

The Path Forward for Alliance Modernization and Redesigning the U.S.-South Korea Alliance

By In Hyo Seol

Since the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term in January 2025, the restructuring of U.S. alliance relationships has accelerated on a global scale. Within NATO, the June 2025 Hague Summit Declaration committed allies to spend an unprecedented 5 percent of GDP on defense and defense-related investment by 2035. In the Indo-Pacific, the Trump administration has intensified pressure on allies to assume greater security responsibilities while signaling a willingness to recalibrate U.S. force posture. Within the U.S.-South Korea alliance, "alliance modernization" has emerged as the central concept encapsulating this transformation. The publication of the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) in November 2025 and the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) in January 2026 has sharpened the strategic direction of the new U.S. alliance posture.¹

As of yet, neither the United States nor South Korea has formally defined the specific contents of alliance modernization. Given President Trump's negotiating style, which deliberately leverages ambiguity as a bargaining tool, it is likely to remain a fluid concept without a fixed definition.² Nevertheless, the broad strategic direction is already discernible. While the term "alliance modernization" has appeared intermittently in the past—most notably in the May 2003 U.S.-South Korea joint statement, in which the two countries agreed to "modernize" the alliance—its meaning under the second Trump administration is qualitatively different.³ It represents the systematic application of America-First principles to alliance restructuring, an effort refined by a cohort of strategists since Trump's first term that reflects, in part, the deepening of U.S.-China strategic competition and the shifting military balance in the Indo-Pacific.⁴

In the U.S.-South Korea context, the concept gained official traction through a series of signals in 2025. That June, U.S. Chargé d'Affaires to South Korea Joseph Yun publicly expressed a desire to "modernize the alliance." In August, the U.S. Department of Defense characterized alliance modernization as ensuring "credible deterrence for the peninsula and beyond."⁵ Most significantly, the November Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) communiqué pledged to "modernize the alliance in a future-oriented and mutually beneficial manner."⁶ Yet as of early 2026, neither government has articulated an official definition, implementation plan, or transition roadmap.⁷

What is particularly noteworthy is that the Iran war, which erupted in late February 2026, is now acting as a powerful catalyst for accelerating changes to the United States' alliance

Dr. In Hyo Seol is Associate Professor in the Department of Strategic Studies at Korea National Defense University (KNDU). He also serves as Director of the New Security Research Center at KNDU's Research Institute for National Security Affairs.

posture and force deployment in the Indo-Pacific. The crisis has elevated the discourse on alliance restructuring from an abstract strategic discussion to a concrete, lived reality for expert communities and the broader public in both nations.

Alliance modernization entails formidable challenges. It implies fundamental changes to the way an alliance and the combined defense posture that has endured for decades actually operates. These matters have long remained hidden from public view for two reasons. First, many of the operational details have been classified. Second, there has been a persistent concern that open discussion of fundamental changes to the alliance could itself erode trust and credibility between the allies. Yet in a rapidly shifting security environment and evolving regional military balance, proceeding with such far-reaching changes without sufficient deliberation among experts from both countries risks generating unnecessary misunderstanding, controversy, and mutual distrust—an outcome that serves neither country’s interests.

This article does not intend to advocate a particular national strategy for either country. Rather, it seeks to provide an analytical foundation upon which experts from both nations can build a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead. The article proceeds in four parts. The first section analyzes the strategic logic of alliance modernization as articulated in the NSS and NDS, examining its three constituent layers: political-security motivation, defense-strategic prioritization, and military-operational adaptation. The second section examines how the Iran war has transformed alliance modernization from an abstract concept into an urgent operational reality. The third section provides a balanced assessment of the risks and opportunities of pursuing alliance modernization, with particular attention to the structural convergence of military interests between the two countries. The article concludes with recommendations for the path forward, emphasizing the critical role of expert-level dialogue in ensuring a stable transition.

Alliance Modernization and Trump’s Second-Term Alliance Strategy

The Essence of Alliance Modernization

The alliance restructuring agenda articulated during Trump’s first term—expressed primarily through burden-sharing pressure and the conditionalization of security commitments—has evolved into a far more systematic program in the second term. Whereas the first term focused overwhelmingly on financial contributions, demanding exponential increases in South Korea’s annual payment under the Special Measures Agreement and threatening to withdraw forces as leverage, the second term integrates theater-level operational concepts, force posture logic, and military deployment architecture into a comprehensive, redesigned framework.⁸

The two foundational strategy documents of the second term—the 2025 NSS and 2026 NDS—differ markedly from their predecessors in both form and substance. They are notably shorter and less systematically structured than the strategy documents of previous administrations, which aimed to provide overarching guidance to the vast national security apparatus and present a new vision of international order to allies and partners. The current documents are

more directly polemical, criticizing past strategies while making the case for a new direction to the American public. In exchange for this reduced scope, they articulate U.S. positions and demands with unusual directness and clarity.⁹

This evolution matters because it signals that alliance modernization under Trump's second term is not merely a rhetorical shift but a structural project backed by institutional momentum. The appointment of Elbridge Colby as U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy—the same strategist who authored *The Strategy of Denial* and served as the lead architect of the 2018 NDS—ensures that the intellectual framework underpinning burden-shifting and denial-based deterrence is now embedded at the highest operational level of the Pentagon. Similarly, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia John Noh has publicly called on Indo-Pacific allies to “dramatically” increase defense spending, prioritize capabilities that deny China’s military objectives, and take greater responsibility for actively defending “critical terrain, sea lanes and infrastructure within their regions.”¹⁰ The pattern suggests an emerging logic increasingly translated into policy pressure and bureaucratic guidance, rather than a fully institutionalized doctrine.

