Perils of U.S. Illiberal Retrenchment: South Korea's Perspective on Indo-Pacific Recalibration

By Kuyoun Chung

U.S. President Donald Trump has swiftly advanced an "America First" foreign policy agenda since re-entering the White House on January 20, 2025. By translating the populist rhetoric emphasized during his 2024 election campaign—largely capitalizing on economic nationalism that was pervasive among his supporters—into concrete policies, Trump not only deepens the controversy surrounding his seemingly isolationist stance but also challenges the postwar global order, doing much to dismantle the legacy of the Joe Biden administration. While his administration frames these policies as an effort to restore U.S. primacy, the America-First approach practiced thus far may ultimately hinder this very objective. Moreover, these policies are expected to undermine the alignment among like-minded democracies that the Biden administration has sought to strengthen, thereby reinforcing the narrative of an emerging multipolar order, an idea actively promoted by China, India, and Russia.[1] Lastly, President Trump's diplomatic overture toward the United States' principal adversaries, exemplified by his talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, and the resumption of negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, shows his preference for strategic dealmaking to cultivate a favorable balance of power in each region.[2] Yet, this approach appears to be laying the groundwork for a world divided into spheres of influence, which is likely to further strengthen the alignment among China, North Korea, and Russia, affording them greater strategic leeway. In turn, this imposes additional burdens on U.S. allies in maintaining regional stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Meanwhile, South Korea's newly elected President Lee Jae Myung has expressed a commitment to maintaining the South Korea-U.S. alliance and the trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan. However, his administration is expected to pursue pragmatic diplomacy between great powers at the same time. Therefore, it remains uncertain whether this will lead to a deepening of the alignment with like-minded democracies that was cultivated under the previous Yoon Suk Yeol administration. Having criticized President Yoon's values-based diplomacy, the Lee administration now appears poised to return to the approach of the former Moon Jae-in administration. The Lee administration is also expected to prioritize improving inter-Korean relations through rapprochement with North Korea, and in pursuit of this goal, it is likely to seek improved ties with China. This shift may weaken South Korea's strategic position amid ongoing recalibrations in the Indo-Pacific.

Debate on Retrenchment

Trump's America-First foreign policy resembles retrenchment, a policy designed to scale back grand strategic commitments in response to a decline in relative power.[3] Accordingly, retrenchment involves reallocating resources from peripheral to core commitments to reduce foreign policy costs, mitigate risks, and increase burden-sharing with other states.[4] It is important to note that the United States is not

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the first great power to implement retrenchment; historically, great powers that recognized or believed that they had reached the peak of their power have often opted for retrenchment.[5] However, within the context of ongoing competition between the United States and China, U.S. retrenchment has been seen as a symptom of declining hegemonic power, fueling intense debates about whether and to what degree there is a changing balance of power. Furthermore, Trump's illiberal stance, which appears to undermine the existing rules-based order, has furthered debates over whether the United States' retreat from global leadership will imperil the rules-based international order that has been sustained since 1945.

Those who oppose retrenchment argue that doing so reflects U.S. weakness and signals its intention to retreat as an offshore balancer, which could embolden potential adversaries to challenge the status quo.[6] Furthermore, they claim that when the United States adopts retrenchment to reduce foreign policy costs, it has often ended up incurring even greater costs in the long run. For instance, during World War II, the United States initially attempted to maintain the balance of power in Europe and East Asia through an offshore balancing strategy, relying on regional allies such as Britain and France to contain the Axis powers. However, the rapid collapse of France and the severe overstretching of Britain revealed the limitations of this strategy, ultimately compelling the United States to enter the war. As a result, approximately 400,000 American lives were lost, and the war cost the United States an estimated USD 4,104 billion (in constant FY2011 dollars).[7] These immense costs, combined with the strategic landscape of postwar Europe, necessitated a sustained onshore U.S. military presence in the European theater.[8] Additionally, critics of offshore balancing argue that this strategy could heighten the risk of nuclear proliferation among regional allies that may seek independent deterrents in the absence of credible U.S. security guarantees. They question whether the United States could rapidly project military power in times of crisis, given the weakening of the regional security architecture and potential future reduction of U.S. forward deployments. As a result, allies may be less likely to align their actions with U.S. interests. In sum, these concerns suggest that a U.S. retrenchment could undermine the liberal international order and its stability.

