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**PARALLEL SECURITY
STRUGGLES: POLAND
AND SOUTH KOREA'S
LINKED GEOPOLITICAL
NICHEs AND POLAND'S
STAKE IN KOREAN
REUNIFICATION**

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Recently, Warsaw and Seoul have been busy as ever. Earlier this month, Poland and South Korea signed a major security agreement that expanded cooperation between the two countries not only on the security and political fronts, but also in the economic and cultural spheres as well, underscoring the deep connections between the two countries that have blossomed since 2013.¹ The two countries are already making good on their commitments, and are expected to sign another arms deal next month valued at \$6.2 billion that would see Seoul sell 180 K2 Black Panther tanks to Poland.²

This deepening of ties is likely motivated by the multiple tectonic shifts underway on the global stage and their impacts on Poland and South Korea's local spheres. Yet the relationship between the two countries goes much deeper than this, and speaks to their parallel histories and shared geopolitical roles in their respective regions. As two nations that emerged from the Second World War as battlegrounds between the US-led world and the Soviet-led communist axis, Poland and South Korea have continued to function as frontline states in the 21st century geopolitical battle between the Russo-Chinese sphere and the West. This similarity has pushed them to become

close defense partners on an initially transactionally basis, but as the Russian and Chinese threat to the Western-led international order has grown since 2022, they have deepened their ties further, creating a new axis linking Central and Eastern Europe with East Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

In addition to acting as bulwarks against Russia in Europe, North Korea on the Korean peninsula, and their allies across the authoritarian world, both states have played a vital role in pushing back against expansionist efforts by these powers. While Poland has played a major role in supporting Ukraine's struggle against Russia and acted as a springboard for the democratic Belarusian opposition's efforts to put pressure on Minsk, South Korea has done the same in pushing for reunification of the Korean peninsula and limiting the influence of North Korea and other authoritarian actors in its region. While Warsaw and Seoul's goals in the short term are limited to mere containment of this influence, in the long-term, their shared security depends on rolling back the Russian-backed autocratic sphere by encouraging the reunification of the two Koreas, the liberation of occupied territories in Ukraine occupied by Russia, and the introduction of Western democracy in Belarus.

Unexpectedly Similar Histories

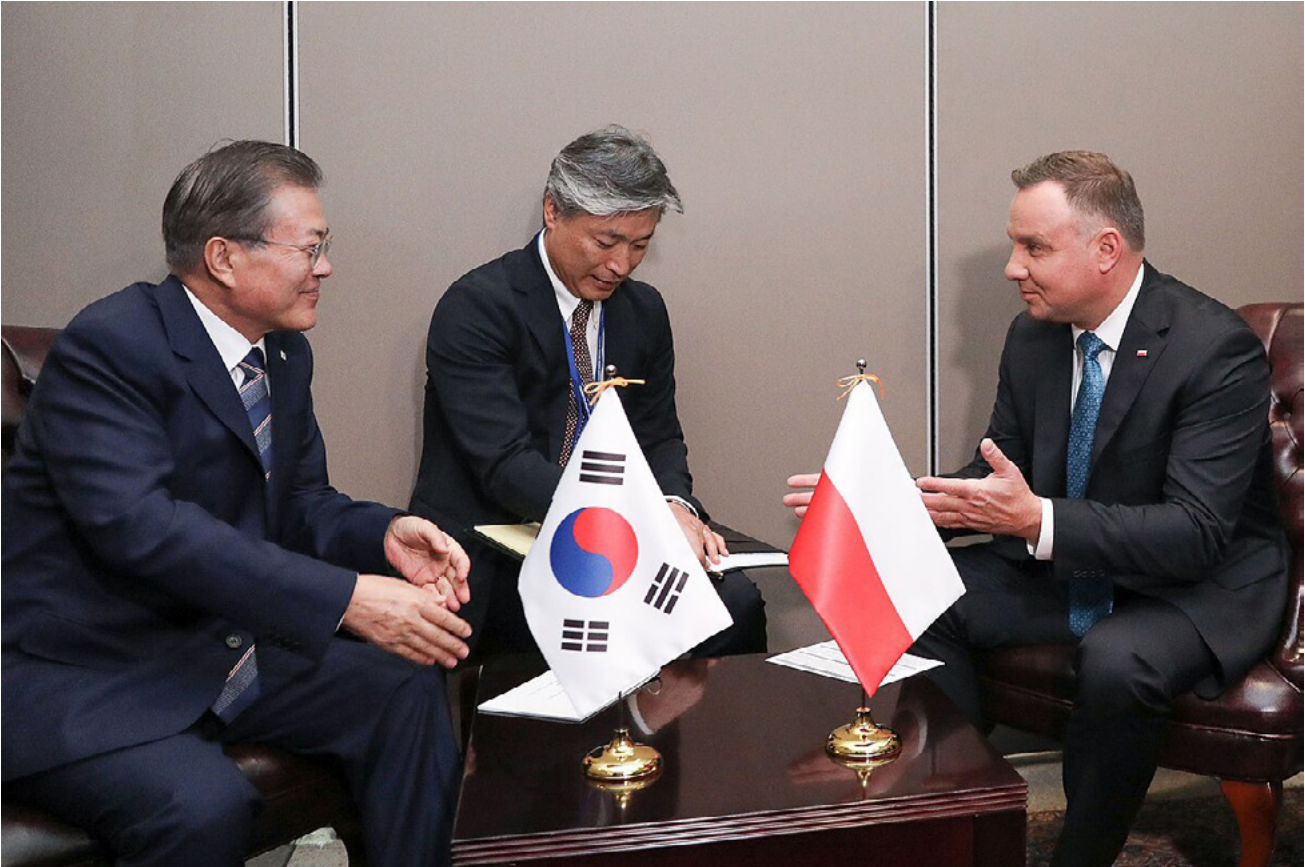
When analyzing the bonds between the two countries, it is critical to also analyze what factors motivate their geopolitical behavior, and why they have been incentivized to cooperate so closely despite being by thousands of kilometers apart. The first part of this equation has to do with their historical experiences from the

