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The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Has Always Depended on Its Managers

There is growing alarm in Seoul, echoed among American experts on Korea, over the state of U.S.-South Korea relations.

By Daniel Sneider

November 16, 2026



U.S. President Jimmy Carter (left) with South Korean President Park Chung-hee, June 1979 | Source: National Security Archive

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There is growing alarm in Seoul, echoed among American experts on Korea, over

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the state of U.S.-South Korea relations. The alliance survived a worse stretch in the 1970s because experienced diplomats on both sides kept the relationship on track. Those people are now in short supply on the American side.

In the economic realm, there is a clear gap over how to select projects that would fulfill South Korea's pledge to invest USD 350 billion in the United States, including the proposed Alaska liquefied natural gas pipeline. Complaints from U.S. investors and lawmakers over Seoul's handling of the Coupang data breach further exacerbate bilateral tensions.

Security ties are equally fraught, with disagreements over the timing of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON), South Korea's plan to build nuclear-powered submarines, and policy coordination on North Korea. Tensions even extend to delays in issuing visas to ruling party legislators.

"Communication between the two countries is not just strained but entirely severed," a recent editorial by the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* stated. South Korean Ambassador to the United States Kang Kyung-wha

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expressed her own frustration over the lack of senior-level dialogue. For the conservative outlet, however, the fault also lies with Seoul. “Despite this situation, it is unclear what efforts this government is making” to improve bilateral relations.

Divergence Across History

Korean national interests have often diverged from American strategic goals. Syngman Rhee, South Korea’s first president, opposed the terms of the armistice that ended the Korean War, consenting only in exchange for the Mutual Defense Treaty.

Relations with Park Chung Hee, who came to power in a military coup in 1961, were even thornier. Park was a fierce Korean nationalist and, according to a close former aide, uncomfortable with Americans. The two countries collided over North Korea policy, economic goals, human rights, and democracy.

The 1970s were perhaps the alliance’s most trying period, in some ways resembling the current moment. As now, South Koreans had developed deep doubts about the durability and reliability of the alliance, fed

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by the Vietnam War and the United States' unilateral decision to withdraw one of its two infantry divisions stationed on the Korean Peninsula.

At the same time, Park faced growing U.S. pressure over his handling of internal politics, spurred by the declaration of martial law in 1972, the revision of the constitution, and the repression of opposition politics.

Fearing U.S. abandonment, Park made two seemingly contradictory decisions. He reached out to North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, who also feared his Chinese backers might sell him out after Beijing's opening to Washington, and the two sides held high-level talks in 1972 that proved short-lived.

Park also began a secret program in 1971 to develop nuclear weapons, clearly aimed at preparing for U.S. retreat from South Korea. The seriousness of this effort was not discovered until late 1974, when a young CIA officer provided proof to a skeptical Washington establishment that South Korea's research had advanced to designing a crude warhead.

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During much of this time, my father, the late American diplomat Richard L. Sneider, served as U.S. ambassador to South Korea. He told *The Wall Street Journal* shortly before his 1978 departure that it was as "arduous a period as any alliance relationship has had in recent history."

In researching this period for a forthcoming book, I was struck by how much the current issues in our alliance, and in our foreign policy more broadly, simply revisit the past. In the spring of 1975, my father sent a top-secret cable to Washington calling for an urgent review of the U.S.-South Korean alliance. Korea was "no longer a client state," he wrote, but was "well on its way to middle power status with ambitions for full self-reliance including its own nuclear potential."

Sneider recommended creating a new partnership, one more akin to the United States' alliances with NATO or Japan. He also pushed for quiet but tough diplomacy to dissuade Park from heading down the nuclear road. That campaign finally succeeded, but not before my father warned Park that the entire security alliance was jeopardized.

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The alliance faced two other major strains during this period. In 1976, North Korean soldiers brutally murdered two American officers in the infamous tree-cutting incident in the demilitarized zone. President Park and Commander of U.S. Forces Korea Joseph Stilwell considered retaliatory measures, some of which could have triggered a much broader conflict. Voices of diplomacy and restraint, including that of my father, prevailed.

That was followed by an even more serious threat to the alliance: the plans of newly elected U.S. President Jimmy Carter to withdraw all American forces from the Korean Peninsula, fueled in part by a passion for human rights. Those plans were opposed throughout the U.S. national security establishment and by Congress, and ultimately largely abandoned.

The perilous state of the alliance reached a peak in 1980 with the Gwangju Uprising against military rule, when hundreds of South Korean civilians were killed by troops deployed—with the alleged acquiescence of the United States.

The Importance of Leadership

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The long-term success of the alliance depends, of course, on shared values and common interests. But it also depends on the skills and commitment of alliance managers, diplomats, military officers, and intelligence officers who work every day to keep channels of communication and understanding open.

The South Korean government has experienced alliance managers, including Director of National Security Wi Sung-lac and Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Hyun, both veteran diplomats. On the American side, however, the Department of State and National Security Council have been stripped of senior hands, with possibly thousands of Foreign Service Officers gone since President Donald Trump returned to office. Privately, and occasionally in public, South Korean officials lament the inability to engage with senior decision-makers in the United States. Amid even greater uncertainty about the future of U.S. policy following the dramatic midterm elections, alliance management has become even more challenging.

In a report card on the bilateral relationship delivered at the conclusion of his tour in Seoul, my father reflected on the failure of

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both the United States and South Korea to recognize the need for change as the alliance moved beyond a patron-client relationship. He argued that the need was to shift from a "big brother" relationship to one of real partnership. He concluded this reflection with words that ring true today.

"Perhaps," Sneider wrote, "the most difficult lesson to learn is the question of style in American diplomacy. Time and time again, hard-nosed American tactics, the failure to consult, the failure to take into account the pride and ego of our allies have delayed achievement of our objectives. The Korea case is not unique. The problem is unfortunately endemic to many of our relations in Asia. Dependence on America and American muscle is all too evident to the Asians, but they resent being reminded of it by heavy-handed pressures, particularly in a period when they are gaining new strength, new confidence and a new sense of nationalism. This may be the ultimate lesson of the Korean experience over recent years."

Daniel C. Sneider is Nonresident Distinguished Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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Why Kim Jong Un's Recent Visit to China Deserves Greater Scrutiny

China's Dandong city has long been a key hub for North Korea's cybercriminal enterprise, and Kim's visit may have had more to do with securing that operational environment than with strengthening bilateral ties with China.

By Benjamin R. Young

November 19, 2026



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visits Dandong City in China's Liaoning Province, October 24, 2026 | Source: North Korean state media

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Five days after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's one-day visit to the Chinese border city of Dandong on October 24, North Korean hackers stole more than USD 6 billion from Binance, the largest crypto heist on record. Kim's trip was intended to commemorate the opening of the New Yalu River Bridge. But Dandong has long been a key hub for North Korea's cybercriminal enterprise, and the visit may have had more to do with securing that operational environment than with strengthening bilateral ties with China. For Washington and Seoul, which are weighing how to respond to the theft while keeping the door open to talks with Pyongyang, that possibility warrants greater scrutiny.

As South Korean Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young said, "The fact that both sides fielded their diplomatic and security teams deserves a close look." Chung has also suggested the trip could relate to preparations for a possible U.S.-North Korea summit, but several features of the visit suggest a broader agenda. First, Kim visited China for only one day and did not meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping. This was the first time that Kim had visited a foreign country without meeting his counterpart.

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Instead, the fourth-highest-ranking leader in the Chinese Communist Party, Wang Huning, met Kim in Dandong. This could suggest that Xi either disapproved of Kim's brief visit or did not think it was important enough to meet. Second, the visit to China came five days before the world's largest-ever crypto heist, in which North Korean hackers stole more than USD 6 billion from Binance. Third, and most critically, Dandong plays a pivotal role in North Korea's illicit finance ecosystem.

Given its proximity to North Korea, Dandong has long been associated with facilitating North Korea's illicit activities. In 2017, the U.S. Department of the Treasury cut the Bank of Dandong off from the U.S. financial system. Despite this sanction, North Korea continues to use Dandong as a key hub for its cybercriminal enterprise. In July 2024, a U.S. federal indictment against North Korean military intelligence operative Rim Jong Hyok revealed that he used an ATM in Dandong near the Sino-Korean Friendship Bridge to withdraw Bitcoin-converted Chinese yuan after a ransomware attack on a Kansas hospital. The U.S. government

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now offers a reward of up to USD 10 million for information on Rim.

