

# After 70 Years of Steadfast U.S.–Korean Alliance, Time to Move to Next Level

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

For 70 years, the U.S.–South Korean alliance has played an indispensable role in promoting democracy, peace, economic prosperity, and security in the Indo–Pacific.

Taking on common challenges has forged a steadfast relationship between the two allies, one based on shared values of democracy, human rights, and economic freedom.

Both countries should build on that steadfastness and notch up the pivotal partnership to the next level and advance the alliance for the coming decades.

The year 2023 marks the 70th anniversary of the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Over the past seven decades, the U.S.–ROK alliance has played an indispensable role in promoting democracy, peace, economic prosperity, and security in the Indo–Pacific region and beyond. The enduring, proven partnership between the two willing allies continues to serve as one of the keystones of America’s foreign policy.

Indeed, the U.S.–ROK bilateral relationship, anchored in the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, is one of the strongest and most successful built by America since the end of World War II. Once a recipient of U.S. development assistance, the ROK has become one of the most competitive economies in the world, and notably transformed itself from a security consumer to America’s capable and reliable partner in providing

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security to other nations. The 70-year-long alliance has a track record of supporting mutual interests of the two like-minded nations across the Pacific while overcoming challenges and adapting to ever-changing global economic and security environments.

## The Republic of Korea: America's Trusted, Capable Security and Business Partner

The United States and Korea have never been enemies. The two countries' bilateral relationship was forged in the struggles of World War II and, in its aftermath, the struggle against communist aggression from China and Russia. Taking on common challenges has forged a lasting, vibrant relationship between the two longtime allies based on mutual respect and shared values of democracy, human rights, and economic freedom. Today, the two allies support each other, defend each other, and depend on each other.

Also notable is that America's partnership with the Republic of Korea is rooted in people-to-people ties and leading-edge business cooperation led by global companies in both countries. According to The Heritage Foundation's annual *Index of Economic Freedom* that measures a country's overall business environment, South Korea ranks 15th in the world as a "mostly free" economy.<sup>1</sup>

## The Alliance at 70: An Elevated New Beginning

Clearly, the U.S.-ROK alliance has been fulfilling its promises. Yet, both countries can and should do more, given the untapped, unique ways in which to broaden the pragmatic partnership. It is in the clear interest of Seoul and Washington to elevate their partnership to the next level of greater strategic clarity and greater practical engagement. To that end, Congress and the Biden Administration should work together to:

- **Ensure the substantive, not just ceremonial, success of President Yoon Suk Yeol's April 26 state visit to Washington to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the alliance with renewed commitment.** President Yoon has unambiguously underscored the importance of freedom and South Korea's close security and economic alliance with the U.S. by placing "the South Korea-U.S. relationship as [the] foundation" of his foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> President Joe Biden appropriately praised the critical bilateral relationship as reaching "new heights" during his visit to Korea in May last year.

- **Invite President Yoon to address a joint session of Congress to reinforce shared values and highlight the importance of the trilateral ties among Korea, Japan, and the United States.** In his groundbreaking speech on March 1, which outlined a new horizon for elevated partnership between two of the America’s closest allies, President Yoon embraced Japan as a “partner” in tackling global challenges and emphasized that the trilateral cooperation among the three nations “has become more important than ever.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, now is the time for Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, the three key drivers of trans-pacific stability and peace, to act on that steadfastness and elevate the trilateral relationship to the next level by preserving and advancing freedom, especially in light of the menace posed by communist China.
- **Seriously address Seoul’s concerns about the electric vehicle tax credit provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and work out the best practical way forward.** Since its passage on a purely partisan basis in August last year, the IRA has been a source of lingering tension between Washington and Seoul due to the electric vehicle tax rebate based on the domestic content and production requirements. Not a single Republican in the House or Senate voted for the passage of the bill. In fact, the IRA is yet another example of irresponsible, shortsighted legislation whose “green” provisions are the major component of the law that include numerous grants, tax credits, loans, and other government meddling into energy production and usage. Ultimately, conservatives in Congress should not lose sight of the critical necessity of annulling the IRA and should take any necessary legislative steps to ensure the annulment.<sup>4</sup>
- **Make the case for expanding the Group of 7 (G7) to the Group of 8 by inviting the Republic of Korea as a new member.** The G7 countries are democracies and close U.S. treaty allies.<sup>5</sup> Today, the need for the greater effectiveness and unity of the G7 is more pressing than ever before, as the world’s free-market democracies are being confronted by Russia and China, which long ago decoupled themselves from the values of free-market democracy, including the rule of law, openness, and respect for human rights. The ROK, one of the world’s leading free-market democracies, deserves to have a seat in the G7. As ROK foreign minister Park Jin put it, “Korea now envisions an initiative to serve as a ‘Global Pivotal State,’ and we call it ‘GPS.’ We hope that this ‘GPS’ could guide us into the wider world and into a closer

