

The Republic of Korea and 2024 NATO Presidential Summit in Washington DC

By Dr. Youngjun Kim

South Korea, formally the Republic of Korea (ROK), is not a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member. Still, as one of the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, it is now among NATO's most important partners. In the Indo-Pacific era, a collaboration of like-minded countries in Europe and the Indo-Pacific is unavoidable. Moreover, it is very much needed to fortify the liberal world order against challenges from authoritarian countries. The Yoon administration has branded South Korea a Global Pivot State. Given the foreign policy implication underlying the new slogan, NATO is a crucial partner beyond traditional ROK allies like the United States and Japan.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is no longer a European problem but a world crisis as a result of its effects on the global supply chain and the threat it poses to the liberal world order. The Republic of Korea, as a key partner to NATO, has imposed sanctions on Russia and supports Ukraine. During the Korean War, North Korea, formally the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), invaded the ROK, and many liberal democratic countries, including European countries, came to the aid of South Korea, even though South Korea was not yet a significant player on the international stage at the time. Due partly to the contribution and sacrifice of liberal democratic countries, South Korea has become a leading economic and cultural power. The South Korean people will never forget the sacrifices the soldiers from these countries made. Thus, the ROK is committed to being an active partner in safeguarding the liberal world order in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and other world regions.

Within the context of ROK commitments to the liberal world order, NATO is an important partner. The ROK-US alliance and trilateral security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan are critical to the defense of the ROK. The ROK-NATO partnership parallels trilateral cooperation but for the defense of liberal democracy in the world order. Within the Indo-Pacific, challenges to liberal democracy abound. North Korea continues to pose an ongoing missile and nuclear threat. Russia and North Korea have revived their old partnership, with Russia inviting North Korea to participate in the Russia-China joint exercises. A security and military partnership between Russia, China, and North Korea will be a nightmare and a game changer for global security architecture. Enhanced relations between these countries, especially in the realms of nuclear weapons, missile technology, and cyber-attacks, would present a significant challenge to liberal democratic countries.

Dr. Youngjun Kim, Professor of International Politics at Korea National Defense University's National Security College, explains that the "Yoon administration has branded South Korea a Global Pivot State. Given the foreign policy implication underlying the new slogan, NATO is a crucial partner beyond traditional ROK allies like the United States and Japan."

In this new Cold War environment, a partnership between NATO and Indo-Pacific countries is not an option but mandatory for the interest of liberal democratic countries. Diplomacy always matters but goes hand-in-hand with deterrence capabilities and security partnerships. The ROK is a leading nation in defense technology, pioneering advancement in artificial intelligence (AI), space assets, cybersecurity, microchip production, and other areas. Regular combined exercises are needed to further develop the security partnership between NATO and the IP4. Ideally, these exercises would be situated between Europe and the Indo-Pacific and include air, sea, land, and cyber components. Moreover, a NATO office in South Korea or Japan would enhance coordination.

Cybersecurity, information sharing, maritime security, space technology, AI, counter-terrorism, and countering weapons of mass destruction are all areas for collaboration between NATO and the IP4. Following the example of the ROK and United Nations Command (UNC) Member States Defense Ministerial Meeting, which South Korea has hosted annually for the last two years, NATO and the IP4 should organize regular ministerial, practitioner-level, and chief-of-service level meetings.

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The 2024 visit of a NATO Defense College delegation to Seoul and Tokyo, which included the college's commandant and 100 high-level military officers, highlights the potential for people-to-people and educational exchanges between NATO and the IP4. For example, the Korea National Defense University could host contingents for its NATO and IP4 counterparts, with successive summits rotating between the IP4 members.

In 2024, the NATO Summit took place in Washington, DC. It was a successful meeting that spoke to the direction of NATO and IP4 collaboration. NATO leaders formally acknowledged the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, noting that developments in the region have a direct impact on Euro-Atlantic security. In the summit's official declaration, NATO leaders emphasized the growing collaboration with the IP4, as well as the European Union, to address common security challenges. The summit highlighted the contributions of NATO's Asia-Pacific partners, like the ROK, to Euro-Atlantic security and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening dialogue and practical cooperation across regions.

In the face of authoritarian aggression, the Republic of Korea was able to maintain its sovereignty with support from the UNC, underscoring the importance of collective security efforts. Similarly, the multilateral efforts of NATO and the IP4 may prove to be an essential mechanism for maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. NATO and IP4 share the same values and face the same challenges. This partnership serves as a guardian of the liberal world order and a potential savior of small nations against aggressive authoritarian states. World War II and the Cold War are over. However, new challenges are coming, and this global partnership will defend the value of human progress. As a beneficiary of the liberal world order, the ROK will be a key partner to NATO and a key player in collaboration between NATO and the IP4.

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