More recently, a 2025 Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team report found that a North Korean company linked to the Ministry of Atomic Energy Industry was based in Dandong and facilitated remote IT worker schemes there. A fifteen-person North Korean IT team was also found to have been stationed in Dandong and living in a clothing factory dormitory. More importantly, two North Korean operatives, Kim Chol Min and Kim Ryu Song, were cited as representatives of the Munitions Industry Department's 313 General Bureau in Dandong and Yanji, respectively, and used Chinese accomplices to launder and cash out cryptocurrency.

During his one-day visit to Dandong, Kim Jong Un visited a memorial that paid homage to the Chinese troops who died in the Korean War. He also visited a vehicle factory, Dandong Huanghai Automobile, which was founded during the Korean War. While Kim presumably did not meet any of these North Korean cyber operatives, the opening of the bridge and Kim's visit may signal Dandong's continued importance to North Korea's cybercrime. After the recent

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Binance hack, North Korean operatives likely need to launder and convert these stolen crypto assets into liquid currency. North Korean hackers depend on Chinese accomplices, including money-laundering organizations and over-the-counter traders, to convert crypto into cash. North Koreans have previously laundered stolen funds into legitimate cross-border economic ventures, including businesses based in Dandong, to conceal their origins.

Given the opacity of the Chinese and North Korean systems, there is likely to be no smoking gun linking North Korean cybercrime activities to Kim's recent visit to Dandong. However, North Korea's cyber operations are increasingly an important source of revenue for the regime, and Dandong has long served as a critical node for the Kim family regime's illicit commerce. It is plausible that the North Korean delegation raised the cyber issue with the Chinese side and pushed for assistance, or at least asked the authorities there to turn a blind eye. Given Xi's animosity toward cryptocurrency, this may explain why he did not meet with Kim.

Regardless of Kim's discussions in Dandong, the Binance theft has put the

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issue in front of Washington and Seoul. The United States has called for coordinated international action, and South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is reviewing additional measures, including unilateral cyber sanctions. At the same time, both allies are leaving room for diplomacy, and Pyongyang has warned that the FBI's attribution leaves it "matters to reconsider."

The Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, which the United States and South Korea helped create after Russia killed off the UN Panel of Experts, has documented how North Korea's illicit revenue moves through Dandong. How the allies weigh that record against the pull of renewed diplomacy will go a long way toward deciding whether Dandong stays open for North Korea's business.

Benjamin R. Young is Nonresident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) and Assistant Professor of Intelligence Studies at Fayetteville State University. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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Asian Studies Review

ISSN: 1035-7823 (Print) 1467-8403 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/casr20

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To cite this article: Jae Jeok Park & Ellen Kim (11 Nov 2026): Coalitions of Major Regional States and Strategic Institutional Innovation: A South Korean Perspective, Asian Studies Review, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2026.2757101

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Coalitions of Major Regional States and Strategic Institutional Innovation: A South Korean Perspective

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ABSTRACT

South Korea's foreign policy choices are often constrained by internal and external factors, as well as its security dependence on the United States. Despite this, this article argues that South Korea employs strategic institutional innovation as a key coalition-building strategy to navigate great power competition, enabling it to assert agency, expand its regional and global influence, and, at times, actively shape the evolving rules and norms of the regional order. The article examines how South Korea engages in strategic institutional innovation through global anchoring, institutional layering, institutional nesting, and hybrid alignment. South Korea's policy initiatives and normative and institutional leadership have become increasingly prominent, reflecting both its ambition and potential as an order-shaper, though several constraints remain and may limit its active engagement in strategic institutional innovation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 October 2025
Accepted 24 August 2026

KEYWORDS
South Korea; middle powers; strategic institutional innovation (SII); coalitions of major regional states; Sino–US competition; regional order; alliances; strategic autonomy; Indo–Pacific

Introduction

In 2026, South Korea finds itself in a turbulent external environment. The rise of US–China strategic competition and the outbreak of the Ukraine war have caused tectonic shifts in the regional balance of power in Northeast Asia, marked by China and Russia forming a 'no-limits' partnership in February 2022 and North Korea and Russia formalising their comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2024. North Korea also continues to pose an existential security threat to South Korea, while renewed trilateral cooperation between North Korea, Russia, and China has reignited Cold War-like dynamics on the Korean Peninsula.

Separately, the return of the 'America First' policy under the Trump administration has presented new challenges for South Korea in its alliance with the US. President Trump urged South Korea and other US allies to do more to share the burden of national defence. The 2026 US National Defense Strategy specifically called on South Korea to take 'primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited US support' (US Department of War, 2026) amid a reorientation of US policy priorities towards the Western Hemisphere.

In response to these complex geopolitical environments and new evolving dynamics in its alliance with the US, South Korea has stepped up to enhance its

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national defence and deterrence. Under the Lee Jae Myung administration, South Korea has committed to increasing its defence spending to 3.5 per cent of GDP. As part of efforts to modernise the alliance, Lee also resumed official discussions with his American counterpart about transferring wartime operational control of South Korean forces from the US to the Republic of Korea (ROK).

While South Korea continues to face significant challenges on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, it has also sought to expand its role beyond the subregion, as demonstrated by both the Indo–Pacific Strategy pursued by the Yoon Suk Yeol government and the Lee administration's vision of South Korea as a 'responsible global power'. In this context, this article examines the evolution of South Korea's rise as a major regional power in the Indo–Pacific and the growing self-acceptance of its identity as both a regional and global player. It then illustrates the emergence of its proactive diplomatic strategies through various forms of strategic institutional innovation (SII). In the introduction to this Special Issue, SII is defined as 'the deliberate, and often creative, design, recalibration, and orchestration of institutional frameworks by non-great powers as a form of strategic statecraft' (Lee & Park, 2026). It involves four major mechanisms that represent proactive strategies rather than mere institutional engagement: value-based global anchoring (projecting regional influence onto the global stage by aligning with normative institutions that cut across regional divides), institutional nesting (integrating existing or new frameworks within broader, recognised, and legitimate structures), institutional layering (adding new institutional commitments on top of existing alliances or alignments), and hybrid alignment (engaging across multiple institutional frameworks at the same time, even when these frameworks reflect different ideological or strategic orientations).

This article argues that, despite internal and external constraints, South Korea employs SII to assert its agency, expand its regional and global influence, and, at times, actively shape the evolving rules and norms of the regional and international order – all while avoiding direct backlash from great powers. To substantiate this claim, the article presents cases of anchoring, nesting, layering, and hybrid alignment as key coalition-building mechanisms through which South Korea demonstrates this behaviour. While not all these cases show South Korea's effective leadership or successful outcomes, this research finds that Korean policy activism influences the processes of regional order-building and maintenance, especially in the normative and institutional dimensions.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section introduces and defines the concept of 'major regional power coalitions' in the Indo–Pacific. The second section traces South Korea's evolving regional and global identity and highlights its normative and institutional leadership in democratic and AI governance as examples of global anchoring. The third section examines South Korea's participation in trilateral partnerships (with the US and Japan, and with Japan and Australia), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and the Indo–Pacific Four (IP4) as regional coalition-building through layering and nesting. In the fourth section, we examine the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat among South Korea, Japan, and China and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to demonstrate the applicability of hybrid alignment. The article also assesses the limitations of SII across these cases.

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Conceptualising 'Coalitions of Major Regional States': A View from the Indo–Pacific

Contrary to the conventional view that middle and regional states have little choice but to follow the lead of great powers in shaping and maintaining the regional order in the era of US–China rivalry, a growing body of research argues that these states can still exercise meaningful agency in constructing and sustaining the regional order (He & Feng, 2023; Teo & Emmers, 2025). Indeed, following the tradition of hegemonic stability theory, it can be argued that both the US (the existing defender) and China (the rising challenger) seek to build coalitions, often by adopting conciliatory and inclusive strategies towards middle and smaller powers (Loke & Emmers, 2025). Furthermore, deepening interdependence and the spread of global production chains have elevated the status of secondary states and constrained great powers' ability to pursue unilateral, coercive foreign policies. As a result, even amid great-power rivalry with mixed dynamics of conflict and cooperation, secondary states may be able to secure a certain degree of leverage vis-à-vis the great powers.

