

제2호

발행일 2025년 6월 12일

발행

아주통일연구소  
AJOU Institute for Unification

편집 한기호

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# Issue Brief

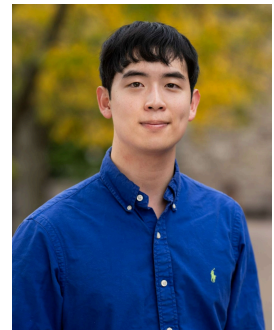
2025.06

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## 아통 칼럼

※ AIU Issue Brief No.2 에서는 홍태화 협력연구원의 영문칼럼을 연속 게재합니다.

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- ☐ 대한민국에는 대전략이 부재하다. 대내외 정책을 융합하고, 각 지역 전략을 연계하는 대전략이 필요하다. 이 글은 대한민국의 외교 대전략을 제언한다.
- ☐ 먼저 유럽에서는 직접적인 군사 협력 대신 일종의 분업이 필요하다. 한국-유럽 방산협력으로 유럽의 재무장을 가속화하되, 나토는 인도-태평양으로 해군을 진출시키기 보다는 유럽의 안정에 초점을 뒀야 한다.
- ☐ 아시아에서는 중국을 견제하기 위해 다섯 가지 정책을 추진할 수 있다. 첫째, 해군력을 지원해 비전투 지역 해양 수송로를 보호한다. 둘째, 중국의 서해 진출을 견제한다. 셋째, 핵 잠재력을 확보해 파트너들이 지정학적 핫스팟에 집중할 여력을 열어준다. 넷째, 조선업과 반도체 등 비교 우위를 지닌 전략 섹터를 강화하고, 경제나토 등의 다자 집단경제안보 기구를 창설한다. 다섯째, 동남아 무기 수출로 남중국해 교역로의 안정에 기여한다.

(영문칼럼 PART.1) 대전략의 개념과 대유럽 정책

## South Korea Must Change How It Deals with the United States and Europe

*South Korea needs to leverage its global economic strength to support U.S. priorities, bolster its importance in NATO, and enhance deterrence, especially amid shifting American focus and global uncertainties.*

The Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis defined grand strategy as “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities.” This alignment could unfold through integrating domestic and foreign policies and coordinating regional strategies.

The United States, for example, strives to unify its strategies across Europe, Asia, and Africa while treating domestic vulnerabilities, such as Chinese influence operations on U.S. soil, as part of its broader China policy.

South Korea, the world’s twelfth-largest economy, has yet to construct a fully integrated grand strategy that matches its stature. Despite its global economic reach, Seoul often treats international affairs beyond the peninsula as peripheral concerns. With the fluctuating global order and shifting U.S. strategic priorities, South Korea needs a framework to navigate threats and seize opportunities.

### South Korea’s Relationship with the United States

Recognizing the limits of American capacity is essential, not just to prepare for new risks but to leverage new possibilities. The current phase of the so-called U.S. retrenchment is not about abandonment, but rebalancing and delegation.

In recent years, Washington has pressed for German rearmament, lifted South Korea’s missile restrictions, transferred nuclear submarine technology to Australia, and pursued a reconciliation between Israel and Saudi Arabia to anchor Middle East security. This broader strategy empowers capable allies to share the burden of global stability while complementing U.S. strategic priorities.

Yet South Korea’s discourse regarding the second Trump administration remains narrow, centered on defense cost-sharing and, later, shipbuilding as disparate topics. These issues are

essential but rarely discussed within a larger strategic vision: How could Korea leverage its capabilities to shape regional dynamics? What should it demand from Washington in return?

More critically, strategic silence has prevailed. Concerns about the “strategic flexibility” of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK)—the possibility of redeployment in contingencies like Taiwan—are often evaded and not addressed.

Public and private discussions are stifled by fear of political backlash and the impact of a potential change in government. While strategic ambiguity may have served short-term stability, the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape increasingly calls for open and forward-looking deliberations, however politically delicate they may be.

A historic window of opportunity is opening, along with the apparent risks. As the U.S. focus shifts to Asia under its “Asia-First” strategy, South Korea is well-positioned to emerge as a central American partner, not merely in symbolism, but in strategic substance.

Historically, hegemons and great powers enjoyed close partnerships with key allies. Portugal granted Britain vital access to global theaters during the British Empire’s heyday, the UK anchored Cold War Europe, and South Korea can serve as the linchpin of American strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

Korea’s role could include securing maritime trade routes, preventing territorial revisionism, and expanding its defense autonomy.

