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[Column] A year and a half of Yoon's foreign, security policies has added to Korea risk

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It is time to reflect objectively on what has been achieved to date



President Yoon Suk-yeol speaks at an event celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Korean National Diplomatic Academy on Sept. 1 at the academy's campus in Seoul's Seocho District. (courtesy of the presidential office)



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The South Korean public's evaluation of President Yoon Suk-yeol's governance has been harsh. The proportion of people who rate his performance positively has not risen beyond the mid-30% range.

There is one exception, though: the area of foreign affairs and national security. Conservative supporters in particular believe that Yoon has been successful at achieving the three major foreign affairs and national security policy objectives in terms of survival (security), prosperity (the national interest), and national prestige.

Has that really been the case, though?

Yoon has consistently stressed the importance of the South Korea-US alliance and deterrence against North Korea, calling for "peace through strength."

He has been working to hasten the establishment of a "three-axis" system in response to North Korea's nuclear capabilities, and he has sharply increased the frequency and intensity of joint military exercises with the US. He has fleshed out plans for institutionalizing deterrence

against nuclear proliferation through his Washington Declaration with US President Joe Biden and developed plans for the first-ever nuclear operation drills during next summer's Ulchi Freedom Shield joint exercise with the US.

Beyond that, he has been stepping up trilateral military coordination with the US and Japan along with security cooperation with major allies, including NATO. This accounts for the confidence he has been showing in his national security agenda.

Ironically, fears about the security situation have only been growing in and around South Korea. Overseas experts have pointed to the Korean Peninsula — rather than the Taiwan Strait — as the next region where conflict is expected to erupt in the wake of the situations in Ukraine and Gaza.

A survey of around 500 investment companies by a French investment bank showed them listing North Korea alongside Russia and Iran as one of the three major “geopolitical villains” for the global economy. This indicates their perception of a growing Korea risk.

With both South and North Korea shifting toward aggressive doctrines of preemptive strikes and massive retaliation, their Sept. 19 comprehensive military agreement from 2018 has been nullified and lines of communication between them have been shut down completely. People are concerned that isolated clashes in the West Sea, Demilitarized Zone, or East Sea could escalate into all-out military frictions and even nuclear war.

The fears are also very apparent in changes to the security environment.

Under the Yoon administration, North Korea has been defined as South Korea's “main enemy,” Russia as “antagonistic,” and China as quasi-antagonistic. This situation has encouraged increasingly visible signs of closeness between Pyongyang and Moscow and trilateral cooperation by North Korea, China and Russia, while presaging a return to the precarious security environment of the Cold War era.

South Koreans' security concerns have been compounded by the high-pressure, aggressive tactics of the Yoon administration, which has been emphasizing its willingness to go to war as opposed to making diplomatic efforts to prevent war. This is the sort of contradictory outcome that emerges from one-eyed foreign affairs and national security policies.

What about the national interest?

In the 90 or so days after taking office, Yoon visited 25 countries. In settings of multilateral diplomacy, he has had summits with around 90. His diplomatic focus has been on economic matters.

But despite all the administration's publicity to the contrary, it has not yielded tangible results in terms of individual livelihoods. No concrete progress has yet been made on the US\$30 billion investment from the United Arab Emirates that was announced earlier this year. While Joe Biden has boasted of attracting US\$55.8 billion in investment from South Korean companies, US investment in South Korea has amounted to only US\$7 billion.

A similar situation unfolded with Yoon's state visit to the UK. This explains why some critics are even questioning whether this amounts to self-destructive “giveaway diplomacy,” where the president's summit diplomacy efforts end up hollowing out the South Korean economy.

In the area of economic security, the signs are increasingly alarming.

Consider the situation with urea water solution. In 2021, South Korea's relied on China for 67% of its urea solution. This year, that rate is up to 91% again.

It's understandable why the administration would create policies with the aim of reducing dependence on China and diversifying trade channels. But the excessive focus on the US, in the name of creating an economic and technological alliance, has been boomeranging back to hurt South Korea's economic relationship with China.

This is true even when it comes to relations with Japan. In the interest of normalizing ties, the Yoon administration took the unconventional steps of arranging for third-party compensation to forced labor mobilization victims while condoning the ocean release of radioactively contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

But those actions have not brought about any corresponding reciprocity from Tokyo. In diplomatic terms, it amounts to a loss for the national interest.

The administration has also scored poorly in its strategy for boosting national prestige and elevating South Korea into a “global pivotal state.”

We can see a clear example of this with the failed bid to host the 2030 World Expo in Busan. Despite receiving support from the G7 countries and other advanced economies, South Korea could not clear the barrier raised by the Global South. Some have rumored that its international image as a “follower of the US” worked against it.

While South Korea has been positioning itself as a crusader for liberty, human rights and democracy, its World Press Freedom Index ranking, as assessed by Reporters Without Borders, fell from 41st to 47th between 2019 and 2023. It similarly tumbled in the Economist’s Democracy Index, dropping from 16th in 2021 to 24th in 2022. Meanwhile, the international community’s response to Yoon’s proposal for a “carbon-free alliance” — an ambitious plan intended to take the place of the RE100 — has been cool.

An even bigger issue is the failure to achieve a popular consensus at home. The consequences of an overly ideologically, dogmatic and arrogant approach that divides the public and labels those with different views as “anti-state forces” could be catastrophic.

It is not too late. As a first step, it is time to reflect objectively on what has been achieved to date. The moment has come to build on that foundation, reconstructing South Korea’s foreign affairs and national security policy with humility, caution, moderation and openness.

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