In addition, the increasing interconnectedness among elements of comprehensive national power – ranging from hard and conventional capabilities to soft power and non-traditional security – has further empowered regional states to play a more influential role in shaping the regional order. Since the end of the Cold War, the global security environment has evolved, shifting away from the zero-sum logic of ideological confrontation. Instead, norms, identity, and other non-material factors have become important in shaping state behaviour, creating a space for regional states to serve as mediators and facilitators. A notable historical example is the Helsinki Process, which was launched in the mid-to-late 1960s under the leadership of Finland and other Nordic countries. By implementing an 'indirect approach' built on the concept of 'three baskets' (Bond, 2025), this initiative helped to de-escalate US–Soviet tensions and contributed significantly to establishing a more stable regional order in Europe. Similarly, when alliance or cooperation networks led by the US and China are in competition, the actions of major regional powers can influence the perceptions and behaviours of these great powers while offering alternative pathways and policy options.

This article defines 'major regional states' as sizeable middle powers that hold strategic positions of influence within key subregions. In line with Barry Buzan's (2003) theory of regional security complexes, they possess sufficient capacity to shape subregional dynamics and act as key nodes in broader regional networks. A major regional state should not passively accept the order defined by the US and China but rather aim to actively shape it when either great power seeks to revise it according to its own preferences. At a minimum, such a state must hold a leadership position within its subregion and serve as a connector within a network that spans multiple subregions. Currently, countries that qualify as major regional states in the Indo–Pacific region (hereafter 'Indo–Pacific major regional powers') – based on criteria such as national capacity (GDP and defence spending), positional power (institutional centrality), and regional leadership – are Japan and South Korea in Northeast Asia; Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines in Southeast Asia; Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific; and India in the Indian Ocean.

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What kind of regional order do these Indo–Pacific major regional powers seek? Kai He and Huiyun Feng (2023) conceptualise order as consisting of power, institutions, and norms. In the dimension of power, while competition between the US and China remains intense, many of these major regional powers align as either US allies or security partners. US allies tend to support US coalitional hegemony vis-à-vis China more strongly than others, while also seeking to deepen security cooperation among the 'spoke' states so that the US-led hub-and-spoke system evolves into a less hierarchical network. If countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia secure greater status within this network and thereby enhance their policy autonomy, they can help prevent the hub-and-spoke system from being used excessively as a tool in the US–China rivalry. Given the second Trump administration's transactional approach – by which it has prioritised US interests while disregarding the concerns of allies – these allies favour an order in which the US remains committed to the Indo–Pacific, even as they strengthen military and security cooperation among themselves to prepare for possible US retrenchment (Chung, 2025).

On the institutional and normative dimensions of order, major regional powers tend to proactively support existing ASEAN-centred mechanisms and the core principles of the current international order, including the rule of law and free trade. Nonetheless, they are concerned that the institutional and normative underpinnings of the order are being eroded by the second Trump administration's 'Make America Great Again' agenda and protectionist trade policies. While they value ASEAN's institutional procedures, centrality, and the principle of non-interference, they also recognise its inherent limitations, stemming from consensus-based decision-making, as well as the tendency of both the US and China to marginalise ASEAN. Furthermore, they regard China's assertive maritime strategy and territorial claims in the region as a direct challenge to freedom of navigation and the rule of law.

In sum, many Indo–Pacific major regional powers envision a regional order in which the existing order is preserved through sustained US regional engagement and commitment, coupled with a progressive expansion of their own roles. They seek to ensure that maritime governance, trade, and other key domains are maintained and regulated through existing institutions and norms supported by regional states. That said, Indo–Pacific major regional states cannot have a meaningful impact on their own. Instead, they must form coalitions to do so, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association in the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Islands Forum in Oceania, and ASEAN in Southeast Asia. Coalitions of major regional powers, in turn, connect these subregional hubs – each endowed with sufficient positional power within its respective subregion – thereby shaping agenda-setting, policy coordination, and issue-linkage across the Indo–Pacific. Indeed, as US–China tensions increased over the past decade, the Indo–Pacific has witnessed a sharp increase in minilateral coalitions and other forms of regional cooperation – excluding the US and China – on issues such as terrorism, hybrid threats, refugee crises, and climate change (Parameswaran, 2024; Teo, 2025).

Crucially, this coalition-building strategy allows major regional powers not only to navigate the constraints of great-power dynamics but also to actively craft institutional arrangements that enhance their own and collective strategic autonomy and diplomatic leverage. Through strategic institutional innovation, they seek to assert their agency, expand their regional and global influence, and shape the rules and norms of the changing order – all while avoiding direct backlash from great powers. The formation

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of major regional state coalitions involves three main dimensions, each representing a particular form of SII.

Dimension 1: New regional and global identity

A major regional state should first establish a clear vision of itself as a regional order-shaper based on its positional power. According to He and Feng (2023), 'order-shapers' are states that actively influence one or more of the power, institutional, and normative dimensions of the international order, whereas 'order-takers' merely accept the consequences of US–China strategic competition. Once this identity is internalised, the state can, either willingly or with external support and encouragement, assume new roles, initiate strategic agendas, and lead regional cooperation. This identity formation is essential and can result in global anchoring, in which the state positions itself as a convenor or agenda-setter in international forums such as the G7+, G20+, and other high-level platforms. In doing so, anchoring enhances credibility by projecting shared norms, values, rules, and regulations at the global level.

Dimension 2: Subregional and regional coalition-building

The major regional state forms coalitions with other states within its immediate subregion and then seeks to expand this cooperation to other subregions. By forming inter-subregional coalitions, these major regional states can collectively increase their influence relative to great powers. Subregional and regional coalition-building entails institutional layering and nesting, whereby multiple levels of cooperation (formal/informal, bilateral/minilateral) operate simultaneously to reinforce the regional order. In this process, major regional powers transform the regional order from a predominantly hierarchical structure driven by two great powers into a less hierarchical architecture in which information and resources flow to other sub- and regional states through these major regional powers. As a result, the regional order evolves in ways that enhance the influence of major regional powers in areas such as maritime security, supply chains, subsea cables, and logistics integration. At the same time, this transformation produces a more integrated regional architecture while strengthening the ability of major regional powers to set the agenda.

Dimension 3: Hybrid alignment

Given the increasing difficulty of exercising traditional forms of power due to economic globalisation and complex interdependence, both the US and China are increasingly compelled to accommodate alternative regional orders. Hybrid alignment allows coalitions of major regional states to fill the 'empty holes' in great-power networks and act as connectors, gaining recognition from both Washington and Beijing. This strategy is not about walking a fine line between two great powers and is therefore not akin to hedging. Rather, when implemented by key US allies, it seeks to shape the institutional and normative dimensions of regional order while remaining within the US-led security architecture. It allows Indo–Pacific major regional powers to distribute their strategic commitments across multiple institutional arenas. This, in turn, reduces excessive US-

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

centrism and prevents US-led institutional mechanisms from evolving into rigid balancing frameworks against China.

In sum, major regional states that envision themselves as active order-shapers rather than passive order-takers build subregional and regional coalitions to influence processes of regional order-building and -maintenance through deliberate institutional nesting and layering. As US allies and security partners in the Indo–Pacific, they also pursue hybrid alignments by selectively engaging in 'Chinese-style multilateralism' led by China, while maintaining their status and alignment within the US-led security architecture.

Importantly, the three dimensions should not be understood as sequential stages in a linear process of coalition-building. Rather, each operates according to its own distinct causal logic. While the evolution of a new regional and global identity constitutes an a priori condition for the deliberate formation of subregional and regional coalitions, the other dimensions can, in turn, reinforce and consolidate this role identification. Moreover, while subregional and regional coalitions may expand to include China, hybrid alignment can provide normative legitimacy for major regional powers to form such coalitions.

South Korea's New Regional and Global Identity

South Korea's shift towards a broader global outlook and vision is a relatively recent development. Its foreign policy priorities and preferences have often been heavily influenced and limited by external conditions, its security reliance on the US, and its own vulnerabilities (Snyder, 2018). During the Roh Tae-woo administration (1988–1993), South Korea began to expand its focus beyond the peninsula as global tensions eased. Along with the country's achievement of economic development, Roh adopted Nordpolitik to improve relations with the Communist bloc. This diplomatic effort led to South Korea's rapprochement with the Soviet Union and China, although it was motivated by the desire to improve relations with North Korea.

Since the late 1990s, South Korea has become more active in regional diplomacy as a rising middle power and a successfully democratised country. Notably, President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) strongly advocated for East Asian regionalism and played a critical role in building the East Asian Community (discussed below). Under the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008), South Korea adopted a more ambitious foreign policy, seeking greater policy autonomy from the US while declaring itself as a potential 'balancer' in Northeast Asia and 'the hub of Northeast Asia' (Snyder, 2018). South Korea's global activism began under the Kim Young-sam administration (1993–1998), which launched a policy of *segyehwa* ('globalisation'), but this policy took full form under the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013). Lee's Global Korea initiative marked a major milestone in Korean diplomacy, signalling a shift from 'a consumer' to 'a producer of security resources', positioning South Korea as a responsible stakeholder and public goods provider (Bruce et al., 2012; Snyder, 2018). To that end, South Korea participated in peacekeeping missions in Haiti, Lebanon, the Gulf of Aden, and Afghanistan, as well as in antipiracy operations and the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative to stop the spread of illicit weapons of mass destruction (Bruce et al., 2012).