## **South Korea’s Increasing Importance in Europe**

To realize this potential, South Korea must act as a proactive stabilizer and remain engaged in global security beyond the Korean Peninsula. This begins with Europe and the Indo-Pacific, arguably the most consequential arenas in contemporary geopolitics.

To be sure, being proactive does not require overextension. South Korean forces need not deploy globally. Instead, Korea should adopt a pragmatic, regionally tailored approach. Despite their symbolism, NATO’s naval forays into the Indo-Pacific added little to deterrence.

Similarly, a prominent Korean presence in Europe would be unrealistic and unproductive. A more efficient global division of labor would see allies take the lead in their regions, thus freeing up U.S. capacity and strengthening American strategic staying power.

This division of labor does not exclude Korean contributions to European defense, quite the opposite. Korean defense firms are already expanding in Europe. Their entry should be understood as a business opportunity and a strategic investment in NATO's rear-guard amid America's pivot to Asia. Korea's defense exports could help fill critical gaps left by constrained U.S. support to Ukraine, gaps primarily driven by the trade-off between European and Taiwanese contingencies.

Paradoxically, South Korea, unable to export arms to Taiwan due to China's sensitivities, may have fewer European constraints than its American ally. Indeed, bureaucratic barriers for third parties remain due to the EU's Buy European policy.

From South Korea's perspective, eliciting Trump's support, who would strongly prefer that the Europeans rearm quickly, to remove some of these restrictions could be effective.

Korea–Europe cooperation should be considered part of a geopolitical burden-sharing arrangement. It also opens avenues for non-traditional security cooperation, particularly in economic security. The Netherlands, for instance, is home to ASML, the world's most crucial photolithography equipment maker. A functioning semiconductor alliance cannot ignore Europe's indispensable role.

Despite frequent calls for "Fab 4 (or Chip 4)" cooperation, a formal framework remains lacking. Building one would be strategically wise. Korea could also support U.S. energy logistics by maintaining and retrofitting LNG vessels headed to Europe, simultaneously reducing Russian leverage and revitalizing Korean shipbuilding.

One uneasy European issue remains: support for Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion in 2022, South Korea has indirectly armed Ukraine by replenishing American and European artillery stocks. Some argue that if Ukraine falls, Taiwan is next, and U.S. credibility must be defended in Europe to deter Chinese aggression in Asia. Hence, the argument goes that South Korea must coalesce with fellow European countries to pressure America to support Ukraine.

This logic, reminiscent of Cold War domino theory, holds intuitive appeal. If Russia achieves a quick victory, the theory goes, Xi Jinping may question U.S. resolve and strike Taiwan. Conversely, China may think twice about whether the U.S. will help Ukraine hold the line.

However, the historical record urges caution.

Adversaries often care less about a country's past actions elsewhere than its specific interests and capabilities in the case at hand. Hitler didn't extrapolate Britain and France's general resolve to fight by observing their choices in the *Rhineland* or *Sudetenland*; his calculations were more nuanced, focusing on the two's capability and will to fight over specific issues at specific times. Similarly, Stalin saw America's involvement in the Korean War not as a display of strength, but as a distraction from Europe.

This also makes intuitive sense. Taiwan and Ukraine differ in too many ways—strategic significance, geographic conditions, economic weight, adversary capabilities, and likely modes of conflict—for deterrence to be easily transferrable.

From China's perspective, it would be a risky, ungrounded gamble to base its decision on Taiwan on what the United States does in Ukraine.

South Korea should resist overinterpreting the Europe–Asia link and instead prioritize material allocations and choices. To deter China, the Indo-Pacific must develop real military capacity, not excessively rely on symbolic demonstrations of resolve elsewhere.

On a more cynical note, U.S. allies such as South Korea may have limited influence over the direction of Washington's grand strategy.

※ 본 글은 미국의 국제관계 전문 매체 The National Interest(2025.5.3) 에도 수록되었습니다.

(영문칼럼 PART.2) 인도-태평양 전략과 경제안보

## How South Korea Can Grow as a Nonconfrontational Powerhouse

*South Korea can become a powerful force in Asia by enhancing maritime deterrence, defense exports, and economic security cooperation without confronting China or over-relying on the U.S.*

South Korea can take an even more proactive, multidimensional role in its neighborhood without directly confronting China.

