

# The U.S.-ROK Washington Declaration

## —Autonomy and control in deterrence strategy

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### Greater ROK involvement, but avoidance of nuclear deployment

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In the Washington Declaration, ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol and U.S. President Joseph Biden agreed to establish a Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG). This indicates that the ROK's autonomy in its alliance with the United States is moving to approximate that of a NATO member, while also indicating the limits of that autonomy. Through the Declaration, the United States answered the ROK's calls for greater autonomy, which the conservative base underlying the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has been striving for, while placing certain restraints on it.

The Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which is the core of NATO's nuclear sharing program, maintains control over nuclear decision-making at the political level. Through the NPG, the representatives of each country avoid delegating any decision about the use or employment of nuclear capabilities to their military commanders.<sup>1</sup> What this means is that decision-making in the NPG encompasses even the criteria for decisions about the use of nuclear weapons.

In contrast, the United States defines the U.S.-ROK NCG as possessing no direct decision-making function. According to the U.S. Government's explanation, the NCG's role is "to discuss how to plan for nuclear contingencies and cooperate on the Alliance's approach to nuclear deterrence."<sup>2</sup> Discussing how to plan is different from decision-making on the use of nuclear weapons, as in the NPG. Thus, the ROK remains unable to be as proactively involved in nuclear strategy as NPG participants.

The redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, which ROK conservatives have pursued as an alternative to the ROK starting its own nuclear armament,<sup>3</sup> has also failed to happen. Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, countries that store U.S. B61 nuclear gravity bombs, are in charge of transporting and dropping them with their own dual-capable aircraft (DCA). Failure to bring about nuclear deployment on the Korean Peninsula is just another indication of the fact that the ROK has yet to reach the nuclear sharing arrangements it has been aspiring to achieve, using these NATO members as its benchmark.

However, there are some NATO members without deployed nuclear weapons, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, that also participate in the NPG and are included within the framework of the nuclear

sharing program. Instead of DCA operations, these countries are responsible for Support for Nuclear Operations with Conventional Air Tactics (SNOWCAT) missions.<sup>4</sup> Although the U.S.-ROK Washington Declaration did not give the ROK the same level of status as NPG participants, it did point in the direction of having the ROK play a supportive role similar to that of SNOWCAT missions. Specifically, this is mentioned in the part of the Declaration that states, “the Alliance will work to enable joint execution and planning for ROK conventional support to U.S. nuclear operations in a contingency.” Hence, the ROK Armed Forces will deepen its involvement in nuclear strategy in a manner analogous to NATO countries without deployed nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, SNOWCAT missions as officially conceived by NATO—that is, operations in which conventional fighters escort aircraft carrying B61s—cannot be conducted in northeast Asia. This is because there are no U.S. B61s nor Allied aircraft to carry them in the region. Considering this, a feasible format for the ROK would be to support forces directly operated by the United States, similar to how Polish Air Force fighters escort U.S. B-52 strategic bombers, for example.

There have been occasions in the past when ROK Air Force fighters have flown in formation with B-52s. However, because B-52s also perform missions to carry precision guided conventional ordnance, flying in formation with the bombers does not necessarily mean that the ROK was supporting nuclear operations. Once ROK “conventional support” for nuclear operations becomes a reality based on the Washington Declaration, the United States may deploy strategic assets such as B-52s explicitly for nuclear operations and coordinate with the ROK Armed Forces. To prepare for implementation of the Washington Declaration, the U.S. Department of Defense intends to welcome personnel from the ROK Armed Forces to participate in training that integrates both conventional and nuclear forces.<sup>5</sup>

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## Autonomy and control

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Besides nuclear deterrence, the Washington Declaration also indicates an agreement concerning the ROK’s autonomy in terms of the Strategic Command that the country plans to establish. According to the Declaration, the new ROK Strategic Command will closely connect its capabilities and planning activities with the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC). The ROK Strategic Command is the command for preemptive strike strategy (Kill Chain) and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR), which also reflects the ROK’s efforts to ensure autonomy in national defense, as defined by ROK conservatives.

