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US-ROK Strategic Communication

Track II Dialogue on the US-China Strategic
Rivalry and the US-ROK Alliance

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About the Project

The purpose of this project (US-ROK Strategic Communication: Track II Dialogue on US-China Strategic Rivalry and the US-ROK Alliance) is to set up a platform between leading Korean and US experts for (1) actively communicating on and frankly discussing major diplomatic, security, economic and military challenges that the two allies are facing in the context of an intensifying US-China strategic rivalry; (2) searching for forward-looking cooperative measures to strengthen the US-ROK alliance in the changing regional strategic environment; and (3) making concrete and actionable policy recommendations for the policy leaders in both countries.

In 2022, both the United States and the Republic of Korea will have to navigate a new political landscape in the aftermath of the 2022 Korean presidential election and changing dynamics in US domestic politics leading up to and after the 2022 midterm elections. This necessitates a strategic communication channel, not only at the intergovernmental level, but also through engaging relevant stakeholders between the two allies that will prevent unnecessary misunderstandings as well as build a common ground for meeting mutual interests going forward.

For this project led by Yonho Kim, Associate Director of the GW Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS), GWIKS, in collaboration with the US-China Policy Institute (UCPI) at Ajou University, hosted three roundtable meetings with a bipartisan group of leading policy opinion leaders from the United States and South Korea, including former government officials, current and former government advisors, and senior scholars. The participants explored policy options through innovative thinking, intensive collaboration and dialogue searching for forward-looking cooperative measures to strengthen the US-ROK alliance in the changing regional and global strategic environment. (See the summaries of the roundtable meetings [here](#).) Based on the discussions, the participants produced concrete and actionable policy recommendations for the policy leaders in both countries.

Recommendations for the US-ROK Strategic Alliance and Global Partnership

1. Strengthen the US-ROK “comprehensive strategic alliance” and global partnership

- South Korea has been a vital partner in upholding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific as a foundation for regional peace and prosperity.
- Seoul and Washington have already agreed to pursue a comprehensive partnership in May 2021 Biden-Moon summit. Washington and Seoul need to take follow-up steps to implement this concept.
- Modernize the alliance by expanding bilateral cooperation into new frontiers—space, cyber, public health, energy, the environment, and the fourth industrial revolution.
- Going forward, given many global challenges, the bilateral partnership needs to broaden its base to perform at its peak level. This means realizing the alliance’s global potential as the provider of public goods.

2. Strengthen bilateral coordination on China-related issues

- US-ROK Alliance-Partnership should be entrusted to enable both countries to better deal with challenges related to China; the two partners should strengthen such coordination. For this goal, both Seoul and Washington should try to reorient and strengthen the US-ROK cooperation on China-related issues with a principles-based framework toward “a resilient Asia.”
- Seoul and Washington should cooperate to develop more secure, diverse supply chains for industry and reduce overreliance on China or any other one source.
- South Korea and the United States should establish a strategic government dialogue akin to the consultations between the United States and European Union to achieve US-ROK alliance coordination on China-related issues and promote better mutual understanding and coordination.

3. Bolster US-ROK military readiness

- In the face of growing North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats, it is urgent to reassure the ROK and strengthen US extended deterrence. The extended deterrence commitment to the ROK refers to Washington’s pledge to devote the full range of its military and diplomatic capabilities to deter and, if needed, defeat an attack on South Korea by North Korea or other potential aggressors.
- Resume joint military exercises in response to North Korea’s abandonment of self-restraint and ongoing commitment to nuclear weapons development.
- Both sides should implement the conditions based on the Operational Control (OPCON) agreement made during the 2021 Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) and enhance readiness in responding to gray zone provocations and hybrid warfare.

4. Pursue greater policy coordination on North Korea

- Denuclearization is not a short-term project, but complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID) should remain the long-term goal. Defending South Korea against North Korean provocations remains the core objective of the US-ROK alliance, but the alliance must not lose sight of the common goal of a Korean peninsula that is whole, democratic, and free of nuclear weapons.
- Follow a principled, substantive approach to North Korean denuclearization. Seoul and Washington should enhance policy coordination between the Yoon Suk-yeol administration’s North Korea approach and the Joe Biden administration’s “calibrated, practical approach.”
- Work to maintain pressure from the sanctions implemented by the UN Security Council and various UN member states and exercise caution in trading away this critical source of leverage in exchange for reversible steps.
- Seoul and Washington should pursue a coordinated approach on the development of a diplomatic pathway to achieve the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

5. Enhance cooperation and policy coordination on economic security

- South Korea and the United States should cooperate to bolster free and open regional multilateralism as a foundation of long-term prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific.
- In the near future, readjusting supply chain disruption and expanding cooperation in high-tech areas will be an important issue for bilateral collaboration. Both sides should

cooperate on strengthening the supply chain resiliency of key strategic products, including semiconductors, electric batteries and biomedical.

- The South Korean and U.S. governments need to ensure that their respective private sectors devote adequate investments in the fields of semiconductor and batteries to prevent supply chain interruptions or monopolistic control by any potential adversary.
- Washington and Seoul should move beyond a bilateral framework for technology and supply chain cooperation to a multilateral framework, in particular working with Japan and Taiwan, such as in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

6. Cooperate on reinforcing rules-based international order

- To strengthen a rules-based international order and for a more resilient Asia and beyond, the two countries should expand in-depth discussions and coordination on their regional strategies.
- The United States and South Korea have common interests in promoting an open, rules-based order as the basis for regional and global peace and prosperity that includes secure supply chains, clean cyber and digital networks, democracy promotion, a clean information ecosphere, freedom of navigation, reform-inducing official development assistance (ODA), human rights, maritime security, and respect for territorial sovereignty.
- Improving the Korea-Japan relationship is crucial to regional peace, security, and stability. Japan shares with South Korea the “values of democracy, freedom, human rights, and market economy as well as a common strategic interest in promoting an open, rules-based regional and global order that is safe for democracies.”
- Close trilateral defense and intelligence cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan act as a force multiplier in addressing regional security challenges and should be promoted and deepened.

7. Promote improved global governance of trade and investment to enhance economic stability and prevent monopolist control by any firm or country

- Improved economic cooperation between the United States and South Korea has augmented the strategic alliance, carving out new areas for cooperation on international matters in organizations such as World Trade Organization (WTO), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the G20. It is imperative to update the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) with a focus on the digital economy. The digital space is a crucial emerging frontier in establishing rules and norms for all economic interactions.

- The alliance needs to open a new era of economic cooperation, particularly in regional and multilateral fora. Seoul and Washington should, together with other like-minded countries, focus on augmenting coalition-based economic initiatives through a principles-based approach to prevent economic coercion and promote greater economic interaction and integration through multilateral organizations, the G20, APEC, and the WTO among them.

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