



***SOUTH KOREA'S ROLE IN A TAIWAN  
CONTINGENCY: INDIRECT BUT  
ESSENTIAL***

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*The views in this commentary are his own and do not represent those of the APCSS or the US Department of Defense.*

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As South Korea's military has grown stronger, the United States now expects it to play a larger role in maintaining regional stability. Gen. Paul LaCamera, the commander of the US Forces Korea (USFK), [stated](#) that "given the international reach of the South Korean military, opportunities are emerging for alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula." The former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper was more explicit. In the event of a contingency in the Taiwan Strait, he [said](#), "certainly there would be a support role (by South Korea) as well. I would imagine coming off the Korea Peninsula to support any type of Taiwan scenario."

There are important precedents. South Korea provided military support for the United States war efforts in Vietnam and Iraq, and its air force and navy could likewise be deployed to the Taiwan Strait to fight with the United States. But South Korea's military involvement would surely trigger China's retaliation. China has [shown](#) the pattern of "killing the chicken to scare the monkey" when confronted with multiple players, as seen in the South China Sea. South Korea is the chicken in this case. Chinese media publicly [refers to](#) the country as "the weakest link" of

the US alliance system in East Asia. China's missiles can easily reach South Korea's bases, and the People's Liberation Army Navy will [block or attack](#) South Korean naval vessels in the Yellow Sea even before they sail to the Taiwan Strait.

North Korea is also likely to [exploit](#) the situation because the United States would be distracted if conflict were to occur in the Taiwan Strait. Such an event would create an opportunity for North Korea to speed up its advancement in missile and nuclear capabilities. North Korea's concurrent military provocations may also help China divide the US military assets between the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang already began to comment on the Taiwan issue. For example, Kim Jong Un [sent](#) "a letter of solidarity" to Beijing after the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan last August. This is North Korea's strategic signaling of potential support for China in the event of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

For these reasons, the South Korean government has been cautious in clarifying its potential role in a Taiwan contingency. During the summit with President Joe Biden in May 2022, President Yoon Suk Yeol agreed to [insert](#) "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" in the joint statement. But President Yoon did not meet with Speaker Pelosi when she visited South Korea after her trip to Taiwan. Likewise, while South Korea's minister of defense and the US secretary of defense reaffirmed the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait in December 2021, South Korea's vice defense minister [revealed](#) that there has been no discussion between the two governments about South Korea's role in a Taiwan contingency.

Surprisingly, the South Korean people are ready to support South Korea's positive contribution to the defense of Taiwan. According to a [survey](#) conducted by *JoongAng Ilbo* and the East Asia Institute in August, only 18% of respondents opposed any involvement of South Korea in a Taiwan contingency, while 22.5% said they would support its participation in the joint military operation with the US forces. In the same survey, 42% responded that South Korea's military role should be limited to providing rear-area

support for US forces. Overall, 64.5% of South Korean respondents agreed that South Korea should provide direct or indirect support for US military operations in a Taiwan contingency.

South Korea is thus most likely to [provide](#) indirect support for the US forces in a Taiwan contingency. The USFK commander has [hinted](#) that the contingency planning for the forces' involvement in the Taiwan Strait is under development. Due to China's potential retaliation and North Korea's opportunistic provocations on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea's direct involvement in combat operations would most likely create two fronts of crises. Therefore, in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, South Korea's primary focus should be to deter North Korea's aggression while providing rear-area support for US operations—for example, through base access, provision of ammunitions, noncombatant evacuation, and noncombat operations like maintenance of weapon systems and augmentation of US reconnaissance capabilities.

Critics may argue that the diversification of the USFK's role to the region beyond the Korean Peninsula is concerning given North Korea's military threats and improvement in missile and nuclear capabilities. But they should acknowledge the new reality that the United States and South Korea must be prepared for multiple contingencies in different locations. The need to [discuss](#) the division of labor between allies should not be confused as a “decoupling” of the alliance. Regardless of the probability of China's invasion of Taiwan, the issue is a matter of alliance management between the United States and South Korea.

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