The concept that led to Kill Chain was raised during the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration (after the sinking of the ROK corvette *Cheonan* in March 2010). The argument at the time was that the role of the ROK Armed Forces, which was responsible for “denial capability” against DPRK attacks under the ROK’s alliance with the United States, should be expanded to allow ROK Armed Forces to destroy a DPRK base in advance at the first sign of a weapons launch.<sup>6</sup> In other words, while the ROK Armed Forces’ conventional role was to repel (deny) incoming attacks, it was argued that the ROK Armed Forces should autonomously conduct preemption, which is the stage before an attack (when an attack is imminent).<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the origins of KMPR can be traced back to a statement made on March 25, 2011, after the Yeonpyeong shelling (November 2010), by then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Han Min-goo, who stated that during a “provocation,” the ROK would massively punish “not only the origin of provocations but also the commanding and the supporting force” based on the right of self-defense.<sup>8</sup> Following this, on March 31, then Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-jin stated that a “proactive deterrence strategy” was needed, and that not only would he enable commanding officers at all levels to launch counterattacks against the origin of provocations without reporting to higher command, but even include “the supporting force” as targets of retaliation.<sup>9</sup> The intension behind the alleged strategy was to allow local forces to retaliate before consulting with the CFC and others, thereby improving the ROK Armed Forces’ autonomy within the U.S.-ROK Alliance.

In other words, the autonomy in national defense that the conservative base underlying the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has been striving for is the ability to take more initiative in pursuing military strategy targeting North Korea. In contrast, the view of the progressive forces is that increased autonomy means shifting the focus of the ROK Armed Forces’ mission away from targeting North Korea, which is its role in the U.S.-ROK Alliance. The terms Kill Chain and KMPR temporarily disappeared from the concepts of the Ministry of National Defense during the previous Moon Jae-in administration, which was a progressive administration.

It was not until after the election of Yoon Suk-yeol as president that the ROK Ministry of National Defense once again publicly announced Kill Chain and KMPR.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, the Ministry of National Defense decided to establish the Strategic Command to command and control a “three-pronged system” consisting of Kill Chain, KMPR, and the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system.<sup>11</sup> The deepening of coordination between the Strategic Command and the CFC in the U.S.-ROK Washington Declaration symbolizes an agreement to further formalize the role of Kill Chain and KMPR, which are primarily executed by the ROK Armed Forces, in the Alliance.

On the other hand, if the function of the Strategic Command is to coordinate with the CFC, then when coordination is not possible—that is, when the CFC Commander, a U.S. Army general, does not agree—the implementation of Kill Chain and KMPR becomes problematic. The United States has always accepted Kill Chain and KMPR, while also exerting a certain degree of control over it.

First, in October 2011, about six months after the arguments that led to KMPR emerged, U.S. and ROK defense leaders agreed to proceed with the formation of a Combined Counter-Provocation Plan (CCPP) in which the two countries would jointly respond to localized military actions by North Korea.<sup>12</sup> Based on the CCPP, the ROK is able to execute KMPR only within the extent that it is able to join forces with U.S. forces—in other words, only when the U.S. side has made the decision to do so.

In addition, the capabilities related to Kill Chain and KAMD are now operated by the Korea Air and Space Operations Center (KAOC),<sup>13</sup> in which U.S. personnel also participate.<sup>14</sup> KAOOC is located in the U.S. Air Force’s Osan Air Base, and the U.S. Armed Forces will also intervene in any decision by the ROK to execute Kill Chain.

During his first summit meeting with President Biden after taking office (May 2022), President Yoon Suk-yeol visited KAOC together with President Biden and emphasized to the U.S. side its importance as the center of the three-pronged system.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the ROK has been trying to get the United States to accept increased military autonomy by the ROK Armed Forces while demonstrating its commitment to coordinating with the U.S. Armed Forces.

The U.S.-ROK Washington Declaration was an agreement to promote coordination with the U.S. Armed Forces regarding the Strategic Command, which is the higher-level organization above KAOC. As the ROK Armed Forces develops a system to execute its own autonomous strategy, the scope of its cooperation with the U.S. Armed Forces, i.e., U.S. intervention, will also increase. As part of enhanced coordination with the CFC, the ROK Strategic Command also plans to forge a relationship with the U.S. Strategic Command through a new table-top exercise.<sup>16</sup>

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## **The ROK vs. European NATO members**

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The manner in which the ROK is increasing its autonomy bears some similarity to European NATO members. Although nuclear sharing has increased the autonomy of European NATO members in nuclear strategy, it is the owner of the nuclear weapons, the United States, that actually authorizes their use. Whether in the U.S.-ROK Alliance or in NATO, the proactive role played by U.S. allies is formalized in such a way as to ensure that the United States holds the trigger for execution.

