

# KOREA LOOKS TO EUROPE: ITS GROWING MILITARY-STRATEGIC COOPERATION WITH NATO

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*Korea is looking to Europe in the military-strategic dimension. It wants to boost ties with NATO even as strengthening relations with the AP4 (four Asia-Pacific partners) forms an important aspect of the NATO 2030 agenda. Korea has proactively joined this diplomatic effort, a foreign policy initiative that is unprecedentedly bold for Korea, which had been passively stuck in Northeast Asia. This series of political action already brings Korea multiple consequences—both positive and negative—which will only increase in number and magnitude. This issue brief examines the Korean perspective and compulsion for strengthening ties with NATO as the world experiences a convergence of regions (Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic) and security dimensions (military, economy, technology, political regime) driven by the U.S., China, and other significant powers. Against this backdrop, Korea needs NATO much more than before given four key factors—the U.S. push, need of capable partners, commercial opportunity, and nuclear tripwire. And most likely vice versa.*

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The global security structure has been changing in the last few years to such an extent that most countries are largely at a loss, and Korea is not an exception. As strengthening relations with Asia-Pacific partners forms an important aspect of the NATO 2030 agenda,<sup>1</sup> Korea also wants to boost ties with NATO, however, without outlining anything sophisticated or strategic at this moment. Even though it is more like a ‘learning by doing’ process for Korea (and NATO), Korea’s cooperation agenda with NATO covers a wide range of military dimensions such as military acquisition and

procurement, weapons system interoperability, emerging disruptive technologies R&D, and nuclear deterrence. And the strategic awareness on Russia, China, and other non-democracies such as North Korea in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions as well as a convergence of military, economic, technological, political, and environmental security dimensions have started to form a foundation that justify recent developments for Korea.<sup>2</sup>

One such development was the NATO-AP4 (Asia-Pacific Partners 4) summit in Madrid last June,

a groundbreaking event connecting the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions from the multi-dimensional security point of view. This year's NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, scheduled for July, also invites Korean president Yoon and the other three AP4 heads of state. The participation in this annual summit seems to be getting quickly institutionalized and is likely to be maintained in the foreseeable future. The meetings between Korea and NATO, including those under the NATO-AP4 framework, were made possible owing to the U.S.' hard push to make them more linked, aligned, and integrated.<sup>3</sup> Korea has proactively joined this diplomatic effort, a foreign policy initiative that is unprecedentedly bold for Korea, which had been passively stuck in Northeast Asia. Of course, this series of political action already brings Korea multiple consequences—both positive and negative—which will only increase in number and magnitude.

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as the world gets accustomed to a convergence of regions and security dimensions driven by the U.S., China, and other significant powers.

## **The U.S. Grand Strategy of Security Convergences**

The declining U.S. has still shown that it has enough convening power to assemble its capable junior partners in both regions. It is also making a great effort to form a framework to literally cover the entire globe in a multilateral manner or the recently coined “integrated deterrence” strategic concept.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. grand strategy seems to be directed at convergence between the two regions.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the NATO-AP4 format, which has been quickly set in the last several months, has started to play a significant role in the military dimension. Certainly, this military dimension does not move solo and is amalgamating with the economic and technological dimensions. It is logical as security becomes more comprehensive to combine multiple conventional (military) and emerging (economic, technological, political, and environmental) dimensions at every level of analysis. The U.S.-China competition in the prevailing super high-tech, hyper-connected era is behind this monumental development. Korea's evolving military relations with NATO as one unit as well as its individual member-countries largely coincide with the aforementioned strategic move of the U.S.

## **No Longer Rhetoric, But Realpolitik**

Even though this progress in military relations has been accelerated over the last several months, Korea is still not familiar with NATO, and vice-versa. The first NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting with the Asia-Pacific partners in December 2020 did not convince the Korean strategic and military community of this ‘remote’ military partnership. In a similar vein, a gradual integration between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions through the NATO-AP4 format is regarded as more rhetoric than *realpolitik* strategy. Of late, after a remarkable

change of scenery across the military, economic, and technological security dimensions that revolve around the Ukraine-Russia war and related strategic responses from major powers in the two regions, a minor number of strategic thinkers, analysts, and decision makers in Seoul and Europe have started to realize this monumental change of military and strategic structure that connects the two regions. As witnessed over the last several months, defense industrial actors from both sides are already in full action and more comprehensive military cooperation is on the way. It is just a matter of time for Korea to see plenty of productive but risky opportunities in accelerating bilateral relations with NATO and its individual member-countries in a military ecosystem, which would be eventually incorporated with other security dimensions. Such politico-economic amalgamation is likely to be seen within the 2020s itself.

