsula by itself, and the key task is how to appropriately manage these complicated international factors. It is not an exaggeration to state that the success of the Yoon administration's diplomacy and security policies will depend on how well it performs this role. How successfully the Yoon government is able to further strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance will be an extremely important policy goal, especially considering how the incoming administration has clearly exhibited its identity as a conservative government. Regardless of objective facts, much of the South Korean public believes that South Korea's relationship with the U.S. has been significantly weakened over the past five years and therefore has high hopes for the Yoon administration's role in restoring the relationship.³

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- 1 Not only between the U.S. and the North, but also summits between China and the North have been held five times during 2018 and 2019, including Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang.
 - 2 Chung-in Moon, "The Next Stage of the Korean Peace Process," *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2019.
 - 3 Whether the Moon Jae-in administration switched its diplomatic direction toward China is a sensitive debatable issue. Considering the progressive Rho Moo-hyun administration's attachment to the U.S. in its specific foreign policies, it is not easy to academically prove the question of what the Moon administration's real stance was on relations with the U.S. and China.

In addition, a successful policy toward the U.S. is an important national agenda, perhaps more than ever, considering how great power competition is expected to intensify due to escalating conflict between the U.S. and China and the war in Ukraine.

From this perspective, this article will first examine the characteristics of the current global security environment that the Yoon administration must prioritize. Next, the article will outline the main policies for U.S.-South Korea relations within this context and identify potential obstacles that may arise in the process of pursuing these goals. The article will conclude by explaining the main factors that the Yoon administration must consider as it implements its diplomacy and security policies, including U.S.-South Korea relations, over the next five years.

II. The Security Environment facing the Yoon Administration

This section explores two core issues relevant to the international security environment before assessing the U.S.-South Korea relationship under the Yoon administration. First, the main debates regarding changes to the international liberal order (ILO) will be discussed. Second, the current context of the conflict between the U.S. and China will be examined. The former aspect is important as changes to the ILO are closely tied to the decline of America's global leadership. Meanwhile, the latter is necessary to address as it involves the most difficult challenge for South Korea's foreign policy in determining the appropriate diplomatic stance between the U.S. and China.

1. Phase of Adjustment of the ILO

The ILO, which has been established, developed, and adjusted since 1945, consists of the institution of multilateralism, democratic state actors, and the 'global public goods' provided by the U.S. as its main elements. Among these aspects, the combination of a system of multilateralism and the global public goods has been crucial. In particular, the provision of

global public goods by the U.S., especially in the areas of security and trade, has been the core foundation that has sustained the international order.⁴ At times, the global public goods that the U.S. has provided have been criticized as 'private goods' that eventually award the U.S. with greater benefits. But when considering the historical significance, such as the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the Plaza Accord, and America's aggressive trade negotiations after the collapse of the Cold War, it is difficult to deny that the U.S. suffered considerable losses and made sacrifices to maintain the ILO.

But the 'global financial crisis' that unfolded before and after 2008 built momentum for fundamental changes to the ILO. Specifically, the most important characteristic has been the increasing tendency of states to pursue their independent national interests. At the same time, resources that the U.S. could invest in preserving global security began to be depleted.⁵ Examples of the former include Brexit, conservative domestic politics in China and Japan, the emergence of populist leadership, and a strong interrelationship between economic interests and foreign policy. Regarding the latter, the two main resources in the form of 'domestic support' and 'coordination with foreign allies' that the U.S. has traditionally relied on have gradually decreased. As a consequence of the global financial crisis, the political and economic resources that were excessively spent on domestic politics could not be applied outside American borders. Meanwhile, U.S. leadership was also ineffective in coordinating with major allies around the world. Furthermore, the election of President Trump and his administration's views and stance on anti-terrorism, the system of cooperation with Europe, affairs in the Middle East, and other global issues raised genuine questions about whether the link between 'the

4 Piotr Dutkiewicz, *Hegemony and World Order* (Routledge Global Cooperation Series) (New York: Routledge, 2020), Ch. 2, 3.

5 Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6, Nov/Dec 2010; Joseph S. Nye Jr., "American and Chinese Power after the Financial Crisis," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2010): 143-53.

