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Effects of the Development of Korea's Self-Reliant National Defense in the US-ROK-Japan  
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*Effects of the Development of Korea's Self-Reliant National Defense in the US-ROK-Japan Alliance*

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## **Resumen**

Para resumir las ambiciones de EE. UU., la República de Corea y Japón hacia la región del Indo-Pacífico, una alianza trilateral con una estrecha cooperación militar/económica y amenazas y objetivos comunes establecidos alineados por sus posturas políticas son esenciales para progresar adecuadamente en sus ambiciones. A pesar de las necesidades de la alianza para los integrantes, existen discusiones y pasos para realizar la sedimentación de las amenazas mutuas, objetivos y nivel de desarrollo militar. A la luz de la propuesta de Yoon Suk Yeol al comienzo de su presidencia sobre un Corea del Sur armada con sus propias propiedades nucleares, la doctrina chaju kukbang complementa la demora en el establecimiento de esta alianza prometedor. Por lo tanto, Corea del Sur debe sopesar sus beneficios y perjuicios en cada área pendiente de discusión en la implementación de la alianza trilateral, teniendo en mente sus propias ambiciones militares.

## **Palabras clave**

Alianza trilateral, Indo- Pacífico, cooperación militar, ROK nuclear, doctrina autosuficiente

### **Abstract**

To sum up the ambitions of the US-ROK-Japan towards the Indo-Pacific region, a trilateral alliance with close military/economic cooperation and established common threats and objectives aligned with their political stances are essential to progress adequately their ambitions. Despite the necessities of the alliance for the members, there are discussions and steps to be made for the sedimentation of the mutual threats, objectives, and level of military development. In light of Yoon Suk Yeol's proposition of a nuclear-armed ROK at the start of his presidency, this chaju kukbang doctrine complements the delay in the establishment of this alliance. Thus, South Korea should weigh its benefits and detriments in each pending area of discussion.

### **Keywords**

Indo-Pacific, Nuclear ROK, Military cooperation, Trilateral Agreement, self-reliant doctrine

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ROK-Japan's complicated relationship originates from the end of Japanese colonialism in Korea back in 1945. The interaction between the countries has progressed to further disagreements in themes that vary from the historic mistreatment under Japanese colonialism to territorial feuds. Thus, it resulted in the Japan-ROK alliance reaching its lowest point through the mutual removal of the favorable trade list, constraints in major companies' trades, and the limitation of military information cooperation. The most notable one is the limitation of an effective trilateral Japan-ROK-US alliance, which is essential for security in the Indo-Pacific region. The alliance presents mutual benefits for all parties involved, not only improving trade but also aiding in the complementation of their military aspects, cooperation on their common threats, and progress towards common goals. However, the rising trend amongst South Korean presidents known as *chaju kukbang* (자주국방) adds to the inapplicability of the trilateral alliance. Translated as a self-relational national defense, Moon's attempt to create an aircraft carrier fleet and Yoon's recent proposal to obtain its own nukes are both examples of incorporation of this doctrine.

These plans have called into question the ROK relationship with the United States and Japan, as this would mean the ROK removal from the U.S.'s nuclear umbrella and further damage the relationship with Japan. This research paper highlights the importance of the trilateral relationship for the ROK and answers whether the continued pursuit of the ROK's self-relational national defense will damage the possibility of the alliance. It will identify potential approaches that the Yoon administration should take as he tries to promote the alliance with the United States and Japan with the innovation of nuclear weapons in mind.

