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How South Korea Can Contribute to the Defense of Taiwan

It is rare that American strategists, scholars and government officials generally agree, but the centrality of alliances to US power is one such area. The US alliance network is considered by most to be “one of the most enduring and successful elements of US foreign policy since World War II.”¹ The institutionalization of close defense relationships not only helps the United States project power globally, they also facilitate strong trade relations and the promotion of shared values in international institutions, which are the US’ comparative advantage vis-à-vis China. Unsurprisingly then, the United States has emphasized strengthening its alliance relationships to counter nefarious Chinese activities, deter Chinese aggression, and outcompete China’s attempts to revise the US-led world order. In his major speech on US policy toward China, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken summed up the Biden administration’s strategy in three words: “invest, align, compete.” Among these three verbs, “align” strongly underscores the US’ desire to closely coordinate efforts vis-à-vis China with its allies and partners.²

This priority notwithstanding, the role of South Korea is often of secondary consideration, if not completely left out, when it comes to formulating the specifics of countering Chinese aggression. South Korea is often mentioned in

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broad reference to the importance of US allies in the Indo-Pacific, or in formulations of strategic approaches to North Korea, but otherwise makes infrequent appearances in other regional operational discussions. The 2021 Department of Defense report to Congress on Chinese military developments, for example, mentions in a series of sections the security risks that China may pose to Australia, Japan and India—referencing Japan over twenty times and India over sixty—yet it references South Korea only once, in the context of a specific Chinese attempt at economic coercion.³ Discussions about a potential Taiwan contingency specifically tend to highlight the importance of US-Japan coordination, citing the critical importance of US bases in Japan, or the need for enhanced US-Australian defense cooperation in the form of AUKUS.⁴ Policy discussions, however, focus less on the role that Seoul may play, even though South Korea is geographically closer to mainland China and almost as close to Taiwan as Japan and hosts fifteen US military bases and about 28,500 US personnel.

For its part, compared with Tokyo or Canberra, Seoul remains relatively ambiguous about whether it is willing to support US efforts to push back against China’s malign influences.⁵ That ambiguity stems from structural constraints that are particularly severe for South Korea: it relies heavily on China for economic growth and dealing with its number one security threat, North Korea. For South Korea, if it too clearly bets on the US and loses, the stakes could be nothing short of existential. For these reasons, whether conservative or progressive, the South Korean government has tried to maintain a friendly relationship with China.⁶ President Park Geun-hye (2013-17), for example, was the only US-allied leader to attend the 2015 military parade in Beijing commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, standing alongside Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.⁷ However, over the course of the last seven years or so, China’s norm-violating behavior, coupled with intensifying US-China competition, has made it increasingly difficult for South Korea to remain on the sidelines.

President Yoon appears committed to work more closely with Washington

Domestic politics also creates an opening for a more proactive approach. Inaugurated on May 10 this year, the new South Korean President, Yoon Suk-yeol, announced that his government would pursue a policy of “strategic clarity” in contrast to the previous Moon Jae-in government’s “strategic ambiguity.” In other words, President Yoon pledged to reinforce the US-South Korea alliance while

taking a “principled” approach toward China.⁸ Indeed, during the first summit between the US and South Korea in May 2022, President Yoon reaffirmed that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is “an essential element in security

and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁹ South Korea’s conservative media interpreted the statement as evidence of the new government’s commitment to work more closely with Washington to push back against China’s growing influence in the region, including in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁰

In this article, we analyze South Korea’s potential role in this era of strategic competition through the lens of war over Taiwan. This is not to suggest that it is the most likely scenario that will test South Korea’s role in the region; the US-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance is primarily designed to deter and defeat North Korea, and rightfully so. In a war on the Korean peninsula, the Chinese military is likely to be involved extensively, though more to advance Beijing’s own interest in regional hegemony than to protect the Kim regime.¹¹ But given the existential nature of this scenario for South Korea, its policy options are less debated; South Korea will protect itself from North Korea, even if it means engaging with Chinese forces.

What South Korea can and should do in a Taiwan scenario is much less clear-cut. US-China competition is currently fiercest over this issue—it is the most likely potential cause of a great-power war between the two sides. Preventing this outcome through enhanced deterrence depends on the policies of US allies like South Korea. What can South Korea do to support US-led efforts to compete with China, and what are the major hurdles in attaining deeper bilateral cooperation to deter China’s potential aggression against Taiwan?

