

## Interaction between the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula: Are Crises Cascading?

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### 1. Introduction

In 2021, the "Taiwan contingency" became a popular topic of discussion; in 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian war erupted, demonstrating to the international community that military superpower leaders such as Vladimir Putin could easily make strategic errors and that wars between major powers could occur even in the 21st century. In 2023, Kim Jong-un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea) named the Republic of Korea (ROK/South Korea) as his "number one enemy." Moreover, both regions have been expanding their military and are constantly engaging in provocative military actions.

Discussion of the link between the two crises began in Korea; however, it was not a broad discussion but confined to the expert level.<sup>1</sup> In September 2022, President Yoon Suk Yeol responded to a CNN interview about South Korea's position in the Taiwan contingency, stating, "We must deal with the North Korean threat first."<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is clear that Yoon Suk Yeol avoids discussing this issue publicly. Both South Korea and the U.S. have traditionally avoided linking the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula issues.<sup>3</sup>

Reviewing the history, it is undeniable that the two regions, located in the contact zone between China and the Soviet Union/Russia and the U.S. and Japan, have built and maintained their unique logic in terms of security while simultaneously potentially interlocking with each other. This study discusses the possibility of interlocking crises in the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula against the background of ongoing US-PRC strategic competition and the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to clarify the

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<sup>1</sup> Kohtaro Ito, "Taiwan yūji ni kansuru Kankoku de no giron (Discussion on Taiwan Contingency in South Korea)," *NPI Commentary*, March 23, 2023, [https://www.npi.or.jp/research/data/npi\\_commentary\\_ito\\_20230323.pdf](https://www.npi.or.jp/research/data/npi_commentary_ito_20230323.pdf). The final access date of all the websites in this paper is March 12, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> "Interview with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol," Fareed Zakaria GPS, Transcripts, CNN, September 25, 2022, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-09-25/segment/01>.

<sup>3</sup> Hideya Kurata, "Ado hokku na Bei-Chū kyōchō' to Kan-Chū kankei: Taiwan kaikyō mondai tonō bunri kakuran yōin toshitenō THAAD, ('Ad Hoc U.S.-China Cooperation and ROK-China Relations: THAAD as a Separating and Disturbing Factor with the Taiwan Strait Issue)," in *Shu Kimpei Seiken Kenkyū (Research on Xi Jinping Administration)*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2023, pp. 174-178.

nature of this issue by analyzing whether the Taiwan and Korean Peninsula contingencies can be linked from the perspective of US-ROK relations under US-PRC strategic competition and the impact of US-DPRK proximity and the Russia-Ukraine war on PRC-DPRK relations.

## 2. Views of Korean Progressives on the Taiwan Contingency

Concerns in the international community, including Japan, about the Taiwan Strait war intensified rapidly in 2021-2022.<sup>4</sup> The phrase "the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" was used at the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee meeting (Japan-U.S. "2+2") in March 2021, and it was mentioned at the Japan-U.S. summit meeting the following month. In March 2022, during a teleconference with President Tsai Ing-wen, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated, "A Taiwan contingency is both a Japan contingency and a Japan-US alliance contingency." This was a strong message to deter China. In Japan, there has been a flood of discourse about the Taiwan contingency. This indicates a sense of crisis in Japan regarding the Taiwan Strait situation.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 heightened Japan's sense of urgency regarding Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> According to a poll by *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 74% of respondents favored Japan's involvement in Taiwan's stability. A poll by *Mainichi Shimbun* revealed that 89% of respondents in Japan were concerned about the Chinese invasion of Taiwan. According to a May 2022 poll conducted by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, when asked how Japan should prepare for a Taiwan contingency, more than 90% of respondents stated, "Japan should prepare as much as possible within the current laws" (50%), and "Japan should enhance its preparedness, including amending its laws" (41%). However, only 4% of the respondents stated they "do not need to be prepared."

A similar phenomenon was observed in South Korea. South Korean President Moon Jae-in referred to the "importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" in his joint statement at the June 2021 summit meeting with U.S. President Biden. Like Japan, South Korea is a U.S. ally, and the U.S. forces are present in South Korea. The primary role of United States Forces Korea (USFK) is South Korea's defense. However, in 2006, the U.S. and South Korea agreed on the strategic flexibility of the USFK in advancing the War on Terrorism. Despite this, the USFK is not supposed to be deployed outside the region against South Korea's intentions. Thus, the USFK's strategic flexibility can be exercised if the ROK provides a go-ahead. During the Iraq War, some USFK assets were moved to the

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<sup>4</sup> Yasuhiro Matsuda, "Dai 6 shō Taiwan fakutā: akujunkan no kōzōka, (Chapter 6: The Taiwan Factor: Structuring a Vicious Cycle)," in Akio Takahara, Shigeto Sonoda, Tomoo Marukawa, and Shin Kawashima (eds.), *Nicchū kankei 2001-2022 (Japan-China Relations 2001-2022)*, The University of Tokyo Press, 2023, pp. 189-191.

<sup>5</sup> Yasuhiro Matsuda, "Dai 6 shō Taiwan fakutā: akujunkan no kōzōka, (Chapter 6: The Taiwan Factor: Structuring a Vicious Cycle)," pp. 189-191.

Middle East for use.