## Materiales y Métodos

As a manner of correctly analyzing the adequate steps that the ROK should take towards their diplomatic approach, there is a necessity of first analyzing the necessity of a trilateral alliance for the ROK as it increasingly becomes a priority for the Indo-Pacific region and the ROK. After constructing the basis of the relevancy of the Indo-Pacific region for the ROK, a national analysis is directed to consider adequate hypothetical steps for the Yoon administration, based on its current diplomatic situation. The essay splits the mutual importance of the trilateral alliance for the ROK into the following three sections: military influence, homogenous goals, and threats. Focusing on the military aspects, primary reports of quantitative military economical values indicate the preceding military influence that the three countries hold in the region and the opportunity in becoming a dominant force in the Indo-Pacific region. The cross-comparison of qualitative diversification of military necessities in each country further demonstrates the benefit of a mutually complementing alliance. To do so, an in-depth analysis of data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's report on Arms-Production Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Region is needed to evaluate the quantitative data of the military influence in the Indo-Pacific region and the necessity of the trilateral alliance. Addressing the homogenous goals as a priority for the alliance, the national position and ambitions of the ROK, US, and Japan are required to evaluate where their political interests overlap. Therefore, the essay cross-examines statements given by the leaders at diverse summits, e.g. the Nato Summit, the East Asia Summit, and the Phnom Penh Statement, to establish the goals that the trilateral alliance priorities. An analysis of previous and present cooperation is required to further highlight and support the efficiency of using the alliance as a medium to reach these goals. Correlated to the homogenous national goals, the examination of statements in multilateral summits points out these states' mutual threats, specifically towards China and DPRK. The essay compares the previous military trilaterally cooperated measures taken with the persistent diplomatic struggles of Korea in interacting with its allies counterparts to highlight the necessity of an effective trilateral alliance and the effectiveness of a coordinated approach. Throughout expanding the benefits of the alliance for the three nations, the essay highlights the required areas of development to implement a functioning alliance.

After understanding the benefits of the ROK to join the trilateral alliance and the areas of discussion, it is crucial to understand the influence that the chaju kukbang doctrine of Yoon

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holds on the implementation of the alliance. For a better grasp on the context of the incarnation of the doctrine in the ROK, a quantitative analysis of the aircraft carrier project and potential national nuclear program under Moon Jae-In's and Yoon Suk-Yeol's presidencies respectively, is needed. Understanding the context of the ROK and the arguments supporting these approaches addresses the possibility of balancing the ROK's national nuclear ambitions while considering Yoon's diplomatic approach, which aligns with the trilateral alliance. Approaching this multi-faced situation, the essay focuses mainly on the existing diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Japan and elaborates on hypothetical scenarios with possible consequences of the ROK progressing its military ambitions, having its current context and nuclear agreements in the mind.

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The approach that the essay entails toward this complex diplomatic situation compresses the multi-dimension into a singular perspective of the ROK. Given this condensed perspective, it portrays both significance and limitations in its findings. The limitation of this study lies in the focus of the study, which consisted majorly of the analysis of ROK's situation. The constraint restricts the outside party's take in the enforcement of the trilateral alliance. However, the article's strength lies in its same weakness, as the focus allows the rigorous data collection of quantitative and qualitative measures to obtain an in-depth understanding of the context, the complications, and the future of the singular party. It further allows the consideration of various factors aside from diplomacy to grasp the currently relevant approach of the ROK. Progressing with such an approach even further, future investigations should continue with not a singular-cause analysis but widen their scope of catalysts in evaluating their singular party behavior, keeping up with relevant data past March 2023. Additional investigations could expand further from Yoon's administration and towards the continuing trend of military ambitions of the ROK and long-term effects on its diplomatic approach.

## Resultados

### Military necessity

The foremost reason for the successful cementation of the alliance is the ability of nations to attain a higher level of influence and power within the Indo-Pacific region. According to the Arms-Production Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Region report, aside from the military spending of India and China, South Korea and Japan follow as the highest spenders in the Indo-Pacific region; the ROK ranks 2nd as a supplier, 4th as an importer, and 4th in most inversion with \$50,227 in the year 2021, while Japan ranks 6th in military importation and 3rd in spending in the year 2021, with \$54,124 in total (Béraud-Sudreau, 14). The joint forces from these nations alone make up 20% of the total military spending in the Indo-Pacific region. The North American hegemony, the United States, is an essential military asset in Southern Asia, making up large percentage of armory imports in the following countries: Australia (69%), Indonesia (23%), Japan (97%), South Korea (58%), and Taiwan (100%) (Béraud-sudreau 14). Crunching up all these numbers, cooperation between these three states enhances the military, economic, and even diplomatic influence in the region. This large military influence in the Indo-Pacific region holds relevance in the trilateral alliance, as it further benefits the countries in reaching their objectives in the region.