U.S. and the stability of the international system' had been lost forever.⁶

At this current moment, discussions about systemic changes to the ILO have been complicated by forecasts of a 'post-COVID-19' order. Regardless, according to the various views of experts, the international order and its main feature of combining the efficiency of institutions with multilateralism will continue, similar to how the ILO was able to restore its resiliency through numerous adjustments despite several problems observed after the two World Wars. In other words, it is expected that an alternative new international order that will replace multilateralism predicated on the efficiency of institutionalism will not emerge in the near future.⁷ While a type of re-socialization process may occur within the international community as a result of various threats that exist in the global system, it will take a considerable amount of time for a 'new *modus operandi*' to replace the principle of multilateralism based on liberalism and openness.

However, it is possible to anticipate a competition among different forms of multilateralism that seek divided interests. For example, distinct forms of multilateralism such as liberal multilateralism centered around the U.S., partially restrictive multilateralism in Asia centered around China, and a multilateral order among countries that share region-specific awareness of problems with either Europe or Russia at its core may all emerge. This, in turn, may incite a type of competition that differs from the 'competition between blocks' that had existed between regions before. This is because this new form of competition will not occur between camps based on 'differences' or 'exclusion.' Instead, it will likely unfold by simultaneously maintaining a sense of a united community on common global problems, such as climate change or the environment on the one hand, while seeking the individual interests of separate forms of

6 Peter Slezkine, "The Case for Questioning U.S. Leadership," *National Interest*, Sep/Oct 2020.

7 For the representative argument see, G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 2-21.

multilateralism on the other. Moreover, a single state will attempt to secure various types of national interests at the same time as countries will not be exclusively tied to a single form of multilateralism but linked with numerous ones.⁸

2. Result of the Conflict between the U.S. and China

Unlike Europe, a balance of power does not operate at the regional level in East Asia. The lack of a balance of power not only exists today but has been absent in the past also. Japan became the regional hegemon in East Asia in the late 19th century, as the long-standing Sino-centric order collapsed due to the Sino-Japanese war. The U.S. functioned as the power balancer in the region after World War II.⁹ Unlike Europe, a regional balance of power created within the region over an extended period of time has never been created in Asia. The security order in East Asia since 1945 has undergone four phases that can be categorized as follows: 1) a regional order led by the U.S., which excluded China from 1945 to the period of détente, 2) a regional order led by the absolute leadership of the U.S., even after the inclusion of China from détente to the early 1990s 3) a period in which American leadership in the region was redefined, as the interdependence between countries in East Asia, including the 'little détente' on the Korean peninsula from the 1990s to the mid-2010s, increased, and 4) a period during which conflict between the U.S. and China has structurally intensified as a result of the rise of China from about 2010 to today.

The impact of the seriousness of the Sino-U.S. conflict on South Korea's diplomatic and security interests has continued to increase.

8 Korea is one of the popular cases, since the country is simultaneously engaged in different types of multilateralism, such as the Northeast Asian regionalism, G7 plus, ROK-US alliance plus, and Korea-ASEAN network based on different types of national interests.

9 Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2019); Samuel Kim (ed.), *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

Questions about South Korea's diplomatic stance within the structure of Sino-U.S. competition initially remained at the rhetorical level. But this became a very specific concern directly tied to the nation's national interests through the 'deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries' in 2016 and the 'Huawei incident' in 2019.¹⁰ If the U.S. were a 'benevolent guarantor of security' in the past, following the signing of the U.S.-ROK alliance in 1953, today it has become a 'country that shares reciprocated mutual security interests,' while China has become a 'strong interest-seeking expansionist state.' The difficulties of managing the consequences of the Sino-U.S. competition apply to many other states as well. For example, countries such as Australia, Singapore, France, Vietnam, and the Philippines have experienced diplomatic challenges, as U.S.-China relations have worsened. But no country compares to the awkwardness that South Korea faces due to the North Korean nuclear problem and the unique nature of the security situation on the Korean peninsula.

The phases of conflict between the U.S. and China from past to present can be summarized as follows in Table 1 below.

