



The Benefits of the US–South Korea Alliance Beyond Deterring North Korea

By Tongfi Kim | 10 September 2021

Key Issues

- The US–South Korea alliance has restrained the two countries from taking risky actions against North Korea.
- The US–South Korea alliance has contributed to a better relationship between South Korea and Japan.
- The US–South Korea alliance and the US military bases in South Korea raise the strategic value of South Korea to China.

Deterring North Korea is arguably the most mentioned function of the US–South Korea alliance although it has been given less emphasis under the Moon Jae-in administration, as evidenced by the [US–ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement](#) issued in May 2021. This policy brief focuses on other major roles the alliance plays in international relations.

Deterring North Korea from attacking the South remains important even though South Korea’s conventional military capabilities are far superior to those of North Korea. After all, North Korea regularly engages in provocations against South Korea. Unlike South Korea, Pyongyang possesses nuclear weapons. The politically convenient narrative that exclusively focuses on the alliance’s deterrence and defence against North Korea, however, fails to capture other

important functions the alliance has fulfilled in its history.

Modern military alliances play various roles, including their effects on domestic politics and economic relations. There are also issues that may be difficult for policymakers to discuss publicly for diplomatic reasons. Most importantly, the US–South Korea alliance has restrained both countries from taking risky actions against North Korea. Talking about an iron-clad alliance against a common adversary is easy and good alliance politics. In contrast, restraining the ally is hard to publicly discuss with sugar-coating. After explaining this neglected but essential aspect of the alliance, the brief will discuss two other roles the alliance has played: first, it has generally contributed to a better (or less bad) relationship between South Korea and Japan; second, the

alliance and the US military bases in South Korea raise the strategic value of South Korea for China.

Allies restraining each other

Military alliances are typically considered to be tools for fighting a war or intimidating other states. Academic research, however, has shown that alliances also restrain their members from taking actions that harm the respective interests of alliance partners. Managing or restricting the allies' freedom of action is indeed a central goal of states in alliances. As historian Paul Schroeder pointed out decades ago, some alliances were actually formed to manage allies rather than to deal with external adversaries. This desire to manage allies is not limited to cases where allies are directly threatened by one another (as in the case of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941). When a country has an obligation to enter a military conflict on behalf of its ally, as in the US–South Korea mutual defence treaty, it has a strong reason to prevent the ally from taking risky actions. Military allies often have strong mutual dependence, albeit seldom symmetrical. This creates incentives for them to listen to each other more seriously than without an alliance. Thus, allies often try and succeed in restraining one another.

Back in 1953, when the United States signed the mutual defence treaty with South Korea, Washington's primary goal was to restrain South Korea. South Korean President Rhee Syngman was sabotaging the negotiations for the armistice of the Korean War. US President Dwight [Eisenhower accepted Rhee's request](#) for a mutual defence treaty in exchange for Rhee's cooperation to stop the war. In order to discourage South Korea's adventurism, the United States carefully limited its defence commitment, and the alliance placed the South Korean troops under the operational control of the US commander in Korea. Peacetime control of South Korean troops was transferred back to the country in 1994, but the return of wartime operational control, which the two sides already agreed upon in 2006, has been repeatedly postponed. Wartime operational control is popularly discussed in relation to the deterrence against North Korea, but the restraining function of the operational control should not be neglected.

The Northern Limit Line (NLL), a de facto maritime boundary between the two Koreas in the Yellow Sea, also began as a tool to restrain South Korea. The boundary was unilaterally imposed by the US-led United Nations Command in South Korea after the Korean War; North Korea has challenged the NLL since the 1970s and declared its own demarcation line in 1999. Since North Korea has carried out several naval skirmishes against South Korea over the NLL, one might assume that the line was drawn as a defensive line against North Korea. However, the United States imposed the NLL originally to prevent South Korea from venturing further north.

Until the early 1990s, restraining South Korea was more important than restraining the United States. The United States had few incentives to attack North Korea until 1993 when the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program erupted. During the Cold War, the United States had taken a risk-averse approach, keeping South Korea from retaliating against North Korean provocations—even after assassination attempts against South Korean presidents. The United States also refrained from retaliating against attacks on its own soldiers: for instance, after North Korean fighter jets shot down a US spy plane over international waters in April 1969, killing all 31 crew members, the Nixon Administration chose not to militarily retaliate although it contemplated various plans of air strikes, including nuclear options.

