

Security on the Korean Peninsula

Prepared statement by

Scott A. Snyder

*Senior Fellow for Korea Studies and Director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy
Council on Foreign Relations*

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Hearing on Security on the Korean Peninsula

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before this committee on the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. We have just passed the seventieth anniversary of the signing of the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) Mutual Defense Treaty, which marked the beginning of a security alliance “forged in blood” during the Korean War. Throughout the past seventy years, the alliance has evolved to encompass economic cooperation powered by chips, electric batteries, and clean technology, as the threat perceptions of our two countries have expanded in the face of common threats not only on the peninsula, but also regionally and globally.

As like-minded democracies, the scope of common values, interests, and actions that initially bounded the United States and South Korea together to address the North Korean threat now extends to potential revisionist security threats across the Taiwan Strait, in the South China Sea, and from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Likewise, the scope of U.S.-South Korea alliance cooperation extends both to non-traditional security as we cooperate to combat threats against public health, energy security, and climate change and to the growing integration of our economies to ensure supply chain resiliency and maintain leadership in technological innovation and development.

I emphasize the U.S.-South Korea alliance because it is the most promising instrument through which the United States maintains its interest and stake in promoting stability on the Korean Peninsula while also

addressing major threats to security in the Indo-Pacific region. Because the viability of the alliance provides the foundation for U.S. strategy and policy toward security on the peninsula and in the region, please allow me to make a brief comment on the importance of defending the alliance from the emerging internal threat posed by domestic political polarization in our two countries.

My forthcoming book, *The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Why It Might Fail and Why It Must Not*, argues that the risks of a “go it alone” approach to Indo-Pacific security represented by “America First” or “Korea first” policies threaten the longstanding bipartisan consensus and strong public support that the alliance enjoys. There remains a risk that narrow partisan arguments that denigrate or demean our allies and partners might undermine this support. In the United States, arguments against the alliance might revolve around whether allies are paying enough to justify our commitment to defend against a threat “over there.”

In South Korea, there could be arguments that cooperation with North Korea is more important than the alliance with the United States on the one hand or that South Korea cannot rely on the credibility of U.S. defense pledges against North Korea’s nuclear weapons on the other. **In this regard, the determination of Congress to preserve the bipartisan consensus supporting the U.S.-South Korea security alliance is a bulwark against any possible degradation of the effectiveness of the alliance in preserving our mutual security and prosperity.**

The primary security developments facing the United States on the Korean Peninsula today revolve around the implications of the changing geopolitical context on North Korea’s foreign policy and strategic aims, the impact of South Korea’s closer alignment with the United States on the relative priority of North Korea in the context of broader Indo-Pacific issues, and the implications of North Korea’s nuclear declarations for the future of the regime.

The Era of Major Power Rivalry And Its Impact on North Korea’s Foreign Policy

North Korea under Kim Jong Un has consistently pursued its objective of attaining domestic prestige and international legitimacy as a nuclear weapon state. Upon becoming leader, one of Kim’s first acts in 2012 was to enshrine the nuclear legacy of his forefathers into the preamble of the North Korean constitution. Kim dangled the prospect of “complete denuclearization” to win a series of summits with China, South Korea, and the United States under President Donald Trump. But the regime’s internal statements and actions underscore Kim’s quest to illegally gain international recognition as a “responsible nuclear state,” but outside the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

The failure of Kim’s 2019 Hanoi summit with President Trump meant Kim returned home empty-handed. As a result, Kim redirected his diplomatic focus away from the United States, redoubled his missile and nuclear development in response to a hostile external environment, and recentralized his domestic economy. An extended self-quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic weakened North Korea economically, but Kim used the pandemic to demonize foreign influences in the country and reassert political loyalty to himself as the primary condition for survival in an isolated North Korea. The intensification of major power rivalry between the United States and China and the Russian invasion of Ukraine further catalyzed North Korea’s inward focus, created space for Kim’s diplomatic maneuvers, and undermined the effectiveness of UN sanctions.