Under Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), South Korea shifted its policy focus, prioritising inter-Korean affairs and diversifying its regional relations. The latter was

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

demonstrated through two separate diplomatic initiatives. One was the New Northern Policy, aimed at strengthening ties with the US, China, Japan, and Russia. The other was the New Southern Policy, which emphasised the equal importance of ASEAN, India, and Northeast Asia (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2018).

South Korea's global activism was revitalised under Yoon Suk Yeol (2022–2025). In response to internal and external criticism that previous governments had focused mainly on North Korea and had limited engagement in Indo–Pacific regional affairs, the Yoon administration introduced a new vision that defined South Korea as the 'global pivotal state' (GPS). Yoon's Indo–Pacific Strategy declared, 'Korea aspires to become a Global Pivotal State that actively seeks out agendas for cooperation and shapes discussions in the region and the wider world' (MOFA, 2022). This GPS concept aimed to clarify South Korea's strategic direction amid the evolving strategic landscape of the Indo–Pacific and signal its intention to increase regional and global contributions (Yeo, 2023).

The Lee Jae Myung administration has moved away from explicitly using the term GPS, but it has maintained the underlying premise that South Korea's enhanced international standing should be accompanied by an expanded global role and greater international contributions (Theresia, 2026). Building on Korea's achievements in democratic governance, industrial competitiveness, and cultural influence, President Lee has consistently emphasised in public speeches and press conferences that the country should strengthen its status and role as a 'responsible global power'. In his address to the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2025, Lee stated: 'The Republic of Korea will fulfill its responsibility as a responsible global power that steadfastly upholds the values of freedom, human rights, inclusiveness, and solidarity championed by the United Nations' (Blue House, 2025). After his visit to Europe and the G7 Summit in June 2026, he also stated:

> To a remarkable extent, without our even realising it, the national strength and international standing of the Republic of Korea have risen. We must therefore assume greater responsibility and play a larger role in promoting peace, prosperity, solidarity, and cooperation in the international community (Blue House, 2026; authors' translation).

These remarks reflect a broader foreign policy narrative that has become increasingly prominent under the Lee administration.

Partly driven by the strong performance of Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix, as well as by what Lee has described as South Korea's world-class AI infrastructure, Korea's projection of this new identity is particularly evident in the administration's approach to international cooperation on artificial intelligence (AI), as discussed below. The administration has declared establishing South Korea as one of the top three AI leaders a core national priority (Yoon, 2025a). At the same time, Lee has repeatedly asserted that South Korea, as a responsible global power, should assume a leading role in international cooperation to ensure that AI is developed and governed as a force for the sustainable future of humanity. In this framing, technological leadership is presented not only as a matter of national competitiveness but also as a means of fulfilling South Korea's growing responsibilities stemming from its self-identification as a major regional and global actor.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Value-based global anchoring: Summit for Democracy and Global AI Basic Society

South Korea's hosting of the third Summit for Democracy in March 2024 exemplifies value-based global anchoring. In 2021, US President Joe Biden launched a new initiative to hold a summit of democracies to counter rising authoritarianism, combat corruption, and promote respect for human rights (US Department of State, 2021). Following the inaugural (virtual) summit hosted by the US, South Korea joined the US, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, and Zambia to co-host the second summit in March 2023. The following year, South Korea hosted the summit alone. Under the theme, 'Democracy for Future Generations', Korea, as the convenor and agenda-setter, emphasised the urgent need to counter digital threats to democracy, such as 'misinformation, disinformation, and digital surveillance' (Cho, 2024).

South Korea is uniquely positioned to lead a global agenda on democratic governance. It is one of the few successful cases in Asia that transitioned from an authoritarian regime to a vibrant democracy. Yoon's value-based diplomacy also made South Korea an ideal country to lead the initiative, given its expressed commitment to 'uphold international norms and strengthen a rules-based order built on the universal values including freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights' (MOFA, 2022).

The Biden administration welcomed Yoon's value-based diplomacy and his government's active support for the Summit for Democracy, particularly given the concerning global trend of democratic backsliding. This led Korean and US officials to tout the bilateral relationship as a 'value alliance' (Choi, 2024). Yet South Korea's involvement in the summit also drew criticism from China. In response, the Yoon government explained that the summit was 'not aimed at targeting specific countries' and 'Democracy is not about ideological confrontations but rather a matter of universal values for humanity' (Ji, 2024). However, Yoon's declaration of martial law in December 2024 was a significant setback for South Korea; ironically, it undermined his government's own efforts to strengthen global democratic governance by contradicting the principles of freedom and democracy it actively advocated and, in doing so, endangered South Korea's democratic system.

'Global AI Basic Society' is another example of Korea's value-based global anchoring, showcasing its efforts to set and shape global norms and the agenda for AI governance. Introduced and actively promoted by President Lee as a key pillar of his government's AI policy for inclusive growth, 'Global AI Basic Society' emphasises that 'all humanity ... equally enjoy the benefits of technological advancements' in AI (Kim, 2025). While the value-based principles of AI for 'inclusive growth, sustainable development and well-being' were adopted by OECD members in 2019 (OECD, 2019), South Korea emerged as a strong advocate for this vision. This was evident when the country, serving as a convenor and agenda-setter alongside the United Kingdom (UK) at the AI Seoul Summit in May 2024, introduced innovation and inclusivity as new core principles for global AI governance (Allen & Adamson, 2024). Building on the Bletchley Declaration, signed at a previous AI Safety Summit held in the UK, the Seoul Declaration affirmed that innovation and inclusivity are 'inter-related goals' of the global agenda on AI, alongside safety (MOFA, 2024).

South Korea's efforts to promote inclusive AI continued and expanded under the Lee administration. President Lee adopted 'AI for All' as his administration's core vision,

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

stressing that 'advances in cutting-edge technology [should] contribute to the universal values of humanity' and vowing that South Korea would make efforts to make this vision the 'new normal' for the world (Blue House, 2025). To that end, he advocated establishing a 'Global AI Basic Society' and promoted it at key multilateral forums, such as the United Nations Security Council, APEC, the G7, and the G20. As the host and chair of the APEC Economic Leaders' Summit in Gyeongju, his government also introduced the APEC Artificial Intelligence Initiative (2026–2030) (APEC, 2025). As part of this Initiative, South Korea announced plans to establish the Asia–Pacific AI Center, positioning the country as a bridge to reduce the AI capability gap between APEC members (Sayankina, 2025). This Initiative received unanimous endorsement from all members, including the US and China, making it the first time these two technological giants, despite their fierce rivalry, had come together to commit to international cooperation on AI (Schattle, 2025).

Behind these normative and institutional efforts to shape the global agenda on AI was Korea's ambition to achieve technological leadership and emerge as one of the top AI powerhouses. Korean leaders and policymakers across administrations have viewed the era of AI as presenting enormous challenges and uncertainties, while also offering economic opportunities for South Korea to drive a national leap forward (Woo et al., 2024; Yoon, 2025b). To foster national competitiveness and seize the opportunity to lead international cooperation on AI, South Korea launched several national initiatives. First, the country established a Presidential Council on National Intelligence Strategy as a control tower to drive the national AI strategy. In December 2024, it also passed the AI Basic Act, becoming the second entity after the European Union to establish a comprehensive legal framework for AI. In June 2026, South Korea announced an astronomical investment of more than 4,000 trillion won (US$2.77 trillion) by Samsung Electronics, SK Group, Naver, and other firms to build semiconductor clusters, AI data centres, and Physical AI (Lee, 2026; Park, 2026). The Lee government went beyond these domestic efforts and led initiatives to strengthen AI supply chain cooperation between Korean and US tech giants, culminating in the San Francisco AI Summit in July 2026. The summit brought together Lee and leaders from Korean and American companies such as NVIDIA, OpenAI, Broadcom, Anthropic, and Microsoft, resulting in the signing of MOUs and investment deals. While it remains to be seen how all of these efforts will play out, they certainly demonstrate South Korea's unusual policy initiatives and strong commitment to institutional and normative leadership in global AI governance.