Five potential contributions stand out:

First, South Korea could provide indirect maritime support. It could signal the *possibility* of contributing to a second front, rather than joining the U.S. in the hotspot. For example, Korea could help patrol key maritime trade routes in the South China Sea during a Taiwan contingency, securing commerce while avoiding direct military conflict. This complicates China's strategic planning and contributes to deterrence. In return, Seoul could request U.S. cooperation in acquiring nuclear-powered submarine capabilities for long-range undersea patrols, making such regional burden-sharing explicit.

Second, South Korea could consider low-intensity, indirect signaling operations when the United States is preoccupied with confronting China elsewhere. Seoul could consider proportionate responses in disputed zones, such as crossing the 124°E meridian or building artificial structures near contested maritime zones.

China routinely asserts jurisdiction over 70 percent of the Yellow Sea, with little convincing justification. It has recently also constructed massive steel structures in the Korea-China Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ). Reciprocal measures could raise the cost of Chinese gray-zone operations without provoking direct conflict.

Third, South Korea can help the U.S. focus on critical theaters by bolstering its independent capabilities. Seoul should request reopening talks with the U.S. on uranium enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) to revise outdated nuclear agreements. Acquiring nuclear latency, the ability to swiftly produce atomic weapons without fully arming—could deter North Korea, allowing the U.S. to prioritize Taiwan or the South China Sea during crises.

The ENR capability itself provides deterrence via two mechanisms. First, it enables delayed nuclear retaliation within weeks or months, deterring the adversary. Second, adversaries may hesitate to escalate tension, fearing it would push South Korea to complete its nuclear weapons program.

Fourth, South Korea could exploit its comparative advantage to aid the U.S. posture in the region. Korea's shipbuilding sector, long noted by the U.S., could be vital in closing the ship gap with China. The U.S. Navy lags in warship production, and the Jones Act bars overseas construction.

However, maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) are permitted. China's shipbuilding capacity is over 230 times larger than America's, which spells a problem for the naval balance of power, where quantity is as important, or even more critical than, quality. Korean shipyards could become the industrial base of allied maritime power in East Asia, making up for this disadvantage.

Fifth, just as South Korea could revitalize European defense through arms export, it can also support rearmament in Southeast Asia – functioning as the Arsenal of the Free World. Korean arms exports to Southeast Asia could support regional deterrence without fueling a destabilizing arms race. Countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines increasingly distrust Beijing despite close trade ties.

Korean arms exports would raise the cost of unilateral Chinese action and help preserve regional stability. Given that Seoul already supplies many of these markets, Beijing would have difficulty retaliating against further expansion without appearing contradictory.

When it comes to the issue of the USFK's strategic flexibility concerning Taiwan, Seoul must also be realistic. Given North Korea's constant threats, South Korean leaders are correct to try to keep the entirety of U.S. forces on the peninsula at all times. However, USFK operates under American command. If Washington redeployed some troops to a Taiwan crisis, Seoul might have little practical recourse.

Consider the inverse: would Korea accept Japan blocking U.S. troop movements to the peninsula during a North Korea emergency? Seoul could instead ensure that strategic flexibility bolsters the case for continued U.S. presence in Korea by ensuring regional utility beyond North Korea. Achieving ENR is critical in this sense, as an autonomous insurance against a partial USFK relocation.

Innovative cost-sharing measures could also strengthen USFK's legitimacy. While South Korea should avoid fully acquiescing to U.S. demands for increased payments, resisting heightened

financial contributions may be challenging, especially given the Trump administration's pressure-driven approach toward allies.

One alternative Seoul should consider is substituting cash payments with the provision of arms and munitions directly to the United States or third parties designated by Washington. These would be produced by South Korean defense firms and funded by the South Korean government. This arrangement offers three key advantages.

First, it would help compensate for production shortfalls within the overstretched U.S. defense industrial base.

Second, it would serve as a *de facto* subsidy for South Korean defense manufacturers, fostering economies of scale.

Third, exporting high-quality South Korean weaponry could contribute to regional stability by enhancing deterrence in key geopolitical flashpoints.

Korea should consider adopting a “clear strategic ambiguity” posture on Taiwan. It can affirm opposition to unilateral Taiwanese independence but also commit to indirect support if and only if China initiates force absent such a declaration. As long as Taiwan's democratic way of life is preserved, *de jure* recognition or UN membership is secondary. Like the U.S., Korea's priority should be maintaining the *status quo*.

