



# The Korean Peninsula at a Strategic Crossroads: Reimagining Security and Statecraft

Next Generation Policy Perspective

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# The Korean Peninsula at a Strategic Crossroads: Reimagining Security and Statecraft Next Generation Policy Perspectives

Introduction by Susan A. Thornton and Nia Williams

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The rules-based international order is at an inflection point. In his second term President Donald Trump has overhauled U.S. foreign policy, challenging the resilience of alliances, intervening in other countries, and starting a war in Iran. While countries across the world have endured the Trump administration's imposition of tariff duties through rounds of negotiation, the U.S.'s protectionist policies have allies questioning the role the U.S. plays as a security partner and global power. The war in Iran launched by the U.S. and Israel has entangled nations around the world in the conflict, driven up energy prices around the world, and pushed countries to reconsider their security and defense arrangements.

The Asia-Pacific, meanwhile, has managed to steer clear of major power conflict. The region continues to face mounting pressures, though, that could erupt into major power conflict, if not managed with prudence and diplomacy. China-Japan tensions remain high following Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's comments on Taiwan in November 2025. On the Korean Peninsula, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un named South Korea as "the most hostile state" and reaffirmed his commitment to establishing an "absolutely irreversible status as a nuclear power."<sup>1</sup> While U.S.-ROK relations remain strong after careful navigation of the tariff dispute on the part of the ROK government, it will take continued effort to maintain coordination and alignment. Indeed, amid concerns of U.S. credibility as an ally, South Korea is looking to other countries to deepen its security partnerships, as conflicts around the world are no longer confined to a single theater. In a tumultuous security environment, countries such are ramping up their defense capabilities and spending, raising concerns that more countries may look towards pursuing nuclear weapons programs.

This period of instability and upheaval will put to test the foundation, adaptability, and coordination of alliances. The Korean Peninsula will remain a focal point, as North Korea advances its nuclear and missile capabilities, joins with Russia in its war in Ukraine, and acts as a disruptor of global networks via cyber hacking and cyber theft. It is therefore

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1 Kim, Tong-Hyung. "Kim Vows to 'irreversibly' Cement North Korea's Nuclear Status." AP News, March 24, 2026. <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-nuclear-seoul-trump-parliament-89e4da24d985fc91f3c223836ab4855f>.

crucial that the world, and especially the U.S., not be so drawn away by conflict in the Middle East that it neglects this major threat in the beating heart of the most dynamic region of the world. For South Korea to remain an anchor and force for stability in the region, the credibility of U.S. alliance commitments is key.

It will take innovative thinking to navigate these challenges, and this volume of policy papers highlights the brightest next-generation thinkers and policy leaders who are bringing fresh perspectives on the most pressing issues facing the Korean Peninsula and the broader Asia Pacific.

# Ensuring We Go Together: Principles of Modernization for the United States– Republic of Korea Alliance

Derrick J. Barksdale\*

## Executive Summary

The defense commitment, or Alliance, between the Republic of Korea (“ROK”) and the United States of America remains centrally important and relevant to the security of the Indo-Pacific region. The changed security environment in the region, brought on by the intensive military buildup of the People’s Republic of China, nevertheless invites a reexamination of the Alliance’s purpose and scope. Furthermore, due to the current political decision-makers in South Korea and the United States, modernization of the Alliance is likely. These modernization efforts should look to the foundation of the Alliance: the Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1953. The Mutual Defense Treaty provides principles that should guide this modernization effort. These principles show that the Treaty is still relevant to address today’s geopolitical environment:

1. A philosophical commitment to the Alliance is necessary.
2. The Treaty supports a flexible response to strategic concerns by the United States and South Korea throughout the Indo-Pacific region.
3. Both numbers and capabilities of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula are important.
4. The bilateral treaty is the foundation for enhanced cooperation among other nations.
5. The United States should recognize the threat of North Korea to the American homeland and not divest itself of ROK security concerns.

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\* *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of the U.S. Government, the Department of War, the Department of the Navy, The Judge Advocate General’s Corps, or any other governmental or non-governmental agency.*

## Introduction: The Continuing Relevance of the Korean Peninsula

The 38th Parallel North—the latitudinal line that has served approximately as the border between North and South Korea since the division between American and Soviet zones of occupation following the end of World War II—runs through the middle of the United States. Where the line runs through states like Kentucky, West Virginia, and Colorado, there are large plaques and monuments, often near interstate highways or in parks, commemorating the veterans of the Korean War.<sup>1</sup> These memorials are a vivid reminder that, although separated by a vast distance, the United States and South Korea are profoundly connected – connected by the 2 million American personnel sent to support the war effort in the period of 1950-1953, by the approximately 34,000 Americans who fought and died in place far from home, and by a legal agreement establishing a formal Alliance.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the Korean War, American military planners considered the Korean Peninsula “an insignificant element of U.S. security concerns[.]”<sup>3</sup> However, after the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed, the United States determined that collective security could deter further communist aggression and ensure stability on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>4</sup>

On October 1, 1953, the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea (hereinafter, the “Mutual Defense Treaty” or “Treaty”) was signed in Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup> This Treaty formally established a strategic commitment by the United States to deter communist aggression and to maintain peace and stability beyond the Western Hemisphere. It was an explicit recognition that the United States had interests in the Indo-Pacific and that the Korean Peninsula was significant to American security concerns. On the day the Treaty was signed, the Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Y.T. Pyun

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- 1 See, e.g., “Korean War Memorial,” Louisville Parks and Recreation, <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/parks/korean-war-memorial>.
  - 2 Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 482; “U.S. Military Casualties – Korean War – Casualty Summary,” Defense Casualty Analysis System, accessed November 17, 2025, <https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/app/conflictCasualties/korea/koreaSum>.
  - 3 Bae Ho Hahn, “The Korean-American Alliance: Its Evolution, Transition, and Future Prospects,” *Asian Perspective* 7, no.2 (Fall-Winter 1983): 182. American security commitments to the mainland of Asia were viewed as more hazardous than defense commitments to island nations like Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. See, e.g., “Memorandum of Conversation, by Elizabeth A. Brown of the Office of United Nations Political and Security Affairs” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Korea*, vol. 15, pt. 2, document 732, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d732>.
  - 4 American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles explicitly noted the deterrence purpose of the treaty, stating that “[b]itter experience has taught us that weakness invites aggression; that the requirement of peace and security is the maintenance of our strength.” Press release 535, Secretary John Foster Dulles, October 1, 1953, 484, *Department of State Bulletin*.
  - 5 Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea, U.S.—S.Kor., Oct. 1, 1952, U.N.T.S. No. 3363, 202-205.

observed that the “thought that the United States stands behind [the Korean people] will be an unfailing source of inspiration that will harden their will to fight for freedom and that will support them in their recurring difficulties.”<sup>6</sup> Pyun’s statement highlights an important point: alliances matter because they provide a coherent and predictable framework for interactions between states, but also because they provide an important affirmation of interests and values that bind states together.

In 2025, nearly 75 years after the Treaty was signed, two events occurred with significant implications for the future of the United States-Republic of Korea Alliance, particularly the nature, scope, and focus of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula: first, the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump to his second term of office in January; and second, the election and inauguration of President Lee Jae Myung in June after the impeachment and removal of Yoon Suk Yeol. The Trump and Myung administrations indicate a shift in rhetoric from the so-called “rules-based international order,” democracy, and ideological commitments, to national self-interest, specifically interests tied to economics and autonomy.<sup>7</sup> These two administrations have signaled efforts to further update the Alliance.

*Alliances matter because they provide a coherent and predictable framework for interactions between states, but also because they provide an important affirmation of interests and values that bind states together.*

The rise of China, particularly its extensive military “modernization and buildup,” does necessitate a reexamination of the role of the American and South Korean Alliance in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>8</sup> As a longtime ally of the United States, South Korea is in a unique position. It has a complicated relationship with China, its largest economic trading partner, but also its adversary during the Korean War. Similarly, the United States also fought the military of the People’s Republic of China during the Korean War. The Korean Peninsula has served as a key strategic terrain in great power conflicts for centuries.<sup>9</sup>

This paper argues that the Alliance can be adjusted to better address today’s security environment. However, this paper also argues that the foundation of the Alliance, the

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6 Korean Embassy Press Release, Dr. Pyun, p. 485, *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 29, 1953.

7 President Lee Jae Myung, statement on diplomacy and national interests, November 14, 2025, <https://www.president.go.kr/president/speeches/TWHSBtDf>.

8 Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the Sejong Institute in South Korea (As Delivered), January 26, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4389207/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-sejong-insti/>.

9 See, e.g., Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023).

Mutual Defense Treaty, should serve as a guide to this modernization effort. Laws—treaties—matter. By examining the text of Treaty, principles can be derived that should shape any Alliance modernization effort.

## Principles of Modernization based on the Text of the Mutual Defense Treaty

### 1. A philosophical commitment to the Alliance is necessary.

The Trump and Lee administrations have emphasized economic security and burden sharing.<sup>10</sup> This focus on economic security and burden-sharing reflects a changed relationship between the United States and South Korea, where both countries provide mutual benefit. South Korea is no longer a “client” state, with the United States as the patron. President Lee, after his meeting with President Trump in October 2025, noted that: “Just as the United States helped South Korea in the past, now, our Republic of Korea will join our ally, the United States, in rebuilding its core industries.”<sup>11</sup>

In response to President Trump’s tariff negotiations, South Korea agreed to invest \$350 billion in American shipbuilding and other industries.<sup>12</sup> In October 2025, the United States indicated it had “given approval for the ROK to build nuclear-powered submarines.”<sup>13</sup> The sharing of nuclear technology is indicative of the American National Security Strategy’s goal of increased burden-sharing through the development of new capabilities and higher defense spending by Asian countries, specifically Japan and South Korea.<sup>14</sup> U.S. Secretary of War Hegseth called South Korea a “model ally” that will receive the “special favor” of the United States by taking on increased security burdens.<sup>15</sup>

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10 The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) argues that “economic security is fundamental to national security[.]” White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, 13, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>. Citing strategic documents is risky, but can provide insights into the thinking of senior-level policy makers.

11 President Lee Jae Myung, statement, November 14, 2025, <https://www.president.go.kr/president/speeches/TWHSBtDf>.

12 White House, “Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump’s Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung,” November 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/joint-fact-sheet-on-president-donald-j-trumps-meeting-with-president-lee-jae-myung/>.

13 Ibid.

14 White House, *National Security Strategy*, 22.

15 “Hegseth Says ‘Special Favor’ for ‘Model Allies’ like S. Korea, Consequences for Those Failing to Do Their Part,” *Korea Times*, December 7, 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20251207/hegseth-says-special-favor-for-model-allies-like-s-korea-consequences-for-those-failing-to-do-their-part>.

If they materialize, these initiatives should be commended. However, a focus solely on economic collaboration between the two countries and defense burden-sharing risks turning the Alliance into one of superficial convenience. When business deals fall through, business partners go their separate ways and seek other interested parties. For example, what happens if South Korean investments in the American economy are not as robust as the United States hopes? The 2025 American National Security Strategy reaffirms its “commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>16</sup> However, the U.S. should work to increase South Korean buy-in to this commitment beyond economic investment or pragmatic self-interest.

In stark contrast to this emphasis on economic and pragmatic self-interest is the text of the Treaty itself. In the preamble to the Treaty, there is an explicit commitment to the values that have upheld the international order since the end of the Second World War: respect for sovereignty, justice and international law, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The preamble to the Treaty contemplates a regional security style treaty like NATO, stating the agreement arose “pending the development of a more comprehensive system of regional security in the Pacific area.”<sup>17</sup> Both the United States and South Korea reaffirm “their desire to live in peace with all peoples and... governments, and [desire] to strengthen the fabric of peace in the Pacific area[.]”<sup>18</sup> Article I is a restatement of the United Nations Charter Article 2(4) and its prohibition against the threat or use of force.

Any modernization of the U.S.-ROK Alliance should include recognition of congruent ideological interests between the United States and South Korea, not just economic interests. These interests are fundamentally about peace and stability in Asia based on a commitment to democratic ideals. This means no change to the status quo in Asia. If China, Russia, or North Korea take actions that upset the current geopolitical situation in Asia, South Korea, and the United States should work together to counter this change. The United States should not expect a more confrontational approach to China under the Lee administration, although PRC actions in the Yellow Sea regarding the construction of maritime structures, along with Chinese fishing in the South Korean Exclusive Economic Zone, present clear examples of Chinese actions contrary to South Korean interests, which in turn should be emphasized by the United States.<sup>19</sup> China and South Korea have substantial economic ties as well. If the United States approaches its relationship with South Korea as transactional, then South Korea will view the relationship as transactional as well. This removes America’s great advantage over China regarding South Korea: the congruent philosophical interests of the United States and South Korea. This ideological basis of the Alliance provides a sounder footing for combined efforts to counter the various threats in the Indo-Pacific.

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16 White House, *National Security Strategy*, 19.

17 Mutual Defense, U.N.T.S. No. 3363, 202-205.

18 Ibid.

19 Victor Cha, “Creeping Sovereignty: China’s Maritime Structures in the Yellow Sea-West Sea,” *Beyond Parallel*, CSIS Korea Chair, December 9, 2025, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/creeping-sovereignty-chinas-maritime-structures-in-the-yellow-sea-west-sea/>.

## 2. The Treaty supports flexible response to strategic concerns by the United States and South Korea throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

A resilient, flexible response to contingencies in East Asia and the Western Pacific is one that recognizes the importance of the Alliance for security for the entire Indo-Pacific, not just the Korean Peninsula. In 2006, South Korea recognized that American forces on the Korean Peninsula might be used in support of contingencies outside the Korean Peninsula, but that the ROK “shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.”<sup>20</sup> The 2025 Joint Fact Sheet, published after President Trump met with President Lee, contained an explicit reference to this concept of “strategic flexibility.”<sup>21</sup>

Any contingency in the Pacific region is likely to implicate Korea as well. The impact a war over Taiwan would have on sea lines of communications and maritime trade is well documented.<sup>22</sup> What is not as often appreciated is the distinct possibility that any contingency between the United States and China could occur simultaneously with a contingency on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>23</sup> The language of the Mutual Defense Treaty already provides for this possibility.

The language of the Treaty itself supports expanding the understanding of the defense commitment of the Alliance. Article III of the Treaty contains the actual defense commitment, where each state will “act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional process” in response to an “armed attack *in the Pacific area*” (emphasis added). Five points are evident from this language.

First, Article III does not limit the defense commitment between the United States and South Korea to the Korean Peninsula. Instead, it applies to any armed attack “in the Pacific area.” In contrast, America’s Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security with Japan limits the defense commitment to an armed attack “in the territories under the administration of

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20 Sean McCormack, “United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership,” Media Note, Department of State, January 19, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm>.

21 White House, “Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump’s Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung.”

22 Matthew P. Funaiolo, Brian Hart, David Peng, Bonny Lin, and Jasper Verschuur, “Disruptions to Trade in the Taiwan Strait Would Severely Impact China’s Economy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/disruptions-trade-taiwan-strait-would-severely-impact-chinas-economy>.

23 Markus Garlauskas, Lauren D. Gilber, Kyoko Imai, “A Rising Nuclear Double-Threat in East Asia: Insights From Our Guardian Tiger I and II Tabletop Exercises,” Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, May 12, 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/>.

Japan[.]”<sup>24</sup> The plain language of the Treaty between the United States and the ROK does not limit the defense commitment to the territory of South Korea itself.<sup>25</sup>

Second, Article III does contain a limiting provision, noting that this armed attack must be in “territories now under [the United States’ or ROK’s] administrative control, or hereafter recognized...as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other[.]”<sup>26</sup>

Third, Article III uses the language of U.S. President Monroe to contemplate action in self-defense, but only in accordance with the “constitutional processes.” This language was fastened by Secretary Dulles to avoid a dispute with Congress over the war-making powers of the President.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Secretary Dulles noted that the difference in language between the two treaties was “not appreciable” and that the presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula practically guaranteed a response by the United States in the event of any attack on the ROK.

Fourth, while the Treaty clearly allows for the Alliance to address threats beyond North Korea, it also clearly applies to *both* parties. The United States should come to the aid of South Korea, but South Korea should come to the aid of the United States *anywhere* in the Indo-Pacific.

Fifth, an important caveat to the above is that an emphasis on strategic flexibility does risk undermining the Alliance if South Korea and the United States do not have a shared understanding of their strategic interests in the Pacific. This is why the ideological commitment discussed previously is important.

### **3. Both numbers and capabilities are important on the Korean Peninsula.**

In the 2026 National Defense Strategy, the United States says it will now provide “critical but limited support from U.S. forces” to the Korean Peninsula, allowing it to “update U.S.

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24 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America, U.S.—Japan, Jan. 19, 1960, U.N.T.S. No. 5321, 207.

25 Article III, Mutual Defense Treaty, U.N.T.S. No. 3363, 202-205.

26 Young Kyun Kim notes that this provision is contrasted with corresponding provisions of the treaties of NATO and SEATO and the Article III of the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty was drafted to recognize ROK only control part of the Korean Peninsula and to “anticipate the day when a settlement unifying the country would be reached through processes recognized as lawful by the United States.” Young Kyun Kim, “The Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953 with the United States: With an Appraisal on the Possibility of a Pacific NATO,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1982), 325-326.

27 See Kim, “Mutual Defense Treaty,” 325-327.

force posture on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>28</sup> This suggests the Trump administration intends to change the posture of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula. This intent may be limited by Congress. The FY-2025 National Defense Authorization Act requires a certification by the Secretary of Defense that a reduction in the number of American armed forces on the Korean Peninsula below 28,500 is in the national security interest of the United States and that appropriate consultation with allies has occurred.<sup>29</sup>

The recent “Joint Fact Sheet” explicitly “underscored its commitment to the defense of the ROK through the enduring presence of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the question of American military force reductions previously received media attention in press reporting that the Trump administration was planning to withdraw 4,500 troops from South Korea.<sup>31</sup> In a press briefing, General Xavier Brunson, the triple-hatted commander of USFK/Combined Forces Command (CFC)/United Nations Command (UNC), stated that he “refused” to get into a conversation about “numbers,” emphasizing American “capabilities” integrated with the South Korean military.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this strategy seems to follow the familiar pathway of U.S. military engagement: contemplate commitment of air and naval forces, but rely on partner forces to conduct the bulk of ground operations.<sup>33</sup> South Korea’s military capability is significant improved compared to its posture at the outbreak of the Korean War. However, the risks to this strategy must be contemplated.

Article IV specifically grants the United States the ability to station American troops in the territory of the Republic of Korea. This Article provides the basis for the presence of American troops on the Korean Peninsula since the end of hostilities in 1953. These forces are sometimes characterized as a “trip wire” that ensures American action if a conflict or contingency were to occur on the Peninsula. This characterization may be controversial, but it raises important considerations.

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28 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, January 23, 2026, 20-21, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

29 S.1071, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, 119th Cong. (2025-2026), section 1268; White House, statement on signing of S. 1071 into law, December 18, 2025.

30 White House, “Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump’s Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung.”

31 “U.S. Considers Withdrawing Thousands of Troops From South Korea” *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/u-s-considers-withdrawing-thousands-of-troops-from-south-korea-725a6514>.

32 General Xavier Brunson, press briefing, United States Forces Korea, August 10, 2025, <https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Speeches-Transcripts/Article/4270708/gen-xavier-brunson-holds-press-briefing/>.

33 See Jager, *Brothers at War*, 299-301, for discussion of American thinking regarding commitment of ground troops in Indochina following the Korean War Armistice. President Eisenhower’s “New Look” strategy emphasized reliance on air, naval, and atomic weapons. General Ridgway, who replaced General MacArthur during the Korean War, stated that “In Korea, we learned that air and naval power alone cannot win a war and that inadequate ground force cannot win one either.”

First, any substantial troop withdrawal is likely to undermine South Korean public support for Alliance.<sup>34</sup> Second, the presence of American troops presents a dilemma to any power in the region that seeks to alter the status quo. The worst thing the United States can do is willingly alter this status quo. Any “modernization” of the Alliance should include a substantial commitment or presence of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula, otherwise the commitment is likely to wane.<sup>35</sup>

The dilemma regarding capabilities versus numbers of U.S. forces is overstated. For example, Garlauskus argues the requirement of 28,500 American troops is an “artificial constraint” and that instead U.S. force posture on the Korean Peninsula should better reflect the current threat environment through ensuring the presence of capabilities that can deter and defeat conventional and non-nuclear threats from North Korea and China.<sup>36</sup> This is no doubt true. However, the presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula provides unparalleled access to contingency response in East Asia. The United States should update its force posture to better reflect capabilities, but this should not result in a significant reduction in forces.

American Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s speech in 1950 at the National Press Club leaving the ROK out of the American “defensive perimeter” is often cited as an impetus for the Korean War.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the causality of this pronouncement, American statements omitting Korea from its “interest and concern” are noted in Korea and viewed by the Korean government as proof that the United States “is not fixed in its determination to assist Korea and will abandon Korea at the earliest opportunity.”<sup>38</sup> Talk of strategic flexibility and troop withdrawal naturally raises questions of the commitment of the United States to the protection of Korea. This, in turn, raises abandonment concerns.

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34 Karl Friedhoff, “Troop Withdrawal Likely to Undermine South Korean Public Support for Alliance with United States,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2020.

35 Andrew Yeo makes a similar point regarding the presence of US troops in his Brookings article: Andrew Yeo, “How Trump and Lee Can ‘Modernize’ the US-South Korean Alliance,” *Brookings Institution*, 24 October 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-trump-and-lee-can-modernize-the-us-south-korean-alliance/>.

36 Markus Garlauskas, “Focus on Dual Deterrence, Not Headcount, for Transforming US Forces Korea,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, September 9, 2025, [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/1140382.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1140382.html).