〈Table 1〉 Phases of Conflict between the U.S. and China

Period	Key Characteristic	Areas of Dispute	Context
Phase 1 (late 1990s)	Event-driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conflicts based on specific issues• Maintaining strategy of including China• Confidence in the U.S.-led international order	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collapse of the Soviet Union• Clash of civilizations• 'Theory of utilizing China'
Phase 2 (before and after 2010)	Institution-driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Economic growth shifting to strengthening of the military• SCO, AIIB, NDB, CICA, etc.• Sharp rise in Chinese interest in the benefits of system-building → G2 Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'War against terror'• Worsening situation in the Middle East• Limitations of American power

10 John Hemmins, "South Korea's Growing 5G Dilemma," *CSIS Report*, July 7, 2020.

Period	Key Characteristic	Areas of Dispute	Context
Phase 3 (before and after 2020)	Global standard-driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated through the 5G dispute (Huawei) • Dynamics of dispute becoming more specific • Extreme coexistence of cooperation/ conflict • Competition over platforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trumpism • Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) • Great Powers seeking individual self-interests
(Future)	"Who will lead the new model of international cooperation?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control over the new model of international cooperation • Emphasis on the importance of international organization / modified forms of multilateralism • Groups of states that share a variety of new interests • Dominate future issues first and provide problem-solving capabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New threats • Global new security • Emergence of various coalitions among states

What is interesting is that during phase 2 before and after 2010, China began to break away from the various institutional settings of the international order created by the U.S. after World War II by concluding that China could only maximize its interests by creating an international system itself. Institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) were all the result of China's strategic decisions to move out of America's influence on security cooperation, trade, the tariff system, international currency, and even trust-building.¹¹ The U.S. had concentrated much of its diplomatic and security resources on the Middle East at the time, and this power vacuum in Asia led to an opportunity for Chinese growth through the utilization of international institutions. The U.S. and the Obama administration sought to rearrange its China policy through its policy of 'Asia Re-balancing,' but these efforts failed to achieve meaningful progress due to limited resources, China's rapid growth, and China's diversified foreign policy

11 David M. Lampton, "China: Challenger or Challenged?," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2016): 107-119.

tailored to different regions around the world.¹²

Over the next five years, the Yoon administration will likely be pressured by both sides between the U.S. and China. Therefore, the key question is what South Korea's diplomatic stance will be. While there is no simple answer to this dilemma, South Korea will need to persistently proclaim, as it has since its democratization, that 'South Korea's diplomacy respects global standards based on universal values and principles.' Of course, there is the risk that the 'global standard' will be misinterpreted as the 'American standard.' But since the identity of a person or a country stems from its 'words and actions,' South Korea needs to maintain a consistent approach to major issues related to international security and heighten the nation's diplomatic status. Between the U.S. and China, South Korea should seek to balance not its 'diplomatic distance' but its 'national interests'. Establishing new cooperation systems with countries facing similar challenges may also be a useful alternative.

Meanwhile, some have speculated that a new system of conflict between great powers will emerge, with Russia at the center, based on the recent war in Ukraine and the emergence of geopolitics. These factors will also strongly influence the U.S.-South Korea relationship under the Yoon administration. It appears clear that Russia will be a key factor after the war in Ukraine in some shape or form. Two scenarios are possible. First, if cooperation between Russia and China strengthens, Russia will sincerely hope that the U.S. will be preoccupied in Asia and focused on the Sino-U.S. conflict. As a result, Russia may believe that it will be able to obtain greater strategic space in Europe. Second, a 'trilateral competition between the U.S., Russia, and China' may unfold in a more complicated fashion than before. While it may not reach the levels of the complex relationship between the U.S, China, and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, both

12 Robert G. Sutter, *US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017); Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenges: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (NY: W. W. Norton Company, 2016).

cooperation and competition between these three countries will likely become much more dynamic than it is today. In this process, if China chooses to increase its level of cooperation with the U.S. due to psychological pressures incited by supporting Russia, which is being heavily criticized by the international community, this may offer the U.S. an opportunity to restore its global leadership.

Regardless of which scenario unfolds, it appears clear that America's global leadership, which has gradually declined over the past ten years, will be partially restored. This is because Russia's inefficient military operations and capabilities have been exposed, while criticism against Russia's non-democratic political system has intensified. Both aspects may increase support for the 'principle of democracy' and 'transparent and efficient institutions' that the U.S. has persistently advocated in the international community. This may, in turn, mean that the possibility of South Korea strengthening its diplomatic status through the U.S.-ROK alliance will increase as well.

III. U.S.-South Korea Relations: Major Challenges and Problems

1. Principles and Overall Stance of Diplomacy and Security Policy

In the Key National Tasks announced by the Yoon administration on May 3, policies in the area of diplomacy and security were introduced in 'National Objective 5' in the form of 18 specific policy tasks under the broad strategy of achieving the status of "a Global Pivot State that contributes to liberty, peace, and prosperity." Specifically, the 18 tasks noted above address the issues of inter-Korean relations, regional cooperation and global diplomacy, and military security relatively equally.¹³ This section seeks to anticipate major issues in U.S.-South Korea relations that the Yoon administration may face based on the Key National Tasks.

