



US-ROK Global Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

Policy Opportunities, Challenges, and Pitfalls

By Kayla Orta

Executive Summary

The alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) plays an increasingly important role in US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region. At the 2023 Biden-Yoon Summit, the two nations celebrated the 70th anniversary and proclaimed the triumphs of the past with an eye towards the future of the expanded US-ROK Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Today, the United States and the ROK have defined clear—and, importantly, mutual—foreign policy agendas on security, defense, trade, and energy. As the United States and the ROK look towards the decades to come for the alliance, both opportunities and challenges lay on the horizon.



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Executive Summary (Continued)

Recent geopolitical events from Russia's incursion into Ukraine to the strategic competition between the United States and China and the burgeoning Russia and Democratic Republic People's of Korea's (DPRK) arms trades serve as reminders of the importance of close security cooperation between the United States and the Republic of Korea. Such close policy alignment between the US and ROK governments—exemplified in the Washington Declaration's establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and the US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Summit at Camp David—adds weight to both countries' bilateral and multilateral engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Beyond these security challenges, there is political appetite for the expansion of the US and ROK collaboration in nontraditional security. Pitfalls from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the US CHIPS and Science Act, however, drained nascent enthusiasm between the two countries. Moving forward, the United States should seize the opportunity to strengthen cooperation in three key areas of collaboration: 1) economic security and supply chain resiliency, 2) digital and cybersecurity; and, 3) climate & energy policy.

As one of the United States' closest allies in the Indo-Pacific, mutual political alignment between the United States and ROK bolsters US foreign policy implementation, continuity, and expansion in the Indo-Pacific region. Ensuring US and ROK policy alignment endures through 2024 and beyond is paramount for the continued success of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy at large.

Policy Recommendations

The evolving US-ROK Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership plays an increasing—and expanding—role in US foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific region.

Geopolitical Security Engagement:

- Mutual policy coordination between the United States and the ROK in both traditional and non-traditional security dynamics should be considered as vital for furthering US strategic interests in the region.
- Strengthening US-ROK strategic defense cooperation, through the newly-institutionalized US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) vis-à-vis an emboldened DPRK should remain high on the US administration's priority list. Key consideration of the ROK's participation as an invited observer to NATO and, potentially, AUKUS could serve as further avenues for defense cooperation.
- Institutionalization of US-ROK-Japan trilateral relations, although early, should continue to be seen as important for both security and economic reasons. While limitations exist for defense collaboration beyond information sharing and regional joint training exercise, opportunities exist for shared economic cooperation in supply chain management, cyber security, and energy policy.

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Policy Recommendations (Continued)

- The United States should expand the Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework with the ROK to detect, deter, and disrupt malicious activities in cyberspace, including in addressing DPRK's cyber threats and cryptocurrency theft.

Economic Security Enhancement

- To address critical economic security challenges, the United States and the ROK should seek avenues within the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for bilateral and multilateral policy coordination to ensure supply chain resilience and encourage industry-to-industry cooperation.
- As global leaders in science and technology (S&T) development, next steps for the US-ROK Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies Dialogue should serve as a leading example towards closer bilateral engagement with the potential for deeper regional engagement.
- New initiatives in public-private cooperation, such as the US Clean Energy Demand Initiative and ROK Carbon-Free Alliance should be expanded in 2024 and beyond. Both the United States and South Korea, committed to 2050 net-zero targets for decarbonize key heavy industries, should explore areas of joint research and cooperation in renewables, nuclear energy, hydrogen technologies, and green shipping.

Introduction

The alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) plays an increasingly important role in US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region. The 2023 Biden-Yoon Summit proclaimed the triumphs of the past with an eye towards the future. During the summit, the two nations celebrated the 70th anniversary of the alliance, establishing the diplomatic launching pad for the new US-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Today, the United States and the ROK have defined clear—and, importantly, mutual—foreign policy agendas on security, defense, trade, and energy. As the United States and the ROK look towards the future of the alliance, both opportunities and challenges lay on the horizon.