The problem is that in the case of the Taiwan Strait War, the target would be China, South Korea's largest trading partner, and China could use its influence over North Korea to provoke military actions that would check the Republic of Korea Armed Forces (ROKA) and USFK. Indeed, the "Taiwan Clause" aforementioned did not necessarily have the security implications of ROKA supporting the deployment of U.S. forces in the event of a Taiwan contingency.<sup>6</sup> Published in Korea in 2022, the book titled 'U.S.-China Competition and the Taiwan Strait Crisis: Are North and South Korea in the Chains of Alliance?' examines the challenges that South Korea will face during the Taiwan Strait Crisis from a perspective aligned with the views of progressives in South Korea.<sup>7</sup>

One of the authors, Cheong Wook-Sik, Director of the Hankyoreh Peace Institute, first indicated the concern that, based on information available from the U.S. military and Congress, the U.S. has already established the option of deploying the USFK during the Taiwan Strait War, is promoting strengthening the UN forces to fill the vacuum of the USFK, and there is a trend of enhancing the strategic flexibility of the USFK.<sup>7</sup> He is pessimistic about the future of cross-Strait relations, indicating that both sides are moving in an unresolved direction with the intention of changing the status quo, while U.S. support for Taiwan is rising.

Specifically, Cheong Wook-Sik said that according to Article 3 of the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the ROK, "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes."<sup>8</sup> The U.S. indicated its concern that an attack by China over the Taiwan Strait would amount to an "armed attack in the Pacific area" and may be a requirement for the exercise of the right of collective self-defense by the ROK, and simultaneously,

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<sup>6</sup> Hideya Kurata, "Ado hokku na Bei-Chū kyōchō' to Kan-Chū kankei: Taiwan kaikyō mondai tonō bunri kakuran yōin toshitenō THAAD, ('Ad Hoc U.S.-China Cooperation' and ROK-China Relations: THAAD as a Separating and Disturbing Factor with the Taiwan Strait Issue)," p. 181.

<sup>7</sup> Cheong Wook-Sik, "3bu Daemanhaehyeop wigiwa dongmaengui chein: Nambukaneun yeolludoel geosinga? (Chapter 3: The Taiwan Strait and the Chain of Alliance: Will North and South Korea Get Involved?)," Gil Yun-hyung, et.al., *MiJung gyeongjaenggwa Daemanhaehyeop wigi: Nambukaneun dongmaengui cheine yeolludoel geosinga? (U.S.-China Competition and the Taiwan Strait Crisis: Will North and South Korea Become Involved in Chain of Alliance?)*, pp. 147-148. Note that the author's analysis is based on perceptions close to those of China and the Kuomintang in Taiwan, as he notes that the foundation of cross-Strait relations is the 1992 Consensus, agreed to by China and Taiwan in 1992.

<sup>8</sup> "Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea" United States Forces Korea, October 1, 1953, [https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H\\_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty\\_1953.pdf](https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty_1953.pdf).

the use of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missiles deployed in Seongju and the naval base on Jeju Island. Simultaneously, he indicates the concern that the use of THAAD and launching a sortie from the naval base on Jeju Island would not require "constitutional processes" on the part of South Korea and that South Korea would eventually be involved through the actions of the U.S. military.<sup>9</sup>

This "entanglement theory" regarding the Taiwan Strait in Korea is similar to the argument that has developed in Japan since the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996.

Another author of the book, Chang Young-Hee, Research Fellow at the Institute for Peace & Security Studies at Chungnam National University, highlighted the following concerns in an interview with TV Tokyo in Japan.<sup>10</sup> The question is: How can we ensure the safety of local Korean companies and nationals in the event of war across the Taiwan Strait? According to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), only about 100 Korean companies operate in Taiwan, and according to the ROK's Overseas Koreans Agency, only about 4,800 Korean nationals live in Taiwan. Chang Young-Hee indicated that South Korea should consider the 215,000 Koreans living in China. Although it is uncertain how many companies and individuals will be affected in Taiwan, China can easily target Korean companies and individuals staying in the country for retaliation. Thus, economic relations with China could significantly restrict the actions of the ROKA and its governments.

According to a poll conducted by the East Asia Institute (EAI) of South Korea in 2022, 64.5% of the respondents said that if a war broke out across the Taiwan Strait, Japan would have to cooperate with the United States to deal with the Taiwan issue. When asked how the U.S. should respond, 42.0% stated it should be limited to logistical support, and 22.5% said it should participate in military operations.<sup>11</sup>

In Japan, concerns about the safety of Japanese companies and nationals staying in Taiwan and China, coupled with the Taiwan contingency theory, rapidly increased, and the Japan-US alliance was discussed as a way to deal with the situation. Similar concerns are believed to have rapidly grown in South Korea. Chang Young-Hee explains that the situation in South Korea emphasizes a triangular alliance between the ROK, the U.S., and Japan from the perspective that war in the Taiwan Strait

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<sup>9</sup> Cheong Wook-Sik, "3bu Daemanhaehyeop wigiwa dongmaengui chein: Nambukaneun yeolludael geosinga? (Chapter 3: The Taiwan Strait and the Chain of Alliance: Will North and South Korea Get Involved?)," pp. 190-192.

<sup>10</sup> "Kankoku wa 'Taiwan yuji' ni do mukiaunoka? (How Will the ROK Face the 'Taiwan Contingency') [Seoul Correspondent's Perspective]," TV TOKYO BIZ, December 2, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZBD5NTAe\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZBD5NTAe_M).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

should be deterred.