Kim Jong Un's recent summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin reflects North Korea's geopolitical realities and marks the emergence of Kim's post-COVID foreign policy 2.0. No longer pursuing a sanctions-relieving deal with the United States in exchange for partial denuclearization, Kim's foreign policy 2.0 is marked by a sanctions-defying arms deal with Putin in exchange for tangible Russian military and economic rewards. Kim now faces a more favorable geopolitical environment for growing his nuclear arsenal and burnishing his legitimacy without facing the risks or demands that would come from the United States. And Kim may still hold out hope that his meeting with Putin is only a warm-up for renewed summitry with a reelected President Trump in 2025.

Additionally, paralysis at the UN Security Council resulting from geopolitical rivalry has created new opportunities for North Korea to benefit from global divisions that did not exist prior to the pandemic. Moreover, global sanctions applied to Russia following its invasion of Ukraine expanded the domain of sanctioned countries to include both North Korea and Russia, with the perverse impact of partially relieving North Korea's isolation and expanding Kim's freedom of action.

The main implication of stalemate at the UN Security Council for U.S. policy toward North Korea is the evisceration of an effective UN-centered international sanctions regime, enabling North Korea to engage in nuclear and missile tests with virtual impunity from political censure and with assurance that the country will face no further tangible costs for its actions. The nine major UN Security Council resolutions punishing North Korea for missile tests since 2006 have been undermined. China and Russia brazenly supply North Korea through the back door of bilateral transfers while the UN front door remains firmly shut. Moreover, North Korea has adapted its myriad sanctions evasion practices since the high point of UN sanctions pressure in 2017 to render the sanctions ineffective.

Thus, the sanctions regime against North Korea is in desperate need of a revamp, even if such a regime will not stand on the foundation of UN Security Council resolutions. **Instead, the United States should pursue the establishment of a broad multilateral sanctions regime among like-minded actors in a fashion similar to that of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)**, a multilateral effort established in 2006 to interdict illicit North Korean commercial transfers. By building a coalition of the willing, the United States can sustain some pressure on North Korea while attempting to bypass Chinese and Russian non-cooperation through the pursuit of secondary sanctions that hold entities with exposure to the U.S. banking system accountable for their assistance to North Korea.

The reestablishment or revitalization of a multilateral sanctions regime targeting North Korea is necessary but will not be sufficient unless it is accompanied by an updated analysis of North Korea's pattern of external resource procurements and the ability to hold accountable entities physically located in states not participating in the multilateral regime. For instance, the United States, Japan, and South Korea have already announced cooperative measures to monitor and interdict North Korean earnings from cybertheft operations undertaken by the North Korean government. Such efforts need to be pursued with both greater urgency and expanded scope.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration should be ready to engage in diplomacy with North Korea where possible. The securing of the release of Private Travis King underscores the necessity and value of

maintaining diplomatic channels and openness to dialogue, even while prospects for denuclearization negotiations remain low. Prospects for broader diplomacy will remain poor until the North sends a clear signal indicating its willingness to talk.

U.S.-South Korean Alignment on Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Impact on Policy Toward North Korea

The second geostrategic development with implications for policy toward North Korea is the decision by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to align South Korea's policies toward China more closely with the United States. President Yoon's closer alignment with the United States is reflected in his government's decision to adopt the U.S. strategic framework for the region by issuing South Korea's first Indo-Pacific strategy. The adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy reflects the broadening of the scope of U.S.-South Korean strategic coordination beyond a sole focus on North Korea to include more active coordination on China. Effective policy coordination toward China will require a significant investment of time, effort, and resources by both governments. But in the course of expanding the scope of coordination to include China policy, the importance of effectively addressing North Korea's nuclear development must not be lost in the shuffle.

In addition, the Yoon administration's courageous effort to stabilize relations with Japan and the deepening of trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea have implications for policy toward North Korea. The institutionalization of trilateral coordination among the United States, Japan, and South Korea will strengthen the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, enhance real-time monitoring and responses to North Korean missile launches, and align trilateral public diplomacy toward North Korea on issues such as human rights and its destabilizing military development, all while enabling the expansion of a values-based investment, development, and deterrence strategy against Chinese aggression across the Indo-Pacific region.

Alongside the deepening of trilateral cooperation, there is also the development of a tit-for-tat dynamic between rival coalitions among the United States, Japan, and South Korea on the one hand and China, North Korea, and Russia on the other hand. The development of such a dynamic makes it more likely that North Korea will receive a measure of protection and support from China and Russia while diminishing the likelihood of positive interactions between North Korea and the United States, Japan, or South Korea. One ironic impact is that the development of rival coalitions eases North Korea's isolation and deepens its dependency on China and Russia in return for greater protection from UN sanctions.