Since the 1950s, the relations between the United States and the ROK have grown, evolving, and strengthening into a comprehensive strategic partnership. The [1953 Mutual Defense Treaty](#), signed in the aftermath of the devastating Korea War (1950-1953), codified the US defense commitments towards ensuring peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. A bilateral agreement between the United States and the ROK, the treaty, nonetheless, punctuated the importance of regional stability and security hinged on the Korean Peninsula. In no uncertain terms, the treaty serves as a reminder that “no potential aggressor could be under the illusion that either of them stands alone in the Pacific area.”

As the United States and the ROK look towards the future of the alliance, there are both opportunities, challenges, and, if not careful, pitfalls that remain.

In particularly, recent geopolitical events from Russia’s incursion into Ukraine to the strategic

competition between the United States and China and the burgeoning Russia-North Korean arms trades serve as reminders of the importance of close security cooperation between the United States and the ROK. Such close policy alignment between the US and ROK governments—exemplified in the Washington Declaration’s establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and the US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Summit at Camp David—adds weight to both countries’ bilateral and multilateral engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Beyond these security challenges, there is both political drive and appetite for the expansion of the US and ROK collaboration in nontraditional security fields of economic security, digital infrastructure, cyberspace, climate, and energy policy. While lessons from the [US Inflation Reduction Act \(IRA\)](#) and the [CHIPS and Science Act](#) drained early enthusiasm between the two countries, the boom in multi-sector expansion of the United States and Republic of Korea’s coordination presents undeniable opportunities. The United States should seize the opportunity to strengthen cooperation in three key areas of collaboration: 1) economic security and supply chain resiliency, 2) digital and cybersecurity; and, 3) climate and energy policy.

As one of the United States’ closest allies in the Indo-Pacific, the mutual alignment between the US and ROK supports US policy implementation, continuity, and expansion in the Indo-Pacific region. Ensuring US and ROK policy alignment endures through 2024 and beyond is paramount for the continued success of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy.

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US-ROK Policy Alignment

In February 2022, the Biden administration announced the [US Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) with the aim of addressing 21st-century challenges alongside regional allies, such as South Korea. The United States reengagement in the wider Asian region seeks to re-shape the strategic environment by shifting countries out of the looming shadow of China's expanding sphere of influence and, instead, towards a "free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient" Indo-Pacific regional system. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy placed US allies and a shared vision of policy implementation at the center of the policy's rubric for success—No US refocus on the Indo-Pacific region would be possible without the critical cooperation of local US partners in the region.

At the same time, the ROK government's recent foreign policy signals a reinvigorated policy shift towards investing broadly in international diplomacy, multilateral organizations, and industry-to-industry cooperation—Strongly mirroring the diplomatic and economic goals of the United States. Even prior to winning office in 2022, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol's campaign platform called for the [expansion of the ROK's role in the international community](#) to the level of a "Global Pivotal State" (GPS). Since assuming office, the Yoon administration through the GPS policy has embarked on a maximum internationalist approach to expand cooperation—at both the state and corporate levels—among like-minded, allied countries at bilateral, multilateral, and global levels. Importantly, highlighting the successes of the US-ROK long-standing partnerships across policy dimensions has been key to Yoon's foreign policy initiatives.

Moreover, the GPS foreign policy agenda is—in no uncertain terms—situated within the ROK

governments larger Indo-Pacific framework. In his [2022 ROK-ASEAN Summit address](#), ROK President Yoon stated that "we are living in the Indo-Pacific era...peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region directly connected to our survival and prosperity." In many ways, the most recent focus of ROK's foreign policy leans into bridging the East and West as the ROK government aims to put South Korea on the international stage as a responsible, proactive international stakeholder within the global community, but also as a key, state-of-the-art technology developer within conflicted spaces of supply chain management.

To this end, the Republic of Korea followed the United States' lead in announcing its own [Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region](#) in December 2023. The ROK Indo-Pacific policy, much like the US strategy, centered South Korea's long-term security within the importance of regional peace and prosperity. Similar to the US, the ROK's comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy, encompassed both economic and security dynamics. Unlike US policy, the Yoon administration carefully treaded around the question of China's disruptive nature in the region. Instead, China was listed as a "key partner for achieving prosperity," indicating the ROK's hesitancy to take a directly abrasive position vis-à-vis its traditional largest trading partner in the region. Despite this difference, much of the US-ROK policy in both traditional and nontraditional security remains in close alignment.

