



서울대학교 통일평화연구원
The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies
Seoul National University

Institute for
Korean Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

SEPTEMBER 2026 | ISSUE 25

SAVING AN ALLIANCE
FROM DIRE STRAITS

BY PATRICK M. CRONIN

**THE INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND
UNIFICATION STUDIES
SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

Web: <https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/>
Facebook: facebook.com/IPUSINSNU
Instagram: [ipus.snu_official](https://instagram.com/ipus.snu_official)
Email: tongil@snu.ac.kr

**INSTITUTE FOR KOREAN STUDIES THE
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**

Web: <https://gwiks.elliott.gwu.edu/>
Facebook: facebook.com/GWIKS2016/
Instagram: [gwukorea](https://instagram.com/gwukorea)
Email: gwiks@gwu.edu

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick M. Cronin is the Asia-Pacific security chair at Hudson Institute. Dr. Cronin's research analyzes salient strategic issues related to US national security goals in the Indo-Pacific region and globally. His current writing touches on protecting national interests and world order despite intensified great-power competition, the enduring North Korea problem, and other state and non-state challenges.

Previously, he was the senior director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS); senior director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University, where he simultaneously oversaw the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs; director of studies at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS); senior vice president and director of research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); and director of research at the US Institute of Peace. During the George W. Bush administration, he was confirmed by the US Senate as the third-highest ranking official at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). He served as an intelligence officer in the US Navy Reserve. He has been an adjunct faculty professor at the University of Virginia, the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and Georgetown University. Dr. Cronin has a rich and diverse background in Asia-Pacific security and US defense, and foreign and development policy. Before leading INSS, Dr. Cronin served as the director of studies at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). At IISS, he also served as editor of the Adelphi Papers and as the executive director of the Armed Conflict Database. Before joining IISS,

Dr. Cronin was senior vice president and director of research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Dr. Cronin has taught at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and the University of Virginia's Woodrow Wilson Department of Government.

Edited by Taesuh Cha (Professor, Seoul National University), **Celeste Arrington** (Professor, Institute for Korean Studies, The George Washington University) and **Yonho Kim** (Interim Director, Institute for Korean Studies, The George Washington University)



Patrick M. Cronin

Asia-Pacific Security Chair

Hudson Institute and Scholar in Residence,
Carnegie Mellon Institute for Strategy and
Technology (CMIST)

위기의 한미동맹을 구하기

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin

Asia-Pacific Security Chair

Hudson Institute and Scholar in Residence,

Carnegie Mellon Institute for Strategy and Technology (CMIST)

September 2026

Two terrible ideas for the U.S.–ROK alliance are now in circulation. One calls for [pulling American forces back](#) behind the first island chain, a major geopolitical and military boundary in East Asia stretching from the Japanese archipelago down to the Philippines and Borneo. The other would [make American support for South Korea contingent](#) on whether Seoul joins an ill-defined and potentially protracted conflict with Iran.

Both are wrongheaded, unnecessary, and counterproductive. [Cutting and running](#) from South Korea and Japan would be catastrophic for U.S. influence, allied autonomy, and regional deterrence. Dragging South Korea into a military confrontation with Iran, meanwhile, would do little to alter the balance in the Persian Gulf while [undermining alliance trust](#) and distracting both allies from a far more consequential agenda on the Korean Peninsula and across East Asia.

Perhaps wiser reflection will reject both ideas in time. But the deeper danger is not any single policy disagreement. It is the erosion of the mutual respect and trust on which a successful alliance ultimately depends. That danger was evident in a recent exchange between Presidents Donald Trump and Lee Jae-myung. Recounting a [phone call with President Lee](#), Trump said: “...would you like to give us a little hand? We don't need help with Iran. But if you would like, give us a hand with Iran. He said, no thanks. And I said, wait a minute. We have 39,000 soldiers [author's note: actually around 28,500] over there guarding you from Kim Jong-un, your next-door neighbor. And you're not going to help us on a very easy military operation in Iran? That's strange.”

The alliance is not in dire straits, but turning Gulf security into a litmus test for continued U.S. support could make it so. I would have welcomed a different decision out of Seoul to dispatch a naval combatant or other [military contributions](#) in support of a U.S.-led effort to maintain a partial flow of oil that Korea and most Asian countries rely on. But that is different from making Korean participation a test of alliance loyalty. Having demurred after so much pressure, forcing Seoul into [an unpopular military commitment](#) against its will would risk creating a much larger alliance problem than the one Washington is trying to solve.

