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South Korea: Background and U.S. Relations

Overview

South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea, or ROK) is one of the United States' most important strategic and economic partners in Asia. The U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, signed in 1953 at the end of the Korean War, commits the United States to help South Korea defend itself, particularly from North Korea (officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK). Approximately 28,500 U.S. troops are based in the ROK. The economic relationship is bolstered by the U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), implemented in 2012. In 2022, South Korea was the United States' seventh-largest trading partner (goods and services trade combined), and the United States was South Korea's second-largest trading partner, behind the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China). Over the past decade, congressional interest in U.S.-ROK relations often has focused on U.S.-ROK cooperation over North Korea, Indo-Pacific policies, the U.S.-ROK alliance, and U.S.-South Korea trade and investment flows.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, in office since May 2022, is seeking to transform South Korea into a "global pivotal state" by raising its profile beyond the Korean Peninsula and becoming a more active partner in the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. Yoon issued South Korea's first-ever Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022. President Joseph Biden and Yoon have capitalized on greater U.S.-ROK strategic alignment by forging closer cooperation on North Korea policy through military exercises and expanding trilateral cooperation with Japan. They also have made efforts to integrate South Korean companies with U.S. efforts to promote technological development and supply chain resiliency. South Korea is one of 14 negotiating partners in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) initiative, a proposed new trade and economic arrangement. Despite the growing alignment, South Korea's approach to China is less confrontational than the United States', and U.S.-ROK economic friction had increased due to South Korean complaints about the electronic vehicle (EV) provisions in P.L. 117-169, known as the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA). On April 26, 2023, Biden is scheduled to host Yoon Suk-yeol for a State Visit, including a state dinner, to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Yoon has been invited to address a Joint Meeting of Congress on April 27.

North Korea Policy Coordination

Historically, North Korea has been the dominant strategic concern in the U.S.-ROK relationship. Whereas the previous ROK government emphasized diplomacy with North Korea, Yoon and Biden have emphasized deterrence. They have reactivated high-level consultations on extended deterrence under the U.S. nuclear umbrella and expanded the scope and scale of combined military exercises

(including with Japan), which President Donald Trump and Yoon's predecessor had curtailed. The United States has increased deployments of strategic assets—such as stealth fighter jets—to South Korea, introduced new unilateral sanctions designations on North Korea, and proposed new DPRK sanctions measures in the United Nations. (China and Russia vetoed the attempt.)

Alongside these steps, the two allies have offered Pyongyang unconditional humanitarian assistance, and Yoon has pledged to provide large-scale economic assistance if North Korea "embarks on a genuine and substantive process for denuclearization." Biden Administration officials say they have reached out to North Korea, offering to meet "without preconditions." Since the collapse of Trump's meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in 2019, however, Pyongyang largely has ignored U.S. and South Korean outreach. If negotiations restart, the Administration appears to envision offering some sanctions relief in exchange for steps toward denuclearization.

Since the start of 2022, North Korea has test-launched more than 60 missiles, including multiple tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), which are capable of delivering nuclear warheads, and has boosted relations with Russia and China. Satellite imagery publicized in 2022 appeared to indicate repairs and enhancements at North Korea's nuclear weapons test site, raising concerns that it will conduct its seventh nuclear weapons test, which would be the first since September 2017. In 2022, Kim pledged to "exponentially increase" North Korea's nuclear weapons stockpile, said he will "never" denuclearize, and promulgated a new law expanding the conditions under which North Korea would use nuclear weapons to include non-nuclear attacks and situations that threaten the regime's survival. Pyongyang continues to evade sanctions and conduct illicit activities to raise funds.

U.S.-South Korea Security Issues

The Biden Administration has worked to repair the alliance, which had been strained under Trump, prompting the 115th and 116th Congresses to impose conditions (via the National Defense Authorization Acts) on the President's power to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea. In 2021, the Biden Administration concluded a cost-sharing negotiation with South Korea that boosted South Korea's contribution to alliance costs by 13.9%. The ROK traditionally has paid for about 50% (over \$800 million annually) of the total non-personnel costs of the U.S. military presence, according to congressional testimony by U.S. military officials.

Washington and Seoul have been adapting the alliance to recognize South Korea's increased military capabilities and desire for greater autonomy. Since 2006, they have been preparing to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON)

to a binational command led by an ROK general with a U.S. deputy. Under the existing arrangement, South Korean forces would be under a binational command led by a U.S. general in the event of war. The two sides have established conditions and benchmarks to demonstrate that the ROK can assume wartime OPCON, including improved ROK capabilities to lead combined forces and counter DPRK nuclear and missile threats, and a security environment on the Peninsula conducive to a transfer.