13 The Transition Office, accessed May 7, 2022, <http://www.korea.kr/news/visualNewsView.do?NewsId=148901283>. (in Korean)

In order to do so, it is, above all, necessary to first establish which principles and direction the diplomatic and security policies of the Yoon administration are founded upon. The principles and direction of the Yoon administration are explained based on the policy platform of the candidate that was released in two stages in September 2021 and January 2022, statements by key officials in the Yoon administration, and the recently published '110 Key National Tasks.' In general, four broad principles are discovered, and the administration has particularly emphasized a 'practical' diplomatic approach. It is difficult to clearly distinguish what practical diplomacy entails for either conservatives or progressives, given how practicality was a value that not only President Yoon but also the democratic party candidate emphasized during the elections. Regardless, the Yoon administration has tended to address diplomatic and security challenges in today's global environment from this practical approach.

For example, several key members of the Yoon administration have emphasized the term 'economic security.' The incoming government has demonstrated its intent to actively respond to changes in the economic security environment by creating the position of 'secretary for economic security' under the First Deputy Director at the Office of National Security. Furthermore, the phrase 'diplomacy that prioritizes national interests' has been frequently used; the first phrase mentioned to reporters by Han Duk-soo, nominee for Prime Minister chosen by President-elect Yoon, was 'diplomacy based on national interests.'¹⁴ Diplomacy is understood as a pivotal issue area and tool to realize South Korea's national interests by the Yoon administration. Also noteworthy is how Southeast Asia, India, and Central Asia were suggested as important partners for economic diplomacy. These regions were also considered important by the Moon administration, and this can be viewed positively as the continuation of the successes of the previous administration. These principles of the Yoon administration can be summarized as a 'practical diplomatic approach.'

14 Hyun-woo Nam, "Yoon nominates Han Duck-soo as prime minister," *The Korea Times*, April 3, 2022.

Second, the Yoon administration has proclaimed its intent to strive to 'enhance South Korea's diplomatic status' in the international community over the next five years. As can be seen by how 'National Objective 5' is titled 'Global Pivot State,' the stance toward multilateral diplomacy, solutions for global problems, and an active response to climate change and carbon neutrality are specified in detail. Of course, previous administrations shared similar views on these problems. However, the Yoon administration is especially interested in South Korea's 'global status' and considers the current period of preparing for the 'post-COVID-19 order' as an opportunity to achieve this national objective. Given the characteristics of conservative governments that tend to place diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, universal values, and human rights as their core values, this can be viewed as a diplomatic security principle that matches the aims of the Yoon administration.

Third, the Yoon administration has stressed the overall expansion of cooperation with the U.S. as a 'comprehensive strategic alliance.' While what a 'comprehensive strategic alliance' is has not yet been clearly defined, comprehensive cooperation is understood to apply to a broader meaning of strategy that has traditionally been stressed in the area of military security to include both economic security and non-traditional security. Given the Yoon administration's emphasis on practical diplomacy and the enhancement of South Korea's international status, a comprehensive strategic alliance appears to match the incoming government's policy direction of achieving these goals through the strengthening of the U.S.-South Korea alliance.¹⁵

Fourth, the Yoon administration has stressed an approach to the North Korean problem based on 'principles and the rule of law.' It is impossible to evaluate which government's North Korea policy was either correct or wrong since each administration has its own unique stance on diplomacy

15 President Yoon has emphasized the enhanced role of the ROK-US alliance not only in the "National Tasks," but also during the whole process of the presidential election whenever he had chances.

and security. Regardless, the Yoon administration has criticized the previous Moon administration's North Korea policy for failing to be based on reciprocity and has emphasized that mutual respect based on principles is important for the respective actions of South and North Korea. Even so, it does not appear that the North Korea policy of the Yoon administration will entirely abandon engagement with North Korea. But it has emphasized that engagement with, and assistance to, North Korea must be related to changes in behavior.

The principles and content of the Yoon administration's diplomacy and security policies explained above can be summarized as follows in Table 2 below.

