

The U.S.-South Korea alliance and the deterrence of China's aggression against Taiwan

By Tongfi Kim | 15 November 2022

Key Issues

- For legal and strategic reasons, it would be difficult for South Korea to refuse to assist the United States against China without undermining the alliance with Washington.
- South Korea's public opinion seems to be more supportive of Taiwan than the government's position so far.
- South Korea's role in deterring China from invading Taiwan is large because China is uncertain about Seoul's reactions.

Introduction

Taiwan has not been a major topic for the U.S.–South Korea alliance, but has now turned into a difficult topic, especially for South Korean policymakers. Although a military conflict over Taiwan still remains a low-probability event, the risk of military alliance entanglement has increased considerably for South Korea. In this policy brief, I first spell out the implications of U.S. President Joe Biden's statements about Taiwan for South Korea. After describing South Korea's stance on a Taiwan contingency, I explain why South Korea's role in deterring Chinese aggression is larger than commonly perceived. I then argue that South Korea, along with its ally and partners, should pursue a geoeconomic tying-hands strategy to deter such a conflict rather than turning a blind eye to the risk.

Biden's commitment to Taiwan and its implications for Seoul

On four occasions, U.S. President Joe Biden remarked that the United States would defend Taiwan against China even though the United States has no treaty obligation to do so. In a TV interview that aired on 18 September 2022, when asked "would U.S. forces defend the island?" the president said "Yes, if in fact there was an unprecedented attack." When the journalist asked again if "U.S. forces, U.S. men and women would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion," Biden again said "Yes." Many, including China, have long expected such a role of the United States. However, this explicit statement confirming direct military intervention is important in view of the indirect support the United States chose to grant the Ukraine against Russia.

The U.S. government insists that its policy on Taiwan has not changed, but the president's remarks have important implications for South Korea for multiple reasons.

First, based on the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, South Korea has to recognise that “an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories” under their respective administrative control (e.g., U.S. bases in South Korea, Guam) “would be dangerous to its own peace and safety,” and it has to “act to meet the common danger.”

Second, as South Korean policymakers recognise, even when the legal obligation mentioned above does not apply, it would be difficult for South Korea to refuse assistance to the United States against China without undermining the alliance. Refusing to assist the United States in such a conflict would hurt the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella against North Korea. In times of peace, Washington has been accommodating Seoul's needs to maintain friendly ties with Beijing for economic and diplomatic reasons. However, the U.S. government, and even more so the U.S. public, would have less tolerance if the United States entered a hot war against China.

Third, around 28,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea could play a role in a conflict over Taiwan, and that creates the risk that China would strike U.S. forces in South Korean territory. In such a scenario, Seoul would not have a say in their military entanglement in a Taiwan conflict. In fact, even before U.S. Forces Korea makes any move, China could pre-emptively strike them with ballistic missiles across the Yellow Sea. Attacking U.S. Forces Korea is admittedly a risky choice for China, but it is hard to predict how a Taiwan conflict will escalate. As I will explain later, a military tying-hands strategy by South Korea would enhance deterrence against China's aggression against Taiwan but also increase the risk of China's attack against U.S. forces in South Korea. At this stage, I therefore recommend a geoeconomic commitment strategy instead.

Fourth, the potential involvement of U.S. Forces Korea in a Taiwan contingency would also affect U.S. military capabilities that are available to defend South Korea. I personally doubt that North Korea would see such a situation as an opportunity to provoke or attack South Korea, but many worry about China and North Korea coordinating their military actions. Even without a

simultaneous crisis in the Korean peninsula, a military conflict over Taiwan will affect U.S. force deployment patterns in East Asia. Depending on the outcome of a short conflict or on the duration of a protracted conflict, U.S. military presence in South Korea could be diminished.

