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# The Folly of Pushing South Korea Toward a China Containment Strategy

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# Executive Summary

The narrow victory of conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol in the recent South Korean presidential election comes against the backdrop of an intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, now compounded by the Ukraine crisis. Washington would like South Korea to play a security role in its Indo-Pacific strategy – a strategy that effectively aims to contain China.

However, South Korean elites (and the general public) are deeply ambivalent and internally divided on the question of containing China. Pushing South Korea – a robust democracy with major elite divisions – toward containing Beijing risks negative consequences for the United States. These include a reduction in U.S. influence in South Korea, erosion of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, a less-effective South Korean presence in the region, and, in the long run, the potential of South Korean neutrality with respect to China.

To avoid these negative outcomes for the United States, Washington should:

- Avoid pressuring South Korea to join its China-containment strategy,
- Refrain from including Seoul in emerging, non-inclusive, bloc-like structures of U.S. allies in Asia,
- Consider pulling back on its intended new Terminal High Altitude Area Defense deployments until a greater consensus is reached within South Korea on the issue,
- See South Korea's role as a bridge and an opportunity to stabilize Washington's own relationship with Beijing. For example, both South Korea and China could be included in non-traditional security activities of the Quad such as infrastructure and climate change, and

- More generally, demilitarize the Quad and open it to wider participation for strengthening U.S. influence in Asia, rather than see it as a zero-sum vehicle for containing China.

## Introduction

South Korea's recent presidential election produced an extremely narrow victory for Yoon Suk-yeol, the conservative candidate. During his campaign, Yoon called for a tougher policy on China and closer relations with the United States and Japan — positions Yoon confirmed upon getting elected.<sup>1</sup> Such views broadly align with Washington's preferences as detailed in the Indo-Pacific Strategy the White House released in February 2022.

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The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes cooperation between the United States and its allies in Asia.<sup>2</sup> This cooperation has a goal: band together allies in a de facto China-containment strategy, which carries major risks of confrontation or even war between the two great powers.<sup>3</sup> Based on Yoon's skeptical comments about China during the presidential campaign,<sup>4</sup> Washington expects Yoon to be more aligned with

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<sup>1</sup> Yoon, Suk-yeol. "South Korea Needs to Step Up." *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>; Lee, Michelle Ye Hee.

"South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol unveils foreign policy goals." *Washington Post*, April 14, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/14/south-korea-president-interview/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States." *The White House*, February 2022.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Swaine, Michael D., and Shidore, Sarang. "Biden pursues China-containment in new Indo-Pacific strategy." *Responsible Statecraft*, March 7, 2022.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/03/07/biden-pursues-china-containment-in-new-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

<sup>4</sup> For example, on December 28, 2021, Yoon noted at an event hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea that "Moon's pro-China policy produced disastrous consequences." (Son Young-ha. "윤석열 '대다수 한국 청년 중국 싫어한다 ... 中 편향 정책 결과 나빠'" ["Yoon Suk-yeol, 'The majority of Korean youth don't like China. ... The result of China-biased policy is bad.'"] *Hankook Ilbo*, December 28, 2021.

<https://m.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021122817120003308>). See also Kim, Deok-hyun. "Key election promises and policy views of two leading presidential candidates." *Yonhap*, March 6, 2022.

Washington's approach in the region compared with his progressive predecessor, Moon Jae-in. Yet President-elect Yoon will face major constraints as he moves toward a more confrontational China policy, as South Korean political elites differ substantially on how best to deal with a more assertive China amid growing Sino-U.S. competition.

This brief lays out the risks to the United States from pressuring South Korea to participate in Washington's China-containment strategy and argues that doing so is likely to harm the U.S. national interest. It analyzes deep divides among the South Korean elite when it comes to China, the constrained mandate of the new president in Seoul, and the plausibility of an anti-American blowback should the United States go too far in pushing South Korea. The brief concludes with a set of specific recommendations for U.S. policymakers to minimize risks posed to U.S. national interests in South Korea. These interests include maintaining the health of the U.S. alliance with Seoul to stabilize the Korean Peninsula and enhancing American influence and economic opportunities in South Korea.

## **U.S. push on China containment**

The alliance between the United States and South Korea has stood the test of time and contributed to stability on the Korean Peninsula and U.S. influence in the region over the past seven decades. The relationship is governed by the 1953 U.S.–South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty. About 28,500 U.S. troops are currently stationed in the country. The United States has also committed to the use of nuclear weapons, if necessary, to defend its ally.<sup>5</sup>

Though the United States backed authoritarian regimes in the early decades of the alliance, it subsequently supported the country's democratization and greatly aided its stunning economic rise by keeping its markets open to South Korean products.

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<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220303008300315>.

<sup>5</sup> Manyin, Mark, et al. "U.S.-South Korea Relations." *Congressional Research Service*, February 24, 2022. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41481>.

Although some tariff barriers imposed during the Trump era remain, economic ties between the two allies remain strong and mutually beneficial.

The focus of the alliance has traditionally been balancing against the North Korean threat – a challenge complicated by Pyongyang’s nuclearization in 2006. However, as the U.S.–China competition becomes much sharper, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and Washington’s claim to be waging a grand global battle between democracies and autocracies, the U.S. is asking South Korea to take a greater role in matters well beyond the Korean Peninsula. Seoul has in the past sometimes obliged in this. Unlike most other countries in Asia, South Korea joined the United States and Japan in levying sanctions against Russia in the wake of Moscow’s illegal invasion of Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

*As the U.S.–China competition becomes much sharper... the U.S. is asking South Korea to take a greater role in matters well beyond the Korean Peninsula.*

But the most controversial requests from Washington to Seoul involve efforts to contain China’s influence in the region.<sup>7</sup> These include opposing more explicitly China’s military intimidation of Taiwan; associating more thoroughly with the Quad, the four-nation group comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia; deepening security cooperation with Japan; and an additional deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, batteries. Beijing perceives all these as core security concerns or threats. Other U.S. preferences are more generic or focus on the North Korean challenge: delaying transfer of wartime operational control to the South Korean military,

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<sup>6</sup> “The Republic of Korea’s Economic Actions to Support Ukraine.” *U.S. Department of State*, March 2, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/the-republic-of-koreas-economic-actions-to-support-ukraine/>.