Second World War onward, while the second is connected to their efforts to balance their security interests amid the post-Cold War consequences of these histories.

After being invaded from two directions by Germany and the USSR in 1939 and subsequent

1. Associated Press (2025) ,South Korea signs security agreement with Poland to boost economic and defense cooperation', AP News, 5 March. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/south-korean-poland-b6f418f6f45212fa49383a70dbb3dd08> (Accessed: 12 March 2025).

2. Malyasov, D. (2025) ,Poland to buy more K2 tanks in \$6.2B deal', Defence Blog, 9 March. Available at: <https://defence-blog.com/poland-to-buy-more-k2-tanks-in-6-2b-deal/> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).



POLISH PRESIDENT ANDRZEJ DUDA AND THE FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA MOON JAE-IN IN 2019
(JAKUB SZYMCZUK VIA KANCELARIA PREZYDENTA RP)

tly being occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, Poland became a Soviet satellite state after being handed to Stalin at Yalta,³ despite its attempts to regain its independence on its own terms. During the Cold War, Poland eventually emerging as one of the main fronts in the shadow conflict between the US-led sphere and the Soviet world, especially during the period of martial law in the 1980s.⁴

Korea's experience was remarkably similar — having been conquered by Japan in 1910, the northern half of the peninsula was occupied by

the Soviet Union in 1945 in the final phase of the Pacific conflict of the Second World War.⁵ The Korean Peninsula was also subject to the great games of global superpowers, being divided between the USSR and the US along the 38th parallel, and was subsequently the site of warfare between Soviet and Chinese-backed communist forces on one side and American forces on the other in the Korean War.⁶ Following the armistice that ended the conflict in 1953, the peninsula has remained divided between the US-aligned south and the communist north throughout the Cold War and into the present day.

3. Atlantic Council (2020) 'The Yalta Conference at Seventy-Five: Lessons from History', Atlantic Council, 10 February. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-yalta-conference-at-seventy-five-lessons-from-history/> (Accessed: 12 March 2025).
4. Instytut Pileckiego (2025) 'Poland as a Playground of Cold War Struggles: 1981-1989', Instytut Pileckiego. Available at: <https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/instytut/kalendarz/poland-as-a-playground-of-cold-war-struggles-1981-1989> (Accessed: 13 March 2025).
5. Park, M-O. (1983) North Korean relations with China and the Soviet Union: the impacts of changes in the leadership of the two communist powers on North Korea. Master's thesis. Eastern Illinois University. Available at: <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/2892> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
6. Office of the Historian (n.d.) 'Korean War and Japan's Recovery', U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/korean-war> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).