Limitations

South Korea's Indo–Pacific Strategy envisions the country as an active contributor to the development of international norms and technology standards, including in AI, through cooperation with 'digitally-advanced partners' (MOFA, 2022). This vision reflects South Korea's growing self-identification as a major regional power with broader regional and global responsibilities. Yet, the extent to which Seoul can translate these aspirations into sustained leadership may be constrained by the enduring security imperative of deterring and countering North Korean threats.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Today, North Korea has become a de facto 'nuclear power', possessing around 60 nuclear warheads (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). As the prospect of denuclearising the North diminishes and its hostility persists, this pressing security challenge could force South Korea to turn inwards and prioritise issues on the Korean Peninsula. This will inevitably divert South Korea's attention away from the Indo–Pacific and from being an active global player.

South Korea's Subregional and Regional Coalition-Building

South Korea has significantly expanded both bilateral and minilateral cooperation with like-minded or like-situated countries – including US allies and strategic partners such as Japan, Australia, and India – thereby contributing to subregional and regional coalition-building. It has shown growing interest in coalition-building under both Yoon Suk Yeol and Lee Jae Myung. For instance, Yoon's Indo–Pacific Strategy stated:

> In realising the vision for a free Indo-Pacific, the Republic of Korea is committed to partnering with like-minded countries that share the values of freedom, rule of law, and human rights as well as international norms to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region (MOFA, 2022).

One line of scholarship argues that this trend primarily reflects South Korea's adaptation to the US-led Indo–Pacific strategy, which seeks to strengthen a liberal coalition amid intensifying US–China strategic competition (Cha, 2023). From this perspective, South Korea's expanding bilateral and minilateral partnerships are less the product of an autonomous regional strategy than a response to US efforts to strengthen regional security networks by encouraging greater roles for its allies and security partners. An alternative interpretation, however, emphasises Korea's strategic agency. Although embedded within the US-led alliance system, South Korea increasingly recognises the need to diversify its strategic partnerships with regional middle powers in response to the growing uncertainty generated by US–China competition. This argument has gained further prominence under the second Trump administration, whose more transactional approach to alliances has reinforced concerns about the reliability and predictability of US commitments. Reflecting this changing strategic environment, a growing number of academic studies and policy commentaries in South Korea argue that the country should actively participate in – or even help lead – coalitions of regional middle powers (Kim et al., 2026).

Recent developments lend support to this latter claim. Following the disruption of maritime commerce caused by the US–Iran conflict and the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz, South Korea has joined Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and NATO members in exploring options for coordinating responses through the 'Group of 22'. Similarly, during his state visit to India in April 2026, President Lee announced South Korea's intention to participate in the India-led Indo–Pacific Oceans Initiative, signalling Seoul's willingness to engage more actively in regional institutional initiatives beyond its traditional alliance framework.

The following section shows that South Korea is pursuing regional and subregional coalition-building through overlapping bilateral and minilateral partnerships by strategically employing institutional layering and institutional nesting. Although it possesses

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

considerable economic and military capabilities as a major regional power, South Korea lacks the material capacity to independently establish or institutionalise regional coalitions comparable to those led by the US or China. Consequently, rather than creating entirely new institutions, South Korea seeks to expand its regional influence by embedding new cooperative arrangements within existing institutional frameworks and by linking bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral institutions in mutually reinforcing ways. Through these complementary institutional strategies, South Korea maximises its coalition-building capacity despite structural constraints imposed by great-power competition.

Institutional layering: South Korea's trilateral partnerships

The South Korea–US–Japan trilateral partnership exemplifies institutional layering by building on the South Korea–US alliance to develop a trilateral partnership in Northeast Asia. Since South Korea and Japan normalised their diplomatic relations in 1965, building trilateral cooperation with these two Asian allies has been a US policy objective in Asia. But progress has been slow due to political tensions and unresolved historical and territorial disputes between the two allies. The first trilateral cooperation framework emerged in 1991 with the creation of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG). Initiated by the Clinton administration, TCOG served as a coordination mechanism for the three countries' respective policies towards North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. However, TCOG lost momentum after several regular consultation meetings and was eventually succeeded by the Six-Party Talks in 2004. Since then, trilateral cooperation has been conducted on an ad hoc basis. In 2016, it reached a new milestone with the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement, but it soon stalled due to a rupture in Korea–Japan relations over forced labour disputes, trade restrictions, and other historical grievances.

The trilateral partnership was revived in 2022 following a dramatic improvement in bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan. In response to North Korea's growing nuclear and missile threats, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and other evolving security developments, President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio took a bold step – despite potential political backlash at home – and agreed to overcome their countries' differences and pursue a future-oriented relationship. This initiative by Korea and Japan was widely welcomed by the Biden administration, and the three-way partnership accelerated, leading the three countries to strengthen their joint defence and deterrence posture through annual, multi-domain joint exercises (White House, 2023a, 2023b). The scope of the trilateral partnership has also expanded to include the Indo–Pacific, where Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo aligned on their shared interests and commitments to a free and open Indo–Pacific and on reinforcing the rules-based order while opposing any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the region. Furthermore, they agreed to expand trilateral cooperation to supply chain resilience, development assistance, and maritime security capacity-building in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, and launched the Trilateral Indo–Pacific Dialogue to coordinate their regional strategies.

In August 2023, the trilateral partnership culminated in the historic Camp David Summit, followed by the establishment of the South Korea–US–Japan Trilateral

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Coordinating Secretariat in November 2024. The latter marks the formal institutionalisation of the trilateral partnership, following the Biden administration's efforts to ensure the continuity of trilateral cooperation even after political changes in the three countries (Cha, 2024). These efforts apparently bore fruit, as trilateral cooperation has continued smoothly to date under the leadership of the governments led by Donald Trump, Lee Jae Myung, and Takaichi Sanae.

Meanwhile, the restoration and improvement of bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan has also enabled them to expand their strategic partnerships with other major regional states. For instance, the South Korea–Japan–Australia trilateral dialogue is an emerging effort to promote shared strategic goals and contribute to stability in the Indo–Pacific. As a key US ally in Oceania, Australia maintains a Special Strategic Partnership with Japan and a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with South Korea (Watterson, 2024). The three countries held their inaugural trilateral meeting in June 2024, along with summit meetings within the IP4 framework. This trilateral network represents spoke-to-spoke ties within the US hub-and-spoke system, which could develop into a strategic platform that extends their cooperation in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, while also sustaining and shaping the Indo–Pacific regional order – especially when the US is distracted from the region.

Institutional nesting: ASEAN Plus Three and Indo–Pacific Four

South Korea has expanded its regional cooperation beyond Northeast Asia to encompass other subregions. This strategy involves institutional nesting by integrating new diplomatic mechanisms into the existing regional frameworks. A notable example is the creation of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) following the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, highlighting the urgent need for a new regional mechanism to address the currency crisis and strengthen cooperation in East Asia (Stubbs, 2002). Concurrently, diminishing objections from the US and Australia to Malaysia's proposal for the East Asia Economic Caucus also created a more receptive environment for a new regional cooperative arrangement. This led to the first (informal) APT Summit in December 1997, followed by the formal institutionalisation of the APT in 1999.

While South Korea did not lead the creation of the APT, President Kim Dae-jung played a visionary leadership role in its evolution and the creation of the East Asian Community. He proposed establishing the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) and the East Asia Study Group (EASG), which were accepted by other APT members in December 1998 and November 2000, respectively (East Asia Study Group, 2002; Kim, 2006). Composed of 26 experts and intellectuals from APT member-states, the EAVG was tasked with developing recommendations for East Asian regional cooperation. In 1999, South Korea hosted the first EAVG meeting. After five meetings, the EAVG submitted its report to APT leaders in October 2001, recommending comprehensive regional cooperation across economic, financial, political, security, environmental, social, cultural, educational, and institutional areas (East Asia Vision Group, 2001; Kim, 2006). Senior officials serving on the EASG reviewed these recommendations and submitted a final report to the APT leaders with recommended policy actions (East Asia Study Group, 2002). Some of these recommendations included the creation of the East Asia Summit (EAS), which became a reality in 2005.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

The Indo–Pacific Four (IP4) is a recent example of institutional nesting. The IP4, which comprises South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, is a minilateral group of four Indo–Pacific countries embedded within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The main catalysts for the NATO–IP4 partnership were the announcement of a 'no limits' partnership between Russia and China and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which together underscored the realisation that the Euro–Atlantic and Indo–Pacific regions are not separate theatres, and that, according to the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 'developments in [the Indo–Pacific] can directly affect Euro–Atlantic security' (NATO, 2022). The Strategic Concept also highlighted that '[t]he deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to [NATO's] values and interests' (NATO, 2022). Similarly, Russia's military action against Ukraine raised concerns about a cascading effect in the Indo–Pacific; as former Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio warned, 'Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow' (MacLellan, 2022). This strategic reckoning in both Europe and the Indo–Pacific led IP4 leaders to attend, for the first time, the NATO Madrid Summit in June 2022, where they reaffirmed their commitment to the rules-based international order and agreed to enhance cooperation on cyber defence, new technologies, maritime security, climate change, and countering disinformation (Stoltenberg, 2022). Since then, IP4 leaders have attended the NATO Summits in 2023 and 2024.