Prioritization, Burden-Shifting, and Limited Support

The overarching principle animating both documents is prioritization. The NSS declares that the United States will no longer attempt to defend everything but will concentrate on its most vital interests. Homeland defense and the Western Hemisphere receive the highest priority, while secondary threats are to be addressed primarily through allies and partners. Past strategies are criticized as grandiose, while the new approach is characterized as “flexible realism.”¹¹ This framing represents a significant departure from the expansive ambitions of previous administrations, which sought to maintain credible deterrence across all theaters simultaneously.¹²

More consequentially, the strategy documents move beyond the familiar language of burden-sharing to articulate what amounts to burden-shifting. The new formula assigns allies a “primary responsibility” for their own defense and for regional collective defense, while the United States commits to providing “critical but more limited support.” The NDS explicitly states that “decades of the United States subsidizing their defense” have led allies to chronically underinvest in their own security—a condition it frames as both strategically unsustainable and economically unjust to U.S. taxpayers.¹³ The implications are far-reaching. Unlike burden-sharing, which implies a negotiated redistribution of costs within a broadly unchanged framework, burden-shifting entails a structural reallocation of responsibility. Allies are expected not merely to pay more but to assume fundamentally different roles, becoming the primary defenders of their territory. At the same time, the United States repositions itself as an enabler and backstop rather than a frontline protector. For the U.S.-South Korea alliance, this distinction is not semantic; it portends changes to virtually every dimension of the combined defense posture, from command authority and operational planning to force structure and crisis management procedures.

The NDS offers a strikingly different diagnosis of the simultaneity problem—the challenge of multiple conflicts erupting concurrently across different theaters. The Joe Biden administration treated simultaneity as an inevitable byproduct of U.S.-China competition and responded with a policy of “integrated deterrence,” which sought to leverage all instruments of national power in coordination with allies.¹⁴ The 2026 NDS, by contrast, identifies the root cause not in the structural dynamics of great power competition but in allied free-riding. Its logic is straightforward: if allies were adequately fulfilling their defense responsibilities, regional conflicts would be deterred or contained locally, and U.S. intervention capacity would not be stretched across multiple theaters.¹⁵ This diagnosis leads directly to the prescription: allies must assume primary responsibility for their own security, freeing U.S. resources for the highest-priority challenges.

To incentivize compliance rather than resistance, the NSS introduces a differentiated system of incentives and pressure. Allies that demonstrate exemplary commitment to burden-sharing may receive preferential treatment in trade, technology transfer, and arms sales, while those deemed insufficiently committed may face greater pressure or reduced priority.¹⁶ The intent is to create competitive dynamics among allies, encouraging proactive role expansion. The United States also maintains its commitment to providing critical—if more limited—support, recognizing that its own interests are served by preserving allied sovereignty. However, if allies lack sufficient deterrence capability, they may abandon resistance and instead accommodate—or bandwagon with—potential adversaries, a prospect that would severely damage U.S. strategic interests.¹⁷

From Overwhelming Force to Denial: A Shift in Deterrence Posture

At the military-strategic level, alliance modernization is driven by the growing sophistication of China’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. These capabilities have turned large, fixed, and high-value targets near the first island chain—major bases, ports, command-and-control nodes, and logistics hubs—into increasingly vulnerable assets subject to long-range precision strikes.¹⁸ This creates what might be called the “paradox of forward deployment”: the same forward presence that provides deterrence through proximity and rapid response also creates vulnerability to preemptive attack and catastrophic paralysis.¹⁹

The envisioned response involves redistributing forces within the first island chain to positions along the second island chain, with an emphasis on survivability, mobility, and resilience. Simultaneously, the United States intends to support capacity building for allies within the first island chain so they can sustain deterrence with a reduced U.S. forward presence, while the United States maintains the ability to rapidly deploy forces when required.

This constitutes a fundamental shift in the deterrence paradigm—from deterrence by overwhelming force to deterrence by denial. Overwhelming deterrence, predicated on the forward deployment of massive forces capable of suppressing any crisis from the outset, risks giving adversaries the dangerous perception that a swift fait accompli is achievable by destroying concentrated forward forces in a preemptive strike. The concentration of high-value assets at a small number of known locations creates what strategists call a “target-rich environment” that rewards aggression—precisely the opposite of what deterrence is meant

to achieve. Deterrence by denial, by contrast, demonstrates that even after an initial strike, sufficient forces will survive, reconstitute, and frustrate the adversary's objectives, making aggression a losing proposition regardless of initial tactical success.²⁰

From this perspective, alliance modernization could contribute to a more sustainable deterrence posture, but only if it is paired with credible crisis-management mechanisms, careful signaling, and close U.S.-South Korea coordination on China policy. Without such political and diplomatic management, a distributed and resilient posture could just as easily be perceived by Beijing as a more durable containment architecture rather than a path toward a “decent peace.”²¹ The critical caveat is that successful implementation remains uncertain. Force posture adjustments risk being perceived as a weakening of U.S. security commitments, and the inherent instability of the transition process could itself undermine existing deterrence arrangements before new ones are firmly in place.