Strategic Alliance: Security and Defense

Long-time strategic allies, the United States and Republic of Korea share decades of military and defense integration in the Indo-Pacific region. Since the 1950s, the US-ROK alliance has been

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a linchpin in the region, ensuring security and peace on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. As the DPRK threat continues to advance, the US-ROK strategic defense posture in the region will be paramount for signaling strong deterrence and retaliatory capabilities vis-à-vis both traditional and nontraditional threats.

As the US administration reviews security postures in the region in 2024 and beyond, the maintenance of a strong US-ROK military readiness is paramount. The diversification of DPRK threats—from the [revisions of the North's Nuclear Posture](#) to [drone incursions](#) into the South and, most recently, the [redesignation of South Korea](#) in the North Korean constitution—poses ongoing challenges to the US-ROK defense partnership. Sustained and maintained defense cooperation will be key for both US and ROK safety, security, and strategic interests on the Korean Peninsula.

To ensure consistency in the US-ROK strategic defense cooperation, the US government should continue its [forward-leaning defense posture readiness](#). Maintaining strong US-ROK defense cooperation, however, requires at the most basic level clear policy on military cost sharing. To date, expenses covering the approximately 28,500 US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula are renegotiated through rounds of multi-year Special Measure Agreements under Article V of the 1966 Status of Forces Agreement. In the past, these agreements have fallen [prey to the politics of alliance management](#). Delays in agreements between the two countries predominantly weakens stability within the alliance. With the current Special Measures Agreement set to expire in 2025, renegotiation is [underway to seek an early agreement](#) to lock in predictability for US-ROK cost sharing past 2026. The United States should view these early negotiations as an upfront investment in the long-term security of alliance strength and readiness.

Moreover, the [2023 US-ROK Defense Vision](#) details shared opportunities to further strengthen the alliance defense structure through 1) assurance towards US nuclear posture via the newly established Nuclear Consultative Group, 2) sustained annual joint military exercises, and 3) consideration of new avenues toward cooperation with third-party countries in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, leaving room for the question of trilateral efforts with Japan and continued observer status in NATO to name a couple of examples.

1) US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group

The United States and the Republic of Korea continue to face the challenge of the DPRK's self-proclaimed nuclear weapon status and growing expansion of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile programs. Since the 1950s, the United States has provided continuous assurance of its extended deterrence for the ROK. However, as the North Korean WMD program persists (defying decades of bilateral and multinational denuclearization efforts), the US-ROK alliance has felt the growing [erosion of the ROK's confidence](#) in US commitments—albeit not in absolute defense capabilities but rather in public perception. With the large-scale uptick in North Korean missile diversification and launch tests, South Korean public opinion polls stressed the [domestic perception](#) of future trade-offs—i.e. the question of Seoul for Washington.

The [2023 Washington Declaration](#) reaffirmed US commitment to the US-ROK alliance and nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula and emphasized greater strategic clarity between the two countries. With the signing of the [US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group Framework](#) in early 2024, both countries have moved forward with implementation strategies to strengthen the alliance. However, as the threat of North

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Korea's WMD program continues into the US 2024 election year, further provocations from the North are likely to continue to test the US-ROK alliance and the reliability of US extended deterrence.

2) Joint US-ROK Military Training Exercises

Regularization and expansion of US-ROK joint training exercises in the region could play a role in further alleviating the ROK's concerns by strengthening force posture readiness in the region. In response to the DPRK's provocations and rhetoric, the United States and ROK have utilized ad hoc demonstrations of defense capabilities near the peninsula, including the deployment of US assets such as nuclear-capable bombers and aircraft carriers. As the two countries seek new avenues to bolster military interoperability, the two countries should build upon recent iterations of the Freedom Shield, Hoguk Field Training Exercises, and Vigilant Storm Joint Air Training. Careful attention to the right balance of US-ROK joint response to the DPRK's actions will be necessary as the North's threats intensify during times of training exercise.