### 3. Assumptions about the U.S.-Korea Alliance Response by U.S.-Korea Military Experts

In March 2023, military experts from both South Korea and the United States published two papers on the role of the US-ROK alliance in the Taiwan Strait War. Michael Casey, a U.S. Department of Defense military analyst, divided the Taiwan Strait War into: 1) a PRC joint fire strike campaign intended to inflict sufficient damage to compel Taiwan to negotiate its political status with Beijing; 2) a PRC joint blockade intended to inflict sufficient damage to Taiwan's economy to compel negotiations; and 3) a joint island landing campaign intended to seize Taiwan and bring it under PRC control.<sup>12</sup>

In these three cases, Phillip C. Sounders, Director at the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs and a Distinguished Research Fellow at the U.S. National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), indicated the actions the United States may demand of South Korea.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. usually makes political considerations to avoid South Korea's suffering between the U.S. and China. Once wartime begins, however, "Washington is likely to be less deferential to ROK interests and political concerns than in a peacetime environment," Sounders noted.<sup>14</sup>

From the Korean perspective, Alex Soohoon Lee and Choong-Koo Lee, two Associate Research Fellows at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), quoted retired General Robert Abrams, former Commander of the USFK, as mentioning possible use of USFK in the Taiwan Strait crisis by stating that "all options," "including those assigned to the USFK," are open for the Taiwan Strait crisis because the USFK is under the command of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) and part of its area of responsibility (AOR), and speculated on what the US would demand of South Korea.<sup>15</sup>

The assumptions made by both sides regarding the US-ROK alliance's responses are summarized in Table 1.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Casey, "Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing: PLA Campaigns for a Cross-Strait Conflict," Joel Wuthnow, Derek Grossman, Philip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, and Andrew N.D. Yang, eds., *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (Washington D.C.: NDU Press, 2022), pp. 113–138.

<sup>13</sup> Phillip C. Sounders, "Stressing the Alliance: The United States and the ROK in a Conflict with China over Taiwan," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 1, March 2023.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Alex Soohoon Lee and Choong-Koo Lee, "The Taiwan Strait and the ROK-U.S. Alliance," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 1, March 2023, p. 154.

9. Interaction between the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula: Are Crises Cascading?

Table 1: Assumptions by U.S. and Korean Scholars on the Taiwan Strait War

	U.S. Demands and Concerns	Korea's Response and Concerns
Commonality for all scenarios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to ask strong diplomatic condemnation of China and statement of support for Taiwan</li> <li>to compare Korea's response with those of Japan, Australia, and other allies</li> <li>to implement economic sanctions against China: sanctions focused on individuals and organizations, ban on exports of weapons and dual use goods, travel bans, asset seizures etc.</li> <li>if U.S. forces are taking significant casualties in an actual conflict with China, U.S. leaders will be much less likely to defer to ROK concerns about potential North Korean provocations or attacks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the ROK has demonstrated its support for the United States, such as "importance of the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait"</li> <li>if the time comes, the ROK's policy options could be limited; therefore, the ROK must prepare well for various options in multiple situations</li> <li>decisions will have to be made promptly in a dynamic situation</li> <li>Seoul will face a dilemma where its involvement in the conflict, whether active or passive, may affect the security landscape of the Korean peninsula; the ROK will have to assess its own risks before making any decisions regarding involvement</li> </ul>
(1) a joint fire strike campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>intelligence-sharing</li> <li>the U.S. military may move some U.S. forces off the peninsula to conduct or support combat operations against China, particularly if the ROK government will not allow them to operate from Korean territory</li> <li>to ask the ROK to provide logistics support for U.S. forces (could be done quietly without public announcement)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ROK will have to cooperate with the United States to cope with the Chinese aggression under visible and tangible clashes between China and Taiwan</li> <li>to support the implementation of the U.S. regional strategy by monitoring and deterring aggressive Chinese activities around the Korean Peninsula, particularly on the western front</li> <li>to deny the Chinese military's transit across ROK territorial airspace and seas within 12 nautical miles of the ROK mainland (this would not be difficult)</li> <li>cooperate with the United States in the space and cyber domains</li> </ul>
(2) a joint blockade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to make similar requests to South Korea as in the previous scenario in the event of a conflict with China focused on blockade and counter-blockade operations</li> <li>to ask South Korea to provide logistics support for civilian ships and aircraft carrying military goods to the combat theater and for U.S. military ships and planes engaged in non-strike operations such as surveillance, escort duties, and search and rescue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ROK may be able to designate maintenance facilities and bases for the maintenance of U.S. civilian aircraft or ships engaged in non-military missions (it may be the target of the Chinese criticism)</li> <li>there could be a case that Seoul may positively consider its cooperation with Washington and Tokyo</li> <li>the ROK will have to defend the USFK from a Chinese naval offensive</li> <li>the ROK should prepare for a Chinese naval blockade in the Yellow Sea</li> </ul>
(3) a joint island landing campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>China would have incentives to encourage North Korean provocations (although probably not a full war) to create strains in the U.S.-ROK alliance and tie down U.S. forces on the peninsula</li> <li>to expect the ROK to deal with low- and medium-level DPRK provocations largely on its own</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to keep track of the bilateral relations between China and the DPRK</li> <li>the ROK may be expected to deal with North Korean low-level provocations on its own, a strengthened alliance coordination mechanism may be a must to manage simultaneous provocation in two theaters</li> <li>China's direct offensive to the ROK territory cannot be excluded</li> <li>If Kim Jong-un decides to commence a war on the Peninsula in the midst of a contingency, it will be an all-out war that could possibly develop into a nuclear war</li> </ul>

Source: Author's arrangement of the contents of notes 13 and 15 references.

