

2024 NATO SUMMIT

The ROK & NATO: Higher Expectations, Starker Choices

By [Clint Work](#) [Director, Academic Affairs at the Korea Economic Institute of America]

July 21, 2024

[#IP4](#) [#NATO](#)

- ▶ *President Yoon's attendance at the 75th NATO Summit highlighted 1) efforts to deepen links between Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security due to North Korea-Russia ties and growing global perceptions of China as a systemic challenge; 2) increased expectations on Seoul to be a security provider beyond the Korean Peninsula; and 3) growing political uncertainty and hyper partisanship in South Korea and the United States.*
- ▶ *Current trends indicate the threats and challenges posed by Russia and China (and North Korea) will become increasingly intertwined and conflated both in perception and reality.*
- ▶ *In this context, Seoul will face a combination of increasing expectations from the United States to make more overt choices than it is traditionally comfortable making alongside a narrowing strategic space within which to make them.*

Higher Expectations, Starker Choices

President Yoon Suk Yeol's attendance at the 75th NATO Summit amplified several existing and interconnected developments. For one, it highlighted an effort to deepen linkages between Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security due to burgeoning North Korea-Russia ties and growing global perceptions of China as a systemic challenger to global security. Additionally, the trip highlighted increasing expectations for Seoul to enhance its role as a security provider beyond the Korean Peninsula, expectations held by outside observers and generated by the Yoon administration's own expansive foreign policy discourse on being a [Global Pivotal State](#). Finally, Yoon's visit came at a time of considerable political uncertainty and hyper partisanship in South Korea and the United States. These several developments combine to severely complicate and potentially narrow Seoul's strategic choices.

The Immediate Linkage: North Korea-Russia Ties

From South Korea's perspective, tighter North Korea-Russia ties are the most immediate link between Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security; a link that Yoon, like his Japanese counterpart Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, has begun referring to as [inseparable](#). Although

Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin's recent signing of the [Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) has heightened concerns around the linkage, it represents the culmination of a years-long process.

Following the failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit and its accelerated pursuit of self-sufficiency during the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea abjured engagement with Seoul and Washington and [exploited opportunities](#) borne of hardening geopolitical fault lines. Russia was receptive. Pyongyang and Moscow increasingly mirrored one another's diplomatic rhetoric about their respective core security concerns and the need to oppose the US-led international order. Russia (and China) simultaneously [blocked](#) new UN sanctions against North Korea during its [unprecedented](#) missile testing campaign while calling for the [lifting](#) – and enabling evasion – of existing ones.

Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine amplified the trend. North Korea embraced Putin's revanchist logic regarding Ukraine and capitalized on Russia's need for munitions. Kim has supplied [large amounts of artillery and rockets](#) in exchange for an even warmer and more formal diplomatic embrace from Putin; [refined petroleum](#) beyond what is permitted by sanctions; [possible assistance](#) to access international financial networks; and potentially higher-end support for various aspects of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Further, Moscow, while openly violating the sanctions it had previously approved, [vetoed renewal](#) of the UN Panel of Experts, ending the international community's most institutionalized – even if flawed – mechanism for monitoring Pyongyang's evasive practices.

In this context, Seoul, too, broadened its aperture. It joined like-minded countries in [condemning](#) Russia's invasion and, under President Moon Jae-in, [joined the international sanctions](#) effort against Moscow. Under Yoon, it has implemented additional unilateral sanctions against Moscow while [providing Kyiv](#) with economic, humanitarian, and non-lethal military assistance. Furthermore, by the end of 2023, Seoul had indirectly supplied more artillery to Ukraine – lending over 300,000 155-millimeter (mm) shells to the United States which then transferred them to the Ukrainians – [than all European countries combined](#). Such indirect, lethal support gave Seoul plausible deniability to prevent further erosion in relations with Russia while formally adhering to its policy to never export weapons to countries in conflict; based upon domestic South Korean [legislation](#) that [circumscribes](#) such assistance. Despite such efforts, however, Seoul continues to face consistent public calls alongside private prodding from Washington to provide more open, lethal support to Kyiv.

To Be or Not To Be More Pivotal?

While focused on the bedrock issues of deterrence and defense, the 75th [NATO Summit](#) also revolved around institutionalizing support for Ukraine and strengthening NATO's partnerships, including with its Indo-Pacific partners. NATO [highlighted](#) the historic achievement that 23 of 32 member states have met the target of investing 2 percent of GDP in their own defense. Nonetheless, such a threshold [does not meet](#) Europe's current or future

security and defense needs, and most European member states remain woefully unable to supply Kyiv with the military and defense industrial support it needs. The United States and other partners, like South Korea, remain essential.