Aside from the augmentation of military mass and influence, the cooperation among these nations contributes to building on each other's necessities to their alliance. According to the report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute referencing Béraud-Sudreau, Japan, specializes in the development of uncrewed surface vehicles (USV) and uncrewed underwater vehicles (UUV) using its specialty in artificial intelligence and the research by the Acquisition Technology and Logistic Agency (ATLA), showing promising results and a large amount of investment in AI (Béraud-sudreau 21). In contrast to the development of naval technologies, Japan has difficulty developing weapons because their production is expensive, produces low comparative profits, and lags behind in the competition on the global market due to their low investment in the military and the self-imposed export bans they have put in place. ROK testifies to developing from an armory-import dependent country to licensed production, through companies such as Hanwha Aerospace and Korea Aerospace Industries is close to self-reliant levels. Unlike Japan, the ROK Navy aims to expand its naval autonomous systems engineering, which is far from completion. Hypothetically, both countries could trade based on their opportunity advantages, satisfy their

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necessities, and grow their military inventories through this trade. However, in order for both countries to reach sufficient military resources, they are still reliant on military exports from the US. The ROK-US mutual security treaty (1958) demonstrates this reliance clearly, as the ROK lacks any nuclear weapons of its own but solely relies on the nuclear arsenal and defense of the U.S. to fend against the DPRK. Besides this, according to the U.S. Office of Technology Evaluation, the U.S. ROK imports vital military necessities: aircraft, gas turbine engines, ground vehicles, “information security” systems, etc., while Japan imports vital military necessities: military aircraft, gas turbine engines, electronics, launch vehicles, and human and animal pathogens (the Bureau of Industry and Security). These different U.S. imports testify not only to the trilateral alliance but also show that these Asian countries are yet to reach self-reliance levels. The reliance within the relationship is viceversa. U.S. relies on its Asian counterparts not only to cooperate in multilateral agreements such as the G20, NATO, or other intergovernmental organizations but also relies on securing the Indo-Pacific region from threats: the DPRK's nuclear advancement and the increasing hegemonic influence of China. In order to form a functional trilateral alliance, the nations must agree on a suitable level of military development for each nation and allow deeper interconnected trade on necessities to promote trust and transparency within their alliance. Unchecked advancement in independent national defense poses as a threat to the countries in the alliance.

### **Progress towards homogenous goals**

Aside from military augmentation, the alliance enhances the achievement of similar goals arising from homogenous political national stances between the three nations. As evidenced by their internal responses to foreign threats, securing their national democratic stance is one of their primary complementary goals. Taking the U.S. action on the Russo-Ukraine war as an example, its open critics against Russia, collaboration with the EU in sanction placement, and military and economic assistance to Ukraine are steps in not only protecting their democratic stance but voicing their concerns. According to the East Asia Forum, the ROK supported the sanctions placed in condemnation of Russia by restricting its oil and technology trade and imposing sanctions on major Russian banks; these actions resulted in major won inflation, loss of exports revenue of semiconductors to Russia, and a 60.3% decrease in Russia's crude petroleum imports (Stangarone, 2023). These losses that ROK suffered signify the importance that the country places on its democratic stance aligned with the U.S. at the cost of its



economy. Japan reacted in a similar manner to its alliance counterparts by prohibiting Russian goods (energy, machinery, vodka, gold, and wood), financially supporting 600 million dollars to Ukraine, and restricting interactions with Russia in multilateral organizations including the World Bank, IMF, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Prime Ministers Office of Japan). Japan took its opposition a step further by providing military, economic, and refugee support for Ukraine, placing major financial sanctions on Russia, and even opposing Russian allies. Japan also suffers from the sanctions as they degrade possible Japan-Russia joint activities or investments; 55.9% of Japanese companies suffered losses, as did the effect of non-profitability in trade-restricted goods (Shagina, 2019). All these non-toleration individual actions taken by these countries show the political similarities in seeking to protect their democracy, despite the massive economic cost.