In South Korea, the IP4 has emerged as a crucial platform to develop a strategic partnership with NATO. This was driven by the desire to enhance democratic alignment with European countries and, more importantly, by the newly formed alliance between North Korea and Russia in the wake of the Ukraine war. Strong commercial interests were another driver as South Korea's defence exports to European countries surged. In November 2022, South Korea established a diplomatic mission to NATO and, in July 2023, it agreed to launch the Individually Tailored Partnership Program to enhance Korea–NATO cooperation in 11 areas, including anti-terrorism, non-proliferation, and cyber defence (NATO, 2026). South Korea also provided support to Ukraine by contributing to NATO's Comprehensive Assistance Package.

The IP4 is a US-led strategic institutional innovation designed to respond to the evolving global security landscape and the growing convergence of European and Indo–Pacific security interests. This has helped the IP4 secure legitimacy and cross-regional support to some extent, but the strength and scope of the IP4–NATO partnership remain limited. Especially due to a shift in US policy towards NATO under the second Trump administration, coupled with the lack of a shared vision for collective defence among NATO and IP4 countries, this cross-regional partnership is likely to become 'functional' or 'selective engagement' (Odgaard, 2026). This trend was observed during President Lee's attendance at the 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara, Türkiye, where South Korea and NATO agreed to start formal negotiations on a procurement framework agreement. Invited by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Lee's participation was significant given the absence of other IP4 leaders at the summit. However, this development was largely driven by mutual commercial interests, with Korea seeking to enter

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

NATO's joint arms-procurement market and NATO aiming to boost its defence capability (Haggard & Anaya, 2026).

Limitations

The fluctuation in South Korea's foreign policy with changes in government may constrain its ability to build subregional and regional coalitions. This policy fluctuation is particularly pronounced in terms of its approach to North Korea, China, and the US alliance, as conservative and progressive camps have different preferences. For instance, both conservative and progressive governments support the alliance, but the latter generally favours greater policy autonomy from the US and therefore has experienced policy disagreements with Washington (Cha, 2003; CRS, 2026). In addition, conservative governments typically prioritise strengthening the alliance as a key foreign policy goal and have increasingly adopted a tougher stance on China's assertive behaviour in the region, while progressive governments generally prefer a more balanced engagement with China. As a result, changes in government have often led to fluctuations in Korean foreign policy, creating uncertainties about its future direction. This, in turn, makes South Korea's regional strategy in the Indo–Pacific less sustainable, less effective, and more unpredictable over the long run. This uncertainty about South Korea's future policy direction thus could be seen by allies and like-minded countries as a risk to their cooperation with South Korea, especially when the world becomes more divided into opposing geopolitical and ideological blocs.

Hybrid Alignment

Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat

In the context of US–China great power rivalry, states have incentives to maintain a strategic balance between the two great powers by engaging with each side. Despite their own reservations about China's growing assertiveness, even US allies and partners want to maintain policy flexibility and stay engaged with China because many of them depend heavily on trade with China and want to benefit from the economic opportunities offered by the Chinese market. When the US–China confrontation becomes conflictual and forces states to pick sides, however, hedging is no longer a viable option.

In this context, South Korea's pursuit of subregional and regional coalitions within the US-led security network can provide Seoul with more diplomatic leeway to engage China without being (mis)perceived as tilting towards Beijing. For example, to assuage China's concerns and weaken its efforts to construct a counterbalancing bloc, US allies have occasionally pursued minilateral security arrangements that involve China with or without direct US participation. Specifically, Australia invited China to join the Kowari joint military exercises with the US between 2014 and 2019, with approximately 10 Chinese soldiers participating annually. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, Thailand has invited China to participate in Cobra Gold, its major multilateral military exercise with the US. In addition, amid intensifying US–China rivalry in the South China Sea, China and ASEAN conducted their first joint naval exercise in 2018.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

In the case of South Korea, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) among South Korea, Japan, and China has served as an important platform for engaging China. The Trilateral Summit process originated from an informal breakfast meeting between the three leaders on the sidelines of the APT Summit in 1999. While the Japanese side hosted the meeting, it was the Korean government that initially proposed the idea of convening such a gathering. The trilateral leaders' meeting continued on the margins of APT until South Korea proposed in 2004 that the three countries hold a separate summit outside the ASEAN framework. This proposal was accepted at the eighth APT Summit in 2007, leading to the first standalone Trilateral Summit in 2008. At the second Trilateral Summit in October 2009, South Korea proposed establishing a permanent secretariat. Following consensus among the three leaders, a memorandum on establishing the TCS was adopted at the third summit in 2010, and in 2011, the three governments agreed to establish the secretariat in South Korea. From 2008 to 2012, the Trilateral Summit was held annually on a rotational basis, but as relations among the three countries fluctuated, the summit was held only intermittently in 2015, 2018, and 2019. After 2019, the meetings were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, deteriorating South Korea–Japan relations, and worsening US–China relations. The ninth Trilateral Summit was eventually held in Seoul in 2024, with South Korea playing a leading role in revitalising the process.

As discussed above, the Yoon government's efforts to strengthen the ROK–US alliance and revive ROK–US–Japan security cooperation created greater diplomatic space for Seoul to promote the resumption of the Trilateral Summit. This reflects a form of strategic institutional innovation in which South Korea practises hybrid alignment by reinforcing its alliance network while simultaneously institutionalising engagement with China. Also, although the summit meetings themselves have experienced periodic interruptions, functional-level cooperation among the three countries has continued to operate relatively smoothly, with South Korea often playing a proactive coordinating role.

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) case illustrates how South Korea maintained agency and pursued its national interest in the US–China zero-sum game by adopting a hybrid alignment. In 2013, shortly after China launched a new multilateral financial institution to address a significant infrastructure gap in Asia and invited countries to join as founding members of the AIIB, the bank became a choice between aligning with either the US or China. The Obama administration quietly urged US allies, including South Korea, not to join, out of concern that the China-led AIIB would compete with and undermine the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, over which the US has considerable influence (Psaki, 2014). The US State Department stressed that AIIB should 'incorporate high standards of governance, environmental and social safeguards, procurement and debt sustainability that have been established over decades of experience at multilateral development banks' (Psaki, 2014). In response to US pushback, China also increased its diplomatic efforts and sent senior officials to persuade countries to join the AIIB.

In South Korea, the Park Geun-hye administration initially showed interest in the AIIB, seeing potential economic opportunities for Korean companies in new infrastructure markets in Asia. The Park administration sent an official delegation to attend three rounds of Multilateral Consultation Meetings hosted by China to

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 11/23/2026 2:43:09 PM

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discuss the AIIB, and Chinese officials actively sought Korea's participation. However, caught between the US and China and facing intense pressure from both sides, South Korea announced that it would decide based on its 'national interest' (Bang, 2015). In October 2014, Park postponed South Korea's participation because its strategy to build good relations with China was based on a strong US–ROK alliance. In addition, concerns about AIIB's governance structure, safeguards, and other arrangements also remained unresolved. South Korean Finance Minister Choi Kyung-hwan told Chinese officials that 'If such issues are resolved, there will be no reason for [South Korea] not to join the AIIB' (Yonhap News Agency, 2014).

The situation changed in March 2015 after the UK broke ranks with the US and announced its participation in the AIIB. Although a senior US official criticised the UK for 'constant accommodation' of China, this did not stop other US allies from following suit (Perlez, 2015). In South Korea, calls for the country's participation increased, and the government ultimately announced its participation while indicating its intent to work with other major countries 'to help the AIIB possess a high level of standards in the areas of responsibility, transparency, governing structure and debt sustainability' (Yoo, 2015). Tensions between Washington and Beijing also eased shortly after China reaffirmed its commitment to existing institutions and expressed its intent to adhere to high standards of governance. In June 2015, 50 countries signed the AIIB's Articles of Agreement after South Korea, Australia, and other like-minded countries pushed China to adopt higher governance standards, resulting in 'a significant improvement' in the final negotiations over the bank's charter (Yonhap News Agency, 2015).

