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Dilemmas in South Korea's Security Policy: The Need for Alliances and the Ambition for Autonomy

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The U.S.-China rivalry and the development of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities are leading South Korea to seek greater security independence. Despite the alliance with the U.S., South Korea does not fully support its ally in its competition with China. Instead, South Korea is developing conventional military capabilities to deter North Korea and strengthen its position in the region. The deteriorating security environment in East Asia and doubts about the credibility of U.S. security commitments may intensify the discussion on the acquisition of nuclear weapons in South Korea. Despite the different regional specificity, some of the security dilemmas resulting from the U.S.-China rivalry are common to South Korea and the European allies of the U.S.

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Since its establishment in 1948, South Korea has been looking for a balance between the need to maintain the alliance with the U.S., which guarantees its security, and striving for the greatest possible autonomy.

Since its establishment in 1948, South Korea has been looking for a balance between the need to maintain the alliance with the U.S., which guarantees its security, and striving for the greatest possible autonomy.¹ The gradual development of South Korea's potential, mainly economic, since the mid-1960s allowed it to increase its influence in East Asia and beyond, and to shape the alliance with the U.S.

towards a more partner-like than client-patron relationship. This included measures aimed at increasing independence in the security dimension, which was especially evident when doubts arose about the credibility of American allied obligations. For example, after the announcement of the Guam Doctrine² by President Richard Nixon in 1969 and the subsequent decision to withdraw some American forces from the Korean Peninsula in the early 1970s, the government of Park Chung-hee began work on nuclear weapons, stopped in 1979.³

After the democratisation of the 1980s and 1990s, foreign and security policy became the subject of a dispute between the two main political camps: conservatives and liberals. Conservative governments (1987-1998 and 2008-2017) traditionally supported a tightening of the alliance with the U.S. and a more confrontational policy towards North Korea. Liberal governments, on the other hand, supported maintaining cooperation with the U.S., while emphasising the need for greater autonomy. They were also more conciliatory towards North Korea.

In the analysis of the contemporary security policy of the Republic of Korea, attention should be paid to the diagnosis of its security environment, South Korea's position on the U.S. rivalry with China, as well as the development of the conventional deterrence potential as one of the demonstrations of South Korean autonomy ambitions in the security dimension.

Diagnosis of the Security Environment of South Korea

The "2020 Defence White Paper", published in February 2021 by the South Korean Ministry of National Defence, draws attention to the continued importance of traditional threats and challenges to international security. It mentions, among other things, the intensifying competition between countries, especially between big powers, the arms race, territorial disputes, religious and ethnic conflicts, and extremism. The document emphasises that the global political, economic, and social crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has overlapped the U.S.-China rivalry, increasing the instability of the international security environment. The pandemic also revealed shortcomings in cooperation within international organisations and regional initiatives, limiting the effectiveness of multilateral solutions to global problems such as climate change, threats in cyberspace, terrorism, and natural disasters.⁴ Leading analytical institutions in South Korea describe the current international situation as, among others, an "era of chaos": countries—especially big powers—have been increasingly acting on the basis of narrowly understood national interests, international organisations and norms are in crisis, and the alliances of liberal democracies are in danger of breaking. South Korean think tanks consider competition in the field of science and technology (including in the field of artificial intelligence, 5G, semiconductors, space technologies, and quantum

¹ S. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

² L. Ford, Z. Cooper, "America's Alliances After Trump: Lessons from the Summer of '69," *The Strategist*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2021), <https://tnsr.org>.

³ P. Hayes, C.I. Moon, "Park Chung Hee, the CIA & the Bomb," *Global Asia*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Autumn 2011), pp. 46-58, www.globalasia.org.

⁴ Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defence, "2020 nyeon Gukbangbaekseo" [2020 Defence White Paper], pp. 8-10, www.mnd.go.kr.

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computers) to be the most serious global problems in the coming years. They predict that the technological decoupling, possible especially between the U.S. and China, will be an additional source of instability.⁵

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From South Korea's perspective, the greatest challenge for security, both globally and regionally, is the deepening competition between the U.S. and China. This is emphasised in the "Defence White Paper", as well as in governmental and private analytical institutions' materials.⁶ Attempts to enlist the support of other countries by these two powers can lead to a weakening of

the cohesion of alliances and blocs. States can selectively cooperate in selected ventures with the U.S. and with China in others. The dynamics of American-Chinese relations will pose an increasing problem for countries with strong ties to both powers, such as South Korea, which are trying to pursue an ambiguous policy under these conditions. Increasingly, faced with the choice to support the U.S. or China, they may be more willing to develop their own potential or become more involved in multilateral initiatives.⁷

Other challenges for South Korea's security are related to the development of the military potentials of other countries in the region, including Russia and Japan. A separate challenge is the development of North Korea's nuclear and missile potential, which has accelerated despite its diplomatic opening in recent years.⁸ The tense situation in the region makes it more difficult to achieve the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, which is one of the main goals of South Korea's foreign and security policy.