Correlated with their shared goal of protecting their democratic stance, the major goal that these nations have is cooperating to secure the Indo-Pacific region- which is shown in their interactions with international organizations. Within these interactions, the attempt to work closely together to oppose the DPRK's expanding ballistic and nuclear missile programs and recognize the DPRK as a threat to their democratic nations serves as an example of their shared political ideals. Taking the Phnom Penh Statement on the Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific in particular, the mutual correlation between the stance of the countries and the concerns is quite noticeable, as it states: "The Leaders strongly condemn the DPRK's unprecedented number of ballistic missile launches this year, including multiple ICBM launches, as well as a flurry of conventional military action that poses a grave threat to the peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and beyond" (The White House, 2022). The usage of the term "strongly condemns" plainly shows their consensus towards the DPRK and their view of the nation as a menace. Their similarity of stances is not just a factor of similar democratic ideals; rather, they incorporate them into their mutual goals of protecting their security. The three states are driven to work together more closely in order to achieve security in the Southeast Asia region through implementing specific sanctions, defensive joint exercises, and missile warning data. With the effective alliance of the three nations, the deterioration of the DPRK's nuclear production would be much more efficient by coordinating actions toward the targeted factors of its production. The states demonstrate remarkable defensive preparation towards the DPRK attacks through joint exercises (ballistic missile defense exercises, anti-submarine drills, fire joint drills, etc.) and local missile warning programs. These practices are evidence of the efficiency of the close military, technological,

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and data cooperation of the states, through examples of the usage of “US Indo-Pacific Command’s (INDOPACOM) F-16 fighter jets and B-1 bomber aircraft, along with the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) B-15 fighter aircraft” in drills and the training of 2,100 GSDF personnel and 1,400 Marines in the Southeastern region (Airforce Technology, n.d.). Hence, the solidification of a trilateral alliance would advance this progress even further since there would be no limitation on trade between Japan and the ROK. Therefore, in order to prevent inefficient progress toward goals or disputes between nations, there is a need for diplomatic discussions to reach a consensus on the priority goals and take action accordingly.

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### **Efficient resolution to mutual national threats**

The last reason the nations require the trilateral alliance is the need for efficient progress toward their shared threats. Similar to their homogenous goals, the threats that these countries perceive as hazardous to their national security arise from their similar democratic positions, especially the continuous nuclear enhancement of North Korea and the looming hegemonic position of China because of their geographic proximity, the DPRK's active ballistic missiles are an active concern for the ROK. According to 38 North, Kim Jong Un isolated the US and the ROK as threats to the DPRK government at the key meeting of the ruling Workers Party and has warned the ROK through territorial violations, such as the ballistic exercises past the Northern Limit Line (NLL), invasions of North Korean unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and DPRK drone surveillance in Seoul (Aljazeera News, 2023). The DPRK's actions, such as Limit Line (NLL) invasions of North Korean unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and drone surveillance in Seoul, concern the ROK severely since these actions target the ROK region as a warning against the coordinated large fire exercises and drill exercises of the ROK and the US. These provocations trouble the countries, and it explains why the nuclear advancement of the DPRK is an utmost threat to them.

However, the vigorous activity of the DPRK has caused closer coordination between Japan and the ROK, resulting in the strengthening of the trilateral alliance. The Japan Times supports this claim by indicating examples of actions taken to respond to the growing nuclear arsenal of the DPRK, such as the trilateral cooperation in missile defense exercises, closer tactical data sharing information, and further anti-submarine exercises, elaborated in the meeting in Singapore in June 2022 (Dominguez, 2022). Not only will these responses protect the countries from the DPRK, but these coordinations are also key for preventing the