South Korea's current position

Given these and other implications of Biden's statements on the U.S.–South Korea alliance, it was no surprise that this topic came up in a CNN interview of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol that aired on 25 September 2022. When Fareed Zakaria asked, “If China were to attack Taiwan, do you support the United States coming to Taiwan's military defence?” Yoon answered through his translator as follows: “In the case of military conflict around Taiwan, there would be increased possibility of North Korean provocation. Therefore, in that case, the top priority for Korea and the U.S. Korean alliance on the Korean peninsula would be based on our robust defence posture. We must deal with the North Korean threat first.”

Yoon's answer is an excellent one because it is hard to argue against this North Korean threat justification, but this also shows that there is a clear limit to Yoon's supposedly pro-U.S. foreign policy. Relatedly, those who expected the president to be tougher against China than his predecessor were disappointed when Yoon did not meet U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi when she visited South Korea in August after her visit to Taiwan, allegedly because Yoon worried about upsetting China.

Diplomatically, the past couple of years have ostensibly seen steady progress in U.S. alliance coordination on Taiwan, but it is not clear how much substantive progress was made for the U.S.–South Korea alliance beyond Seoul paying lip service to Washington's position. The “importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” was mentioned in President Biden's joint statements with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April 2021, with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in May 2021, and with President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in May 2022. The Biden–Moon joint statement of May 2021 was the first instance that such a document mentioned the issue of Taiwan and therefore attracted much attention. Later, however, the Moon administration backpedalled by dismissing the significance of the

reference as “very general expressions” in the words of then foreign minister Chung Eui-yong.

South Korea’s public opinion seems to be more supportive of Taiwan than the government’s position so far. In a poll commissioned by the JoongAng Ilbo and the East Asia Institute (conducted in July and August 2022), the majority of the public chose some form of South Korean assistance for the United States in a military conflict against China over Taiwan: 22.5% of the respondents supported South Korea’s participation in a military operation with U.S. forces and 42% supported logistical support to U.S. forces while only 17.9% answered that South Korea’s military intervention was

has not caused many problems for Seoul vis-à-vis Washington because the North Korean threat justification works well. Furthermore, Washington’s expectation level for Seoul has been rather low to begin with.

U.S. analysts acknowledge that South Korea faces an immediate and direct threat from North Korea. For instance, Michael Mazza, a defence policy analyst, expressed the view in 2021 that in the case of a Taiwan contingency South Korea could simply “hold down the fort on the Korean Peninsula” to help the United States. In terms of South Korea’s intention, U.S. policymakers have long recognised South Korea’s strategic necessity to maintain good ties with China. Experts on the Korean

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unnecessary. This reflects the South Korean public’s increased sense of a Chinese threat and a corresponding increase in support for the United States in the Sino–U.S. competition.

From the Chinese perspective these and other related developments should be worrisome. In December 2021, for example, the [53rd U.S.–South Korea Security Consultative Meeting](#) (SCM) led by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and South Korea’s Minister of National Defence Suh Wook “acknowledged the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”; this is reportedly the first time a SCM joint statement mentioned Taiwan. Following President Biden’s interview of September 2022, the former and current commanders of U.S. Forces Korea have hinted at the possibility of U.S. Forces Korea being deployed to a Taiwan contingency. The South Korean government has been trying to downplay this risk in the aftermath.

The importance of South Korea in deterring China’s aggression against Taiwan

So far, South Korea’s hesitance on the Taiwan matter

peninsula, like Jung H. Pak in 2020, have even argued that “Beijing perceives Seoul as the weakest link in the U.S. alliance network.”

Others have pointed out that the role of South Korea’s military and U.S. Forces Korea would be limited in a Taiwan contingency because both forces are tailored to defend against mostly land-based threats from North Korea. When analysts discuss the role of U.S. alliances in a Taiwan conflict, most focus on the U.S.–Japan alliance because Taiwan is much closer to the Okinawa prefecture of Japan, which hosts a large number of U.S. troops. In addition to the geographic proximity, U.S. Forces Japan with naval and air force assets are better suited to defend Taiwan than the South Korean military and U.S. Forces Korea. Thus, Japan and U.S. Forces Japan will play a larger role if a military conflict breaks out between China and Taiwan.