Indeed, South Korea must be cautious not to trigger an unnecessary security dilemma; efforts to enhance its security could prompt countermeasures from adversaries, paradoxically leaving the country less secure. Expanding frank and direct communication channels with China and North Korea remains essential. Seoul should also avoid excessively worsening security relations for the sake of symbolic gestures that offer little strategic benefit.

At the same time, it cannot afford to neglect defensive measures based on assumptions of the opponents' benign intentions. After all, these opponents likely have not decided their course of action; they are observing and adjusting to the real-time balance of power. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether there are realistic and politically viable concessions that could meaningfully reduce mutual suspicion.

In this context, strengthening deterrence is the least-worst option available.

## **How South Korea Can Grow Stronger Through Its Economy**

Beyond hard power, South Korea can lead efforts to build a new economic security architecture. A regional “economic NATO,” as envisioned by figures like Rishi Sunak (“Tech NATO”), Liz Truss



(“Economic NATO”), Victor Cha (“Collective Resilience”), and Rahm Emanuel (“Anti-Coercion Coalition”), could provide four key functions:

First, it could coordinate a collective response to economic coercion. When China economically pressures a specific country, member states collectively impose counter-sanctions and support the affected country.

Second, it could facilitate advanced technological cooperation and investment in high-tech industries. This would promote sustainable growth through technology sharing and joint research and development initiatives.

Third, an economic NATO could help members synchronize policy and rhetoric. Partners could coordinate the content and timing of policies likely to provoke economic retaliation, thus preemptively preventing exemplary punitive actions.

Fourth, it could enable member trade policy coordination and trade dispute mitigation. Unlike current supply chain diversification, which is defensive, this would shift toward deterrence, raising the cost of coercion and complicating adversaries’ decision-making.

Skeptics might question whether a second Trump administration would support such an initiative. But the case can be made.

U.S. tariffs aim to reduce trade deficits, not coerce political outcomes, which is fundamentally different from Beijing’s tactics. Further, like NATO’s intra-alliance de-confliction mechanism (e.g., Greece–Turkey), an economic NATO could reduce intra-bloc disputes, and Trump’s protectionist tendencies could enhance the credibility of joint deterrence.

Finally, free-riding concerns would be minimal with flexible, case-by-case responses and no rigid spending targets. Contrary to common perception, most security alliances rarely lead to entrapment; states carefully craft alliance terms before and after formation to limit risks through contractual safeguards. Similarly, an Economic NATO could be structured to avoid issuing blank checks for provocative actions and to guard against unnecessary escalation.

Granted, the second Trump administration’s radical foreign policy shifts are increasing fear even amongst many U.S. allies in Asia about America’s abandonment. However, to equate such an unconventional approach with impending wholesale U.S. withdrawal from the region might be overblown.

After all, even for the U.S., a grand bargain with China is much less feasible than one with Russia. Beijing is simply not trustworthy enough to be allowed dominance in Asia. If Asia, the global economy, and a high-tech innovation engine, falls under China’s sway, America’s

prosperity could depend on Chinese goodwill. Its international influence would also be in jeopardy.

The U.S. consolidated the Americas via the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary, before striving for global impact. As long as its Asian allies pull their weight and render Chinese hegemony uncertain, the U.S. will prefer not to retreat from the most critical region in the world.

## **South Korea Grows Stronger Despite/Because of U.S.-China Competition**

The U.S. Republican Party has already undergone a foreign policy realignment. National Conservatives now favor strategic prioritization and economic nationalism over Neocon-style democracy promotion. This may be a generational shift, not a passing trend. The world is unclear whether this wind is for better or for worse.

However, it seems clear that the “business as usual” era has passed.

Korea must also adapt to shifting realities, including the changing discourse in Washington itself. A new global and regional order will likely emerge beyond the Liberal International Order. Many speculate that this latest order will be more exclusive and fragmented, further increasing the need to be a rule-setter rather than a rule-taker. Seoul should consider drafting a principles-based “Indo-Pacific Charter” with like-minded states, just as the Atlantic Charter 1941 shaped the postwar principles.

The traditional foreign policy triad, North Korea-centrism, deep U.S. reliance, and naive engagement with China, may require rebalancing in light of today’s geopolitical realities. Korea also lacks a coherent national security doctrine linking foreign policy, defense industry, technology, and society. Bureaucratic silos and inertia stifle innovation.

A new strategic narrative must rise, rooted in realism, committed to regional leadership, and backed by a clear grand strategy.

※ 본 글은 미국의 국제관계 전문 매체 The National Interest(2025.5.4) 에도 수록되었습니다.

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