<sup>7</sup> Shidore, Sarang. “Mr. President, don’t push South Korea into your China-containment strategy.” *Responsible Statecraft*, December 30, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/30/mr-president-dont-push-south-korea-into-your-china-containment-strategy/>. Also see interview of ex-commander of U.S. Forces in Korea, Robert Abrams, which stoked controversy in South Korea, <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-top-us-commander-in-korea-urges-allies-to-include-china-in-war-plans/6391856.html>.

despite the outgoing Moon Jae-in administration's strong push toward such a shift; demanding Seoul strictly enforce all U.N. Security Council sanctions resolutions on North Korea regardless of diplomatic progress with Pyongyang; and buying more American arms.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these demands are not expressed forcefully or explicitly in public, and Biden administration officials have said they do not want American allies to have to choose between the U.S. and China.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, phrases such as “respect for the rules-based international order” are interpreted by Asia watchers in Washington to be in reference to China.<sup>10</sup>

However, American policymakers and former senior military officials have discussed the implications of these choices in public forums and have strongly hinted that South Koreans should accept them uncritically.<sup>11</sup> The United States's overall approach in Asia,

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<sup>8</sup> According to the Congressional Research Service, approximately 75 percent of South Korea's total foreign defense purchases from 2008 to 2016 were U.S. Foreign Military Sales and commercial sales from U.S. companies. From FY2017 to FY2020, South Korean FMS contracts with the United States totaled \$5.95 billion, making it the tenth-largest recipient during those years. See Manyin, et al. “U.S.-South Korea Relations.” *Congressional Research Service*. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Wadhams, Nick. “Blinken Says U.S. Won't Force ‘Us-or-Them’ Choice With China.” *Bloomberg*, March 24, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-24/blinken-says-biden-won-t-force-us-or-them-choice-with-china>

<sup>10</sup> In the case of South Korea's membership in the Quad, for example, the Moon government denied that the U.S. had made an explicit request that Seoul join the group, and the Biden administration has been silent in this regard. It is unclear whether South Korea was ever formally invited to join the Quad, but there have been public discussions about whether it was invited to attend the Quad's first meeting. According to Victor Cha, South Korea was offered a seat at the first Quad meeting but declined. See Cha, Victor. “Why South Korea's Presidential Election Matters to the United States.” *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/26/south-korea-presidential-election-candidates-biden-administration/>. The South Korean government has denied Cha's claim. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Choi Young-sam's comments at MOFA press briefing on January 27, 2022.

<https://www.korea.kr/news/policyBriefingView.do?newsId=156493724>. Similarly, soon after Yoon was elected, there were reports that South Korea sought to attend the upcoming Quad meeting as an observer. See Akiyama, Hiroyuki. “South Korea seeks to attend Quad summit as observer in May.” *Nikkei Asia*, April 14, 2022.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/South-Korea-seeks-to-attend-Quad-summit-as-observer-in-May>. Yoon's campaign denied the claim. “‘쿼드 참석 타진’ 보도도에 尹당선인측 “전혀 논의된 바 없다,” [“No discussion on participation in the Quad.”] *Maeil Economy Daily*. April 14, 2022.

<https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/view/2022/04/334492/>.

<sup>11</sup> For examples of Washington's implicit demands for South Korean support on China, see comments by Randall Schriver, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs at the Department of Defense during the Trump administration, and Evan Medeiros, former Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Asia at the White House during the Obama administration, at “ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2021: The Road Ahead after the Biden-Moon Summit.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 15, 2021.

<https://www.csis.org/events/rok-us-strategic-forum-2021-road-ahead-after-biden-moon-summit>. Schriver warns of a “diminished alliance” due to a “divergence that we may have on views of China and the regional order and how much deference to show to China in favor of maintaining normal trade relations.” Medeiros warned of “real risks” in a Chinese strategy that is “one of either neutralizing or Finlandizing South Korea.” Also see comments by the recently retired commander of U.S. Forces Korea, Robert Abrams. Lee, Christy. “Former Top US Commander in Korea Urges Allies to Include China in War Plans.” *VOA*, January 11, 2022.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/former-top-us-commander-in-korea-urges-allies-to-include-china-in-war-plans/6391856.html>.

as explicitly indicated in its Indo–Pacific Strategy, is to build military capabilities and interoperability among its Asian allies to counter or contain China.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, from Washington’s standpoint, South Korea cannot be an exception to this push. The status of Taiwan is at the center of this effort. The two key U.S. policies on Taiwan, the One China policy and its cultivation of “strategic ambiguity,” have significantly eroded during the Trump and Biden years. Both administrations have increased political and military ties with the island and sent signals that they think Taiwan should be treated as a de facto ally, a shift with potentially dangerous consequences.<sup>13</sup>

## South Korean responses to U.S. preferences

South Korean responses to U.S. preferences on China depend in part on which party is in power in Seoul. As President-elect Yoon begins his five-year term in May, he faces heightened expectations from Washington for South Korea to play a greater role in its Indo–Pacific strategy – a role Yoon embraced throughout his presidential campaign and has confirmed since his election. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 10, the day after Yoon’s victory, Gen. Paul LaCamera stated that President-elect Yoon’s apparent willingness to work with the United States was “very promising.” LaCamera, who is Commander of U.N. Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea and the most senior U.S. military official in South Korea, told the committee, “Everything we have seen on the conservative side, in his approach and focus on defense,” is in line with Washington’s thinking.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Swaine Michael D., and Shidore, Sarang. “Biden pursues China-containment in new Indo-Pacific strategy.” *Responsible Statecraft*, March 7, 2022.  
<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/03/07/biden-pursues-china-containment-in-new-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

<sup>13</sup> Swaine, Michael D., and Roy, Stapleton J. “Don’t Use the Ukraine Crisis to Inflate the China Threat.” *The National Interest*, February 23, 2022.

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/don%E2%80%99t-use-ukraine-crisis-inflate-china-threat-200745>; Swaine, Michael D. “US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret ‘One China’ policy.” *Responsible Statecraft*, December 10, 2021.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/10/us-official-signals-stunning-shift-in-the-way-we-interpret-one-china-policy/>.

<sup>14</sup> Exchange between Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Gen. Paul LaCamera, Commander of United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/United States Forces Korea, “The Posture of United States Indo-Pacific Command and United States Forces Korea.” *Senate Committee on Armed Services*, March 10, 2022.  
[https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-11\\_03-10-2022.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-11_03-10-2022.pdf).