South Korea and the U.S.-China Competition

Public opinion

South Korean society is aware of the challenges posed by the rivalry between the U.S. and China. In a Gallup Korea poll from December 2020, the vast majority of South Koreans agreed that the U.S. and China would dominate globally in the next decade, and their rivalry would destabilise the world situation.⁹ In one East Asia Institute survey from 2020, 35% of South Korean respondents considered the U.S.-China rivalry as "a threat to South Korea's national interests."¹⁰ In turn, in a survey commissioned by the Chicago Council in March 2021, 49% of respondents had such an opinion.¹¹ In 2020, Asan Institute research, the vast majority of South Koreans perceived the U.S. as stronger than China (both militarily—80.4%; and economically—71.1%), with a relatively high percentage of

⁵ "Challenge in the Era of Chaos," *Issue Brief*, No. 2021-01, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 1 February 2021, <http://en.asaninst.org>.

⁶ "IFANS Forecast 2021: The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia," *IFANS Perspectives*, No. IP2021-02E, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, 10 February 2021, www.ifans.go.kr; S.H. Lee, "Prospect of International Affairs in 2021: Return of Geopolitics and Great Power Competition," *Current Issues & Policies*, No. 2020-36, The Sejong Institute, 23 December 2020, www.sejong.org.

⁷ "Challenge in the Era of Chaos...", *op. cit.*

⁸ Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defence, "2020 nyeon Gukbangbaekseo...", *op. cit.*, pp. 19-30.

⁹ "4 dae gangguk gukje jeongchaek insikgwa 2030 nyeon chogangdaeguk jeonmang" – Gallup International dagukga bigyo josa" [*Global Policy Recognition of Four Powers and Prospects of Superpowers in 2030 – Gallup International Multi-Country Comparative Study*], Gallup Korea, 16 December 2020, www.gallup.co.kr.

¹⁰ S.Y. Kim, S.J. Lee, "South Korean Perception of the United States and China: United States, a More Favorable Partner than China," *EAI Issue Briefing*, The East Asia Institute, 21 July 2020, www.eai.or.kr.

¹¹ K. Friedhoff, "South Koreans See China as More Threat than Partner, But Not the Most Critical Threat Facing the Country," *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, 6 April 2021, www.thechicagocouncil.org.

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respondents convinced that China will achieve balance in relations with the U.S. (34.7%) or even surpass them (18.9%).¹²

Research shows that South Koreans have a positive attitude towards the U.S.¹³ and over 90% of respondents support alliance with the U.S.¹⁴ This is despite the critical assessment of the Trump administration, whose decisions and declarations have raised concerns about the credibility of the U.S. as an ally. In turn, South Koreans have an increasingly negative attitude towards China.¹⁵ Most respondents consider China as a threat to both the security and economy of South Korea.¹⁶ This is due to negative experiences in recent years, especially the Chinese economic pressure on South Korea after the American THAAD anti-missile system has been deployed on its territory.¹⁷ China's policy towards Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, as well as trade and technological practices, growing nationalism and the Chinese appropriation of Korean cultural heritage are also negatively assessed.¹⁸

South Koreans believe that under the Biden administration the alliance relationship will be improved and predominantly support the U.S. in its rivalry with the China.¹⁹ However, asked about whose side South Korea should take, they most willingly opt not to make a choice. On average, about half of the respondents in various polls believe that South Korea should maintain a “balanced approach” towards the U.S. and China.²⁰ However, faced with the necessity to choose, they definitely choose the U.S., for example, in an Asan Institute survey from August 2020, as many as 73.2% chose the U.S., and only 15.7%, China.²¹

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¹² J.J. Kim, C. Kang, “The U.S.-China Competition in South Korean Public Eyes,” *Issue Brief*, No. 2020-05, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 25 August 2020, <http://en.asaninst.org>.

¹³ In the April 2021 Hankook Research survey, the U.S. was South Koreans' most favoured country, with a score of 53.4 out of 100 (in comparison, Japan was 25.3, China–26.3, North Korea–33.5, Russia–39.9). See: “[Jubyeonguk hogamdo – 2021 nyeon 4 wol 1 jucha] Jungguk hogamdo 26.3 do, yeokdae choejeochi” [Favourability of neighbouring countries – 1st week of April 2021] *Chinese favourability of 26.3, record low*], Hankook Research, 8 April 2021, <https://hrcopinion.co.kr>.

¹⁴ K. Friedhoff, “Troop Withdrawal Likely to Undermine South Korean Public Support for Alliance with United States,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 2020, www.thechicagocouncil.org.

¹⁵ For example, in the October 2020 Pew Global Poll, 75% of South Koreans had a negative attitude towards China (37% in 2015). See: L. Silver, K. Devlin, C. Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries,” *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020, p. 24, www.pewresearch.org.

¹⁶ In a Hankook Research survey commissioned by the Chicago Council, 53% of respondents considered China a “critical security threat” and 50% as a “critical economic threat”. Demographic problems (81%), climate change (76%), and North Korea's nuclear programme (62%) were considered to be the most critical threats. See: K. Friedhoff, “South Koreans See...,” *op. cit.* In a 2019 Carnegie survey, 54.4% of respondents considered China to be the greatest threat to a potentially unified Korea. See: C.M. Lee, “A Peninsula of Paradoxes: South Korean Public Opinion on Unification and Outside Powers,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2020, p. 42, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

¹⁷ O. Pietrewicz, “China-South Korea Relations: An Attempt to Break the Deadlock,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 3 (1576), 5 January 2018, www.pism.pl.

¹⁸ S.H. Yim, “A war wages on online over Korea's most-loved heritages,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 13 December 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com>.

¹⁹ J.J. Kim, C. Kang, “South Korean Outlook on the United States and ROK-U.S. Relations in the Biden Era,” *Issue Brief*, No. 2021-06, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 15 February 2021, www.asaninst.org.