Meanwhile, proponents of retrenchment argue that its primary goal is to preserve U.S. primacy over the long term and to safeguard the country's freedom of action.[9] In this context, offshore balancing is a pragmatic strategy of retrenchment with very limited objectives. For example, the United States does not need to act as the world's police, nor should this be the goal of an offshore balancing strategy. Maintaining leadership in the international community is a valid objective only when it directly serves U.S. interests. Of course, proponents of offshore balancing argue that this approach differs from isolationism, as the United States recognizes the importance of maintaining its commitment in key regions such as Northeast Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. For the United States, it is necessary to respond to emerging states that achieve or aspire to achieve great power status. But the core argument of offshore balancing is that the United States should allow regional states to respond to arising threats first and intervene only when necessary, rather than assuming the role of the world's police. In other words, it seeks to create parallel balance-of-power systems in each key region by combining buck-passing and balancing strategies.[10] If this approach can minimize U.S. involvement abroad, it would not only free up resources for domestic investment but also reduce the sacrifices of American soldiers.

Against this backdrop, former U.S. President Barack Obama's foreign policy was characterized by multilateral retrenchment—maintaining a compromised commitment to the liberal international order while pursuing a realist policy of retrenchment.[11] The 2010 *National Security Strategy* endorsed the view that U.S. foreign policy is not only about reducing unnecessary military commitments overseas and sharing the burden with global partners but also about enhancing its standing in the international community.[12] This principle reflects a recognition of the limitations of U.S. resources and capabilities while acknowledging the imperative of maintaining U.S. global leadership.

Indeed, the Obama administration clarified its rebalancing strategy in *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, the Department of Defense's 2011 strategic guidance document.[13] The guidance emphasized not only repositioning U.S. forces to Asia but also reducing the size of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. It further underscored the importance of limited military engagement, prioritizing drone warfare operations in Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia, as well as cyberwarfare operations against Iran using targeted malware like Stuxnet, instead of waging conventional warfare. This rebalancing strategy revealed not only the Obama administration's federal budget strains and attention to a rising China but also the political constraints arising from the war on terror initiated by the George W. Bush administration.[14] These factors, coupled with the negative public opinion on any subsequent military actions, resulted in a reduction of U.S. military engagement in the Middle East.[15] In this context, the Obama administration's *National Security Strategy*, published in 2015, raised the threshold for the use of military force in situations where U.S. interests are not directly threatened and stated the United States would share the burden with its allies if it did intervene, thus emphasizing the merits of retrenchment in some areas of foreign policy.[16]

At the same time, the Obama administration continued its institutional engagement with the international community to maintain global leadership. Its efforts to preserve global leadership were based on the judgment that upholding the U.S.-led global order, shaped by strategic restraint since World War II, aligns with U.S. interests.[17] Strategic restraint in this context refers to the United States limiting its use of power over others in the short term while simultaneously creating rules, norms, and institutions that lock in its power in the long term.[18] Through multilateral, reciprocal, and binding institutional bargains, the United States was able to establish those rules, norms, and institutions in various domains, projecting its asymmetric power advantage and eliminating the need for a constant struggle for power. In this way, strategic restraint sought to reassure countries within the rules-based order that they would be neither dominated nor abandoned, despite the sharply asymmetric power distribution favoring the United States.

This strategic restraint was instrumental in shaping a U.S.-led rules-based order and was further institutionalized due to the democratic nature of the countries involved, especially under the historical context of the Cold War. Furthermore, strategic restraint was a central component of the post-war settlement led by the United States and has even endured power shifts, including the end of the Cold War, that reinforced U.S. global leadership. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's retrenchment is based on the belief that the existing international order, rooted in this strategic restraint, contradicts U.S. interests. This, in turn, has endangered both U.S. primacy and global leadership.