The policies of Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in, were much more cautious on siding with the United States on a China containment strategy.

## *South Korean responses to U.S. preferences on China depend in part on which party is in power in Seoul.*

In May 2021, Presidents Biden and Moon signed a joint statement that noted the importance of preserving “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”<sup>15</sup> This was the first such mention in a U.S.–ROK statement, and the Biden administration probably urged it on Moon. However, South Korea signed on to the Taiwan reference with great unease. According to Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, the same phrase was mentioned when Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Wang Yi, China’s state councilor and foreign minister, in Alaska in March 2021.<sup>16</sup> As a former senior South Korean official said, the Blue House deliberately insisted on the phrase used at the Alaska meeting as a compromise in an attempt to not rile up Beijing needlessly: It had already been used, Seoul seems to have reasoned.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, four days after the summit, ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong stated that the Taiwan portion of the statement was expressed only “in generalities” and was not intended to signal specific intentions, further watering down the Taiwan reference.<sup>18</sup>

On the issue of working with the Quad, the Moon administration began engaging with Quad countries (along with Vietnam and New Zealand) in March 2020, focused on the Covid–19 response, in a meeting that outside observers labeled “Quad–Plus.”<sup>19</sup> Shortly after winning the election, President-elect Yoon declared that he intended to seek a “phased membership” in the Quad once in office.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that Yoon avoided

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<sup>15</sup> “U.S.-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement.” *The White House*, May 21, 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.

<sup>16</sup> “China, U.S. hold timely, helpful high-level strategic dialogue.” *Xinhua*, March 20, 2021.

[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/20/c\\_139824237.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/20/c_139824237.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a former South Korean official. February 13, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, Ji-eun. “정의용: ‘중국 인권문제, 한-중 관계 특수성 감안해 언급 자제’ [“Chung, Eui-yong: ‘Refraining from commenting on Chinese human rights issues in consideration of ROK-China relations.’”] *Hankyoreh*, May 25, 2021.

<https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/diplomacy/996578.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Li, Jason. “South Korea’s Formal Membership in the Quad Plus: A Bridge Too Far?” *Stimson Center*, October 4, 2021.

<https://www.stimson.org/2021/south-koreas-formal-membership-in-the-quad-plus-a-bridge-too-far/>.

<sup>20</sup> Noh, Seok-jo. “尹 ‘쿼드 단계적 가입 추진 ...’외교통상부 부활도 검토” [“Yoon ‘Promoting a phased membership of the Quad ... Reviewing the revival of the ‘Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.’”] *Chosun Ilbo*, March 15, 2022.

<https://www.chosun.com/politics/assembly/2022/03/15/ANXVT6X2HBB0ZKBIKRC242E/>.



committing to any security partnerships with the Quad during the campaign.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, there are signs that Yoon intends seriously to consider deepening ties with the Quad, as suggested by his appointment of Park Jin, a four-term National Assemblyman, as foreign minister. Park has been a vocal advocate of South Korea membership in an expanded Quad (to be called “Penta” with the inclusion of South Korea as a fifth member).<sup>22</sup>

As a part of its China-containment strategy, the United States is also pushing to deepen the hub-to-hub security linkages within its hub-and-spoke alliance system in Asia to confront China with a unified U.S.-led bloc. Forging close security ties between South Korea and Japan would be the most consequential of these linkages, given the military capacity of the two powers and their proximity to the Taiwan theater.

## *South Korean elites are sharply divided on their attitudes toward Japan.*

However, this goal is also among the most challenging and risky for Washington to achieve, as there is far from a consensus among the elites in the two states for such deep linkages. South Korean elites are sharply divided on their attitudes toward Japan. South Korean progressives in particular are deeply suspicious of Tokyo, with wartime issues such as the sexual enslavement of South Korean women by Japanese troops and unresolved territorial disputes figuring prominently in their thinking. The wider South Korean society is also polarized on the issue as reflected in recent polling.<sup>23</sup> In turn, the Japanese national security establishment reportedly is lukewarm about South Korea’s

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<sup>21</sup> Yoon, Suk-yeol. “South Korea Needs to Step Up.” *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

<sup>22</sup> Park, Jin. “Korea needs to consider joining Quad to make Penta.” *The Korea Times*, April 4, 2021.

[https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/04/197\\_306495.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/04/197_306495.html). For an alternative South Korean perspective about the Quad, see Moon Chung-in and Lee Sung-won’s article, “South Korea’s geopolitics: Challenges and strategic choices.” *Melbourne Asia Review*, March 18, 2022.

<https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/south-koreas-geopolitics-challenges-and-strategic-choices/>.

<sup>23</sup> According to a Genron NPO poll from 2021, 63 percent of South Koreans had a poor or somewhat poor impression of Japan, while 48.8 percent of the Japanese public had a poor or somewhat poor impression of South Korea — indicating animosity in large segments of each country. “What signs are there that the relationship between Japan and South Korea will improve? Public sentiment less acrimonious, but still chilly.” *The Genron NPO*, November 30, 2021. [https://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion\\_polls/archives/5589.html](https://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/archives/5589.html).

joining the Quad.<sup>24</sup> These divides have been sometimes showcased starkly in public. For example, last November, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's counterparts from South Korea and Japan pulled out of a joint press conference at the last minute because of a decades-long dispute over the islets of Dokdo/Takeshima.<sup>25</sup> Although incoming President-elect Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida have pledged to improve ties, the road will not be easy.<sup>26</sup>

## Constraints on U.S. goals for South Korea

The United States must overcome two key structural constraints within South Korea on taking a harder stance toward China to avoid negative impacts on U.S. interests in the region. These constraints include economic interdependence with China and elite polarization buttressed by societal opposition and ambivalence on China containment.

### Economic interdependence

Any shifts by Seoul toward a harder line on Beijing must contend with South Korea's deep economic ties with China, which in turn also contribute to the high volumes of U.S. trade with South Korea. South Korea is now the United States's sixth-largest trading partner: Two-way trade totaled \$127 billion in 2020, according to the latest data from the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.<sup>27</sup> The net stock of South Korean investment in the United States tripled in 2021, to \$64 billion, from the previous year.<sup>28</sup>

South Korea's joining a containment coalition will likely invite harsh Chinese sanctions (as happened post-THAAD deployment in 2017), weakening the South Korean economy and reducing the growth potential for U.S. exports into the Korean market.