²⁰ In 2020, East Asia Institute research found that more than 6 out of 10 respondents believed that South Korea should have a “balanced approach” towards the U.S. and China. See: S.Y. Kim, S.J. Lee, “South Korean Perception...,” *op. cit.* In January 2021, a Korea Society Opinion Institute poll reported that 56.5% of respondents had such an opinion (38.6% indicated the U.S. and 2.2% China). See: “Miguk-Jungguk goraessaum kkin Hanguk, gwabani “gyunhyeongjeok ipjang chwihaeya” (56.5%)” [South Korea in the U.S.-China whale fight, the majority “must take a balanced stance” (56.5%)], Korea Society Opinion Institute, 26 January 2021, <http://ksoi.org>.

²¹ J.J. Kim, C. Kang, “The U.S.-China Competition...,” *op. cit.*

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The South Korean authorities' perspective: not taking sides

The majority public support for not choosing between the U.S. and China is reflected in the views of the influential experts and advisers of the Moon Jae-in administration. The dispute over THAAD highlighted South Korea's cost of choosing one side. At that time, the Republic of Korea not only experienced economic pressure from China, but also did not receive support from the U.S.

Since then, South Korea's policy has been described variously as hedging,²² non-action,²³ strategic non-decision,²⁴ or double allegiance.²⁵ This policy is characterised by the simultaneous signalling of

South Korea's choice to pursue this policy of relative balance between the powers is understandable due to its security and economic interests: the U.S. is the guarantor of its security, and China is its largest economic partner.

its intention to remain an ally of the U.S. and maintain cooperation with China. South Korea's choice to pursue this policy of relative balance between the powers is understandable due to its security and economic interests: the U.S. is the guarantor of its security, and China is its largest economic partner. The attitude towards the U.S. and China also serves the implementation of Moon Jae-in's main foreign policy goal, which is progress in the

peace process on the Korean Peninsula.²⁶ The support, or at least a favourable position of both powers is needed both for the inter-Korean dialogue, for example, in the context of the implementation or easing of sanctions, and for denuclearisation.

South Korea's policy towards the U.S. and China is also influenced by the internal situation and the views of the ruling elite. Despite high support for the alliance with the U.S., South Korean liberals do not treat the "pro-American stance" as the most desirable orientation in foreign and security policy. President Moon Jae-in and his associates primarily emphasise the need to reduce South Korea's dependence from the influence of great powers and the strengthening of its own independence.²⁷ Such views have gained importance in recent years due to both the increased popularity of the liberal political camp and the U.S. policy of demands and pressure on allies under Trump.

The will to transform the alliance with the U.S. and divergences regarding regional cooperation

No political force in South Korea questions the usefulness and need for the alliance with the U.S. This does not mean, however, that South Korea is satisfied with shape of the alliance. In particular, liberals believe that the U.S. does not take into account many of South

No political force in South Korea questions the usefulness and need for the alliance with the U.S. This does not mean, however, that South Korea is satisfied with shape of the alliance.

²² J. Park, "Korea Between the United States and China: How Does Hedging Work?", *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* 2015, pp. 59-73, <https://keia.org/>.

²³ J. Delury, "Managing big powers" [in:] *Routledge Handbook of Korean Politics and Public Administration*, edited by C.I. Moon, M.J. Moon, pp. 228, 234-235, New York: Routledge, 2018.

²⁴ J.Y. Lee, "South Korea's Strategic Nondecision and Sino-US Competition" [in:] *Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence* edited by A. Tellis, A. Szalwinski, M. Wills, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020, www.nbr.org.

²⁵ E.A. Jo, "Double Allegiance: Moon Jae-in's Strategy amid US-China Rivalry," *Special Forum*, The Asan Forum, 27 August 2020, www.theasanforum.org.

²⁶ O. Pietrewicz, "Perspectives on President Moon's Inter-Korean Policy," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 29 (1777), 25 February 2019, www.pism.pl.

²⁷ Y.H. Gil, "S. Korean diplomacy expert says US 'gaslights' S. Korea, calls for more autonomy," *Hankyoreh*, 1 April 2021, <http://english.hani.co.kr>; S.Y. Kim, "Moon's adviser calls for S. Korea to break away from 'U.S. or China' framework," *Yonhap News Agency*, 27 November 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr>; D. Son, A. Abrahamian, "South Korea's search for autonomy," *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute, 15 December 2017, www.loyyinstitute.org; J. Robertson, "Coming soon: A neutral South Korea?," *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute, 4 November 2020, www.loyyinstitute.org.