Scenarios (1) and (2) will undoubtedly occur in the first half of Scenario (3), and it is difficult to

determine at the stages of Scenarios (1) and (2) that this will not develop into Scenario (3); rather, it is natural to prepare for Scenario (3). Thus, it is meaningful to compare the U.S. and South Korea for the scenario as a whole.

These are only estimates by scholars; however, they agree on three points. First, the fear of involvement is strong in South Korea. Second, North Korea's military provocation could occur (nuclear use is not excluded in the worst case). Third, since the USFK will be dispatched outside the region, South Korea may have to deal with North Korean military actions independently.

However, the differences between the U.S. and ROK regarding Scenario (2) are relatively significant. Korean scholars are concerned about supporting the U.S. military and civilian aircraft and vessels that would sail into the Taiwan Strait battlefield, whereas U.S. scholars have taken explicit military support for granted. Korean scholars fear a Chinese blockade of the Yellow Sea.

If North Korea were to use nuclear weapons, retaliation by the U.S. (not excluding nuclear use) would be certain. Since both China and Russia oppose North Korea's use of nuclear weapons, the probability of an actual nuclear attack would be considered extremely low. However, since the USFK, after realignment, is concentrated in three garrisons and bases, including Pyeongtaek, Osan, and Gunsan, the risk has increased under a tactical nuclear threat, making the USFK bases more vulnerable to a North Korean nuclear threat.

Will U.S. military assets in South Korea be used on the battlefield in Taiwan? Since 2020, U-2 high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft belonging to the USFK Osan Air Force Base have been conducting reconnaissance flights over the Yellow Sea, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea.<sup>16</sup> In June 2021, a U.S. military aircraft (C-17) in South Korea visited Taiwan with three U.S. senators.<sup>17</sup> C-17 is a military aircraft capable of transporting M1 Abrams tanks. The fact that the U.S. military operational aircraft made an unprecedented landing in Taiwan, not as an emergency landing owing to an accident but for political use, flying to Taiwan with U.S. senators was greeted with surprise. They were used to deliver a political message to break through the Chinese "vaccine blockade" of Taiwan, a demonstration of clear U.S. intent to support Taiwan.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that since U.S. military assets in Korea are used for the Taiwan Strait

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<sup>16</sup> Cheong Wook-Sik, "3bu Daemanhaehyeop wigiwa dongmaengui chein: Nambukaneun yeolludoel geosinga? (Chapter 3: The Taiwan Strait and the Chain of Alliance: Will North and South Korea Get Involved?)," pp. 153-154.

<sup>17</sup> "Mei canyiyuan fangtuan diTai, xuanbu jiang juanzeng Taiwan 75 wanji yimiao, (U.S. Senate Delegation Arrives in Taiwan and Declares Taiwan Will Receive 750,000 Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine)," *Central News Agency*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/202106065002.aspx>.

and the South China Sea in peacetime, they will also be used in a contingency. When the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), an American policy think tank, conducted simulations of the Taiwan Strait War, it also mentioned the diversion of two of the four squadrons of the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force of the USFK to the Taiwanese battlefield and the possibility that Russia, Iran, and North Korea would take advantage of this opportunity to launch military action. The possibility of Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other countries taking advantage of this opportunity for military action has also been mentioned.<sup>18</sup> From a military rationale, it should be assumed that the USFK will play a role in the Taiwan contingency and that the expansion of the front line beyond the Taiwan Strait is also envisioned.

Sounders noted that after the end of the war, "South Korean behavior and support will be critically examined, and this analysis will take place in a politicized and nationalistic United States. The future of US-ROK relations and the long-term fate of the US-ROK alliance will likely depend on U.S. perceptions about whether South Korea did enough to help when the United States needed that help the most."<sup>19</sup> South Korea, too, will have to decide on its actions, considering the type of support Japan and Australia will provide to the U.S. and the nature of the postwar relationship between South Korea and the U.S. Many people have begun to consider future wars after 2021, which did not occur during peacetime. Xi Jinping has opened a Pandora's box by suggesting the use of force.

#### 4. Signs of a Closer Relationship between South Korea and Taiwan?

The rise of the Taiwan contingency theory led to a trend toward closer Japan-Taiwan relations.<sup>20</sup> This did not necessarily result in Japan's commitment to the defense of Taiwan or defense exchanges between Japan and Taiwan. Nonetheless, Japan strongly believed that China's aggression against Taiwan must be deterred and that communication with Taiwan should be strengthened. This led to increased visits to Taiwan by Diet members and other activities.

These exchanges between Western countries and Taiwan have increased in recent years.<sup>21</sup> Although it has not received much attention, there has been a movement in South Korea seeking the development of relations with Taiwan. During the Cold War, Taiwan and South Korea were sometimes referred to

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<sup>18</sup> Mark F. Cancian, Mathew Cancian and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 2023, pp. 60-63.

<sup>19</sup> Phillip C. Sounders, "Stressing the Alliance: The United States and the ROK in a Conflict with China over Taiwan," p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Yasuhiro Matsuda, "Dai 6 shō Taiwan fakutā: akujunkan no kōzōka (Chapter 6: The Taiwan Factor: Structuring a Vicious Cycle)," pp. 189-191.

