

# HANKYOREH

## [Column] Takeaways from the NATO summit in Washington

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**If the standoff between the opposing sides worsens until not only North Korea but also China and Russia are aiming missiles and nuclear weapons at Seoul, it is South Koreans who will have to stand on the front lines of that conflict**



President Yoon Suk-yeol of South Korea (second from left) shakes hands with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy while at a welcome reception at the White House on July 10, 2024, ahead of the NATO summit in Washington, DC. On the far right is Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. (Yonhap)



**By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University**

The 32 member states of NATO began a three-day summit in Washington on July 10 along with the leaders of the organization's four Indo-Pacific partners, namely South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Shortly before that, over 60 of the US' leading scholars of international relations, who run the gamut from conservatives to progressives, published an open letter for the NATO national leaders.

This open letter had a big impact — understandably so, considering that its signatories included John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt from Harvard University, leading proponents of hard-hitting realism, and Charles Kupchan from Georgetown University and Stephen Wertheim from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, major figures in liberal internationalism.

The open letter had the following main points. First, admitting Ukraine into NATO would not be wise. If Ukraine, which is in the middle of conflict, were admitted into NATO, Article 5 of the treaty would require all NATO members to join the conflict. That would in turn damage the security and prosperity of both Europe and the US.

Second, the war in Ukraine is not important enough to merit risking the US' security and prosperity on it, especially when a botched intervention could lead to World War III.

Third, admitting Ukraine to NATO would not prevent Russia from launching another invasion of Ukraine. If anything, that might only arouse Russia's suspicions, causing an escalation of the war, or aggravate divisions within NATO. All that might ultimately cause even more harm to Ukraine.

Finally, since the original purpose of NATO is defending the territory of member states and safeguarding their security, NATO members ought to find a way to end the war without making Ukraine a member of NATO.

At a glance, those arguments may sound rather callous, not only to general observers around the world but to Ukrainians in particular. For the leaders of NATO members, who have emphasized the cause of liberty, the defense of international law and stern punishment for aggression, they also represent a powerful appeal to face the hard facts and adopt a pragmatic course based in the national interest.

And the fact is that such a position is not far removed from general public sentiment in European countries, where people are already suffering from war fatigue.

Some of the arguments in the open letter were reflected in the 38-point joint declaration adopted at the Washington summit.

While the declaration specifies comprehensive and concrete military aid for Ukraine, it does not extend an invitation for Ukraine to become a NATO member.

The declaration does pledge to provide Ukraine with various benefits comparable to those given to a member state and explains that those aid initiatives are supposed to serve as an irreversible bridge to Ukraine becoming a member state of NATO. But there is no consensus among NATO member states about letting Ukraine join the alliance.

Another argument that came up frequently during the summit was that North Atlantic security is inseparable from Northeast Asian security. That was likely because the war in Ukraine has accelerated the world's alignment into hostile blocs and because of the pressure exerted by

Russia's increasingly cordial relations with North Korea.

But in principle, it's to the advantage of both sides to separate security in different regions — and indeed, to erect a high firewall between those regions. Otherwise, a conflict in one region can easily spread into another region, potentially escalating into a world war.

Besides, how could NATO play a role in Northeast Asia when it's struggling to guarantee the security of Europe? Or how could South Korea provide military aid to Europe when it faces the immediate threat of North Korea?

Some people argue that South Korea would attract fresh interest and gain new respect from European countries if it provided lethal aid to Ukraine. But in the event of an extreme crisis on the Korean Peninsula, such as an all-out war with North Korea, would that interest and respect inspire European countries to send meaningful and timely aid to a country halfway around the world?

During the period of the summit, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol remarked, “Cooperation between NATO and partners in the Indo-Pacific who share universal values is what our age demands for the sake of global freedom and prosperity. Collusion between forces that advocate attempts to change the status quo through force represent a direct challenge to the peace and freedom built by the free world.”

Yoon's comment amounts to blanket criticism of North Korea, China and Russia. While it could be dismissed as puffed-up platitudes for a grand gathering of friendly nations, the leader of a country must not forget that all his remarks bear diplomatic import.

It can't be wise for Korea's self-styled champions of freedom to stir up more hostility. If the standoff between the opposing sides worsens until not only North Korea but also China and Russia are aiming missiles and nuclear weapons at Seoul, it is South Koreans who will have to stand on the front lines of that conflict.

The open letter by 60 American scholars speaks loud and clear: foreign affairs and security policy ought to be pragmatically oriented on public lives and safety. If that's true of the US, which considers itself the strongest country in the world, the implications for South Korea are all too clear.

It's essential that our foreign policy be grounded in a clear-eyed understanding of reality and appraisal of the objective situation.

Please direct questions or comments to [[english@hani.co.kr](mailto:english@hani.co.kr)]

Original Korean