To answer this question, we build upon traditional concepts of balancing to create a more granular, operationally relevant set of strategies for South Korea. We argue that while it is politically infeasible for South Korea to fight side-by-side with US forces against China in a Taiwan scenario or to attempt to build its military sufficiently to deter the People’s Republic of China (PRC) from aggression against Taipei, these classic external and internal balancing strategies are not South Korea’s only options. First, by taking up more responsibilities and resources to deter North Korea’s aggression during a Taiwan contingency, South Korea can support the strategic flexibility of US Forces Korea (USFK) to defend Taiwan if needed. Second, South Korea can provide rear-area support for US forces involved in Taiwan contingency. Third, South Korea can expand economic cooperation with Taiwan in an effort to cope with China’s coercive economic statecraft together, along with the United States and other allies.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide background on South Korea’s approach to the Taiwan issue to date. Second, we evaluate South Korea’s strategic importance and what it can theoretically bring to the table. We then explore how China and North Korea may respond to increased South Korean cooperation with the US, along with the potential obstacles this cooperation could create. Lastly, we recommend ways to leverage the US–South Korean alliance to enhance deterrence against China with respect to Taiwan.

South Korea's Taiwan Policy

South Korea's relationship with Taiwan traces back to the 1930s when Chiang Kai-shek lauded the Korean people's resistance against Japan's colonial rule. Chiang later supported the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea until Korea was liberated in August 1945, for which the Korean people were appreciative.¹² The Korean War further deepened bilateral ties. Taiwan, then representing China as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, voted for the use of military measures to repel North Korea's invasion.¹³ Taiwanese agents were also involved in interrogating Chinese prisoners of war.¹⁴ The war also prompted the US decision to defend Taiwan from Mao's plan to invade the island. As soon as the war broke out, US President Harry Truman swiftly dispatched the US Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait. The US and Taiwan, or the Republic of China as it was then officially recognized, signed a mutual defense pact in 1954, a year after the end of the Korean War. In this context, some scholars even argue that the Korean War "saved" Taiwan from Mao's invasion.¹⁵

Although South Korea and Taiwan maintained a united front against the Communist bloc in Asia during the Cold War, their bilateral ties ended abruptly when South Korea normalized diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1992.¹⁶ Since then, the South Korea–Taiwan relationship has recovered at the societal level: Taiwanese people have been attracted to South Korea's pop culture, and Taiwan has become the top tourist destination for South Koreans.¹⁷ But when it comes to political issues regarding Taiwan, Seoul has tried to remain aloof.¹⁸

In 2005, the "Taiwan issue" became the subject of national debate in South Korea. Controversy developed because of then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's new US Security Strategy, as the strategy concretely called for USFK's adoption of "strategic flexibility," which implied less stability in military support for South Korea. As the demand for military commitment surged in the Middle East, the Bush administration applied the idea of "strategic flexibility" to USFK, meaning that the United States could rapidly move selected US military assets off the Korean Peninsula to wherever these forces were needed. At the time, South Koreans were worried that strategic flexibility would be employed in another direction: to justify USFK's involvement in a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, which would weaken the US commitment to the Korean Peninsula and thus weaken deterrence against North Korea, along with engendering a situation that could entrap South Korea in a war between the US and China. President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-08) publicly opposed the possibility of USFK's deployment outside the Korean Peninsula against South Korea's will.¹⁹ In January 2006, the two governments managed to agree on the "strategic flexibility" of USFK, under the condition that Seoul would be closely "consulted"

should Washington intend to deploy USFK units away from the Korean Peninsula.²⁰

Taiwan again became the subject of US–South Korea alliance discussion in May 2021, when Presidents Biden and Moon included “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” in their joint summit statement.²¹ It was the first time that the Taiwan issue was ever included in a joint statement. Well aware of China’s sensitivity to the Taiwan issue, South Korean diplomats quickly backtracked, stating that “we are fully aware of the unique relations between China and Taiwan” and that “our government’s stance has not changed.”²² Afterward, however, South Korean policymakers continued to emphasize the importance of the Taiwan issue. A joint statement issued in December 2021 by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his South Korean counterpart, Suh Wook, reaffirmed “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”²³ During a February 2022 trilateral ministerial meeting, US secretary of State Antony Blinken, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, and South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong also emphasized the same point.²⁴