The Trump Administration's Illiberal Retrenchment

The Trump administration's retrenchment raises concern that such efforts undermine the existing rules-based order. This order, made possible by strategic restraint and the presence of democratic countries that participate and agree with its legitimacy, demonstrates that the U.S. hegemonic order is not solely a U.S. prerogative but rather represents a form of coalitional hegemony.[19] This collective nature of the U.S.-led rules-based order indicates the existence of international constituencies—U.S. efforts to legitimize its leadership being among them. Material primacy alone does not guarantee U.S. global leadership; instead, the cultivation of legitimacy and the process of persuasion are essential to maintain the support of democratic and like-minded countries for the U.S.-led order, despite the relative decline of the United States and the subsequent adoption of retrenchment.[20]

In this context, the following characteristics of the Trump administration make its embrace of retrenchment polarizing, which reduces the cohesion fostered among like-minded countries in upholding the rules-based order since the end of World War II.

First, the Trump administration has shown a lack of commitment to liberal democracy and demonstrated a friendly attitude toward authoritarian leaders. For instance, President Trump thrashed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a meeting in the Oval Office in March 2025, which not only revealed the limitations of concerted NATO efforts to influence Trump's approach toward Russia's war against Ukraine but also demonstrated Trump's dismissive attitude toward NATO allies.[21] Also, during the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, U.S. Vice President JD Vance stated that "the threat from the European continent does not come from Russia or China, but from within" and criticized European countries for allowing freedom of expression and accepting immigrants.[22] Vance also attempted to intervene in European domestic politics by meeting with Alice Weidel, co-leader of Germany's far-right political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD).[23] These actions were perceived as signaling the Trump administration's antagonism toward European allies and contributed to eroding the solidarity that the Biden administration had worked hard to restore with democratic partners during its tenure. Such antagonism is likely to weaken alignment between the United States and its allies—that is, U.S.-led coalitional hegemony—which in turn undermines leverage over China, as the current great power competition is fundamentally between coalitional hegemonies led by the United States and China.

Second, President Trump's perception of allies as competitors has threatened to undermine the U.S.-led security architecture around the world. The Biden administration made significant efforts to rebuild alliances and partnerships, constructing a latticework framework that supplemented the existing hub-and-spokes alliance system. This was exemplified by initiatives like South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation and the NATO-IP4 consultative group, which generated a synergistic effect in bolstering the U.S. security architecture, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. These groups were centered around like-minded allies, and the Biden administration's values-based diplomacy further mobilized them by providing normative and ideological legitimacy for participation. Ultimately, these groups contributed to the recovery and consolidation of the transatlantic alliance, which had been fragmented during the first Trump administration.

Meanwhile, Trump prioritizes U.S. interests over those of its allies. Notably, he regards U.S. allies as competitors, has reopened debates over defense spending and burden-sharing, has signaled its desire to renegotiate free trade agreements, and even suggested the possibility of withdrawing from NATO. Trump's transactional approach led NATO allies to explore independent extended deterrence systems in pursuit of greater strategic autonomy.[24] By contrast, it remains unlikely that Indo-Pacific allies such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia, which depend entirely on U.S. nuclear extended deterrence, will distance themselves from the United States to the same degree. However, if the Trump administration continues to attribute U.S. trade deficits to the U.S. allies' perceived bad faith behavior, while imposing tariffs and complaining about their insufficient defense contributions, anti-U.S. public sentiment may grow in the Indo-Pacific region.[25] This, in turn, could constrain the political latitude of allied governments and diminish prospects for deeper strategic cooperation with the United States.

Third, retrenchment under Trump, seen as a response to strategic insolvency within the Department of Defense, is now taking shape in practice. Strategic insolvency refers to a condition in which a country's stated strategic objectives exceed the resources available to achieve them. In other words, it occurs when the scope of U.S. global commitments surpasses what can be sustainably supported by its capacity.[26] Recent discussions about integrating U.S. regional combatant commands can be viewed within this context. The Pentagon is currently assessing the benefits of combining European Command and Africa Command, as well as merging Northern Command, which covers the U.S. mainland, Canada, and Mexico, with Southern Command, responsible for Latin America.[27] This reflects a less ambitious or scaled-down U.S. military posture. Such restructuring is either underway or under consideration across the U.S. government, and examples like the closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) can be understood within this same context.[28] The restructuring, driven by retrenchment, is likely to continue under the concept of the "Lippmann Gap," which was discussed during the Senate Committee on Armed Services' confirmation hearing of Elbridge Colby, who was nominated and confirmed as under secretary of defense for policy.[29] Lippman Gap describes a situation where foreign policy becomes unsustainable due to a mismatch between a state's international commitments and its available resources.[30] Therefore, this is not merely a matter of budget-related restructuring but should be understood as a deliberate reduction in the U.S. commitment to its allies and partners, potentially increasing uncertainty about U.S. reliability in critical regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific.

