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Lessons from the Yulgok Operation and South Korea's Quest for Sovereignty and Able Partnership with the United States in the Trump 2.0 Era

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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian war has dragged on for more than three years, causing immense sacrifices, including significant civilian casualties. Continuing hostilities without a decisive victory from either side appears increasingly futile. Despite international mediation efforts and previous peace talks, both countries have failed to reach an armistice. The core issue lies in the conflicting goals of the two sides and the resulting non-negotiable terms for a ceasefire. Russia seeks to eliminate Ukraine's potential to act against its interests, while Ukraine strives to secure guarantees against future Russian aggression. Currently, Ukraine finds itself in an unfavorable position, partly due to President Donald Trump's expressed intent to end the war under any conditions. This paper cautiously explores the potential role of the Coalition of the Willing and the Reassurance Force in broadening the scope of agreements necessary to achieve an armistice.

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War illustrates the old adage: "Ending a war is much more difficult than starting one." When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, most military experts predicted that the conflict would last only a few weeks or even just days. However, the war has dragged on for more than three years, eroding trust in humanity and claiming countless innocent lives.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has fundamentally reshaped how people perceive war. For many in the modern, civilized

world, it was shocking to witness a full-scale war erupt in 21st-century Europe between two nations with shared religious and cultural traditions. Additionally, the war revealed that atrocities committed by soldiers against civilians remain a grim reality. The ongoing nature of the conflict continues to astonish observers, as no tangible solutions for an armistice have yet emerged.

Negotiations had been underway since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. Just a few days into the conflict, Belarus hosted three rounds of talks aimed at securing a ceasefire and providing immediate aid to Ukrainian civilians

in combat zones. However, the Belarusian initiative failed to yield meaningful results, and Turkey stepped in as a mediator starting in March 2022. During this period, Russia and Ukraine came close to announcing the Istanbul Communiqué, which outlined key conditions for an armistice. Nevertheless, they ultimately failed to reach an agreement, and the talks came to a halt in May 2022. Since then, individual proposals, unilateral declarations of armistice terms by both sides, and large but fruitless conferences have taken place without producing tangible outcomes.

The structure of the war and its consequences have hindered progress in armistice talks. Neither Russia nor Ukraine has been able to achieve a decisive advantage to enforce a victory that would bring a clear end to the conflict. Russia is waging a limited war without full mobilization, which allows it to conserve resources and sustain its military operations over time. At the same time, Russia pursues ambitious objectives, aiming to eliminate Ukraine's potential to pose future "challenges" to Russian interests. In contrast, Ukraine is conducting a total war with significant foreign aid, driven by the absolute goal of national survival. The absence of decisive victories and the conflicting objectives of both sides have prolonged the war indefinitely. Specifically, the incompatible goals of the two belligerents have resulted in non-negotiable terms during peace talks.

This paper aims to analyze why the war has failed to achieve an armistice by focusing on the arguments presented by both sides during negotiations and examining past ceasefire agreements between Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, it seeks to explore potential pathways for an armistice based on these arguments. Specifically, the paper highlights the possibility of a European initiative, including the Coalition of the Willing and its armed forces, as a means to expand the scope of agreements for an armistice.

Russian Arguments for an Armistice

The current momentum for negotiations began after the inauguration of President Donald Trump. President Trump initiated discussions with Vladimir Putin and pushed Volodymyr Zelensky to participate in a well-orchestrated summit at the White House. As a result, Russia and Ukraine temporarily agreed to a 30-day ceasefire in the Black Sea region. However, Russia subsequently asked the lift of sanctions on Russia to move to implementations. Unlike Ukraine's short-term approach—developed in cooperation with the United States—Russia demanded more fundamental terms for an armistice. Consequently, negotiations have reached an impasse.

In 2022, Putin rejected a near-finalized armistice agreement negotiated in Istanbul in March. This negotiation followed significant Russian military setbacks in Ukraine. During these talks, Ukraine proposed permanent neutrality and agreed to limitations on its military capabilities, including restrictions on major weapons systems such as tanks. In

exchange, Ukraine requested security guarantees from a group of guarantor nations, including Russia itself. Under this arrangement, these guarantor nations would be obligated to defend Ukraine in case of foreign invasion. However, Russia undermined this proposal by insisting on veto rights for participating countries within the security framework. At that time, Putin showed no intention of ending the war.

