

DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

Podcast Transcript

MG Brian N. Wolford, COL Marvin Haynes, COL James “Cowboy” Landreth,
COL Eric Hartunian, and COL Rich Butler

“Recognizing the Increasing Importance of the US-ROK Alliance”

The essay this podcast episode is based on sets the stage for the Strategic Studies Institute’s research on the growing importance of South Korea to the US alliance system and security objectives across the Indo-Pacific region, provides reasons why South Korea may become commensurate with Japan as the region’s primary US ally, and proposes ways the United States should leverage this reality to maximize this relationship and maintain a free and open Pacific. This important analysis challenges the orthodox view of South Korea as a self-contained problem set with little relevance to other regional security issues and explains its underappreciated connections to regional stability.

Read the article here: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol53/iss2/15/>

Email usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

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Stephanie Crider (Host)

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I have US Army War College Strategic Research and Analysis Department Director Colonel Eric Hartunian and the US Army War College China Land Power Studies Center Director Colonel Rich Butler in the studio today. Joining us virtually from Korea is Marine Corps Major General Brian N. Wolford, United Nations Command U5, Combined Forces Command C5, and United States Forces Korea [USFK] J5. Also joining us virtually from Korea are Colonel Marvin Haynes, the deputy J5 at USFK, and Colonel James “Cowboy” Landreth, the US Chief at Combined Forces Command C5 Strategy and C5 Policy Divisions. Hartunian’s SRAD Directors Corner article titled “Recognizing the Increasing Importance of the US-ROK Alliance” was published in the Summer 2023 issue of *Parameters*.

Colonel Hartunian, over to you, sir.

Colonel Eric Hartunian

Last summer, in *Parameters*, I wrote a short piece that argues for the increasing importance of the alliance to broader Northeast Asia’s security concerns. Given the long-standing alliance and the close ties we’ve had with the ROK related to on-pen [on the Korean peninsula] security, how would you characterize the ROK’s views on the evolution of the alliance?

Major General Brian N. Wolford

So, over time, things have changed quite a bit here on the pen in the last, just in the last 30 years. More recently, probably in the last 8 to 10 years, the security environment in the region has changed dramatically. A lot of it’s tied to what China is doing in the South China Sea, but also, a lot of it ties to North Korea and their pursuit of better rockets and nuclear weapons. That has changed fundamentally the risk that is owned here on the pen. No longer does South Korea own all the risk when it comes to North Korea; the region and, in some cases, the world, owns the risk. As they continue to develop their missile technology, they’re able to range most, if not all, of the capitals of the alliance,

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DECISIVE POINT PODCAST – EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

MG Brian N. Wolford, COL Marvin Haynes, COL James “Cowboy” Landreth, COL Eric Hartunian, and COL Rich Butler
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not just the US and the ROK, [but also] the regional partners, Japan, all the [United Nations Command] UNC capitals. So, what that’s done is it has fundamentally changed how people view a conflict on the pen. Something that would start here locally on the pen could very quickly develop into a regional or a worldwide war, depending on the actions of North Korea. Over time, that has reevaluated how we view things here. Specifically, it isn’t just about the ROK-US alliance and what happens here on the pen. Even the ROK starts to take more of a regional view of things.

In the last year or two, they have militarily participated in activities Cobra Gold in Thailand, Balikatan in the Philippines, and also a deployment down to Australia. So, they’re also taking a more regional view of things. President Yoon [Suk Yeol] has expressed a desire, 1.) to put more emphasis on United Nations Command as well as the trilateral efforts with Japan across the [diplomatic, informational, military, economic or] DIME spectrum. Of course, we’re interested in the military portion of that, but over time—over the last couple of years—lots of efforts have been made with Japan—the closest, I’ll say, “ally,” here in the region—not just because they own UNC-Rear but also because we rely on Japan for a lot of the support for any contention that may occur on the pen. I’ll hand it over to Colonel Haynes to see if he wants to add anything.

Colonel Marvin Haynes

I think the ROKs are fairly delayed in realizing the potential of what they can offer both to the region and the world and, frankly, what that gives them in return with regard to national standing and how they’re treated by other countries. I think that’s going to continue to evolve faster with conservatives in power. There’s a political aspect to all of this, of course. I think that side of the Korean political spectrum clearly understands that the world has changed [and] that the region has changed significantly and that they have, potentially, a greater part to play in all of that.

Colonel James “Cowboy” Landreth

As South Korea, the country and the government, seeks to have a greater influence not only on the pen but in Northeast Asia, they realized that actions that happen on the peninsula have reverberations throughout Northeast Asia and other countries. From my position, it feels that there is more relationships, warmer relationships. So, to your question about the evolution of the alliance, I think there is converging pathways with Japan, Korea, the US, and other allies. It takes a coalition to get the job done.