Lastly, U.S. retrenchment under President Trump includes not only cynicism toward traditional alliances but also an emphasis on great power diplomacy and reduced involvement in global conflicts, aiming to keep U.S.-China competition as the primary focus of U.S. foreign policy. Against this backdrop, the administration has sought to end the war between Russia and Ukraine, apparently on terms more favorable to Russia.[31]

As evidenced by the Trump administration's efforts to reset U.S.-Russia relations, some analysts have characterized its approach as a "reverse-Nixon" strategy. Drawing on historical precedent, this strategy seeks to drive a wedge between Russia and China. However, the current U.S.-Russia relationship lacks the geopolitical conditions that enabled U.S.-China reconciliation during the Cold War. For a reverse-Nixon strategy to succeed, Washington would need to weaken the strategic ties between Moscow and

Beijing through a broader rapprochement with Russia, potentially including progress on the Russia-Ukraine ceasefire negotiations. Yet, as seen in those negotiations, Moscow has adopted a hardened position—demanding full capitulation from Ukraine and showing little willingness to compromise. Notably, Russia's pursuit of rapprochement with the United States is not motivated by a desire to resolve the conflict with Ukraine, but rather by a desire to normalize bilateral relations, secure sanctions relief, and reduce its diplomatic isolation.

China, for its part, does not view U.S. efforts to restore relations with Russia as a strategic threat. On the contrary, Trump's devaluation of alliances presents an opportunity for Beijing, as it encourages European countries to seek greater strategic autonomy from Washington.[32] In the trade and financial sectors, many U.S. allies—including the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada—are likely to pursue de-risking strategies to shield themselves from U.S. market volatility. Furthermore, China does not expect the Russia-Ukraine ceasefire negotiations to progress as rapidly as the United States might hope. As a result, Beijing sees little incentive to adopt a confrontational stance toward U.S.-Russia rapprochement efforts.[33]

As a result, the United States now finds itself in a position where its accelerated efforts to restore relations with Russia—and to expedite a Russia-Ukraine ceasefire—have diminished its influence in Europe without any meaningful success in weakening China-Russia alignment. Whether the Trump administration's reset with Moscow was intended as a tactical maneuver or a strategic pivot, it may contribute to the fragmentation of the transatlantic alliance. Contrary to Trump's pivot toward Russia, NATO declared Russia a long-term threat to its collective security in a joint statement issued after the NATO summit in June 2025.[34]

Should the United States abandon the liberal international order—which has historically resisted the division of global influence among great powers—the pace of U.S.-Russia rapprochement may accelerate further. Russia's long-term objective remains the revision of the post-Cold War settlement and the reestablishment of a sphere of influence over the former Soviet Union territory and Eastern Europe. China, likewise, appears intent on restoring its regional dominance across Asia. Ultimately, it is up to the United States to decide whether a multipolar world with competing spheres of influence is an international system it is willing to accept.[35]

In sum, U.S. retrenchment under the Trump administration is creating a different strategic landscape compared to the Biden administration. While the Biden administration emphasized values-based diplomacy and solidarity of like-minded countries to form a coalition of U.S.-aligned states amid U.S.-China competition, President Trump is seeking to foster global competition involving both allies and adversaries alike. This strategic shift will ultimately make it impossible to reclaim any sort of U.S. primacy in the world. Countries around the world are likely to hedge and de-risk against the United States, potentially forming their own coalitions to secure strategic autonomy.