To examine Russia's terms for an armistice, it is essential to consider how Russian elites perceive the war and Ukraine. Putin launched his "special military operation" with the stated goals of "de-Nazifying" and demilitarizing Ukraine. In the early stages of the war, Russia aimed to conquer all of Ukraine through multiple axes of advance, including airborne operations targeting Kyiv. Russia has consistently pursued the same objectives even after shifting its focus to eastern offensives in April 2022. Additionally, the Russian leadership views Ukraine through a specific lens that shapes its approach. These factors must be analyzed to fully understand Russia's arguments at the negotiating table.

Putin's perception of the conflict differs significantly from that of others. For Russian leaders, this war is not merely a conflict with Ukraine but a confrontation with Western civilization itself. According to Kremlin narratives, the United States instigated the war through influence operations that manipulated Ukrainian identity and consciousness, turning its citizens against Russia. Russian authorities claim that the U.S. orchestrated events such as the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 to establish an anti-Russian government in Kyiv.¹⁾ As long as Putin views the war through this lens, he is unlikely to engage seriously in negotiations.

Additionally, Russian leaders hold incompatible views regarding Ukraine's statehood compared to other nations. Putin has repeatedly asserted that Ukrainians and Russians were historically one people—united by language, faith, and culture—until relatively recently. He refers to Ukrainians as "Little Russians," portraying them as regional variants of Russians rather than an independent nation. This belief has been widely shared among Russian elites and used to justify their invasion of Ukraine. Based on this perspective, Russia considers its territorial boundaries to include Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and parts of the Black Sea region.

Russia's vision for an armistice involves no concessions from its side but rather a return to historical ties between Moscow and Kyiv—resembling either Soviet-era relations or those under President Yanukovich (2010-2014). Under such conditions, Kyiv would be forced to accept Russian control over Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson oblasts, and Crimea.²⁾

If Russia faces unfavorable situations on the battlefield, Putin may shift his focus to achieving more limited

1) Lucjan Kubica, "Ukraine's Position in Russia's Strategic Thinking: Domestic, Regional and International Order," *Hybrid CoE Paper* 20, September 2024, p. 11.

2) Lucjan Kubica (2024), p. 15.

objectives. Among these, as he has previously stated, the demilitarization of Ukraine would likely become his second preferred goal. Under this scenario, Russian armed forces aim to destroy Ukraine's industrial bases and social infrastructure. With successful strikes against Ukrainian forces on the front lines, Russia's attacks could cripple Ukraine economically and militarily. During the peace talks in Istanbul, the concept of demilitarization was explicitly presented by the Russian delegation.³ In such a scenario, Ukraine would be subjected to Russian coercion, left without any significant means of resistance.

Ukrainian Desire for an Armistice

Ukraine has continued its struggle for survival since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Following this, Russia expanded the conflict to the Donbas region, achieving no significant military victories but causing immense suffering among Ukrainian civilians. In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion under the pretexts of "de-Nazification" and "demilitarization." Contrary to the expectations of military experts, Ukrainians managed to defend their country, though at great cost in human lives. Foreign support has been a critical factor in sustaining Ukraine's resistance. Recent setbacks, such as operational failures near Kursk, highlight Ukraine's heavy reliance on U.S. intelligence assistance. With the inauguration of President Trump, Ukraine suddenly faces the challenge of finding appropriate terms and strategies to conclude the war with an armistice.

During the negotiation process in Istanbul in 2022, Ukrainian representatives prioritized guarantees for national security. As mentioned earlier, Ukraine proposed establishing a security guarantor group composed of states that would intervene in the event of foreign invasion. Remarkably, Russia was included as a potential member of this group. In exchange, Ukraine offered to adopt permanent neutrality. The Ukrainian delegation even suggested abandoning NATO membership option and agreed to impose strict caps on its military capabilities. These concessions demonstrated Ukraine's strong desire for assurances regarding its defense.

One incident further underscores Ukraine's commitment to peace negotiations—the Bucha atrocity. During peace talks, reports emerged of horrific war crimes in Bucha, where victims were bound before execution. Despite widespread outrage among Ukrainians and heightened animosity toward Russia, President Zelensky insisted on continuing negotiations, prioritizing efforts that could eventually bring peace and security to his country. Unfortunately, Zelensky's efforts were thwarted by Putin's intransigence.

Thereafter, Ukraine abandoned its previous stance of forgoing NATO membership and actively pursued accession, a move crossing Russia's red line and potentially prolonging the

war. On November 15, 2022, at the G20 Bali Summit, Ukraine publicly proposed 10 conditions for an armistice. President Zelenskyy called for the restoration of Ukraine's borders to their pre-2014 status, including the return of Crimea, along with the repatriation of all prisoners and children deported to Russia. The proposal also included guarantees against future Russian aggression and the establishment of a peace conference backed by "a legally binding international treaty." Among these conditions, securing robust security guarantees remains Ukraine's top priority.