U.S. forces in the ROK also have consolidated their presence, in part to return land to South Korea. South Korea has paid \$9.7 billion—about 94% of total costs—to construct new facilities such as Camp Humphreys, the largest overseas U.S. base. In 2021, the allies terminated a 1979 agreement that limited the range of ROK ballistic missiles to 800 kilometers (497 miles).

Reaction to Russia's War in Ukraine

Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, South Korea has imposed sanctions against Russia and offered over \$200 million in humanitarian aid and nonlethal equipment to Ukraine. Yoon also joined a 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, a first for an ROK leader. Poland has signed contracts to purchase over \$3 billion in South Korean arms to replace equipment sent to assist Ukraine. According to press reports, the 2023 leak of classified U.S. Defense Department documents may include intelligence regarding internal South Korean government deliberations about possibly providing material assistance to Ukraine. ROK officials reportedly have said some of the documents were fabricated.

South Korea's Regional Relations

China is South Korea's largest trading partner and second-largest destination for foreign direct investment (FDI). In the past, Beijing has imposed retaliatory economic measures on South Korean companies for Seoul's foreign policy choices. PRC support or opposition could be decisive in shaping the outcome of South Korea's DPRK policies. Opinion polls show strong negative South Korean attitudes toward China. Even as Yoon often has shown caution in his relations with China, he has pushed back against China's efforts to curtail the ROK's expansion of its military posture and its security cooperation with the United States and Japan. He also has indicated interest in participating in the vaccine, climate change, and emerging technology working groups established by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or "Quad"), a group comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States that PRC officials have criticized as being part of a U.S.-led "anti-China alliance."

ROK-Japan relations are perennially fraught because of sensitive legacy issues from Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. In 2018 and 2019, a series of actions and retaliatory countermeasures by both governments involving trade, security, and history-related controversies caused South Korea-Japan relations to plummet, eroding U.S.-ROK-Japan policy coordination. With encouragement from the Biden Administration, Tokyo and Seoul took steps to reverse this trend in 2022 and 2023, including three bilateral heads-of-state meetings (the first since 2019), multiple ROK-Japan-U.S. summits, expanded

trilateral military exercises, and an agreement to share data on DPRK missiles in real time. In March 2023, the Yoon government removed a major source of friction by arranging for an ROK foundation to compensate South Koreans forced to work by Japanese companies during the colonial period, instead of insisting the companies pay the victims, as the ROK Supreme Court had ruled. Although relations have improved, distrust over historical issues remains a source of tension between the two U.S. allies.

U.S.-South Korea Economic Relations

U.S. goods and services exports to South Korea totaled \$95.5 billion in 2022, and imports totaled \$132.0 billion. Autos and parts accounted for one-quarter of U.S. imports (\$33.6 billion). In 2021, the stock of South Korean FDI in the United States was \$72.5 billion, up 14.9% from 2020, and U.S. FDI to South Korea was \$38.1 billion. Over 80,000 workers in the United States were employed by ROK multinational firms in 2020. In 2022, ROK companies pledged \$25 billion in new investment in key industries including EVs, semiconductors, and biotechnology.

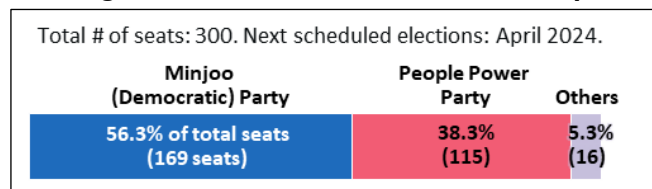
The KORUS FTA has been the centerpiece of U.S.-South Korea trade and investment relations since its entry into force in 2012. Most U.S. business groups support the agreement, highlighting market access improvements in South Korea and a more robust mechanism for dispute resolution. The Trump Administration negotiated limited modifications to the KORUS FTA, which took effect in 2019, to address some implementation concerns. South Korea's participation in the IPEF initiative may provide an opportunity to further enhance economic ties, including on digital trade issues, a priority area for both countries.

South Korea had raised concerns over the IRA's assembly and sourcing requirements, and engaged in bilateral discussions with the Biden Administration as the Treasury Department wrote implementing rules. The Yoon government reacted positively to the new rules published on March 31, 2023. Trump-era import restrictions on ROK steel, aluminum, solar, and other products, remain in effect.

South Korean Politics

Yoon, who won the 2022 election by a margin of less than 1%, is contending with a National Assembly firmly controlled by the opposition Minjoo Party (see **Figure 1**) and with public approval ratings generally below 40%.

Figure 1. South Korea's National Assembly



Source: National Assembly website, accessed April 5, 2023.

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