The Iran War and the Acceleration of Alliance Modernization

Direct Impact on the Korean Peninsula

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched large-scale military strikes against Iran, initiating what has become the most significant U.S. military operation in the Middle East since the 2003 operation against Iraq. Responding to the ensuing Iranian retaliation—missile strikes against U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf, drone attacks across the region, and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz—has required an enormous concentration of U.S. military assets, including carrier strike groups, air defense systems, strategic bombers, and ground forces.²²

The consequences for the Korean Peninsula have been direct and immediate. In March 2026, unusually frequent flights of Boeing C-17 Globemaster III and Lockheed C-5 Galaxy were observed at Osan Air Base—aircraft typically used to transport Patriot and THAAD missile defense components. U.S. media reports confirmed that components of the THAAD system were being relocated from South Korea to the Middle East and that Patriot interceptor missiles from the Indo-Pacific were being deployed to counter Iranian threats.²³

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung acknowledged the situation at a cabinet meeting, stating, “USFK may dispatch some air defense systems abroad in accordance with its own military needs. While we have expressed opposition, the reality is that we cannot fully push through our position.” He added that South Korea's own defenses were sufficient to deter North Korea. This redeployment was not without precedent: in 2025, the U.S. Air Defense Artillery Regiment returned to the Korean Peninsula after being deployed to the Middle East for approximately six months, confirming a pattern of treating peninsula-based assets as globally fungible reserves.²⁴

The concept of “strategic flexibility”—the use of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea for off-peninsular operations—has been a point of contention in the alliance since at least the George W. Bush administration, when the United States declared it would withdraw forces from South

Korea for redeployment to Iraq. At that time, then South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun insisted that South Korea “will not be embroiled in any conflict in Northeast Asia against our will,” and the allies papered over their differences with carefully worded mutual acknowledgments.²⁵ The Iran war demonstrates that strategic flexibility is no longer a diplomatic abstraction to be managed through creative language; it is an operational reality implemented unilaterally, in real time, and during live military conflict. This reality demands a fundamentally different kind of alliance management—one based on joint planning and institutional preparation rather than post-hoc diplomatic accommodation.

What the Iran War Reveals

The Iran crisis has highlighted several dynamics central to the logic of alliance modernization and with profound implications for the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

First, the redeployment of key U.S. assets from the Korean Peninsula to another theater is no longer a theoretical possibility but an operational reality. What had been discussed as an abstract contingency—the prospect of U.S. forces and critical defense systems being redirected from the peninsula during an external conflict—is now unfolding in real time. This constitutes a scaled-down preview of what could occur during a future U.S.-China confrontation or a Taiwan contingency, when the demands on U.S. military resources would be vastly greater than those imposed by the war in Iran.

Second, the war has demonstrated the vulnerability of forward-deployed, fixed assets. Reports that a low-cost Iranian drone destroyed a high-value THAAD radar in Jordan—valued at hundreds of millions of dollars—underscore the risks inherent in static forward deployment.²⁶ In the Indo-Pacific context, where China’s A2/AD capabilities are far more sophisticated than those of Iran, the vulnerability of fixed assets within the first island chain would be exponentially greater. Additionally, the Center for Strategic and International Studies assessed that the United States expended a substantial number of THAAD interceptors during the Iran conflict, raising serious questions about the sustainability and replaceability of expensive air defense systems in high-intensity engagements.²⁷

Third, the possibility of a simultaneity problem has only intensified. As the Middle East conflict consumes strategic resources, including high-demand, low-density air defense assets critical to Indo-Pacific deterrence, the tools available for the Indo-Pacific are further constrained. This dynamic may create opportunities for provocation by North Korea, which has historically exploited periods of U.S. strategic distraction.²⁸

Fourth, and most fundamentally, the Iran war demands that both sides of the alliance confront the changed reality with open eyes. The question is whether Washington and Seoul will continue to grapple with the resulting uncertainty without joint deliberation or develop a shared vision and institutionalize a roadmap for managing the ongoing transformation. How this transition is framed—whether as a U.S. retreat from its security commitments or as the construction of a more survivable and sustainable deterrence architecture—will be decisive for public confidence

and alliance stability on both sides of the Pacific. The framing challenge is not merely a matter of public relations; it reflects a genuine analytical choice about how to interpret the structural changes underway. If the narrative of retreat dominates, it will become self-fulfilling, as the public in both countries loses confidence in the alliance and political leaders face pressures to hedge against its decline. If, however, the narrative of adaptation and resilience gains traction, supported by concrete evidence of continued deterrence capability, the transition can strengthen rather than weaken the alliance.

The Underdeveloped State of Alliance Modernization and Potential Risks

The Underdeveloped State of Alliance Modernization and Its Potential Risks

As of early 2026, the alliance modernization agenda remains underdeveloped. The strategic direction has been articulated through the NSS and NDS, but neither a concrete implementation plan nor a transition roadmap exists. Crucially, there has been insufficient deliberation among mainstream security experts in either country about the operational details of what modernization would actually entail. If wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer—which the fifty-seventh SCM affirmed would proceed through Full Operational Capability verification—moves forward in conjunction with alliance modernization, the combined scope and pace of change will be unprecedented, encompassing command structures, operational plans, force allocation, rules of engagement, and extended deterrence arrangements.²⁹ U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has publicly endorsed South Korea’s pursuit of OPCON transfer as a “great” endeavor reflecting South Korea’s growing military capability, while Under Secretary Colby has advocated reviewing the conditions for transfer, potentially lowering the bar for compliance.³⁰ This creates a situation in which political momentum toward rapid change may outpace the institutional preparation needed to ensure a stable transition.