deterioration of the alliance through the deepening interdependency of the states. Despite the positive progress between the nations, the unresolved debates between Japan and South Korea continue to pose challenges to the alliance. Aside from the mutual trade restrictions, the non-renewal of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) deteriorates majorly the factors of the alliance, especially in resource trading, information sharing, and possible closer cooperation. In terms of resource trading, the Japanese import restriction had a significant impact on semiconductor production because it targeted materials like hydrogenic fluoride, photoresist, and fluorinated polyimide that were crucial to the process (Yoon, 2023). This results in an issue for the alliance because, when in need of immediate resource transactions or the production of needed technology to respond to a DPRK attack, the restrictions prevent an effective and quick response. For the past few years, the GSOMIA has provided joint military data about possible threats to the DPRK through the usage of tools such as satellites, external hard drives and software (ETD), security protocols for Enhanced End Use Monitoring (EEUM), and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) Enhanced Targeting Data disks (Global Security, n.d.). The trade restriction and the end of this agreement would leave the countries blind because of the lack of information exchanged between the states, leaving them vulnerable to possible threats. Finally, the debates between the countries would cause a decrease in closer cooperation and joint exercises. Besides the GSOMIA, the three countries have conducted joint military preparations by focusing on preventing ballistic missile attacks. Nevertheless, the limitation of trade between the countries causes the deterioration of these exercises, leaving both countries unprepared for upcoming threats. Hence, in observing the situation in the DPRK, resolving conflicts and mending an efficient trilateral alliance would be the best response to the looming nuclear threat, compared to restricting cooperation between the states.

Apart from the DPRK, China's hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region is another major threat that shows the necessity of a trilateral alliance. China's steady rise as the second-leading world power has shifted the dynamics of relations with its neighboring countries. The US Department of State advances on this effect by highlighting that "the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using military and economic coercion to bully its neighbors, advance unlawful maritime claims, threaten maritime shipping lanes, and destabilize territory along the periphery of the People's Republic of China (PRC)," as observed by its continuous assertion of One China policy towards Hong Kong and Taiwan (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Besides the rising trade conflict between the countries and NATO's declaration of China as a

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“security threat,” the US has taken restrictive actions against China through trade constraints, verbal declarations, support for Taiwan, and attempts to secure the Indo-Pacific region. Similarly, Japan holds shaky relations with its large neighboring country because of territorial disputes over the East China Sea islands, the aftermath of the historic Sino-Japanese war, and China’s aggression towards Taiwan. On the other hand, the ROK perceives the DPRK as a higher level of threat than China, because of ROK’s interdependent economy. According to Kathryn Botto, Japan “placed China over North Korea as Japan’s most serious security threat for the first time” in its annual defense white paper because of China’s “rapid increase in military spending”, “increased deployment of assets in water” near Japan, and the strategic competition between the two states, creating initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Botto, 2020). On top of that, the ROK’s attempt to balance the relationship with the US and China adds to the halt in progress towards mutual threats, specifically with the ROK’s installation of the U.S. Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense Systems (THAAD). The intensification of THAAD in the ROK, which initially was introduced to the ROK as a defensive strategy against an attack by the DPRK, is perceived as a threat to China’s national security because it signifies an active involvement of the US. China feared the THAAD putting limitations on their military and responded by applying further pressure on the ROK, discouraging them from joining the trilateral alliance. The two states settled in some sort of agreement, but Yoon's pushing for closer ties with the US and trilateral alliances causes friction. To adequately organize the trilateral relations, the major first step is to set trilaterally agreed objectives to progress together and not each country's national aspirations.

## Discusión

### Chaju kukbang doctrine and its effects on the alliance

A concerning factor for the trilateral alliance is the attempt by the ROK to reach a self-reliant national defense. To further analyze the effects of implementing this self-reliant national defense and suggest decisions for the ROK, an overview of the president's ambitions is required. During President Moon Jae-In's presidency, he gave the green light to the Republic of the Korean Navy to construct two aircraft carriers. The classification for this project was "CVX" (previously classified as LPX-II or 대형수송함-II t ship)). These aircraft carriers were estimated to have a displacement of 45,000 tons and would have cost the South Korean government an estimated ₩2.3 trillion (\$2 billion) to construct and about ₩50 billion (\$45 million) per year to maintain each aircraft carrier (Lee, 2022). Ultimately, once it was announced that President Yoon Suk-Yeol would take office, there was speculation that he was likely to either halt or completely cancel the pronouncement plans given his party's opposition to the project within the Korean Parliament during Moon's presidency. After the publication of the 2023 defense budget, the Yoon administration canceled all procurement plans for the CVX program and incorporated his own ambition to expand the ROK's military capabilities, through a possible national nuclear weapon development. In order to further understand the reasoning behind Moon and Yoon's pursuit of increasing the ROK's self-reliant national defense, we need to understand the reason behind this trend.