〈Table 2〉 Core Principles of the Yoon Administration's Diplomacy and Security Policy

Core Principle	Main Contents	Context and Characteristics
Practical Diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing national interests through economic security and diplomacy, diverse cooperation with various regions around the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geopolitical changes, intense great power politics, countries acting on their self-interests
Enhancement of Global Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Pivot State, realizing universal values, ability to provide solutions for global problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing for the 'post-COVID-19 order,' opportunity for South Korea to demonstrate its capacity, identity of a conservative government
Expansion of Comprehensive Cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive strategic alliance, strengthening the military alliance, cooperation on non-traditional security issues and science and technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy of conservative governments, the time for diplomacy for the Biden administration, new meaning of the U.S.-ROK alliance
Normalization of Inter-Korean Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach to the North Korea problem based on principles and the rule of law, North Korea policy based on reciprocity, recognizing the utility of engagement with North Korea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Korea's strategy of heightening tensions, efforts towards denuclearization, solution of the North Korea problem through international cooperation

2. Overall Expansion of Cooperation in the Comprehensive 'U.S.-ROK Strategic Alliance'

Based on the core principles of diplomacy and security policy explained above, this section will examine key policy areas and explore

anticipated problems related to each issue. In anticipation of future U.S.-South Korea relations, the Yoon administration has used the terms "comprehensiveness" and "strategic alliance." As much time has passed since the Cold War, most alliance relationships have broadened far beyond the boundaries of military alliances and have sought comprehensive cooperation. Therefore, as mentioned briefly above, the Yoon administration intends to continue to increase the policy coverage of the U.S.-ROK alliance and further share important and strategic national interests. In other words, the U.S. and South Korea will seek to cooperate on issues such as problems related to global crises, the issue of global supply chains for strategic materials, competition over global platforms, and energy security from a 'strategic' perspective.

Meanwhile, the Yoon administration has stated its intent to hold a more definitive stance on issues on which South Korea has traditionally maintained strategic ambiguity. In this case, it is necessary to consider whether there might be any diplomatic or security-related problems. For example, while Key National Task 97 does not directly mention the U.S.-ROK alliance, it does seek to expand multi-level cooperation with "countries in the Indo-Pacific". The same Task also mentions the strengthening of "value diplomacy with European countries". Reference to the Indo-Pacific region is suggestive of the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' that the U.S. is actively pursuing, while 'value diplomacy' is a concept that may make China uncomfortable. As analyzed above, because the conflict between the U.S. and China has intensified, the 'strategic ambiguity' that South Korea has maintained so far has lost its effectiveness. But considering how China might already be concerned about the inauguration of a conservative government in South Korea, it appears necessary to implement these policies with considerable caution. Much of the South Korean public still clearly remembers the losses incurred in the relationship with China as a consequence of the unprepared and somewhat rushed decision to deploy THAAD batteries in 2016.

3. Strengthening the U.S.-South Korea Military Alliance

The Yoon administration intends to "strengthen the comprehensive strategic alliance" across all aspects of relations between the U.S. and South Korea. The term strategic alliance sufficiently includes the will to develop a close cooperative relationship for not only the military power but also in terms of the economy and the society. However, the Yoon administration has separately stressed the need for military cooperation between the two allies in Key National Task 105, titled the "strengthening of the U.S.-ROK military alliance and the expansion of cooperation on science and defense for national security." The practice of establishing these Key National Tasks with the inauguration of a new government began in 2002 by the Roh administration, but this is the first time that the phrase 'strengthening the U.S.-ROK military alliance' has been used independently as the title of a national task.¹⁶ The content of National Task 105 includes items that are important from three specific perspectives.

First, extended deterrence and a combined defense posture are emphasized. This section is understood as the administration's will to respond effectively to North Korea's increasingly advanced nuclear arsenal. This is positive, as it will not only preemptively eliminate unnecessary debates on South Korea's development of its own nuclear arsenal but also reduce security fears among the public. The administration has, however, announced the resumption of large-scale military exercises, and since North Korea will undoubtedly respond sensitively, it appears prudent to cautiously approach this issue. Second, there is an emphasis on trilateral security cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. This can be understood at a common-sense level, as trilateral cooperation was expected to materialize in some shape or form with the election of President Yoon. To forecast in a bit more detail, the probability of security

16 The former Park Geun-hye administration also emphasized the importance of military partnership with the U.S. in the "140 National Tasks." In that case, however, not only ROK-US military partnership, but also 'military diplomacy' with Korea's neighboring countries was articulated simultaneously.

cooperation in a format resembling the 'Trilateral Coordination & Oversight Group' managed by the three countries seems high. Third and lastly, there is a need to examine the phrase that stipulates the "transfer of operational control (OPCON) based on certain conditions". The ambiguous timing inherent in the wording of this policy may result in a fierce debate among the South Korean people. In particular, South Korea has already experienced a contentious social debate over whether the government's position of "being based on certain conditions" is beneficial or not.