At the same time, however, I argue that the role of South Korea in deterring China from invading Taiwan is actually very important and can become larger than that of Japan. Japan’s involvement in a Taiwan contingency is already included in China’s strategic calculations,

whereas Beijing is uncertain about South Korea's role. Exactly because South Korea has been cautious in its position between the United States and China, South Korea can have a larger impact on China's strategic calculations in the coming years than others whose positions have already been factored in.

In trying to deter China's aggression against Taiwan, Seoul needs to assess military risks and economic costs carefully. It must, however, also consider the massive military and economic costs it will incur if the United States and its allies and partners fail to deter China. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has already strained the global economy, and a war between China and the United States is likely to impose far larger costs on countries like South Korea. With the increasing risk of such a conflict, staying away from the deterrence scheme has become less sensible for Seoul.

Tying hands geoeconomically

As a first step for South Korea's contribution to deter a Chinese aggression, I recommend Seoul tie its own hands in geoeconomic policy. South Korea should improve geoeconomic cooperation with the United States, Japan, and other countries that support the status quo of the Taiwan strait—in a manner that makes it difficult for Seoul to deviate from the cooperation in the future. The geoeconomic initiatives, at least in peacetime, should not be publicised as a deterrence scheme because that will invite Chinese retaliation. At the same time they should clearly signal a long-term commitment. The specifics of the cooperation matter less (be it on semiconductors supply chain or joint investments in infrastructure projects in Taiwan and elsewhere) than the durability of the cooperation and the difficulty Seoul faces if it tries to get out of it. If China invades Taiwan, Seoul should be in a position where it is compelled to take a hard stance against Beijing. Economic sanctions against China would be costly to Seoul, and the tying-hands strategy should make it even costlier to be out of step with the like-minded partners who support Taiwan. South Korea and others should also consider precommitment to sanctions against China's aggression to create domestic and international audience costs for inaction.

By consciously cultivating its own economic vulnerabilities to like-minded partners or staking its reputation on compliance with sanctions, South Korea can more credibly commit to wide-ranging and

debilitating economic sanctions against China should the latter attack Taiwan. This policy would also reduce South Korea's dependence on China although its goal is not decoupling from China. Such a policy obviously entails significant risks and costs for South Korea, and the United States and its partners should reciprocate such moves. Although the focus here is on economic issues, the shift in economic calculations that favour punishing aggression by China could also spill over into military strategic calculations. Other countries that have disputes with China, such as Japan and the Philippines, would also benefit from it.

There are multiple ways to increase China's expected costs for invading Taiwan, but the ambiguity about South Korea's military role in a Taiwan contingency seems still worth maintaining. A military tying-hands strategy, which commits U.S. Forces Korea or South Korea to military intervention against China, increases the risk of a preemptive strike on U.S. forces in Korea or even South Korea itself. Even without a clear declaratory policy, uncertainty about the military role of the U.S.–South Korea alliance in a Taiwan conflict will have a certain level of deterrence effects.

The geoeconomic tying-hands strategy by South Korea and like-minded partners will incentivise China to prepare against the increased certainty of economic sanctions after attacking Taiwan, but there is no economic equivalent to a pre-emptive strike against the forces of the United States and its allies. China will seek to reduce its economic vulnerability where possible, but such an economic policy is something Beijing would pursue in any case. Decoupling itself from the most advanced countries in the world is self-defeating for China, and China's economic retaliation is also likely to further alienate South Korea and other victims.

Finally, a geoeconomic tying-hands strategy by South Korea will require protection and encouragement from others. Such a strategy will certainly irritate China and incur costs. The costs will be manageable only if the United States and its allies and partners cooperate against China's economic coercion. The European Union, which has been [intensifying cooperation with Taiwan](#), could also play an important role here because of its strong economic capabilities. While I recommend South Korean policymakers take a proactive approach to the issue of Taiwan, such a policy should be incrementally pursued, in close consultation with like-minded partners.




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