37 See Jager, *Brothers at War*, 59, regarding perceptions of U.S. “interest and policy” in East Asia by Stalin and Mao. Some have questioned the causation of this speech on Stalin’s and Mao’s decision-making. See, e.g., James I. Matray, “Dean Acheson’s Press Club Speech Reexamined,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (2002), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/366>.

38 “The Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk),” Seoul, May 25, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, Korea, vol. 7, document 42, 611.95B/5-2550, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d42>.

*Although a focus on capabilities versus numbers is important, to remove a substantial number of U.S. forces from South Korea is to divest itself of the defense of South Korea, undermine the Mutual Defense Treaty, and invite the same mistake that Acheson made in the Press Club Speech, creating the perception that the Korean Peninsula is no longer an American concern.*

Korea is often viewed as an Army or Air Force location for U.S. forces. U.S. Forces Korea would be well-suited to emphasize more naval capabilities on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea can also be a critical element in deterring and denying China, but the United States will have to work to gain South Korean buy-in. Although a focus on capabilities versus numbers is important, to remove a substantial number of U.S. forces from South Korea is to divest itself of the defense of South Korea, undermine the Mutual Defense Treaty, and invite the same mistake that Acheson made in the Press Club Speech, creating the perception that the Korean Peninsula is no longer an American concern.

#### **4. The bilateral treaty is the foundation upon which enhanced cooperation emerges.**

The strength of the Alliance between the United States and the ROK is its bilateral framework. As Cha notes, the bilateral system provides a basis for a “patchwork architecture” of multilateral groups to “flourish.”<sup>39</sup> This framework provides the basis for further developments of other groupings, both formal and informal. Any modernization of the Alliance should recognize that the bilateral framework provides a solid foundation for increased engagement amongst allies and partners. The most obvious example of this is trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The United States should capitalize on these trilateral engagements and seek to further institutionalize it. For example, the United States should increase combined military exercises with Japan and South Korea, prudently seeking out opportunities to integrate South Korea and Japan, while also remaining mindful and respectful of historical issues.

Article II of the Mutual Defense Treaty contains a “consultation” provision where both states will consult whenever threatened by “external armed attack.”<sup>40</sup> Article II also contains a deterrence commitment, where both will “maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack” as well as take measures to “implement” the Treaty and “further” its purposes.<sup>41</sup> The preamble also points toward the future development of a collective

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39 Victor Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture,” *Asia Policy*, No. 11 (January 2011): 48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24905025/>.

40 Mutual Defense Treaty, N.T.S. No. 3363, 202-205.

41 Ibid.

security arrangement like the North Atlantic Treaty Association.<sup>42</sup> Although some prominent politicians and commentators have argued for a “Pacific defense pact,” such a pact is improbable.<sup>43</sup> President Trump has criticized the relevance of NATO, so the Trump administration pushing for a multilateral, U.S.-led Asian defense pact is unlikely. The National Security Strategy specifically states American policy in Europe should “prevent...the reality of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance[.]”<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the Trump administration has shown support for other multilateral bodies in the Pacific. Despite concerns that the United States might shelve the AUKUS security partnership, the Trump administration affirmed it.<sup>45</sup> To the extent that countries are willing to increase burden sharing, that is, increase their own defense spending, the current administration is willing to work with and provide support. On the other hand, Cha observes that historically, if the United States is “too enthusiastic about multilateral security, this enthusiasm might be interpreted in the region as a pretext for U.S. withdrawal.”<sup>46</sup>

The 2026 National Defense Strategy states that the United States will “prioritize cooperation and engagements with model allies” but there is no indication that this means the United States will pursue closer engagements *amongst* allies and partners. As evidenced by the ROK nuclear-powered submarine announcement, these multilateral engagements in the Pacific present the most fruitful area for further development. The United States must encourage and develop these multilateral bodies. If it does not, these countries will seek security guarantees from other nations, perhaps less friendly ones towards the United States.

## **5. The United States should recognize the threat of North Korea to the homeland and not divest itself of South Korean security concerns.**

Article VI of the Treaty states that it is indefinite.<sup>47</sup> The Treaty allows for shifting threats and changes in the geopolitical landscape. The threat of North Korea has become more potent,

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42 “[P]ending the development of a more comprehensive and effective system of regional security in the Pacific area[.]” Preamble, Mutual Defense Treaty.

43 See, e.g., Ely Ratner, “The Case for a Pacific Defense Pact,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/case-pacific-defense-pact-ely-ratner>; “Shigeru Ishiba on Japan’s New Security Era: The Future of Japan’s Foreign Policy,” Hudson Institute, September 25, 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/politics-government/shigeru-ishiba-japans-new-security-era-future-japans-foreign-policy>.

44 White House, *National Security Strategy*, 27

45 Ken Moriyasu, “AUKUS Review Concludes, with US Saying ‘Full Steam Ahead,’” *Nikkei Asia*, December 5, 2025, <https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/indo-pacific/aukus-review-concludes-with-us-saying-full-steam-ahead>.

46 Cha, “Complex Patchworks,” 30.

47 Mutual Defense Treaty, U.N.T.S. No. 3363, 202-205.

if in different ways than contemplated at the time of the signing of the Treaty. North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons program represent a direct threat to the American homeland. North Korea also poses a direct threat because of American security commitments to South Korea and Japan. Because of treaty commitments to these countries, the United States should recognize that North Korea poses a direct threat to the United States. If not, the United States will complicate relations with its allies throughout the Indo-Pacific. The United States will be viewed as an unreliable partner. If the United States wants to "erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain" it should focus on South Korea, not divest itself of its defense.<sup>48</sup>

To the extent that the United States or South Korea continues to treat the Korean Peninsula as a wholly-separate theater in the Indo-Pacific, both countries risk drifting further apart, particularly as long as the United States views North Korea as only an "indirect threat."<sup>49</sup> This concern is clearly displayed in the debate over transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korea. Giving command authority over Korean armed forces to the United States during hostilities is an extremely significant transfer of responsibility. But this transfer dates to the start of the Korean War, when South Korea gave control of its forces to General Douglas MacArthur.<sup>50</sup> Both countries are committed to accelerating the transfer of OPCON to South Korea. The Lee administration has set 2030 as the year by which it wants to achieve OPCON transfer.<sup>51</sup> Colby, in a January 2026 visit to South Korea, discussed wartime OPCON control with South Korean Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-Back.<sup>52</sup> At this point, transfer of wartime OPCON control seems inevitable. Both countries want it to happen. But can the United States accept its forces being commanded by a non-U.S. military leader? Will this ultimately lead to further strain in the Alliance and provide a basis for further withdrawal of American forces from the Korean Peninsula? Not necessarily, provided the United States does not minimize the North Korean threat and both countries recognize that American and South Korean forces defend South Korea but also have a role to play in the Indo-Pacific region.

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48 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*.

49 South Korea should also be willing to expand its role in the Pacific. There may come a time when South Korea will have to choose between the United States or China.

50 Seoyeon Yoon, "South Korea's Wartime Operational Control Transfer Debate: From an Organization Perspective," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 22, no. 2 (December 2015), 91.

51 "New US Defense Strategy Shifts Alliance Roles, Puts Focus on OPCON Transfer," *Korea Times*, January 25, 2026, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/defense/20260125/new-us-defense-strategy-shifts-alliance-roles-puts-focus-on-opcon-transfer>.

52 Eun-ji Bahk, "US Defense Policy Chief Calls for Greater Allied Responsibility," *Korea Times*, January 26, 2026, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/defense/20260126/us-defense-policy-chief-elbridge-colby-meets-korean-counterparts-as-opcon-talks-loom>.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on the above principles, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. The United States should make clear, unambiguous statements of support to the Alliance. This reassures Korean policymakers, the Korean public, and other American allies. As the United States and South Korea move to a “pragmatic” or “flexible” understanding of the Alliance, these statements ensure that the ROK will not be abandoned. This includes regular visits by American cabinet officials.
2. Public statements regarding the Alliance should emphasize democratic values, not dismiss them as abstractions.
3. The United States should engage in high-level dialogue with South Korean decision-makers regarding the scope of strategic flexibility, emphasizing that the Mutual Defense Treaty allows for resilient and flexible responses throughout the Indo-Pacific.
4. A significant American troop presence on the Korean Peninsula is necessary to ensure the integrity of the Mutual Defense Treaty. American troop presence reassures allies and deters potential adversaries. Capabilities *and* numbers are important. U.S. forces can focus on upgrading capabilities without removing a significant number of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula.
5. Multilateral participation, particularly engagements between the United States, ROK, and Japan should be expanded. The United States should seek out opportunities to deepen this cooperation wherever possible, including during multilateral joint military exercises as well as civil engagements. The United States should also pursue information-sharing agreements and other mechanisms to institutionalize this cooperation.
6. Wartime OPCON transfer should cautiously continue, ensuring that operational plans are in place to provide for clear roles and responsibilities of American and South Korean forces during any wartime contingency. Although OPCON transfer is likely inevitable, this end should not be pursued at the expense of security on the Korean Peninsula. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring South Korea has the capabilities, and American support, to manage any war effort.
7. Improve understanding of the importance Korean Peninsula among military staff at strategic and operational level among United States military planners, including recognition that any Western Pacific contingency is likely to involve the Korean theater in some capacity.

## Conclusion: Not Yet a Requiem for the World of Yesterday

On January 2026, the Canadian Prime Minister of Canada gave an address to World Economic Forum, observing that middle powers could no longer rely on the “pleasant fiction” of the rules-based international order.<sup>53</sup> Instead, he observed that the new world order is “a system of intensifying great power rivalry, where the most powerful pursue their interests, using economic integration as coercion.”<sup>54</sup> Elbridge Colby, in recent remarks at the Sejong Institute in South Korea, criticized American post-Cold War foreign policy, saying it was “shaped by abstractions, assumptions of permanent unipolarity, and ambitions that were untethered from geopolitical reality.”<sup>55</sup>

Politicians and diplomats commonly observe that the world is changing, that the world is at an inflection point, or that the post-World War II rules-based order has changed or is over. These assertions often masquerade as descriptions rather than what they actually are: prescriptive declarations. However, because they are normative declarations, these observations reflect the profound decision-making that countries are currently taking with respect to their relations with other countries. The world has changed since the Soviet Union collapsed, not least because of the rise of China. But the world has also changed because of choices made by the leaders of democracies and autocracies alike. This decision-making is also evident in the Alliance between the United States and Republic of Korea and efforts by both countries to modernize it. Questions regarding “updating” and “modernizing” the Alliance are not new. Almost as long as the Alliance has existed, there have been concerns that it would not survive, or that it must be updated or reinterpreted to meet the current security environment.

These concerns are now reflected in a mistaken choice between the “rules-based international order” and countries strengthening their own military power. The Mutual Defense Treaty between South Korea and the United States shows that countries can be committed to philosophical and ideological interests while also providing strong deterrent capabilities. By turning to the text of the Treaty itself, clear principles and policies emerge that will guide the Alliance to address today’s security environment. Modernization of the Alliance is possible, but to alter it at the expense of the principles delineated in the foundational document of the Alliance is to risk undermining it.

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53 Mark Carney, “Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada,” World Economic Forum, Davos, January 2026, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>.

54 Ibid.

55 Elbridge Colby, remarks at the Sejong Institute in South Korea (As Delivered), Under Secretary of War for Policy, January 26, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4389207/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-sejong-insti/>.

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# Drones, Strategic Air Competition, and the Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula

Chris H. Park

In wars of the past half-decade, strategic air campaigns have returned at a scale not seen since the First Gulf War or the Second World War. Militaries, for a variety of reasons, have resorted to using air power for deep strikes. Targets not linked to immediate tactical developments on land and at sea are struck—this time, with the widespread use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Both Koreas are closely studying their respective allies' wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, not least because they are participants in both conflicts, however indirectly, as arms providers or sources of manpower.

The two wars also offer a glimpse into a potential future conflict on the peninsula. As this paper will argue, the main arena of the inter-Korean military competition has shifted from ground combat to deep strikes. Long-range artillery, missiles, and nuclear weapons, so far, have shaped each side's view of the balance and whether deterrence holds on the peninsula. Now, UAVs have entered the picture.

This paper offers a preliminary diagnostic assessment of UAV adoption on the Korean peninsula. It delineates how various unmanned systems could fit into existing concepts of operations, organizations, and theories of strategic air power—and the scenarios that may alter the military balance on the peninsula. UAVs could reinforce the current offense/defense imbalance, in which North Korea's ability to disperse and employ offensive firepower outpaces South Korea's "Three Axis" capacity to track it in peacetime and, when war breaks out, destroy it.

The conventional military balance may thus increasingly favor North Korea. In this case, there will be a premium on the perceived credibility of U.S. alliance guarantees to offset this trend. The various diplomatic and military posture decisions could make U.S. extended nuclear deterrence appear more credible to the North Koreans.

Meanwhile, there are compelling reasons for South Korea to reestablish the Drone Operations Command (or a similar structure with a different name) to develop concepts of operations for its UAVs, identify requirements to exploit North Korean vulnerabilities, and address gaps in firepower from the South Korean missile arsenal.

## UAVs and Military Innovation

Two points are worth noting at the outset to set the terms of this paper’s discussion. First, a note on terminology. “UAV” has become a gargantuan catch-all that describes everything from first-person view quadcopters piloted by infantrymen to stealthy “loyal wingman” drones designed to fly alongside F-22s. This paper focuses on two categories of UAVs relevant to the study of military balance on the Korean peninsula:

1. Long-range attack UAVs delivering firepower far beyond the forward edge of battle of a ground fight—inclusive of *Medium Altitude Long Endurance UAVs (MALEs, like the Reapers)*, *one-way attack “suicide” drones (OWA, like the Shahed/Geran)*, and *other cruise missile-esque UAVs*;
2. High-altitude, long-endurance UAVs (HALEs, like the *Global Hawk*) and other intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) UAVs used to acquire targets and support the long-range attack UAVs.

Second, a note on military learning. Every national security community grapples with the difficult question of how to best mobilize available limited resources to generate combat power to achieve political objectives. The military technological landscape, of course, constantly changes as new technologies emerge and their military applications are identified. Countries obviously need to decide whether to invest in acquiring said technology, but this is often the least important part of the innovation process. Rather, how militaries design new doctrines, organizations, or concepts in adopting said technology determines how well they will use it to lethal effects under the trial of combat. In the case of the British adoption of an integrated air defense system in World War II, a new operational concept (Dowding system) and organization (Fighter Command) were needed to exploit the promise of a new military technology (radar). This innovation process is rarely straightforward: militaries experiment, learn, and adopt largely through the prism of what already exists.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of UAVs, militaries have experimented with some versions of an uncrewed air asset since the First World War. This effort persisted through the inter-war period among the leading air powers of that time, namely the American, German, and British militaries.<sup>2</sup> The first major use in combat would be during the Vietnam War for reconnaissance and psychological warfare, but the U.S. Air Force did not significantly invest in them after the Vietnam War in the face of budget cuts. The Israelis, however, took up the mantle for advancing and

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1 Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 13; Eliot Cohen, Michael Eisenstadt, and Andrew Bacevich, *Knives, Tanks, and Missiles: Israel’s Security Revolution* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998), 7; Donn Starry, “To Change an Army,” *Military Review* (March 1983): 20–27; Leonard Heinz and Vincent O’Hara, *Innovating Victory* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022), 5.

2 Perhaps most famously, the Kettering Aerial Torpedo.

deploying UAVs in the Yom Kippur War (1973) and the Lebanon War (1982). Observations from these wars reignited the U.S. military and intelligence communities' interest in developing UAVs in the 1980s. Long-endurance surveillance and strike drones developed then were widely used in counterterrorism campaigns of the 21st century, supplementing U.S. manned air capabilities.<sup>3</sup> The widespread adoption, rapid pace of innovation in fielding new models, and discovery of novel applications of UAVs over the past half-decade, however, mark a watershed point in the century-long military innovation process.

Before discussing the interaction of the two Korean militaries, their respective strategies, and the process of UAV adoption, this paper first provides an overview of drone development on the peninsula.

## The view from the North

For North Korea, its attention to military drones dates back at least to the 1980s. This interest was driven by two factors: the observed presence of U.S. reconnaissance drones operating near its coast and the recognition of Israeli success in using remotely piloted drones—particularly, the Mastiff—during the 1982 Lebanon War.<sup>4</sup> While it is difficult to identify the concepts or bureaucratic processes that drove UAV adoption and use within the Korean People's Army (KPA), the types of systems developed and occasional leadership statements provide some insights into the North Korean thinking.

In its first phase of development—roughly spanning the late Cold War through the 2010s—North Korea fielded a modest fleet of small, fixed-wing UAVs. Many of these were imported models from its foreign partners, including Chinese and Soviet models, alongside several U.S.-made Streaker drones reportedly acquired from Syria.<sup>5</sup> These platforms were designed mainly for reconnaissance missions, though some likely could carry rudimentary payloads.<sup>6</sup> Several of these drones were recovered in South Korea in the early 2010s in their occasional incursions across the Demilitarized Zone.

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- 3 James Cann, "On the Horizon: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles," *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, October 1, 1988; Ash Rossiter, "Beyond the Predator Paradigm: What the Iraq and Afghan Wars Did (and Did Not) Tell Us About Emergent Drone Warfare," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 37 (2026): 65.
  - 4 "Remotely Piloted Vehicles in the Third World: A New Military Capability, Intelligence Assessment GI-86-10060," *Directorate of Intelligence*, August 1986, declassified and released March 22, 2011.
  - 5 Joseph Bermudez, "North Korea Drones On," 38 North, July 1, 2014, [https://www.38north.org/2014/07/jbermudez070114/#\\_ftn2](https://www.38north.org/2014/07/jbermudez070114/#_ftn2).
  - 6 Hyunjong Son and Jinki Sung, "A Study on the Risk Assessment of Drone Terrorism in National Critical Facilities: Focusing on the Dangers of Drones and the Vulnerability of Facilities," *Police Journal* 23, no. 2 (2023): 214. [in Korean].

A second phase of drone development likely started in the 2010s but became apparent in the early 2020s, marked by the introduction of larger, more capable multi-mission UAVs.<sup>7</sup> In 2023, North Korea unveiled the Saetbyoul 4—a high-altitude, long-endurance (HALE) reconnaissance drone resembling the American RQ-4 Global Hawk—and the Saetbyoul 9, a medium altitude, long-endurance (MALE) drone similar to the MQ-9 Reaper.<sup>8</sup> Their reveal was timed for a politically opportune moment—the visit of the Russian Defense Minister—but reflected investments made over many years.<sup>9</sup>

A third phase of development appears to be in the making. Through its direct participation in the ground war in Ukraine, the KPA has been acquiring insights into the tactical use of drones alongside ground maneuver. The Russian-North Korean learning on this front merits a close study but is not the focus of this paper.<sup>10</sup> The third phase appears to also reflect North Korea’s evolving thinking on *deep strikes* using UAVs, not least based on its study of how its allies—Russia and Iran—have fought their wars. In 2024, Kim Jong Un ordered officials to “establish a mass-production system and begin full-scale operation” of “suicide attack drones.” He highlighted three attributes that make drones a needed investment for the Korean People’s Army: low production cost, simple manufacturing process, and ease of integration into existing firepower.<sup>11</sup> A fleet of Kumsung-series small attack drones was showcased that year.<sup>12</sup> In 2025, North Korea has also reportedly begun

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7 *North Korea Military Power*, (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, January 9, 2021), 47.

8 “Kim Jong Un Shows Off New Drones, Gives Russian Defense Chief Tour of Nukes,” *NK News*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/2023/07/kim-jong-un-shows-off-new-drones-gives-russian-defense-chief-tour-of-nukes/>; “Imitation Is the Sincerest Form: North Korea Unveils Two Types of Copycat UAVs,” *38 North*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.38north.org/2023/08/imitation-is-the-sincerest-form-north-korea-unveils-two-types-of-copycat-uavs/>.

9 “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits Weaponry Exhibition House with Sergei Shoigu,” *KCNA*, July 27, 2023, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2023/202307/news27/20230727-02ee.html>.

10 “Captured North Koreans Describe Fighting for Russia in a War They Didn’t Understand,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/north-korean-soldier-prisoners-ukraine-0ac12ca2>; “A Stick-Figure Drawing in a North Korean Soldier’s Diary Showed how Pyongyang’s Troops Wanted to Use Each Other as Drone ‘Bait,’” *Business Insider*, January 12, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/stick-figure-drawing-north-korean-soldier-diary-drone-bait-tactic-2025-1>.

11 “North Korea to Start Mass-Producing Suicide Attack Drones, Kim Jong Un Says,” *NK News*, November 15, 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/2024/11/north-korea-to-start-mass-producing-suicide-attack-drones-kim-jong-un/>; “Russia Training North Korean Drone Pilots Near Wonsan Resort, Capital: Kyiv,” *NK News*, July 2, 2025, <https://www.nknews.org/2025/07/russia-training-north-korean-drone-pilots-near-wonsan-resort-capital-kyiv/>.

12 “Current Status of North Korea’s Drone Program,” *38 North*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.38north.org/2025/09/current-status-of-north-koreas-drone-program/>; “North Korea Claims to Have Made ‘Suicide Attack Drones’ That Use AI,” *Washington Post*, March 28, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/28/north-korea-ai-drones-ukraine/>.

producing Iranian-style Shahed drones.<sup>13</sup> Kim also called for the development of suicide drones using artificial intelligence, presumably for targeting in a denied environment.<sup>14</sup>

## The view from the South

South Korea, too, has experimented with drones. Its first effort, dubbed the Solgae Project, began in the late 1970s. With British technical assistance, the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) developed a jet-propelled decoy drone designed to overwhelm North Korean radars and successfully flight-tested prototypes by 1981.<sup>15</sup> The project was ultimately aborted in 1982 despite technical successes, a casualty in the Chun government's cuts to ADD and defense technology investments in response to U.S. pressure.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, this nascent phase demonstrated signs of technical competence and interest in incorporating UAVs into the South Korean force structure.