POLISH MINISTER OF DEFENSE WŁADYSŁAW KOSINIAK-KAMYSZ WITH THE SOUTH KOREAN DELEGATION DURING THE POLISH-KOREAN STRATEGIC DIALOGUE IN JUNE 2024. (MINISTERSTWO OBRONY NARODOWEJ)

Shared Geopolitical Pressures in the Modern Period

In light of each country's past domination by foreign powers and their centrality to the conflicts and politics of the Cold War, both Poland and South Korea have remained sensitive to any threats to their sovereignty by more powerful states and their proxies. As a result, they have opted to place their bets on the US defense umbrella in the 21st century in order to guarantee their security, with Poland joining NATO in 1999⁷ and hosting 10,000 US troops as of 2025,⁸ while South Korea has become home to 28,500

US troops⁹ and played a key role in America's defense architecture in the Western Pacific.

As Russia has become more aggressive in Eastern Europe starting in 2014, Poland has continued to push for greater American investment in its defense and more troop deployments to its territory,¹⁰ while also dramatically expanding its own military. Starting in 2022, Poland became a key node in the Western support network for Ukraine, cementing itself as a major player in Europe on defense and becoming the third largest military

7. NATO (2024) 'Poland and NATO - 1999', NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_223582.htm (Accessed: 13 March 2025).

8. U.S. Department of State (n.d.) 'U.S. Security Cooperation with Poland', U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-poland/> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

9. U.S. Department of State (n.d.) 'U.S. Security Cooperation with Korea', U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-korea/> (Accessed: 13 March 2025).

10. U.S. Department of State (n.d.) 'U.S. Security Cooperation with Poland', U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-poland/> (Accessed: 13 March 2025).

in NATO in 2024.¹¹ Similarly, South Korea has continued to invest in its defense and military readiness as North Korea has escalated tensions over the last several years,¹² becoming a key global exporter of security hardware¹³ and growing its military to become the 8th largest standing army in the world.¹⁴ The dramatic military spending both countries have undertaken has been enabled in large part due to their rapid economic growth, in South Korea's case since the 1960s,¹⁵ and in Poland's since the 1990s¹⁶ — twin experiences that have further contributed to their geopolitical closeness over the last twelve years.

Since North Korea's increasing involvement in the war in Ukraine and its turn toward Russia,¹⁷ South Korea has also become a significant anchor of Western power on the opposite end of the Russian sphere from Ukraine, meaning that both South Korea and Poland are in essence then combating the same axis of enemies for the long-term survival of their countries. This creates even more powerful motivations, opportunities, and incentives for cooperation between the two states on security.

Contemporary Cooperation and Emerging Mutual Opportunities

To this end, since 2013, Poland has bought an ever-growing array of equipment from South Korea, including tanks, howitzers,¹⁸ aircraft, MLRS,¹⁹ and much more. Last year, Seoul has in turn purchased drones from Warsaw,²⁰ strengthe-

ning the bilateral nature of the pair's commercial and military relationship. Yet the cooperation between Warsaw and Seoul has moved well beyond mere weapons purchases, and has created opportunities to supercharge Poland's defense

11. NATO (2024) 'Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)', NATO, 17 June. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
12. France 24 (2024) 'South Korea military says fully ready as drone tensions soar', France 24, 14 October. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241014-south-korea-military-says-fully-ready-as-drone-tensions-soar-1> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
13. Josephs, L. (2024) 'As global defense spending surges, South Korean arms makers look like a clear winner', CNBC, 4 December. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/12/04/as-global-defense-spending-surges-south-korean-arms-makers-look-like-a-clear-winner-.html> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
14. Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea (2023) Defense White Paper 2022. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240115070043/https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mnd/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202307280154039760.pdf (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
15. Korean Cultural Centre UK (n.d.) 'The Korean economy: the miracle on the Hangang River', Korean Cultural Centre UK. Available at: <https://kccuk.org.uk/en/about-korea/economy/the-korean-economy-the-miracle-on-the-hangang-river/> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
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17. Loh, M. (2025) 'Russia gets 50% of its war ammo from North Korea: Ukraine spy chief', Business Insider, 25 February. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-50-percent-ammo-north-korea-ukraine-war-kyrylo-budanov-2025-2?IR=T> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
18. Reuters (2023) 'Poland buys more K9 howitzers from South Korea in \$2.6 billion deal', Reuters, 1 December. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-buys-more-k9-howitzers-south-korea-26-billion-deal-2023-12-01/> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
19. Indo-Pacific Defense Forum (2024) 'Poland-South Korea defense partnership grows with weapons procurements', Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 1 May. Available at: <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/05/poland-south-korea-defense-partnership-grows-with-weapons-procurements/> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).
20. The Korea Times (2025) 'South Korea's defense exports hit record high', The Korea Times, 10 March. Available at: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/03/113_383505.html (Accessed: 14 March 2025).