On the question of whether or not to deploy nuclear weapons, the United States may have viewed the ROK's argument for nuclear deployment in the context of comparison with Europe. This is because, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, arguments urging the United States to deploy nuclear weapons had surfaced from the Government of Poland as well.<sup>17</sup>

The United States has long sought to avoid expanding the deployment of nuclear weapons, even when faced with the need to offset the lack of credibility of extended nuclear deterrence as argued by Poland and others. This can be seen in NATO's Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) from 2011 to 2012. Whereas Germany and other countries at the time suggested that they would no longer continue to host B61 nuclear bombs deployed by the United States, countries that became NATO members after the Cold War insisted on continued deployment in order to maintain the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence. In the DDPR process, SNOWCAT was seen as a way to offset these concerns without new nuclear deployments.<sup>18</sup> By giving the ROK a role similar to that of SNOWCAT, the United States has demonstrated its general position toward its allies of not guaranteeing extended deterrence through new nuclear deployments.

Just as Poland, which had become a key player in the U.S. strategy toward Russia, argued for nuclear deployment, the ROK may have also tried to fulfill its argument for nuclear weapons in exchange for cooperation with U.S. strategy. On March 10, shortly after the ROK announced its policy for dealing with

the wartime Korean laborers issue, Yoon Suk-yeol reiterated the ROK's argument concerning extended nuclear deterrence. He said that the ROK will further strengthen extended deterrence by establishing a "nuclear planning and execution regime between South Korea and the United States."<sup>19</sup>

This statement was a request issued by President Yoon Suk-yeol to the United States prior to his visit to Japan, where he would then announce the normalization of the ROK-Japan General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). These events are what led to the announcement of the U.S.-ROK Washington Declaration, which provided for a new nuclear consultative framework and an expanded role for the ROK Armed Forces.

<sup>1</sup> "NATO Nuclear Policy in a Post-INF World: Speech by NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller at the University of Oslo," September 10, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_168602.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_168602.htm); Didier Audenaert, "NATO's Nuclear Forces," *Belgium Should Not Change Strategy on Her Contribution to NATO's Nuclear Role Sharing*, Egmont Institute, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28847.9>, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> "FACT SHEET: Republic of Korea State Visit to the United States," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/fact-sheet-republic-of-korea-state-visit-to-the-united-states/>.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, refer to the following papers I have authored: "In South Korea, NATO is a Reference for Tactical Nuclear Weapon Advocates," *Briefing Memo*, National Institute for Defense Studies, January 2018; "Seijiteki bunretsu no moto deno kokubō to anpo: Post Moon Jae-in ni okeru kadai [National defense and security under political division: The agenda of the post-Moon Jae-in administration]," *Taikokukan kyōsō no jidai' no chōsenhantō to chitsujo no yukue* [The Korean Peninsula and the future of the peninsular order in an 'era of great power competition'], The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2023, p. 134–135.

<sup>4</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, "NATO Nuclear Exercise Underway with Czech and Polish Participation," *Federation of American Scientists*, October 17, 2017, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2017/10/steadfast-noon-exercise/>.

<sup>5</sup> "FACT SHEET: Republic of Korea State Visit to the United States," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/fact-sheet-republic-of-korea-state-visit-to-the-united-states/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Byeonghwa Wonhandamyeon Jeonjaeng Daebihaeya, Buggyeongje Pipye Wiheom deo Keojyeo: Lee Sang-woo Guggaanbo Chong-gwaljeomgeomhoeui Uijang Teugbyeol Inteobyu [If you want peace, prepare for war. Deepening economic exhaustion of North Korea increases the danger of provocations: Special interview with Lee Sang-woo, Chairman of the National Security Oversight Committee]," *Kookbang Ilbo*, August 13, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> This point and the following brief history of KMPR are based on my discussions in the following papers, and overlap with them in content: "Seijiteki bunretsu no moto deno kokubō to anpo: Post Moon Jae-in ni okeru kadai [National Defense and Security Under Political Division: The Agenda of the Post Moon Jae-in Administration]," *Taikokukan kyōsō no jidai' no chōsenhantō to chitsujo no yukue* [The Korean Peninsula and the future of the peninsular order in an 'era of great power competition'], The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2023, pp.131–132.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Seokjong, "Bug Dobal Ganeungseong Naenyeon Deo Nop-ajil Geos: Han Min-goo Habcham-ujjang KIDA Bughan Gunsa Poleomseo [The possibility that North Korean provocation will increase in the next year: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Han Min-goo at the KIDA forum of North Korea military affairs]," *Kookbang Ilbo*, March 28, 2011. The relationship between KMPR and the United States has been discussed in detail in the following essays: Takeshi Watanabe, "Mun Jaein seiken no jishu ga chokumen suru fukakujitsusei: Seiji kyōsō to taibeichūkankei [The uncertainty the Moon Jae-in administration faces in seeking self-reliance: Political competition and relations with the U.S. and China]," *Fukakujitsusei no jidan no chōsenhantō to mihon no gaikō anzenhoshō* [The Korean Peninsula and the diplomacy and national security of Japan in an 'era of uncertainty'], The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2018, pp. 21–22.