In this context, the foreign policy dilemmas faced by Indo-Pacific countries, including South Korea, are likely to evolve in a significantly different direction. The Trump administration has seemingly renewed pressure on allies caught in the middle of the U.S.-China rivalry. As this competition intensifies, demands for cooperation from the United States are expected to increase, thereby narrowing strategic options for

countries like South Korea. Simultaneously, U.S. allies face the prospect of reduced security commitments and greater burden-sharing expectations. Consequently, these countries are likely to place increased emphasis on developing independent cooperative frameworks, potentially without U.S. involvement. How the Trump administration effectively addresses allies' concerns over U.S. pressures to choose between the United States and China will play a critical role in determining the future stability of U.S.-China competition. Otherwise, the coalitional nature of the U.S.-led hegemonic order risks dissolution, thereby weakening U.S. power in both relative and absolute terms.

Strengthened Narrative of the Multipolar Order

Trump's return to the White House has amplified, rather than initiated, debates about whether multipolarity best characterizes the current world order. For instance, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted that the world is rapidly entering into a multipolar phase, while French President Emmanuel Macron surprised EU member states by stating that Europe must position itself as a major independent power within the emerging order, aiming to be a third pole that challenges U.S.-China dominance.[36] Similarly, in 2022, Putin declared that a multipolar system had already taken shape and described this development as irreversible.[37]

Although academics and foreign policy specialists often discuss the concept of multipolarity, there is no consensus on whether this term accurately describes the world in 2025. Those who emphasize hard power tend to argue for a bipolar world—a new cold war between the United States and China. China's military strength has grown to the point where it can now compete with the United States in a direct conflict.[38] However, there are still debates over whether this military bipolarity is global or confined to the Western-Pacific region. Proponents of bipolarity often draw comparisons between the current international system and the Cold War, examining both the similarities and differences between the U.S.-China rivalry and the U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

On the other hand, those who argue that the world is becoming multipolar tend to focus on economic, social, and political dimensions of power.[39] While the United States and China remain the largest economies, economic influence is becoming increasingly diffused. For example, the European Union, with its extensive trade networks, wields significant regulatory power over global trade and technical standards. East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan, alongside emerging economies in the developing world, also play major roles in the global economy. Although military strength remains a critical factor, the United States has demonstrated the limitations of relying solely on military coercion to achieve policy objectives, especially in non-military spheres. Despite its significant military capabilities and a two-decade commitment, for instance, the United States failed to realize its goals—such as building a stable democracy—in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some scholars still argue that unipolarity—or a unipolar balance of power—remains intact despite relative declines in U.S. capabilities. Much of this research emphasizes the United States' unmatched global military reach, which remains unrivaled by any other state. These studies also underscore the dominance of the U.S. dollar in global markets and the lack of credible alternatives to replace it as the world's primary reserve currency. While China is undoubtedly a significant and rising competitor, it has not yet attained superpower status. It lacks an alliance network comparable to that of the United

States and faces substantial internal challenges, including mounting demographic pressures and signs of economic stagnation.[40] Under these conditions, the unipolar character of the international system is likely to persist in the near term.

The lack of consensus on polarity among scholars and practitioners suggests that the international system is in flux, and the future of the liberal international order led by the United States is uncertain. But the Trump administration's illiberal retrenchment is likely to convince many that the United States can no longer play the same influential role as before. As discussed above, U.S. retrenchment is not a typical case of great power retrenchment but rather that of a hegemonic power—one that has maintained the most extensive military reach in the world and issues the global reserve currency. In this context, the retrenchment of such a country signifies a reduction in its military and economic influence necessary to sustain coalitional hegemony. Pulling back from this will likely fuel arguments for multipolarity. Moreover, this retreat not only weakens U.S. alliances with like-minded democracies by framing them as competitors but also undermines the very concept of U.S. coalitional hegemony. As a result, countries seeking to hedge against the United States are more inclined to form alternative poles or strengthen their alignment with China. In this sense, President Trump's illiberal retrenchment may accelerate the emergence of a multipolar world.

