WHAT SWEDEN'S COLD WAR STRATEGY CAN TEACH SOUTH KOREA IN AN ERA OF ALLIANCE FRACTURE

by
Ju Hyung Kim

Recent remarks by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the World Economic Forum in Davos 2026 showcased growing concern among middle powers over the durability of the post-WWII international order. Carney's call for a foreign policy grounded in "value-based realism" was not a mere rhetorical expression. It reflected a structural shift in international politics in which the U.S.—long regarded as the key stabilizer of the liberal order—has begun raising questions about the very restraints it once enforced on itself. Open discussions in Washington about territorial revisionism, including the Greenland issue, have clearly demonstrated that the postwar order is no longer considered sacrosanct, even among its architects.

The current juncture is strategically unusual. While NATO is experiencing internal disputes across the Atlantic, it is mobilizing collectively to deter a revisionist Russia. Alignment among allies does exist, yet it is becoming more conditional, shaped by domestic politics, resource scarcity, and competing theaters. For America's allies and partners that have clung on to U.S. primacy as a constant source of stability, such circumstances reflect uncertainty. In other words, the primary assumption—that U.S. support would almost always be immediate upon request in an overwhelming fashion—is in the process of erosion.

For South Korea, such uncertainty intersects with an unprecedentedly dangerous regional scenario. The probability of a dual contingency—where China embarks upon a massive military operation against Taiwan while North Korea escalates tensions on the Korean Peninsula, opportunistically exploiting a security vacuum—has moved from the realm of abstract speculation into serious defense-planning discussions. In such a scenario, the U.S. would encounter unprecedented strain across air, maritime, missile defense, and logistical domains. Even if Washington's security commitment remained fully intact toward Seoul, the timing, scale, as well as the form of U.S. intervention can no longer be taken for granted.

Sweden's Cold War Strategy: Alignment Without Guarantees

Under the aforementioned circumstances, Sweden's Cold War experience offers an unexpectedly precise historical parallel.

Throughout the Cold War period, Sweden maintained its official posture of military non-alignment. Nevertheless, this stance was never synonymous with passivity or equidistance between different blocs. Swedish leaders extracted hard lessons from the early twentieth century, particularly from the rapid collapse of neutrality guarantees during the Second World War and the Soviet Union's coercion vis-à-vis Finland. In the late 1940s, Stockholm reached the conclusion that international law and declarations of neutrality could be insufficient when credible national defense was absent.

As a result, Sweden developed a strategic model that combined value alignment with operational independence. Sweden expected that it would have to fight alone in the initial stages of a war, although Western support was anticipated but never assumed with certainty. This perception influenced every aspect of Swedish defense planning. The concept of "total defense" integrated civil defense preparedness, industrial mobilization, psychological resilience, and military forces into a single system designed to function under isolation and long-term stress. The primary aim was denial over decisive victory: preventing rapid territorial occupation, imposing high price tag on the aggressor, and preserving national autonomy long enough for international dynamics to shift in Sweden's favor.

This logic also demonstrates Sweden's insistence on maintaining its own defense industry. Indigenously

manufactured fighter aircraft, submarines, and missile systems were a means of strategic insurance that went beyond mere symbols of technological pride. In exchange for securing wartime autonomy, Sweden accepted higher peacetime costs, prioritizing assured access to critical capabilities over reliance on overseas supply chains that could be subject to disruption during a crisis. At the same time, Sweden closely coordinated with NATO member-states through intelligence sharing, the establishment of contingency plans, and interoperability measures, carefully balancing preparation with discretion.

The implication of this experience for South Korea does not lie in Sweden's neutrality itself, but in its assumptions. Sweden's decision-makers did not confuse political alignment with operational guarantees. They treated alliance assistance as a variable—instead of a constant—and structured deterrence accordingly.

From Historical Analogy to Policy Adjustment in South Korea

Today, South Korea is faced with similar challenge, albeit in a far more volatile and compressed security environment. Due to its geographical peculiarity, the Korean Peninsula has little strategic buffer and short warning times, while North Korea's growing nuclear and missile capabilities are explicitly designed to exploit moments of alliance hesitation. In a dual-contingency scenario, the U.S. would likely prioritize the maintenance of its regional air and maritime superiority in and around the Taiwan Strait, delaying and constraining U.S. reinforcement to the Korean Peninsula in the early stages of the conflict. The available U.S. and Japanese assets to implement Operation Plan (OPLAN) 5055—a joint US-Japan contingency plan that is to be activated once a crisis erupts on the Korean Peninsula—would be thinned out. Under such conditions, the credibility of South Korea's deterrence would be less dependent on alliance declarations and more on its proven capability to independently prevent North Korea from achieving a swift and decisive victory. Although the South Korean government has proclaimed to establish self-reliant defense for years, recent developments—including the North Korea's newly garnered tactics from the Ukraine front, presumably weakening South Korea's existing defense mechanism—make such efforts more complex and difficult.

Applying Sweden's lesson does not require Seoul to distance itself from the United States. Instead, it demands a reassessments of key assumptions. Defense planning needs to be structured around the possibility of delayed and disrupted military intervention, placing greater emphasis on survivability, dispersal, redundancy, and prolonged missions under contested conditions. This means a transition from the current force concept—optimized for an immediate counteroffensive that expects the U.S.-ROK combined forces to repel the North Korean aggressors, cross the 38th parallel, and march towards Pyongyang—to a posture that could absorb and mitigate initial blows, including a blast of tactical nukes or an EMP attack on command centers, while maintaining command continuity.

This would also require a reevaluation of defense-industrial priorities. South Korea's defense export success has been notable particularly after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukraine war, but export-driven production should not come at the expense of sustainability during wartime. Sweden's Cold War experience underscores the strategic value of controlling key supply chains, including munition, sensors, and sustainment systems. In an era of globalized production, this does not mean autarky, but it does require identifying and securing the nodes where dependency would prove most dangerous during a crisis.

The societal dimension of deterrence is equally important. Sweden's total defense model was premised on the fact that war would test not only military power but also civil resilience and political cohesion. By contrast, South Korea's civil defense institutions have weakened over time as reliance on extended deterrence has grown. Revitalizing civil preparedness, government continuity planning, and infrastructure resilience would send strong signals that national resolve as well as decision-making

capability would not collapse even under escalation.

Last but not least, Sweden's approach offers a cautionary lesson for alliance management. Quiet alignment—rather than declaratory dependence—preserved Sweden's flexibility while maximizing deterrence benefits. For South Korea, this suggests deepening operational coordination with Japan—through practical planning, especially on logistics, intelligence, and maritime security—yet ensuring that such cooperation is not perceived as a substitute for national capability. The objective should be alliance resilience, not alliance assumption.

Carney's invocation of value-based realism showcases the broad perception that is spreading among middle powers around the globe: that values can be sustained only when supported by credible strength and sober planning. Sweden internalized this crucial lesson decades ago, crafting a defense posture that neither rejected alignment nor blindly relied on it. For South Korea, facing an increasingly unstable regional order and the growing possibility of a dual contingency, Sweden's case offers a stark reminder that strategic autonomy and alliance alignment are not conflicting concepts. Properly understood and applied, they are mutually reinforcing.

Dr. Ju Hyung Kim currently serves as a President at the Security Management Institute, a defense think tank affiliated with the South Korean National Assembly. He holds a doctoral degree in international relations from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) in Japan, a master's degree in conflict management from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and a degree in public policy from Seoul National University's Graduate School of Public Administration (GSPA). Dr. Kim has written extensively on international security, diplomacy, and alliance management.