**POLISH PRESIDENT ANDRZEJ DUDA WITH FORMER MINISTER OF DEFENSE MARIUSZ
BŁASZCZAK AND REPUBLIC OF KOREA DELEGATES UPON THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST
TRANCHE OF SOUTH KOREAN TANKS AND HOWITZERS IN POLAND IN 2022
(JAKUB SZYMCZUK VIA KANCELARIA PREZYDENTA RP)**

industry — Poland and South Korea signed deals in 2024 to manufacture Korean K2 tanks²¹ and missiles on Polish territory.²² In addition, Poland's Deputy Defense Minister Paweł Bejda stated in May of last year that Poland would become a maintenance hub for Korean military equipment not only in use by Polish forces, but by other European states as well.²³

Such developments make South Korea not just an ideal defense partner for Poland, but an ally that has the capacity to enable its rise as a key node in European military logistics and equipment production at a time when the continent is ende-

avoring to build out its own independent defense sector. Polish business executives have already acknowledged the importance of South Korea in this regard, and have recently touted the “Koreanization” of Polish defense systems²⁴ as a means of not only expanding Poland's equipment stockpiles, but also modernizing its military — a goal that defense analysts and Polish leaders have for years singled out as critical for Poland's overall military readiness. Using the momentum of such new relationships with South Korea, Poland may well choose to model its security industry on Seoul's own robust defense sector to emerge, eventually creating the groundwork to emerge as

21. Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland (n.d.) ‘K2 tanks will be produced in Poland’, Gov.pl. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/k2-tanks-will-be-produced-in-poland> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).

22. Notes from Poland (2024) ‘Polish and Korean firms sign deal to create missile factory in Poland’, Notes from Poland, 3 October. Available at: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/10/03/polish-and-korean-firms-sign-deal-to-create-missile-factory-in-poland/> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).

23. Defence24 (2025) ‘Poland as a maintenance hub for South Korea’. Available at: <https://defence24.com/industry/poland-as-a-maintenance-hub-for-south-korea> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

24. Defence24 (2025) ‘Poland as a maintenance hub for South Korea’. Available at: <https://defence24.com/industry/poland-as-a-maintenance-hub-for-south-korea> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

a defense supplier in its own right, both in Europe and beyond.

South Korea in turn has benefited from all of this by securing a consistent and long-term defense partner in Poland, and has already underscored that these mutually beneficial ties are a priority for it this year when it delivered 18 Chunmoo rocket launchers to Poland ahead of schedule, all as part of a larger deal to provide 290 such systems by 2027.²⁵ For Seoul, its closeness to Poland also serves in many ways as its gateway toward broader relationships with other European NATO states, which will likely only grow in importance for South Korea in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment.

As laid out in Poland and South Korea's latest cooperation agreement, the two countries' areas of collaboration extend well beyond the security space into the economic and political spheres as well. Poland is already South Korea's most important trade partner in Central Europe, and the pair aim to triple their trade relationship by 2030.²⁶ On the political and humanitarian front meanwhile, South Korea committed critical funds in December of last year that would aid in UNICEF efforts to provide support to Ukrainian refugee children and families living in Poland,²⁷ highlighting once again the two countries' shared interest in bolstering Ukraine's defense and the wellbeing of its war-battered people.

A Common Interest in the Korean Peninsula's Reunification

Both countries cooperate not only on protecting their own borders from Russian and North Korean aggression, but are also engaged in rolling back and containing these powers' and their allies' expansionism across Central Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia. In addition to acting as a bulwark against Russian expansion in Ukraine, Poland is the primary regional opponent of Belarus,²⁸ and has played a major role in putting pressure on the Lukashenko regime to move away from Russia and toward the West through sanctions, security pressure, and support for the Belarusian opposition.²⁹ South Korea is engaged in the same

mission in North Korea, aiming to liberate its own people in the north from de facto occupation by foreign powers that has persisted since 1945.³⁰

As a result, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula is a goal that lies squarely within Poland's strategic interests. Not only would the end of the Kim regime in Pyongyang eliminate a key lever of influence for the Russian-led sphere in East Asia, but it would also directly weaken Moscow's ability to rearm itself in its war against Ukraine and its shadow conflict with NATO. Poland's Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski

25. <https://tvpworld.com/84679140/poland-receives-18-south-korean-chunmoo-rocket-launchers>

26. Yonhap News Agency (2023) 'S. Korea, Poland agree to strengthen defense industry cooperation', Yonhap News Agency, 23 August. Available at: <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230823003800320> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).