한미동맹이 지금 심각한 위기에 처해 있는 것은 아니다. 그러나 걸프 지역의 안보에 대한 한국의 기여를 미국의 지속적인 지원 여부를 결정하는 잣대로 삼는다면, 동맹을 실제로 위기에 빠뜨릴 수 있다

Thinking Through What Has Happened

While the closure of the Strait of Hormuz resulted from [U.S. military intervention](#) against the Islamic Republic of Iran at the end of February, the fact remains that the United States is South Korea's one and only formal ally and its [second-largest trading partner](#), trailing only China. South Korea, along with Japan, China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian nations, [depends heavily](#) on a peaceful Persian Gulf and freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and other critical chokepoints, including Bab el-Mandeb and Malacca, for much of its [energy and trade](#). As a prosperous and powerful country, South Korea should naturally have an interest in ensuring that the United States does not fail.

The United States, meanwhile, is seven months into a military campaign that has settled, for the moment, into a [precarious stalemate](#). A [radical IRGC](#) remains in charge of a badly weakened Iran, yet one still capable of threatening international shipping and the free flow of vital energy through both the Gulf and the Red Sea. South has a strong interest and, as prosperous maritime powers, a responsibility, to do what they reasonably can to help reopen international straits and shipping lanes.

Yet there is no easy way to open narrow straits that can be effectively disrupted by drones, mines, and missiles launched from a sanctuary state. Nor is there any easy way to impose good governance on either Iran or all of Yemen, which is why launching [Operation Epic Fury](#) and the gamble of using military power decisively as a means of dislodging Iran's radical regime was ill-advised in the first place. That does not mean doing nothing was the only alternative, as the far less costly and more focused [Operation Midnight Hammer](#) in 2025 to set back Iran's nuclear threat suggests.

Even so, we are stuck where we are. [South Korea has studied](#) its potential contributions to the Gulf while trying to buy time and avoid being dragged into a potentially costly and open-ended operation. Thus far, it has been easier for wealthy, energy-dependent states to [work around](#) the partial closure of the strait than to join military operations entailing considerable risk, cost, and uncertain duration.

The better course is for the alliance to return to first principles. The leaders had already agreed to focus on economic security, military modernization, managing North Korea, and shaping the peace in East Asia and the Pacific. The [Joint Fact Sheet](#) released by the White House last November spells out ample ambitions that serve the mutual interests of both allies. The Gulf has become an unwelcome distraction. But South Koreans do themselves no favor by assuming they have no stake in the ability of the United States to combat nuclear proliferation, counter Iran's support for proxy warfare against Israel and throughout the Gulf, and, above all, preserve freedom of navigation through international straits.

Strategic Case for the Alliance

The strategic case for the ROK–U.S. alliance begins with the simple reality that even strong countries are stronger with capable allies. Korea's geography leaves little room for strategic solitude. Its security depends on maintaining a favorable regional balance of power, and partnership with a distant great

**한국의 자율성 확대와 한미동맹 강화는 서로
모순되지 않는다. 한국은 한미동맹을 확고한
기반으로 삼으면서도 자국 방위에 더 큰
책임을 맡을 수 있다**

power such as the United States helps sustain that balance without threatening South Korean sovereignty.

Greater Korean autonomy and a stronger alliance are not contradictions. South Korea can assume greater responsibility for its own defense while remaining firmly anchored in the ROK–

U.S. alliance. Indeed, a more capable South Korea should make the alliance stronger, provided that greater Korean responsibility is matched by interoperability, credible deterrence, and genuine joint decision-making.

The same principle should guide [OPCON transfer](#). OPCON is a means, not an end. Its measure should be [stronger deterrence not adherence to a political timetable](#). South Korea must possess the forces and capabilities needed to prevent North Korean miscalculation and deny Pyongyang any expectation that nuclear weapons can be used successfully for coercion.

Looking toward the next decade, greater Korean responsibility should mean greater capability, not greater strategic distance from the United States. Washington benefits from an ally increasingly able to shoulder the primary burden of its defense and contribute to regional security. Seoul benefits from combining that autonomy with an enduring U.S. presence and a wider network of alliances that helps preserve a favorable balance of power.

The counterfactual makes the stakes clear. Removing the U.S. strategic presence from East Asia would make South Korea less secure. Removing the ROK-U.S. alliance would make the entire region less secure. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between Korean autonomy and

**과제는 한국의 자율성과 동맹 중 하나를
선택하는 것이 아니라, 한국의 자율성
확대가 동맹의 역량 강화로 이어지도록
하는 것이다**

alliance, but to make greater Korean autonomy a source of greater allied strength.

Reciprocity is for Alliances, Too

The September Washington summit between Presidents Trump and Xi highlighted the value both leaders placed on preserving their trade truce and pursuing [strategic stability grounded in fairness and reciprocity](#). Successful alliances should similarly demand an even higher standard of mutual respect.

성숙한 동맹을 위해서는 미국이 강압에 대한 의존을 줄이고, 설득과 상호주의, 이해관계의 조율에 더 힘써야 한다

Arm-twisting an ally evokes an anachronistic patron-client relationship rather than a politically sustainable partnership. A mature alliance requires Washington to rely less on coercion and more on persuasion, reciprocity, and alignment of interests. Washington can

maximize its leverage over Seoul, or it can maximize Seoul's confidence in the alliance, but it cannot maximize both at the same time.