<sup>21</sup> Yasuhiro Matsuda, "Chūgoku-Ōshū kankei no kōzō henka: Ōshū no taiChūkeikai to taiTai sekkin wa naze okitaka? (Structural Changes in China-Europe Relations: Why Did Europe's Caution Against China and Its Proximity to Taiwan Occur?)," Shin Kawashima, Ayame Suzuki, and Yu Koizumi eds., *Yūrashia no jigazō: "Bei-Chū tairitsu/sin reisen" ron no shikaku, (Eurasia's Self-Portrait: The Blind Spot in the 'US-China Conflict/New Cold War' Theory)*, PHP Research Institute, 2023, pp. 355-360.



as "brotherly countries" as they had something in common: they were both under threat from divided states run by communist parties.<sup>22</sup>

The turning point was the development and success of the ROK's Northern Diplomacy, which led to the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Korea in 1992, resulting in the loss of diplomatic relations between the ROK and the Republic of China in Taiwan. Since then, South Korea has "respected" China's "one China" principle and has taken the position that the Taiwan issue is an internal affair of China. This situation is similar to that observed in Japan. The Park Geun-hye administration has accelerated its approach toward China, and, in inverse proportion to this, relations with Taiwan have been soured. In the absence of diplomatic relations, the ROK defined its relationship with Taiwan as an "informal pragmatic relationship" and only sought to build nonpolitical ties centered on economics and culture, such as by holding the "Joint TAITRA-KOTRA Conference" between Taiwan External Trade Development Council and the Korea External Trade Promotion and Investment Corporation of the ROK.<sup>23</sup>

However, as aforementioned, a reference was made to the "importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" at the May 2021 U.S.-South Korea summit meeting. This reference by President Moon Jae-in, seen as having a strong consideration for China, was received with surprise. It is safe to assume that discussions on how to respond to the Taiwan contingency began in the ROK at this time. Unlike during the election period, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration inherited this position while increasing its consideration for China since assuming office.<sup>24</sup>

In December 2022, reports circulated in South Korea that President Yoon Suk Yeol was considering appointing the former Chairman of the ROK Joint Chief of Staff as his representative to Taipei.<sup>25</sup> As of March 2024, this has yet to occur; however, if it does, semi-official relations between South Korea and Taiwan will reach their highest level since the 1992 diplomatic break. In January 2023, Chung

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<sup>22</sup> Chao Wen-Chih, "Tai-Han guanxi de lishi yanbian yu weilai zhanwang: jiegouxianshizhuyi de guandian, (Historical Transition and Future Prospects of Taiwan-ROK Relations: A Structural Realist Perspective)," Bumsig Ha ed., *Tai-Han guanxi de fazhan: xianzai, guoqu, xianzai yiji weilai, (The Development of Taiwan-Korea Relations: Past, Present and Future)*, Taipei: Hanlu Press, 2018, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Bumsig Ha, "Tai-han guanxi de xingcheng yu tezheng: yi jiangouzhuayi guandian tantao, (The Formation and Characteristics of Taiwan-Korea Relations: A Constructivist Perspective)," Bumsig Ha ed., *Tai-Han guanxi de fazhan: xianzai, guoqu, xianzai yiji weilai, (The Development of Taiwan-Korea Relations: Past, Present and Future)*, pp. 44-47.

<sup>24</sup> Hideya Kurata, "'Ado hkku na Bei-Chū kyōchō' to Kan-Chū kankei: Taiwan kaikyō mondai tono bunri kakuran yōin toshitenō THAAD, ('Ad Hoc U.S.-China Cooperation' and ROK-China Relations: THAAD as a Separating and Disturbing Factor with the Taiwan Strait Issue)," pp. 178-180.

<sup>25</sup> Yi Hsuan Lu, "Dongya qingshi kaoliang, chuan Nanhān jiang pai qian canmouzongzhang ren zhu Taidaiiao, (In view of the situation in East Asia, Accordingly South Korea will send its former Chief of General Staff as its representative in Taipei)," *Liberty Times*, November 2, 2022, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/4110128>.

Woo-taik, Deputy Speaker of the ROK National Assembly, visited Taiwan and met President You Si-kun of the Legislative Yuan and President Tsai Ing-wen.<sup>26</sup> This was the highest political visit to Taiwan by a politician since the island's diplomatic breakup, and China reacted furiously.

Still, this is not necessarily evidence that the ROK has begun to increase its involvement in Taiwan. This is because the deterioration of cross-strait and PRC-ROK relations could result in the recurrence of past events, but with greater coverage by the Taiwanese media and a stronger reaction from the Chinese government.

On the other hand, Taiwan's relations with North Korea deteriorated in inverse proportion to its development of relations with Western nations. In the past, during the Lee Teng-hui administration (1988-2000), Taiwan and North Korea had repeated reciprocal visits by private organizations over economic and trade relations and continued discussions over the disposal of nuclear waste from Taiwan's nuclear power plants in North Korea. However, this relationship worsened after the birth of the Chen Shui-bian administration in 2000.<sup>27</sup> The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government of Chen Shui-bian tended to be more pro-US than the Kuomintang government. Every time North Korea conducted a nuclear test or launched a ballistic missile, sanctions were imposed based on UN Security Council resolutions; however, Taiwan accepted these international norms and implemented sanctions against North Korea even though it has no representation in the UN. The same was true for the Russia-Ukraine War, in which Taiwan aligned itself with the international community to impose sanctions against Russia in 2022. The resurgence of the old Cold War logic is apparent in this case, too. It appears as though East Asia will revert to a bloc of the U.S., Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and a bloc of China, Russia, and North Korea.