Ukraine's concerns about its defense are rooted in past failures under international treaties such as the Minsk Agreements. These agreements, signed in September 2014 and February 2015, outlined ceasefire roadmaps but ultimately failed due to insufficient enforcement mechanisms and ongoing Russian aggression. Western nations were unwilling to provide adequate security guarantees during these negotiations, leaving Ukraine vulnerable to further Russian incursions. Although the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was tasked with monitoring compliance, its efforts lacked robust mechanisms to ensure adherence.

Ukraine's defense concerns have garnered widespread support among European powers. In early March 2025, defense ministers from the UK, Germany, Italy, Poland, and France convened in Paris to discuss forming a Reassurance Force capable of guaranteeing peace in Ukraine. The concept was incubated among leaders of Coalition of the Willing which pursues a peace settlement in Ukraine. Approximately 15 countries expressed willingness to contribute troops for a force of up to 30,000 personnel tasked with protecting airports, ports, and critical infrastructure permanently.⁴ However, while Ukrainian authorities hoped for U.S. troop involvement in this initiative, President Trump ruled out such participation. Nonetheless, European countries continue to anticipate U.S. contributions to their efforts.

A Possible Pathway for an Armistice Agreement and Peace

In general, states engaged in armed conflicts begin by reducing or halting violence as a step toward achieving peace. A ceasefire typically provides a short-term arrangement for specific purposes, such as facilitating humanitarian aid, whereas an armistice can establish a prolonged period of hostilities' absence. Ceasefires and armistices may even be agreed upon at the level of military commanders. The fundamental characteristic of both actions is the cessation of violence. Once an armistice is achieved, the belligerents can move forward to negotiate

3) Ibid.

4) Shaun Walker, et al, "Trump hints at financial repercussions if Russia rejects Ukraine ceasefire," *The Guardian*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/12/russia-demands-details-from-before-commits-to-ukraine-ceasefire>(Accessed March 25, 2025).

peace agreements that culminate in legally binding treaties.

To explore possible pathways to peace, it is necessary to examine previously proposed models for an armistice and peace. Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro have suggested potential models for armistices between Russia and Ukraine, based on the efforts of both sides in 2023. They argue that armistice models can be categorized into two options for Ukraine: neutrality or alliance. If Ukraine opts for non-alignment, it could return to the Istanbul Communiqué model or adopt the Israel model. The Istanbul Communiqué model was discussed earlier. On the other hand, the Israel model entails Ukraine receiving security assistance commitments from foreign countries without a formal treaty, similar to the relationship between the United States and Israel.⁵⁾ At present, it appears unlikely that Ukraine can return to the Istanbul model due to Russian opposition. Furthermore, Ukraine cannot rely on extensive American security assistance, as Trump has explicitly rejected such commitments.

The current situation suggests that forming alliances with European countries could serve as a viable pathway. If Ukraine joins NATO, it might adopt the West German model, where allies extend Article 5 protections to defend against Russian aggression but refrain from supporting offensive operations to reclaim lost territories. Additionally, NATO membership could allow Ukraine to integrate the Norway model to ease tensions with a wary Russia. This approach would involve Ukraine renouncing practices such as hosting nuclear weapons, establishing permanent foreign military bases, or conducting military exercises near Russian borders.⁶⁾ However, Putin has strongly opposed Ukraine's NATO membership. Persuading Russian authorities to accept Ukraine's accession to NATO may prove extremely challenging.

In this situation, the establishment of the Coalition of the Willing and the formation of the Reassurance Force hold significant importance, even without U.S. participation or support. The coalition, comprising 31 countries including Japan, has broadened the scope of nations involved in the armistice process and strengthened its influence by organizing its own military forces. This approach allows the coalition to take measures free from accusations of NATO's direct involvement in the war, despite most member states being part of NATO. With these characteristics, the coalition has the potential to deter future Russian aggression and lay a foundation for a lasting peace treaty.