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<sup>24</sup> Kwon, Gyu-hong. "윤 당선인, 쿼드 4개국 정상과 통화 ... 김준형 '반중동맹 체제 되면 엄청나게 부담 될 것.'" ["President-elect Yoon speaks with the leaders of the Quad ... Kim Jun-hyung 'An anti-Chinese bloc would be a huge burden."] *Nate News*, March 18, 2022, <https://news.nate.com/view/20220318n13664>.

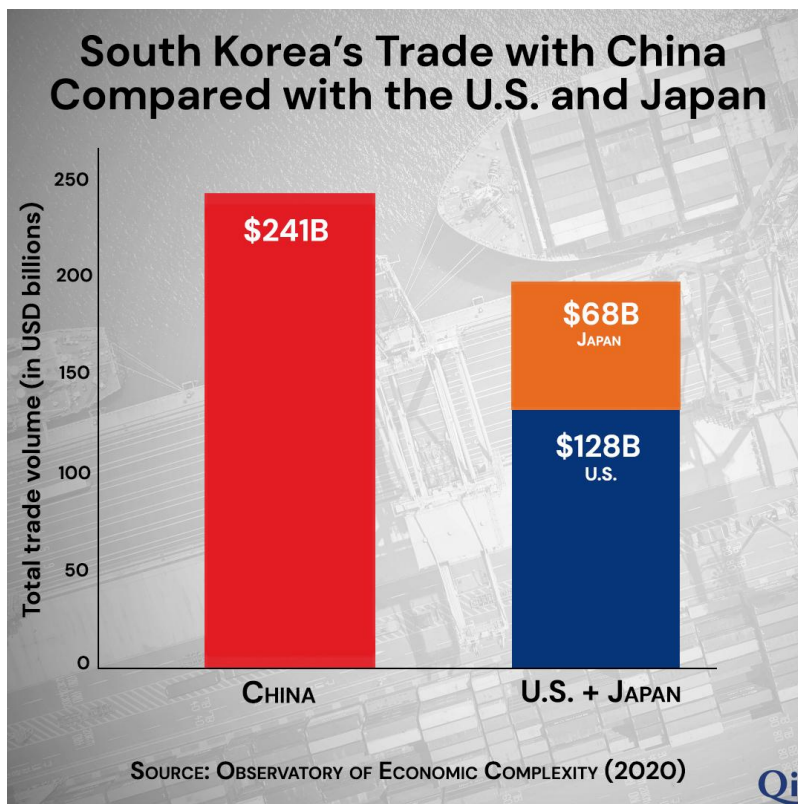
<sup>25</sup> Pamuk, Humeyra, and Lewis, Simon. "Japan Diplomat Pulls Out of U.S. News Conference Over Islet Dispute With S.Korea." *US News & World Report*, November 17, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-11-17/us-deputy-secretary-of-state-sherman-says-japan-south-korea-talks-constructive-despite-differences>.

<sup>26</sup> "South Korean delegation faces uphill battle in rebuilding ties with Japan." *Japan Times*, April 24, 2022. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/24/national/politics-diplomacy/south-korea-delegation-kishida/>.

<sup>27</sup> "U.S.-Korea Trade Facts." *Office of the United States Trade Representative*, accessed on March 30, 2022. <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/japan-korea-apec/korea>.

<sup>28</sup> Manyin, *et al.*

China is South Korea's largest trading partner. Over a quarter of South Korea's total trade is with China, totaling more than its trade with the United States and Japan combined.<sup>29</sup> South Korea is highly dependent on China for critical equipment and components. In 2020, China exported \$110 billions worth of goods to South Korea, mainly in areas such as integrated circuits for electrical machinery (\$16.3 billion), broadcasting equipment (\$3.89 billion), and computers (\$3.86 billion).<sup>30</sup> South Korea's reliance on Chinese imports is most acute in the production of semiconductors, large-capacity batteries, and medical equipment, and products that require rare earth minerals.<sup>31</sup>



Thus, South Koreans are concerned that any overt signaling of support for the U.S. in areas such as Taiwan or the Quad (which China sees as a hostile bloc) will result in economic retaliation from Beijing. Such retaliation occurred five years ago, when China

<sup>29</sup> Manyin, Mark, et al. "U.S.-South Korea Relations." *Congressional Research Service*, February 24, 2022. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41481>.

<sup>30</sup> "China/South Korea." *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, accessed on March 29, 2022, at <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/kor?redirect=true>.

<sup>31</sup> Kim, Ba-woo, et al. "한국 산업의 공급망 취약성 및 파급경로 분석." ["Vulnerability Impact Analysis of South Korean Supply Chains."] *Korea Institute of Industrial Economics and Trade*. November 18, 2021. [https://www.kiet.re.kr/kiet\\_web/?sub\\_num=650&state=view&idx=10376](https://www.kiet.re.kr/kiet_web/?sub_num=650&state=view&idx=10376).

responded harshly to Seoul's deployment of THAAD, a Lockheed Martin anti-ballistic missile defense system, against North Korean missiles. Beijing's de facto sanctions wreaked havoc on South Korea's tourism industry and on major South Korean corporations such as Lotte and Hyundai Motors, totaling \$7.5 billion in losses to the nation.

## Divided government in Seoul

The recent South Korean presidential election was the closest in the country's history.<sup>32</sup> President-elect Yoon won by 0.73 percentage points over his rival Lee Jae-myung – a wafer-thin majority. In his concession speech noting the closeness of the vote, Lee asked Yoon “to lead the country over the divide and conflict and open an era of unity and harmony.”<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, President Yoon will face an opposition-dominated legislature. The National Assembly is controlled by the now-opposition Democratic Party, which holds 172 out of 300 seats. President Yoon's party, People Power Party, holds 110 seats. The Democratic Party can pass virtually every bill except constitutional amendments. The next legislature election is in April 2024, which means President Yoon faces a significant period of divided government.

The South Korean National Assembly has traditionally played a secondary role to the executive branch when it comes to foreign policy. Yet because some of these issues, such as assisting Taiwan in a cross-strait crisis or participating in the military activities of the Quad states (such as the Malabar exercise, though this is not officially under the rubric of the Quad<sup>34</sup>), increase the chances of South Korea getting dragged into war, the South Korean public is likely to demand that the National Assembly take a more active role in shaping these discussions.