South Korea resumed UAV development in the 1990s. This second phase was marked by a focus on tactical Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to support ground operations. By 2002, the Army had fielded the indigenously-developed RQ-101 Songolmae at the corps level, followed by the man-portable *RemoEye* at the battalion level in 2010—alongside imported Israeli systems like the *Skylark II*.<sup>17</sup> When an ROKA unit deployed to Afghanistan in 2010 as part of the International Security Assistance Force, they arrived in Parwan Province with these systems.

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13 “Russia Plans to Make Up to 120,000 Glide Bombs This Year, Ukrainian Intelligence Says,” *Reuters*, November 14, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russia-plans-make-up-120000-glide-bombs-this-year-ukrainian-intelligence-says-2025-11-14/>.

14 “North Korea’s Kim Jong Un Oversees Drone Testing, KCNA Says,” *Reuters*, September 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-oversees-drone-testing-kcna-says-2025-09-18/>; “Automation Does Not Lead to Leaner Land Forces,” *War on the Rocks*, February 7, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/automation-does-not-lead-to-leaner-land-forces/>.

15 Sangbyum Park, “New Paradigms and Success Strategies in the Aviation Industry: Focusing on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles,” *Journal of Aviation Development of Korea* 52 (2009): 90; “Chun Doo-hwan regime and the Untold Story of the ‘Solgae’ Drone,” *Presian*, June 8, 2014, <https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/117821> [in Korean]; ADD is South Korea’s equivalent of the U.S. DARPA—a government agency for defense technology research and development.

16 Aaron Karp, “The Spread of Ballistic Missiles and the Transformation of Global Security,” *Nonproliferation Review* 7, no. 3 (2000):115; “1970s, Beginning of Aircraft Development from a Barren Land,” *HelloDD*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.hellodd.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=90899> [in Korean].

17 “Capital Mechanized Infantry Division Poured Everything They Had into Their Mission Until the Very End,” BEMIL, Chosun Ilbo, July 11, 2025, [https://bemil.chosun.com/nbrd/bbs/view.html?b\\_bbs\\_id=10002&num=27070](https://bemil.chosun.com/nbrd/bbs/view.html?b_bbs_id=10002&num=27070) [in Korean]; “DAPA completes performance upgrades of Songolmae,” *Financial News*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.fnnews.com/news/202501071047194829> [in Korean]; “Upgrades to Songgolemae in Twenty Years,” *News Impact*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.newsimpact.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=3505103> [in Korean].

The third phase marked the Air Force's entry into UAV development and adoption, which paralleled iterative upgrades to the tactical reconnaissance drones.<sup>18</sup> The ROKAF expressed interest in acquiring RQ-4B *Global Hawks* from the United States in 2010 and began operations with the HALE UAVs in 2020. In 2008, it also began developing the KUS-FS—a MALE reconnaissance and strike UAV dubbed the “Korean Reaper”—which is expected to enter service by 2027.<sup>19</sup> Also in development is the KUS-X, intended to operate alongside crewed fighter jets of the South Korean Air Force in a role similar to the Collaborative Combat Aircraft of the U.S. Air Force and Navy.<sup>20</sup>

In the past few years, there has been another qualitative shift in South Korea's UAV adoption. The distinguishing features of the fourth phase are: 1) a growing number of defense industrial entrants producing upgraded tactical drones, 2) expanded classes of UAVs under developing, and 3) most significantly, broader institutional participation with all three services now involved. The current composition of South Korea's UAV fleet reflects the Army-led development and employment of the past three decades. In 2024, the Army operated more than 500 drones, the Air Force had four *Global Hawks*, and the Navy had fewer than ten.<sup>21</sup> This appears to be changing.

The ROKN is developing concepts for UAV employment in reimagining its fleet structure. One plan seeks to stand up a Naval Unmanned Systems Command and reduce its numbered fleet to two from the current three.<sup>22</sup> The Army and Marine Corps have both experimented with small-unit drone tactics, while the Ministry of Defense announced a “500,000 drone warrior” initiative that expresses its ambition to equip every troop with

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- 18 “KAI Challenges the Global UAV Market Based on Its Military Technology,” *Business Post*, July 10, 2016, [https://www.businesspost.co.kr/BP?command=article\\_view&num=30507](https://www.businesspost.co.kr/BP?command=article_view&num=30507) [in Korean].
- 19 “Korean Air Begins Producing Reconnaissance Drone for South's Military,” *Defense News*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2024/02/01/korean-air-begins-producing-reconnaissance-drone-for-souths-military/>; Korean Air, “KUS-FS,” <https://aerospace.koreanair.com/business/uav/kusFs>.
- 20 “Chung Declares Plans to Develop Hypersonic Missiles... and Stealth Drones,” *Yonhap*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20200805105200504> [in Korean].
- 21 Minsuk Choi, “Game-Changing Drones ... Protecting Airspace with Anti-Drone Laser Weapons,” *LiveBiz*, October 16, 2024, <https://www.livebiz.today/news/articleView.html?idxno=3778>; “RemoEye,” *Kookbangilbo*, November 22, 2021, [https://kookbang.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb/m/20211122/1/BBSMSTR\\_000000100006/view.do](https://kookbang.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb/m/20211122/1/BBSMSTR_000000100006/view.do) [in Korean]; “The Military is Considering Including ‘Micro-UAVs’ in Its Deployment to Afghanistan,” *Yonhap*, December 7, 2009, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20091207181700043> [in Korean].
- 22 “Navy to Establish Maritime Unmanned Systems Command ... Marine Corps Independently Reviewing Options,” *KTV*, October 21, 2022, [https://m.ktv.go.kr/news/major/view?content\\_id=659331](https://m.ktv.go.kr/news/major/view?content_id=659331); “South Korea Plans MUM-T Fleet with Drone Carrier for ROK Navy,” *Naval News*, August 25, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/08/south-korea-plans-mum-t-fleet-with-drone-carrier-for-rok-navy/>; “S. Korea to Develop Spy Drone Deployable From Warships By 2028,” *Yonhap*, January 29, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240129002500315>.

unmanned systems.<sup>23</sup> These are important developments that reflect heightened interest in UAV adoption across the South Korean armed forces.

Growing attention to the use of UAVs for a strategic air campaign has also been a feature of the fourth phase. This development was most clearly reflected in the creation of a specialized joint command structure, the Drone Operations Command.<sup>24</sup> The Yoon government proposed the new command a day after a North Korean UAV entered the restricted airspace near the presidential office in December 2022. The command was established by September 2023 for “strategic and operational-level missions utilizing drone power, including surveillance and reconnaissance, *attack*, psychological warfare, and electronic warfare” [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup>

The new command’s attack mission—when past UAV operations had focused entirely on reconnaissance and surveillance—reflected a growing sense in the South Korean defense community to develop an offensive concept of operations for its UAVs. The Lee government disestablished the Drone Operations Command due to its alleged role in the Yoon government’s 2024 martial law crisis. There was thus insufficient time to assess how the Drone Operations Command interacted with the Strategic Command that integrates long-range fires. Yet, the offensive concept will likely live on in other means.<sup>26</sup>

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23 “The Army’s Drone Operations Command Was Established, with Colonel Kim Young-gyun Appointed as Its First Commander,” *Yonhap*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20180928047300014> [in Korean]; “Ministry of National Defense Pushes to Disband Drone Operations Command and Begins Training 500,000 Drone Warriors,” *Munwha Ilbo*, January 21, 2026, <https://www.munhwa.com/article/11562451> [in Korean].

24 In a similar structure as specialized commands for cyber and psychological operations.

25 “President Yoon Orders Early Establishment of Drone Unit,” *Seoul Shinmun*, December 27, 2022, <http://www5.seoul.co.kr/news/politics/president/2022/12/27/20221227500069> [in Korean]; “Drone Operations Command Established as Power Game-Changer That Instill Fear in Enemy,” *Yonhap*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230901092200504> [in Korean]; “North Korea-Striking Drone Stealth UAVs ... Drone Operations Command Unveiled,” *Yonhap*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230426070000504> [in Korean].

26 “The Pyongyang UAV Infiltration Operation Was Carried Out by the Drone Operations Command Last October,” *Chosun Ilbo*, July 9, 2025, [https://www.chosun.com/national/court\\_law/2025/07/09/Q5LYV3RPENEJJDNL0VXUX3Z7IQ/](https://www.chosun.com/national/court_law/2025/07/09/Q5LYV3RPENEJJDNL0VXUX3Z7IQ/) [in Korean]; “Amid the Dismantling of the Drone Operations Command, the Military is Establishing a ‘Drone Unit’ at the Company Level,” *Chosun Ilbo*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.chosun.com/politics/diplomacy-defense/2026/01/30/A2GSKLO44NF45DN4PKOXTXUWM4/> [in Korean].

## UAVs, Missile/Air Competition, and Military Balance on the Peninsula

The multi-decade trajectory of UAV development and employment on the Korean peninsula should be understood in the context of the broader inter-Korean military competition.

Since World War II, the KPA has grappled with the problem of confronting a superior adversary coalition, made up of its neighbor to the south and its patron ally, the United States. The approach to deal with this strategic problem has evolved in tandem with the shifting military balance on the peninsula and the broader Eurasia, from infantry-centric operations based on Soviet operational art during the Korean War, to a Maoist “people’s war” approach in the 1960s that emphasized mass mobilization and infiltration.

Today, Kim Jong Un is acutely aware of the vulnerability of his regime and the lopsided military balance favoring the South. He inherited the military buildup started by his father in the 1990s. The KPA’s answer to a dangerous post-Cold War order was military technology—namely, nuclear weapons and conventional long-range firepower—under the banner of “strong and prosperous country.”<sup>27</sup> Under Kim Jong Un’s rule, North Korea has expanded its missile force to deliver both conventional and nuclear warheads deep into South Korea and, increasingly, beyond the peninsula. The nuclear arsenal, too, has grown both numerically and in its centrality to North Korea’s security policy. Kim notably got the parliament to codify North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and has rejected denuclearization.<sup>28</sup> The pronouncements from the 7th Party Congress in 2026 reaffirmed these trends. The KPA Ground Force also operates thousands of artillery pieces—with sufficient range to reach Seoul—out of hardened sites concentrated south of the Pyongyang-Wonsan line.<sup>29</sup>

South Korea’s Ministry of Defense assesses that, with these assets, the North seeks to create favorable conditions with a surprise firepower attack that forces a rapid end to a war.<sup>30</sup> Even without an offensive intent, with the prospect of catastrophic damage from missiles and other munitions that bypass imperfect defenses, North Korea created a powerful psychological deterrent intended to prevent attack and ensure regime survival.

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27 “North Korea, A Country Study,” *Department of the Army*, June 1993, 248.

28 “North Korea Amends Constitution On Nuclear Policy, Cites US Provocations,” *Reuters*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-parliament-amends-constitution-enshrine-nuclear-policy-kcna-2023-09-27/>; “North Korea Passes Nuclear Law,” *Arms Control Association*, October 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/news/north-korea-passes-nuclear-law>; Duk-ki Kim, “The Republic of Korea’s Counter-Asymmetric Strategy,” *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 1 (2012): 3.

29 *ROK Defense White Paper*, 27.

30 *Ibid.*, 25.

UAVs—first reported to cross the DMZ to the South in 2014—have gradually factored into North Korea’s strategy over the past decade. To date, North Korea has used drones primarily for symbolic incursions, harassment, and limited intelligence collections. The ongoing effort towards developing long-range strike-capable UAVs suggests that the KPA likely sees drones as a complementary element of its deep-strike strategy. For the defender, it presents unique problems compared to defending against ballistic missiles. The limited drone incursions so far, ineffectively countered by the South Korean military, have been a proof of concept.<sup>31</sup>

South Korea’s UAV programs are taking place as President Lee, like his predecessors, knows South Korea has conventional superiority over the North, particularly with the addition of U.S. Forces Korea. While believing it can prevail if a war breaks out, the government also recognizes the immense costs, particularly from the North’s conventional and nuclear missile barrage.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, South Korean officials appear to fear growing risks of deterrence failure. The fear of abandonment, of course, has been a perennial concern for successive South Korean governments.<sup>33</sup> North Korea’s growing arsenal of nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, however, exacerbates the classic credibility dilemma of whether a U.S. president would risk an American city to defend South Korea. Further, the second Trump administration has characterized the North Korea threat as a “direct threat” to South Korea and called for “shifting of responsibility.”<sup>34</sup> These assessments could lead to a major shift in U.S. force posture on the Korean peninsula that would aggravate existing concerns.<sup>35</sup>

Faced with this security problem, South Korea has developed a counterforce strategy to serve as a non-nuclear deterrent. This idea has seen iterative conceptual updates over the past decade. Today, this strategy rests on a three-pronged framework, combining preemptive strikes on North Korean nuclear and missile facilities (“Kill Chain”), multi-layered missile defense (Korea Air and Missile Defense or KAMD and Low-Altitude Missile Defense or LAMD) and overwhelming retaliatory firepower against military and leadership targets (Korea

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31 “North Korean Drone Infiltrates Kyounggi Airspace for the First Time in Five Years...Air Force Responds with Fighters,” *Newsis*, December 26, 2022, [https://www.newsis.com/view/?id=NX20221226\\_0002136522](https://www.newsis.com/view/?id=NX20221226_0002136522) [in Korean].

32 Victor Cha, “Giving North Korea a ‘Bloody Nose’ Carries a Huge Risk to Americans,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/victor-cha-giving-north-korea-a-bloody-nose-carries-a-huge-risk-to-americans/2018/01/30/43981c94-05f7-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/victor-cha-giving-north-korea-a-bloody-nose-carries-a-huge-risk-to-americans/2018/01/30/43981c94-05f7-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html).

33 Jungyoul Jung, “Park Chung Hee’s Self-Reliant Defense Thought and Modern Implication,” *Journal of Military History Studies* 139 (2015): 431 [in Korean].

34 *The 2026 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2026), 12–13, 20.

35 Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, *The 2026 National Defense Strategy by the Numbers: Radical Changes, Moderate Changes, and Some Continuities* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026), 12.

Massive Punishment and Retaliation or KMPR). Introduced as the “three-axis system” or “3K defense” by the Lee government in 2013, maintained by Park, rebranded under Moon, and restored to the 3K system by Yoon, South Korea’s counterforce strategy—now under Lee’s command through the recently established Strategic Command—has persevered and matured over five South Korean presidents.<sup>36</sup> The South Korean armed forces seek to carry out a technologically and organizationally complex strategy. A successful three-axis system requires: 1) numerous salvos of long-range fires to strike hundreds—or even thousands—of leadership and military targets in a preemptive or retaliatory package and 2) layered missile defense that synchronizes the KAMD, operated by the Air Force, and the LAMD, run by the Army.

## Wither the Balance?

A comparison of the two sides’ views and objectives makes clear that the main domain of the inter-Korean military competition is an air and missile-centric contest. The ability to wage a *strategic* air campaign—one not directly connected to the ground fight—is now the central metric in assessing the military balance and ensuring the inter-Korean deterrence persists. One side has invested in capabilities and systems for precise preemptive (or offensive) deep strikes, while the other has pursued missile and nuclear weapons technology to hold at risk its more powerful neighbors with long-range fires. Deterrence holds as both sides possess long-range strike assets that impose what are, at least for now, unacceptable risks and costs if the shooting starts. While ground forces remain important in both Korea’s force structures, the primary arena of competition lies in deep-strike, strategic air power. In this context, the introduction of UAVs could disrupt the military balance on the Korean peninsula in two ways.

*The ability to wage a strategic air campaign—one not directly connected to the ground fight—is now the central metric in assessing the military balance and ensuring the inter-Korean deterrence persists.*

First, both Koreas will have greater surveillance capability, a shared weakness of the two militaries. Both have recently turned to space-based assets, though these remain expensive and limited.<sup>37</sup> North Korea has launched camera-mounted UAVs into the south to collect imagery of THAAD batteries and other sensitive locations. It remains unclear what

36 Clint Work, “Navigating South Korea’s Plan for Preemption,” *War on the Rocks*, June 9, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/south-koreas-plan-for-preemption/>; “Experts are Divided on the Creation of a Strategic Command for the Three-Axis Strategy,” *Yonhap*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20221005084300504> [in Korean].

37 “A Tale of Two Satellites: ISR on the Korean Peninsula,” *IJSS*, December 11, 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2023/12/a-tale-of-two-satellites-isr-on-the-korean-peninsula/>.

operational value these images might have added. Precise target location and strike matter less for North Korea as it (threatens to) carry out countervalue strikes against South Korea.

Rather, UAV-enabled surveillance carries far more consequential implications for South Korea. Current and forthcoming ISR drones are intended to supplement gaps in intelligence collection and will constitute a key node in operationalizing the three-axis strategy.<sup>38</sup> All three “Ks” depend on a near-perfect and near-persistent intelligence picture over North Korea, to locate concealed facilities, track land-mobile missile launchers, monitor leadership movements, and follow submarines—in addition to detecting UAV launch sites and flight trajectory. This is a tall order, given that South Korea has often struggled to track North Korean missile test launches and drone incursions. Missile defense cannot function effectively without accurate ISR. Kill Chain and KMPR without it would be suicidal. For South Korea, the operationalization of a greater number and variety of surveillance drones could gradually bridge the gap between the current collection capacity and needs, at a lower cost and risk than manned platforms, with future systems being more attritable and cheaper to operate than the ROKAF’s HALEs.

Second, UAVs will affect the balance of offensive firepower. For North Korea, mass, concealment, and dispersal are the key enablers of its strategy—aside from nuclear possession. Salvos of UAVs launched in conjunction with ballistic and cruise missiles could stress South Korea’s missile defense architecture. The relatively low cost of UAVs, a point Kim has acknowledged, also reduces the economic burden of acquisition on North Korea’s constrained economy. At the same time, producing offensive systems is far less costly than defending against them—so far. This asymmetry poses an economic problem for the South Korean armed forces. Even as South Korea invests in ISR capabilities, it remains far easier for North Korea to disperse and conceal drones and missile launch sites than for the South to locate and strike them. UAV launch sites pose a particularly difficult tracking challenge: they can be launched from small and austere runways and thus expand the range of potential launch locations.<sup>39</sup>

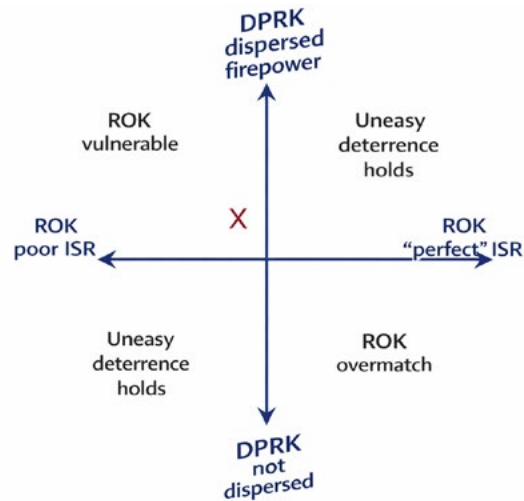
Taken together, these trends first elevate the importance of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Today, North Korea’s ability to disperse and employ offensive firepower likely outpaces South Korea’s capacity to track it in peacetime and preemptively—or after conflict begins, offensively—destroy it (“X” point on Figure 1). The introduction of more long-range UAVs will further reinforce this imbalance: they will complicate South Korea’s current missile defense architecture while enabling even greater dispersion. Taken to its logical extreme, North Korea’s vast missile, UAV, and nuclear arsenal may eventually convince the Kim regime that it may prevail if the shooting war begins.

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38 Chris H. Park, “Caught in the Crossfire: How Seoul’s Intel-Sharing Plans Jeopardize China ties,” *Korea Pro*, June 27, 2023, <https://koreapro.org/2023/06/caught-in-the-crossfire-how-seouls-intel-sharing-plans-jeopardize-china-ties/>.

39 Martyn Williams, “Quick Take: New Drone Launching System Shown,” *38 North*, October 14, 2025 <https://www.38north.org/2025/10/quick-take-new-drone-launching-system-shown/>.

**FIGURE 1. Potential futures in the deep strike competition**



The variable that offsets the offense/defense imbalance on the Korean peninsula is the U.S.-South Korea alliance—to be more specific, the perceived strength in the North of the U.S. commitment to its ally, including the promise of an extended deterrent. Here, the stronger North Korea’s perception of the U.S. security guarantee, the lower the chance of deterrence failure, even if the balance of the strategic air campaign increasingly favors the North. Conversely, improvements in South Korean ISR and other technological developments that provide greater awareness of North Korean assets and leadership movements could compensate for weaker and less credible U.S. assurances.

UAVs could also reshape the inter-Korean military competition by opening a low-intensity realm, characterized by persistent, non-armed incursions, in the strategic air competition. For more than a decade, North Korean drones have made unauthorized incursions into the South Korean airspace. These activities appear to be designed to probe sensors and defenses, serve as a low-cost means of harassment to induce fear in the South Korean public, and normalize intrusion. South Korea has recently begun to respond in kind: the presidential order under Yoon was to send two to three drones for each North Korean UAV incursion. The emerging tit-for-tat dynamic has remained non-kinetic for now, likely as long-range attack drones are relatively new additions to both Koreas’ force structure.

Expanding UAV arsenal on both sides may lead to a more routinized drone salvo exchange across the DMZ. In this way, UAVs

*UAVs could also reshape the inter-Korean military competition by opening a low-intensity realm, characterized by persistent, non-armed incursions, in the strategic air competition.*

may introduce a persistent, low-intensity domain of hostile exchanges to the inter-Korean military competition. Escalatory risks are real, as such exchanges could spiral into kinetic war. Armed drones may make an appearance, too. On the other hand, these activities may simply extend the long-standing inter-Korean harassment—from loudspeaker propaganda along the DMZ now to aerial incursions deep into each other’s territory.