Several specific risks demand careful attention. The first concerns the Trump administration’s coercive negotiating style. The use of tariffs, economic pressure, and deliberate strategic uncertainty as bargaining leverage may yield short-term concessions, but risks eroding the predictability and trust that undergird alliance cohesion. Alliance theorists have long observed that the deliberate cultivation of uncertainty intensifies both abandonment and entrapment anxieties, creating a volatile dynamic in which rational expectations become difficult to sustain, and misperception becomes more likely.³¹ In the U.S.-South Korea context, this dynamic is particularly dangerous because South Korean public opinion on the alliance—while broadly positive—is sensitive to perceptions of unequal treatment and can shift rapidly when the alliance appears to impose costs without corresponding benefits.³²

The second risk lies in the insufficiently explored nature of the issues at stake. Force posture restructuring, changes to command arrangements, adjustments to extended deterrence operations, and revisions to crisis management protocols are complex, sensitive matters that demand intensive expert engagement. The problem is not that alliance modernization is moving too fast, but that the expert-level deliberation needed to support it has not yet begun in earnest. They must be launched immediately and proceed in parallel with the political and institutional

process. Without such concurrent deliberation, the risk is not that change happens too quickly, but that it happens without the shared understanding needed to prevent confusion, misperception, and a decline in mutual confidence. The history of alliance management demonstrates that the most dangerous moments are not disagreements over policy, but misunderstandings about intentions—precisely the condition that the absence of substantive expert dialogue creates.³³

Third, adjustments to U.S. force posture risk being interpreted as a contraction of the U.S. defense commitment. In South Korea, the historical memory of the Acheson Line—U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s January 1950 speech defining the U.S. defense perimeter in a way that excluded the Korean Peninsula, widely regarded as having contributed to North Korea’s miscalculation in starting the Korean War—remains a powerful frame of reference.³⁴ Any perceived U.S. withdrawal or pullback is likely to trigger significant public anxiety in South Korea. These concerns were heightened when the November 2025 SCM communiqué notably omitted previous U.S. pledges to maintain U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) at current force levels and removed language stating that any North Korean nuclear attack would lead to the end of the North Korean regime.³⁵

Fourth, there is the risk that adjustments to USFK’s physical presence will be misread as a weakening of U.S. extended deterrence. USFK has long been perceived as the tangible guarantor of the U.S. nuclear umbrella: “the physical manifestation of the U.S. ironclad commitment to the U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty,” as the USFK commander himself has characterized it.³⁶ If its presence is reduced, concerns may arise that this signals a gradual withdrawal, ultimately eroding the U.S. nuclear assurance. The perception that the United States might weaken extended deterrence to reduce its military burden could fundamentally undermine deterrence against North Korea’s nuclear threat, with cascading consequences for regional stability.

Structural Opportunities: Why Alliance Modernization Can Succeed

Alliance modernization also presents significant opportunities for both countries—opportunities that expert communities must work to identify, articulate, and maximize. A failure to recognize these opportunities risks ceding the narrative entirely to the risks, producing a self-fulfilling prophecy of alliance deterioration.

South Korea stands as one of the strongest candidates for a “model ally” in U.S. alliance restructuring, provided that Seoul can sustain a bipartisan commitment to deterrence, defense responsibility, and strategic coordination with Washington despite changes in domestic political leadership. It has invested in self-reliant defense capabilities more consistently and for a longer period than virtually any other U.S. ally. With one of the largest and most capable conventional forces among U.S. allies, an annual defense expenditure that ranks eleventh in the world, a defense spending ratio among the highest of U.S. allies relative to GDP at approximately 2.6 percent, and a defense industrial base ranked in the global top ten, South Korea possesses a strong foundation for assuming greater defense responsibility.³⁷ A successful modernization of the U.S.-South Korea alliance would serve as a proof of concept for the broader U.S. global alliance restructuring strategy, lending credibility to the entire enterprise. Conversely, if the

most capable and best-prepared ally fails to navigate modernization successfully, the signal sent to other U.S. allies would be deeply damaging.

Moreover, South Korea is structurally indispensable to the United States in its long-term competition with China. Its advanced semiconductor industry, world-class shipbuilding capacity, and growing role in global defense exports provide the United States with critical supply-chain resilience and industrial depth essential for sustained strategic competition. South Korea's defense industry has emerged as a major global exporter, with contracts spanning Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, demonstrating precisely the kind of allied capability development that the NDS's burden-shifting framework envisions.³⁸ This structural interdependence transcends any single transactional exchange and constitutes a durable basis for building modernized alliance arrangements. For both countries, the modernization process offers an opportunity to deepen cooperation in precisely those technological and industrial domains—semiconductors, advanced manufacturing, AI-enabled defense systems, and naval construction—that will determine the outcome of long-term great-power competition.