At present, achieving an armistice remains the most critical step to ensure stability. Several preconditions are necessary to continue negotiations toward an agreement. First, the U.S. should maintain military assistance to Ukraine, at least in the form of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance,

to preserve equilibrium on the battlefield. Second, the U.S. must persuade both sides: encouraging Russia to be content with the current situation and cease offensives, while possibly suggesting that Ukraine accept *de jure* sovereignty over Russian-occupied territories under *de facto* Russian control. While such a concession would be difficult for Ukrainian authorities to accept, it may be preferable to risking another Russian invasion of reclaimed territories. Instead, Ukraine could benefit from support through the Coalition of the Willing and the deployment of the Reassurance Force within its territory—an arrangement far superior to the Minsk Agreement. Additionally, Ukrainian leaders must recognize that U.S. commitment to supporting Ukraine will not be indefinite.

Conclusion And Recommendations

Concluding an armistice for the Russo-Ukrainian War is a highly challenging endeavor. At present, one of the belligerents remains reluctant to reach an agreement, while the other adheres to demands that are unlikely to be accepted by its counterpart. Moreover, the U.S.-led initiative appears to be losing momentum. Putin has requested detailed disclosures regarding discussions between the U.S. and Ukraine in Jeddah, which proposed a 30-day ceasefire in air and maritime operations. Although Trump warned Russia of potential financial repercussions if it failed to respond positively, Russia—accustomed to enduring sanctions—has shown little reaction.

For Ukraine, the European initiative may represent its last hope for an armistice with reasonable terms. Ukrainians must weigh the costs of forfeiting the opportunity to secure guarantees provided by the Coalition of the Willing. President Trump has shown little interest in supporting Ukraine, preferring to shift focus to the Indo-Pacific to counter China. Militarily, Ukraine lacks the capability to reclaim lost territories, and continuing the war at the cost of countless lives would be futile. The pursuit of territorial recovery cannot take precedence over securing the desperately needed security guarantees that Ukraine seeks.

After successfully establishing an armistice, European countries should focus on building robust mechanisms to ensure lasting peace, including a legally binding peace treaty governing Russia-Ukraine relations. A regional consultation mechanism could help ease tensions in the region. Additionally, NATO should initiate regular dialogues to restore constructive communication, which would serve as a foundation for regional stability.⁷⁾ Ending a war is a difficult task, but it requires wisdom and courage to save lives and uphold humanity.

5) Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro, "Elements of an Eventual Russia-Ukraine Armistice and the Prospect for Regional Stability in Europe," Stimson, December 14, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/research/pivotal-places/russia/> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid.

Lessons from the Yulgok Operation and South Korea's Quest for Sovereignty and Able Partnership with the United States in the Trump 2.0 Era

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This article examines historical lessons from South Korea's Yulgok Operation (1974–1992) and their critical application to the nation's security policy in the Trump 2.0 era. The Yulgok Operation and its contributions to South Korea's "self-reliant national defense" efforts laid the foundation for today's globally competitive *K-Bangsan* (K-Defense) industry, while establishing patterns of military-technological sovereignty that continue to shape the nation's current defense posture. Drawing from this experience, South Korea should continue investing in domestic defense capabilities while positioning itself as a key technological partner vis-à-vis the United States. The continued advancement of South Korea's defense industry remains essential to maintaining a viable and sovereign partnership with the United States.

South Korea (or the Republic of Korea: ROK) has emerged as a leader in the global arms market, with its "K-Defense" (*K-Bangsan*) products gaining international recognition for their technological sophistication and cost-effectiveness. As 2024 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Yulgok Operation (1974–1992)—the independent weapons program launched by President Park Chung-hee in 1974—this article examines the historical significance of South Korea's efforts to localize arms production in the rise of the country's defense capabilities and the sovereignty discourse that emerged from it.¹⁾ The Yulgok Operation represents South Korea's first indigenously driven effort toward what Park called "self-reliant national defense" (*jaju gukbang*) capabilities. This initiative not only established foundations for today's globally competitive K-Defense Industry but also transformed South Korea's role in its relationship with the United States—from a dependent client to a strategic partner. The patterns of technological sovereignty established during this period continue to shape South Korea's defense posture and offer valuable lessons for navigating the uncertainties of the Trump 2.0 era. It is argued that for South Korea's promotion of an able and viable partnership with the United States as a sovereign entity, its continuous advancement of its domestic defense industry is critical.

