



**TRUMP OR HARRIS: THE ROK-US ALLIANCE
MUST MEET CHALLENGES TOGETHER BY**

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The following is the fourth in a series on the challenges facing the next US presidential administration in managing the most crucial Indo-Pacific relationships. See part one in the series [here](#), part two [here](#), and part three [here](#).

The US presidential election is just around the corner. In South Korea, there are [concerns](#) about the potential re-election of President Trump. Trump previously mentioned the [withdrawal](#) of US forces from Korea, but he was not the only one: There have been numerous historical examples where the ROK-US alliance faced drastic changes depending on who became US president. After the end of the Vietnam War, President Nixon [reduced](#) US forces in Korea to just above 40,000. President George W. Bush revisited this issue during the Iraq War.

However, let's look externally. North Korea continues to advance its nuclear missile capabilities and has amended its constitution, declaring a [shift](#) in policy toward South Korea. China [launched](#) an ICBM for the first time in 40 years and exchanged sharp warnings with Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Russia, after dragging out the war in Ukraine for over two and a half years, imposing enormous sacrifices, is also [threatening](#) nuclear use and has restored its close Cold War [ties](#) with North Korea.

It is not only South Korea but also the US that faces a

critical period for the alliance. It is an environment where neither country can defend its security alone. The US and its allies have shared situational awareness through the announcement of the "[IndoPacific Strategy](#)" and are building a robust defense network with the US' "[Integrated Deterrence](#)" concept. While conflicts and politics within the alliance are inevitable, they must be conducted with a purpose aligned with the alliance's goals.

South Korea's strategy

I believe the US government fully understands the difficulties the alliance is facing. However, shared threat perceptions do not automatically strengthen the alliance, nor can the US unconditionally understand South Korea's national interest. An alliance is managed through dialogue, where differences in threat perception and national interests are adjusted. The South Korean government must not simply be concerned about the uncertainties in US policy orientation.

South Korea, as part of the alliance, not as two separate nations, must establish a clear direction to maximize its interests. First, South Korea should establish a priority list of national interests it seeks to push forward within the alliance. Second, it should strategize to expand South Korea's parameters in US policy on the Korean Peninsula. Third, attention should be paid to events that could change the perceptions of key figures after the US election. Lastly, there must be a sophisticated approach to key topics and issues.

South Korea's top priority should be to strategically differentiate the issues to be emphasized and those to be minimized for the new US administration. This must be done with careful consideration of the new president's tendencies, the transition team's inclinations, and the events that could influence their perceptions. For instance, promoting the defense budget ratio ([2.7%](#) of GDP), the strategic value of [Camp Humphreys](#), a value-based strategic alliance, and the defense industry foundation (shipbuilding, low-grade fighter jets, artillery/missiles) should be at the forefront. On the other hand, seemingly complex and confusing ROK-US defense consultation bodies

or multilateral consultation systems, as well as previous commitments or policy directions that could burden the new administration, should be cautiously addressed.

Key issues

We remember the concerns surrounding President Trump’s unprecedented policies, which materialized shortly after his inauguration. His North Korea-related promises were challenged before they even materialized, with a series of North Korean missile tests that reshaped Trump’s perception of the Korean Peninsula and led to a [near-war crisis](#). However, it also opened an unprecedented opportunity for North Korea and the US to sit at the [negotiation table](#).

The next US administration, whether it continues the legacy of Trump’s first term, or should Harris follow Biden’s policy direction, will not represent an entirely new path for South Korea. Although election promises are gradually becoming more concrete, uncertainty remains regarding which Korean Peninsula policies or defense issues will surface. Key topics for South Korea around the 2024 election include:

contribute more financially and take on leading roles. South Korea should [pledge](#) strong efforts on regional issues while emphasizing its clear responsibility for the security of the Korean Peninsula. This does not mean ignoring regional matters but rather actively managing Korea's role in regional security, where the Korean Peninsula is a central pillar.

- **Ukraine War:** The [stark difference](#) in stance between Republicans and Democrats regarding support for Ukraine will lead to significant changes depending on the election outcome. However, as European nations’ threat perceptions evolve and they accelerate their military buildup, efforts by NATO and the US to [strengthen military cooperation](#) and defense trade with their Indo-Pacific partners will likely increase. South Korea will actively engage in connecting the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.

- **North Korean Nuclear Issue:** This is one of the most critical issues for South Korea but also one fraught with uncertainty. In the short term, it is unlikely to be a top priority for the new US administration. However, the current international system, with its unstable balance of power and increasing fragmentation, gives North Korea significant maneuvering room and opportunities. Expected North Korean actions may include the [7th](#)