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Korea's interests, including primarily its ambition regarding autonomy in security matters.²⁸ The way to increase the independence of the South Korean armed forces and strengthen its position in the alliance with the U.S. and in the international arena are actions to take over wartime operational control (OPCON) of the South Korean military (currently, if war broke out, the South Korean military would be commanded by a U.S. general). To prepare for this change militarily, South Korea have been developing capabilities to meet key requirements, such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), command, control, communications and information (C4), missile defence, and countering weapons of mass destruction.²⁹ According to the U.S., South Korea is still not prepared for OPCON transfer, and the conditions set by the Americans raise concerns among some South Korean experts.³⁰

From the South Korean point of view, the alliance with the U.S. serves primarily to respond to challenges and threats on the Korean Peninsula. In addition to the U.S. commitments to assist in the event of an attack by North Korea, the authorities of South Korea expect coordination of allied policy towards the North. Moon's administration wants the U.S. policy towards North Korea to be based on engagement and dialogue. The joint statement adopted during the Biden–Moon summit in May 2021 demonstrated that the U.S. takes into account South Korea's expectations. The allies are also willing to expand cooperation beyond issues related to the Korean Peninsula.³¹ This is in line with the readiness declared by the Obama administration to develop comprehensive cooperation, as well as in public opinion polls, according to which less than a third of South Koreans believe that the alliance should be limited to the North Korea problem.³²

The negative experiences of the THAAD dispute have translated into South Korea's restrained attitude to U.S. regional security initiatives. This is the case of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy in which the U.S. wants to include South Korea since its announcement in 2017. The country is encouraged to join the Quad, now comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. A manifestation of South Korea's distanced approach to these initiatives in their current shape was the lack of an indication that China is a factor destabilising the situation in the region in a statement summarising the "2+2" meetings in Seoul in March this year and in the Biden-Moon joint statement in May. Instead of joining the Quad, South Korea has been pursuing a New Southern Policy,³³ focused on deepening ties with the countries of Southeast Asia and India, as complementary to the American Indo-Pacific strategy.³⁴ However, the South Korean initiative pursues mainly economic rather than security goals, with limited application in the latter area.³⁵

Despite the unwillingness to confront China, South Korea is interested in cooperation with the U.S. in the region, which was manifested especially during the Biden-Moon summit in May.

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²⁸ M. Fuchs, H. Lee, "Bridging the Divide in the U.S.-South Korea Alliance," *Center for American Progress*, November 2020, www.americanprogress.org.

²⁹ J. Nordin, "Taking Back Control: South Korea and the Politics of OPCON Transfer," *Issue Brief*, Institute for Security & Development Policy, January 2020, www.isdp.eu.

³⁰ J.S. Kim, "OPCON Transition: Issues and Tasks," *Sejong Policy Brief*, No. 2020-11, The Sejong Institute, 20 August 2020, <http://sejong.org>; J.S. Kim, "[Column] Why OPCON transfer conditions are subject to change," *Hankyoreh*, 25 February 2021, <http://english.hani.co.kr>.

³¹ White House, "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," 21 May 2021, www.whitehouse.gov.

³² J.J. Kim, C. Kang, "South Korean Outlook...", *op. cit.*

³³ O. Pietrewicz, "South Korea's Growing Economic Involvement in Southeast Asia," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 29 (2227), 12 February 2021, www.pism.pl.

³⁴ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, "The U.S. and ROK on Working Together to Promote Cooperation between the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the New Southern Policy," 13 November 2020, <https://kr.usembassy.gov>.

³⁵ W. Choe, "'New Southern Policy': Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy," *Asie.Visions*, No. 118, Ifri, January 2021, www.ifri.org; J. Lee, "Korea's New Southern Policy: Motivations of 'Peace Cooperation' and Implications for the Korean Peninsula," *Issue Briefs*, 2019-07, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 21 June 2019, <http://en.asaninst.org>.

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region, which was manifested especially during the Biden-Moon summit in May.³⁶ Some kind of cooperation is possible beyond the anti-Chinese dimension of the Quad and extending it to other areas, which was signalled at the summit of Quad leaders in March this year.³⁷ Since last year, South Korea has regularly participated in “Quad+” meetings at the level of deputy foreign ministers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸ South Korean authorities are considering joining the Quad on the condition that it will function on the principles of “transparency, openness and inclusiveness” so that it will not be directed against any state in the region.³⁹ South Korea also emphasises its readiness to cooperate in selected areas, such as cybersecurity, with all the Quad countries, even if it does not join it.⁴⁰ There are opinions that the formal accession of South Korea to the Quad would strengthen its position in the region, deepen cooperation with other democratic countries, and enable it to co-shape the members’ agenda, thus weakening the anti-Chinese tone of the initiative.⁴¹ In exchange for South Korea joining the Quad, the U.S. could consider a partial relaxation of sanctions on North Korea, thus allowing the resumption of the inter-Korean dialogue.⁴²

Factors hindering regional cooperation include the problems of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea format. Until now, during the Moon presidency South Korea’s relations with Japan have been focused primarily on historical and trade disputes, which weakened the coordination of trilateral actions.⁴³ As a result of the tensions, the hostility among South Koreans towards Japan is at its highest in years.⁴⁴ South Korea declares its readiness to dialogue with Japan on the contentious issues, but similar signals in the last year did not bring any improvement in bilateral relations. Such policy of the Moon government is increasingly criticised in South Korea as it does not serve to strengthen its position in the region, and in practice appears weaker, as Japan is now the most important U.S. ally in the region given its endorsement of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” vision.⁴⁵ Despite the many misunderstandings, a positive factor is the actions of the Biden administration to improve relations and stimulate trilateral cooperation, as exemplified by the meeting of national security advisers from the three countries in April this year.

Pragmatic and careful cooperation with China

South Korea’s relations with China are primarily conditioned by economic interdependence. Despite attempts to diversify economic relations, China remains South Korea’s largest trading partner, which justifies the need for cooperation. In addition, China, as the country with the greatest influence over

³⁶ White House, “U.S.-ROK Leaders’...”, *op. cit.*

³⁷ P. Kugiel, “Quad Summit—Reaffirming the Pivotal Role of the Format in the Indo-Pacific,” *PISM Spotlight*, No. 23, 16 March 2021, www.pism.pl.