Deepening U.S.-China geostrategic differences will continue to offer Kim Jong Un solace rather than restraint despite the limited shared interest that the United States and China have in North Korea's denuclearization. **The United States and South Korea should resist the urge to subordinate North Korea as an issue on the U.S.-South Korea policy agenda with China or to think about North Korea simply as a subcomponent of the China challenge. Instead, the United States and South Korea should pursue an approach to China built on a U.S.-South Korea alignment borne of common values but that attempts to compartmentalize North Korea as an area where both sides hold shared interests despite U.S.-China strategic competition.** Such an approach should exploit differences within the emerging China-North Korea-Russia coalition and encourage Chinese efforts to maintain restraint on the worst of North Korea's destabilizing behavior.

For instance, China may be dissatisfied with Kim's warming relations with Putin, but Chinese leader Xi Jinping has both a close relationship with Putin and sufficient leverage over North Korea that he is unlikely to be drawn into a fruitless competition for influence over Kim. The biggest risk inherent in the warming of relations between Kim and Putin is the possibility that Kim might misread warming relations as a justification for ignoring perceived Chinese restraints on North Korea's ability and willingness to pursue a seventh nuclear test. The United States and South Korea should make efforts to separate China from North Korea and Russia rather than allowing rising U.S.-China competition to force Xi into closer alignment with Kim and Putin.

U.S.-South Korean Alliance Coordination and North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Development

A third dimension of the international security challenge posed by North Korea's enshrinement of its nuclear status in the regime's constitution is that it further deepens the intractability of the North Korean nuclear issue and makes it possible for the North to use its nuclear program as a poison pill meant to guarantee Kim's primary objective of regime survival. Rather than enhancing the regime's legitimacy and survivability, however, it highlights the dangers to global security of Kim Jong Un's "I survive or we all die" quest for absolute security.

North Korea's threats to preemptively use tactical nuclear weapons against South Korea have generated debates within South Korea over its own acquisition of nuclear weapons independent of the United States, giving hope to North Korea that its nuclear threats might generate unprecedented tensions in the U.S.-South Korea alliance. At the April 2023 summit between presidents Biden and Yoon, the United States and South Korea responded to South Korean public support for an autonomous nuclear capability with the Washington Declaration, which pledged closer nuclear planning and coordination through the newly established U.S.-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group. At that time, President Biden personally underscored U.S. policy that North Korea's use of nuclear weapons would result in the end of their regime and committed to closely consult with the South Korean president on such matters. The United States has increased the rotation of U.S. nuclear-capable strategic assets to South Korea, which included the first visit of a U.S. nuclear submarine to a South Korean port in over four decades.

The promulgation of the Washington Declaration and subsequent measures have been moderately successful in assuaging South Korean concerns about the credibility of the U.S. pledge to defend South Korea from North Korea's nuclear threats. **Through ongoing nuclear planning consultations at various levels, the United States and South Korea must continue to bridge the gap between the global view of extended deterrence through which the United States pledges to uphold global nonproliferation norms while responding to North Korean nuclear threats and the peninsular view which focuses on the imbalance between a North Korea that has nuclear weapons and South Korea that does not. Another step that the United States should take as part of this process involves the training of South Korean military units on how to implement effective responses in the event of the detonation of a North Korean nuclear device on South Korean soil.** Such training would provide South Korea with its own dedicated nuclear response capability and would save the precious hours it might take for U.S. units to arrive in South Korea to carry out a response to a nuclear disaster.

Conclusion

North Korea's decades-long pursuit of nuclear weapons has gradually turned the regime from a peninsular to global security threat. The rise of major power rivalry has complicated the already slim prospects for resolving the threat and has provided additional protection for North Korea, which is the source of the threat. Kim Jong Un's quest for regime survival and legitimacy has exacerbated an intractable and potentially catastrophic situation that has both peninsular and global implications. The international community must seek levers that catalyze the pace of change inside North Korea and take measures to limit the truly daunting consequences that may come if Kim Jong Un indeed takes steps to export his own insecurity to the rest of the world.