South Korea's growing [defense-industrial power](#) and its strategic investment in U.S. shipbuilding, energy, and other sectors, is changing the balance within the alliance. Korea's emergence as a [major arms supplier](#) both reflects and reinforces its growing capacity to assume primary responsibility for defense of the peninsula. Even as Seoul commits to spend [\\$25 billion](#) of its increased defense spending on U.S. weapons by 2030, its expanding ability to produce and export sophisticated military systems is reducing its dependence on American weapons. South Korea is increasingly not just a security consumer, but a security provider with growing international clout.

한국이 주요 무기 공급국으로 부상한 것은 한반도 방위의 주된 책임을 맡을 역량이 커지고 있음을 보여주는 동시에, 그 역량을 더욱 강화한다

The same dynamic is emerging through rising economic interdependence. Korea's approval of [Project Star](#), a \$22.3 billion gas project in Texas, gives tangible form to President Lee's much larger pledge of \$350 billion, of which \$150 is earmarked for shipbuilding. [Tariff pressure](#) may have helped Washington extract those commitments, but their implementation changes the bargaining relationship. Once Korean capital, technology, and industrial capacity become embedded in American

한국의 자본과 기술, 산업 역량이 미국의 재산업화 과정에 깊이 결합되면, 양국의 의존관계는 쌍방향으로 작용하게 된다

reindustrialization, dependence runs both ways. Seoul acquires leverage over a Washington increasingly invested in seeing those projects and the full [\\$350 billion commitment](#) come to fruition.

These investment pledges [will fail to materialize](#) if the two allies do not remain focused on addressing each other's primary concerns. South Korea's role will not be decisive in the Gulf, but losing out on growing mutual dependence argues against turning every disagreement, including how much risk South Korea should assume in the conflict with Iran, into a do-or-die test of the alliance itself. While the Trump administration has sought to connect Korean support in the Strait of Hormuz to the broader bilateral relationship, the Lee administration has preferred to keep these issues in separate lanes. Washington should therefore be cautious about suggesting that any unfair Korean [treatment of U.S. technology companies](#) could affect the American security commitment, or that Seoul's contribution to the Iran conflict should become a test of alliance solidarity rather than a decision based on Korean interests, including the protection of its nationals, domestic law, energy security, and readiness on the peninsula.

There is a useful lesson here in Korea's success as a [major defense exporter](#). The keys to success for the Korean model are mutual respect, reciprocity, and accommodation. Seoul wins partners by adapting to their requirements rather than simply demanding that they accept what Korea wants to provide. Washington may get more from an increasingly capable and autonomous ally by applying the same principle to alliance burden-sharing. As Korea answers America's call to build greater military power, Washington's coercive leverage will inevitably diminish, making strategic alignment, rather than pressure, increasingly important.

Taking the Long View

It is tempting to juxtapose the question of Korea's role in the Iran war with Park Chung-hee's decision to deploy Korean troops to support the American war in Vietnam. In fact, he even [kept those troops on the ground](#), despite dramatic losses on the battlefield, in support of America's ultimately unsuccessful war in Vietnam. But the comparison can mislead. South Korea was in a [far weaker](#) position. Park was worried about losing U.S. troops on the peninsula, the larger lesson Park drew from Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine, and U.S. troop reductions was that American commitments could not be taken for granted; that logic undergirded his decision to pursue a covert nuclear weapons capability.

Today, Lee governs a democratic South Korea in which overseas military deployments must contend with public opinion, law, and the prerogatives of the National Assembly. For the U.S.–ROK alliance to remain resilient, both sides must reconcile Washington's expectations for global burden-sharing with Seoul's domestic political reality.

**한미동맹이 흔들림 없이 유지되려면,
양국은 국제적 부담 분담에 대한
미국의 기대와 한국의 국내 정치
현실을 조화시켜야 한다**

The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

Disclaimer:

The views expressed in the ROK-US Policy Brief are those of the authors alone, and should not be taken to represent the views of the editor, IPUS, GWIKS or any other organization.

Call for Papers

ASIAN JOURNAL OF PEACEBUILDING

Asian Journal of Peacebuilding (AJP) is a semiannual, peer-reviewed journal published by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University. The journal publishes original research on violence, conflict, and peacebuilding in Asia and beyond. AJP welcomes submissions from scholars worldwide.

AJP is indexed in SCOPUS. The contents of the journal are indexed and abstracted in EBSCOhost™ Political Science, EBSCOhost™ Academic Search, ProQuest Political Science, ProQuest Social Science, Sociological Abstracts, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and International Political Science Abstracts.

Submission Link: <https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/submission> | Inquiries: asianjournalofpeacebuilding@gmail.com



E-ISSN 2288-2707
Print ISSN 2288-2693