Restraining the United States became important in the 1990s. Many South Koreans lost appetite for reunification with North Korea after observing the costs of German reunification. South Koreans got very concerned about a US attack on North Korea because of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. South Korean President Kim Young-sam (1993–98) was by no means conciliatory toward North Korea, but he claimed in his memoir that he had persuaded US President Bill Clinton not to attack North Korean nuclear facilities in June 1994. Restraining the United States was even more important to Presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in, who followed a more conciliatory policy toward Pyongyang. These progressive presidents pursued a double goal when making concessions to the United States (for example, Roh sending South Korean troops to Iraq): first, keeping US military

protection; second, getting a voice in the US policy toward North Korea while avoiding getting drawn into a US war against North Korea. This still works both ways: former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recalls in his memoirs that the United States restrained President Lee Myung-bak in 2010, when he wanted to aggressively retaliate against North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.

Japan as an ally of the ally

The antagonistic relationship between South Korea and Japan due to their history is widely known, and pundits and policymakers lament the lack of cooperation between the two East Asian democracies. An important question is whether

and co-operate with one another when they both fear abandonment by their common ally, the United States; but his argument is predicated on the United States being their shared ally.

This conjecture about South Korea's relations with Japan is backed up by academic research: those sharing a common ally are less likely to start military conflicts. Li, Bradshaw, Clary, and Cranmer in their 2017 article "A Three-Degree Horizon of Peace in the Military Alliance Network" show that the pacifying effect extends up to three degrees of separation: "allies, the allies of allies, and the allies of allies of allies enjoy lower rates of military conflict than would be expected otherwise" The US-South Korea alliance places Seoul in a community of states that

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the relationship between these two neighbours would not be worse without their important bilateral alliances with the United States. The answer is, most likely, without the United States as a shared ally. States tend to align their foreign policy with that of their allies, and the US influence on Japanese and South Korean foreign policy is undisputed. Thanks to the alliances, the mutual threat perception of the two neighbours was reduced. While many South Koreans like to ponder the threat of Japan's remilitarization, some Japanese worry about the increasing military capabilities of South Korea. The US alliances with South Korea and Japan effectively neutralise the perceived mutual threats. Moreover, Washington encourages Seoul and Tokyo to improve their relations in the interest of securing the effectiveness of the US forward presence in the region. US scholar Victor Cha in his 1999 book, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, argued that South Korea and Tokyo are more likely to be pragmatic

are allies of the United States, which includes most importantly Japan.

US-South Korea alliance as a booster of South Korea's strategic value to China

The US-South Korea alliance and US bases are of concern to China. On one hand, this concern raises the standing of South Korea in China's strategic calculations and thereby improves Seoul's bargaining position vis-à-vis Beijing. On the other hand, South Korea is caught in the geopolitical competition between the United States and China: while the United States is a treaty ally and security guarantor, China is the largest trading partner.

Beijing demonstrated that it feels threatened by the US-South Korea alliance when it reacted with economic sanctions against South Korea in the wake of Seoul's decision to allow the United States

to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defence system on its territory. While it is debatable whether Seoul would have a better relationship with Beijing if it were not a US ally, it is clear that without it, South Korea would be at the mercy of China, a giant communist neighbour who fought against South Korea in the Korean War.

The US–South Korea alliance is an irritant for China, but it has also kept peace between China and South Korea. The US–South Korea mutual defence treaty makes it difficult for China to militarily coerce South Korea. Without the alliance, China would have wider room for manoeuvre. Chinese dynasties have a long history of attacking and subjugating neighbours like Korea or Vietnam. The latter was attacked in 1979, despite being a fellow communist state.

The US military bases in South Korea hosting about 28,500 troops further enhance the strategic importance of Korea for China. According to the [US Congressional Research Service](#), as of June 2020 South Korea had paid US\$9.7 billion (about 94% of total costs) for new US facilities in the process of consolidating US military presence in the country. These facilities include Camp Humphreys, which has expanded in recent years and become the largest US overseas base. Camp Humphreys is less than 1000 km from Beijing (for comparison, Havana to Washington is about 1800 km).

In sum, the cost–benefit analysis of the alliance is favourable for Korea on the China front as well: South Korea’s bargaining position vis-à-vis China has strengthened—important, for example, in Korea’s maritime boundary dispute with China.

Appreciating the multiple roles of the alliance

In order to discuss the future of the US–South Korea alliance, it is essential to acknowledge that the alliance is not just about deterring North Korea. This should be communicated much clearer to both public opinions in concrete terms and not just in terms of the mantra of ‘shared values’.

Positive alliance rhetoric is an important tool to manage an alliance and increase public support. South Korea and the United States can benefit from diversifying their alliance rhetoric, shifting away from their traditional focus on North Korean threats. At the same time, it is unnecessary to publicise every role the alliance plays. For instance, framing the US–South Korea alliance explicitly against China will do more harm than good, at least at this point. The allies have already developed institutional assets such as Security Consultative Meeting, Senior Economic Dialogue, and Combined Forces Command which make their political, economic, and military collaboration effective. Therefore, robust public support for the alliance is what they should go after.



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