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Asan Issue Brief Release: “Testing Allies: The Greenland Crisis and Implications for South Korea”

SEOUL, March 26, 2026 – Dr. KIM Saeme of the Asan Institute’s Center for Foreign Policy and National Security (<http://en.asaninst.org/>) has published a new *Asan Issue Brief*, titled “Testing Allies: The Greenland Crisis and Implications for South Korea.”

The Issue Brief examines what the 2026 Greenland crisis reveals about evolving U.S. alliance expectations and argues that the episode reflects a broader shift in how Washington manages its alliances. It makes the case that U.S. allies, including South Korea, must prepare for a more demanding and less predictable alliance environment.

The Greenland crisis was triggered in early 2026 with President Donald Trump’s renewed interest in acquiring Greenland, who framed the issue as vital to U.S. national security and Arctic strategy. While tensions de-escalated after Trump pledged not to use force to annex Greenland, it generated significant concern across Europe and raised questions about alliance cohesion within NATO.

The Issue Brief argues that the episode reflects growing U.S. frustration with allied burden-sharing and signals a shift toward more assertive forms of alliance management, including the use of political pressure to elicit greater contributions from partners.

The Issue Brief further highlights how European allies responded with a calibrated approach, combining firm defense of sovereignty with efforts to avoid escalation. In this context, the Issue Brief identifies two key trends: increasing expectations for allied contributions and a widening gap in perspectives between the United States and Europe regarding the future of the transatlantic relationship. These dynamics are not confined to Europe but are relevant across the broader U.S. alliance network.

To this end, the Issue Brief outlines two lessons for South Korea.

1. Clearer alliance signaling supported by tangible contributions
South Korea’s challenge is not only to contribute, but to ensure those contributions are clearly recognized as supporting shared security objectives. As U.S. expectations toward allies become more specific and demanding, ambiguity in Seoul’s strategic positioning carries increasing risks. This includes expectations for clearer positions on China, a more proactive role in deterring North Korea, and greater participation in regional and global security initiatives. Yet South Korea is already contributing significantly—through higher defense spending, roughly \$350 billion in U.S. investments, and expanded defense industrial cooperation. The priority is to ensure these contributions are recognized as central to shared alliance objectives, not merely economic or parallel efforts.
2. Deeper coordination with like-minded partners
South Korea should strengthen coordination with Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Embedding itself in a broader network of security cooperation will enhance Seoul’s credibility and help manage evolving U.S. expectations in a more coordinated manner.

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to undertaking policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments conducive to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.