<sup>9</sup> "Gugbang-gaehyeog Yocheneun Habdongseong Ganghwa Siseutem Guchug: Gugbangbujang-gwan bangsong-gijakeulleob TV tolonhoe [The essence of national defense reform is building a system for reinforcing jointness: National Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin at a TV debate hosted by the Broadcast Reporter Club]," *Kookbang Ilbo*, April 1, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See the following papers for my discussion on the competition between the conservatives and progressives and the rise and fall of the Kill Chain concept described so far: "Seijiteki bunretsu no moto deno kokubō to anpo: Post Moon Jae-in ni okeru kadai [National defense and security under political division: The agenda of the post Moon Jae-in administration]," *Taikokukan kyōsō no jidai' no chōsenhantō to chitsujo no yukue* [The Korean Peninsula and the Future of the Peninsular Order in an 'Era of Great Power Competition'], The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2023; "The Political Divide in South Korea in the Face of North Korea's Coercion Strategy," *Research Report*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, February 10, 2023, <https://www.jia.or.jp/en/column/2023/03/korean-peninsula-fy2022-05.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Wonjun, "Baewihyeob Daeung Ganghwa Wihan Jeonlyagsaleongbu 2024nyeong Changseol Gyehoeg [The plan to establish the Strategic Command in 2024 to reinforce responses to North Korean threats]," *Kookbang Ilbo*, July 7, 2022.

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- <sup>12</sup> *Joint Communique, The 43rd U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting*, October 28, 2011.
- <sup>13</sup> Kim Sangyoon, "Hwaggohan Gongjung-gamsichegyelo Baedobal Daebihala: Lee Wang-keun Gong-gunchammochongjang, Chwiim hu Cheos Gong-gunjagjeonsalyeongbu Hyeonjangjido [Prepare for North Korean provocation based on an effective air surveillance system: Air Force Chief of Staff Lee Wang-keun inspected the Air Force Operations Command for the first time after his inauguration]," *Kookbang Ilbo*, August 17, 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> Lee Seokjong, "Kateomigugbangjang-gwancheosbanghan [U.S. Secretary of Defense Carter's first visit to Korea]," *Kookbang Ilbo*, April 10, 2015. The U.S. military's control over Kill Chain and KMPR described so far overlaps with my discussion in the following article: "Seijiteki bunretsu no moto deno kokubō to anpo [National defense and security under political division]," p. 138.
- <sup>15</sup> U.S. White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea at the Air Operations Center's Combat Operations Floor on Osan Air Base," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/22/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-at-the-air-operations-centers-combat-operations-floor-on-osan-air-base/>.
- <sup>16</sup> "FACT SHEET: Republic of Korea State Visit to the United States," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/fact-sheet-republic-of-korea-state-visit-to-the-united-states/>.
- <sup>17</sup> "German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier under fire for Russia ties," *Deutsche Welle English*; Helen Collis, "Poland's Kaczyński criticizes Germany's refusal to cut energy ties with Russia," *Politico*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-kaczynski-criticizes-germany-energy-russia/>; Anna Koper and Alan Charlish, "Poland would like more U.S. troops in Europe, says ruling party boss," *Reuters*, April 3, 2022; Bruno Waterfield, "US urged to put nuclear weapons on Polish soil," *The Times*, April 4, 2022.
- <sup>18</sup> Karl-Heinz Kamp, "NATO's Nuclear Posture Review: Nuclear Sharing Instead of Nuclear Stationing," *Research Paper*, NATO Defense College, May 2011.
- <sup>19</sup> The Office of the President, Republic of Korea, "Address for the 77th Graduation and Commission Ceremony of the Naval Academy," March 10, 2023, <https://www.president.go.kr/president/speeches/B93AHfxG>.

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