Wolford

The mutual defense treaty we have doesn’t name an enemy, which is actually quite good because of the burgeoning relationship between North Korea and Russia in the last six or eight months, as well as the ties to China. And they’re not just direct ties to China here on the pen but, again, what China does in the South China Sea. They’re all interrelated. Again, our defense alliance doesn’t name an enemy; we defend each other regardless of what the threat is.

China can hinder activities on the pen directly and indirectly— even without causing a major international conflict somewhere else in the region.

Colonel Rich Butler

The ROK military and the way that they’re reorganizing themselves because of their own internal demographics (and how they’re building a much more coherent joint fighting force that’s integrated with the US right from the get-go) sends also a very strong intention of what it means to be an ally among allies and inside of a coalition. I think that plays into how they’re going to work through their foreign policy and their military policy, as well.

Wolford

And their foreign policy—President Yoon wanting to improve relations with Japan, but also bolster of the United Nations Command—that’s a recognition that’s well timed and a recognition of how the world would support South Korea if there’s any conflict on the pen and how important it is. Ukraine has brought that to the forefront that support from the United Nations Command is a lot more than just forces that they send but [also] materiel. The right material at the right time at the right place is arguably just as important as the right unit at the right place at the right time.

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Hartunian

And I think that goes both ways. I think it’s really important to recognize the strength of the ally that we have. They’re [an] economic powerhouse. They’ve got one of the largest ports in the world. They have a defense industry that exports to other nations. So, their ability to not only contribute to security and stability in Northeast Asia but globally, as an ally, is really critical, and I think something that we can’t lose sight of.

Wolford

Well, I’ll build on that. Because we’re such close allies with South Korea, things that they’re exporting are inherently interoperable with what we’re selling. The best thing is if you sell your own stuff around the world—of foreign military sales—but the next best thing is having an ally sell something compatible. And it bolsters their industrial base. And their industrial base for both ground and sea operations is phenomenal and a huge force multiplier around the world, and for anything that may happen here on the pen.

Hartunian

How would you characterize the ROK both as a military and as a state—as a nation—how would you characterize their views on exporting security outside of the peninsula?

Wolford

You already hit on it. Depending on who you talk to, you’re the- they’re the 6th, 8th, 10th largest economy in the world. Regardless, President Yoon wants to become an even larger economic power across the world. So that’s really an economic question. That’s simply a cog in the machine for economics, and exporting foreign military sales is just one way to do that. We support that because we see mutually beneficial benefits to that because it is compatible equipment with what we have, he’s selling to our allies. And that’s good. And then anything that brings up their economy—first-world nation, first-world capabilities—gives us the ability to quickly mobilize or quickly support operations, whether it’s in heightened competition or in crisis.

Haynes

That’s exactly right. I don’t think they see this as exporting security. They look at those elements from a purely economic perspective. Where it does spill over into security, frankly, is that it gives folks actually a lot of confidence in the equipment being fielded here. To know that countries are fielding their entire forces with Korean-produced artillery and tanks, that does a lot for folks here who worry about their security. They have this huge enemy perched on the northern border, an enemy that they’ve fought before, and in a lot of people’s lifetime. They actually worry about security issues here, unlike a lot of places where the threat seems further away. And so, things like things like Poland’s purchases [and] Australia’s purchases—these are things that bolster not only the industry and bolster not only the “E” in DIME but actually give folks some confidence in their military, a military that’s dealt with some issues over the past decade or so, in maintaining the public trust.

Landreth

As you know, the combined Forces Command is the war-fighting command. So, to your question, I don’t think they export security. Their No. 1 priority is the will of the people and the security of the people and the security of the country. So, if they do export products or materiel, it always is one degree of separation back to [the] security of the country. And then slightly behind that would be to maintain [a] good alliance and coalition throughout the region. So, it always comes back to security.

Wolford

Going back to what it means to have an ally also exporting doing foreign military sales—it’s not just on the pragmatic piece where some of the parts and the ability to repair it is similar, if not the same, to what we have, but the equipment is also similar for operations.

DECISIVE POINT PODCAST – EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

MG Brian N. Wolford, COL Marvin Haynes, COL James “Cowboy” Landreth, COL Eric Hartunian, and COL Rich Butler
“Recognizing the Increasing Importance of the US-ROK Alliance”

If we ever had to use some of their equipment, it's very similar to the equipment that we have, and it means interchangeability much faster, which is terribly important. If you get a piece of equipment and you don't know how to use it—ammunition is a perfect example. You can expend a lot more ammunition attempting to achieve the same effect if you're not qualified on the piece of equipment. Whereas, if you're qualified on it, you can have much more effects faster, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy on logistics.

Butler

We're about seven or eight months on since the initial Yoon-Biden Summit in DC and seven or six months on [from] the Camp David Summit. Can you describe a little bit about (in the military lane) the changes you're seeing coming out of those in terms of working with the ROKs on making sure that we're bounding extended deterrence correctly, keeping up pace with conventional deterrence, and working more thoughtfully with the Japanese?

