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# **Assessment of the South Korea-U.S. Summit** **April 26, 2023**

by James Trottier  
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# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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CGAI Fellow  
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**P**resident Yoon Suk-Yeol's visit to Washington was a personal and PR triumph for him and a modest success regarding issues of concern to South Korea.

It was only the Biden administration's second state visit so it was an attempt by the U.S. to signal the importance that the administration attaches to U.S./South Korea relations.

Nevertheless, all the goodwill at the summit cannot conceal the fact that the Korean Peninsula is not a top-tier issue for the Biden administration, not to mention for the U.S. media and population. Yoon's performance of a song at the state dinner was a personal triumph and a PR coup, but it completely overshadowed media coverage concerning the summit's actual substance.

The summit and its Washington Declaration covered a range of important issues. While the summit did not herald major breakthroughs, it did deliver a compromise on the deterrence and nuclear weapons issues and turned down the heat on a number of economic irritants.

## **North Korea**

Regarding North Korea, the Washington Declaration was designed: 1) more to address growing popular support in South Korea for it to acquire its own nuclear weapons than to deter North Korea; and 2) to address South Korean concerns about the long-term U.S. commitment to East Asia and, in particular to South Korean security. Regarding the latter, the Biden administration attempted to reassure South Korea and bind future possible isolationist U.S. administrations to that commitment. This commitment's durability remains to be seen.

The U.S. strengthened extended deterrence in exchange for Yoon's commitment not to pursue nuclear weapons for South Korea.

The creation of a consultative process regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons and visits to South Korea by U.S. nuclear ballistic missile submarines could reduce the pressure for nuclear weapons from some sectors of the South Korean population but not from others.

At the same time, the U.S. will ultimately decide when and if to deploy nuclear weapons. It is also unclear how these nuclear consultations will proceed.

Moreover, visits by American nuclear submarines – let alone some future deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea – could anger both China and North Korea. With its trade overwhelmingly tied to China, South Korea is vulnerable to Chinese economic measures. As for North Korea, its reaction can be expected to be loud and threatening.



At the end of the day, the Washington Declaration will not achieve what it ostensibly aims to do, namely, deter North Korea from expanding its nuclear arsenal. But arguably, it may deter North Korea from staging an attack on South Korea. The latter point is premised on the assumption that North Korea would otherwise attack South Korea as opposed to threatening to do so.

In fact, North Korea will continue to test and expand its missile arsenal and probably conduct another nuclear test in a strategic context that it finds particularly favourable. North Korea is on its own missile and nuclear weapons pathway and timetable and will not be deterred by the measures in the Washington Declaration.

North Korea's continued missile testing and probable nuclear test will alarm South Koreans, increase popular support for South Korean nuclear weapons and require further measures to dampen that demand, such as the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea.

The summit and Washington Declaration do not meaningfully address the need to engage North Korea at some time apart from a cursory reference to dialogue.

## **Economic Issues**

The Washington Declaration contains a lot about economics, with an emphasis on South Korea/U.S. relations. There were positive steps to reduce and remove irritants and make progress on various bilateral and multilateral issues. The summit highlighted the fact that there are more areas of co-operation between South Korea and the U.S. than there are irritants.

At the same time, unresolved economic issues include Chinese pressure on U.S. companies in China. The U.S. wants to persuade South Korea not to agree to Chinese requests for its companies to fill any gaps resulting from the exit of U.S. companies. Other issues include the impact of the *Inflation Reduction Act* and the *Chips and Science Act* on trade and investment and protectionism in general.

## **Other Issues**

The summit glossed over some issues, such as the U.S.'s request for South Korea to supply weapons to Ukraine and South Korea's reluctance to do so. The U.S. is also pressuring South Korea to choose between America and China, a choice that South Korea is unwilling to make given its dependence on trade with China.

South Korean/Japanese rapprochement is arguably due as much to Yoon's efforts and the two countries' recognition that it is in their mutual self-interest, as it is to American pressure.



## **Conclusion**

In focusing on the extended deterrence of North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea are only addressing part of the equation. Apart from the fact that extended deterrence will not actually deter North Korea from pursuing its missile and nuclear ambitions, the allies need to provide a pathway to dialogue with North Korea at some point. This will require shifting from a sole and futile focus on denuclearization to one that addresses a broader and more achievable slate of objectives including:

- Freezing and reducing North Korea’s nuclear stockpile;
- A halt to further missile and nuclear testing;
- A moratorium on uranium enrichment and production of plutonium; and
- Conventional arms talks and arms reduction, etc. in return for lifting or substantive easing of sanctions on North Korea, and possibly other measures.

As with past provocation cycles, North Korea will emerge from this one with a stronger missile and nuclear capacity. Eventually, dialogue will be renewed. The longer it takes before this happens, the more time North Korea will have to increase its missile and nuclear arsenal.

## ► About the Author

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**James Trottier** is a Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, a lawyer and a former career Canadian diplomat who directed the political/economic (diplomatic) programs at the Canadian embassies in South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines and also served at the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN in New York. He was accredited to North Korea where he led four Canadian diplomatic delegations and to Myanmar for five years as Chargé d'affaires and political counsellor and met regularly one-on-one with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi while she was under house arrest and after her release. He also met regularly with other opposition leaders and the military in Myanmar. At headquarters, he had a variety of responsibilities including human rights, environmental issues, managing political relations with South Asia and with the European Union (EU) and organizing four Canada-EU summits involving three Canadian prime ministers and their EU counterparts.

He is a frequent media commentator on international affairs and is regularly invited to participate as a panellist and expert at foreign policy conferences in Canada, the United States, South Korea, Thailand and elsewhere.

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