May 2021 was the first time the Taiwan issue was ever included in a joint US-ROK statement

Although the new South Korean government is now more willing to talk about Taiwan issues, it has yet to say anything specific about South Korea’s role in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Increasing tensions across the Taiwan Strait have not registered as a security concern for the South Korean people in general—Taiwan was not mentioned at all as a subject of debate during the 2022 presidential campaign. Some mainstream media editorials and South Korean experts mentioned the importance of Taiwan for the security of South Korea, but those commentaries merely pointed out the urgency of the issue without offering concrete proposals for South Korea’s potential role or strategy in a Taiwan contingency.²⁵

In sum, there is still much uncertainty about what Seoul would be willing to do in a Taiwan contingency, how China or North Korea would react, and what South Korea’s policy should be vis-à-vis Taiwan. The next section attempts to address these issues by formulating a new way of thinking about threat management.

Potential Deterrence Contribution in the Taiwan Strait

International relations theory cleanly separates balancing behavior—the strategies states pursue to protect themselves against countries of increasing power

or threat—into two categories: internal and external. Internal balancing refers to efforts a country makes to strengthen its capability to resist, and usually entails building up its military. External balancing entails reaching out to other countries to form alliances, in hopes that the aggregation of military capabilities would be sufficient to deter aggression, or at least to successfully defend against it if necessary. In practice, however, these categories are not mutually exclusive and do not capture all the different ways countries implement and shift between these approaches.

Instead, we posit that it is more useful to think of two types of actions aligned states can take—either unilaterally or bilaterally—that change the strategic dynamics in various contingencies. First, the two sides can take actions that increase the material capabilities of the two to fight together, such as using the same equipment and weapons platforms, establishing liaisons and embeds, conducting training designed to strengthen interoperability, engaging in joint contingency planning, and establishing joint command structures. Second, they can increase each other's independent, material war-fighting capabilities through activities such as arms sales, training, and base access, or they can take actions that free up a state's resources to counter the threat. This is not to discount multilateral security coalitions, which are the best bet at deterring and defeating China on Taiwan. But given the nature of the US hub-and-spokes alliance system in the Indo-Pacific, such a multilateral coalition would still essentially be the accumulation of unilateral and bilateral strategic decisions.

It is noteworthy that the combined operations of the US-South Korea militaries are primarily designed to deter North Korea's aggression without consideration of contingency elsewhere. For example, Operations War Plan (OPLAN) 5027 has been co-developed by the United States and South Korea to deal with a North Korean invasion.²⁶ The plan assumes a North Korean attack and then lays out how USFK and South Korean forces would initially defend against the attacks and then counter-attack and advance into North Korean territory once additional US forces arrived to support.²⁷ The locations of defense assets, the agenda of the annual combined military exercises, and the structure of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) have all been designed with this North Korea-centric plan in mind. In other words, unless policy changes are made, the CFC will not be prepared to engage in combined military operations in any other contingencies, including Taiwan.

While the first mechanism of fighting together may be operationally infeasible for South Korea, the second mechanism stated above holds great promise for Seoul in enhancing the US' ability to fight China in the Taiwan Strait. First, South Korea could prepare to support the "strategic flexibility" of USFK so that the US could use its forces in Korea in responding to a Taiwan contingency. Deployment of US troops based in South Korea is not without precedent; indeed,

in 2004, 3600 USFK soldiers were moved from their South Korean deployment to Iraq, despite previously being considered “untouchable by the Pentagon for deployment to other trouble spots.”²⁸ Then in 2008, USFK Apache units were withdrawn to the States so that they could prepare for deployment to Iraq.²⁹ South Korea’s declaration of support for USFK’s strategic flexibility would quickly remove political obstacles for the deployment of select USFK units to the Taiwan Strait.³⁰ This could enhance US deterrence given the assets the United States has at its disposal on the peninsula, which comprise more than just 28,500 troops—it operates about 90 combat planes, 40 attack helicopters, 130 armored vehicles, about 40 multiple rocket launchers, and 60 Patriot missile launchers, according to South Korea’s December 2020 Defense White Paper.³¹ The US also has significant infrastructure in South Korea—including two air bases, one naval base, and twelve ground bases—that could contribute to a Taiwan contingency.³² USFK’s Camp Humphreys, located near Pyeongtaek City, is the largest overseas American military base.³³