Origins of Yulgok

The Yulgok Operation was launched largely in response to the security crisis of the early 1970s—the US reduction of military

aid and its withdrawal of the 7th Infantry Division from South Korea in 1971 amidst North Korea's increasing provocations—which triggered South Korea's turn toward more independent defense capabilities. In response to these challenges, President Park implemented his policy of "self-reliant national defense," centered on building a domestic military-industrial complex. In April 1973, Park issued an order to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to plan a national strategy for building South Korea's independent military capabilities, including arms production, in anticipation of complete US troop withdrawal by the 1980s.²⁾ Following this order, the JCS devised the "Eight-Year National Defense Plan" (1974–1981), which eventually came to be known as the "First Force Improvement Plan" in the military and given the code name "Yulgok."³⁾

The name "Yulgok" was taken from the penname of Yi I (1536–1584), a renowned Neo-Confucian scholar during the Joseon Dynasty in Korea. Yi I had warned Seonjo, the king of Joseon at the time, to train 100,000 reserve troops to prepare for future foreign invasions. When his counsel was dismissed, it proved catastrophic a decade later when Japan's Toyotomi Hideyoshi launched two invasions (1592–1598), later called the "Imjin War," that overwhelmed the Joseon army. Using this historical lesson as motivation, Park and military leaders were determined to build an independent military system that would enable Korea to defend itself.

In addition to implementing comprehensive military

1) This article incorporates details that are further illustrated in my working book manuscript, *Column of the Nation: The Yulgok Operation and South Korea's Global Rise*. For the transliteration of Korean words, it uses the Revised Romanization of Korean system, the official romanization system of the ROK government.

2) Ministry of National Defense (MND) Institute for Military History, *The History of the ROK-US Alliance (1953–2023)* [English Version] (Seoul: MND, 2024), 98–99.

3) Gukbangbu, *Yulgok saeob ui eoje wa oneul geurigo naeil* (Seoul: Gukbangbu, 1994), 22; MND Institute for Military History, *History of the ROK-US Alliance*, 54; Hanguk bangwi saneop hakoe, *Bangwi saneop 40 nyeon kkeuteomneun dojeon ui yeoksa* (Seoul: Peullenit midieo, 2015), 82–83.

modernization efforts, Yulgok initiated South Korea's indigenized production of weapons, including those not supported by US military aid. By domestically manufacturing arms and reducing reliance on American imports, South Korea implemented Park's vision of "self-reliance." Yulgok was carried out in the following three stages of the "Force Improvement Plan" (FIP) from 1974 to 1992.

The First FIP (1974-1981) quickly led to unprecedented advancements in localized weapons production. For the Army, South Korea enabled the domestic manufacture of infantry arms such as M16 rifles, M60 machine guns, heavy artillery, and even the production of military vehicles, MD 500 helicopters, and upgraded M48 tanks.⁴ The Navy developed PKM patrol craft and the FFK-951 *Ulsan*-class frigate while the Air Force began production of F-5E/F fighter jets. These projects were led by the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) in collaboration with Korean civilian manufacturers, fully integrating the private sector into national arms production efforts.⁵ The most well-known achievement of the Yulgok Operation during this period was the successful test launch of the *Baekgom* surface-to-surface missile in 1978, which established South Korea as only the seventh nation in the world capable of developing its own precision missiles.

Under the Second FIP (1982-1986), South Korea's arms procurement strategy diverged from Park Chung-hee's focus on indigenous development. The new Chun Doo-hwan administration prioritized import substitution that heavily relied on imported US arms rather than domestic production capabilities. This reorientation of defense policy resulted in a large reduction in the ADD's R&D funding.⁶ Nonetheless, the Second FIP contributed to expanding localized production capacity by Korean firms and brought advanced military technologies from the US through offset agreements that began in 1982.⁷ South Korea developed the homegrown K-200 armored vehicle and the K-1 tank (Type 88), the first Korean-model main battle tank (MBT).⁸ It also began development of the K-55 (155mm self-propelled howitzer). The Navy constructed a second *Ulsan*-class frigate and developed the *Pohang*-class corvette (PCC).⁹ This period also saw important achievements in missile capabilities (under

the *Hyunmoo* missile program), arms exports, and expanded military cooperation with other nations.¹⁰

The Third FIP (1987-1992) was carried out under the Roh Tae-woo administration. Under the slogan of the "Koreanization of the Defense Industry," President Roh sought to return to the Park-era emphasis on indigenous production.¹¹ For this purpose, Roh's administration focused on building up R&D for precision weapons system, expanding indigenous weapons development, and promoting state-of-the-art technologies developed by defense businesses and through industry-academia-research collaboration.¹² South Korea began mass production of the K-1 tank and K-200 armored vehicle and initiated the Korean Destroyer eXperimental (KDX) program, which led to the development of the KDX-1 destroyer.¹³ South Korea also began producing Type 209 submarines. The Air Force launched the Korea Fighter Program (KFP), a domestic fighter jet program, in 1991. Such programs laid the groundwork for South Korea's signature military modernization programs today, such as the KF-21 *Boramae* and the KDX-III *Sejong the Great* class destroyers.