## What is to Be Done?

UAVs will introduce new dynamics to the deep-strike competition on the Korean peninsula, and they will be employed in novel ways, unlike the periodic harassment incursions in the past decade. The ongoing war in Ukraine and the recent wars in the Middle East (notably, the April 2024 Israel-Iran fire exchanges) also offer glimpses of how drones can supplement missiles and aircraft in waging a strategic air campaign. This paper presented a preliminary diagnostic assessment of force balances, trends, and possible futures of how UAVs can alter the military balance on the peninsula.

As discussed, the proliferation of long-range drones on the Korean peninsula would first place an increased premium on U.S. extended deterrence. As North Korea arms itself with thousands of long-range attack drones, the Three Axis System—or whatever its future branding under Lee—may be insufficient by itself to convince Kim Jong Un that escalation would be met with an unacceptable, regime-ending response. In which case, U.S. extended nuclear deterrence will be the key offset to the deteriorating conventional balance, with greater need to reassure South Korea and, more importantly, to appear credible to North Korea.

The question, then, is what credibility looks like from the north. Forward stationing nuclear weapons on the peninsula could symbolically demonstrate U.S. commitment while reassuring nervous South Koreans. Sustaining the Nuclear Consultative Groups and other mechanisms launched by the April 2023 Washington Declaration may have similar effects. North Korea likely understands that, regardless of posture or signaling, the decision to use nuclear weapons in defense of South Korea ultimately rests with the U.S. president—an understanding it may come to at ease as it mirrors its own highly centralized launch authority. Trump’s rhetoric could have some impact in the near term. As U.S. investment in next-generation homeland missile defense (i.e., “Golden Dome”) matures and its technical competence becomes more visible, the system could reduce, in both the North and the South, the perceived acuteness of the “Seoul for Los Angeles” trade-off.

For South Korea, the thinking on incorporating UAVs as part of the Three Axis system appears to be underdeveloped. With the disestablishment of the Drone Operations Command, it is unclear which organization is responsible for deep-strike drone operations, how such

capabilities will be fielded, and how they will be integrated into the Kill Chain or KMPR. DAPA today leads the experimentation and development with industry partners, but significant conceptual muddiness remains.<sup>40</sup>

The command could have played an important role in developing doctrine and concepts of operations, while clarifying requirements to exploit North Korean vulnerabilities and address gaps in firepower from the South Korean missile arsenal. It could also have devised a conceptual update to the current tit-for-tat response to North Korean UAV incursions. While the initial establishment of the command was criticized as rushed and redundant, there are compelling reasons to reconsider a similar structure.<sup>41</sup> Its unique status as a specialized joint command—with representation from the Navy and Air Force, both central to long-range strike drone development—would make organizational sense. South Korea’s drone development has been ground-centric and focused on tactical support. The existing command structure reflects this reality, even as the inter-Korean military competition has moved in a different direction.

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40 Youngeun Kim, “Suggestions on the Main Determinants for the Establishment of a Drone Combat System: Based on Expert Awareness,” *Strategic Studies* 89 (2023): 20 [in Korean].

41 Jaekyu Jang, “The Evaluation of the Validity of Establishing the Drone Operation Command: Focusing on Military Necessity and Environmental Suitability in Korea,” *Strategic Studies* 94 (2024): 57 [in Korean].

# Beyond Passive Participation: South Korea's Leadership in U.S.-ROK Semiconductor Relations

Alessandro Vesprini

## Executive Summary

South Korea's semiconductor policy can no longer be insulated from U.S. economic foreign policy imperatives. To respond to mounting geopolitical pressures, Seoul must move beyond passive participation and proactively shape U.S.-led initiatives. In fact, South Korea's semiconductor industry sits at the intersection of economic ambition and geopolitical pressure. As the United States increasingly equates economic security with national security, initiatives such as Pax Silica illustrate Washington's bipartisan trajectory of securitizing supply chains. In this environment, South Korea has little room left for neutrality in U.S.-led initiatives, let alone an entirely autonomous semiconductor industrial policy.

The paper traces continuity across U.S. administrations, showing how trade skepticism and, most importantly, supply chain securitization have become structural features of American policy. In recent years, South Korea has invested heavily in its semiconductor future through the K-Semiconductor Strategy, the K-Chips Act, and a 700 trillion won pledge under Lee Jae Myung. Despite its ambition, South Korea faces contradictions: construction starts have slowed, advanced logic chip capacity is shifting to the U.S., even as Korean firms consolidate global leadership in memory semiconductors. These efforts unfold thus within a policy environment dominated by U.S. techno-nationalism and constrained by the structural realities of global value chains.

Recent disputes, notably the Coupang case, highlight how corporate grievances, such as alleged discrimination against U.S. companies, can escalate into bilateral trade friction. They also reveal how Washington prioritizes the interests of its firms over the broader prosperity of the bilateral relationship, consistent with a technonationalist approach first articulated under the Biden administration but equally descriptive of his successor. Taken together, these dynamics underscore the need for Seoul to pursue a complex and strategic balancing act, one that transforms competition into a zerosum game where both countries ultimately gain more than they lose.

The paper recommends that both countries defuse the Coupang issue as quickly as possible. From the American side, Section 301 petitions and tariff threats risk undermining relations, while arbitration under the KORUS FTA offers a more balanced alternative. A

diplomatic, less coercive approach would therefore be advisable. In turn, South Korea could leverage current tensions to redefine its role in U.S.-led frameworks. Specifically, Seoul might drop some of the investigations against Coupang or merge them with others to avoid claims of discriminatory measures. In exchange, it could propose the creation of a Pax Silica Business Advisory Council, modeled after APEC’s ABAC, and host its permanent secretariat. Such a step would institutionalize South Korea’s leadership in Pax Silica, secure the initiative’s longterm viability, and align with Lee Jae Myung’s pragmatic foreign policy.

## Introduction

How can South Korea’s industrial policy in the semiconductor sector effectively balance its national economic interests with national security imperatives? To what extent will alliance politics and structural realities necessitate a decisive strategic choice for South Korea, potentially impacting its economic foreign policy?

These tensions are embedded in the evolving geopolitical landscape shaped by the U.S. and China, the two dominant powers in the semiconductor industry. The Lee administration will inevitably confront the pressures of this economic competition. As the first year of the second Trump administration demonstrated, managing relations with Washington will be as demanding as navigating ties with Beijing, the country at the center of the tycoon’s attention. Against this backdrop, South Korea’s decision to join Pax Silica (PS) is particularly significant. PS, the flagship initiative of the current American government, seeks to secure supply chains in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and related industries, semiconductors included. The PS Summit, held on December 11, 2025, marked not only Seoul’s formal participation but also the recognition of an alleged new geopolitical consensus, one in which national and economic securities coincide.<sup>1</sup>

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1 “Pax Silica Summit Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/12/pax-silica-initiative>. If a simple and unanimous definition of security has been long subject of debates, the one referring to the economic dimension is even more difficult to identify. Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817762>. Joseph S. Nye defined *economic security* as the absence of threat of severe deprivation of economic welfare. Joseph S. Nye, “Collective Economic Security,” *International Affairs* 50, no. 4 (1974): 588, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2615925>. Vincent Cable proposed a three-fold definition, where the term identifies i) those aspects of trade and investments affecting a country’s ability to defend itself, ii) those instruments of economic policy used for aggression or defense, and iii) the idea that relative military capacity, or projection of power, may be undermined by relatively poor economic performance and requires an economic policy response. Vincent Cable, “What Is International Economic Security?” *International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (1995), 306–7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2623436>. On a more economic side, Jacob S. Hacker gave a definition of the term connected to how much individuals, and not groups, are vulnerable to economic loss, therefore exploring concepts such as risk and (economic) vulnerability, thus shifting the focus from nations to people. Jacob S. Hacker, “Economic Security,” in *For Good Measure: Advancing Research on Well-being Metrics Beyond GDP*, ed. J.E. Stiglitz, Jean-Paul Fitoussi, and Martin Durand (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), 205.

For Peter Navarro, economic councilor during both Trump administrations, economic security means aligning tax, regulatory, energy, and trade policies with increased defense spending, liberalized arms sales, and broader defense objectives.<sup>2</sup> Because Washington equates economic and national security, any divergence in Seoul’s semiconductor policy is treated not merely as an economic choice but more importantly as a security threat. This framing, which I will demonstrate is bipartisan in nature, leaves little room for passive engagement. Within this framework, South Korea’s semiconductor industry is therefore subject to mounting U.S. pressure to align domestic economic priorities with Washington’s foreign policy imperatives. This paper argues that Seoul’s response requires a complex and strategic balancing act, one that makes passive participation in U.S. initiatives increasingly detrimental to bilateral relations.

To grasp the depth of this challenge, it is essential to examine the geopolitical context of U.S.-ROK economic relations, particularly the continuity between the Biden and Trump administrations. The following section provides this foundation, outlining the assumptions and background data that inform South Korea’s policy choices.

## Context

As anticipated earlier in the paper, PS represents the Department of State’s (DOS) flagship initiative in high-tech sectors such as semiconductors, with South Korea among its signatory countries.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of PS is to build an AI ecosystem in which the entire supply chain, from energy and critical minerals to advanced manufacturing and models, is treated as secure. While the DOS describes this in terms of “reliability,” I interpret the underlying policy logic as equating that term with “security,” for analytical simplicity, and to some extent, with economic security. This linkage is tightly connected to the political agenda of Donald Trump, as the concept appears prominently in both Trump administrations’ 2017 and 2025 National Security Strategies (NSS).<sup>4</sup> However, the idea of equating economic and national security is not an absolute novelty in U.S. foreign policy.

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2 Peter Navarro, “Why Economic Security Is National Security.” RealClearPolitics, December 9, 2018, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/12/09/why\\_economic\\_security\\_is\\_national\\_security\\_138875.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/12/09/why_economic_security_is_national_security_138875.html).

3 “Pax Silica,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/pax-silica>.

4 In its 2017 National Security Strategy, the equivalence between national and economic security is the leitmotiv of Pillar II. The White House, *National Security Strategy* (2017), 17, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>. White House, *National Security Strategy* (2025), 13, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

## Continuity between the Biden and Trump administrations

The same principle of coincidence can, in fact, be traced back to earlier administrations. Clinton's NSSs, for instance, acknowledged that the United States' economic and security interests were increasingly inseparable, and the Bush administrations, in different ways, also linked economic strength or freedom to national security.<sup>5</sup> A review of Obama's NSS documents further reveals the growing salience of this connection, as he explicitly tied economic strength to national security.<sup>6</sup> What is most relevant for this paper, however, is how this conceptual equivalence has moved beyond strategic rhetoric to the concrete policy. The last two U.S. administrations exemplify this shift, enacting international economic policies that operationalize the inextricable link between economic and national security and that show more continuity than one might think.

The most evident similarity lies in Washington's approach to trade, particularly in its handling of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). The first Trump cabinet withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and introduced modifications to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).<sup>7</sup> The American withdrawal from the TPP was the outcome of a wider political climate in which skepticism toward FTAs had gained traction across party lines during the 2016 electoral campaign.<sup>8</sup> The Biden administration's Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, echoed this skepticism in a 2023 policy speech, arguing that the traditional

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5 The Clinton administration acknowledged that the U.S.'s economic and security interests are respectively increasingly inseparable, first, and then *inextricably* linked. White House, *National Security Strategy* (1994), 15, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf>; The White House, *National Security Strategy* (1999), 21, <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/media/pdf/nssr-1299.pdf>. The first Bush administration put emphasis on free markets and free trade, linking strong economy, rather than secure, to national security. White House, *National Security Strategy* (2002), 17, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>. On the other hand, the Bush administration that followed the first dropped the reference to either economic strength or security, linking economic *freedom* to *political liberty*. White House, *National Security Strategy* (2006), 25, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2006.pdf>.

6 Furthermore, while the 2010 National Security Strategy links the two concepts on page 18, the 2015 document does that at the second line of the President's opening statement, a testament of how the focus on economic strength has become more relevant to the Obama administration during the years. White House, *National Security Strategy* (2010), [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf). White House, *National Security Strategy* (2015), [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf).

7 Shannon K. O'Neil, "Trump and the Future of the USMCA." Council on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/trump-and-future-usmca>.

8 Democrats generally viewed those positively, arguing that they benefited the American economy by, for instance, raising incomes for certain parts of the population. Pew Research Center, "Clinton, Trump Supporters Have Starkly Different Views of a Changing Nation." Pew Research Center, August 18, 2016, <http://pewrsr.ch/2bilbbR>. However, despite being initially pro-TPP, the Dem candidate Hillary Clinton joined the choir of the voices against it, such as Bernie Sanders. "Hillary Clinton Voices Opposition to Pacific Trade Deal," *BBC*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-34469293>. Conversely, Republicans considered them generally detrimental to the U.S., arguing that they depressed wages and led to job losses.

reliance on FTAs and tariff reductions was no longer suited to the realities of the twenty-first century and had, in fact, deepened economic dependence on China.<sup>9</sup> Her remarks were delivered in defense of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the Biden administration’s alternative approach to advancing economic security and prosperity in the region, an initiative that South Korea, under President Yoon Seok Yeol, chose to join.<sup>10</sup>

The second, and arguably most prominent, area of continuity lies in the securitization of supply chains. In 2021, an executive order and its accompanying 100-day review focused on strengthening the American supply chain;<sup>11</sup> experts warned that this trajectory risked disrupting the microchip ecosystem and undermining the economic welfare of allies such as South Korea, one of its most important elements.<sup>12</sup> Although the Biden administration initially identified the Quad as the most suitable platform for this agenda, the securitization of supply chains was ultimately incorporated into the IPEF in 2022.<sup>13</sup> Under the second Trump administration, the prospects for IPEF’s survival grow increasingly thin, yet the logic of securitization has not receded. On the contrary, it has more than endured: the Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement (FORGE), inaugurated at the Critical Mineral Ministerial in February 2026 and built on the Biden administration’s Minerals Security Partnership, illustrates how Washington extends the same continuity into critical minerals, reinforcing its bipartisan trajectory.<sup>14</sup> South Korea, moreover, chaired the MSP between 2024 and 2025 and will do the same with FORGE until June 2026.<sup>15</sup>

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- 9 David Lawder, “U.S. Trade Chief Tai Defends Pursuit of Non-Traditional Trade Deals,” *Reuters*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-trade-chief-tai-defend-pursuit-non-traditional-trade-deals-2023-04-05/>.
  - 10 Office of the United States Trade Representative, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef>.
  - 11 “America’s Supply Chains,” *Federal Register*, 2021, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/03/01/2021-04280/americas-supply-chains>. White House, *Building Resilient Supply Chains, Revitalizing American Manufacturing and Fostering Broad-based Growth*, 2021, [https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/100-day-supply-chain-review-report.pdf?utm\\_source=sfmc%E2%80%8B&utm\\_medium=email%E2%80%8B&utm\\_campaign=20210610\\_Global\\_Manufacturing\\_Economic\\_Update\\_June\\_Members](https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/100-day-supply-chain-review-report.pdf?utm_source=sfmc%E2%80%8B&utm_medium=email%E2%80%8B&utm_campaign=20210610_Global_Manufacturing_Economic_Update_June_Members).
  - 12 James K. Galbraith, “China and the Supply Chain: A Comment on the June 2021 White House Review,” Institute for New Economic Thinking, June 23, 2021, <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/china-and-the-supply-chain-a-comment-on-the-june-2021-white-house-review>.
  - 13 Zack Cooper, “Before the East Asia and Pacific Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Strategic Opportunities and Risks in the East Asia and Pacific Region,” February 25, 2025, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA05/20250225/117895/HHRG-119-FA05-Wstate-CooperZ-20250225.pdf>.
  - 14 Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “How to Secure Critical Minerals for Clean Energy Without Alienating China,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 25, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-secure-critical-minerals-clean-energy-without-alienating-china>.
  - 15 “2026 Critical Minerals Ministerial. Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, February 4, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/2026-critical-minerals-ministerial>.

The narratives of IPEF and PS thus strongly converge in their treatment of supply chain security, each positioning it as central to America’s economic and strategic posture and confirming its role as a guiding principle of the U.S. economic strategy onward. Even before the launch of Pax Silica, in fact, the emphasis of the current American government on supply chain security, in the broader sense, was evident in the so-called reciprocal tariffs regime’s exemptions. Annex II of Executive Order 14257 exempted raw materials and intermediate goods in industries such as semiconductors,<sup>16</sup> underscoring the priority placed on securing critical inputs. And the second Trump administration similarly exempted “USMCA-compliant goods,”<sup>17</sup> meaning that in 2025 only 25 percent of non-textile imports from Canada and Mexico could be subjected to tariffs, given a 75 percent utilization rate of preferential treatment.<sup>18</sup> Although the Supreme Court later deemed Trump’s tariff powers unconstitutional,<sup>19</sup> a decision that left most existing tariffs in place, these exemptions nonetheless show that Washington calibrates its securitization agenda to the economic realities of close partners. For South Korea, this creates limited but important room to negotiate its own semiconductor strategy.

The Korean governments are indeed responding to geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures with political economy tools suited for its economic capabilities: namely, tax credits and R&D subsidies. In 2021, Seoul had already responded to global supply shortages by releasing the K-Semiconductor Strategy (later labeled the “K-Belt Semiconductor Strategy”). This large-scale national industry plan focused on fostering one of the world’s biggest microchip clusters and included substantial public and private investment, generous tax credits, and R&D subsidies.<sup>20</sup> The financial ambition of this plan, as visible in Figure 1,<sup>21</sup> is a testament to South Korea’s national commitment. Given that the investments pledged surpass those

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16 White House, “Modifying the Scope of Reciprocal Tariffs and Establishing Procedures for Implementing Trade and Security Agreements,” September 5, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/modifying-the-scope-of-reciprocal-tariffs-and-establishing-procedures-for-implementing-trade-and-security-agreements/>.

17 White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase our Competitive Edge, Protect our Sovereignty, and Strengthen our National and Economic Security,” April 2, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/>.

18 “Utilization Report FY 2025,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, May, 1, 2025, [https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/fy2025\\_mid-year\\_year\\_-\\_free\\_trade\\_agreements\\_and\\_preferential\\_trade\\_utilization\\_report\\_0.pdf](https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/fy2025_mid-year_year_-_free_trade_agreements_and_preferential_trade_utilization_report_0.pdf).

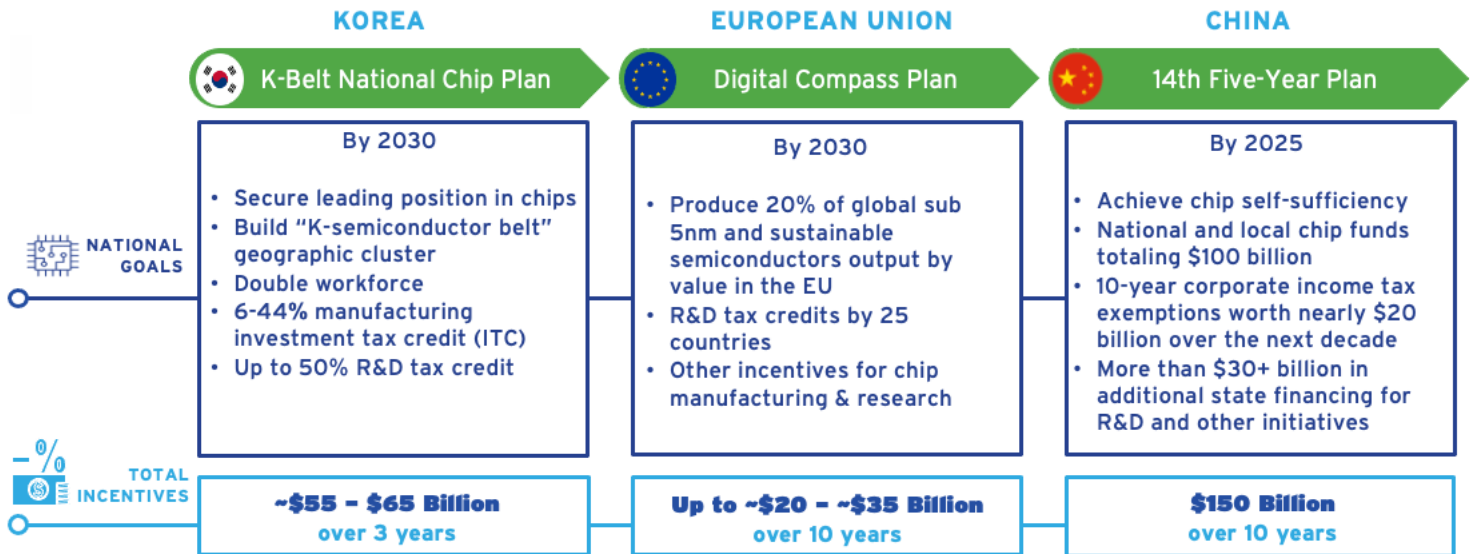
19 Jennifer Hillman, “The Supreme Court Clipped Trump’s Tariff Powers—and Opened New Trade Battlefronts,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 23, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-supreme-court-clipped-trumps-tariff-powers-and-opened-new-trade-battle-fronts>.

20 “‘K-Semiconductor Belt Strategy’ to Establish the World’s Largest Supply Network by 2030,” KBS World, May 17, 2021, [https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents\\_view.htm?board\\_seq=403357](https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?board_seq=403357).

21 “Global Governments Ramp Up Pace of Chip Investments,” Semiconductor Industry Association, June 2, 2021, <https://www.semiconductors.org/global-governments-ramp-up-pace-of-chip-investments/>.

of an economic superpower like the EU, this plan highlights South Korea’s importance in the semiconductor value chain.