³⁸ The meetings are attended by deputy foreign ministers/secretaries of state of South Korea, the U.S., Japan, Australia, India, New Zealand, and Vietnam. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, “Outcome of Video Teleconference on COVID-19 Response between Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choi and his Counterparts,” 22 March 2021, www.mofa.go.kr.

³⁹ J.H. Nam, “The Quad dilemma,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 16 March 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com>.

⁴⁰ “S. Korea open to considering Quad membership, Cheong Wa Dae says,” *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 March 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr>; S.Y. Kim, “S. Korea willing to cooperate with Quad countries on issue-by-issue basis: official,” *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 April 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr>.

⁴¹ R. Pacheco Pardo, “South Korea would benefit from joining a Quad+,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 26 February 2021, www.csis.org.

⁴² R. Pacheco Pardo, J. Hwang, “Seoul sees hope in Biden’s North Korea approach,” *The Hill*, 8 March 2021, <https://thehill.com>.

⁴³ O. Pietrewicz, “Japan-South Korea Tensions with History in the Background,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 102 (1850), 23 July 2019, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁴ Y. Kudo, “South Korean attitudes toward Japan have worsened dramatically, annual survey finds,” *The Genron NPO*, 19 October 2020, www.genron-npo.net.

⁴⁵ A.V. Rinna, “Where does the South Korea–US alliance fit in a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’?,” *East Asia Forum*, 26 March 2021, www.eastasiaforum.org.

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North Korea, plays a key role in maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula and influences the effectiveness of the South's policy towards the North.

Due to these conditions, under Moon, South Korea's policy towards China is characterised by cautious engagement. By opting for a conciliatory stance after the escalation of tensions around THAAD, South Korea responded to the most serious Chinese security concerns.⁴⁶ Its sceptical attitude towards U.S. regional initiatives such as the Quad also serve to reassure China. In addition, South Korea increased the number of channels of communication with the Chinese military in the form of new hotlines as confidence-building measures and a response to violations of the Korean air defence identification zone by Chinese forces. There is also noticeable rapprochement at the diplomatic level, as evidenced by the visits of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to South Korea in November 2020 and the first visit in three years of his South Korean counterpart, Chung Eui-yong, to China in April this year.

Despite signs of engagement and consideration of Chinese security interests, South Korea does not intend to build its security policy on close relations with China.

Despite signs of engagement and consideration of Chinese security interests, South Korea does not intend to build its security policy on close relations with China.⁴⁷ It is aware of the costs of economic dependence on China, including possible Chinese economic pressure in the event of security disputes. The recent example of Australia⁴⁸ proves that South Korea was not an isolated case and China may apply

such measures when it deems that its security interests have been breached. There is a strong belief in the South Korean analytical community that China will try, in turn, to contain the U.S. and consolidate its influence in the region primarily by taking advantage of economic interdependencies with American allies, including South Korea.⁴⁹ There is also an awareness of cyber threats from China.⁵⁰ The joint statement from the Biden-Moon summit in May also showed that South Korea speaks more boldly on matters of particular interest to China, such as the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, but without mentioning China by name and without commenting on internal issues, including the human rights situation.⁵¹

Conventional Deterrence as an Example of South Korea's Growing Ambitions

South Korea takes advantage of the U.S. nuclear umbrella but also its conventional support, including in particular reconnaissance, strike, and missile defence capabilities. At the same time, South Korea is developing its own capabilities to increase its autonomy in the security dimension. This serves both as a response to the expansion of the North Korean nuclear and missile arsenals and to secure itself in the event of U.S. abandonment. Fears of alliance abandonment—

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⁴⁶ South Korea declared, among others, that it is not considering additional THAAD deployment. See: B.S. Park, "South Korea's 'three no's' announcement key to restoring relations with China," *Hankyoreh*, 2 November 2017, <http://english.hani.co.kr>.

⁴⁷ J.Y. Lee, "The Geopolitics of South Korea-China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific," *RAND Corporation*, November 2020, www.rand.org.

⁴⁸ M. Przychodniak, "The Most Important Challenges in China's Foreign Policy after the First Phase of the Pandemic," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 214 (2146), 26 October 2020, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁹ "Challenge in the Era of Chaos..." *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Q.E. Hodgson, L. Ma, K. Marcinek, K. Schwindt, "Fighting Shadows in the Dark. Understanding and Countering Coercion in Cyberspace," RR-2961-OSD, RAND Corporation, 2019, pp. 20-22, www.rand.org.

⁵¹ R. Pacheco Pardo, "The South Korea-US summit," *Korea Chair Explains*, 25 May 2021, <https://brussels-school.be>.