Seoul could enhance the US ability to fight China in the Taiwan Strait in at least 3 ways

Second, South Korea could provide logistical support. Some munitions—particularly precision-guided munitions like cruise missiles, stingers, and javelins—are in limited supply because they are expensive and take longer to build.³⁴ If the US could count on South Korea for supplies of these weapons, it would reduce the US’ logistics burden.³⁵ South Korea has also invested heavily in its own unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned surface vessels that could augment US reconnaissance capabilities.³⁶ South Korea also uses US equipment, such as F-16s and F-35s. South Korean troops are trained on their maintenance and thus could provide that support to US forces.³⁷ South Korea could also use some of its defensive assets, like Aegis and unmanned vehicles in the air and sea, to enhance coverage for US combat operations.³⁸ South Korea’s support would complicate China’s military strategy, as it is difficult to calculate balance of power changes with the number of states involved.³⁹

Third, South Korea could use its own forces to fight to defend Taiwan separately (not jointly for the reasons mentioned above, but still alongside US forces). With the second-largest reserve force and paramilitary force as well as eighth-largest active-duty force in the world, the South Korean military is twenty times larger than Japan’s.⁴⁰ South Korea also ranks tenth in military spending, contributing twice as much to its defense as Israel.⁴¹ And while South Korean bases are no better protected against the Chinese military than those in Japan, expanding operations against China from South Korea’s eight major air bases, in addition to the US bases in Osan and Kunsan, would at the very least

create a targeting challenge for China.⁴² Moreover, while China has the military capabilities to attack these bases, the risk of South Korea joining the conflict and siding with the US could instill some caution in Beijing.

Obstacles to South Korea's Collaboration

While South Korea has many options for supporting US efforts to defend Taiwan, how China and North Korea respond will determine the best course of action. China, for its part, is unlikely to sit idly by if South Korea becomes involved in Taiwan contingency planning.⁴³ South Korea is within operational strike distance of China, and China views the country as the weakest link in the US alliance system, hence an easier target to influence.⁴⁴ An editorial in *The Global Times*, a state-affiliated media outlet in China, explicitly warned that “South Korea’s joining the US-led ‘anti-China camp’ ... will only damage South Korea’s vital interests and destroy its economic outlook.”⁴⁵ After the May ’22 US-South Korea summit this year, another *Global Times* editorial wrote that “[the Yoon administration] must be fully aware that China has many means to counteract South Korea ... If South Korea makes trouble over the Taiwan question, it will be [Seoul] which will ultimately pay the price.”⁴⁶

Therefore, South Korean involvement, however minimal, could come with some costs in a war across the Taiwan Strait. First, South Korea must worry about a Chinese attack on South Korean soil.⁴⁷ Even if China’s military attacks are limited to US bases, South Korea would be legally obligated to respond in conjunction with USFK based on the mutual defense treaty.⁴⁸ Moreover, some 9,000 South Korean citizens work on US bases, suggesting that South Korean casualties would be impossible to avoid.⁴⁹ And China may not limit its attacks to US forces alone; South Korean bases or even cities could be targeted by China’s missile attacks.⁵⁰ In addition, China’s large numbers of battleships and submarines could quickly dominate the oceans surrounding the Korean Peninsula, blocking or even destroying South Korea’s naval ships if Seoul tried to deploy them to the Taiwan Strait.⁵¹ The South Korean navy has already been threatened by an increase in Chinese naval ships crossing the median line of the overlapped Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) areas in the Yellow Sea.⁵² Such aggressive Chinese threats could pressure South Korea to suspend any involvement in a Taiwan contingency.