##### **5. PRC-DPRK Proximity under U.S.-China Strategic Competition**

As is clear from the strategic confrontation between the U.S. and China, intensifying military confrontation in cross-strait relations, and intensifying conflict between North and South Korea, the logic of the Cold War is partially returning. North Korea can be presumed to be a country with strong expectations of a return to the Cold War based on its experience of receiving support from both China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War while simultaneously suffering the hardships of isolation

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<sup>26</sup> Lu Chia-rong, "Hanguohui fuyizhang deng ren fangTai, Beijing: dailai yanzhong chongji, (Deputy Speaker of the ROK National Assembly visits Taiwan, Beijing Says It Will Have Serious Impact)," *Central News Agency*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202301050272.aspx>.

<sup>27</sup> Lin Chih Hao, "Jin Zhengri-Jin zhengen shiqi de tiaozhan waijiaoluxian zhiyanjiu: yi meifang sanjiao, dongnanya he Chao-Tai guanxi wei li, (A Study of Challenges and Diplomatic Paths in the Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong-un Period: The Cases of the Northern Triangle, Southeast Asia and North Korea-Taiwan Relations)," Bumsig Ha ed., *Tai-Han guanxi: Jiaoliu, hezuo yu zhengce bijiao, (Taiwan-Korea Relations: Exchange, Cooperation and Policy Comparison)*, Taipei: Hanlu Press, 2019, pp. 187-189.

after the Cold War. Although China and North Korea may be legally allied, their militaries do not have joint plans, conduct joint training, or take joint actions, which is different from alliances such as those between Japan and the U.S. or South Korea and the U.S. Does a close relationship exist between China and North Korea that would lead to joint action in the event of a Taiwan Strait War? Are there signs of such a relationship being established in the future?

The Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping administrations were established at approximately the same time—in 2011 and 2012-2013, respectively. However, the relationship between the two governments was initially poor.<sup>28</sup> North Korea conducted a satellite launch and its fifth nuclear test around the time the Xi Jinping administration was formed. In December 2013, it executed Jang Sung-thaek, Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission, who had close ties with China. Moreover, Xi Jinping visited South Korea in July 2014, before North Korea. North Korea launched a ballistic missile, Hwasong-12, on May 14, 2017, when the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), Xi Jinping's key initiative, opened in Beijing. North Korea forced its sixth nuclear test in September 2017, and PRC-DPRK relations remained in the doldrums. When North Korea launched ballistic missiles 23 times in 2016 and 17 times in 2017, China failed to stop its outbursts. In addition, no meetings or mutual visits between the leaders of the two parties were realized. However, there was a visit by Chinese State Vice President Li Yuanchao in July 2013 and a meeting between Xi Jinping and Kim Yong-nam, President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly in the DPRK, at the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics in February 2014.<sup>29</sup>

China's tough response to the U.S. military's deployment of THAAD in South Korea in 2016 also resulted in the Xi Jinping administration's goal of initially seeking good relations with South Korea falling short and simultaneously facing deteriorating relations with North and South Korea.

These changes occurred because of U.S. President Donald J. Trump's policy shift toward China and North Korea.<sup>30</sup> The Trump administration imposed sanctions and tariffs on China in March 2018. Combined with China's simultaneous decision to amend its constitution to revoke the term of its president and begin strengthening its dictatorship, the US-China confrontation worsened. However, Trump decided to hold a summit with Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June 2018. After this US-China closeness was finalized, China and North Korea rapidly moved closer. Kim Jong-un visited China

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<sup>28</sup> Shunji Hiraiwa, "Chū-Chō no aratana 'dentōteki kankei' (New 'Traditional Relations' between the PRC and the DPRK)," *Research Report*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 26, 2021, <https://www.jiia.or.jp/research-report/post-78.html> <https://www.jiia.or.jp/research-report/post-78.html>.

<sup>29</sup> "Zhongguo tong Chaoxian de guanxi (Relationship between China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated in December 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/yz\\_676205/1206\\_676404/sbgx\\_676408/](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676404/sbgx_676408/).

<sup>30</sup> Shunji Hiraiwa, "Chū-Chō no aratana 'dentōteki kankei' (New 'Traditional Relations' between the PRC and the DPRK)."

thrice in March, May, and June 2018.

The PRC-DPRK relations are often described in a way that "each side maintains relations while concealing their intentions toward the U.S. and their distrust of the other."<sup>31</sup> Faced with the approaching U.S.-North Korea relationship, Xi Jinping significantly reduced the distance with North Korea, which had cold relations since the beginning of his administration: a visit to China by Kim Jong-un in January 2019, the Trump-Kim meeting in Hanoi in February 2019, and Xi's visit in June 2019, all in rapid succession, brought PRC-DPRK relations close. At the Trump-Kim meeting in Panmunjom in June 2019, negotiations regarding the suspension of nuclear development broke down. This was followed by an increase in ballistic missile test firing. Clearly, the US-China rivalry was a factor in the proximity of China and North Korea. An increase in ballistic missile launches under improved PRC-DPRK relations was observed. Thus, the Xi Jinping administration was forced to improve the initially cold Sino-North Korean relationship by Kim Jong-un, who took advantage of the proximity of the U.S.-DPRK.

