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The Past, Present and Future of the Republic of Korea – United States of America Military Alliance: Naval and territorial perspectives

This year marks the 70 anniversary of the military alliance between the United States of America (US) and the Republic of Korea (ROK). The ROK-US military alliance was established as part of US policy to contain Communism in East Asia. The partnership has not always been smooth, especially during the Cold War. US governments distrusted the dictatorship that ruled ROK for over thirty years and was often concerned by the country's unilateral streak. Meanwhile, ROK leaders questioned the sincerity of the US commitment to its security, suspecting that it prioritized South East Asia and Japan.

The post-Cold War order brought about a new dynamic to the alliance. ROK's development into a prosperous and democratic country, coupled with North Korea's nuclear sabre rattling and the rise of China elevated the value of the ROK-US alliance in the eyes of Washington. The US has tried to bring this alliance into their larger containment strategy against China, notably the Quad. Many in ROK consider China, alongside North Korea, to be a security threat. But a majority also have misgivings about joining an anti-Chinese alliance, especially with Japan. The possibility that Seoul might be dragged into a war against China over Taiwan has led many to question the feasibility of the US strategy.

By providing a historical overview of the ROK-US alliance, this presentation argues that a crucial difference between the two in their strategic viewpoints lies in the geographical lens. Despite having one of America's largest army bases in South Korea, the US strategic vision in East Asia has been shaped by a naval-centred perspective. ROK's horizon has been territory centric, focusing on the Korean peninsula and Northern China. The presentation further questions the publically stated US intention of bringing ROK closer to the Quad. Instead, it suggests that the US and ROK would have much to gain if ROK was a strategic but decisive rear, separate from the Quad.