While it is possible that China, hoping to avoid a world war, would not target South Korea militarily, economic punishment for supporting the US is all but guaranteed. Among the US allies in Asia, South Korea remains one of the most vulnerable to China’s economic retaliation; China accounts for approximately 25 percent of South Korea’s total volume of trade. While this isn’t the

highest ratio among US allies (China accounted for 35 percent of Australia's trade volume in 2019), South Korea is much more reliant on trade for its economic wellbeing.⁵³ South Korea's trade-to-GDP ratio has been 75 percent for the last five years (while Australia's has been 44 percent), implying a heavy dependence on imports for economic health and growth.⁵⁴

South Korea's supply chain, like much of the world, also heavily relies on imports from China for raw materials. According to South Korea's Trade Association, 94.7 percent of South Korea's tungsten oxide (a key material for semiconductor manufacturing), 83.5 percent of its lithium hydroxide (important for rechargeable batteries), and 100 percent of its magnesium (for vehicle light panels) were imported from China in 2021.⁵⁵ These statistics imply that China can significantly slow down or even halt South Korean industry by restricting its exports of these key materials. South Korean people still vividly remember China's economic retaliation for the US deployment of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) equipment to South Korea in 2017 in response to North Korea's growing missile threats.⁵⁶ Claiming that the measure undermined China's security, Beijing suspended Chinese group tours to South Korea and obliterated the Chinese business of South Korean companies, including the cosmetic and entertainment industries.⁵⁷ If China could retaliate over South Korea's shoring up of its self-defense interests, there is no doubt that China would take much harsher measures against South Korea for its perceived "interference in the internal affairs of China."

In addition, South Korean strategists must consider North Korea's potential response to a greater South Korean role in defending Taiwan.⁵⁸ North Korea could opportunistically scale up its military provocations, creating an even more dangerous environment for South Korea. During the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in January 2021, Kim Jong-un specifically announced that North Korea would continue to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles, "super-large hydrogen bombs," and miniature nuclear weapons.⁵⁹ With its latest test of a hypersonic glide vehicle in January 2022 and ICBM test in March, North Korea successfully proved its ability to implement what it says it will do.⁶⁰

A crisis in the Taiwan Strait could provide a strategic opportunity for North Korea to strengthen its ties with China. North Korea knows that Beijing does not always endorse its military provocations; when Pyongyang conducted long-range missile and nuclear tests in 2017, Beijing openly condemned North Korea and joined international sanctions.⁶¹ North Korea could win more of

South Korea remains one of the US allies most vulnerable to China's economic retaliation

China's support by proving its strategic value as a distraction for US resources and attention away from the Taiwan Strait.⁶²

Beijing has traditionally opposed North Korea's nuclear tests at the strategic level, for fear that South Korea and Japan will pursue nuclear weapons in turn.⁶³ However, Beijing appears to have a greater level of tolerance for North Korea's military provocations at the operational level. Indeed, China's UN envoy said on June 9, 2022 that Beijing does not want to see North Korea's new nuclear test go forward, even while vetoing a US-led bid to impose new UN sanctions on Pyongyang over ballistic missile tests.⁶⁴ Seoul has legitimate reasons to worry about Pyongyang being emboldened with confidence that Beijing will not oppose its military provocations, whether such a belief on North Korea's part is right or not.

Another potential downside for South Korea of joining a US-led coalition to defend Taiwan is the prospect of encouraging a stronger coalition to form between China and Russia. Beijing and Moscow both have an interest in the future of the Korean peninsula, and thus have visibly increased joint activities surrounding the Korean Peninsula in recent years. Indeed, China and Russia conducted their first long-range joint air patrol in July 2019 in the vicinity of the Peninsula.⁶⁵ In November 2021, China and Russia entered South Korea's air defense identification zone (KADIZ) without prior notice, and they did so again just hours before North Korea test-fired an ICBM on March 24, 2022.⁶⁶ Given Russia's interests in the Korean peninsula, it is possible that the inclusion of South Korea in a US-led defense of Taiwan could push Moscow to support China's efforts to take the island. Indeed, an analysis of joint statements, arms collaboration, exercises and operations show that China and Russia are aligning primarily to challenge US hegemony in Asia.⁶⁷

The war in Ukraine has served to deepen security vulnerabilities, but there is debate about what it means for US-China competition from a South Korean perspective. On one hand, the fate of Ukraine convinces many South Koreans that their country should not take the US-South Korea alliance for granted and instead should make extra efforts to reinforce it.⁶⁸ On the other hand, some analysts give great weight to Ukraine's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the negative effects it had on Putin's threat perception of the West. They argue that South Korea should be careful not to threaten China's security in an analogous way by moving too fast and close to the United States.⁶⁹

In short, South Korea's readiness to support Taiwan in contingency may contribute to integrated deterrence against China, but it could also trigger China's retaliation, bigger security challenges from North Korea, and increased Russian support of China's activities in the region. This observation calls for South Korea to develop an optimal strategy that strikes the right balance between its

needs to contribute to the stability of the Taiwan Strait and avoid exacerbating existing security concerns.