alliance with the United States to contribute to peace, freedom, and prosperity.”<sup>6</sup> Washington should welcome that.

- **Foster greater practical engagement between the Republic of Korea and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).** Last June, President Yoon became the first South Korean president to attend a NATO summit. Strategic and timely opportunities abound for further ROK–NATO engagement, facilitated by the United States. Forging greater pragmatic cooperation between willing allies necessitates forward-looking engagement and fine-tuning the trajectory of the alliance. The U.S. ally South Korea is NATO’s trusted, capable partner, too. It is certainly in the interest of Washington to welcome such a timely interaction between America’s vital Indo–Pacific partner and key transatlantic allies.
- **Encourage the practical participation of South Korea in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI).** In recent years, European countries explored, pursued, and formed various regional cooperation initiatives throughout emerging Central and Eastern Europe, of which the 3SI is one of the most notable and practical, and should be further prioritized. The initiative was launched to promote connectivity among the nations in the regions of the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas, supporting infrastructure, energy, and digital projects.<sup>7</sup> Its significance includes geopolitical, economic, and energy security aspects. From a broader strategic foreign policy perspective, South Korea would be a uniquely capable partner to the U.S. and the 3SI countries in further operationalizing the initiative.
- **Forge a case-by-case strategic partnership to promote values-based global development for the post-pandemic era.** South Korea has become one of the principal U.S. partners in addressing an array of global challenges, as well as in working together on diplomatic opportunities. In the world of development assistance, with its increasing emphasis on the vital role of the private sector in achieving durable economic growth and public health, enhancing U.S.–ROK cooperation presents a unique opportunity. Such a case-by-case partnership would, in turn, reinforce other vital economic and diplomatic linkages between the two trade and investment partners. On that front, Washington should welcome and support South Korea’s bid to host the World Expo 2030 in Busan that will showcase the power of free enterprise and innovation.

## The U.S.-ROK Alliance in Action: Fulfilling Its Promise, and More to Come

The Republic of Korea is one of the best examples of an ally putting its alliance with the United States into action. Since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty 70 years ago, time and time again, South Korea has proven to be a reliable and steadfast U.S. ally in dealing with many challenges. Throughout many trying and difficult times over the past seven decades, South Korea has demonstrated its willingness and capacity to work with the U.S. toward shared goals. Now is the time for Washington and Seoul to build on that steadfastness and notch up the pivotal partnership to the next level and advance the proven alliance into coming decades.

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## Endnotes

1. Anthony B. Kim, *2023 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), <http://www.heritage.org/index>.
2. Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "South Korean President-Elect Yoon Suk-yeol Unveils Foreign Policy Goals," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/14/south-korea-president-interview/> (accessed March 7, 2023).
3. "Yoon Calls Japan 'Partner' in Tackling Security, Economic Challenges," *Yonhap*, March 1, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230301002451315> (accessed March 7, 2023).
4. Daren Bakst and Richard Stern, "Combat the Inflation Reduction Act's Central Planning," *Jewish Policy Center*, Winter 2023, <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2023/01/05/combat-the-inflation-reduction-acts-central-planning/> (accessed March 7, 2023).
5. The G7—consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and the United States—was founded in 1973 in the midst of a then-unprecedented oil-price shock, stagflation, and the need for unity among the world's largest industrial democracies when the Soviet Union appeared to be winning the Cold War. The group meets annually to discuss shared global security issues and economic matters.
6. Opening Speech by Park Jin, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, roundtable hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 12, 2022, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5689/view.do?seq=319587&page=1](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5689/view.do?seq=319587&page=1) (accessed March 7, 2023).
7. The 12 countries of the initiative are Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.