Technological Sovereignty and Hybridization Skills

Through its promotion of military and technological localization, the Yulgok Operation initiated an era of significant advancement in South Korea's indigenous defense capabilities. The ADD made rapid progress in developing new weapons systems, even in the areas where US aid was scarce or absent. The United States initially restricted its Technical Data Packages (TDPs) to basic (mostly defensive) weapons, concerned that providing South Korea with advanced military technology might encourage an attack against North Korea.¹⁴ This limitation pushed the Park government to pursue aggressive, independent weapons development through the ADD. Whenever the ADD came close to developing certain technologies banned by the US, the US State Department often conceded to allow technology sales to the Koreans since the ADD would develop them anyway.¹⁵ In addition, South Korea diversified its foreign arms suppliers, some of whom provided technologies that the US had refused to share.¹⁶ It

4) Gukbangbu, *Yulgok saeob ui eoje wa oneul geurigo naeil*, 35-36; MND, *History of the ROK-US Alliance*, 98-99.

5) Peter Banseok Kwon, "Defender of the Nation, Champion of Science: The Agency for Defense Development as a Nexus for the Technological Transformation of South Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies* 28, no. 1 (2023): 59-90.

6) Han Yongseop, *Uri guk bang ui noll* (Bangnyeongsa, 2019), 359.

7) "Olhae reul bangsan ui jeonhwangi ro- (7) geonguk ihu choecho ui bangsan mulja jeonsihoe," *Asia gyeongje* (May 30, 2020), <https://www.asiae.co.kr/article/2020052915091584610>; Jang Won-Joon and Park Hea Ji, "Trends in Korean Defense Offsets and Policy Implications: Toward Making Korea One of the Four Largest Defense Exporters," *KIET Monthly Industrial Economy* (July 8, 2023), 2-3.

8) MND, *History of the ROK-US Alliance*, 98-99.

9) Gukbangbu gunsa pyeonchan yeonguso, *Guk bang jeongchaek pyeoncheonsa*, 1988-2003 (Gukbangbu, 2016), 153.

10) Yukgun bonbu, *Yukgun gihoek gwalli 50-nyeon baljeonsa* (Yukgun Bonbu, 2003), 543-550.

11) Han, *Uri guk bang ui noll*, 359.

12) Daehan Minguk yeoksa bangmulgwan, *Daehan Minguk Gukbangsa* (Daehan Minguk yeoksa bangmulgwan, 2017), 234.

13) MND, *History of the ROK-US Alliance*, 99-100.

14) Peter Banseok Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation: The Defense Industry and the Building of Modern Korea under Park Chung Hee* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2024), 133, 169.

15) Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 219-220.

16) Eom Jeongsik, "Bak Jeonghui jeongbu ui jaju guk bang jeongchaek gwa Han-Mi gwangye- jajujeok mug i gaebal mit mug i doip dabyeonghwa jeollyak," *Daetongnyeong girongmul usu yeongu nonmun 2* (Daetongnyeong girokgwan, 2012): 9-35; see also Kwon, "Defender of the Nation, Champion of Science."

was only after Korean manufacturing firms demonstrated their ability to produce advanced weapons under Yulgok—and Korea built its own domestic military-industrial complex (the Changwon Machinery Industrial Complex) in 1974—that the US began granting critical coproduction subcontracts to Korean manufacturers.¹⁷⁾

This pattern of technological development gave rise to a historically consistent pattern whereby South Korea's tangible demonstrations of autonomous weapons capabilities created political and technological leverage vis-à-vis the United States that exceeded what could be achieved through conventional negotiation alone.¹⁸⁾

A good example of this US pattern of response to aggressive South Korean weapons development is the chronology of Korea's missile development, or its quest for "missile sovereignty."¹⁹⁾ When President Jimmy Carter announced his intention to withdraw US ground forces in 1977, the ROK government responded by accelerating the Yulgok Operation.²⁰⁾ The ADD's rapid advancement of indigenous weapon capabilities, especially the successful launch of *Baekgom* in September 1978, alarmed US officials who were caught off-guard by the speed of Korea's development of such advanced weapon systems. By 1979, not only did Carter grant the previously banned technologies, such as US missile technology and an F-16 coproduction agreement, but he had also delayed his troops withdrawal timeline; and by 1981, the policy was completely halted.²¹⁾