Overall, the AIIB case shows that collective efforts by major regional states can shape great-power rivalry and advance shared national interests while averting the strategic risk of undermining the existing financial order in Asia. Nonetheless, lessons from this case may not be widely applicable because South Korea and other US allies might not have been able to join the AIIB if the UK had not been the first to break the US-led alignment. For smaller middle powers such as South Korea that are heavily reliant on the US for security, adopting a hybrid alignment is challenging due to potential backlash and repercussions. In this case, the reputational cost incurred by the UK arguably helped South Korea avoid such repercussions.

Limitations

Although the TCS and AIIB cases show South Korea's nuanced approach to engaging with China, its ability to practise hybrid engagement is limited by its reliance on the US alliance, which imposes constraints on its policy autonomy. More significantly, the alliance is vital to South Korea's national security and survival in the face of North Korea's existential threat. While South Korea's proximity to China heightens its fear of entrapment, its reluctance to fully support the US also increases the risk of abandonment. Under the Yoon government, South Korea abandoned its policy of strategic ambiguity and firmly aligned with the US, but Lee's pursuit of pragmatic diplomacy indicates South Korea's desire to return to strategic ambiguity. But, as US–China competition intensifies, the space for South Korea to manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing continues to shrink.

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Conclusion

In 2026, the Indo–Pacific is grappling with heightened uncertainty as the regional order undergoes significant transformations. In the East and South China Seas, China seeks to challenge the maritime order through its assertive actions and gray zone tactics. The US is reshaping the global trade system by imposing universal and reciprocal tariffs. These actions by the two great powers usher the Indo–Pacific region into an era of great uncertainty. Individual countries lack the capacity to effectively counter and reverse this trend, but they can come together to have a meaningful impact by collectively resisting great-power pressures and shaping US–China strategic behaviour.

This article has argued that strategic institutional innovation is a key strategy for South Korea to build coalitions in the Indo–Pacific and influence the regional and global order. These diplomatic and institutional arrangements have given South Korea greater diplomatic leverage and flexibility to navigate the constraints imposed by intense great-power rivalry. The article's case studies show how this has enabled the country to set and influence global agendas, promote democratic norms, bolster the liberal international order, and take an active leadership role in global AI governance to shape norms and institutions. South Korea is seeking to formulate its national identity as a responsible global power in the Indo–Pacific region as the country expands its influence abroad. Policymakers and scholars in South Korea have been exploring regional and global roles commensurate with its national power and in response to the evolving security environment. If the US under Trump's 'America First' policy gradually withdraws from global leadership and moves away from its commitments in the Indo–Pacific region, South Korea and other major regional states will have no choice but to recalibrate their strategies and fill the gap left by the US to ensure regional peace and stability.

To that end, South Korea should continue and deepen trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan in the Indo–Pacific region and also diversify its strategic partnerships with other like-minded countries, such as Australia, as well as like-situated countries caught between the two great powers, such as India, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Specifically, strengthening trilateral cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and Australia seems promising because these three countries – each of which serves as a major regional state in its subregion – share a commitment to the liberal international order.

Acknowledgements

This article has benefitted significantly from three academic workshops and the insightful comments of colleagues.

Disclosure Statement

KEI is registered under FARA on behalf of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

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Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Hairan Research Fund of the Hairan Series, Institute for Interdisciplinary Unification Studies, Korea University. Jae Jeok Park's work was also supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea [NRF-2026S1A5A2A01003589].

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The Midterms Gave the U.S.-South Korea Alliance New Defenders in Congress

If South Korea can strategically and intentionally engage with the new U.S. Congress, it can keep the alliance intact throughout the next two years.

By Michael Schiffer

November 20, 2026



The American flag flies in front of the United States Capitol, April 2026 | Source: Shutterstock

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With Democrats firmly in control of Congress come 2027, lawmakers will step up to defend the U.S.-South Korea alliance's structure. But given his constitutional powers, the president will still decide how the alliance operates. Seoul should engage the new Congress now, before positions on Capitol Hill harden.

During the 2018 midterm elections, the Democratic Party took the House of Representatives from U.S. President Donald Trump. Over the next year, they set an authorized floor for U.S. forces in Korea (USFK) at 28,500, but they never restored the joint exercises Trump suspended after his Singapore summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—nor did they fully restore trust in the alliance's stability. If past is prologue, that record may be the best guide to the next two years.

In the 2026 midterms, Democrats won both congressional chambers, with a Senate majority of fifty-six seats, flipping seats in Alaska, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Texas. They also picked up over forty seats in the House and now control a majority of governorships. 2026 was the largest opposition landslide since 1974.

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Voters ranked corruption, the cost of living, and the Iran war as their top concerns, and the war impacted voters through high gas and diesel prices. And the 2028 election cycle began the day after the midterms, when U.S. Vice President JD Vance blamed the Iran war for the Republicans' loss.

Democrats gain the power of the purse, the gavels, subpoenas, the ability to set the legislative calendar, and the power to block confirmations. But even with the dramatic gains, they lack a veto-proof majority. For example, while tariff authority rests with Congress, reclaiming the powers Congress long ago delegated to the Executive Branch will require two-thirds of both chambers. The most likely scenario for the next two years, then, is paralysis. Congress passes bills that the president vetoes. Congress issues subpoenas that the administration ignores. The president issues executive orders that Congress, through the Congressional Review Act, tries to overturn by striking down the implementing rules and regulations. Lawsuits abound. Senate-confirmed officials do not get confirmed, leading to acting officials that lack the power to move policy.

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Traditionally, lame-duck presidents turn abroad, where they face the fewest constraints. One can expect Trump to do so now as well, but amid a slew of hearings on how tariffs were imposed, on Pentagon contracting, and on corruption related to corporate and sovereign deals, which may impose constraints or slow the administration down.

The U.S.-South Korea alliance's coalition in Congress is also changing hands. Susan Collins (R-ME), Thom Tillis (R-NC), John Cornyn (R-TX), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Mitch McConnell (R-KY) in the Senate, and Michael McCaul (R-TX) and Ann Wagner (R-MO) in the House, are gone or leaving, taking with them much of the Republican bench that anchored the alliance. Leadership passes to Democrats: Chris Coons (D-DE) at the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Gregory Meeks (D-NY) at the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and Adam Smith (D-WA) at the House Committee on Armed Services. All three support the alliance and have questioned cutting joint exercises.

On alliance security issues, the new Congress will defend troop levels and extended deterrence. It will press harder

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than the administration on conditions for transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) because the administration treats OPCON transfer purely as a burden-shifting measure. Nuclear-powered submarines and a revised 123 agreement both need Congress, and Democratic senators have already expressed skepticism about fuel supply, enrichment, and construction locations. If U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth leaves or is forced out, a Democratic Senate may delay confirming a successor, and acting officials will run the Pentagon through the OPCON decision.

Congress also cannot stop a summit with Kim Jong Un. The Hanoi summit and the DMZ meeting both came after the 2018 wave, and a president seeking a legacy may have reason to try again. The risk for South Korea remains a deal negotiated without a seat at the table.

On trade, expectations are that political costs will rise, but the architecture holds. Democrats will likely hold hearings on whether the Section 232 and 301 tariffs served their statutory purposes, but South Korea's 15 percent rate stays where Trump puts it. The USD 350 billion investment framework will face questions about how it

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was negotiated, while members of both parties will want plants and jobs in their districts. With Jamie Raskin (D-MD) replacing Jim Jordan (R-OH) as chair of the House Committee on the Judiciary, the committee that accused South Korea of discrimination over Coupang in July may see the issue as an anticorruption inquiry rather than just a trade complaint. The midterm data-center backlash cuts closer to South Korea than to most U.S. allies and partners because South Korean memory and battery investment depend on an American buildout, and voters approved forty of forty-one local measures restricting data centers.

All of this raises three observations for Seoul to consider. First, Congress will protect the alliance but will raise some new questions. Nuclear-powered submarines, enrichment and reprocessing rights, and an early date for transferring wartime OPCON will meet harder questions, more conditions, and longer timelines.

Second, the larger risks to the alliance still sit in the White House, where Congress has little reach. Trump can still raise tariffs, cut joint exercises, negotiate with Kim without

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Seoul at the table, or simply stop paying attention.

