

Opinion – Seventy Years of Solidarity: The ROK-US Alliance

Written by Wooyun Jo

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WOoyun JO, APR 28 2023

On a state visit to the US, Republic of Korea (ROK) President Yoon Suk-yeol, visited the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington DC with US President Joe Biden on April 25, 2023. The two heads of state paying respects and laying flowers symbolizes how the two countries are tightly bonded within the long-lasting ROK-US alliance. In addition to celebrating the alliance's 70th anniversary, Yoon and Biden agreed to launch a 'US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)' to provide more enhanced regional security stability in terms of nuclear deterrence.

Over the past seven decades, the ROK-US alliance has become one of the world's most successful partnerships in modern history, serving as a linchpin of peace, stability, and prosperity in the Korean Peninsula and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Since the signing of the Mutual Defence Treaty in 1953, the two countries have forged a solid and enduring partnership based on shared values, common interests, and a commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. South Korean and US governments officially announced the significance of this alliance "as the linchpin for peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, our Alliance has grown far beyond the Korean Peninsula, reflecting the vital role of our two countries as global leaders in advancing democracy, economic prosperity, security, and technological innovation."

The history of the ROK-US alliance dates to the aftermath of the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953. During this war, North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, invaded South Korea to reunify the Korean Peninsula under the communist regime. The US, along with other members of the United Nations, came to the aid of South Korea, and after three years of fighting, an armistice was signed in 1953. This armistice established a demilitarised zone which divided into two Koreas until present, and a ceasefire has been in effect ever since. Moreover, it marked the end of the war and the beginning of a formal alliance between Seoul and Washington. Following the war, the US and South Korea signed a Mutual Defence Treaty in 1953, which established the basis for a long-term security partnership between the two countries.

The treaty committed both countries to defend each other and laid the groundwork for a military alliance. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when South Korea faced internal political instability and a communist insurgency, Washington provided military and economic assistance to help the South Korean government overcome these challenges and establish a stable democracy. In the 1980s, Seoul experienced rapid economic growth and modernization. Behind the economic miracle of Seoul, the US supported this transformation by providing financial assistance and technology transfer. The 1990s witnessed the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union. As a result, Washington shifted its focus to other regions, leading some to question the continued relevance of the ROK-US alliance. Nevertheless, the alliance remained unchanged, and both countries continued to work together to promote peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

The 21st century has brought new challenges for the ROK-US alliance. North Korea publicly announced that it had successfully developed nuclear weapons and tested inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM), which can directly target the US mainland; undoubtedly this development posed a severe threat to regional and global security. The alliance has resolutely responded to Pyongyang's nuclear threats through diplomatic, economic, and military measures.

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Diplomatically, the alliance has engaged in numerous efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue. The US, South Korea, and other countries have participated in multilateral talks, including the Six-Party Talks, to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Economically, the alliance has pressured North Korea through sanctions and other measures to cut off its access to international trade and finance. Washington has played a crucial role in imposing strict economic sanctions on North Korea, which has significantly impacted its economy. South Korea has also restricted trade with North Korea and stopped most inter-Korean economic cooperation. In terms of the military, the alliance has strengthened its deterrence posture by deploying advanced military capabilities, such as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence System (THAAD). South Korea deployed this missile defence system in 2017 in response to North Korea's endless missile and nuclear tests. Moreover, the alliance has also conducted numerous joint military exercises to enhance readiness and deterrence against North Korean aggression.

As history shows, one of the key strengths of the ROK-US alliance has been its ability to adapt and evolve to meet changing circumstances and emerging threats. In the early years of the alliance, the primary focus was on countering the threat of communist aggression from North Korea and its allies. Seoul and Washington worked together to build up the South Korean military, which gradually became a formidable force. Today, the alliance faces new and complicated challenges, including the threat of Pyongyang's nuclear advancement, as well as the rise of China and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Regardless of the era, the formation and strengthening of the alliance has been a way to secure the survival and prosperity of any nation, and at the same time, the most efficient tool, given the conditions of anarchic international politics. In Northeast Asia, where the interests of China, Japan, Russia, and the US surrounding the Korean Peninsula are intricately intertwined, 70 years of the ROK-US alliance has proven to have sufficient capabilities to play a role as a stabilizer in the region.

On 26 April 2023, Biden stated that "the ROK-US alliance is unbreakable", to which Yoon immediately replied, "Korea and the United States are a blood alliance born as a result of the struggle for freedom. The ROK-US alliance is not a transactional relationship, but a value alliance to protect the value of freedom." In this regard, it is noteworthy that two presidents of the alliance reaffirmed its relationship as 'ironclad.' Based on these rock-solid ties of friendship, trust, and cooperation, the ROK-US will be a security linchpin of the Korean Peninsula and the Indo-Pacific region for the coming decades

About the author:

Wooyun Jo is a Doctoral Researcher in Politics and International Studies at Loughborough University. His research interests specialise in International Security, with a major focus on alliance politics and deterrence in the Korean Peninsula. Before turning to academia, Wooyun served as an army officer in the Republic of Korea Army.