In 1979, under the US-imposed missile guidelines, South Korea agreed to restrict its missile development to the 180 km range and its warhead payload to 500 kg. But South Korea's continuous indigenous advancement of its missile capabilities (along with North Korea's rapid development of its nuclear missile program) played a pivotal role in persuading Washington to concede to Seoul's demand to revise its missile guidance limits.²²⁾ Under Yulgok's second and third stages (1982-1992), South Korea had consolidated its ballistic missile capabilities through the *Hyunmoo* missile series. It was only after South Korea's persistent demonstration of technological progress that four guideline revisions (2001, 2012, 2017, 2020) between the US and ROK occurred. Finally in May 2021, then-President Moon Jae-in announced a joint decision with the United States to terminate all US guidelines that had long restricted South Korean-made missiles.²³⁾

While the US concession of lifting the missile guidelines was driven by Washington's own evolving strategies in the Indo-Pacific region as well, it was also an acknowledgement of the ROK's growing autonomous missile capabilities.²⁴⁾ The complete pattern, from restriction to full sovereignty in missile development, illustrates how South Korea's indigenous capabilities influenced US policy positions.

This pattern recurs in multiple historical instances, from conventional weaponry to the jet fighter program, in which US concessions on arms restrictions and technology transfer followed—but seldom preceded—South Korea's demonstrations of independent capability. Korea's most significant leverage has come from demonstrating either domestic weapon capabilities or forming viable alternative international partnerships.²⁵⁾

Related to this latter point, starting in the late 1970s, South Korea's ADD and defense firms have deliberately cultivated relationships with multiple technology suppliers from abroad to procure technologies not provided by the US.²⁶⁾ As a result, through the decades, South Korea has developed a distinctive expertise in technological hybridization—the ability to absorb, mix, and merge foreign and domestic technologies into unique "hybrid" systems customized for Korean needs, which has often eventually led to full indigenous development.²⁷⁾

Historical cases of successful hybridization include: the *Baekgom* and *Hyunmoo* missiles, which incorporated Korean, American, and European technologies; the K-2 tanks, which integrated a German power pack with Korean armor technology; the KDX-III destroyer program, which integrated the US Aegis combat system and European missile systems with Korea's vertical launching system; T-50/FA-50 aircraft, which combined US aerospace design with Korean engineering; and the KSS-I submarine, which began by incorporating German technologies.²⁸⁾ Such expertise

17) Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 110-111.

18) Peter Banseok Kwon, "Beyond Patron and Client: Historicizing the Dialectics of US-ROK Relations amid Park Chung Hee's Independent Defense Industry Development in South Korea, 1968-1979," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 185-216.

19) "US and South Korea scrap ballistic-missile range limits," *IJSS* (June 2, 2021), <https://www.ijss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/06/us-south-korea-ballistic-missile-range-limit/>.

20) Kwon, "Beyond Patron and Client," 206.

21) Kwon, "Beyond Patron and Client," 207-208.

22) "US and South Korea scrap ballistic-missile range limits."

23) "South Korea, US agree to end bilateral missile guidelines," *Korea Times* (May 22, 2021), <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/>

05/120_309213.html;

"US lifts missile restrictions on South Korea, ending range and warhead limits," *Defense News* (May 26, 2021), <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/05/25/us-lifts-missile-restrictions-on-south-korea-ending-range-and-warhead-limits/>.

24) "Could More Powerful South Korean Ballistic Missiles Actually Help North Korea?" *The Diplomat* (June 3, 2021), <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/could-more-powerful-south-korean-ballistic-missiles-actually-help-north-korea/>;

Kim Kwang-nyeong, "The Process, Meaning, and tasks of Lifting the ROK-US Missile Guidelines," *Korea and Global Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2021): 57-100.

25) For US patterns of arms transfer to South Korea in reaction to the latter's independent weapons development, see Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*; Kwon, "Patron and Client."

26) See Kwon, "Defender of the Nation, Champion of Science."

27) See Kwon, "Defender of the Nation, Champion of Science," 75-76, 80.

28) "Korea to buy German engines for K2 tanks," *Korea Times* (Apr. 2, 2012), [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/01/113_108229.html#:~:text=Seoul%20decided%20Monday%20to%20import%20an%20engine.of%20the%20state%2Drun%20arms%20procurement%20agency%20said](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/01/113_108229.html#:~:text=Seoul%20decided%20Monday%20to%20import%20an%20engine.of%20the%20state%2Drun%20arms%20procurement%20agency%20said;);

"South Korea commissions its first next-generation Aegis destroyer," *Defense News* (Dec. 9, 2024), <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2024/12/09/south-korea-commissions-its-first-next->

represents one of Korea's most powerful strategic tools for enhancing its indigenous development and technological sovereignty.