The Double Contingency Logic: Convergence of Military Interests

Perhaps the most consequential structural opportunity lies in the convergence of national security interests created by the double contingency problem. The global simultaneity challenge increasingly raises the probability of multiple crises erupting concurrently within the Indo-Pacific itself. At the regional level, the risk of a dual contingency—a Taiwan Strait crisis and a Korean Peninsula crisis occurring simultaneously or in close succession—has grown substantially.³⁹ Political-military tabletop exercises conducted by the Atlantic Council's Indo-Pacific Security Initiative have demonstrated that the region's security structure increasingly generates conditions in which simultaneous crises become plausible, and that these scenarios present extraordinarily complex challenges for U.S. decision-makers.⁴⁰

The strategic implications are profound. Maintaining deterrence on the Korean Peninsula is essential to achieving the highest-priority U.S. strategic objective in the Indo-Pacific—preventing a Chinese fait accompli against Taiwan. If deterrence on the peninsula fails, the United States would be forced to contend with two simultaneous fronts, drastically complicating its ability to concentrate on the Taiwan contingency. North Korea, for its part, has a structural incentive to exploit a Taiwan crisis: Pyongyang could calculate that with U.S. attention and resources diverted to the Taiwan Strait, the window for coercive action on the peninsula would be wider than at any other time. The possibility of episodic coordination or opportunistic alignment among revisionist states—often captured in the CRINK framework—could further elevate this risk, although the Iran war also revealed limits to their ability or willingness to act in a tightly coordinated manner.⁴¹

Given these risks, it follows that if South Korea assumes primary responsibility for peninsular defense and the United States provides “critical but more limited support,” then the United States retains a powerful structural incentive to ensure that this support is genuinely forthcoming. If the peninsula becomes unstable because U.S. support proves hollow, the entire Indo-

Pacific deterrence architecture unravels. This means that even under the new burden-shifting framework, the United States has compelling self-interested reasons—not merely altruistic or treaty-based ones—to invest in the success of Korean Peninsula deterrence. The logic also runs in the other direction: South Korea’s demonstrated capability to maintain peninsular stability with reduced direct U.S. involvement frees U.S. resources for the Taiwan contingency, making the United States a more effective great power competitor and, paradoxically, a more reliable ally.

In other words, alliance modernization need not signify a contraction of the U.S. security commitment. Rather, it can be understood as a redistribution of roles on a foundation of converging military interests. The new division of labor, in which South Korea leads peninsular defense while the United States concentrates on the broader Indo-Pacific challenge, creates a structure in which both sides have strong incentives to fulfill their respective commitments, because the failure of either would undermine the security of both. This is a fundamentally different dynamic from a simple withdrawal or abandonment scenario, and it is essential that expert communities on both sides articulate this distinction clearly.

The Double Nuclear Contingency: Why Extended Deterrence Must Endure

The convergence of interests deepens further—and becomes even more urgent—when considering the nuclear dimension. In a simultaneous crisis involving the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, both China and North Korea could employ the threat of tactical nuclear weapons—as Russia has done during its war in Ukraine—to deter U.S. intervention. Russia has demonstrated that nuclear threats, even when not carried out, can significantly constrain the scope and tempo of Western responses and create political paralysis among allied publics.⁴² The war in Ukraine has, in effect, provided a real-world laboratory for the coercive use of nuclear threats below the threshold of actual employment. China and North Korea may well internalize this lesson and seek to replicate this dynamic in a future Indo-Pacific crisis, calculating that nuclear brinkmanship can deter or delay U.S. military response at the most critical moments.

North Korea’s nuclear arsenal is particularly relevant in this context. Pyongyang has developed and tested a range of tactical nuclear delivery systems—including short-range ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles—and explicitly incorporated the use of tactical nuclear weapons into its declared military doctrine.⁴³ In a dual-contingency scenario, North Korea could threaten or carry out a limited nuclear strike against military targets in South Korea or Japan, calculating that even small-scale nuclear use would fundamentally alter the strategic calculus for the United States and its allies across the Indo-Pacific theater.

The Atlantic Council’s Guardian Tiger tabletop exercises found that participants consistently judged that failure of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula in a dual-contingency scenario significantly complicated U.S. options for defending Taiwan.⁴⁴ Should nuclear deterrence fail on the Korean Peninsula, even limited North Korean nuclear use would lower the global threshold for nuclear employment. This would place the United States in an extraordinarily difficult position: attempting to defend Taiwan under Chinese nuclear coercion at a moment when the nuclear

taboo has already been breached in the same theater. The cascading effect on U.S. credibility, allied confidence, and the global nuclear nonproliferation order would be devastating.

The implication for alliance modernization is unambiguous. Maintaining credible extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula is not merely a South Korean interest; it is integral to the viability of U.S. strategy for defending Taiwan and, more broadly, to the preservation of the global nuclear order. This structural logic demonstrates that in the course of alliance modernization, extended deterrence should not be weakened but rather institutionalized with greater precision and sophistication. The mechanisms for nuclear consultation, crisis communication, and escalation management between Washington and Seoul should be strengthened, not attenuated, as part of the modernization process.

The Taiwan Contingency and the Role of the Korean Peninsula

The Iran war has brought to the surface one of the most sensitive challenges embedded in alliance modernization: the question of entrapment and the alliance's out-of-theater role. If the conditions under which peninsula-based assets may be redirected to other contingencies are not addressed through the modernization process, this issue risks becoming a persistent source of friction that corrodes cooperation from within. The Taiwan contingency represents the most consequential version of this challenge. Any military confrontation over Taiwan would be fundamentally shaped by the fact that both the United States and China possess nuclear arsenals and have compelling reasons to prevent nuclear escalation. With Camp Humphreys located in close proximity to Beijing, the direct involvement of peninsula-based U.S. forces in offensive operations against China would risk transforming a Taiwan Strait conflict into a qualitatively different kind of confrontation—one that dramatically raises the threshold of nuclear escalation. It is reasonable to expect that both Washington and Beijing would have strong incentives to limit the Korean Peninsula's direct role in such a crisis, particularly at levels below a full-scale general war.