South Korea's Vulnerability after Political Uncertainty

Former President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, and his subsequent suspension from office by the National Assembly two weeks later, effectively paralyzed the South Korean government. After the Constitutional Court upheld the National Assembly's decision and formally removed Yoon from office on April 4, 2025, South Korean voters elected Lee Jae Myung as the new president on June 3. Although President Lee expressed his commitment to maintaining the South Korea-U.S. alliance and supporting trilateral cooperation with Japan, the ruling Democratic Party's inclusion of anti-U.S. and anti-Japan rhetoric in the impeachment motion drew criticism from Washington.[41] Notably, the motion cited Yoon's confrontational posture toward North Korea and China as grounds for impeachment, although this justification was sharply criticized by U.S. Representative Young Kim (R-CA), who described it as undermining a core pillar of the alliance.[42]

Yoon's foreign policy emphasized strategic clarity in the context of U.S.-China competition. South Korea has participated in various U.S.-led security initiatives and expanded cooperation with like-minded democracies, such as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, particularly in areas like supply chain restructuring and emerging technology collaboration.[43] The Yoon administration published the country's first *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, articulating South Korea's commitment to promoting stability in Northeast Asia beyond the Korean Peninsula.[44] Under President Yoon, South Korea contributed to Ukraine's defense through financial, humanitarian, and reconstruction aid as well as non-lethal military support, further signaling South Korea's willingness to expand its global role beyond the Korean Peninsula. But this momentum is unlikely to continue in the short term because the U.S. administration that facilitated such collaboration no longer exists, and South Korea is set to face trade disputes and burden-sharing negotiations with the Trump administration in the foreseeable future. This friction will likely intensify if the United States downsizes or reduces its military footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

It is worth noting that not all individuals within the Trump administration agree with this approach, particularly traditional Republican leadership, including Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Chris Christie, and Mike Pence, who find it difficult to support the administration's retrenchment. Comments such as those by Colby regarding the withdrawal or realignment of U.S. forces in South Korea and the potential acceptance of nuclear armament among Asian allies are unlikely to find much support among GOP lawmakers.[45] Although the Trump administration is only six months in and much remains in flux, the precedent established during Trump's first term suggests that these sorts of internal divisions will continue and exacerbate uncertainty abroad about the U.S. security strategy.

This uncertainty may be felt most acutely in the Indo-Pacific, with the Taiwan Strait serving as a key example. The U.S. Congress has long supported preserving the status quo between China and Taiwan and maintaining the existing power balance in the region. As a result, it would be difficult for a Trump administration to ignore or disengage from a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait. But, as with all allies and partners, Trump will likely demand that Taiwan increase its defense spending, expand its security contributions, and assume a greater role in pursuing shared objectives. In addition, the United States will likely request its allies, including South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, to maximize deterrence capabilities by enhancing their conventional military capabilities. These allies will likely continue to utilize current alliance and minilateral cooperation frameworks to achieve such goals. However, rather than achieving a dominant position over China through the current security architecture and the visible presence of U.S. forces in the Western Pacific, the Trump administration may prefer to shift from a fixed, large-scale presence toward contingency-based deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, which may generate strategic uncertainty among Asian allies.[46]

President Trump has also expressed an interest in resuming face-to-face talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.[47] South Korea's concern about restarting such summitry lies in the low feasibility of North Korea's denuclearization and the potential shift in U.S. goals from denuclearization to nuclear arms reduction. Given Trump's unilateral approach to diplomacy, there are also concerns about how or whether the United States would consider South Korea's preferences and priorities toward the North. With North Korea's strengthening ties with Russia, it remains uncertain whether North Korea will be willing to engage in dialogue with the United States. Furthermore, given the current momentum in China-Russia relations and deteriorating U.S.-China ties, it is uncertain whether the United States can successfully convince China to help support diplomacy with North Korea.

Conclusion

The Trump administration's illiberal retrenchment changes the dynamics of international relations amid U.S.-China competition and broader great power competition. Trump's apparent favoritism toward great power diplomacy and disdain for the U.S.-led liberal order weaken the alignment between allies and like-minded democracies, thereby undermining the very balance of power through which the United States bargains, negotiates, deters, or engages with China and Russia. Notably, the triangular alignment between China, North Korea, and Russia—however ephemeral—is forcing U.S. allies in Europe to enhance cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific, with or without the United States. In this context, Trump's attempts to reset relations with Russia may complicate the U.S. ability to manage competition

with China. Given these international dynamics, the South Korea-U.S. relationship is likely to be plagued by greater uncertainty, further complicating U.S. security objectives and priorities in the Indo-Pacific.

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