In this context, Seoul faces complex calculations regarding whether to maintain its level of support for Kyiv or shift to a more overt role. In the lead-up to the summit, South Korean officials [stated](#) they could reconsider their stance on lethal aid. And President Yoon himself [said](#) Moscow must decide which of the two Koreas is more important for its interests and that Seoul's provision of lethal munitions to Ukraine would hinge on Russia's own actions and its level and substance of military cooperation with North Korea. Yet South Korean officials have [declined](#) to offer specifics about what they might provide, saying it would weaken their leverage over North Korea and Russia. However, one might legitimately ask: what leverage does Seoul currently have?

On the one hand, both Pyongyang and Moscow have repeatedly bucked Seoul's previous warnings. A critical take is that Yoon and his administration have refrained from further stepping up for fear of causing North Korea or Russia to do the very things *they are already doing*. In this context, the argument could be made that the only way to gain leverage over the two authoritarian actors would be to force the issue. [Putin's threats](#) aside, experts [question](#) how far Russia would be willing to go in supporting North Korea, given its own reservations regarding what Pyongyang might do with Russian technology and know-how. Beijing, too, likely would not welcome Moscow going full speed ahead in support of North Korea's high-end capabilities or behavior that threatens significant instability on the Korean Peninsula, something the South Korean foreign minister [recently](#) observed. By choosing to up the ante, Seoul might force these authoritarian leaders to confront the limits of their partnerships. Furthermore, it bears acknowledgement that North Korea will continue its pursuit of high-end nuclear and missile capabilities, with or without Russian support. And, given its track record, it will likely achieve its goals.

On the other hand, by adhering to its current stance, Seoul may avoid pushing Moscow to provide high-end support for North Korea's WMD program and thus exacerbate an already degrading security environment on the peninsula. If Seoul began to openly provide lethal assistance directly to Ukraine, either in the form of additional 155-mm artillery or [much larger amounts of 105-mm shells](#), it would bolster Ukraine's battlefield position (to which artillery is critical), prolong the conflict, and likely force Russia to seek greater assistance from North Korea. Pyongyang surely would press Moscow to fulfill more of the items on its wish list, and, depending on the level of Russia's need and Putin's ire toward Seoul, it [might be willing](#) to provide them.

Furthermore, the progressive opposition in Seoul already [blames Yoon](#) for worsening security conditions on the peninsula and [helping to cause](#) closer North Korea-Russia ties. Although such politically motivated arguments myopically discount the obvious fact that Russia's war of aggression helped create the conditions, such arguments would gain steam if the Yoon administration were to more openly involve itself in Ukraine and exacerbate existing geopolitical tensions. Additionally, given the increasingly nationalist tenor of the times, the

Korean public may justifiably wonder why it should bear a larger burden and simultaneously undermine its own security environment for a group of European countries seemingly unwilling to step up in their own neighborhood.

Still, NATO officials have consistently sought more assistance from South Korea. During his visit to Seoul in January 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg thanked South Korea for its military and economic support but highlighted that other states that previously restricted lethal exports to countries in conflict had changed their policy following Russia's invasion. Additionally, Australia, its fellow Indo-Pacific partner, has openly sent lethal assistance to Kyiv. Fair or not, some observers view Seoul's position as trying to have its cake and eat it too: selling large amounts of munitions and military hardware to European partners – undoubtedly bolstering the latter's defense capabilities and South Korean defense manufacturers' bottom lines – while allowing Seoul to evade a more explicit diplomatic stance.

If it were to alter its position and openly supply arms to Ukraine, the Yoon administration would have to craft a clear and compelling justification for the policy shift given some of the constraints in South Korean domestic laws. Nevertheless, while existing domestic legislation places certain guardrails on the provision of lethal assistance, a related enforcement decree provides South Korean policymakers with a degree of interpretive latitude. In other words, it is not the fundamental barrier it is sometimes made out to be. This is likely why the political opposition wants to revise the legislation to require the National Assembly's approval before South Korea can supply lethal aid. Again, that same opposition would surely contest Yoon's policy shift and potentially even try to further politicize the issue by trying to rewrite the existing laws, forcing Yoon to exercise yet another veto. Given Yoon's very low approval ratings and the fact that foreign policy is one of the few areas where he retains a degree of flexibility, the opposition would be eager to challenge him in that space.

However, if the Yoon administration did make a decided shift to supplying direct lethal assistance to Ukraine, it would buy significant goodwill in Europe and continue to accrue to the benefit of South Korea's defense industry. If Seoul more forcefully supported Europe, it would enhance a desire to reciprocate if Seoul were ever in need. Moreover, given the shadow of a potential second Trump presidency, such a move might serve as a calculated gamble to set Seoul apart. Trump's rhetoric about NATO member states' (and Seoul's) free riding is well known, and during the NATO summit, Trump openly denigrated European allies for skimping on support to Kyiv while leaving the United States bearing most the burden.