TOPIC	ROK'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE TOWARD THE US	
ALLIANCE POLICY	HIGH-LEVEL OFFICIALS IN CHARGE OF KOPEN*	UNDERSTANDING THE CONTINUOUS AGENDA OF THE ROK-US ALLIANCE AND REFLECTING KOREA'S STANCE IN POLICY
	CONTAINMENT OF CHINA AND TAIWAN CRISIS	ADJUSTING THE PRESSURE ON KOREA'S REGIONAL ROLE
	REORGANIZATION OF REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE	REFLECTING KOREA'S PREFERENCE FOR EITHER ENTERING OR AVOIDING THE REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE
	EXTENDED DETERRENCE AND NCG POLICY	STRENGTHENING THE EXTENDED DETERRENCE PLEDGE THROUGH INSTITUTIONALIZING THE NCG FRAMEWORK
NORTH KOREA POLICY	DEPLOYMENT AND OPERATION OF STRATEGIC ASSETS	STRENGTHENING CONSULTATIONS WITH KOREA ON CHANGES IN US MILITARY POSTURE
	NORTH KOREAN DENUCLEARIZATION	MAINTAINING THE GOAL OF DENUCLEARIZATION AND ENHANCING REALISTIC NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES
	SANCTIONS ON NORTH KOREA	LEADING NORTH KOREAN CHANGE THROUGH THE COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS IMPLEMENTATION
ROK-US ISSUES	TRANSFER OF WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL (OPCON)	UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATING WITH KOREA'S EFFORTS TO BUILD INDEPENDENT CAPABILITIES
	SIZE OF US FORCES KOREA	UNDERSTANDING THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 28,500 TROOPS AND MAINTAINING THEIR ENHANCED READINESS POSTURE
	COMBINED EXERCISES AND TRAINING	EXPANDING BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL EXERCISES TO CONSTRUCT A DETAILED REGIONAL SECURITY
	SPECIAL MEASURES AGREEMENT (SMA)	UNDERSTANDING KOREA'S ROLE IN THE US REGIONAL STRATEGY AND NEGOTIATING COST-SHARING BASED ON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING
	SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE	UNDERSTANDING KOREA'S SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE AND DISCUSSING ALLIANCE-LEVEL TASKS FOR STABILIZING PEACE IN UKRAINE

*KOPEN = The Korean Peninsula

None of these are insignificant, but a few issues stand out:

- **Sustaining the Indo-Pacific Strategy:** The US will seek to maintain its influence in the Indo-Pacific region while shifting the costs and responsibilities to its allies. As a result, there will be increasing demands on countries like South Korea, Japan, and Australia to

[nuclear test](#) to deploy tactical nuclear warheads (*Hwasan-31*), a standard-angle ICBM test to demonstrate the capability to strike the US mainland, and tests of [SLBMs](#) equipped with MIRVs to demonstrate the ability to penetrate US missile defense systems. South Korea and the US must prepare joint responses to these provocations in advance.

However, the current international system, with its unstable balance of power and increasing fragmentation, gives North Korea significant maneuvering room and opportunities. Expected North Korean actions may include the [7th nuclear test](#) to deploy tactical nuclear warheads (*Hwasan-31*), a standard-angle ICBM test to demonstrate the capability to strike the US mainland, and tests of [SLBMs](#) equipped with MIRVs to demonstrate the ability to penetrate US missile defense systems. South Korea and the US must prepare joint responses to these provocations in advance.

- **Extended Deterrence:** Considering Russia's nuclear threats against Ukraine, North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities, and its potential for preemptive strikes, the US will continue to provide its nuclear umbrella to its allies to maintain the international non-proliferation regime. The bipartisan "[Strategic Posture Commission \(SPC\)](#)" of the US Congress also emphasized the need to optimize overseas military postures. South Korea, for its part, must institutionalize the successes of the newly established [NCG](#) system to ensure that the US's extended deterrence and assurance commitment remain strong.

- **Trilateral ROK-Japan-US Cooperation and US Military Redeployments:** There is a stark [difference](#) between the two presidential candidates regarding multilateralism. The trilateral cooperation established at Camp David must continue gaining momentum and institutionalization. If the US Department of Defense reviews the [Global Posture Review](#) and considers redeployments of US troops overseas, including in South Korea, careful consideration of related complex issues like the [transition of wartime operational control](#) will be necessary. South Korea will actively participate in strengthening regional security architecture.

- **Defense and Military Technology Cooperation:** As global supply chains are restructured, South Korea's role in defense and military technology cooperation will become increasingly important. The vulnerabilities in the US's defense industry have been highlighted, and the concept of "[friendshoring](#)" with reliable allies in the Indo-Pacific region is being emphasized on a bipartisan basis. The ROK-US alliance, although currently limited by [US domestic laws](#) and focused on functional cooperation through

[committees](#), provides an opportunity for South Korea to enhance its capabilities and expand the alliance's overall strength.

Conclusion

The inauguration of a new government through elections is a great blessing of democracy. Citizens reflect their will through elections, and in turn, formulate, implement, and evaluate new policies. While allied countries do not have voting rights, they still have expectations. South Korea seeks to safeguard its national security against common external threats and achieve prosperity together with the new US government. As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin emphasized in [the 2022 US National Defense Strategy](#), "We are living in a decisive decade...business as usual at the Department is not acceptable." The ROK-US alliance is indeed at a turning point. It can no longer deter and respond to threats by continuing as it has.

I believe that time will favor those who are integrated by shared values and mutual trust, rather than those divided by conflict and distrust.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.