In practical terms, the most likely role for the Korean Peninsula in a Taiwan scenario would not be as a staging ground for offensive operations against China but as a theater where deterrence against North Korean opportunism must be firmly maintained. Ensuring that Pyongyang does not exploit a Taiwan crisis is a shared interest of the highest order. This logic reinforces the case for an alliance posture in which South Korea assumes primary responsibility for peninsular deterrence, the United States maintains enabler presence and rapiddeployment capabilities for credible support, and forces that would substantively contribute to Taiwan's deterrence are positioned at more dispersed and survivable locations along the second island chain.

Such a reconfiguration must proceed gradually, with the continued presence of USFK serving as the visible anchor of alliance credibility throughout the transition. Even as force composition evolves, the allies should jointly invest in strengthening missile defenses, integrating unmanned and autonomous systems, and incorporating other elements of future warfare that enhance deterrence while reducing the vulnerability of fixed installations. These efforts would alleviate public concerns by demonstrating that the alliance is not contracting but adapting and becoming

more resilient and operationally effective. Over the long term, the Korean Peninsula's strategic significance extends well beyond the current threat environment; as the Arctic emerges as a domain of great-power competition, the peninsula's geographic position will become even more valuable, reinforcing the case for a sustained, if transformed, U.S. commitment.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Trust is the most valuable asset of any alliance. Over more than seven decades, the U.S.-South Korea alliance has accumulated a rich repository of experience and institutional mechanisms for aligning national interests that have not always been naturally convergent. The task of alliance modernization is to leverage this accumulated capital to expand future interest convergence, not to squander it through hasty or poorly considered changes.

Altering the institutional and conceptual foundations that the allies have maintained for decades is an inherently difficult undertaking for both countries. The existing body of preparatory research among expert communities on both sides is insufficient for the scope of change now being contemplated. If sweeping changes are driven primarily by political pressure in the absence of adequate deliberation, this may result in unnecessary friction, misunderstanding, and wasteful controversy that damages the bilateral relationship—precisely when the evolving strategic environment demands close coordination.

Expert dialogue cannot by itself reverse the political logic of the Trump administration or eliminate coercive bargaining. Its more realistic function is to reduce misperception, identify areas of practical convergence, and provide institutional guardrails against avoidable alliance friction. The double-contingency and double-nuclear-contingency analyses presented in this article illustrate one point of convergence: maintaining deterrence on the Korean Peninsula is closely tied to the viability of the broader U.S. regional strategy. Demonstrating the existence of such structural linkages—through rigorous and sustained expert engagement—is essential for instilling confidence among the publics of both nations that the alliance rests on a durable foundation of shared interests, one that endures beyond the fluctuations of any single administration.

For alliance modernization to proceed on stable footing, several concrete steps are needed. First, the specific content and operational conditions of OPCON transfer and “critical but more limited support” must be concretized, institutionalized, and empirically demonstrated through combined exercises, tabletop simulations, and other visible means. What does “critical but more limited support” look like in practice? What assets will the United States commit to providing, under what conditions, and through what mechanisms? These questions cannot be left to ad-hoc negotiation during a crisis; they must be answered in advance through rigorous joint planning. Second, extended deterrence consultation mechanisms, including the bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), should be strengthened and expanded to address the new scenarios created by alliance modernization. Third, both countries should invest in joint research programs that bring together military, academic, and policy experts to develop shared analytical frameworks for understanding the transformed alliance. Such institutionalization and

publicization serve as the most persuasive mechanisms for assuring both countries' public that the alliance remains credible, capable, and robust—even as its operational architecture undergoes significant transformation.

Endnotes

¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (November 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>; U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (January 2026), <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>. On NATO, see North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “The Hague Summit Declaration,” June 25, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration>.

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Department of Defense, January 2018), 7, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF>. The 2018 NDS articulated the principle of being “strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable”—a stance carried into the second Trump term’s alliance strategy.

³ The White House, “Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” May 14, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/text/20030514-17.html>.

⁴ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2021); Fred Fleitz, ed., *An America First Approach to U.S. National Security* (America First Press, 2024); Alexander Velez-Green and Robert Peters, “The Prioritization Imperative: A Strategy to Defend America’s Interests in a More Dangerous World,” The Heritage Foundation, August 1, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-prioritization-imperative-strategy-defend-americas-interests-more-dangerous>; Dan Caldwell and Jennifer Kavanagh, “Aligning Global Military Posture with U.S. Interests,” Defense Priorities, July 9, 2025, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/aligning-global-military-posture-with-us-interests/>.

⁵ Sang-ho Song, “Alliance Modernization Seeks to Ensure Credible Deterrence on, ‘Beyond’ Korean Peninsula: Pentagon,” Yonhap News Agency, August 8, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250808009652315>.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, “57th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique,” November 14, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/14/2003820640/-1/-1/1/57-SECURITY-CONSULTATIVE-MEETING-JOINT-COMMUNIQUE.PDF>.

⁷ Derek Grossman, “The Devil Is in the Details: U.S. and ROK Seek Alliance Modernization, But How?” Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, August 2025, https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/09/ROK-US-POLICY-BRIEF-2025-AUG_ISSUE12.pdf; Jungsup Kim, “Modernizing the ROK–U.S. Alliance and Washington’s Strategic Perspective,” Sejong Institute, September 25, 2025, <https://sejong.org/web/board/22/egoread.php?bd=22&seq=12473>.