**FIGURE 1. Government Investments in Semiconductors**



Source: SIA analysis on data from gov't semiconductor policies, company financial filings, EU R&D Scoreboard, SEMI World Fab Watch

Support for the Korean semiconductor industry remains bipartisan and consistent. Successive governments, from the Moon Jae In administration (pre-2022), through the Yoon Suk Yeol “interregnum” (2022-25) have pledged increases in tax credits and subsidies, primarily through the K-Chips Act. By late 2025, the Lee Jae Myung government pledged 700 trillion won until 2047, roughly equivalent to 475 billion dollars, to become the second largest manufacturer by that year.<sup>22</sup> Despite this commitment, the data suggests a contradictory trend: South Korea’s manufacturing construction starts were 28 percent lower throughout 2023 and 2024 than the 2014-22 average.<sup>23</sup> This slowdown is coupled with a structural shift: Korean companies are expected to lose capacity in advanced logic chips to the USA, even as they strengthen their global leadership position in memory semiconductors, where they already lead the industry.<sup>24</sup>

22 Soon-chan Park and Tae-jun Kim, “Government Invests 700 Trillion Won in Semiconductors.” *Chosun Daily*, December 11, 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/industry-en/2025/12/11/QJZI5WYROJAUTBYJ6H5VPR3OUQ/>.

23 Martin Chorzempa, “The US and Korean CHIPS Acts Are Spurring Investment but at a High Cost,” Peterson Institute for International Economics, June 10, 2021, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2024/us-and-korean-chips-acts-are-spurring-investment-high-cost>.

24 Ibid.

Despite Seoul investing heavily in its semiconductor future, these initiatives unfold within a policy environment increasingly shaped by U.S. securitization, leaving South Korea little room to separate industrial planning from alliance politics.

## Argument

Washington's bipartisan focus on protecting national industries underscores how U.S. foreign policy imperatives force Seoul's domestic economic priorities into alignment, regardless of who occupies the White House. Initiatives such as IPEF, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act exemplify technonationalist<sup>25</sup> measures that embed supply chain security into law. For South Korea, this means that industrial planning cannot be insulated from alliance politics.

These structural constraints are reinforced by the realities of global value chains (GVC). Despite being frequently approached through a dichotomy of free markets versus centralized control, the reality of GVCs is more complex. Interfirm linkages and coordination often determine the chains' structure, not just market forces. In some cases, market dominance in key components and technologies, as with American firm Applied Materials in semiconductor manufacturing, sets the interactions between GVC links.<sup>26</sup> These structural realities intersect with the volatility of U.S. policy, where legal rulings and corporate disputes quickly spill into alliance politics.

Recent episodes, in fact, highlight how economic disputes and legal rulings are increasingly converging with the bilateral political dynamics, tightening the constraints on South Korea's semiconductor policy. The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to deem reciprocal tariffs unconstitutional criticized the legal tool but left most tariffs intact, keeping them a viable instrument of pressure in the hands of the proper authorities, such as Congress or the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR). Executives at Coupang have indeed petitioned the USTR under Section 301, the same legal mechanism used against China, citing Seoul's acts as unfair trade practices. Despite the Korean Prime Minister's efforts to downplay the impact of the Coupang issue,<sup>27</sup> the overlap between trade disputes and alliance matters was further underscored when a U.S. delegation to Seoul on SSN acquisition postponed its

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25 Emily Benson, Japhet Quitzon, and William Alan Reinsch, "Securing Semiconductor Supply Chains in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity," Center for Strategic International Studies, May 30, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/securing-semiconductor-supply-chains-indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity>.

26 Gary Gereffi, John Humphrey, and Timothy Sturgeon, "The Governance of Global Value Chains," *Review of International Political Economy* 12, no. 1 (2005): 78–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290500049805>.

27 Kyung-min No, "Prime minister Rejects Discrimination Claims, Agrees to Set Up Hotline with US," *Korea Herald*, January 25, 2026, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10662190>.

trip, officially citing scheduling issues.<sup>28</sup> The massive data breach that affected the Korean-American company, which took place in November 2025, has escalated into harsh bilateral tensions, with Seoul complaining about the poor management of the incident and Coupang executives complaining about discriminatory measures against the American firm.

The case has the potential to disrupt U.S.-South Korea relations if not handled with caution. The timing of Seoul's conditional approval for Google to export raw map data might raise suspicions that the move was intended to appease Washington.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of speculation, it is undeniable that the Coupang dossier has stirred discontent among U.S. lawmakers and, to some extent, public opinion.<sup>30</sup> This episode exemplifies how domestic corporate grievances can escalate into bilateral trade friction, placing Seoul under the same legal scrutiny Washington applies to China.

The convergence of alliance politics and structural realities once more reinforces the argument that South Korea can no longer insulate its industrial policy from foreign policy imperatives. What is required is a proactive engagement that would redefine Seoul's participation in U.S.-led frameworks as a prominent role, an approach already at the heart of Lee Jae Myung's pragmatic foreign policy.<sup>31</sup>

## Policy Recommendations/Conclusion

The Coupang dispute has emerged as a flashpoint in U.S.-ROK relations, and to engage proactively in the semiconductor industry within the framework of U.S. foreign policy imperatives, Seoul, and to some extent Washington, must first de-escalate the Coupang dispute and restore relations free from the constant threat of tariffs. As Tami Overby, former president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea, observed, of the eleven investigations currently facing Coupang, only two concern data and cybersecurity, leading to the

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28 Seo-yeon Kim, "U.S. Delegation's Trip to Seoul Being Delayed Due to 'Scheduling' Issues: Senior Official," Yonhap News Agency, February 24, 2026, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260224010900315?section=national/diplomacy>.

29 Kyu-Seok Shim, "South Korea Set to Finally Get a Fully Functioning Google Maps," *Reuters*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-approves-google-bid-export-high-precision-map-data-2026-02-27/>.

30 Ari Hawkings and Daniel Desroches, "Most Americans Have Never Used Their Website. The company Has Become a Player in Washington, Anyway," *Politico*, February 8, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/08/amazon-of-south-korea-becomes-a-flashpoint-in-trumps-trade-talks-00770201>.

31 Jeonghun Min, "An Overview of the New Lee Jae-myung Administration's Foreign Policy and Policy Recommendations," *IFANS Focus*, June 10, 2025, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/com/fileupload/FileDownloadView.do;jsessionid=S-AvZIORY-rvCngro1aNewN9.public11?storgeld=c61b04e5-0182-4c75-ad21-828ecacfb855&uploadId=22860141814001868&fileSn=1>.

accusation of discrimination against U.S. companies.<sup>32</sup> This prompted the petition to the USTR under Section 301, the same mechanism used against China, making decisive action in the matter necessary to defuse the situation because this path carries risks for both sides.

Notably, some exhibits in the Section 301 investigation note that South Korea's legislation is aligning with the EU's Digital Markets Act, widely regarded in Washington as a digital tariff barrier against U.S. multinationals.<sup>33</sup> While South Korea lacks the economic weight of the EU to compel compliance from giants like Apple or Meta,<sup>34</sup> Seoul still holds leverage points against Coupang. Thus, the multinational company may face an isolated battle in an unfriendly environment. Moreover, reliance on Trump's 2025 agreement with Seoul is unlikely to provide a sustainable solution, but an alternative path is feasible. By February 12, 2026, five U.S.-based investors had filed investor-state dispute settlement claims under the KORUS FTA's investment chapter, sending a letter of intent to the South Korean president.<sup>35</sup> Despite growing U.S. skepticism toward FTAs, resorting to KORUS arbitration rather than new tariffs would represent a more rational and balanced approach. Such a move would demonstrate coherence with the special relationship between the two countries, and, ultimately, together these two policy tools would exert considerable pressure. It will be up to the United States to decide how much of that to apply to South Korea.

Seoul, in turn, can leverage this situation to strengthen its role in U.S.-led initiatives. By dropping or consolidating certain investigations, for example, combining them with existing measures such as the Yellow Envelope Act, they can undermine claims of discrimination and demonstrate proactive engagement. In exchange, South Korea could lead the creation of a Pax Silica Business Advisory Council (PSBAC), modeled on the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC), and consolidate this role by hosting its permanent secretariat in Seoul. Just as ABAC has been anchored in Manila since 1995, a South Korea-based secretariat would institutionalize the country's leadership in Pax Silica, aligning with the proactive approach central to Lee Jae Myung's pragmatic foreign policy. Overall, a PSBAC would not only deepen understanding of how the semiconductor industry operates but also enhance the long-term viability of Pax Silica. The failure of IPEF, which I interpret as having faltered

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32 Dong-hwan Ko, "Coupang Founder Apologizes, Seeks Exit Strategy from Conflict with Gov't," *Korea Times*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/business/companies/20260227/coupang-founder-apologizes-seeks-exit-strategy-from-conflict-with-govt>.

33 Nigel Cory, "South Korea's Online Platform Fairness Bill. A New Digital Nontariff Barrier in U.S.-ROK Trade," National Bureau of Asian Research, February 25, 2026, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/south-koreas-online-platform-fairness-bill-a-new-digital-nontariff-barrier-in-u-s-rok-trade/>.

34 Penny Naas, Lindsay Gorman, and Antonia Wunnerlich, "The EU's Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act," German Marshall Fund of the United States, October 29, 2025. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/eus-digital-markets-act-and-digital-services-act>.

35 Yohan Moon, "The Coupang Data Breach: A Timeline," Korea Economic Institute, February 22, 2026, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/the-coupang-data-breach-a-timeline/>.

due to weak institutional foundations despite ambitious goals, underscores the need for stronger structures in PS.

Looking ahead, the biennium 2025–26 may well be remembered as a low point in U.S.-ROK relations. Yet, the situation is far from irreparable. The economic and political trajectories of the two countries are deeply intertwined, and tensions alone will likely not undo those bonds. For the prosperity of both nations, a cooperative, institutionalized, and forward-looking relationship is not only desirable but necessary.

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# Resilience-Building Against Weaponized Trade

Juan Pablo Sims

## Executive Summary

Korea's export model is highly exposed to trade weaponization: semiconductors account for approximately a quarter of its exports, memory chips dominate that sector, and production depends on a few foreign chokepoints for equipment, chemicals, and rare earths. Korea cannot eliminate this risk on its own, but it can reduce it by building a resilience regime domestically and collaborating with other middle and small powers that share vulnerable value chains and interests in keeping markets open.

Korea's vulnerability is not spread evenly across its economy. A large share of export earnings depends on a narrow set of memory products that, in turn, rely on highly specialized inputs from a small group of supplier countries. Advanced lithography tools are concentrated in the Netherlands; key etching chemicals and photoresists in Japan; and many rare-earth and magnetic materials in China or in a handful of emerging projects elsewhere. A limited set of foreign suppliers for these tools, chemicals, high-purity gases, wafers, and rare-earth processing and magnets holds disproportionate influence over Korea's production capacity. Disruptions at any of these points can quickly translate into lost output, even if the broader trade system remains formally open. This concentration means that a targeted resilience regime can focus on a manageable number of inputs and counterparties, rather than on "globalization" in general.

At the same time, major powers are increasingly resorting to export controls, investment screening, and technology restrictions as tools of statecraft. Episodes such as Japan's export licensing measures in 2019, the tightening of semiconductor-related controls by the United States and its partners, and growing concern over critical minerals have shown that trade disruptions can be sudden, targeted, and politically driven. Yet existing multilateral trade rules do not prevent Korea from strengthening its position, provided that any resilience measures are neutral, transparent, and time-limited. A domestic system that relies on published risk indicators, avoids tying support to export performance or local-content obligations, and uses temporary, proportionate tools, such as government-backed credit guarantees, fast-track approvals, and priority customs treatment, can strengthen supply-chain robustness without breaching World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments.

Moreover, Korea’s dense network of preferential trade agreements with middle powers such as Chile, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, India, Australia, Canada, and the European Union provides ready-made legal and political channels for extending these practices to partners with similar vulnerabilities.

Accordingly, this paper offers an operational roadmap to mitigate these dynamics. The core idea is a three-step strategy: first, build a domestic early-warning and facilitation system for the most exposed value chains; second, pilot a tailored “resilience” arrangement with a small group of participating partners through short annexes or side letters; and third, replicate this template across Korea’s network of preferential trade agreements so that exposed, trade-dependent economies begin to act in a coordinated way.

A cooperation-focused approach is politically saleable for partner governments because it is reciprocal and modular rather than a standing commitment. For partners, the ask is not an open-ended obligation, but a short resilience annex that pre-agrees a limited set of “good housekeeping” actions, aggregate risk information sharing, recognition of pre-qualified substitutes, and time-bound border and licensing facilitation, activated only when objective indicators activate the arrangement under pre-agreed conditions. This keeps the bureaucratic burden manageable while offering a clear payoff: fewer unexpected disruptions, faster crisis management for their firms, and a credible signal to investors that their trade governance can absorb shocks without resorting to discriminatory controls. These incentives underpin the recommendations set out below. The initial start with memory chips and a short list of rare-earth-intensive inputs is intended as a practical kick-off for a broader regime that can serve multiple middle powers simultaneously. The choice of these starting items reflects their systemic relevance: critical minerals and memory products sit at key chokepoints in modern value chains, and disruptions in either can rapidly propagate across sectors and constrain technology flows internationally.

## Introduction

For the past several decades, Korea has built its prosperity on an export-led growth model that assumes relatively open markets and predictable rules. Few sectors embody this more clearly than semiconductors, and within them, memory chips. In recent years, semiconductors have consistently accounted for roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of Korea’s total exports, and memory products make up most of those semiconductor shipments by value. This is not a marginal industry but a central pillar of external earnings, fiscal capacity, and employment in key industrial regions. Korea’s memory ecosystem is deeply embedded in cross-border flows of equipment, materials, services, and customers across North America, Europe, and Asia, an architecture that historically delivered efficiency and scale.

That underlying assumption -- reliable access through global networks -- has become less defensible. The central risk today is not market volatility per se, but great powers' willingness to weaponize trade and technology chokepoints in pursuit of strategic objectives. Export controls, investment screening, licensing frictions, and targeted regulatory measures are increasingly deployed as instruments of statecraft, even when such moves sit uneasily with the spirit of the WTO-era rules-based order. The practical consequence for Korea is straightforward: disruptions can be sudden, selective, and politically driven, originating in a small number of jurisdictions yet cascading quickly through just-in-time production systems and narrow pools of qualified inputs.<sup>1</sup>

This paper frames the policy problem as a practical question: can Korea reduce its vulnerability in a world in which its specializations can be weaponized, especially memory chips and rare-earth-intensive inputs that function as upstream bottlenecks? The aim is not self-sufficiency, which is neither realistic nor desirable for a trading state whose competitiveness depends on scale, specialization, and interdependence. The objective is resilience against great-power coercion and politically induced disruption: reducing exposure to single-node failure and, crucially, ensuring that when pressure hits, Korea can shift, substitute, and clear inputs faster through lawful, time-bound measures.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the goal is not to withdraw from global markets, but to make Korea's most critical value chains harder to stall, and therefore less rewarding to weaponize.

Great-power rivalry matters because leverage is distributed unevenly across supply chains. The most consequential disruptor varies by chokepoint: rare-earth mining, refining, and magnet processing are heavily concentrated in China; advanced semiconductor equipment and certain upstream materials are shaped by U.S.-led export-control coalitions implemented through allied jurisdictions; and Japan has demonstrated the capacity to impose episodic licensing constraints on specific chemicals and materials, as seen in 2019.<sup>3</sup> The operational implication is not to treat vulnerability as an abstract "globalization" problem, but to target resilience measures at the specific nodes and jurisdictions where great-power decisions can credibly throttle supply.

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- 1 Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), "Korea's Semiconductor Industry: Taking Another Leap Forward," *InvestKOREA*, September 7, 2023, [https://www.investkorea.org/ik-en/bbs/i-308/detail.do?ntt\\_sn=490787](https://www.investkorea.org/ik-en/bbs/i-308/detail.do?ntt_sn=490787).
  - 2 Ryo Makioka and Hongyong Zhang, "The Impact of Export Controls on International Trade: Evidence from the Japan–Korea Trade Dispute in Semiconductor Industry," *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, February 23, 2023, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/3e5537ac17a795823a3e3c46b12c0351-0050022023/related/25-The-Impact-of-Export-Controls-on-International-Trade-Evidence-from-the-Japan-Korea-Trade-Dispute-in-Semiconductor-Industry.pdf>.
  - 3 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Export Restrictions on Critical Raw Materials," *OECD*, 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/export-restrictions-on-critical-raw-materials.html>.

Korea's response, however, must avoid self-defeating strategies. As a trade-dependent economy, it cannot protect itself by replicating great-power tactics, broad discrimination, opaque industrial restrictions, or permanent barriers, without corroding the multilateral trading system that remains essential to its wider prosperity. The feasible policy space lies in WTO-consistent resilience tools: neutral, transparent, and time-limited measures that reduce disruption risk without tying support to export performance or local-content mandates.<sup>4</sup> These include published risk indicators and operational thresholds, fast-track approvals, priority customs handling for critical inputs and pre-qualified substitutes, and carefully designed financial instruments (such as guarantees or credit facilities) that bridge short-term market failures when alerts are triggered.

A further implication follows: Korea cannot build credible resilience in isolation.<sup>5</sup> Many choke-points it faces are shared by other open, trade-dependent economies that sit outside the inner circle of great powers but remain deeply embedded in sensitive value chains. Korea's dense network of preferential trade agreements offers a practical vehicle for coordinating resilience measures with these partners without creating new institutions from scratch. Properly used, PTAs do not "override" great-power export controls; rather, they provide ready-made legal and administrative channels to pre-agree crisis procedures, information-sharing,<sup>6</sup> recognition of pre-qualified substitutes, and time-bound border and licensing facilitation, so that disruption management becomes faster and less improvisational.

The analysis that follows is deliberately narrow and operational. It concentrates on two linked exposure points where Korea's vulnerability is both clear and consequential: memory chips, which anchor export earnings and sit directly in the crosshairs of technology controls; and rare-earth-related inputs that feed into magnets, motors, and components across multiple Korean export industries. Together, they capture both a high-value finished product where Korea is a leading producer and an upstream bottleneck domain where external concentration creates strategic vulnerability. These cases are not exhaustive; they are chosen to demonstrate a scalable policy architecture: start where substitution constraints and macroeconomic stakes are highest, then extend the same resilience template to other sectors that share the same risk profile.<sup>7</sup>

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- 4 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, "Commerce Implements New Export Controls on Advanced Computing and Semiconductor Manufacturing Items to the People's Republic of China (PRC)," press release, October 7, 2022, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/commerce-implements-new-export-controls-on-advanced-computing-and-semiconductor-manufacturing-items-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china-prc/>.
  - 5 International Energy Agency, *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions* (Paris: IEA, 2021), <https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions>.
  - 6 Chad P. Bown, "Modern Industrial Policy and the World Trade Organization," *Annual Review of Economics* 16, no. 1 (2024): 243–270, <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-economics-100223-041958>.
  - 7 U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "South Korea – Trade Agreements," *Country Commercial Guide*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/south-korea-trade-agreements>.

## Context

Korea's export profile is unusually concentrated. Semiconductors account for roughly a fifth of total exports and have recently risen back above 20 percent, while Korea remains a global memory specialist in DRAM and NAND.<sup>8</sup> The result is macro exposure: a narrow set of memory products carries outsized weight in export earnings and industrial activity. That vulnerability now sits inside a more coercive trade-and-technology environment. U.S.–China rivalry is not a passing episode; it is structurally rooted in technology, production networks, and standards competition, and is therefore likely to keep generating pressure on strategic sectors such as semiconductors and critical minerals.<sup>9</sup>

The operational problem is concentration at key nodes. Leading-edge memory production depends on exceptionally concentrated equipment and servicing channels, most visibly in lithography, where supply and after-sales control are tightly held by a small number of firms and jurisdictions.<sup>10</sup> This interacts with long lead times and strict qualification requirements, meaning that substitution is slow even when alternative suppliers exist.

Recent shocks show how quickly chokepoints become disruption. Japan's 2019 tightening of export licensing for key semiconductor materials slowed access and forced accelerated substitution and qualification under uncertainty.<sup>11</sup> A different shock followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when semiconductor-grade neon supplies were abruptly constrained, exposing vulnerability in inputs treated as routine until they were not.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, targeted friction at a small number of upstream nodes propagated into fab-level risk.

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- 8 U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "South Korea – Semiconductors," *Market Intelligence*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/south-korea-semiconductors>.
  - 9 Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2012): 41–78, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00066](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00066); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014)
  - 10 Saif M. Khan, Dahlia Peterson, and Alexander Mann, *The Semiconductor Supply Chain: Assessing National Competitiveness* (Washington, DC: Center for Security and Emerging Technology, January 2021), <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/the-semiconductor-supply-chain/>.
  - 11 Ryo Makioka and Hongyong Zhang. "The Impact of Export Controls on International Trade: Evidence from the Japan–Korea Trade Dispute in the Semiconductor Industry." *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies* 74 (2024).
  - 12 Reuters, "Russia's Attack on Ukraine Halts Half of World's Neon Output for Chips." *Reuters*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/exclusive-ukraine-halts-half-worlds-neon-output-chips-clouding-outlook-2022-03-11>.

One step upstream, rare earth elements magnify the same pattern.<sup>13</sup> These metals are embedded in permanent magnets and components used across EV-related manufacturing, electronics, industrial machinery, and some defence-adjacent production. The strategic issue is not volumes but control over processing and magnet-making capacity concentrated in a small number of upstream actors.

These vulnerabilities unfold within a broader shift toward economic statecraft. Trade, investment, and technology policies are increasingly used as instruments of power rather than treated as neutral market governance.<sup>14</sup> Major powers have expanded export controls, sanctions, and investment screening, and promoted “de-risking” and allied alignment in ways that can rapidly reshape access to equipment, materials, and standards.<sup>15</sup> For Korea, this turns interdependence into a channel through which great-power decisions can impose sudden, selective constraints.