With the rise of "K-Defense" and South Korea's rapidly growing and well-established expertise in heavy artillery, tanks, and shipbuilding, the country possesses greater leverage than ever before. As evidence, the new Trump administration has shown strong interest in partnering with South Korea on advanced projects like shipbuilding, largely thanks to its proven strength in the industry.²⁹⁾ Thus, South Korea's manufacturing abilities have elevated its strategic value and increased its leverage by demonstrating that it can serve as a viable technological partner to the United States.³⁰⁾

Implications for the Trump 2.0 Era

The historical patterns established starting from the Yulgok Operation offer valuable insights for South Korea's approach to defense and sovereignty with the Trump 2.0 administration. Becoming an independent and able partner through indigenous capabilities is key for South Korea's self-reliant defense in the Trump 2.0 era, under the "collaborative self-reliant national defense" framework.³¹⁾

Throughout the alliance history, significant US policy shifts have occurred when South Korea demonstrates its own capabilities, as exemplified by the Yulgok-era developments. The United States has typically granted concessions to South Korea only after the latter proved itself; concessions were rarely given voluntarily. This principle is perhaps more applicable now than ever, especially under President Trump's reciprocity-based approach to diplomacy. For more effective negotiations with Washington, Seoul should continue developing indigenous technological advancements that position the country as not merely a security *client* but an indispensable *partner* capable of mutual contribution to both defense and manufacturing sectors.

The recent meeting between Ukrainian President Zelenskyy and President Trump, in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, illustrates an important diplomatic reality: nations are most effective in international negotiations when they bring their own strategic assets to the table and maintain multiple policy options. To quote President Trump's

generation-aegis-destroyer/.

29) "Korea, US to expand cooperation in shipbuilding sector," *The Korea Economic Daily* (Mar. 2, 2025), <https://www.kedglobal.com/shipping-shipbuilding/newsView/ked202503020002>; "[2024 in Review] The US-ROK Alliance Expands into Shipbuilding," *KEI: The Peninsula* (Dec. 24, 2024), <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/2024-in-review-the-us-rok-alliance-expands-into-shipbuilding/>.

30) "Building a New U.S.-Korea Technology Alliance," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Nov. 13, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/building-a-new-us-korea-technology-alliance-strategies-and-policies-in-an-entangled-world?lang=en>.

31) National Archives of Korea, "Hyeomyeok jeok jaju gukbang," <https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/listSubjectDescription.do?id=010254&pageFlag=&sitePage=>

retort to President Zelenskyy: "You don't have *the cards* right now. With us, you start having *the cards*. [*italics mine*]"³²⁾ President Trump's realpolitik, business-minded approach makes it even more critical for South Korea to develop its own self-reliant national defense capabilities in order to demonstrate and reinforce its standing as an able and independent partner of the United States.

Conclusion: Self-Reliance as the Foundation for Able and Reciprocal Partnership

Fifty years after the Yulgok Operation, its legacy continues to shape South Korea's defense posture and sovereignty discourse.³³⁾ As Yulgok's programs unfolded, South Korea learned that powerful indigenous capabilities create far more leverage than diplomatic language alone in securing favorable outcomes. Yulgok's drive for "self-reliance" transformed South Korea from a dependent client state to a nation with substantial defense ownership and technological sovereignty. By building on the foundations established by the Yulgok Operation, South Korea can continue to boost its sovereignty while maintaining a productive alliance and an able partnership with the United States in the Trump 2.0 era.

This approach aligns with the foundational principles of the alliance itself. Article II of the 1953 US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty states: "...Separately and jointly, *by self help* and *mutual aid*, the Parties will maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack and will take suitable measures in consultation and agreement to implement this Treaty and to further its purposes" [*italics mine*].³⁴⁾ This spirit of "self help" and "mutual aid" can be further realized as South Korea becomes stronger, more technologically advanced, and more self-equipped.

The lessons of the past—the importance of localization efforts, capability demonstrations, diversified foreign sourcing, and technological hybridization—offer a proven playbook for navigating the uncertainties ahead.

32) "Trump's explosive clash with Zelenskyy," *The Guardian* (Feb. 28, 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/28/trump-zelenskyy-meeting-transcript>.

33) The impact of the Yulgok Operation will be further detailed in my upcoming book, *Column of the Nation*, which explores the history of the Yulgok Operation.

34) "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea: October 1, 1953," *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp.



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