27. UNICEF (2025) 'UNICEF and Korean government unite to support refugee children and youth in Poland'. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/unicef-and-korean-government-unite-support-refugee-children-and-youth-poland> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

28. Eurotopics (2023) 'Russia and Belarus casting Poland as the enemy', Eurotopics, 28 July. Available at: <https://www.eurotopics.net/en/305062/russia-and-belarus-casting-poland-as-the-enemy> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).

29. TVP World (2024) 'Tsikhanouskaya praises Poland's handling of Belarus', TVP World, 15 August. Available at: <https://tvpworld.com/81826647/tsikhanouskaya-praises-polands-handling-of-belarus> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).

30. NBC News (2025) 'South Korea's Yoon seeks dialogue path for unification with North', NBC News, 12 March. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/south-koreas-yoon-seeks-dialogue-path-unification-north-rcna166694> (Accessed: 14 March 2025).

recently referred to this fact on X,³¹ where he called on Russia to stop receiving ammunition packages from North Korea if had a problem with the West arming Ukraine during a potential ceasefire period. A reunited Korean Peninsula would not only be a boon for Korean interests, but would also make Poland and its neighborhood safer in the long term.

Historically speaking, Poland is no stranger to the experience of subjugation and subsequent liberation through reunification. As a nation with historically closer ties to the West than to the Russian sphere, Poland's direct rule by Russia until 1918 and its inclusion within the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact after 1945 were seen by most Poles as aberrations of their country's national character, and the end of communist rule in 1989 represented a return to the Western world where Poland had always felt most at home geopolitically. Similarly, the rise of North Korea after the Korean War was not truly a reflection of popular will in the North, but rather a consequence of

Cold War politics and efforts by the Soviet Union to expand its sphere of influence in Asia in the wake of World War II.³²

Unlike Poland of course, Korea's North has been unable to break itself off from the authoritarian sphere and rejoin its countrymen in the South, and Polish leaders have readily expressed sympathy with regular Koreans in the North stuck in this predicament 80 years after the division was first made. In 2016, Polish Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa remarked that, despite North Koreans' desires to overthrow the Kim regime and seek reunification themselves, the brutally repressive realities of the North Korean state make it difficult for them to actively pursuing this goal.³³ Nevertheless, given that Poland is one of few Western countries that maintain limited diplomatic ties with Pyongyang,³⁴ Warsaw has a degree of leverage here that few of its peers have, making its partnership with South Korea even more crucial for Seoul as it looks for new medium-term avenues to reunify the peninsula.

Prospects for the Future

Cooperation on these related goals could emerge as a likely consequence of the two countries' increasingly close defense relationship, as both countries continue to develop a global approach to their respective security challenges. The NATO-IP4 format has already allowed both countries to engage on overlapping security issues facing Europe and the Western Pacific, but as

international relationships unravel and reorient themselves in a period of rapid and unexpected global change, direct ties between Poland and South Korea will become even more crucial for maintaining military cooperation between these two spheres of great power confrontation.

By occupying the same geopolitical niche within their respective neighborhoods, Poland and South

31. Sikorski, R. (2025) 'Tweet'. X (formerly Twitter), 23 March. Available at: <https://x.com/sikorskiradek/status/1902998867248923034> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

32. National Geographic (2021) 'Korean War DMZ armistice 38 parallel geography'. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210225074751/https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/130805-korean-war-dmz-armistice-38-parallel-geography> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

33. Voice of America (2016) 'Iconic peace activist: Poverty inhibiting reform in North Korea'. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/iconic-peace-activist-poverty-inhibiting-reform-in-north-korea/3586045.html> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

34. NK News (2024) 'Poland restores diplomatic presence in North Korea four years after suspension'. Available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2024/11/poland-restores-diplomatic-presence-in-north-korea-four-years-after-suspension/> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

Korea and will continue to play a pivotal role in Western efforts to resist Russian and North Korean expansionism. As they look toward their own shared futures, it will be only natural for the two countries to cooperate even more closely toward political, economic, and defense objectives in order to bolster Poland's security sector and to deepen South Korea's relationship with NATO.

In doing so, they will further unify the Central Eastern European and Western Pacific theaters of confrontation between the West and its adversaries, making the West more nimble and more flexible as it combats authoritarian regimes on both sides of Eurasia. How Russia and its allies in North Korea and Belarus respond to this new alignment however remains to be seen.

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