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understood as the U.S. failing to provide support in contingencies or even termination of the alliance—increased in South Korea during the Trump administration. This experience confirmed to the South Korean political and military elite that they cannot rely solely on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. Moreover, by developing its own military capabilities, South Korea meets the U.S. expectations in terms of alliance burden-sharing and serves to strengthen its position in the alliance.⁵²

Assumptions and Specificity of the Development of Conventional Deterrence

South Korea is developing both defensive and offensive conventional capabilities. Its deterrence strategy relies on its ability to contain or repel a North Korean attack, as well as to carry out severe retaliation.⁵³ During the Moon administration, military spending increased by an average of 7.1% per year, compared with 4.1% under his predecessor, Park Geun-hye. While in 2011 the defence budget amounted to \$28 billion, in 2021 it was already \$48 billion (10th highest defence spending in the world),⁵⁴ or 2.4% of GDP. The medium-term defence plan for 2021-2025 envisages spending a total of \$253 billion, of which \$85 billion will go to strengthening military capabilities by purchasing or modernising equipment, and to research and development.⁵⁵ South Korea's ambitions are expressed in plans to build a light aircraft carrier, nuclear submarines, the KF-X fighter jet, and the development of missile forces.⁵⁶

South Korean conventional deterrence⁵⁷ is based on two components. The first is the missile defence system, initiated in 2006 and since 2019 developed under the name Korean Missile Defence (formerly Korean Air and Missile Defence). The second is the Strategic Strike System, which consists of two elements—Strategic Target Strike (formerly Kill Chain) and “overwhelming response” (formerly “mass punishment and retaliation”). The first is a counterforce strategy aimed to detect imminent North Korean missile launches and to pre-emptively destroy missile launchers and related command systems in the North. The second is a countervalue strategy designed to conduct retaliatory attacks on North Korean political and military leadership in response to an attack by the North.⁵⁸ Additionally, in its strategic documents, South Korea points out that the developed

⁵² I. Bowers, H.S. Hiim, “Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea’s Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula,” *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Winter 2020/21), pp. 13-16, <https://direct.mit.edu>.

⁵³ “Deterrence by denial” means convincing an opponent that an attack will not achieve the intended goals. “Deterrence by punishment” means making the opponent aware that, even if an attack is successful, it will face severe retaliation that will result in losses that exceed the benefits of the original attack. See: Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defence, “2020 nyeon Gukbangbaekseo...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁴ At an exchange rate of ₩1 KRW = \$0.0009 as of 14 April 2021. See: J.O. Paek, “Analysis of 2021 ROK Defense Budget and Its Policy Implications,” *ROK Angle: Korea’s Defense Policy*, No. 232, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 10 February 2020, www.kida.re.kr.

⁵⁵ Y.B. Lee, “The 2021-2025 Mid-term Defense Plan for the Successful Completion of Defense Reforms and a Strong Innovative Military,” *ROK Angle: Korea’s Defense Policy*, No. 225, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 9 September 2020, www.kida.re.kr.

⁵⁶ B.W. Kim, “KAI rolls out KF-21 Boramae, first Korean-made fighter jet,” *The Korea Herald*, 9 April 2021, www.koreaherald.com; K.S. Shim, “Defense aspirations include aircraft carrier, nuclear sub,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 10 August 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com>; E.Y. Ha, “[News analysis] Korea peace process cannot be achieved via biggest military buildup in history,” *Hankyoreh*, 30 August 2020, <http://english.hani.co.kr>; S.H. Choe, “A Quiet Arms Race Is Rapidly Heating Up Between the Two Koreas,” *The New York Times*, 19 April 2021, www.nytimes.com.

⁵⁷ Since 2019, the official name is “system for responding to nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction”. It replaced the name “three-axis system”, which had been in use since 2017. Previously, the system was called 3K (KAMD, Kill Chain, KMPR). See: J.W. Noh, “Defense Ministry changes terminology for ‘three-axis system’ of military response,” *Hankyoreh*, 13 January 2019, <http://english.hani.co.kr>.

⁵⁸ Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defence, “2020 nyeon Gukbangbaekseo...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

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capacities serve to respond to “omnidirectional security threats”, which suggests that this is not only about North Korea, but perhaps also China and Japan.⁵⁹

The development of South Korean military capabilities is supported by the U.S., which has gradually phased out the Cold War limitations on South Korea’s missile arsenal over the past 25 years.⁶⁰ Ultimately, in 2017, the Trump administration eliminated the payload weight limit for South Korean ballistic missiles with up to 800 kilometres range, and in 2020 removed the limits on the use of solid fuel in space launch vehicles. The latter is to facilitate launches from South Korea of satellites into orbit, which will increase ISR capabilities.⁶¹ These activities are also in line with the implementation of the U.S. requirements for South Korea to take wartime operational control of its troops. On the occasion of Biden’s meeting with Moon in May, the U.S. agreed to terminate missile guidelines, which means lifting all restrictions on the South Korean missile programme.⁶²

Challenges and Limitations to Conventional Deterrence

Building credible conventional deterrence capacity requires South Korea to overcome numerous technical and operational challenges. The country remains dependent on U.S. imports of many advanced weapons, such as Global Hawk UAVs, F-35 fighter jets, and the Aegis Combat System. Due to the dependence on American solutions, the development of South Korea’s own advanced weapons systems will require prior agreement with the U.S.⁶³

According to experts, South Korea has limitations in the areas of detection and tracking, offensive strikes, and missile defence. It remains dependent on U.S. support for ISR capabilities. Regardless of the development of South Korean ISR, the key challenge remains the assessment of the North’s intentions and determining the exact number of missile launchers South Korea would have to detect and track. The quantitative and qualitative development of the North Korean missile potential is also a serious challenge for South Korea’s already developed missile arsenal. It is not known if it has sufficient offensive capabilities to deal with highly fortified targets such as rocket launchers or command points. Maintaining readiness of systems capable of this remains a problem, including efficient data processing and procedures in the chain of command. Objections to missile defence relate to problems with sufficient rapid detection and tracking of North Korea’s increasingly sophisticated missiles, an insufficient number of interceptors, and the fact that missile defence does not cover the entire territory of the South.⁶⁴