⁸ Bruce Klingner, “U.S.-South Korea Burden-Sharing Talks Remain Stuck. Here’s How to Fix It,” Heritage Foundation, April 13, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/us-south-korea-burden-sharing-talks-remain-stuck-heres-how-fix-it>; Caldwell and Kavanagh, “Aligning Global Military Posture with U.S. Interests.”

- ⁹ James M. Acton et al., “Unpacking Trump’s National Security Strategy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 21, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/01/trump-national-security-strategy>; Yang Gyu Kim, “‘일차적 책임’ 청구서와 ‘제한된 지원’의 역설: 2026 NDS와 한국의 선택 [The Invoice of ‘Primary Responsibility’ and the Paradox of ‘Limited Support’: The 2026 NDS and South Korea’s Choices],” RINSA Security Review, no. 236, Research Institute for National Security Affairs, Korea National Defense University, April 30, 2026, https://www.kndu.ac.kr/bbs/rinsa/53/K_25452/artclView.do?layout=unknown.
- ¹⁰ John Noh, “Advance Policy Questions for John Noh, Nominee to be Assistant Secretary of War for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs,” Senate Armed Services Committee, October 2025, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/noh-apq-responses>.
- ¹¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 9-10.
- ¹² The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (October 2022), 22, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.
- ¹³ U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 13-14.
- ¹⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 13-14. The NDS lists the simultaneity problem and allied burden sharing as one of five key elements in its security environment assessment, alongside the homeland/Western Hemisphere, China, Russia, and Iran/North Korea.
- ¹⁶ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12.
- ¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 18-19.
- ¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (2025), <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/ANNUAL-REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2025.PDF>.
- ¹⁹ Thomas G. Mahnken et al., *Deterrence by Detection: A Key Role for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Great Power Competition* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/deterrence-by-detection-a-key-role-for-unmanned-aircraft-systems-in-great-power-competition>. On the vulnerability of concentrated forward-deployed forces to Chinese precision strike, see also Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,” *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 115–149.
- ²⁰ Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*; Caldwell and Kavanagh, “Aligning Global Military Posture with U.S. Interests.”
- ²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 10.

²² U.S. Central Command, “Operation Epic Fury Fact Sheet,” April 6, 2026, https://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Publications/260406-FactSheet.pdf?ver=ezk_KiJvld1N84sCwrTJEg%3D%3D; Eve Sampson, “Iran War May Force US to Shift Missile Defenses from South Korea, Seoul Says,” Defense News, March 11, 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-military/2026/03/11/iran-war-may-force-us-to-shift-missile-defenses-from-south-korea-seoul-says/>.

²³ Heejin Kim and Kyu-Seok Shim, “South Korea Says Can Deter Threats if U.S. Weapons Redeployed to Middle East,” Reuters, March 10, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-president-says-cant-stop-us-forces-redeploying-weapons-2026-03-10/>; Sampson, “Iran War May Force U.S. to Shift Missile Defenses from South Korea, Seoul Says”; Seth Robson and Yoojin Lee, “South Korea Objects to U.S. Military Moving Air Defense System to Middle East,” Stars and Stripes, March 11, 2026, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia-pacific/2026-03-11/taad-south-korea-middle-east-iran-21025377.html>; “U.S. Did Not Move Defense System from Korea, General Says,” Reuters, April 21, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-did-not-move-defense-system-korea-general-says-2026-04-21/>; Hui Jie Lim, “South Korea Opposed to U.S. Moving Air Defense Systems in the Country to Middle East: President Lee,” CNBC, March 10, 2026, <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/03/10/south-korea-patriot-transfer-iran-war-air-defenses.html>.

²⁴ Robson and Lee, “South Korea Objects South Korea Objects to U.S. Military Moving Air Defense System to Middle East.” The 2nd Battalion, 1st Air Defense Artillery Regiment returned to South Korea in October 2025 after a six-month deployment to the Middle East, confirming a recurring pattern of treating peninsula-based air defense assets as globally fungible reserves; Wes Rumbaugh, “The Depleting Missile Defense Interceptor Inventory,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 5, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/depleting-missile-defense-interceptor-inventory>. Reports indicate the United States expended approximately 14 percent of its THAAD interceptor stockpile during operations against Iran.

²⁵ Roh Moo-hyun, “Address by President Roh Moo-hyun at the 53rd Commencement and Commissioning Ceremony of the Korean Air Force Academy,” March 8, 2005, <https://www.hri.co.kr/upload/board/AddressByPresidentRohMoohyun.PDF>; U.S. Department of State, “United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership,” January 19, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm>.

²⁶ Vivian Salama and Nancy A. Youssef, “Iran Is Hitting the Radars That Underpin U.S. Missile Defenses,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/iran-is-hitting-the-radars-that-underpin-u-s-missile-defenses-2edbfccc>; “Iran Strikes Three Countries Targeting THAAD Missile Defenses,” *Militarnyi*, March 6, 2026, <https://militarnyi.com/en/news/iran-strikes-targets-thaad-missile-defenses/>.

²⁷ Rumbaugh, “The Depleting Missile Defense Interceptor Inventory”; Karishma Vaswani, “South Korea Alarmed by US Military Shift,” *Taipei Times*, March 21, 2026, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2026/03/21/2003854198>.

²⁸ Liang Tuang Nah, “With US Distracted in Iran, N Korea’s Opportunistic, Not Suicidal,” *Asia Times*, March 17, 2026, <https://asiatimes.com/2026/03/with-us-distracted-in-iran-n-koreas-opportunistic-not-suicidal/>; Sung-Yoon Lee, “North Korea’s Latest Missile Provocation Was Entirely Predictable,” *The Conversation*, September 15, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/north-koreas-latest-missile-provocation-was-entirely-predictable-167942>.