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<sup>32</sup> “李·尹 초접전 끝 25만표차 승부 ... 역대 최소 표차 갱신.” [“The match by 250,000 votes at the end of the close match between Lee and Yoon ... Renewal of the smallest margin in history.”] *Newsis*, March 10, 2022. [https://newsis.com/view/?id=NISX20220310\\_0001787848&cID=10301&pID=10300](https://newsis.com/view/?id=NISX20220310_0001787848&cID=10301&pID=10300). For the election result by party, see *KBS*, March 9, 2022. [https://news.kbs.co.kr/special/election2022/president/vote\\_counting.html](https://news.kbs.co.kr/special/election2022/president/vote_counting.html).

<sup>33</sup> Choe, Sang-Hun. “Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korean Conservative Leader, Wins Presidency.” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/world/asia/south-korea-election-yoon-suk-yeol.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Shidore, Sarang. “The Quad's Perils Outweigh its Promises.” *Responsible Statecraft*, September 27, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/27/does-the-quads-perils-outweigh-its-promises/>.

Similar to the U.S. Congress, the South Korean National Assembly wields a wide range of powers as a check against the executive branch.<sup>35</sup> For example, Article 61 of the South Korean Constitution authorizes the National Assembly to investigate government offices and subpoena government officials. It can also delay implementation of foreign policy or reveal information to shape public attitudes on matters. It could use its budget-setting authority over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to demand clarification on foreign policy. The National Assembly can also ratify treaties made by the executive branch in areas such as aid, national security, trade, war, or troop deployments. The National Assembly may choose to leverage these forms of statecraft to force a debate on China policy, especially if the public demands more transparency, as has been the case in the United States.<sup>36</sup>

## Elite divisions on China containment

South Korean political elites are deeply divided on China. The clearest opposition to containing China comes from progressives who held sway in the Moon Jae-in government, and who currently dominate the South Korean Parliament. For example, under the Moon government, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong opposed China containment at a Council on Foreign Relations interview with Fareed Zakaria:

“We hope to see more stable relations between China and the United States because, from our perspective, both countries are very important. ... [Choosing between China and the United States is] not a choice we ... will be forced to make.”<sup>37</sup>

Chung’s predecessor Kang Kyung-hwa was similarly skeptical about the possibility of joining the Quad:

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<sup>35</sup> *Constitution of Republic of Korea Article 60*. <https://www.law.go.kr/lsEflInfoP.do?lsiSeq=61603#J42:0>.

<sup>36</sup> “Coalition of Organizations Call on Pelosi to Allow Debate on China Bill.” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 1, 2021. <https://quincyinst.org/press/coalition-of-organizations-call-on-pelosi-to-allow-debate-on-china-bill/>; “65+ Orgs: Cold War with China is a Dangerous and Self-Defeating Strategy.” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, May 17, 2021. <https://quincyinst.org/press/65-orgs-cold-war-with-china-is-a-dangerous-and-self-defeating-strategy/>.

<sup>37</sup> “A Conversation With Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong of the Republic of Korea.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 22, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-foreign-minister-chung-eui-yong-republic-korea>.

“We don't think anything that automatically shuts out, and is exclusive of, the interests of others is a good idea.”<sup>38</sup>

But skepticism of participating in a new cold war with China also is prevalent among some senior conservatives or center-right figures. As Kim Sung-hwan, foreign minister in the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration, noted:

“Both the U.S.–ROK alliance and the China–ROK strategic cooperative partnership must move along together under any administration. We must be able to work with both countries by putting national interests as the top priority.”<sup>39</sup>

Jaewoo Choo, a foreign policy adviser of the center-right presidential candidate Ahn Cheol-soo in the recent election, also expressed support for strong ties with both China and the United States:

“South Korea's diplomacy is at a watershed in the era of U.S.-China strategic competition. We need to formulate a strategy taking both sides into account and respond to them with a flexible mind. It will be worrisome if the Yoon administration unilaterally prioritizes U.S.–ROK cooperation and disregards ROK–China relations. ... Taking a clear anti-China path will be a huge blow to our country. The degree of damage will not be something that can just be managed with U.S.–ROK cooperation.”<sup>40</sup>

Public opinion on China also is divided or ambivalent. Anti–China sentiments have intensified among South Koreans since 2017 when Beijing engaged in economic retaliation in response to the THAAD deployment, and in recent months due to a perceived slight to South Korea at the Beijing Winter Olympics.<sup>41</sup> However, while there is

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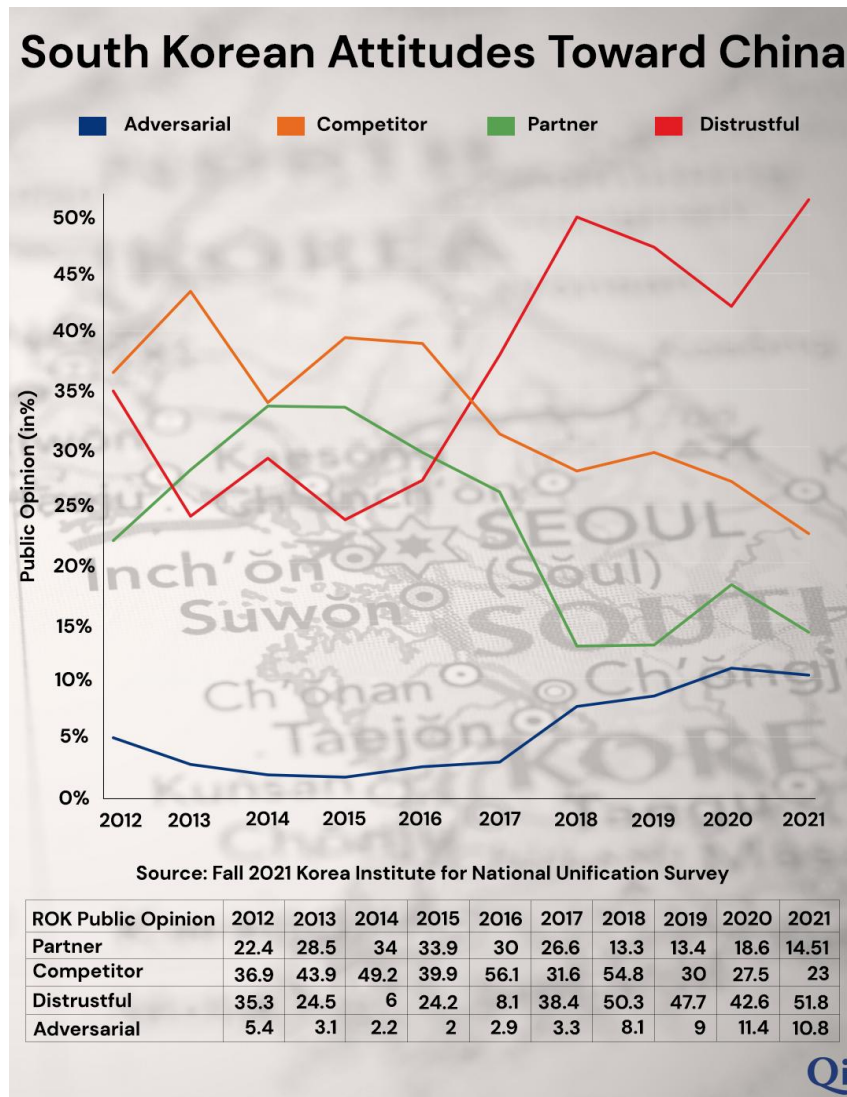
<sup>38</sup> Kim, Seung-yeon. “FM reacts negatively about joining U.S.-led ‘Quad’ alliance.” *Yonhap*, September 25, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200925008900325>.