If Seoul were able to show, beyond what it has already indirectly done, that it was one of the larger direct suppliers of assistance to Kyiv, it might further distinguish South Korea from other allies in Trump's mind and thus temper Trump's cost-sharing crusade, at least when it comes to South Korea. Nonetheless, Seoul also must grapple with the fact that Trump wants to curtail US support for Ukraine and try to end the war in Europe. Therefore, Trump might view Seoul's increased assistance to Kyiv negatively if he sees it as prolonging the war.

Abjuring Dichotomies for Gradual Progress

Maybe, though, this all puts too fine a point on the question of whether Seoul should directly supply lethal aid. In truth, a more gradual and less Ukraine-driven approach is both preferred and already underway, building on a range of existing areas of South Korea-NATO cooperation in the areas of [cyber defense](#), [emerging and disruptive technologies](#), [arms control](#), [disarmament and non-proliferation](#), and interoperability.

During the recent summit, for example, Stoltenberg and Yoon [signed an airworthiness agreement](#), the first such agreement between NATO and an Asian country. While Seoul previously signed similar deals with individual NATO member states – the United States, Spain, France, and Poland – the new agreement will streamline mutual recognition and certification processes for domestically manufactured aircraft between South Korea and NATO allies, deepening cooperation and interoperability. Yoon has [also touted](#) an intelligence-sharing agreement with NATO to track North Korean weapons and ammunition spotted in areas not limited to the Korean Peninsula.

Moreover, NATO included South Korea and other Indo-Pacific partners in its [Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge](#). The pledge states NATO will seek “to enhance our defence industrial cooperation through focused dialogue with engaged partners including, among others, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea,” marking [the first instance](#) of NATO naming the IP4 as partners for defense industry cooperation in an official document. South Korea, of course, stands out. Not only are South Korean artillery shells and weapons systems cost-effective and compatible with US and NATO systems, but Seoul also has the industrial capacity to scale up production – a capacity many others desire but do not possess.

It likely behooves Seoul and its NATO partners to cooperate in areas that are already ongoing. Why can't Seoul continue to ramp up artillery production to help fill European stockpiles, which can then find their way to Kyiv? Korean prosperity has bipartisan appeal in Seoul, whereas prodding Seoul to formally shift its policy on lethal aid in a manner that instigates yet another domestic political showdown (which would undoubtedly happen) could ultimately undermine Seoul's future initiative.

The Bigger Picture and Shadow

Notwithstanding the immediacy of tighter North Korea-Russia ties, the most notable linkage between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security is the increasing degree to which NATO's strategic messaging and cooperative efforts with the IP4 emphasize the People's Republic of China (PRC). The 2019 [London Declaration](#) was the first summit-level statement to mention China, but the [NATO 2030](#) agenda, launched in 2020, kicked the trend into new gear. It aimed to make NATO a more global alliance over the coming decade by working more closely with like-minded partners to defend its values and adapt to growing competition and more

unpredictable threats, including [Chinese and Russian challenges](#) to the rules-based international order.

The 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué was the first time NATO characterized China as a systemic challenge, and the 2022 Madrid Summit – marked by the first-ever participation of IP4 leaders in a NATO summit and the adoption of the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept – solidified closer NATO-IP4 cooperation. The Strategic Concept noted that China’s “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values” and that the deepening strategic partnership between China and Russia and “their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests.” The following year, the 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué repeated such language and was the first time all the Indo-Pacific partners were individually listed in a communiqué.

The 2024 [Washington Summit Declaration](#) signaled a new level of discursive escalation, calling China “a decisive enabler of Russia’s war against Ukraine through its so-called ‘no limits’ partnership and its large-scale support for Russia’s defence industrial base.” It further warned Beijing that it “cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation.” Although Stoltenberg repeatedly assures that China is not an adversary, he has declared that NATO has entered a new era of “enduring competition with China.” Unsurprisingly, NATO’s shift in language was met with [strong rebuke](#) from China and [North Korea](#) alongside significant [skepticism](#) by some commentators in Washington.

Despite this steady trend line, a key question remains for the IP4: does extension of NATO's strategic focus to China or Russia’s revisionist invasion of Ukraine represent the more important motivation for engaging in cooperation with NATO? The answer, of course, is that both developments drive their motivations, with variance across each of the Indo-Pacific partners. Of course, prioritization is critical given that each of the IP4 countries faces a different set of risks and vulnerabilities when it comes to addressing China as a strategic challenge versus contesting Russia’s revanchism. Ideally, they would like to preserve a degree of flexibility.

Current trends, however, indicate the threats and challenges posed by Russia and China (and North Korea) will become increasingly intertwined and conflated both in perception and reality. And, in this context, Seoul will face a combination of increasing expectations or even demands – depending on the outcome of the US presidential election – from the United States and others to make more overt choices than it is traditionally comfortable making alongside a narrowing strategic space within which to make them.

Author(s)

Dr. Clint Work is fellow and director of Academic Affairs at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). KEI is registered under the FARA as an agent of the KIEP, a public corporation established by the government of the Republic of Korea. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.