3) Expanding Defense Cooperation Platforms

As the United States and the ROK reinitialize joint military exercises within the Indo-Pacific region, there is an opportunity for US foreign defense policy to consider further cooperation in the region and beyond. Now, the ROK, [an observer in 2022](#) and 2023 to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), aims to strengthen its [inclusion in allied defense engagement](#) in the European theater. Questions on how US and ROK forces are integrated into a larger framework within the Indo-Pacific remain unanswered.

To this end, US-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation has served as an early-stage experiment in what might be possible and feasible for the three allies. Since the [historic Camp David Summit](#), the US-ROK-Japan tripartite partnership has launched the first-ever trilateral [ballistic missile defense drills](#) (August 2023), [aerial exercises](#) (October 2023), and [naval exercises](#) (January 2024). While the long-term sustainability of the US-ROK-Japan trilateral engagement remains to be seen, these early efforts to institutionalize tripartite defense cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region should be strengthened.

With tensions rising in the region, the US-ROK alliance—and by extension US-ROK-Japan trilateral relations—will need to maintain consistent, clear, and engaged lines of communication. The US government should continue to see the strategic value of close security cooperation between US and ROK military forces.

Expanding Cooperation: Nontraditional Security

The importance of nontraditional security imperatives should not be understated in the US-ROK comprehensive strategic partnership. Since the launch of the US and ROK Indo-Pacific policies, redefining areas of strategic importance within the alliance has also placed economic security and supply chain resiliency at the forefront of many joint projects. Importantly, the Biden-Yoon Presidential Summits in [2022](#) and [2023](#) respectively signal continuity in US-ROK policy towards expanding beyond security, towards cooperation in science and technology (S&T) development, supply chain resiliency, and energy transition.

However, at the same time both countries have sought to capitalize on widening opportunities, there have also been pitfalls in their pursuit of

economic cooperation. Special attention should be given to the successful institutionalization (and implications for failed alignment) of US-ROK cooperation in three critical areas: 1) economic security, 2) digital and cybersecurity, and 3) climate and energy policy.

1) Economic Security & Supply Chain Resiliency

In May 2022, the Biden administration's [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity \(IPEF\)](#), drew attention to the importance of economic security within the newly-delineated Indo-Pacific regional policy. With the launch of IPEF, the United States [argued for a collective movement](#) towards the advancement of “resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and competitiveness” among like-minded countries. The new US policy indicated a potentially long-lasting [shift away from traditional US bilateral free trade agreements \(FTAs\)](#) with regional allies. While allied responses to IPEF's feasibility and durability is mixed, 13 nations—including the Republic of Korea—signed on for the launch commencing with their own IPEF variants in the month to follow.

As the United States sought allyship for its newly launched economic security framework, the Republic of Korea was an obvious and willing joint participant. Given that the United States—as the ROK's second largest trading partner—already reaps the benefit of a [decade-old US-Korea FTA](#) with the ROK government, the rollout of IPEF mainly reinforced US-ROK bilateral trade alignment within the larger regional trade and investment relations within the Indo-Pacific region. However, the lessons from US implementation of the [IRA](#) and the [CHIPS and Science Act](#) draws attention to the pitfalls that still exist for even the close US-ROK economic partnership. As the aftermath highlighted, the United States should look to avenues of close

consultation with Indo-Pacific allies such as the Republic of Korea to ensure “mutually beneficial” corporate investment and industry-to-industry alignment.

As the US-ROK comprehensive partnership moves forward, there are key area to secure competitive advantages in emerging research and industries. As global leaders in S&T development, next steps for the [US-ROK Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies Dialogue](#) should be a leading example for closer bilateral engagement with the potential for deeper regional engagement. Building upon the [US-ROK Energy Security Dialogue](#) last held in March 2023 and the recent [US-ROK Senior Economic Dialogue](#) in February 2024, the two countries should, additionally, expand their bilateral cooperation within the 13-member [Minerals Security Partnership](#). For US-ROK cooperative breakthroughs in supply chain management, the two countries should look to 1) the establishment of joint policies for research on emerging strategic technologies and 2) ensuring sustainable access to critical minerals.