Wolford

It starts with the [Washington Declaration](#) that came out, which is the beginning of a capstone of something has been occurring over the last, seven to eight years—the change in security environment, the recognition of North Korea as a global threat with nuclear weapons. The *Washington Declaration* codified our extended deterrence as we move forward, and we begin to adapt our plans for understanding what it means to have a nuclear threat and extending our nuclear umbrella to protect the ROK. But all that means that there has to be changes. Those changes include the ROK is going to stand up ROK [Strategic Command or] STRATCOM, which is going to be a command that they're going to bring together that's going to be able to help work with counter-nuclear operations, conventional nuclear integration, and conventional support to nuclear operations. And how do they fit into the puzzle? And we can be synergetic in our efforts against North Korea should they use nuclear weapons. And all that's evolving over time. There's also recognition in the region. Again, with President Yoon on trilateral with Japan, how does Japan fit into it?

North Korea is an existential threat to South Korea. They're an existential threat to Japan. And there is mutual interest on how to best continue to deter North Korea from using nuclear weapons, which would be bad for everybody. This is evolving over time. This is something that's going to probably take several more years to finally get everything all put together. The *Washington Declaration* referenced the Nuclear Consultative Group, which is our effort to work with the Republic of Korea and how they will participate in extended deterrence for what the United States brings to the fight on the strategic weapon side.

Haynes

We all understand, intuitively, that this is complicated. We look at things over the course of the last few decades and we think, okay, why can't you just work this out? We're forgetting that these two peoples have a 2,000-year history and nearly that long, frankly, with military interactions going way back to 600 AD. So, there's a lot of depth to the feelings and the emotion that goes along with everything that's happened in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From the US perspective, of course, we have a tendency to make allies of the of the folks that we fight. I wouldn't say that's normal anywhere else in the world, and it seems to be a unique function of a certain few countries, with the United States being one of them. Doing this as a (foreign area officer or) FAO in this region for 20 years now, I've seen multiple attempts. We are just very ham-fisted when it comes to dealing with these two countries.

“You two, go into a room and don't come out until you're friends,” is the approach that we take. Whereas, it has to be a lot more nuanced. We have to urge them forward where they're willing to go forward [and] prod them a little bit where they're not, or where they're hesitant. But we can't push them beyond the means because what you're going to get from both countries is a very nationalistic pushback. And we seem to push it too far each time.

What we've seen out of President Yoon over the past two years has been remarkably different, frankly, than what we've seen in the prior couple of decades when it comes to dealing with-with the Japanese. There is a huge portion

DECISIVE POINT PODCAST – EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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“Recognizing the Increasing Importance of the US-ROK Alliance”

of the population here, almost 50 percent, that still holds deep-seated resentment towards the Japanese period—not just the Japanese military, not just Japanese government, but Japan. Not all of that is genuine, but after a while, it doesn't matter. It's there, and once you drop that into political discourse, it's hard to back out of. So, President Yoon is stuck fighting all that. He is looking forward, whereas this, resentment and this feeling is really backward-looking, but backward-looking to achieve a political purpose. And I think, ultimately, he'll be effective, in moving the ball forward. He's trying to move the relationships forward, not to be so backward-looking—or to pull the things from the from the past that are that are useful for the future. That's a really thin tightrope for him to walk, politically, here in Korea. And we see that play out almost in anything that comes up trilaterally. There's a hesitance that is driven by political concerns. That said, those political concerns are real. We have to keep those in mind as we move forward and as we deal with both countries.

Landreth

I think the extended deterrence has always been there. It is defined differently throughout the decades, but from 1953 (and even before that), extended deterrence has been in the form of a floor of 28,500 soldiers—our sons and daughters on the peninsula—to back the alliance. It is in the form of 22 different United Nations member states who have, since 1953, given all, some, or none, in order for the alliance and to the extended deterrence. It is in the form US bombers, coming onto the peninsula and landing [for the] first time in several decades. It is the nuclear subs and carriers who are coming into port in the country. Those are physical manifestations. And I would say, like the boss said, that the *Washington Declaration* is just a codified additional physical manifestation of the extended deterrence. And it all comes down to, from the warfighter level, it's trust, and there is no light between the ROK forces and the US forces. Commitment to the alliance is ironclad.

Hartunian

Sir, I want to thank you and your team for laying that out for us. and I think that's a really great place to end this—this idea of a very complex environment and relationship and this feeling of mutual trust and the idea that the alliance continues to make these incremental steps towards progress. But it is progress. And I think the alliance is in good shape and really trending in the right direction.

Thank you, sir, for your time and your team's extensive knowledge on this topic. We really appreciate hearing your thoughts.

Wolford

Thank you. And you hit it on the head it the head. The alliance evolves as the situation changes, and evolution is a mark of an aware, a relevant, and a cognizant alliance, and that's where we're going. So, thanks for taking the time to talk with us.

Host

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