However, the process of improving PRC-DPRK relations had to be stalled during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>32</sup> Faced with the pandemic that began in Wuhan, North Korea closed its border with China in January 2020. Since then, human traffic between China and North Korea has ceased. In addition, in October 2020, a total ban was imposed on cargo transport between China and North Korea, which also caused significant damage to the DPRK economy; exports in 2020 were reported to have decreased by 80.9% from the previous year, and imports by 77.7%. The leaders of China and North Korea have been engaged in "congratulatory telegram diplomacy," sending congratulatory telegrams to each other at milestones.<sup>33</sup>

## 6. The Russia-Ukraine War and the PRC-DPRK Relations

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In September 2021, the trilateral security partnership among Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. (AUKUS) was established, and the first Japan-Australia-India-U.S. (Quad) leaders meeting was held, strengthening the U.S. encirclement of China. However, China tacitly approved North Korea's ballistic missile launches. Thus, under the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Zhong-Chao shige liangnian huifu kache huoyun (China and North Korea Finally Bring Back Cargo Transport after Two Years)," *Rijing Zhongwenwang (NIKKEI Chinese)*, February 16, 2023, <https://zh.cn.nikkei.com/politicsaeconomy/politicsasociety/51433-2023-02-16-10-10-24.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Shunji Hiraiwa, "Dai 3 shō Ukuraina jōsei to Chūgoku Chōsen hantō kankei: higashi Ajia no kōzōteki henyō no kanōsei to Kitachōsen no kokubō kyōka (Chapter 3: The Situation in Ukraine and China-Korean Peninsula Relations: The Possibility of Structural Transformation in East Asia and the Strengthening of North Korea's National Defense)," The Japan Institute of International Affairs ed., "*Taikokukan Kyōsō no jidai*" no Chōsen hantō to chitsujō no yukue (*The Korean Peninsula and the Future of Order in the "Era of Great Power Competition"*), The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2023, pp. 83-85.

superficially good relationship, North Korea launched ballistic missiles a record number of 59 times in 2022.

North Korea had a zero-COVID policy; however, it experienced a domestic infection outbreak in the spring and summer of 2022. Railroad transportation was partially restored in September 2022, however, Sino-North Korean trade in 2022 was 60% lower than before the pandemic (\$1.028 billion; \$894 million in Chinese exports and \$134 million in imports).<sup>34</sup> North Korea resumed truck transportation between China and North Korea in February 2023. In July 2023, Li Hongzhong, the Vice Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, visited the DPRK to participate in events marking the 70th anniversary of the armistice in the Korean War and the human traffic that had been halted because of the COVID-19 pandemic was finally restored.

North Korea has repeatedly announced its position of support for Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war. It has also begun to play the "Taiwan card," taking advantage of the timing of Li Hongzhong's visit to the DPRK.<sup>35</sup> In the past, North Korea has made few specific statements on the Taiwan issue other than publicly supporting the "one China" principle. However, on August 3, 2023, the Korean Central News Agency of the DPRK quoted a spokesperson from the DPRK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticizing U.S. military aid to Taiwan.

Further, with the commencement of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration in May 2022, strategic cooperation with Japan and the U.S. has progressed. A summit meeting between the leaders of the two countries occurred in November 2022, resulting in the landmark "Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific," which refers to "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community."<sup>36</sup> Following this, in August 2023, a Japan-U.S.-Korea summit meeting was held at Camp David in the U.S., which called for enhanced cooperation, including security, and a joint statement referred to "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."<sup>37</sup> In response, Kim Jong-un visited Russia in September 2023 and

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<sup>34</sup> "Zhongguo tong Chaoxian de guanxi (Relationship between China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated in December 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/yz\\_676205/1206\\_676404/sbgx\\_676408/](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676404/sbgx_676408/).

<sup>35</sup> Lin Chih Hao, "Hou yiqing shidai Beihan hezhanlve dui Tai-Han guanxi zhi yingxiang, (The Impact of North Korea's Nuclear Strategy on Taiwan-ROK Relations in the Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Era)," pp. 179-180.

<sup>36</sup> Yasuyo Sakata, "Dai 9 shō Indo-Taiheiyō jidai no Nichi-Bei-Kan anzen hoshō kyōryōku: Punonpen 'sankakoku pātonāshipu' seimei to kongo no kadai (Chapter 9: Japan-U.S.-ROK Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Era: Phnom Penh 'Tripartite Partnership' Statement and Future Challenges)," The Japan Institute of International Affairs ed., "*Taikokukan kyōsō no jidai*" no Chōsen hantō to chitsujo no yukue (*The Korean Peninsula and the Future of Order in the "Era of Great Power Competition"*), 2023, pp. 158-161.

<sup>37</sup> "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100541826.pdf>.

strengthened cooperation between the two countries. Soon after, information emerged that Russia had procured arms and ammunition from North Korea.<sup>38</sup> The protracted Russia-Ukraine War forced Russia to approach North Korea, which did not fear sanctions from the U.S. among former Eastern countries that shared many of the same standards for weapons and ammunition. Owing to North Korea's opposition to the UN resolution condemning Russia, when North Korea launched a ballistic missile in March 2022, Russia used its veto power to stop the resolution of the UN Security Council sanctions. Russia is a major power capable of providing North Korea with the energy, weapons, and military technology it requires, and there is much room for development between the two countries. Kim Jong-un's regime took advantage of Russia's struggle to promptly move closer to it.<sup>39</sup> North Korea has significantly improved its relations with both China and Russia over the years by taking advantage of the new Cold War-like confrontational structure in which the United States is at odds with both China and Russia.<sup>40</sup>

Kim Jong-un is attempting to revive the logic of the Cold War in East Asia, with the election in January 2024 of Lai Ching-te of the DPP, who has poor relations with China and is pro-American. As president, Taiwan will have no choice but to become more dependent on the U.S. Examining the region as a whole, there are now prospects for cooperation between Japan, the United States, and Taiwan, and between Japan, the United States, and South Korea in countering China, Russia, and the DPRK, respectively. However, China and Russia disagreed on Russia's continuing war. To bring them together, North Korea aims to provide military support to Russia and ensure that both Russia and China see the value of checking the USFK. Thus, North Korea is creating strategic cards for China and Russia against the United States.