Against this backdrop, Korea needs NATO much more than before given the following **four key factors**—the U.S. push, the need of capable partners, commercial opportunity, and nuclear tripwire. And most likely vice versa.

### Staying Allied with the U.S.

First of all, the U.S. wants it. The bannermen answered the call. The Madrid Summit last June was the exact occasion for the NATO's *de facto* leader and Pacific hub-and-spoke alliance system's senior partner to summon its bannermen from both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. The other three AP4 countries—Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—were more than willing to join the Summit, as was Korea. It is not very clear whether Korean leaders are fully aware of the intention of the U.S., which now openly admits its lost solo supremacy in the global security hierarchy and is trying to assemble a U.S.-centered security framework of two sets of amalgamation—regional and dimensional—not to mention its logical consequences in the long term. Nevertheless, Korea has no choice but to answer the call from its senior

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military partner because it depends heavily, if not decisively, on U.S. forces in every aspect from army to air force to navy and most importantly, for its nuclear umbrella.

### Searching for New Partners

Second, Korea needs more capable and viable partners beyond Northeast Asia; from both the Indo-Pacific region and other regions such as the Euro-Atlantic region. Most of all, Western, Northern, and Central European countries fit the description of Korea's upper-middle power partners, which are generally stuck between the U.S. and China. Just like many individual member countries of NATO, Korea wants to cooperate with the U.S. in the realm of military defense, however, it too needs more influence or leverage over the U.S. If the aforementioned masterplan of the U.S. plays out, the lesser hegemonic U.S. has no choice but to share power with its bannermen in both regions, against their common rivals and competitors (China, Russia, North Korea, and other unlike-minded countries). Korea sees more opportunities to get connected with reliable and capable partners

in Europe (both NATO and EU frameworks) and proactively set the key agendas together or at least avoid being excluded from the process of integrated deterrence formation. Korea wants to be positioned higher in the global and U.S.-led military hierarchy as its state capacity has significantly improved to match several countries in this group. At the same time, Korea's evolving relationship with NATO would be more of a two-way interaction rather than one-way, say, the West to the East like a century ago. From the Korean perspective, it is already a two-way in the defense industry and interoperability—Korea has been going global, especially, to Europe.

Korea also needs to cover much more ground and sea in the Indo-Pacific region in and out of the Korean Peninsula, even all the way to the South Pacific in a near future, if not now.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Korea is not going to be a major military player in the South Pacific, South China Sea, Indian Ocean and other remote blue waters and the grounds in these regions. Nevertheless, it is logically convincing for the Korean decision-makers to engage with aligned Indo-Pacific partners such as the other AP4

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countries and other major countries in Southeast (e.g., Indonesia and Vietnam) and South Asia (e.g., India) in the regional converging process of the global security structure. Last November, the new president Yoon announced the key elements of Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy in the Phnom Penh ASEAN meeting, which was followed through with an official document of 'Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region' last December.<sup>7</sup> With its limit of military state capacity in mind, Korea is considering multiple options to maximize its national interests in the military and other related sectors, or to minimize the cost in military escalation on the Korean Peninsula and Indo-Pacific region. In a sense, Korea needs more strategic leverage over North Korea now and China in the long term, with some significant risks, too. In this context, getting closer to other AP4 countries in multiple platforms is a no-brainer for Korea.

### **Money (and Technology) Talks but No Free Lunch**

Third, Korea wants to expand its defense industry in a profitable way and exchange technology in the military sector. Korea is an advanced manufacturing powerhouse and one of T(echnology) 10-15 countries in the world. It has a comprehensive portfolio in designing, manufacturing, and exporting technology-oriented products including

semiconductors, batteries, chemicals, vehicles, smartphones, ships, nuclear plants, and so forth. Even though the defense industry was not a major strength until recently, Korea's advanced weapons systems have been developed and tested under its unique military confrontation with North Korea over the last seven decades. Korea needed Europe as a competitive and collaborative partner, but probably not the other way around until recently.