Taking the constructivist approach, ROK has many adequate reasons it seeks to pursue the chaju kukbang doctrine. The reasons vary, from its ongoing war with North Korea, which continues to this day, to its constant conflict with neighboring countries. Continuing on into the present day, although the Mutual Defense Treaty, which was signed between South Korea and the United States on October 1st, 1953, ensures the promise of protection under the United States's nuclear umbrella and access to certain U.S. military assets such as their aircraft carriers, presidents Moon and Yoon still pursued their own aircraft carriers and nukes, respectively, in response to the increase of ballistic missile exercises by the DPRK and the skepticism of the U.S.' support. According to 38 North, the record of 90 missiles launched by the DPRK and the frequent suspension of US-ROK joint exercises fueled the advocacy of 66.8% of the South Korean public to support developing nuclear weaponry (Yang, 2023). Following the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from the ROK in 1991, the "America First" policy lessened joint exercises with the ROK and pondered the withdrawal of US forces from

the Korean peninsula under Trump's administration, building on the ROK's doubts towards the U.S. With the increase in the activity of the DPRK and the perception of the US as unreliable, the ROK proposed the expansion of its own nuclear arsenal as a matter of protection without leaving its fate to another nation. Not only do these reasonings behind nuclear development contradict their stance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but the rise of self-reliant defense would worsen the existing conflicts that are still in need of settlement: the limits of national military innovations, diplomatic settlement towards mutual threat priorities, and resolving conflicting national objectives.

### **Possible steps by South Korea for the fortification of the alliance**

Although exhibiting similarities, the ROK under Yoon's conservative administration has taken a different direction regarding international affairs. With the shift from a "balanced relationship" policy to a "peace through strength" approach, the ideals under the presidency of Yoon have prioritized the strengthening of alliances with mutual ideals, the United States and Japan, and regulation towards the interaction with threatening countries, the DPRK and possibly China. The clearest case of this ideal is the attempt to resolve previous conflicts and mend the relationship with Japan. As mentioned before, the complicated relationship between the two states comprises unresolved historical debates and mutual trade restrictions, which Yoon progresses to mend. The most prominent step that the ROK has taken towards mending the relationship is by continuing fence-mending summits with Japan to discuss the disputes between them and lifting the mutual trade restrictions placed on high-tech materials used for the production of semiconductors. This step is beneficial for Japan-ROK relations by allowing closer economic ties and closer coordination without restrictions through the solidification of the alliances. According to the Japan Times, further progress was made by South Korea proposing to resolve the wartime labor compensation dispute through funds raised by "voluntary" private Korean sector donations and paid to a ROK foundation" (Ninivaggi, 2023). Japan has responded positively to this proposal, as they continuously advocate for resolving colonial issues and normalizing ties based on the 1965 bilateral agreement. Of course, these actions taken will not resolve the historic dispute between these two countries immediately. Hence, Yoon must consider various factors to mend ties with Japan and progress toward a trilateral alliance, especially as Yoon prioritizes ensuring national security through a global pivotal state. In order to promote these two factors, Yoon emphasizes close

coordination with the U.S., no longer as an OPCON system but as a bi-national command. Nevertheless, the ROK's enforcement of bilateral alliances with the U.S. and Japan shows that there is still instability in the enforcement of the trilateral alliance, which the chaju kukbang doctrine of Yoon could unsettle even further.