South Korea's Balancing Act

While there are many obstacles that discourage Seoul from enhancing cooperation with the US against Chinese aggression, there are also good reasons for Seoul to want to increase deterrence against China. For example, if Seoul were to take a tougher stance against Beijing, China's fears about horizontal escalation and loss of effective control might cause Beijing to attempt to suppress DPRK provocations. Moscow and Beijing have become closer partners in spite of Seoul's relative neutrality on Taiwan; it is possible that a broader mandate for the US-ROK alliance and new areas of military cooperation are exactly what is needed to discourage its two autocratic neighbors from teaming up against Seoul. And, most importantly, the economic effects of a war between China and the US would be disastrous for South Korea and much of the rest of the globalized world, regardless of whether it chooses to become involved in the conflict. This creates some incentives to enhance deterrence against China to avoid a conflict altogether.

We argue, therefore, that South Korea's optimal strategy to navigate the US-China rivalry should meet two conditions. First, it should contribute to the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, including deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Putting aside South Korea's expected role as a treaty ally of the United States, South Korea sees its economic wellbeing and security as dependent on the continued existence of the US-led liberal international order.⁷⁰ Second, the optimal strategy should be able to make China hesitate to immediately take punitive actions against South Korea, even with an awareness of South Korea's intent to work more closely with the US.

Given the obstacles examined in the previous section, the US must be realistic in its expectations. The risk of being drawn into a military conflict with China, along with the attending costs, means that South Korea is unlikely to directly participate in high-intensity combat operations against China. It is unrealistic for South Korea to directly deploy air fighters or naval warships to the Taiwan Strait in a crisis. However, that reticence does not mean that South Korea cannot have a significant role in deterrence and defense against China.

The most politically feasible option is for South Korea and the United States to prepare for South Korea to provide rear-area support to the United States like

Seoul's optimal strategy to navigate the US-China rivalry should meet 2 conditions

intelligence gathering, ammunition supplies, or noncombatant evacuation. In peacetime, South Korea can also deepen its connections with Taiwan, especially those concerning semiconductor technology, and they can work together to promote human rights and democracy based on their shared experiences of democratic transition.⁷¹ China may perceive such policies to be directed against it, but at the same time they are ambiguous enough to not justify immediate and severe retaliation.

To mitigate the risks associated with deeper cooperation, South Korea and the US need to discuss how to protect USFK and South Korean bases from China's missile attacks.⁷² As former commander of USFK General Abrams argues, growing concerns about the Taiwan contingency suggest that Washington and Seoul need to consider developing new operational war plans (OPLANs) that account for military aggression by Beijing, in addition to threats from North Korea remaining a primary focus.⁷³ If there is hesitancy in Seoul to take this step, at the very least the two sides should discuss, plan, and coordinate defense measures against potential scenarios of Chinese military coercion or attacks against South Korea. One area where this is becoming more necessary is in the context of China's growing naval activities in the Yellow Sea, an area of great concern for Seoul.⁷⁴ Another option would be to engage in the joint production of equipment and weapons, which can be produced with minimal political risk in peacetime and would provide an additional logistics and equipment node in wartime.

One thing South Korea can do to free up US resources to focus on China in a contingency scenario is to play a greater role in deterring North Korean aggression and provocation. For there to be any hope of this possibility, the two countries need to complete the process of transferring wartime OPCON—"the authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission"—to South Korea.⁷⁵ While the US-ROK alliance's priority is firmly set on deterring North Korea's aggression, the burden sharing needs a fresh new approach to reflect the changing reality of the possible linkage between a Taiwan contingency and a crisis on the Korean Peninsula.⁷⁶ As noted above, during a Taiwan contingency North Korea could opportunistically scale up military adventurism to advance its agenda as well as to enhance China-North Korea ties. North Korea's involvement would quickly create two frontlines for the US-ROK alliance. OPCON transfer implies that South Korea must be ready to play a larger role in safeguarding itself from North Korea's aggression, even when some of USFK's assets have to be deployed outside the peninsula in a contingency elsewhere. OPCON transfer has been already underway for several years, and the possibility of a

contingency in the Taiwan Strait just adds another reason to expedite the process.⁷⁷