4. The North Korean Nuclear Problem

South Korea and the international community are increasingly becoming skeptical about the prospect of North Korea's denuclearization,¹⁷ and the Yoon administration is likely well aware of this. From the perspective of U.S.-South Korea relations, two points are noteworthy. First, the Yoon administration has emphasized 'international coordination' with the U.S. as the most important partner. Second, the incoming government has also expressed its will to simultaneously pursue both 'denuclearization and the establishment of a peace system.' The latter point is especially meaningful. This is because, unlike previous governments, the Moon administration attempted a policy of 'exchanging security with security' with North Korea. In other words, the Moon administration proposed a trade between 'denuclearization' and the 'establishment of a peace system on the Korean peninsula'. While there are conditions attached, it is nevertheless positive that the Yoon administration has demonstrated its willingness to, for the most part, continue this approach of the Moon administration. Of course, "a complete and verifiable denuclearization" being stated as a condition in Key National Task 93 may be problematic, as it is reminiscent of the controversial complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) approach of the Bush administration. Nevertheless, it still appears meaningful that the Yoon

17 Kimberly Peh and Soul Park, "Staying the Course: Denuclearization and Path Dependence in the U.S. North Korea's Policy," *North Korean Review* 17, no. 1 (2021): 57-78.

administration appears to be aware of how concessions that North Korea may be interested in must be offered.

The importance of bilateral cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea on North Korean denuclearization is expected to be further stressed by the Yoon administration. The past 30-year history of North Korea's nuclear weapons program reveals that it is necessary to propose to North Korea agendas in various policy areas. Policies in the security area that guarantee North Korea's survival, economic policies that can assist North Korea in addressing day-to-day challenges, and global approaches to collectively promise and work towards boosting security on the Korean peninsula with the international community must all be closely coordinated in order to solve the North Korean problem. It is beyond a doubt that the U.S. is a partner most needed by South Korea in the process of implementing these policies, and the Yoon administration should be well aware of this fact. Meanwhile, the suggestion to establish the 'U.S.-South Korea-North Korea joint liaison office' in Washington D.C. is questionable due to its lack of practicality.¹⁸

5. Global Pivot State and International Cooperation

Through its stated policies, the Yoon administration has expressed its desire to become a "Global Pivot State" that contributes to the prosperity of the global community. Specifically, the seven Key National Tasks both outline prospects for cooperation with major regions around the world in great detail and stress the country's capacity to provide solutions for future problems that the international community faces. The relationship between the U.S. and South Korea can be a vital factor in this context. As the geopolitical risk is increasing from the perspective of the global security order and as the importance of so-called 'new security' grows,

18 While the Yoon administration suggests policy coordination among the three countries, the South, the North, and the U.S., the Moon administration has suggested the Korea-US-China trilateral policy coordination to handle the North Korean problem.

South Korea has the opportunity to use the economic and political growth that it has accomplished so far for the global community. The comprehensive strategic alliance with the U.S. will offer South Korea a meaningful opportunity.

The Yoon administration needs to further take advantage of its stature on the global stage at forums such as the G7-Plus, where South Korea was first invited to under the Moon administration. It should also contemplate a new model for multilateralism that will emerge in the 'post-COVID-19 order' together with the U.S. The increasingly fierce conflict between the U.S. and China has interestingly resulted in an opportunity for all states to share power amidst the power vacuum. Not many countries are as interested in the post-COVID-19 order and future issues as South Korea is, and a strong consensus has already been built among the people of South Korea on the need for advanced science and technology as securing drivers of growth.

IV. Considerations for the Implementation of Policy

Against this backdrop, what are some issues that need to be considered as the Yoon administration implements its policies for U.S.-South Korea relations? The key considerations are as follows.