The U.S.'s willingness to develop from a protector role to a partnership to secure the Indo-Pacific region opens a possibility for the ROK to hold a diplomatic discussion for possible nuclear installments; closer cooperation with the U.S. results in the better option for the ROK when weighing the benefits and detriments of following through with Yoon's doctrine. The "Roadmap for the New Alliance Military Structure in the Post-OPCON Transition Era" agreement (2006) demonstrates the U.S. support of a self-reliant ROK by transferring the OPCON under the Korean Command with the USFK playing a supporting role (Weitz, 2013). As the U.S. stands strong in denuclearization within the Southeast Asia region, the nuclearization of the ROK would not be an aspect of consideration, as it places a higher possibility of damaging the relationship. The departure of the ROK from the NPT would cause sanctions to be placed against their military expansion and economy, placing the US in a difficult position to further support the ROK. As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has stated, the withdrawal of the NPT could harm those areas as it would end all civilian nuclear cooperation with foreign nations, causing a loss of 34.6 percent of its electricity source from nuclear power by the year 2036 (Herzog, 2023). Additionally, the U.S. would remove the ROK from its nuclear umbrella program, leaving the country to fend for itself. Taking these points into consideration, the ROK must approach the issue in a manner that does not prevent trilateral decisions yet assures their national security. As one concern is that Korea is losing faith in the U.S. nuclear umbrella, an alternative option is to reintroduce the U.S. nuclear program on the Korean peninsula, which was withdrawn in 1991. This approach would align with Yoon's attempt to closer relations with the U.S., achieve national security, and prevent unconsented military expansion on any of the three sides. This would spark further conflict between the DPRK and China, breaking the balanced relationship with the ROK. This aligns with Yoon's approach to the national security of the ROK, yet this highlights even further the consideration of the effects of any decision.

The expansion of the nuclear program in the ROK would cause an inner conflict in the alliance and delay the enforcement of their mutual threats. On top of the rickety nature of the Japan-ROK alliance, a nuclear-armed ROK is nothing more than an additional threat to Japan. Like the U.S., Japan is an advocate of denuclearizing the Indo-Pacific region, yet it differs in

acknowledging the effectiveness of nuclear weapons. According to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), not only did Japan not sign or support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the late Abe Shinzō even hinted at a possible nuclear-armed Japan in response to China and the rising DPRK (ICAN, 2023). Japan's unresponsiveness in signing the TPNW emerged as Japan attempted to maintain U.S. nuclear weapons for its defense. Consequently, their perspective towards nuclear weapons is conflicting, yet they are firm in their hostility towards potential nuclear threats. If Yoon were to proceed, Japan would not welcome a nuclear-armed ROK and possibly inspire it to build its own arsenal; the ROK and Japan would perceive each other as threats and further deteriorate the fragile relationship between them, resulting in a delay in their trilateral alliance and response to mutual threats. Yoon contradicts himself by wanting to denuclearize the Indo-Pacific region by building his own arsenal, which nullifies his attempt to close ties with Japan.

With the differentiation of national objectives, ROK's ambition would cause losing essential aspects of the U.S. alliance. The nuclear approach results in the ROK a) being less reliant on the U.S. regarding nuclear protection, and b) pursuing their national interests, such as active economic activity with China. This might seem lucrative for the ROK, yet this results in the ROK being vulnerable in areas where they depend on U.S. resources: manpower, aircraft, and diplomatic influence. Aside from the U.S. being the second largest investor for the ROK, the CNA has elaborated on the importance of U.S. military coordination for the ROK by mentioning their recent cooperated live-fire drills, drills involving carrier strike groups, and F-35A stealth fighter exercises to achieve the deterrence of the DPRK (Bickford, 2022). The highly interdependent economic, essential military resources and cooperations and even the nuclear protection factors highlight the importance of the U.S. for the ROK and place further doubt on the value of proceeding with nuclear innovation. The ROK has sufficient technology to manufacture them in a limited amount of time, yet that is only a small fraction of achieving self-reliant status. The comparatively small population and the constraints of future cooperation/ international relations will place the ROK at a higher risk than in its current stage.



## **Conclusion**

The evaluation of the three factors that show the necessity of the trilateral alliance with the ROK works in suggesting the approach that Yoon must take regarding his self-reliant doctrine. As the alliance is far from solidifying, Yoon should continue to prioritize the strengthening of the bilateral relationship with its counterparts and reconsider employing its own nuclear arsenal. Acknowledging the rising threats in the Indo-Pacific region, closer cooperation with the U.S. and Japan not only ensures their national security but also prevents them from receiving costly opposition based on their stance. In conclusion to their future diplomatic approaches, it is an appropriate decision for the ROK to construct a self-reliant army to assure their national security, yet they ought to consider both sides of the coin and weigh the benefits/detriments of their decision, not only for their security but also for the trilateral alliance.

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