2) Digital & Cybersecurity

In recent years, DPRK's asymmetric, cyber warfare capabilities have steadily advanced. Today, North Korea's cyber program constitutes a formidable threat—arguably on par with major state actors such as China, Russia, and Iran. As the threat increases, the United States will look to its currently existing government-to-government efforts with the ROK to advance further commitments to defend cyber-attacks and curtail the North's expanding cryptocurrency theft.

The US-ROK partnership has leveraged several avenues to address the DPRK cyber challenge, including the ongoing US-ROK collaboration in the [#StopRansomware](#) initiative. Additionally, in

April 2023, the Biden and Yoon administrations launched the [US-ROK Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework](#) to promote an “open, interoperable, secure, and reliable Internet and a stable cyberspace.” To institutionalize this agreement, the two countries convened for senior-level discussion at the [4th US-ROK Working Group Meeting on the DPRK Cyber Threat](#).

In November 2023, through the co-signing of the US-ROK [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU) between the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS), the two countries outlined areas for collaboration under the bilateral Cyber Framework officially. The CISA-NIS MOU detailed US-ROK commitments to share technical and operational best practices across cyber and infrastructure domains, consult regularly on mechanisms for cybersecurity threat response, and collaboration on incorporating critical infrastructure and supply chain resiliency. Most recently, [the 7th US-ROK Cyber Policy Consultations](#) in January 2024 confirmed the first official consultation relevant across wider US and ROK agencies.

The United States should move forward with solidifying the initial foundation of the Strategic Cybersecurity Cooperation Framework with the ROK to detect, deter, and disrupt malicious activities in cyberspace, including in addressing DPRK’s cyber threats and cryptocurrency theft.

3) Climate & Energy Policy

The United States and the ROK—two of the world’s leading carbon emitting countries resolute in expanding their climate and energy transition policy—are cooperative allies in the pursuit of climate solutions. During the 2023 Biden-Yoon Summit, the leaders [re-emphasized](#) their goals

towards achieving 2050 net-zero targets for decarbonizing heavy industries. As the US-ROK comprehensive partnership expands to [encompass energy and climate policy](#), the two countries should explore areas of joint research and cooperation in renewables, nuclear energy, hydrogen technologies, and green shipping.

In particular, the discussion around [US-ROK nuclear energy cooperation](#) presents opportunities for bilateral industry engagement as well as joint efforts in third-country nuclear energy export markets. The ROK’s recent policies towards decarbonization has placed greater weight on the expansion of renewable and nuclear energy development at home and abroad. At the 28th United National Convention on Climate Change in December 2023, the United States and the ROK pledged combined efforts alongside 18 other countries to [tripling nuclear energy capacity globally by 2050](#), reconfirming US-ROK collaborative opportunities in the nuclear energy industry.

Most importantly, S&T and climate financing will be key to freezing global temperatures below the Paris Agreement-stipulated 1 degree Celsius by 2050—and, industry leaders in the United States and the Republic of Korea could contribute to these goals. The US and the ROK should invest in [new initiatives in public-private cooperation](#), such as the US Clean Energy Demand Initiative and ROK Carbon-Free Alliance. Such collaborative platforms should be expanded in 2024 and beyond.

As described, there are opportunities beyond traditional security and defense alignment for the US-ROK comprehensive strategic partnership. The United States should capitalize on the ROK’s current political appetite and climate for bilateral industry-to-industry investment to further wide-sweeping economic security, trade, and energy cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region.

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Conclusion

As one of the United States' closest allies, the ROK plays an important and growing role in the Indo-Pacific region. Ensuring US and ROK policy alignment endures through 2024 and beyond is paramount for the continued success of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Within geopolitical and economic security, both opportunities and challenges lay ahead for the US-ROK comprehensive strategic partnership. Nevertheless, the stronger-than-ever mutual policy alignments between the two countries offers a timely window for forging even closer bilateral (and multilateral) cooperation.





As the two countries move forward, it is in the United States' national interest to maintain the strong, mutually beneficial defense and economic partnerships which actively support US policy implementation, continuity, and expansion in the Indo-Pacific region

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