The nuclear option

Given the growing threats in the region over the last 20 years, South Korean public opinion has ranged between 50% and 70% in support of the presence of nuclear weapons in South Korea, either in the form of the deployment of American tactical nuclear weapons (e.g., during the Cold War and withdrawn at the beginning of the 1990s) or development of an independent South Korean nuclear

⁵⁹ In the “2020 Defence White Paper”, Japan is described as a “neighbour” and not, as before, a “partner”, reflecting the deterioration in bilateral relations. See: B.S. Park, “S. Korean defense white paper lists Japan only as ‘neighbor’, not ‘partner’,” *Hankyoreh*, 3 February 2021, <http://english.hani.co.kr>.

⁶⁰ M.A. Piotrowski, “South Korea’s Ballistic and Cruise Missiles,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 57 (1630), 18 April 2018, www.pism.pl.

⁶¹ A. Panda, “Solid Ambitions: The U.S.-South Korea Missile Guidelines and Space Launchers,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 August 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

⁶² C.D. Lee, “S. Korea, U.S. agree to end bilateral missile guidelines,” *Yonhap News Agency*, 22 May 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr>.

⁶³ I. Bowers, H.S. Hiim, “Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas...,” *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 22-31.

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arsenal.⁶⁵ However, this topic is only occasionally raised by the main political parties. So far, no party has expressed public interest in the development of nuclear weapons, and the call for the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula first appeared in 2017 in the major conservative party's agenda. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the same party also postulated signing an agreement on nuclear sharing. The ruling liberal party does not take up this topic. Regardless, it is worth paying attention to South Korea's security concerns because it could prompt re-consideration of the nuclear option.

Rapid progress in North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missiles programmes, combined with the uncertainty caused by the Trump administration's policy towards the Korean Peninsula, intensified the expert discussion on the acquisition of nuclear weapons by South Korea.

The experience of the 1970s shows that the impulse to start work on nuclear weapons may come from growing doubts about the credibility of U.S. commitments. Rapid progress in North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missiles programmes, combined with the uncertainty caused by the Trump administration's policy towards the Korean Peninsula, intensified the expert discussion on the acquisition of nuclear weapons by South Korea.⁶⁶ Although it is unlikely that it would go nuclear in the near future, South Korea has been likely preparing for such an eventuality for years. This is evidenced by the technical

possibility to modify conventional ballistic and cruise missiles for nuclear purposes, as well as the drive to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. All this could reduce the time needed by South Korea to develop credible nuclear deterrence.⁶⁷

There is awareness of the negative consequences effectively keeping South Korea from developing nuclear weapons. Serious constraints include the risk that the U.S. would terminate the alliance, that the South would be in violation of the NPT treaty, and the related international pressure, including sanctions. Along with the initiation of a nuclear programme, South Korea would likely not only lose U.S. support but also likely would prompt a reaction from North Korea, which might launch preventive strikes on South Korean nuclear facilities. Taking the nuclear route without prior credible deterrence would therefore lead not to an improvement, but a deterioration of South Korea's security.⁶⁸

Conclusions and Perspectives

South Korea's actions are consistent with its entrenched foreign and security policy of maintaining a balance between the need for an alliance with the U.S. and the desire for autonomy. The Republic of Korea is not interested in ending the alliance with the U.S., but is concerned about the credibility of American commitments after the experience of recent years. From this point of view, the Biden presidency is a positive change after the critically judged Trump administration.

South Korean reservations regarding the U.S. and the discrepancies in the alliance related, among others, to regional policy does not mean that South Korea is becoming closer to China. Nevertheless,

⁶⁵ T. Dalton, A. Han, "Elections, Nukes, and the Future of the South Korea-U.S. Alliance," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 October 2020, pp. 5-7, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

⁶⁶ B.C. Lee, "Don't be surprised when South Korea wants nuclear weapons," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 23 October 2019, <https://thebulletin.org>; D. Kim, "How to keep South Korea from going nuclear," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (2020), pp. 68-75.

⁶⁷ I. Bowers, H.S. Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas..." *op. cit.*, pp. 19-21; L. Kim, "South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2018), pp. 115-133.

⁶⁸ M. Fitzpatrick, *Asia's Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 50-55; T. Roehrig, *Japan, South Korea, and the United States Nuclear Umbrella: Deterrence After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 150-152.

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out of concern for current economic interests and in the hope of solving the problems on the Korean Peninsula, the South Korean authorities strive to maintain stable relations with China. Taking into account the rising anti-Chinese public sentiment, Moon administration policy may be more criticised in South Korea, and the attitude towards China may be one of the topics of the campaign in the presidential election in 2022.⁶⁹ The electoral context may cause the government to adopt a more critical stance towards China.⁷⁰

The policy of relative balance has allowed South Korea to maintain allied cooperation with the U.S. and preserve the benefits of economic contacts with China. However, continuing this strategic ambiguity in conditions of a deepening U.S.-China rivalry may not only be more difficult but also harmful, as it creates the risk of losing the trust of both countries, especially the American ally. This direction of South Korean policy could be also weakened by the low probability of a resumption of the inter-Korean dialogue, which has been at an impasse since 2019. The joint statement adopted during the Biden-Moon summit showed that South Korea is ready to support the U.S. position on regional issues, including on containing China. This direction could be strengthened if a conservative candidate wins the presidential election in the spring of 2022, but even then, South Korea will not openly side with the U.S. in its competition with China.⁷¹