The tables have since turned. Korean defense industrial products are now in high demand in European NATO countries, especially, those in Central and Eastern Europe or the Three Seas region.<sup>8</sup> Poland is the clear frontrunner, set to buy at least \$15 billion worth of K1A2 tanks, the K9 155 mm self-propelled howitzers, and FA50 light jet fighters among others. Other countries such as *a la* 'Bucharest 9' are likely to follow through with these advanced weapons given the reasonable prices and quick delivery times.<sup>9</sup> This breakthrough for the Korean defense industry in NATO territory opens up a significantly larger market, which suddenly

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looks very favorable and largely lacks alternative competitors in the foreseeable future. Note that Korea does not directly compete with the U.S. because its products are well-advanced but second-tier in many cases, and a significant number of key components are made in America. Most of all, the U.S. cannot singlehandedly fill up the European armory. The NATO decision to raise its individual countries' defense spending up to 2 percent and the ensuing outcry of Central and Eastern Europe has created substantial demand for diverse weapons and their operating systems.<sup>10</sup> Initially forced by the former Trump administration, but hastily propelled by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and prolonged war, this upward military procurement drive will remain for the next decade or two. Europe is rearming. And the U.S. needs Korea in this mix and is already supporting the Korean defense industry in a quiet manner.

There is no immediate production capacity to fill up within Europe, even though Germany, France, and a few more advanced countries have both technologies and manufacturers. They lack speedy

mass production capacity, which is a legacy of a long peace and ensuing weapon redundancy trend in the post-Cold War era. Japan, a clear alternative from Asia, is not proactive to produce and sell weapons to others, including the NATO allies of the U.S., yet. Encouraged by securing weapon procurement contracts worth \$7.25 billion in 2021 and \$21 billion in 2022,<sup>11</sup> the Korean Yoon government has openly put more resources into R&D, and established systematic cooperation between government and industry, with eyes on its positive externalities for enforcing its military cooperation with allies and aligned partners in both Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.<sup>12</sup> Seoul is all for arms sales to Europe, which also awards much-needed leverage over other weapons importers in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, South Asia, and South America.

Korea has also started to understand the chain reaction that these strong arms sales and provision

to NATO countries create a significant negative externality *a la* Russia's outrage and China's concerns.<sup>13</sup> Even though Seoul does not seem to fully realize the changing global security structure, caused by the great powers, the U.S., China, and Russia in the medium term, some signaling from these countries have already been sent in multiple routes. This would put Korea in an even more dangerous position on the Korean Peninsula because North Korean military threats would be intertwined with those of the NATO battleground—a figment of imagination no more with the most recent Russian 'quid pro quo' threat against Korea.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, money talks. The growing market is one of the most important motivations for Korea to take its cooperative NATO relations up to another level. As defense exports are extremely important in terms of sharing weapon systems, mutual logistics support, strengthening security alliances and domestic political gains, this series of export deals will contribute to Korea's efforts to build solidarity with European countries and expand the boundaries of its security capabilities. The U.S. push on strategic convergences fits in this set of dynamics very well.

***The North Korean nuclear threat became more realistic for Korean elites and even ordinary citizens since the recent Russian threat to use tactical low yield nuclear weapons in Ukraine and potentially NATO member-states. If Russia can use nuclear weapons, so can North Korea. Whether Korea wants it or not, the strategic convergence between the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula, and the Euro-Atlantic regions is happening.***

### **Dealing with Nuclear Tripwire**

Last but not least, Korea wants to boost ties with NATO because the Ukraine-Russia nuclear weapons dimension is getting more closely linked to that of the Korean Peninsula. It is not just Korea's long-standing request to NATO and its individual countries for condemning North Korean nuclear provocation under the NPT venue. Rather, the North Korean nuclear threat became more realistic for Korean elites and even ordinary citizens since the recent Russian threat to use tactical low yield nuclear weapons in Ukraine and potentially NATO member-states.<sup>15</sup> In other words, this outrageous but realistic nuclear blackmail from Russia in Europe has led the Korean public to take the North Korean nuclear threat more seriously. If Russia can use nuclear weapons, so can North Korea. This wake-up call coincided with North Korea's passing a law declaring its readiness to launch preemptive nuclear

strikes, including in the face of conventional attacks last September.<sup>16</sup> The 70 percent support of self-nuclearization in multiple Korean public polls along with President Yoon's positive remark on it enforces this risky military tendency.<sup>17</sup> Whether Korea wants it or not, the strategic convergence between the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula, and the Euro-Atlantic regions is happening.