Third, Iran has become a Korea issue. There is active debate about whether Democrats should block the defense authorization bill and threaten a federal shutdown on December 11 unless Congress cuts off funding for the Iran war, and the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is the vehicle that can write South Korea's protections into law. What happens on Iran in December and January may matter more for USFK than anything Congress says directly about Korea.

What does that suggest? Seoul should make its economic case to Congress in terms of factories and jobs in specific states and districts; it should frame its approach in the context of security and economic competition with China, which remains an area of strong bipartisan consensus in Washington; it should prepare detailed answers on nonproliferation and safeguards before it presses for the submarine and the 123 revision; and it should build relationships with the new committee chairs and members now, while their positions are still forming.

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If Seoul can strategically and intentionally engage with the new Congress, it can keep the alliance intact through a turbulent end to the Trump administration and keep South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's agenda moving. If South Korea waits for a new president in 2029 to set things right, it may find that the positions in Congress have already hardened—and not in its favor.

Michael Schiffer is Senior Fellow for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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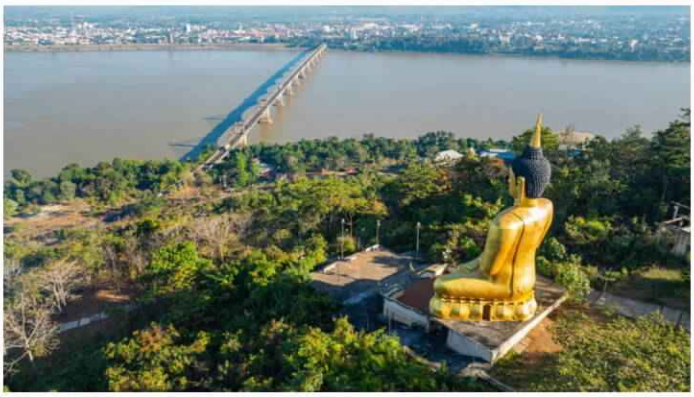
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How Lax Enforcement in Laos Undermines Security on the Korean Peninsula

U.S. and South Korean authorities cannot take down every North Korean cyber unit working overseas, but should prioritize third countries in Southeast Asia.

By Benjamin R. Young

November 10, 2026



A scenic hilltop perspective of Wat Phousalao's golden Buddha monument gazing across the Mekong River and Pakse Bridge, March 2016 | Source: Shutterstock

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North Korean IT workers employed remotely by Western companies generate considerable revenue for the Kim family regime. According to recent estimates, the North Korean IT worker scheme brings in around USD 250 to 600 million annually. South Korean police are also investigating whether a North Korean IT worker used a false identity and secretly worked for a South Korean company.

To combat this illicit activity, U.S. and South Korean authorities should target the locales from which these North Korean operatives work abroad. While many North Koreans work from China or Russia, some use Laos as their hub of cyber operations—and Vientiane is far easier to pressure than Beijing or Moscow.

Although many of these remote workers take jobs at U.S.-based companies, they routinely work overseas and use the readily available internet in China, Russia, and Southeast Asia. In March 2026, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned Yun Song Guk, the leader of a North Korean IT worker unit based in Boten, Laos. Yun worked with a Vietnamese national, Hoang Minh Quang, to launder the IT workers' salaries through local bank accounts for

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eventual transfer back to Pyongyang. This follows sanctions from January 2025, which listed two North Korean front companies working out of Laos that housed North Korean IT workers. Moreover, it appears that North Korean hackers are sharing money laundering networks with local fraudsters and drug traffickers in Southeast Asia. Thus, North Korean cyber operations in the Mekong region also impact the security and stability of these host governments.

Considering South Korea's December 2025 upgrade of its diplomatic relationship with Laos to a "comprehensive partnership," Seoul should formally ask Vientiane to crack down on North Korean cyber activities in the country. For too long, the communist government in Laos has sought to leverage its cordial ties with both North and South Korea for maximum national gain. However, Laos has much more to lose economically if South Korea backs away from this recently elevated relationship. Washington and Seoul should jointly press Vientiane to take the North Korean cyber threat more seriously.

Gaining Chinese or Russian cooperation on North Korean cyber issues is increasingly

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difficult and fraught with diplomatic challenges. However, North Korean cyber operatives have routinely used Laos as a hub for their illicit activities. For example, in May 2023, the Treasury sanctioned a North Korean military front company, the Chinyong Information Technology Cooperation Company, which managed North Korean IT worker delegations in Laos and Russia. Given the relative weakness of Laos, both Washington and Seoul should lean on their economic advantage to pressure Vientiane on this issue.

Currently, North Korean citizens can visit Laos after applying for an e-Visa or a visa on arrival. Laos should make this visa application process much more rigorous for North Korean nationals. Considering Pyongyang's strict control of its citizens' travel abroad, Laotian authorities should treat every North Korean national traveling to their country as a likely government agent or subversive. While Laos is small potatoes compared to North Korea's more expansive cyber presence in China and Russia, it is likely a softer target for U.S. and South Korean diplomatic pressure.

North Korea's presence in Southeast Asia should not be dismissed as passive or

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peaceful. The Kim family regime has a long history of conducting deadly operations in Southeast Asia. For instance, in 1983, North Korean agents attempted to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan in Burma, killing twenty-one people. In 2017, North Korean agents hatched a successful plot to kill North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

While U.S. and South Korean authorities cannot take down every North Korean cyber unit working overseas, they should prioritize third countries in Southeast Asia, chiefly Laos, from which these North Korean IT workers illegally generate revenue for the regime.

Benjamin R. Young is Nonresident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) and Assistant Professor of Intelligence Studies at Fayetteville State University. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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How Illinois Stands to Gain From U.S.-South Korea Cooperation

As new opportunities for investment and collaboration form, communities like Peoria play a crucial role in the bilateral relationship.

By Nils Wollesen Osterberg

November 17, 2026



Golden hour in Peoria, Illinois, May 2024 | Source: Shutterstock

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Central Illinois stands to gain as South Korea helps revive American shipbuilding

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and as data centers spread across the United States. Caterpillar, one of Peoria's largest employers, makes engines for ships and generators for data centers. It also has a foothold in Korea, where it bought a seal manufacturer in 2009. In September, a delegation sponsored by KEI visited Peoria and nearby Bloomington-Normal, two communities with a long record of adapting to economic change.

As part of KEI's Future of Korea program, the delegation included representatives from the Korean Embassy and KEI, along with a former State Department official. The Peoria Area World Affairs Council showcased close-knit communities with a proud history, strong schools, and innovative manufacturing. The area shows how change leads to new opportunities through existing companies, repurposed facilities, and new collaborations.

Not only has Peoria remained a strong community since its founding by French explorers in 1691, making it the oldest European settlement in Illinois, but it has also continued to capitalize on changing times. During the Industrial Revolution, Peoria emerged as a crucial transportation center along the Illinois River and, by 1900,

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a hub for a dozen railroads. Before Prohibition, Peoria was known as the whiskey capital of the world, accounting for 40 percent of all alcohol production in the United States by 1890. Since then, manufacturing and service industries have become key drivers of economic activity in the area.

Today, Caterpillar, formed by the 1925 merger of the Holt Manufacturing Company and the C. L. Best Tractor Company, is one of the largest employers in Peoria, employing 12,000 people. Caterpillar represents one of the most tangible bonds between Peoria and South Korea. Perhaps best known for its construction and mining equipment, the company considers South Korea a major market. In 2009, Caterpillar acquired the Korean JCS Company, a maker of seals for heavy construction equipment.

With the growth of data centers and the push to revive U.S. shipbuilding, the relationship between Caterpillar and Korean companies could become even more complementary. In addition to the heavy construction equipment needed to build data centers and shipyards, Caterpillar also manufactures engines for large freight ships

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and generators that help ensure a steady energy supply for data centers.

Beyond Caterpillar, Peoria and Bloomington-Normal both host local universities, including Bradley University, Illinois State University, and Illinois Wesleyan University. As new opportunities for investment and collaboration form, communities play a crucial role in making them a reality, whether through educating a talented labor force, enabling construction, or providing infrastructure and transportation services.

Peoria and Bloomington-Normal have proved their ability to adapt to changes in industry and the economy. As Korea invests in America and becomes an increasingly integral part of major strategic industries, the bonds between Korea and these two communities in central Illinois are likely to grow stronger. The communities also showcase how future partnerships with Korean companies and investment projects can benefit many parts of America.

Nils Wollesen Osterberg is Fellow and Economic Policy Associate at the Korea Economic Institute of America. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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