South Korea is facing the task of increasing security activities outside Northeast Asia. While the New Southern Policy serves to pursue economic interests in other sub-regions of Asia, South Korean involvement remains limited in the security dimension. This could be changed through activity under the “Quad+” formula in responding to non-traditional security threats, such as natural disasters, transnational crime, or climate change, as well as bilateral defence cooperation with members of the Quad.⁷² Improving relations between South Korea and Japan remains a challenge. Maintaining tensions due to domestic politics in both countries limits security cooperation in areas where Japan and South Korea have common interests: freedom of navigation and flight, stability of supply chains, and cybersecurity.⁷³

Development of the military potential of South Korea is justified from the point of view of numerous threats, mainly from North Korea.

Development of the military potential of South Korea is justified from the point of view of numerous threats, mainly from North Korea.⁷⁴ It also takes place in accordance with allied arrangements and serves the purpose of OPCON transfer. Development of conventional

deterrence by South Korea also accords with the regional trend in the development of missile weapons.⁷⁵ The expansion of the military potential makes South Korea an increasingly attractive partner on the defence industry market, including for European countries. In 2016-2020, South Korea was the third-largest source, after the U.S. and Italy, of Polish arms imports.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ D. Kim, “The Politics of South Korea’s ‘China Threat,’” *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2021, <https://thediplomat.com>.

⁷⁰ S.H. Lee, “Art of South Korea-US summit,” *The Korea Times*, 25 May 2021, www.koreatimes.co.kr.

⁷¹ The chances of the conservatives’ victory increased due to their success in the elections for the mayors of Seoul and Busan in April 2021 and a decrease in support for the Moon government. See: M. Shin, “Seoul and Busan Mayor By-Elections Spell Trouble for President Moon,” *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2021, <https://thediplomat.com>; K. Friedhoff, “South Korea Is Staying Out of the U.S.-China Rivalry,” *World Politics Review*, 5 May 2021, www.worldpoliticsreview.com.

⁷² L.W. Ford, “South Korea and Indo-Pacific Security: Building New Networks Beyond the ‘Quad,’” *EAI Working Paper*, 3 December 2020, www.brookings.edu.

⁷³ A. Park, E. Silverberg, “Mutual Suspicion, Mutual Threats: Getting Japan and South Korea to Work Together,” *War on the Rocks*, 6 April 2021, <https://warontherocks.com>.

⁷⁴ M. Lee, H. Ham, “South Korea’s Conventional Forces Buildup: The Search for Strategic Stability,” *War on the Rocks*, 16 April 2021, <https://warontherocks.com>.

⁷⁵ D. Santoro, B. Glosserman, “Time for a reckoning: missiles have flown under the radar for too long in Asia,” *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 1 April 2021, www.iiss.org.

⁷⁶ In 2016-2020, South Korea’s arms exports increased by 210% compared to 2011-2015—the most among the leading arms exporters. Of total arms exports, 23% went to European countries. See: P.D. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, S.T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020,” *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2021, pp. 6-7, www.sipri.org.

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Under current circumstances, developing and possessing nuclear weapons by South Korea is very unlikely. The situation could change radically if the country loses trust in U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. Therefore, it is in the interest of both countries to adapt the alliance to the changing security environment in a way that maintains the credibility of the U.S. commitments and takes into account the aspirations of South Korea's conventional autonomy. In the nuclear dimension, this may be particularly difficult if South Korea pressures for the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on its territory—possible if, for example, the conservatives return to power.⁷⁷ It is not realistic to expect the Biden administration to agree to such a demand, which promises to diminish the importance of nuclear weapons in U.S. security policy. No less important will be the continuation of the bilateral dialogue on deterrence and taking into account the South Korean perspective on the shape of the U.S. policy on the use of nuclear weapons or the modernisation of nuclear forces. U.S. strategic signalling will play an important role, including by visiting nuclear-capable weapons systems in the region, maintaining a strong conventional military presence, and demonstrating the ability to deploy additional forces in the event of a conflict.

Despite the different regional characteristics, some security dilemmas are common to South Korea and the European allies of the U.S. The latter also expect the credibility of U.S. commitments, including those regarding extended nuclear deterrence. The example of South Korea shows that despite its divergence with the U.S., its pursuit of autonomy, which includes the development of both defensive and offensive conventional deterrence capabilities, can be pursued in cooperation with the U.S. Countries in Europe, including Poland, may also be motivated to further enhance their own defence capabilities, especially because of the U.S. effort to reduce overseas military spending has meant that it continues to call on its allies to take more responsibility for their own security.⁷⁸

Despite the different regional characteristics, some security dilemmas are common to South Korea and the European allies of the U.S. The latter also expect the credibility of U.S. commitments, including those regarding extended nuclear deterrence.

⁷⁷ T. Dalton, "Between Seoul and Sole Purpose: How the Biden Administration Could Assure South Korea and Adapt Nuclear Posture," *War on the Rocks*, 9 February 2021, <https://warontherocks.com>.

⁷⁸ A. Kacprzyk, "Developments in U.S. Defence Spending: Implications for NATO," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 84 (2282), 20 April 2021, www.pism.pl.