Korea’s policy space is therefore narrow. It cannot escape great-power rivalry, but it also cannot mirror great-power tactics without damaging the multilateral system it still relies on. The practical implication is to focus on neutral, transparent, time-limited resilience measures that reduce disruption risk without crossing into overt discrimination.

Finally, resilience cannot be built by Korea alone. Many chokepoints are shared by other open, trade-dependent economies outside the great powers.<sup>16</sup> Middle-power research suggests these states can act as institutional problem-solvers when larger forums stall, using targeted trade rules and practical coordination to manage shared risks.<sup>17</sup> Korea’s existing PTA network and current upgrade windows, therefore, matter less as “market access” and more as a ready-made channel to operationalize joint resilience procedures for shared value chains.

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13 U.S. Geological Survey, “Rare Earths,” in Mineral Commodity Summaries 2024 (Reston, VA: U.S. Geological Survey, 2024), <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2024/mcs2024.pdf>.

14 Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, “Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00351](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351).

15 World Trade Organization, *World Trade Report 2023: Re-Globalization for a Secure, Inclusive and Sustainable Future*. (Geneva: WTO, 2023), [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/publications\\_e/wtr23\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/wtr23_e.htm).

16 Miras Zhiyenbayev, “Middle Powers and Resilient Multilateralism,” *Global Asia* 18, no. 4 (2023): 30–37, [https://www.globalasia.org/v18no4/cover/middle-powers-and-resilient-multilateralism\\_miras-zhiyenbayev](https://www.globalasia.org/v18no4/cover/middle-powers-and-resilient-multilateralism_miras-zhiyenbayev).

17 Alberto Tagliapietra and Guilherme Casarões, “Shaping a New World? Middle Powers and Global Governance,” *Policy Center for the New South*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/shaping-new-world-middle-powers-and-global-governance>.

## The Argument

Korea's recent experience shows that ad hoc crisis management is not enough. When semiconductor-grade neon supplies were suddenly curtailed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, chipmakers had to scramble to secure alternative sources of a gas that had previously been treated as abundant and low risk.<sup>18</sup> Similar dynamics have played out as successive rounds of U.S. controls on advanced chipmaking equipment and Chinese moves on critical minerals have forced firms and officials to reassess the reliability of established suppliers.<sup>19</sup> Each time, the response has been a mix of emergency sourcing, hurried qualification of new inputs, and case-by-case regulatory fixes, layered on top of an unchanged dependency on a few foreign nodes with long lead times. In a context of enduring great-power rivalry, treating each shock as an isolated event is no longer credible; Korea needs a standing resilience regime that anticipates problems, sets clear rules for response, and systematically reduces the payoff of coercion and accidents.<sup>20</sup>

A useful way to think about such a regime is as a set of rules and habits that operate before, during, and after a shock, rather than as a one-off toolbox of subsidies.<sup>21</sup> At its core, it needs three features. First, clear indicators and thresholds for a limited set of inputs and value-chain nodes, so that firms and officials know when a supply issue has crossed from normal volatility into genuine risk. Second, pre-qualified alternatives, materials, suppliers, and in some cases, logistics routes, that have already been tested in peacetime and can be switched to without months of delay.

*In a context of enduring great-power rivalry, treating each shock as an isolated event is no longer credible; Korea needs a standing resilience regime that anticipates problems, sets clear rules for response, and systematically reduces the payoff of coercion and accidents.*

18 Samantha DeCarlo and Samuel Goodman, "Ukraine, Neon, and Semiconductors," in *Disruptions to Global Supply Chains Due to the War in Ukraine*, Executive Briefings on Trade, (Washington, DC: U.S. International Trade Commission, April 22, 2022), [https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/executive\\_briefings/ebot\\_disruptions\\_to\\_global\\_supply\\_chains\\_due\\_to\\_the\\_war\\_in\\_ukraine.pdf](https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/executive_briefings/ebot_disruptions_to_global_supply_chains_due_to_the_war_in_ukraine.pdf).

19 Bureau of Industry and Security, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Implementation of Additional Export Controls: Certain Advanced Computing and Semiconductor Manufacturing Items; Supercomputer and Semiconductor End Use; Entity List Modification," *Federal Register* 87, no. 197 (October 13, 2022), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/10/13/2022-21658/implementation-of-additional-export-controls-certain-advanced-computing-and-semiconductor>.

20 Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/44/1/42/12281>.

21 European Parliamentary Research Service, *Single Market Emergency Instrument*, PE 751.439 (Brussels: European Parliament, 2023), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751439/EPRS\\_ATA\(2023\)751439\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751439/EPRS_ATA(2023)751439_EN.pdf).

Third, agreed facilitation steps, both domestically and with selected partners, so that regulation, licensing, and customs procedures do not become the new bottlenecks when an alert is triggered. For Korea's memory and rare-earth-intensive sectors, this combination matters more than any single diversification slogan.

A regime of this kind is also the only realistic way to manage constraints that cannot be solved overnight, especially in rare earths. Today, there are effectively no full substitutes for China's dominant role in mining, refining, and magnet production; Korean policy cannot conjure an alternate supply at scale in the short term.<sup>22</sup> What it can do is prepare for the fact that several partners (Australia, Vietnam, India, Canada, Brazil, and some European states) are investing heavily to build viable projects and midstream capacity over the next decade.<sup>23</sup> A standing resilience regime allows Korea to track these developments systematically, pre-qualify emerging suppliers and processing hubs as they come online, and plug them into its early-warning and facilitation system. In other words, it creates a bridge between the world Korea faces now, highly dependent on Chinese rare earths, and a more diversified landscape that is plausible in the medium term.

Crucially, a standing resilience regime does not imply retreat from openness or an attempt to match great powers tool for tool. Korea does not have the market size or financial reach to use sanctions and extraterritorial controls the way the United States or China can, and trying to do so would undermine the WTO framework it still needs. The advantage Korea does have is the ability to organize its own response in a predictable, rules-based way and invite other exposed economies to plug into that approach. By defining indicators, alternatives, and facilitation steps in advance, and by embedding them in domestic practice and selected trade agreements, Korea can turn a structurally vulnerable position into a more manageable one, lowering the payoff of coercion without closing its economy.

## How does this work?

Operationally, a resilience regime starts at home with a small, specialized early-warning and facilitation unit. It would not run industrial policy or pick winners; its job is to monitor a short, published list of critical inputs for memory and rare-earth-intensive value chains and trigger predefined responses when risk rises. It can sit in the trade or industry ministry, but it must have direct channels to customs, financial regulators, and the key firms that hold inventories and manage qualification. The aim is coordination without bureaucracy: interpret signals, issue alerts under clear rules, and activate tools firms can use immediately.

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22 International Energy Agency, *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions* (Paris: IEA, 2021), <https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions>.

23 International Energy Agency, *Critical Minerals Market Review 2023* (Paris: IEA, 2023), <https://www.iea.org/reports/critical-minerals-market-review-2023>.

To operate credibly, the unit needs a narrow indicator set tied to operational thresholds. For each listed input (photoresists, high-purity etchants, semiconductor-grade process gases, magnet alloys, key tool components), it should track: (i) inventories at participating firms (in weeks of normal consumption); (ii) supplier lead times and order backlogs; (iii) availability and servicing queues for essential equipment and spare parts; and (iv) regulatory signals in supplier jurisdictions, including export-license processing times and control-list changes. Thresholds should be pre-published, for example, inventories below an agreed number of weeks combined with lead times beyond a defined window, or license delays above a specified limit, so firms know in advance what triggers an alert and what support follows.

When an alert is triggered, the system should shift from monitoring to facilitation on a script, not improvisation. The unit notifies relevant ministries and participating firms and activates a limited set of neutral, time-bound measures: fast-track regulatory approvals for qualifying alternative inputs; priority customs treatment for listed critical goods and pre-approved substitutes; and government-backed credit lines or guarantees that let firms hold modest additional inventories or place parallel orders without over-stretching balance sheets. Each measure should have clear sunset clauses linked to the alert's duration. Designed this way, open to eligible firms, transparent in scope and time-limited, and not tied to export performance or local-content conditions, these tools remain compatible with Korea's WTO commitments while still changing behavior at the margin.

A simple scenario illustrates the logic. If a key supplier jurisdiction extends export-license processing times for a high-purity etchant used in DRAM production, pushing lead times beyond the published threshold, an alert is issued. Firms can then draw on specified credit guarantees to secure additional volumes from existing or secondary suppliers and route shipments through priority customs channels, while regulators accelerate testing and approval of a pre-identified alternative etchant that has already passed basic qualification in peacetime. No single step eliminates risk, but together they create a predictable pathway for adjustment before stocks become critical.

## **Resilience internationalized**

The domestic regime reaches its full potential only if partners cooperate when an alert is triggered. The most practical test is a short, operational "resilience annex" attached to an existing PTA with a small set of willing participants. Chile is a strong starting point because it is a like-minded small power, the Korea–Chile agreement is already under upgrade negotiations, and Chile has direct interests in critical minerals and predictable

market access.<sup>24</sup> A second pilot with a digitally capable logistics and processing hub, such as Singapore or another ASEAN partner, would show that the template can work across different value-chain roles and administrative systems.<sup>25</sup> Together, the two pilots demonstrate feasibility without requiring a large coalition upfront.

The annex should be short and tightly linked to the domestic alert system. It would not rewrite market-access commitments; it would pre-agree a limited set of actions when either side declares an alert on a defined list of critical inputs. First, the parties share aggregate risk indicators and relevant regulatory updates, without disclosing firm-level data. Second, they recognize pre-qualified substitutes and testing procedures to reduce re-qualification delays when rerouting or switching suppliers. Third, they grant temporary priority border treatment and time-bound license handling for listed goods and agreed alternatives; where necessary, they allow narrowly targeted, short-term tariff relief on substitutes. All measures sunset automatically when the alert ends and are reviewed after deactivation.

To keep the arrangement credible and replicable, the annex must plug directly into Korea's domestic regime while remaining outside alignment politics. The same input list, indicators, thresholds, and pre-qualified substitutes that trigger Korea's internal alerts should anchor the partner commitments, so external facilitation becomes predictable rather than improvised. Partners are not asked to endorse sanctions or "choose sides"; they are committing to a limited set of crisis procedures that reduce administrative delay when clearly defined conditions are met. This keeps the annex focused on practical risk management for shared value chains, not geopolitical signaling.

### ***Why would other middle powers invest in this?***

Partners are not being asked to subsidize Korea's industrial policy. They are being invited into a low-cost, reciprocal resilience arrangement that reduces disruption risk across value chains they also depend on, whether as exporters of critical inputs, importers of components, or hosts to downstream firms exposed to semiconductor and critical-mineral bottlenecks. Even if a partner's own list of sensitive materials differs from Korea's, the benefits travel well: earlier visibility on stress points, clearer expectations during disruptions, and faster administrative handling for time-sensitive shipments that matter to the domestic industry. Importantly, the bureaucratic burden is bounded. The arrangement relies primarily on procedures partners already operate—customs, standards recognition, licensing channels, and inter-agency coordination, which are activated only under clearly defined circumstances. Politically, this is easier to defend than alignment-driven initiatives

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24 Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, "Evolving Trade Agreements: Korea–Chile FTA Upgrade Negotiations," *KIEP Opinions* no. 297 (2024), [https://www.kiep.go.kr/gallery.es?act=view&bid=0008&list\\_no=11474&mid=a2030800000](https://www.kiep.go.kr/gallery.es?act=view&bid=0008&list_no=11474&mid=a2030800000).

25 Government of Chile, "President Boric Announces National Lithium Strategy," *Government of Chile*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.gob.cl/en/news/president-boric-announces-national-lithium-strategy>.

because it does not require partners to endorse any great-power restrictions; it simply commits them to transparent, time-bound facilitation measures that trade-dependent economies can justify as market-stabilizing and compatible with WTO disciplines.

## Regime emanation

Once two pilots are in place, the objective is not a new institution but repetition: turning the annex into a template and replicating it across Korea's PTA network through annexes, side letters, or short MOUs. Because the obligations are narrow, emergency-only, and time-limited, partners are formalizing crisis management rather than rewriting market-access commitments or joining an alliance.

In practical terms, scaling should follow negotiation windows. Where PTAs are under review or upgrade, Korea can table the resilience text as a compact horizontal provision.<sup>26</sup> Where no upgrade is planned, Korea can attach a side letter that makes the measures voluntary, emergency-only, and subject to periodic review. Over time, a cluster of agreements can converge on the same indicators, triggers, and a small menu of facilitation steps, so that a bilateral experiment becomes a recognizable resilience regime among exposed, trade-dependent economies.<sup>27</sup>

Partner selection should be functional: upstream diversification partners (critical minerals and processing), logistics and trade-facilitation hubs (expedited clearance and rerouting capacity), and materials and standards ecosystems (faster recognition of testing and substitutes). Japan is a special case: it is indispensable in key inputs, but sensitivities argue for a narrowly technical channel, standards cooperation, and joint stress-testing, rather than making it a flagship pilot.

*Politically, this is easier to defend than alignment-driven initiatives because it does not require partners to endorse any great-power restrictions; it simply commits them to transparent, time-bound facilitation measures that trade-dependent economies can justify as market-stabilizing and compatible with WTO disciplines.*

26 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, *Toward Building Resilient Supply Chains—A Possible Role of Investment Policy* (Singapore: APEC Secretariat, 2021), <https://www.apec.org/publications/2021/12/toward-building-resilient-supply-chains-a-possible-role-of-investment-policy>.

27 Marta Dassù and Andrea Aversano Stabile, "South Korea as a Techno-Democratic Power: Built for Geoeconomic Competition?" *Research and Documents*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, June 2023. <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/korea-security-and-diplomacy-program/south-korea-techno-democratic-power-strategic-positioning-and-cooperation-european-union-2025>.

*If multiple partners recognize pre-qualified substitutes, expedite licenses and customs during alerts, and coordinate around shared indicators, it becomes harder for a single regulatory move or conflict shock to translate into production stoppages.*

The payoff is a network effect. If multiple partners recognize pre-qualified substitutes, expedite licenses and customs during alerts, and coordinate around shared indicators, it becomes harder for a single regulatory move or conflict shock to translate into production stoppages. In rare earths, the same procedures help convert emerging non-China capacity into usable resilience by reducing qualification delay and border friction.

## Conclusion

Korea cannot change the structure of great-power rivalry, and it cannot, in the short term, replace Chinese rare-earth capacity or the small number of suppliers that dominate key semiconductor inputs. It can, however, change how it manages those risks. The analysis above points to a practical path: build a standing resilience regime at home, link it to a small number of like-minded partners through concise annexes to existing trade agreements, and then expand that model by repetition rather than by creating a new institution from scratch. The recommendations that follow are sequenced and mutually reinforcing.

### **a) Establish a domestic early-warning and facilitation regime for critical inputs**

Korea should create a small early-warning and facilitation unit, anchored in the trade or industry ministry, with a clear mandate to monitor a short list of critical inputs for memory and rare-earth-intensive sectors. For each listed input, the unit should track stock levels in weeks of consumption, supplier lead times and backlogs, servicing queues for essential tools, and regulatory signals in supplier jurisdictions. It should publish operational thresholds, defined in terms of inventory coverage and lead times or license delays, that trigger formal alerts. When an alert is issued, the unit must be empowered to notify relevant ministries and firms and to activate pre-defined facilitation steps across government. This is the core of the resilience regime; everything else depends on having a predictable, rules-based way to recognize and signal rising risk.

### **b) Deploy neutral, time-limited support tools that are WTO-compatible**

Alerts must have practical consequences or firms will ignore them. Korea should therefore put in place a limited suite of neutral support instruments that switch on

when an alert is declared and automatically sunset when it is lifted.<sup>28</sup> These should include government-backed credit lines or guarantees that allow firms to hold modest additional inventories or place parallel orders with alternative suppliers; small grants to test and certify substitutes in advance; and fast-track procedures for regulatory approvals and customs clearance of listed inputs and pre-qualified alternatives. Eligibility should be open to all firms using the relevant inputs, with no conditions on export performance or local content. Designed in this way, transparent, proportionate, and time-bound, these tools strengthen resilience while remaining compatible with Korea’s obligations under WTO rules.<sup>29</sup>

**c) Use the Korea–Chile PTA upgrade to pilot a concise “resilience annex”**

The ongoing upgrade of the Korea–Chile preferential trade agreement is an opportunity to test the international dimension of this regime with a willing partner. Korea should table a short resilience annex that does three things. First, it commits both sides to share aggregate risk indicators and basic information on regulatory changes affecting a pre-agreed list of critical inputs, without requiring the disclosure of firm-level data. Second, it provides for mutual recognition of pre-qualified substitutes and testing procedures, so that inputs already approved in one jurisdiction do not face unnecessary duplication when routed through the other. Third, it commits both parties, when either declares an alert, to time-limited emergency measures: priority treatment at customs for listed goods and substitutes, expedited handling of relevant licenses, and, where necessary, narrowly targeted tariff relief for an agreed schedule of alternative inputs. The annex should explicitly reference the domestic alert system and include clear sunset clauses.

**d) Conclude a parallel resilience arrangement with at least one additional partner**

To demonstrate that the model is replicable, Korea should negotiate a parallel resilience arrangement, either as an annex or side letter, with a second partner that plays a different role in relevant value chains, such as a digitally capable logistics hub or an ASEAN member with growing processing capacity. The text should be as close as possible to the Chile annex, with only minimal adjustments for local legal requirements. The objective is not to tailor bespoke clauses for each partner, but to show that a standard, light-touch resilience template can operate in diverse settings. In all cases, the framing must remain strictly technical: partners are not being asked to

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28 International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, World Bank Group, and World Trade Organization, *Subsidies, Trade, and International Cooperation* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1787/a4f01ddb-en>.

29 Robert Howse, “Official Business: International Trade Law and the Resurgence (or Resilience) of the State as an Economic Actor,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 43, no. 4 (2022): 821–883, <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jil/vol43/iss4/1>.

take sides in the U.S.–China rivalry, but to adopt a set of “good housekeeping” measures that protect shared supply chains when clearly defined conditions are met.

**e) Scale the model across Korea’s PTA network through repetition**

Once two pilots are in place and tested, ideally including at least one real or simulated stress episode, Korea should actively promote the same resilience template to other middle- and small-power partners with which it already has PTAs. The natural priority list includes resource producers pursuing critical-mineral strategies, advanced manufacturers embedded in semiconductor supply chains, and regional logistics hubs. Where agreements are under review or upgrade, the resilience text can be offered as a compact horizontal provision. Where no upgrade is scheduled, it can be attached as a side letter or memorandum of understanding linked to the existing PTA. Because the obligations are narrow, emergency-only, and WTO-consistent, the political cost of adoption is low. Over time, this repetition will create a loose but recognizable network of economies that share indicators, triggers, and facilitation practices for memory and rare-earth value chains.

**f) Prepare to embed resilience practices in regional and digital frameworks**

In the medium term, Korea should aim to translate this bilateral practice into optional modules within broader regional or digital trade frameworks in which it participates.<sup>30</sup> Once a cluster of PTAs includes similar resilience annexes, Korea and its partners can propose an optional “resilience module” or guideline under existing committees or working groups, codifying indicators, alert procedures, and facilitation measures for interested members. This step should come only after the bilateral template has proven workable, but it offers a pathway to scale without reopening core tariff or market-access commitments. It would also position Korea, alongside other middle powers, as a rule-maker rather than a passive rule-taker in the emerging debate on economic security and trade.

**g) Formalize a public–private operating model for the resilience regime**

Because most resilience actions occur inside firms, procurement, qualification, inventory strategy, rerouting, and production planning, the regime should embed a structured private-sector role from the outset. The government should define the governance: convene an industry advisory group (chipmakers, key chemical and materials suppliers, logistics providers, and relevant downstream manufacturers) to

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30 National Board of Trade Sweden. *The Digital-Only Trade Agreements – What Is New?* (Stockholm: Kommerskollegium, 2022), <https://www.kommerskollegium.se/contentassets/d4c3fa9298384ca1b860169afb1bf732/the-digital-only-trade-agreements--what-is-new.pdf>.

keep the critical-input list current, validate disruption indicators, and run periodic stress tests and tabletop exercises. Firms should provide the operational content: maintain pre-qualified alternatives where technically feasible; establish stand-by contracting options for surge volumes; and participate in stress-testing so the system is usable in practice rather than only on paper. The division of labour should be explicit: government triggers coordination and provides time-limited facilitation (and, where appropriate, guarantees or finance to bridge market failures), while the private sector executes substitution, rerouting, and continuity planning at the firm level.

Taken together, these measures do not shield Korea from great-power rivalry or from the inherent cyclicity of the semiconductor sector. What they can do is change the terms of vulnerability. By building a standing, WTO-consistent resilience regime at home, linking it to a small group of participating middle-powers, and expanding it through repetition, Korea and its partners can make it harder for any one regulatory decision, export control, or conflict shock to cascade into a systemic crisis. The approach can begin with memory production and rare-earth-dependent inputs, but is designed to scale to other exposed sectors as the mechanism proves itself. In a world where trade and technology are increasingly weaponized, the goal is not self-sufficiency, but a denser web of rules and habits that keeps markets open while narrowing the space for coercion.<sup>31</sup>

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31 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, *Capacity Building Workshop on Resilient Supply Chain*, (Singapore: APEC Secretariat, 2025), <https://www.apec.org/publications/2025/10/capacity-building-workshop-on-resilient-supply-chain>.