China's ability to retaliate against Seoul economically also calls for a rethinking of the scope and contour of the alliance. In this regard, the Biden administration launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and emphasized a "digitally connected, clean and fair economy," and "resilient supply chains" as a way to cope with China's economic coercion throughout the region.⁷⁸ But such a general framework is not enough to reassure US allies; instead, specific plans for "collective resilience" against China's economic statecraft should be devised.⁷⁹ For example, the countries which join any US coalition against China could issue a group statement condemning China's behavior if a member state is targeted by China's economic punishment. Alternatively, each country could identify one product that they trade with China and temporarily suspend or reduce its volume.⁸⁰ Such actions would have a huge impact on the Chinese economy if taken together at the same time. The United States can provide leadership to overcome collective-action problems by coordinating efforts among the coalition's countries, including South Korea.

Specific plans for "collective resilience" against China's economic statecraft should be devised

South Korea could contribute toward other forms of collective punishment as well. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the power of economic forms of punishment and coercion, as US European allies came together to place severe enough sanctions on Russia to reverse Moscow's past fifteen years of economic gains.⁸¹ Here, South Korea has significant leverage over China as one of the leading producers of advanced semiconductors in the world. In 2020, according to the Korea International Trade Association, 46.9 percent of China's imports of semiconductors came from South Korea, compared to 28 percent from Taiwan.⁸² Chinese strategists recognize this vulnerability and are calling on the central government to reduce Chinese dependencies.⁸³ But it is hard to diversify; the South Korean semiconductor industry holds 18.4 percent of the global market share, second only to the US.⁸⁴ If compelled by China's economic retaliation, South Korea may respond with its own economic measures by gradually reducing the export of some key parts and materials to China, including semiconductors.⁸⁵

South Korea's diplomacy also matters. While Chinese commentators openly refer to South Korea as the "weakest link" in the US security alliance in Asia, China is still concerned Seoul may move closer to Washington.⁸⁶ Because the South Korean government itself has been extraordinarily careful not to antagonize China, Beijing views Seoul as an important example for other regional states that are on the

fence.⁸⁷ The war in Ukraine likely encourages Chinese leaders to take even more seriously the importance of managing the international community's response to a Taiwan contingency. Suddenly faced with the need to defend freedom and democracy in Ukraine, the United States and its allies quickly united against Moscow. Many things that seemed unthinkable before—Sweden joining NATO or Germany increasing defense spending, for example—suddenly became reality. In this context, Seoul's diplomatic support of US-led efforts to defend Taiwan can still be effective in making Beijing take seriously the international community's potential united response against any attempt to invade Taiwan.

Lastly, analyzing South Korea's optimal strategy suggests that US allies in East Asia need not all pursue hard traditional military balancing against China. To be sure, the United States needs to gather its allies' support to balance China's growing influence in the region. Even so, each ally can pursue a different mixture of various policies designed to complicate China's calculus. The United States and its allies can examine the plausibility of this approach and develop concrete policies accordingly. In other words, the US and its allies can benefit from a division of labor across different flashpoints, so that they can distribute the risk of China's retaliation while maximizing the cost-effectiveness of their balancing behaviors.⁸⁸

In sum, there are politically feasible options for South Korea to greatly contribute to US integrated deterrence in Taiwan Strait. Seoul can strengthen its own deterrence and defense against North Korea, which would help to free up US assets to defend Taiwan if necessary, even as the country's peacetime posture remains focused on North Korea. South Korea's transfer of operational control (OPCON) would facilitate the strategic flexibility of US Forces Korea (USFK) by allowing the ROK to take on a greater role in its own defense. In a Taiwan contingency, South Korea can also serve as a strategic rear, providing logistics support, equipment, and base access to US forces. South Korea can also deepen its bilateral ties with Taiwan, especially in the areas of technology and democracy promotion. The US-South Korea alliance, along with Taiwan and Japan, can lead the regional efforts to collectively respond to China's potential economic coercion. Given the heightened urgency over tensions in the Taiwan Strait, Washington and Seoul should pursue these options immediately to maintain peace and stability in the region before it is too late.

Notes

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