<sup>39</sup> Song, Young-chan. “김성환 ‘美·中 갈등 상황에서 경제·외교 같이 가야 ... 외교통상부 부활을’” [“Kim Sung-hwan: ‘Economy and Diplomacy Should Move Along Together in the Face of U.S.-China Rivalry.’”] *Hankuk Kyungje*, November 15, 2021. <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/2021111503521>.

<sup>40</sup> Seo, Young-ji. “안철수 외교멘토 ‘중국을 적으로 만들 때 아니다’ 인수위에 ‘쓴소리’” [“Ahn Cheol-soo's Foreign Policy Advisor Criticizes the Presidential Transition Committee: ‘It's Not Time to Antagonize China’”]. *Hankyoreh*, March 21, 2022. [https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics\\_general/1035583.html](https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/1035583.html).

<sup>41</sup> Kim, Min Joo, and Kuo, Lily. “Olympics inflame deep rift between China and South Korea.” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2022/02/18/olympics-china-south-korea/>. Also see Kine, Phelim. “South Korea's ‘maverick’ new president rides tough-on-China platform to victory.” *POLITICO*,

high distrust toward China, nearly 90 percent of South Koreans do not see China as an adversary, according to a 2021 survey.<sup>42</sup>



According to another survey conducted over the past five years by the Korea Institute for National Unification, more South Koreans supported a balanced policy in the context

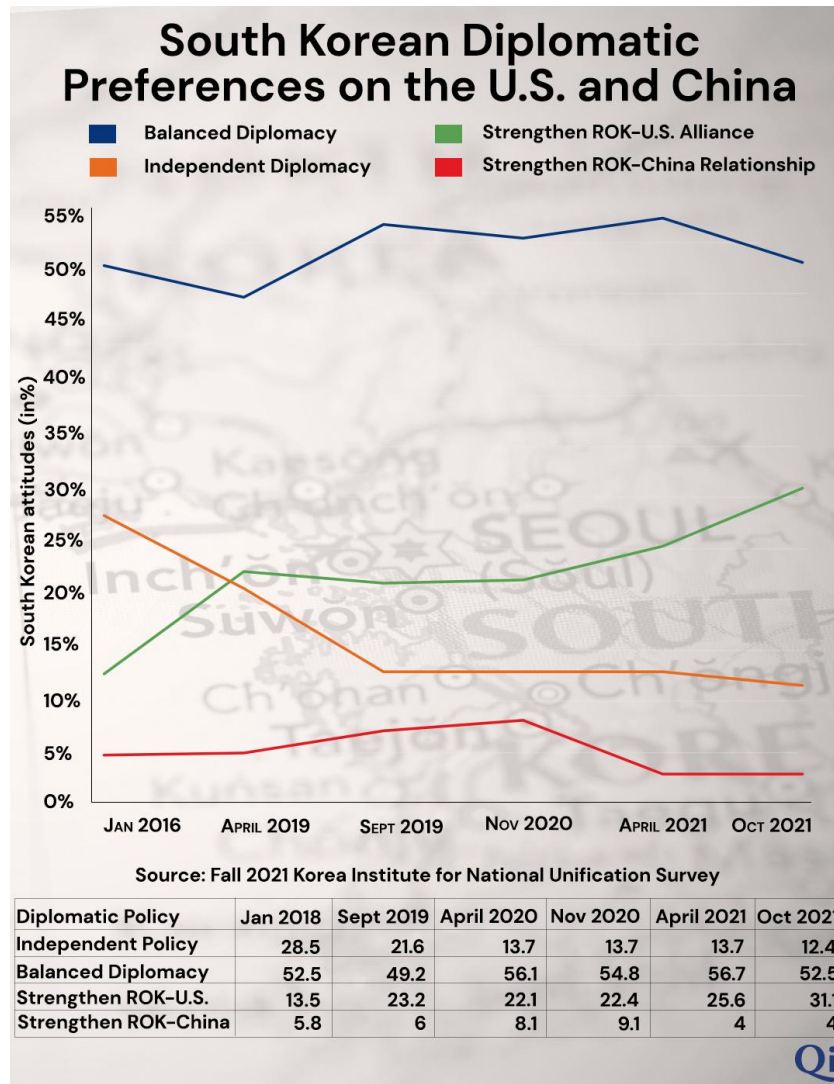
March 9, 2022.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/09/south-koreas-yoon-suk-yeol-new-president-china-00015960>.

<sup>42</sup> “통일과 평화, 시대와 세대 앞에 서다” [“Unification and Peace, In the Face of Era and Generation.”] *Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University*, October 5, 2021., 69.