# From Sadaejuui to Strategic Agency: A South Korea Imagined in Triple-Trilateral Northeast Asia

Hao Nan

## Executive Summary

In early 2026, the “Middle Power Agency” debate has turned into a live policy agenda. In a high-profile World Economic Forum address, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney argued that the global order is entering a moment of “rupture” and that middle powers must build coalitions to resist great-power coercion. Meanwhile, a succession of U.S., European, and Indo-Pacific allies—namely South Korea, France, Canada, the U.K., and Germany—have moved to stabilizing their ties with China without abandoning their U.S. security relationships. For South Korea, this “Middle Power Moment” is structurally sharper: Northeast Asia is increasingly framed around what the paper coins as *Triple Trilateralism*,<sup>1</sup> three overlapping trilateral configurations—U.S.–Japan–ROK deterrence partnership, China–Japan–ROK functional cooperation, and an increasingly visible China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment—teetering on the edge of bloc-to-bloc confrontation, if not outright conflict.

For the Lee Jae Myung administration, the central question is whether South Korea will remain primarily a rule-taker within architectures shaped by others, or whether it can deliberately use these three trilaterals to enhance its own regional strategic agency.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that South Korea can and should move decisively toward the latter. In the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral, Seoul now inherits a revitalized security partnership with Washington, unprecedented economic leverage through a 350-billion-dollar investment

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- 1 Nan Hao, “Triple Trilateralism on Korean Peninsula: Force for Peace or Conflict,” *South China Morning Post*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/asia-opinion/article/3330372/triple-trilateralism-korean-peninsula-force-peace-or-conflict>.
  - 2 By “trilateral,” this paper does not mean three perfectly symmetric alliances. Rather, this paper uses “trilateral” in a graded, functional sense: a relationship becomes meaningfully trilateral when (i) the three parties operate regular three-way mechanisms, (ii) decisions or signalling are increasingly made in three-way formats, and (iii) interactions in one dyad reliably generate externalities for the third. On this scale, the U.S.–Japan–ROK arrangement is moving toward a standing security minilateral; China–Japan–ROK is an institutionalized functional trilateral anchored by the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in Seoul; while China–Russia–DPRK remains closer to an emergent “triangular counter-alignment” built on overlapping bilaterals and episodic coordination. This difference matters: Seoul should push the first two to become more genuinely trilateral, while preventing the third from hardening into one.

package, and political space created by Washington’s increasingly transactional approach to alliances. It can use this combination to lock in reliable extended deterrence while negotiating a greater say over alliance management and over the geographic and functional scope of trilateral cooperation. In the China–Japan–ROK trilateral, an institutionalized secretariat in Seoul and a long record of functional successes give South Korea a platform to act as a cooperation facilitator, re-centring Northeast Asian regionalism on growth and problem-solving rather than zero-sum security competition. In relation to the emerging China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment, Seoul must treat it neither as a caricature of a monolithic “authoritarian axis” nor as a negligible nuisance. It should instead combine enhanced deterrence and strategic pragmatism with efforts to exploit the internal frictions and asymmetries of interest among Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang.

These choices are sharpened by the specific constellation of great-power politics that has emerged in the mid-2020s. President Donald Trump’s second term has re-energized debates over U.S.–China G-2 co-governance or U.S.–China–Russia G-3 coordination, and his administration continues to approach allies primarily through the lens of transaction and burden-sharing. Japan has moved steadily rightward on security issues and is seeking to reinterpret or erode long-standing taboos embedded in its Peace Constitution and non-nuclear principles, prompting China and Russia’s vigilance and countermeasures. Russia and North Korea have upgraded their relationship to a formal treaty alliance, while China, despite some unease, has shifted to acquiesce to North Korea’s nuclear developments and continued to shield it from further multilateral and regional pressure.

Meanwhile, South Korea’s unique strategic niche in Northeast Asia stands out ever more clearly. Despite current hostilities, it remains the only co-ethnic state with North Korea, bound by shared history and culture. It is simultaneously a treaty ally of Washington with newly institutionalized trilateral commitments with Japan, a major economic partner of China with a recent high-level reset, and a state with fewer structural interests that directly clash with Moscow—so long as it avoids gratuitously linking Ukraine to Northeast Asia. This unusual mix of pressures and opportunities means the Lee administration faces not only constraints, but a genuine strategic window in which middle-power agency could produce outsized effects—especially in stabilizing Northeast Asia, which is teetering on the edge of bloc-to-bloc confrontation, if not outright conflict.

Three core propositions guide the analysis. First, the three trilaterals are not simply parallel blocs; they overlap, interact, and impose partial constraints on each other. Policy in one trilateral inevitably shapes Seoul’s room for maneuver in and interactions with the other two. Second, none of these configurations is fully consolidated or pre-ordained. All remain contingent on domestic politics in the major powers, the trajectory of the U.S.–China rivalry, and the evolution of the North Korean nuclear program. Third, South Korea itself—especially under a Lee administration rhetorically committed to strategic autonomy and to a more balanced and pragmatic diplomacy—has meaningful agency over how these trilaterals evolve.

The paper makes five main recommendations for the Lee administration.

1. **Calibrating U.S.–Japan–ROK with Limits:** Lee administration should continue to consolidate and institutionalize U.S.–Japan–ROK security cooperation while insisting on more formalized and coordinated consultation mechanisms on the scope and functions of the trilateral, clearer red lines regarding the use of South Korean territory and forces, and explicit recognition of Seoul’s priorities on the Korean Peninsula.
2. **Reviving China–Japan–ROK for Momentum:** Lee administration should mount an energetic effort to revive China–Japan–ROK functional cooperation, using the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat and Korean-facilitated momentum to relaunch practical initiatives on supply chains, climate, public health, and digital governance, with coordination that links to wider ASEAN-led regional and global economic cooperation mechanisms.
3. **Fracturing China–Russia–DPRK with Incentives:** Lee administration should work with the U.S. and Japan to raise the costs of Russia–DPRK strategic and defense cooperation and tighten monitoring of sanctions evasion, while in parallel using quiet diplomacy to persuade Beijing—and even Moscow—not to allow a fully militarized trilateral counter-alignment to emerge.
4. **Upholding Middle-Power-Posture across Domains:** Lee administration should embed these trilateral strategies in a broader middle-power posture that diversifies South Korea’s partnerships, strengthens indigenous defense and technological capabilities, and frames Seoul’s diplomacy as that of a regional stabilizer rather than a mere U.S. or Western camp follower.
5. **Nurturing Regional-Collective-Security with Entrepreneurship:** Lee administration should complement these trilateral tactics with a longer-horizon region-wide collective security initiative: launching a Northeast Asian Conference on Security and Cooperation as a step-by-step dialogue and confidence-building process that could, over time, evolve into a Northeast Asian Organization for Security and Cooperation.

## Introduction

In early 2026, “Middle-Power Agency” has moved from conference rhetoric to a live policy agenda. Mark Carney’s Davos intervention framed the international order as entering a moment of “rupture” and urged middle powers to build coalitions against great-power coercion. Meanwhile, a visible wave of hedging diplomacy—France, the UK, Germany, and South Korea among them—has sought to stabilize ties with China without abandoning U.S. security relationships. For Seoul, however, this is not a fashionable slogan. It is a question of whether Northeast Asia’s tightening triangles will again reduce Korea to an object of others’ bargains, or whether it can shape the terms of managed coexistence.

That question is sharpened by history. For much of the modern era, the Korean Peninsula was treated less as an autonomous subject than as a contested frontier of great-power politics, and Korean statecraft often took the form of *Sadaejjuui* (사대주의, 事大主義)—accommodating a dominant power to survive—thereby limiting strategic agency. Wars between imperial Japan, Tsarist Russia, and Qing China were fought on and over Korea; the division of the peninsula after 1945 crystallized Cold War fault lines; and the 1950–53 Korean War made them lethal. Democratization and economic ascent expanded Seoul’s options, yet the North Korean threat and the U.S.–ROK alliance continued to narrow its room for maneuver.<sup>3</sup>

The regional environment that the current Lee Jae Myung administration faces is at once more dangerous and more fluid than that faced by his predecessors. The U.S.–China relationship has hardened into a strategic rivalry, yet it is increasingly managed through episodic bargaining for bounded coexistence. In parallel, President Donald Trump’s second presidency has revived speculation about G-2 co-governance with Beijing and even triangular coordination with Moscow on strategic issues—reinforcing the sense that great-power politics may be shaped as much by transactional bargains as by alliance commitments. Meanwhile, Russia’s war in Ukraine has pushed Moscow closer to Beijing and, more directly, to Pyongyang; Japan has embarked on its most significant security policy shift in decades; and North Korea has consolidated its status as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state with more enhanced conventional capabilities. In short, Northeast Asia is being reshaped by a volatile mix of rivalry and deal-making, making the region both more perilous and more malleable.<sup>4</sup>

These shifts have not simply intensified existing two-way relationships; they have rearranged the geometry of regional interaction. Today, three partially overlapping trilaterals are emerging as defining features of Northeast Asia’s strategic landscape. The first is the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral, which has evolved from a loose alignment anchored in U.S. bilateral treaties into a more structured framework for trilateral security deterrence, missile warning, and operational planning. The second is the China–Japan–ROK trilateral, initially a vehicle for functional economic and technical cooperation that has alternated between periods of dynamism and paralysis. The third is the emerging China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment, increasingly visible since Beijing’s military parade on September 3, 2025,

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3 Victor D. Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture,” *Asia Policy* 11 (2011): 27–50; Muhui Zhang, “Growing Activism as Cooperation Facilitator: China–Japan–Korea Trilateralism and Korea’s Middle Power Diplomacy,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 309–337.

4 Doug Bandow, Brian Blankenship, Mireya Solís, and Thomas Wright, “Are America’s Alliances a Source of Strength or a Burden as It Competes with China?,” *Brookings Institution*, May 15, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/are-americas-alliances-a-source-of-strength-or-a-burden-as-it-competes-with-china/>; Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Ties That Bind: Why Asian Alliances Will Survive Trump,” *War on the Rocks*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/ties-that-bind-why-asian-alliances-will-survive-trump>.

which produced a rare and deliberate image of Chinese and Russian leaders standing alongside Kim Jong Un—projecting political cover and a shared posture of anti-pressure solidarity.<sup>5</sup>

Concretely, the U.S.–Japan–ROK configuration is now trilateral, not just because the three leaders meet regularly, but because it has begun to produce standing three-way coordination: ministerial meetings, regular consultations, real-time missile-warning data-sharing, and routine multi-domain exercises. The China–Japan–ROK configuration is trilateral in an even more literal sense: it has a physical permanent secretariat in Seoul since 2011, a dense schedule of ministerial and working-level meetings, and an array of joint projects in finance, trade, public health, environment, and people-to-people exchange. By contrast, China–Russia–DPRK is trilateral mainly in its strategic effects: it is still built primarily on three bilateralisms, namely the Beijing–Pyongyang treaty alliance, Moscow–Pyongyang treaty alliance, and Beijing–Moscow Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination, but the convergence of those bilateral ties can generate de facto three-way counter-pressure on Seoul and on the U.S. alliance system.

In this context, the central research question of this paper is how South Korea can use these trilateral configurations to enhance its own strategic agency and security rather than be passively shaped by them.<sup>6</sup> More concretely, it asks how the Lee administration can strengthen deterrence and alliance cohesion while avoiding entrapment in maximalist U.S. strategies toward China and Russia; how it can revive regional functionalism without undercutting its alliance commitments; and how it can respond to the northern counter-alignment without helping to consolidate it into a rigid bloc.

Answering these questions matters not only for South Korea’s national interest, but also for the broader stability of Northeast Asia, where, as the Russia–Ukraine war potentially settles into a lower-intensity phase, the region could become the next major-power theatre of conflict, driven by three flashpoints: the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait.

## **Context: The Emerging Triple Trilateralized Northeast Asia**

Asia’s regional order has long mixed hierarchy with fragmentation. During the early Cold War, Washington avoided a NATO-like multilateral alliance in Asia and instead built a

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5 Hao, “Triple Trilateralism on Korean Peninsula.”

6 Nan Hao, “South Korea’s Diplomacy More Myopic Than Pragmatic,” East Asia Forum, September 24, 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/09/24/south-koreas-diplomacy-more-myopic-than-pragmatic/>.

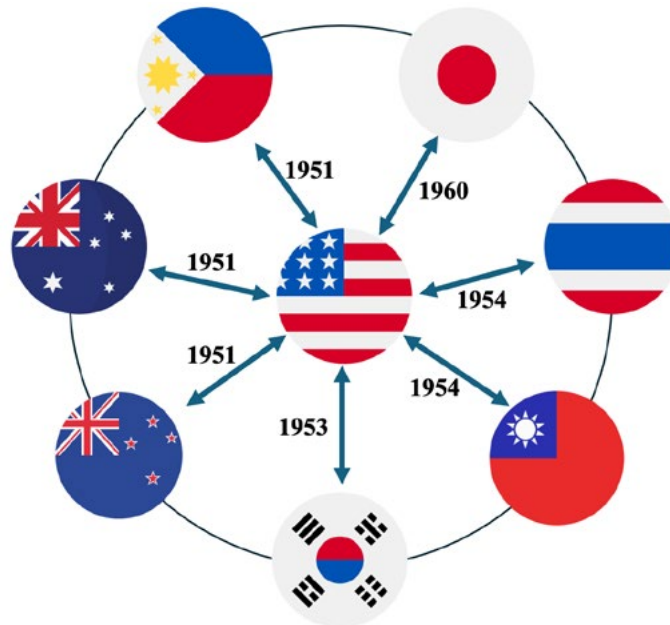
hub-and-spokes system of bilateral treaties, in part because unresolved historical disputes and divergent threat perceptions made collective defense politically costly. Over time, this bilateral core was overlaid by proliferating mini-lateral and multilateral arrangements, creating a dense but uneven “patchwork” of security and functional cooperation. The “triple trilateral” structure in Northeast Asia should be read as a new geometry inside this patchwork: three overlapping triads that can either harden into rival blocs or be shaped—through selective trilateralization and cross-trilateral signaling—into a more managed regional equilibrium.<sup>7</sup>

Within this broader order, the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral has long been present, but its utility has been constrained by the lack of a formal institution. The U.S.–ROK Mutual Defense Treaty and the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty created legal obligations between Washington and each ally, but there is no treaty linking Seoul and Tokyo. Cooperation between the two U.S. allies has historically been episodic and driven by specific crises, such as the coordination over North Korea policy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Domestic politics in both countries, particularly over historical grievances and territorial disputes, repeatedly undermined trilateral efforts. Only in the last decade, and especially since the 2023 Camp David summit, has the trilateral acquired more regularized summitry, joint statements, and standing mechanisms for missile-warning, data-sharing, and large-scale exercises. Most recently, the three governments agreed to establish a Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat housed at South Korea’s Foreign Ministry to support implementation and continuity.<sup>8</sup>

*The “triple trilateral” structure in Northeast Asia should be read as a new geometry inside this patchwork: three overlapping triads that can either harden into rival blocs or be shaped—through selective trilateralization and cross-trilateral signaling—into a more managed regional equilibrium.*

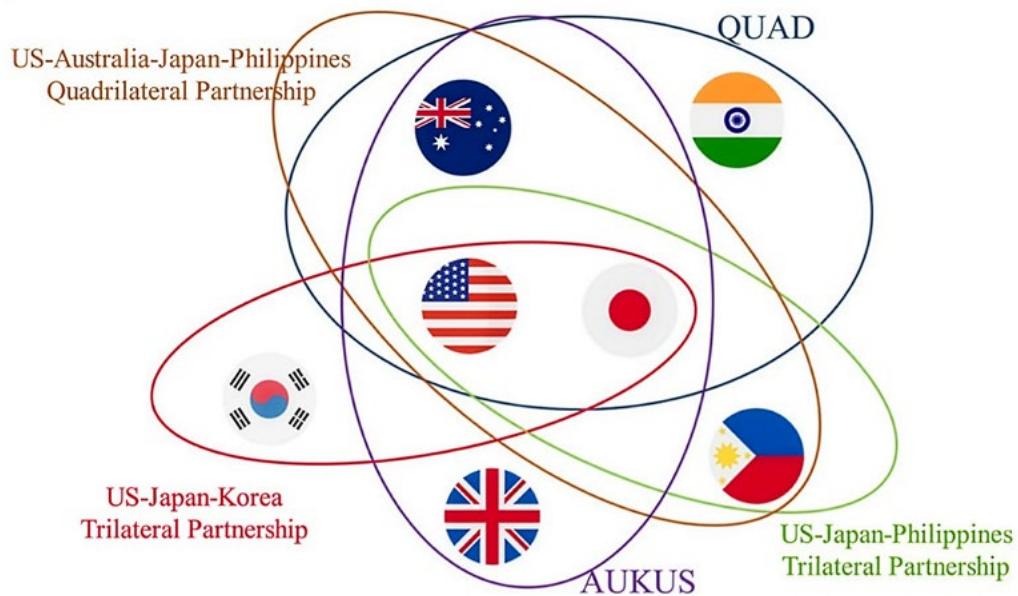
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- 7 Amitav Acharya, *Why Is There No NATO in Asia? The Normative Origins of Asian Multilateralism*, Working Paper 05-05 (Cambridge, MA: Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 2005), <https://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/publications/why-there-no-nato-asia-normative-origins-asian-multilateralism>; Victor D. Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture,” *Asia Policy* 11 (2011): 27–50.
- 8 Kuyoun Chung, “Pathways for U.S.–ROK–Japan Cooperation: Strengthening Trilateral Ties amid Uncertainty,” *Asia Policy* 20, no. 1 (January 2025); “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” The White House, August 18, 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>; “Major Takeaways from US, Japan, South Korea Summit,” *Reuters*, August 18, 2023; “Trilateral Secretariat Office with US, Japan Opened in Seoul,” *Korea.net*, November 21, 2024, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/policies/view?articleId=262019>.

**FIGURE 1. The hub-and-spokes system of US alliances in Asia-Pacific**



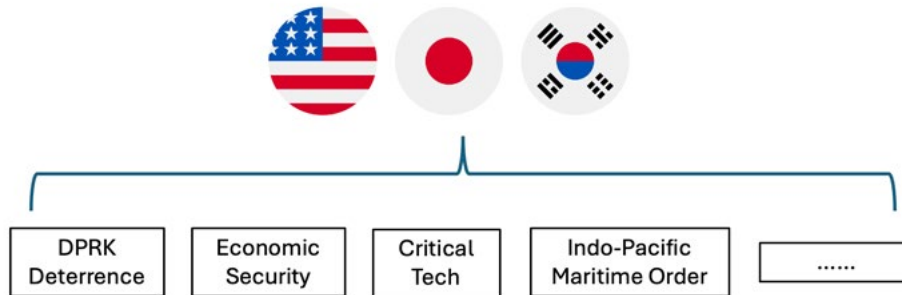
Source: Drawn by author

**FIGURE 2. US-led regional groupings centering in the Indo-Pacific region**



Source: Drawn by author

**FIGURE 3. The key cooperation areas of U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral**

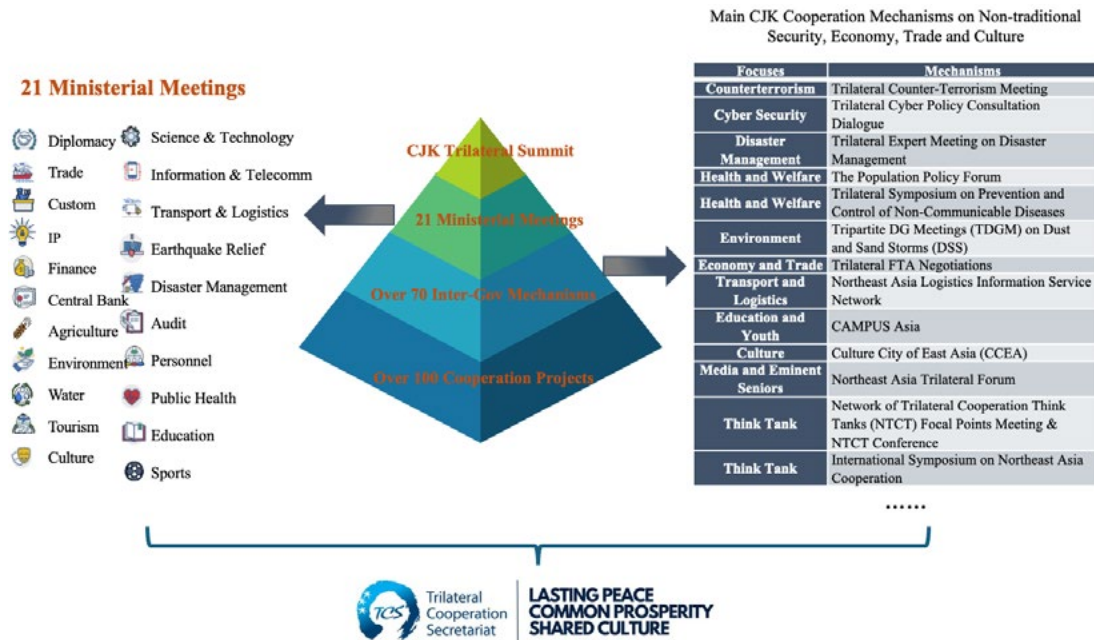


Source: Drawn by author

The China–Japan–ROK (CJK) trilateral, by contrast, is mainly driven by two financial crises in 1997 and 2008 and has its legal and institutional center of gravity in Seoul. Beginning in 1999 as informal meetings on the sidelines of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) processes, CJK cooperation evolved into independent trilateral summits since 2008 and the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in 2011, headquartered in Seoul. For a time, this trilateral generated a dense agenda: finance, trade, supply chains, disaster management, public health, and cultural exchange under a pyramidal system topped by a supposedly annual Trilateral Summit, 21 ministerial meetings, and over 70 intergovernmental mechanisms. South Korean diplomats often played an entrepreneurial role, proposing new projects and hosting meetings. However, CJK cooperation has been vulnerable to exogenous shocks, including but not limited to maritime disputes, flare-ups over history, and, more recently, escalating U.S.–China tensions, which have repeatedly derailed or delayed planned summits.<sup>9</sup>

9 Muhui Zhang, “Growing Activism as Cooperation Facilitator: China–Japan–Korea Trilateral Cooperation,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 309–37.