²⁹ Clint Work, “The Variables of OPCON: One Wartime OPCON Transition, Multiple Plans,” *The Diplomat*, September 5, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/the-variables-of-opcon-one-wartime-opcon-transition-multiple-plans/>; Clint Work, “No More Delays: Why It’s Time to Move Forward With Wartime OPCON Transition,” Stimson Center, June 21, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/no-more-delays-why-its-time-to-move-forward-with-wartime-opcon-transition/>; J. James Kim, “Redefining the U.S.–ROK Alliance in an Era of Uncertainty,” Stimson Center, January 30, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2026/redefining-the-u-s-rok-alliance-in-an-era-of-uncertainty/>.

³⁰ Sang-ho Song, “Pentagon Nominee Voices Support for Bolstering S. Korea’s Role in Alliance over OPCON Transfer Question,” Yonhap News Agency, March 5, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250305000351315>; Sang-ho Song, “Hegseth Calls S. Korea’s Push for OPCON Transfer ‘Great,’ Depicts it as ‘Combat Credible Partner,’” Yonhap News Agency, October 29, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251029016900315>.

³¹ Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–495; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3.

³² Karl Friedhoff, “Troop Withdrawal Likely to Undermine South Korean Confidence in U.S. Commitment,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 2020, https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020_sma_korea_brief_0.pdf; Lee Sang Sin, “South Korean Public Opinion on the ROK-U.S. Defense-Cost Sharing,” Korea Institute for National Unification, July 2020, <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/11681/1/CO20-17%28e%29.pdf>.

³³ Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 180–214; Paul W. Schroeder, “Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management,” in Klaus Knorr, ed., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (University Press of Kansas, 1976), 227–262.

³⁴ Park Won-gon, “‘제2의 애치슨 라인’ 우려 키운 미 국방장관의 36분 연설 [Concerns Over a ‘Second Acheson Line’ Raised by the U.S. Defense Secretary’s 36-Minute Speech],” *Joongang Ilbo*, June 9, 2025, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25342473>.

³⁵ Bruce Klingner, “Divergent Priorities in Dangerous Times: The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Faces Uncertain Future,” *Korea Policy* 3, no. 2 (December 2025): 15–34.

³⁶ Minji Lee, “USFK commander rejects speculation on troop cut in S. Korea, reaffirms commitment,” Yonhap News Agency, May 28, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250528004800315>.

- ³⁷ Minkyong Kim and Xiao Liang, “Can the Growth Trend in South Korea’s Arms Industry Last,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 10, 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2025/can-growth-trend-south-koreas-arms-industry-last>; Xiao Liang et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024,” SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2025, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2504_fs_milex_2024.pdf.
- ³⁸ Toby Dalton and Darcie Draudt-Véjares, “Are Long-Term NATO–South Korea Defense Ties Possible? Transitioning from an Arms Exporter to a Trusted Defense Partner,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 18, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/02/are-long-term-nato-south-korea-defense-ties-possible-transitioning-from-an-arms-exporter-to-a-trusted-defense-partner>.
- ³⁹ Markus Garlauskas et al., *A Rising Nuclear Double-Threat in East Asia: Insights from Our Guardian Tiger I and II Tabletop Exercises* (Atlantic Council, May 2025), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-rising-nuclear-double-threat-in-east-asia-insights-from-our-guardian-tiger-i-and-ii-tabletop-exercises/>; In Hyo Seol, “다중 전쟁 동시 지속 상황과 한국의 안보 전략 [Multi-War Simultaneity and South Korea’s Security Strategy],” *Peace Studies* 32, no. 2 (2024): 43–72; “Extended Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: A Regional Track 1.5 Dialogue,” Center for Global Security Research, September 2024, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-11/event_report_-_extended_deterrence_in_the_indo-pacific.pdf; Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), chap. 5-6.
- ⁴⁰ Garlauskas et al., *A Rising Nuclear Double-Threat in East Asia*.
- ⁴¹ d’Artis Kancs, “NATO Defence Readiness in Europe: A CRINK Scenario Analysis,” *Security and Defence Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2026), <https://securityanddefence.pl/NATO-defence-readiness-in-Europe-A-CRINK-scenario-analysis,208926,0,2.html>.
- ⁴² Heather Williams et al., “Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 23, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-nuclear-calibration-war-ukraine>; Hal Brands, “Assessing the U.S. Response to Russia’s Manipulation of Risk,” Johns Hopkins University, 2024, <https://kissinger.sais.jhu.edu/programs-and-projects/kissinger-center-papers/escalation-management-ukraine-response-russias-manipulation-risk/>.
- ⁴³ Vann H. Van Diepen, “North Korea’s New Nuclear Law: What Does It Say and What Does It Mean?” 38 North, September 15, 2022, <https://www.38north.org/2022/09/north-koreas-new-nuclear-law-what-does-it-say-and-what-does-it-mean/>.
- ⁴⁴ Garlauskas et al., *A Rising Nuclear Double-Threat in East Asia*. The Guardian Tiger exercises found that failure of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula in a dual-contingency scenario significantly complicated U.S. options for defending Taiwan.
- ⁴⁵ Nima Khorrami, “The Arctic and the Future of the South Korea-US Alliance,” *The Diplomat*, September 24, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/the-arctic-and-the-future-of-the-south-korea-us-alliance/>.