[https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/%EC%9E%90%EB%A3%8C%EC%A7%912021%ED%86%B5%EC%9D%BC%EC%9D%98%EC%8B%9D%EC%A1%B0%EC%82%AC\\_%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85.pdf](https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/%EC%9E%90%EB%A3%8C%EC%A7%912021%ED%86%B5%EC%9D%BC%EC%9D%98%EC%8B%9D%EC%A1%B0%EC%82%AC_%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85.pdf).

of U.S.–China rivalry compared to leaning heavily toward the U.S. or heavily toward China, as shown below.<sup>43</sup>



All this indicates that South Koreans, while not necessarily friendly toward China, are opposed to or reluctant to adopt a containment strategy against Beijing in concert with the United States.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, Sangsin, Min, Tae-eun, Yoon, Kwang-il, and Koo, Bon-sang. "US-China Conflict & South Korean Public Opinion." *KINU Unification Survey 2021*. 42. <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/fde761e0-a57d-4a4f-aaf7-08d536296eaa>.



## Risks to the United States

The core risk to the United States in pushing South Korea into containing China when its elites are so divided (and additionally large sections of its population are ambivalent or opposed) is that such a move risks blowback in Seoul with negative consequences for U.S. influence in the region. The United States often manages to pull allies into its strategies of containment or primacy even when a large section of the citizenry in these states are opposed – the Middle East being a good example. However, trying to push outcomes in a situation of divided elites in a robust democracy can have major consequences for the ally's orientation and the overall efficacy of the alliance. For example, post-Marcos Philippines ended the U.S. military presence in the country with a democratically elected Filipino legislature ordering the closure of the huge Subic Bay naval base.<sup>44</sup>

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These risks could manifest themselves in a top-down or bottom-up manner. They follow from the constraints detailed previously, including elite and public divisions and potential for protests and demonstrations over issues such as THAAD. Ultimately, these factors could significantly impinge upon the health of the U.S.–South Korea alliance and result in a less-effective South Korean presence in the region if Seoul is pushed to contain China.

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<sup>44</sup> Sanger, David. "Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay." *The New York Times*, December 28, 1991. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/28/world/philippines-orders-us-to-leave-strategic-navy-base-at-subic-bay.html>.

South Korean presidents serve a single five-year term. This means that a progressive could plausibly be elected in 2027, with another shift in foreign policy. Throughout his term, President Moon's approach toward the U.S. and China was careful and measured. He may not have gone as far as the Biden administration would have liked it to go in terms of confronting perceived and real Chinese threats, but President Moon has maintained good relations with Washington and Beijing. If the incoming Yoon administration takes a more confrontational approach when the public is far from sold on the matter, the next progressive president could easily undertake a sharper reversal of policy beyond President Moon's approach, thus straining the alliance and relations with the United States.

Though President Moon was skeptical of China containment, he nevertheless carefully walked a fine line between U.S. preferences and the need to keep relations with China on an even keel. A top priority of his administration's foreign policy was to end "the era of confrontation and conflict" through diplomacy, in close coordination with Washington.<sup>45</sup> President-elect Yoon reportedly is considering former senior officials from the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration for senior roles when forming his government – many of whom are known for their pro-alliance, pro-Japan policies.<sup>46</sup> However, significant risks remain for the United States in assuming that he will be able to execute a major shift in South Korean foreign policy.

Elite divisions and associated foreign policy reversals in the Japan–South Korea relationship could presage future differences on the nature and purpose of Seoul's alliance with Washington. One example is the South Korea–Japan agreement on "comfort women."<sup>47</sup> The agreement included the announcement of a new foundation funded in part by the Japanese government to support South Korean survivors. Critics of the deal contended that parts of the deal were kept hidden by the Park administration to avoid criticism, while victims were not properly notified before the agreement was

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<sup>45</sup> Moon, Jae-in. "Special Address by President Moon Jae-in to Mark Four Years in Office." *Republic of Korea Cheong Wa Dae*, May 10, 2021. <https://english1.president.go.kr/Briefingspeeches/Speeches/981>.

<sup>46</sup> Kim, Hyo-Jeong. "인수위 외교분과 'MB맨' 전면 배치 ... 귀환 김태호 역할 관심" ["Foreign affairs division of the presidential transition committee features Lee Myung-bak admin officials ... Kim Tae-hyo to return in new role."] *Yonhap News*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220315107051504?input=1179m>.

<sup>47</sup> "Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, December 28, 2015. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page4e\\_000364.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html).

reached. As a result, Park's successor Moon Jae-in scrapped the deal.<sup>48</sup> (President-elect Yoon's nominee for foreign minister, Park Jin, announced that the 2015 agreement is "official" again, causing ire among civic groups that have sought a more consultative process.<sup>49</sup>)

A similar policy reversal occurred in 2012 after major political divisions came to the fore over an intelligence sharing pact – General Security of Military Information Agreement – between South Korea and Japan. This pact was in tune with the U.S. push to forge deeper security ties between its two allies. Kim Tae-hyo, a key adviser to the conservative President Lee Myung-bak and incoming first deputy national security adviser to President Yoon, was forced to resign as a result of the reversal.<sup>50</sup> The pact was ultimately signed in 2016, but South Korea almost pulled out again in 2019. Security ties with the United States are much less controversial in South Korea than those with Japan, but U.S. attempts to push South Korea toward China containment could lead to situations similar to the ones above.

Elite divisions on China containment also are echoed among the wider public. The South Korean people do not trust China, but they do not tend to see it as an adversary either. Containment is an adversarial strategy, and, barring a major faux pas by China, it is unlikely that the broader South Korean public will be aligned with a move that begins to position China as a military adversary in Seoul's grand strategy.

South Korea is a robust democracy with a long history of active civil society and public protests. The country's transition to democracy in the 1980s was largely driven by major protests led by then-opposition leader Kim Young-Sam. In contemporary times, sensitive

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<sup>48</sup> Jung, Min-kyung. "Moon decries 2015 Korea-Japan 'comfort women' deal as flawed." *The Korea Herald*, December 28, 2017. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171228000905>. Also see "S. Korea to shut down 'comfort women' foundation," *Yonhap*, November 21, 2018. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20181121002451315>. For the unofficial translation of the agreement, see "Report on the Review of the Korea-Japan Agreement of December 28, 2015 on the Issue of 'Comfort Women' Victims." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea*, December 17, 2017. [https://www.mofa.go.kr/upload/cntnts/www/result\\_report\\_eng.pdf](https://www.mofa.go.kr/upload/cntnts/www/result_report_eng.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> "South Korea's next top diplomat says 2015 'comfort women' pact with Japan is official." *The Japan Times*, April 22, 2022. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/20/national/comfort-women-agreement/>.