1. Opportunity to Secure Autonomy as a Conservative Government

In accordance with its identity as a conservative government, the Yoon administration should believe in the identity and legitimacy of the Republic of Korea and interact with the U.S. with confidence. South Korea is a model democracy that represents Asia and has achieved exemplary economic growth worldwide. The Yoon administration needs to actively leverage these accomplishments as it pursues its diplomacy and security policies.

From the Korean War to today, the U.S.-ROK alliance is a diplomatic and security asset that both the government and people of South Korea

trust the most. Conservative governments relatively tend to communicate better with the U.S. and can gain earnest support for the relationship among pro-Korean officials and experts in America, which, in turn, makes them better equipped to expand the autonomy of South Korea on matters pertaining to the Korean peninsula.¹⁹ While the 'time for diplomacy' was stressed at its inauguration, the Biden administration has been unable to exercise its diplomatic influence on global issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic political polarization. Even though the high inflation rate remains an obstacle, the Biden administration has exerted various efforts to unite American society. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has actually decreased the great diplomatic power status of Russia, and many believe that this may consequently offer the U.S. a great opportunity to partially restore its diminishing global leadership.²⁰

Therefore, the Yoon administration needs to closely monitor changes to the global security environment and utilize its strengths as a conservative government to prepare bold policies on North Korea that enable North Korea's return to diplomacy. In this process, the Yoon administration should further secure South Korea's autonomy in its relationship with the U.S. and actively pursue the establishment of security and peace on the Korean peninsula. Throughout South Korea's modern history, key diplomatic developments such as the normalization of relations with Japan in 1965, the July 7 declaration in 1988 and the Northern Policy,²¹ and the 'Joint Vision for the U.S-ROK alliance' in 2009 which

19 Regarding the discussion of the role of the U.S. and the comprehensive outcomes of the war see, Robin Wright, "Ukraine is Now America's War Too," *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2022.

20 Differently from the perception in the early stages of the war, people in the world are getting more disappointed by the inefficiency of the Russian military operational capability.

21 See Ihn-hwi Park, "The Nordpolitik and Its Evaluation," in *The 6.29 Declaration and Korea's Democracy*, ed. Won-taek Kang (Seoul, Korea: Purungil, 2017) (in Korean); Byung-kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (eds.), *The Park Chung Hee Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert E. Bedeski (ed.), *The Transformation of South Korea: Reform and Reconstitution in the Sixth Republic Under Roh Tae Woo, 1987-1992* (London: Routledge, 2002).

comprehensively expanded the meaning of the alliance were all based on the diplomatic confidence of conservative governments.²² The Yoon administration should actively refer to these achievements.

2. Preventing the Transformation of Foreign Affairs into Domestic Political Issues

Another aspect that the Yoon administration needs to consider in implementing its foreign policy is the excessively close link between 'diplomacy and security policy' and 'domestic politics' currently seen in South Korea. There is a strong perception in South Korea's political environment that core diplomatic issues such as U.S.-South Korea relations and inter-Korean relations are under the purview of the presidency. Paradoxically, however, this results in a tendency for foreign policy issues to become matters of domestic politics. In other words, instead of remaining solely under the purview of the president, issues of foreign policy become extremely generalized agendas which we need the entire public's shared awareness of and engage with. Simply put, security issues fall into the 'trap of politicization' and the nation's relationship with the U.S. is a key example.

This type of 'transformation of diplomacy to domestic political issues' is a problem that almost every South Korean government has experienced in the past. In particular, the U.S.-ROK alliance is an issue that can create fierce debates in South Korean society depending on which ideological prism it is viewed through. Conservative governments have traditionally approached diplomacy and security policy from the perspective of preserving South Korea's identity and the rule of law that the nation has cultivated since 1948. The relationship with the U.S. is understood in the same vein, and, as a result, 'international cooperation,' including the

22 There is an interesting academic debate to figure out which variable is more critical between 'ideology' and 'national capacity' to achieve larger autonomy in the area of Korea policies with the U.S. See, Jae-yong Chung, "The Conditions under which the R.O.K. pursues autonomy within the R.O.K.-U.S. alliance – testing the partisan and national power hypotheses," *Korean Journal of International Politics* 61, no. 4 (2021): 73-117. (in Korean)

U.S.-ROK alliance, is treated as the most important policy tool for establishing peace on the Korean peninsula and enhancing South Korea's global status. In its '110 Key National Tasks' announced on May 3, for example, the Yoon administration highlights the need for the rule of law and institutionalization in inter-Korean relations over the next five years. Moreover, Policies 96 and 105 propose an active, overall expansion of the scope of the U.S.-ROK alliance and especially emphasize efforts to 'improve the ability to execute extended deterrence by the U.S. and South Korea'.²³ While this may be a positive policy direction, the risk of falling into the trap of domestic politics is also increased as a result. Given this, the Yoon administration should try to maintain an appropriate balance between foreign and domestic affairs, even though key issues such as U.S.-South Korea relations can never be completely free from domestic political debates.