Therefore, North Korea expects China, Russia, and North Korea to share the same position and benefit from confronting Japan, the U.S., and South Korea. China may not want North Korea to act provocatively in peacetime but may want North Korea to check the USFK in times of war. The fact that North Korea has begun referring to South Korea, which is supposed to be the southern part of the

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<sup>38</sup> Julian E. Barnes, "Russia Is Buying North Korean Artillery, according to U.S. Intelligence," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/05/us/politics/russia-north-korea-artillery.html>. Keisey Davenport, "U.S. Says North Korea Shipped Arms to Russia," Arms Control Association, November 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-11/news/us-says-north-korea-shipped-arms-russia>.

<sup>39</sup> Hiromi Kamoshita, "Kitachōsen to Roshia ga kyūsekkin, 'senryakuteki shinraikankei' ni sukeru ryōkoku no ondosa (North Korea and Russia Draw Closer; Difference in Degrees of Enthusiasm between the Two Countries Transparent in 'Strategic Trust Relations')," *Research Report*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, November 13, 2023, <https://www.jiia.or.jp/research-report/missile-fy2023-02.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Shunji Hiraiwa, "Dai 3 shō Ukuraina jōsei to Chūgoku Chōsen hantō kankei: higashi Ajia no kōzōteki henyō no kanōsei to Kitachōsen no kokubō kyōka (Chapter 3: The Situation in Ukraine and China-Korean Peninsula Relations: The Possibility of Structural Transformation in East Asia and the Strengthening of North Korea's National Defense)," pp. 79-80.

DPRK, as the "Republic of Korea," in addition to signifying its determination to maintain its independence, may be an attempt to make China consider the value of the "North Korea card."

As aforementioned, North Korean diplomacy is accustomed to maximizing its own interests while aiming to maintain independence relative to China's influence, and its approach to Russia can also be interpreted in this context. Moreover, because the UN Security Council resolution on the Korean War remains in effect, if North Korea attacks South Korea, the United Nations Command (UNC) in South Korea can counterattack without having to seek instructions from the UN Secretariat. The Korean Armistice Agreement broadly binds North Korea's actions, and it is unlikely that North Korea will take military action solely for China's convenience. It is only to make South Korea and the United States believe that military provocation is possible, which would create an advantageous situation for North Korea.

## **7. Conclusion**

The discussion presented reveals the following three points.

First, in the event of a Taiwan contingency, it is considered almost self-evident by the U.S. and South Korean experts that some U.S. military assets in South Korea would be sent to Taiwan for defense purposes. A U.S. military expert takes for granted the effective use of military assets available in the region. It is not known whether China will attack the USFK within South Korean territory or outside of South Korean territory after a sortie; however, if the U.S. forces are attacked, there are several decision-making forks in alliance management as to how South Korea should respond to this, and the possibility of South Korea being involved is being indicated at various levels which is a concern.

Second, although there is strong concern in the ROK about "entanglement theory," there exists the prospect that, as an ally, the ROK will have no choice but to provide a certain degree of support to the US. However, South Korea's dependence on China is extremely high, and China's influence over South Korea is significant. Furthermore, the responses may vary depending on whether conservatives or progressives are in power. Although public debate is less advanced in South Korea than in Japan, discussions have begun among intellectuals, and some public opinion polls suggest that the majority believe that the US-ROK alliance will have to respond in some way.

Third, it has been indicated that the Taiwan contingency could escalate into a war between the U.S. and China, which could trigger military action by North Korea. Although North Korea strongly expects a revival of the Cold War, China, the largest beneficiary of globalization, does not support North Korea's military provocations during peacetime. However, many experts speculate that once China decides to launch a full-scale invasion of Taiwan, it will not attack South Korea itself but will expect

North Korea to play its role in stalling the USFK. North Korea's hostility toward South Korea also aligns with China's expectations of stalling USFK. However, even if China expects North Korea to take military action in the event of an emergency in Taiwan, whether North Korea will do as expected is another matter. North Korea should decide on the action that best suits its interests. It is natural to assume that China has insufficient influence to make North Korea invade South Korea. In particular, it is difficult to imagine North Korea committing such a "suicide" act as the use of nuclear weapons, which could destroy its own country for the sake of Taiwan's unification.

Perhaps "the Taiwan contingency is both an ROK contingency and a US-ROK alliance contingency." However, this remains an imaginary event. People have begun to form all types of associations based on the assumption that China will make an extreme and unrealistic choice to use force. China wants to avoid or delay the Cold War and is in the same boat as North Korea, which expects to revive the Cold War. Moreover, China is unlikely to welcome Russia-DPRK proximity. If China and North Korea form relations involving shared strategic interests, the probability that the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula crises will be linked may increase. However, in reality, the answer to the question of the link between the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula is that the US-Japan alliance, US-ROK alliance, US-Taiwan security partnership, PRC-DPRK alliance, and Russia-DPRK cooperation will all be strengthened in times of peace. North Korea can take advantage of this fear because both the U.S. and South Korea are concerned about North Korea's military provocations. Thus, the interlocking of the two wars in the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula will accelerate preparation for such a war.

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