<sup>50</sup> Choe, Sang-Hun. "South Korea Fires Top Presidential Aide Over Pact With Japan." *The New York Times*, July 5, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/world/asia/south-korean-aide-offers-to-resign-over-pact-with-japan.html>.

and divisive foreign policy issues have set off public protests. An example is demonstrations against misdeeds by U.S. Forces Korea personnel.<sup>51</sup>

*Elite divisions on China containment also are echoed among the wider public. The South Korean people do not trust China, but they do not tend to see it as an adversary either.*

Such a pushback may also be local. For instance, the question of the additional deployment of THAAD batteries is particularly sensitive to residents of Seongju county in North Gyeongsang Province, where THAAD is stored. This issue drew fresh scrutiny during the third presidential debate when Yoon Suk-yeol stated his support for deploying additional THAAD batteries in South Korea, even naming potential sites (Gangwon, Chungcheong, and Gyeongsang provinces).<sup>52</sup> Local residents, however, were angry at the lack of consultation with local residents before naming the potential sites and concerned about the threat of a preemptive strike in case of a conflict with Pyongyang or Beijing.<sup>53</sup> According to a resident at Soseong-ri, their safety is on the line: “In case of a conflict between the U.S. and North Korea, or between the U.S. and China, this place will be the one of the first targets of attack. This village could become the front line overnight.”<sup>54</sup> Absent a more open and consultative process, opposition to THAAD will likely continue, especially if President Yoon pushes through with the deployment over the heads of local public opinion.

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<sup>51</sup> In late 2002, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans took to the streets in Seoul to protest the death of two Korean schoolgirls in a tragic accident by two American soldiers in a military exercise. For details about this incident as well as the origins of South Korean anti-Americanism from the perspective of a U.S. diplomat's perspective, see Straub, David. *Anti-Americanism in Democratizing South Korea*. Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> “이재명·심상정, ‘사드 추가 배치’ 尹에 집중 포화” [“Lee Jae-myung and Sim Sang-jung bring Yoon under fire on THAAD deployment.”] *YTN*, February 3, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaAdzpO\\_AK4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaAdzpO_AK4).

<sup>53</sup> Lee, Jung-ha. “윤석열 ‘사드 추가배치’ 언급한 지역, 일제히 반발.” [“Regions that Yoon Suk-yeol mentioned for ‘additional deployment of THAAD’ protest against it.”] *Hankyoreh*, February 6, 2022. [https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/area/area\\_general/1029905.html](https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/area/area_general/1029905.html).

<sup>54</sup> Kuhn, Anthony. “A South Korean village is protesting U.S. plans for THAAD missile defense upgrades.” *NPR*, January 8, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/08/1070512969/us-missile-defense-thaad-south-korea-north-korea-china>.

## Conclusion

U.S. national interests in South Korea include maintaining the health of the U.S. alliance with Seoul to stabilize the Korean Peninsula and enhancing American influence and economic opportunities in South Korea. These are best served not through helping engender a new cold war with China, but by building more inclusive structures that rein in such tensions, while also maintaining preferred partnerships and strong American influence in the region.

As the U.S. rushes toward a provocative and wrong-headed containment strategy on China, Washington should avoid pushing South Korea to choose between the two great powers, thereby minimizing the risk of a potential blowback that can hurt U.S. interests. American policymakers should recognize that South Korean elites too are driven more by policies that advance their national interests rather than by taking sides in a new cold war. This means that the U.S.–South Korea alliance ought to be viewed as aimed not at containing China, but at its traditional goals of stability on the Korean Peninsula and aiding American trade and investment, thereby retaining major U.S. influence in the region.<sup>55</sup>

There may, however, be scope for South Korea to join broader U.S.-led initiatives in Asia that are non-military and positive-sum in nature. A retooled Quad could fit this bill. The grouping avows that it focuses on non-traditional security issues such as climate change, pandemics, and infrastructure. However, its shadow Malabar exercise raises concern that the Quad is a proto-alliance that will be pushed toward an overt military role if U.S.–China tensions worsen.

Though President-elect Yoon has most recently indicated that South Korea will associate with the Quad,<sup>56</sup> the United States would be wise to tread carefully on South Korea's membership into a grouping that has all the trappings of a proto-bloc. Even

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<sup>55</sup> Lee, Jessica. "The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Toward a Relationship of Equals." *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, December 4, 2019.

<https://quincyinst.org/2019/12/04/the-u-s-south-korea-alliance-toward-a-relationship-of-equals/>.

<sup>56</sup> Jo, He-rim. "U.S. agrees to upgrade strategic alliance with Korea: Yoon's delegation." *The Korea Herald*, April 5, 2022. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220405000699>.

conservatives will face major challenges in satisfying many U.S. demands when it comes to China because of domestic economic and political costs. Issues such as joining or even associating deeply with the Quad will be controversial. South Korean association with the Quad may be best done by repurposing the Quad's agenda, making it truly inclusive (with outreach to ASEAN and China), and demilitarizing its activities.<sup>57</sup>

The United States ought also to take advantage of South Korean ties to China to explore avenues of cooperation with Beijing. Such trilateral cooperation has a history in the Six-Party talks on North Korea, but in contemporary times can also include positive-sum activities such as climate action and pandemics.<sup>58</sup>

To conclude, U.S. policymakers should:

- Avoid pressuring South Korea to join its China-containment strategy,
- Refrain from including Seoul in emerging, non-inclusive, bloc-like structures of U.S. allies in Asia,
- Consider pulling back on its intended new THAAD deployments until a much greater consensus is reached within South Korea on the issue,
- Encourage South Korea's role as a bridge in U.S.–China disputes, possibly by including both South Korea and China in non-traditional security activities of the Quad such as infrastructure and climate change, and
- More generally, demilitarize the Quad and open it up to wider participation for solving common challenges and strengthening the influence of U.S. partners in Asia, rather than see it as a vehicle for containing China.

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<sup>57</sup> Shidore, Sarang. "The Quad's Perils Outweigh its Promises." *Responsible Statecraft*, September 27, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/27/does-the-quads-perils-outweigh-its-promises/>.

<sup>58</sup> Shidore, Sarang. "The Quad should embrace climate action as its core mission." *Inkstick Media*, May 21, 2021. <https://inkstickmedia.com/the-quad-should-embrace-climate-action-as-its-core-mission/>.

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