3. The North Korean Nuclear Problem and Lessons from the Moon Administration

North Korea has intentionally heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula before and after the presidential elections by conducting an almost unprecedented number and variety of missile test launches. The Yoon administration has stressed the importance of 'coordination between the U.S. and South Korea' for solving the North Korean problem at every opportunity. But at the same time, it needs to sincerely contemplate what it may be able to offer North Korea for denuclearization, given how South Korea is unable to rely solely on pressure campaigns.

The North Korea policy of the Moon administration may be the subject of various debates and, depending on one's perspective, be severely criticized. Nevertheless, the Yoon administration needs to understand the intention of the Moon administration to solve the issue of security on the Korean peninsula from a security-oriented approach. Every policy

23 The U.S.'s stronger commitment for the extended deterrence is a wise policy suggestion in a sense that this policy option should eradicate the far-right's claim for 'Korea's nuclear armament.'

intended to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea has failed. North Korea eventually announced the completion of its nuclear arsenal in November 2017. The fundamental reason why South Korea's North Korea policy has failed is every South Korean government, without exception, had proposed policies for 'economic assistance' and 'social exchanges' despite North Korea consistently claiming that its development of nuclear weapons was a matter of 'survival' and 'security'. Regardless of how attractive and helpful economic aid may be, North Korea was unable to abandon its survival and, by extension, its nuclear program. Because of this, North Korea has likely relied on its strategy of 'direct negotiation only with the U.S. and not South Korea' to ignore Seoul and talk directly with Washington. Though the Moon administration's North Korea strategy failed to achieve success, this article believes that the administration's awareness that proposing a form of peace that North Korea demands is necessary for denuclearization and the 'peace process' on the Korean peninsula was generally accurate.²⁴ With this in mind, South Korea and the U.S. need to seek a fundamental solution through concessions that are 'equal' to North Korea's abandonment of its nuclear arsenal.

V. Conclusion

The pattern of a transition of power after two presidents of the same political affiliation that had continued since the 1987 elections was broken in 2022 with the results of the 20th presidential elections. A conservative government led by President Yoon Suk-yeol was elected after five years of the comparatively progressive Moon Jae-in administration. South Koreans that voted for President Yoon will expect an identity and direction for policies that are entirely different from the past five years and, in particular, will anticipate greater changes to diplomacy and security policies, given how the president's personal leadership has a greater

24 Differently from the previous trade-off model between 'security' and 'economy' which has resulted in failures for the last 30 years, the Moon administration set a new trade-off model between 'security (nuclear)' and 'security (the peace system).'

impact in these areas. Conservative governments in South Korea have traditionally emphasized the U.S.-South Korea relationship, and the Yoon administration has also stressed its intent to actively utilize the security asset in the form of the U.S.-ROK alliance in the process of securing peace on the Korean peninsula. The '110 Key National Tasks' announced on May 5 clearly reflect such views. The U.S. was the only foreign country mentioned by name, which illustrates how vital the Yoon administration thinks the U.S.-ROK alliance is.

The global diplomatic and security environment surrounding the Korean peninsula is perilous. This is because repercussions from a fiercer conflict between the U.S. and China may be concentrated on countries in East Asia, and especially because great power politics are expected to intensify following the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, economic security is becoming increasingly crucial, while problems such as climate change and the environment that are impossible for a single country to address alone have emerged as global priorities for the entire international community. South Korea and the U.S. closely share values such as democracy, a market economy, institutional efficiency, international law, and human rights, and the U.S.-ROK alliance over the past 70 years is viewed as an exceptionally successful alliance unrivaled around the world. It is hoped that potential distortions in the U.S.-South Korea relationship are resolved while the South Korean government's confidence in North Korea policy and U.S.-China-South Korea relations are heightened by the Yoon administration as it leverages its advantage as a conservative government in securing greater autonomy vis-à-vis the U.S.

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