The Taiwan factor joins this already complicated strategic struggle. As soon as the war in Europe became full scale and prolonged, many started to look at another part of the world, the Taiwan Straits. This Indo-Pacific (and Belt Road Initiative) region is far away from NATO territory, but it did not hinder students of war and peace from connecting the two battlegrounds.<sup>18</sup> They see China. So do many European and American decision-makers. Russia is an imminent threat, but China is a strategic rival in years to come. China has not joined to constrain the Russian aggressor, even mulling its long-standing tradition of territorial sovereignty, and is taking advantage of the energy crisis to its own benefits. Now, China has allegedly approved 'provision of lethal aid' to Russia.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, China is looking hard to see how well NATO and linked Indo-Pacific countries such as AP4 can manage this war so as to estimate its true capacity and identity in the context of its own military takeover of Taiwan and potentially the South China Sea. Its nuclear second-strike capability and potential preemptive use option in its neighborhood and beyond (the U.S.) might be seriously considered as Russia advances in this regard. The often-warned nuclearization domino in Indo-Pacific region will likely happen, too. Now, we see a potential 'nuclear tripwire' between Ukraine (or NATO territory) to the Taiwan Straits to the Korean Peninsula.

## Seoul Goes to Brussels and Beyond?

These four factors are a good starting point for analyzing the rapidly evolving Korea-NATO and, more comprehensively, AP4-NATO relations in the current decade. There are more dimensions and levels

to cover in an objective estimation and projection of the mutual payoff structures. The NATO-Korea ITPP (Individual Tailored Partnership Program) will provide a cautious step forward, but a much more comprehensive approach and negotiations at Track 1, 1.5, and 2 levels are urgently needed. The first question to tackle would be whether Korea can take on such a daunting task or not; it's a matter of overstretch and risk management on all fronts. Nevertheless, there seems to be no other choice. The world is moving to the convergence of regions and strategic securities. The U.S. and China are behind this move and those stuck in-between must deal with them.

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## Endnotes

- 1 NATO Factsheet, “NATO 2030,” June 2021, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf).
- 2 Note that this issue brief focuses on the military strategic dimension, picking up the discussion after the following piece: Wooyeal Paik and Yoon Jung Choi, “Evolving Korea-NATO Relations: Global Indo-Pacific and Korean Perspectives,” CSDS Policy Brief 02/2023, February 6, 2023.
- 3 The U.S. invited six senior Korean parliamentarians to NATO headquarters in Brussels from March 27 to March 31, which is unprecedented and even before the Japanese counterparts. (Seungim Chung, “Six national congressmen will visit ‘NATO’... The U.S. invited owing to insecurity on ‘extended deterrence’,” Hankookilbo, March 9, 2023, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2023030815340000532>.) Such U.S. emphasis is witnessed in both formal and informal channels and issue areas, including military procurement and defense industrial cooperation.
- 4 This is a tactical move by the U.S. as part of its ‘integrated deterrence’ strategic concept, which was coined by the Biden presidency in 2022. (Todd Lopez, “Allies, Partners Central to U.S. Integrated Deterrence Effort,” DOD News, March 1, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3315827/allies-partners-central-to-us-integrated-deterrence-effort/>).
- 5 American President Joseph Biden outlined this strategic perspective during his State of the Union Speech on February 8, 2023 as follows: “America is rallying the world again to meet those challenges—from climate and global health to food insecurity to terrorism and territorial aggression. Allies are stepping up, spending more and doing more. And bridges are forming between partners in the Pacific and those in the Atlantic. And those who bet against America are learning just how wrong they are.” (The White House, “State of the Union Address,” February 7, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2023/>). Note that even though this grand strategy might or might not be realized to a full scale, this issue brief acknowledges the U.S.’s intention and quick policy execution across the multiple security dimensions.
- 6 Korea will hold the first Korea-South Pacific Island Countries Summit in Busan, Korea, in May 2023. See [https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m\\_4076/view.do?seq=369815](https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4076/view.do?seq=369815).
- 7 Its three key principles are freedom, peace, and prosperity and the geographical range covers from Northern Pacific, Southeast Asia, South Asia, to East Africa with complementary emphasis on Europe and Central/South America. In particular, it emphasizes the evolving cooperation with NATO as one of the top priorities. See [https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m\\_25838/contents.do](https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_25838/contents.do).
- 8 The Three Seas region is ‘a politically inspired, commercially driven platform for improving connectivity between 12 EU member-states allocated between Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas’. See <https://3seas.eu/?lang=en>.
- 9 Dasl Yoon, “Ukraine War drives rapid growth in South Korea’s Arms Exports,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-war-drives-rapid-growth-in-south-koreas-arms-exports-11675345212>; Hyun-bin Kim, “Korea looks to sell weapons to Romania following lucrative deal with Poland,” *The Korea Times*, February 9, 2023, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2023/02/419\\_345138.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2023/02/419_345138.html).
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