**FIGURE 4. The pyramidic system of China-Japan-ROK trilateral**

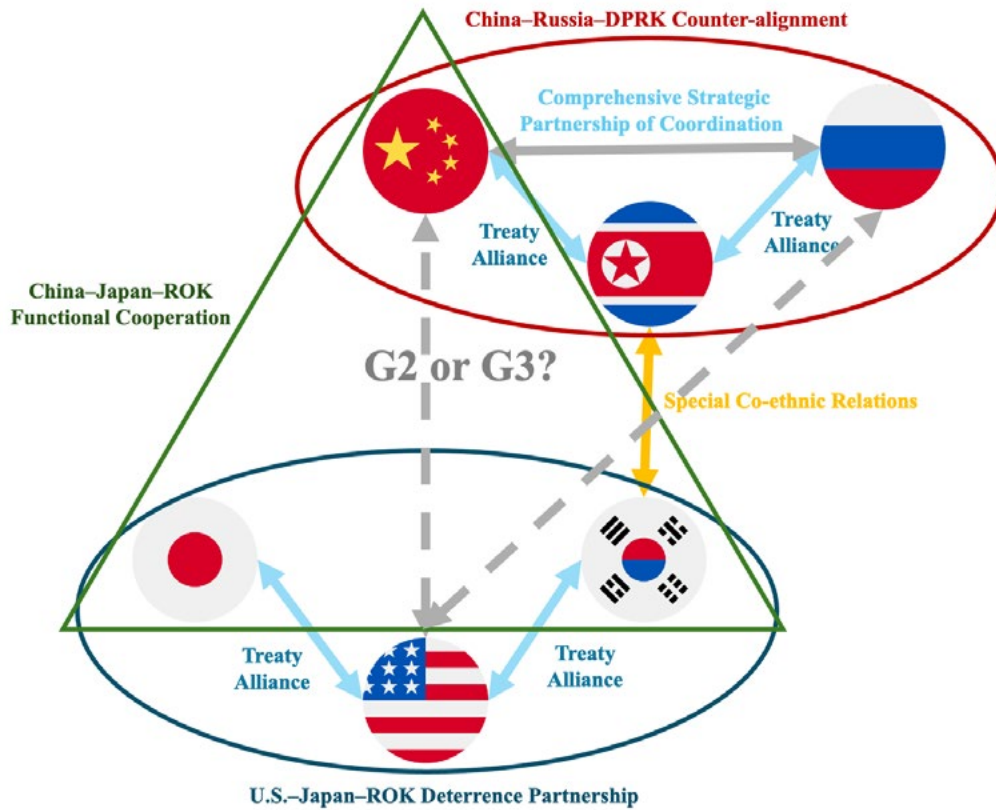


Source: Cited from CJK Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat internal documents

The China–Russia–DPRK configuration lacks the institutionalization of a true bloc and is better described as a counter-alignment. China retains a longstanding but often overlooked alliance treaty with North Korea yet has frequently been ambivalent about Pyongyang’s provocations and has backed UN sanctions after nuclear tests. Russia’s links with the DPRK weakened after the Soviet collapse and only deepened after 2014—and especially after 2022—culminating in a Russia–DPRK mutual defense treaty in 2024 as Moscow faced Western isolation over Ukraine. Recently, all three have converged in opposing U.S. sanctions, criticizing regional military deployments, and framing U.S. actions as threats to stability. Still, there is no formal trilateral defense treaty or institutionalized coordination, and each has reasons to avoid over-commitment given historical grievances and divergent long-term interests.<sup>10</sup> In practice, it is a triangle of overlapping bilaterals whose convergence can generate three-way effects without trilateral institutions.

10 Elizabeth Wishnick, “Russia–China–North Korea Relations: Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis,” Asia Program, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 25, 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russia-china-north-korea-relations-obstacles-to-a-trilateral-axis/>; Daniel R. DePetris, “Russia–DPRK Relations: Strategic Partnership or Opportunistic Alliance,” *38 North*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/10/russia-dprk-relations-strategic-partnership-or-opportunistic-alliance/>.

**FIGURE 5. The triple trilaterals in northeast asia**



Source: Drawn by author

Taken together, the three trilaterals are best understood as a coupled system rather than three parallel tracks. Moves that deepen U.S.–Japan–ROK deterrence—especially when framed as values-based bloc formation or when they expand beyond peninsula contingencies—tend to strengthen the political narrative and strategic incentives behind a China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment. Conversely, visible progress in China–Japan–ROK functional cooperation can serve as economic and diplomatic ballast: it reassures Beijing that Seoul’s regional role is not reducible to containment signaling, provides a channel to de-conflict crises, and raises the opportunity costs of treating Northeast Asia as a single security battlefield. The counter-alignment, in turn, feeds back into the other two: Russia–DPRK military cooperation and China’s diplomatic shielding reduce Pyongyang’s perceived costs of escalation, which pushes Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul toward tighter trilateral institutionalization; that tightening can then spill over into Sino-Japanese distrust and further complicate CJK deliverables. For Seoul, “strategic agency” therefore means managing spillovers—designing actions in one trilateral with a clear theory of how they will be read, priced, and countered in the other two.

Against this backdrop, the Lee administration brings its own priorities and faces certain constraints. Lee’s political brand emphasizes social welfare and peace on the peninsula, and he has demonstrated an inclination to favor engagement with North Korea and a more balanced approach to China than his conservative predecessor. At the same time, he inherits enhanced U.S.–ROK alliance commitments, institutionalized U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral security partnership, extended nuclear deterrence frameworks, and a domestic public opinion that has grown more wary of both North Korea and China. The task is therefore not to abandon existing frameworks, but to use them more strategically.

## Argument: Triple Trilaterals for South Korea’s Strategic Agency

The heart of the argument is that the three trilaterals together define the boundary of South Korea’s strategic environment, but do not necessarily dictate its choices. The trilaterals are classic examples of what analysts describe as “nested mini-lateralism”: small-group arrangements that sit within, and partially reshape, broader regional orders.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral is nested within the hub-and-spokes alliance system and interacts with nuclear and conventional deterrence regimes. The China–Japan–ROK trilateral is nested within East Asian economic regionalism and the wider trade and investment networks that link Northeast Asia to ASEAN, Europe, and North America. The China–Russia–DPRK configuration is nested within an emerging, but still fluid, pattern of strategic coordination among the Global

*The heart of the argument is that the three trilaterals together define the boundary of South Korea’s strategic environment, but do not necessarily dictate its choices.*

South (or Global Majority) resisting U.S. and Western pressure. By understanding these nesting relationships, Seoul can better assess where incremental moves will generate positive spillovers and where they will trigger counterreactions.

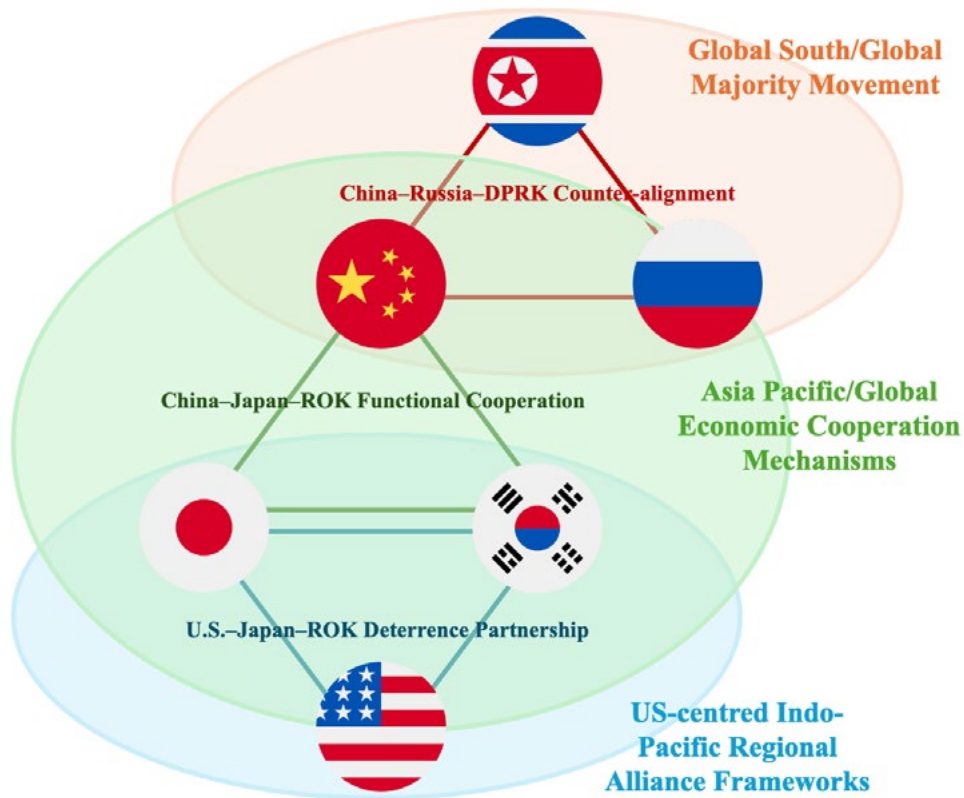
The payoff from making the first two configurations, namely U.S.–Japan–ROK and China–Japan–ROK, “more trilateral” is not rhetorical. Deeper trilateral arrangement reduces transaction costs across the three capitals, makes crisis communication faster and more effective, and prevents a single bilateral dispute from paralyzing cooperation. In the security

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11 Vinod K. Aggarwal, “Nesting Minilateralism in the Asia-Pacific,” *Global Asia* 19, no. 3 (September 2024), [https://www.globalasia.org/v19no3/cover/nesting-minilateralism-in-the-asia-pacific\\_vinod-k-aggarwal](https://www.globalasia.org/v19no3/cover/nesting-minilateralism-in-the-asia-pacific_vinod-k-aggarwal); Victor D. Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture,” *Asia Policy* 11, no. 1 (January 2011): 27–50.

domain, trilateral consultation and planning increase deterrence credibility and lower the risk of miscalculation by Pyongyang. On economics and functional cooperation affairs, trilateral delivery creates durable constituencies and shared standards that are harder to unwind amid political swings. The requirements are also real—deeper trilateral arrangements require domestic political capital, bureaucratic bandwidth, and careful agenda discipline—but the strategic benefit will be a more predictable operating environment for Seoul and a wider set of levers to shape, rather than merely absorb, regional dynamics.

**FIGURE 6. The three trilaterals in the respective nested multilateralism**



Source: Drawn by author

In the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral, recent developments have pushed the configuration closer to a genuine security bloc. The 2023 Camp David summit enshrined regular leaders’ meetings, committed the parties to consult in the event of crises, and set out a multi-year schedule of joint exercises. At the operational level, trilateral missile warning and anti-submarine warfare drills have become more frequent, though the Lee administration

has been scaling down its participation.<sup>12</sup> South Korea's decision, with U.S. approval, to move ahead on nuclear-powered submarines further deepens its interoperability with U.S. and Japanese navies and signals a willingness to shoulder more of the regional security burden. Meanwhile, Seoul's massive investment pledges in the U.S. semiconductor, electric vehicle, and shipbuilding sectors have made it a central economic partner in Washington's de-risking and industrial policy agenda.

Yet this consolidation occurs in parallel with a more transactional U.S. approach. The risk for South Korea is that alliance commitments become contingent on continued South Korean political and financial concessions, and that Seoul is pressured to align fully with Washington's China strategy, including in areas where Seoul's priority diverges. A key requirement for agency, therefore, is institutionalized voice. Seoul needs predictable, formal mechanisms to shape alliance strategy rather than relying on ad hoc leader-level understandings. It also needs a clear articulation of national red lines, such as opposition to permanently stationing certain classes of offensive weapons targeting China on Korean soil, or to being automatically drawn into a cross-Taiwan-Strait contingency absent direct threats to the peninsula. Within those boundaries, however, the trilateral gives Seoul leverage it previously lacked. As one of three indispensable nodes in U.S. regional strategy, South Korea can bargain for specific concessions—on technology sharing, operational control timelines, or economic cooperation—in exchange for taking on more visible and managerial roles in trilateral deterrence.

In the China–Japan–ROK trilateral, the problem is different. The constraints here flow less from alliance politics and, at least for now, more from the fragility of trust between China and Japan and the spillover of their rivalry into regional forums. For South Korea, the opportunity lies in the functional nature of CJK cooperation. Because the trilateral is formally focused on economics, environment, and people-to-people ties, it offers a comparatively apolitical arena in which Seoul can lead. Constantly pushing for regularized CJK summits and working groups would allow the Lee administration to demonstrate that Northeast Asia is not pre-destined for permanent security confrontation, and that concrete gains—increased tourism exchanges, coordinated pandemic preparedness, more resilient supply chains—are still possible even amid strategic rivalry.<sup>13</sup>

To make this meaningful, however, Seoul must avoid treating CJK cooperation merely as a symbol. It should use its role as the host of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat to generate tangible, headline-worthy projects. Joint infrastructure investments in Southeast Asia, collaborative research on green technologies, harmonization of digital trade standards, and pilot programs on cross-border carbon pricing are all candidates. Each creates

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12 "Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement."

13 Muhui Zhang, "Growing Activism as Cooperation Facilitator: China–Japan–Korea Trilateralism and Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 309–337.

constituencies in China and Japan with a stake in continued cooperation, thereby increasing the political costs of walking away from the trilateral. At the same time, South Korea should be disciplined in keeping hard security off the CJK agenda, precisely to preserve it as a space resilient to shocks in U.S.–China and Sino-Japan relations.

The China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment presents the most immediate security challenge. Russia’s deepening military cooperation with North Korea and China’s willingness to maintain Pyongyang’s economic survival have jointly reduced the cost to Kim Jong Un of continued testing and escalation. In the worst case, this trilateral could evolve into a more formalized alignment in which Moscow supplies advanced technologies, Beijing provides economic lifelines and diplomatic cover, and Pyongyang contributes manpower and nuclear pressure on the U.S. alliance system in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, the trilateral is riven with contradictions. While the recent dynamics arguably suggest that China has shown greater acquiescence to North Korea’s Russia-aided nuclear developments, China remains uninterested in a major war on the peninsula or a nuclear confrontation in the region in which North Korea’s actions might trigger regional proliferation or greater U.S. deployments. Russia’s view of North Korea is largely instrumental and tied to its confrontation with the West over Ukraine; it is unclear whether Moscow would be willing or able to underwrite Pyongyang’s security indefinitely. North Korea, for its part, jealously guards its autonomy and has historically oscillated between patrons. These fissures give Seoul room to maneuver. By working closely with the U.S. and Japan to expose and punish the most destabilizing forms of cooperation—such as ballistic missile, nuclear submarine or satellite technology transfers—while simultaneously engaging Beijing and Moscow for closer communication and clear messaging that an unconstrained counter-alignment will inevitably provoke stronger U.S.–ROK–Japan responses, South Korea can try to bound the depth and scope of the counter-alignment.

Finally, the interactions between the three trilaterals matter. Moves that reinforce the U.S.–Japan–ROK deterrent can, if framed purely in ideological terms, harden the narratives that sustain the China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment. Conversely, visible South Korean leadership in CJK functionalism can help reassure Beijing and Tokyo that Seoul is committed to regional public goods, not simply to bloc politics. The challenge for the Lee administration is therefore to calibrate its actions so that strengthening one trilateral does not inadvertently close off options in another.

*Moves that reinforce the U.S.–Japan–ROK deterrent can, if framed purely in ideological terms, harden the narratives that sustain the China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment.*

14 Wishnick, “Russia–China–North Korea Relations.”

## Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, the Lee administration should pursue a strategy that makes full use of—rather than simply being used by—the three trilateral configurations. The purpose is practical risk reduction and leverage maximization in a Northeast Asia defined by overlapping security and economic triangles.

### Calibrating U.S.–Japan–ROK with Limits

The U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral remains the cornerstone of South Korea’s national security. Seoul should lock in the gains of recent years by institutionalizing trilateral consultation and crisis-management arrangements: regular National Security Council (NSC) and defense principals meetings, joint threat assessments and contingency playbooks, and a routinized crisis-consultation channel that works under time pressure. Guidance should be updated to reflect South Korea’s enhanced capabilities and to clarify roles across scenarios—from limited provocations to larger contingencies.

Institutionalization must be paired with boundary-setting. Seoul should communicate—privately if not publicly—limits on out-of-peninsula missions: niche contributions to wider maritime security are feasible, but there should be no automatic participation in a Taiwan contingency that does not directly implicate Korean security. Hosting offensive systems that Beijing would view as primarily China-targeted should require a separate domestic decision, not routine alliance implementation.

### Reviving China–Japan–ROK for Functionalism

Even if Tokyo, the current rotational chair country, cannot easily deliver a summit amid Sino-Japanese tensions, Seoul should sustain momentum through ministerial and working-level meetings, including linkages to CJK+X, ASEAN+3, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). If a leaders’ summit is feasible, it should be prepared through intensive shuttle diplomacy and limited to a small set of realistic deliverables: renewed commitment to accelerate trilateral FTA negotiations, a focused climate-cooperation package, and a working group on critical supply-chain resilience. The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat should be tasked to restart lapsed mechanisms and to drive time-bound initiatives with measurable outputs.

CJK efforts must complement—not undercut—South Korea’s alliance commitments. That requires transparency with Washington and a disciplined agenda centered on economic and “soft-security” cooperation (public health, climate resilience, disaster response) that does not cut across core U.S. interests. Where possible, Seoul should frame CJK outcomes as supportive of regional public goods that Washington can endorse, reducing the risk of misread drift-away from the U.S.

## **Fracturing China–Russia–DPRK with Incentives**

Seoul should prepare for a sustained period in which Pyongyang feels less constrained by sanctions and isolation. The Lee administration should prioritize intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to track North Korean modernization and detect suspicious Russia–DPRK transfers. Simultaneously, Seoul should communicate with Beijing or even Moscow not to treat every U.S.–ROK–Japan security step as inherently anti-China or anti-Russia. By clarifying the defensive logic of specific deployments and exercises—and offering practical incident-prevention discussions in surrounding air and maritime spaces—Seoul can keep open the possibility of Chinese and Russian cooperation in crisis management.

Meanwhile, punitive signaling from the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral alone is unlikely to shift Beijing or Moscow’s DPRK policy. Seoul, therefore, needs credible risk-reduction “carrots” aimed at keeping the triangle loose, transactional, and internally inconsistent. For China, this means sustained trust-building: restoring high-level strategic dialogue; using maritime-affairs mechanisms to manage Yellow Sea frictions; expanding feasible economic cooperation; and delivering disciplined reassurance that trilateral steps remain peninsula-focused, including careful Taiwan messaging and transparency on exercises, to reduce misperception and disincentivize Beijing to lean on Pyongyang in a crisis. With Russia, Seoul should pursue phased, low-profile re-engagement consistent with sanctions: reopening working-level channels, exploring humanitarian or technical cooperation where permitted, and downplaying symbolism that ties Korea policy to Ukraine.

Seoul should also keep one hand extended toward Pyongyang. Humanitarian offers, limited dialogue proposals on disaster response or public health, and renewed support for family reunions are low-cost off-ramps that signal restraint; repeated rebuffs would strengthen South Korea’s position in allied and global debates and undercut narratives blaming Seoul for escalation.

## **Upholding Middle-Power-Posture across Domains**

Beyond these trilateral-specific steps, the Lee administration should embed its policy in a wider effort to bolster South Korea’s status as a middle power with global reach. That means deepening ties with ASEAN, G-7, G-20, India, Australia, and the European Union, and even the BRICS; continuing to expand South Korea’s role as a provider of development assistance and peacekeeping; and investing in the indigenous defense and technological base that underpins true strategic autonomy. It also means cultivating domestic consensus around a realistic understanding of South Korea’s security environment, including the dual necessity of a strong alliance with the U.S. and of avoiding unnecessary enmity with China and Russia.

## Nurturing Regional Collective Security with Entrepreneurship

Seoul should treat Northeast Asia's lack of an inclusive, standing multilateral security institution as both a structural vulnerability and a long-term opening for South Korea's middle-power entrepreneurial agency. Unlike Europe—where the Cold War ended amid a dense architecture of arms control and confidence-building—Northeast Asia remains built on unresolved Cold War foundations: the Korean War persists under an armistice rather than a peace treaty, and no region-wide security framework reliably convenes all key stakeholders.

South Korea can draw practical inspiration from Finland's strategic agency along Europe's pathway from the Finland-hosted 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and Helsinki Final Act to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) creation in 1995. The transferable lesson is not that Northeast Asia can replicate European institutions wholesale, but that a vulnerable state can indeed exert its strategic agency to shape its environment by convening an inclusive forum that begins with confidence-building measures and only gradually institutionalizes.

For Seoul, a Northeast Asian Conference on Security and Cooperation could be framed as a pragmatic, non-ideological risk-reduction platform that complements—rather than replaces—alliances and mini-laterals. An initial agenda could be organized into three baskets: (1) politico-military risk reduction (hotlines, air/sea incident protocols, notification of major exercises, and military-to-military contacts); (2) non-traditional security cooperation (disaster response, public health, nuclear safety, and environmental monitoring); and (3) a long-run peace and arms-control track that preserves optionality to revive peninsula-focused negotiations when conditions permit.

Participation could start with China, the U.S., Japan, Russia, and the two Koreas, leveraging venues such as the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue and the Six-Party Talks legacy as steppingstones. If the forum proves useful, Seoul can press for modest institutionalization—a small secretariat, standing working groups, and a crisis-consultation mechanism—as early building blocks toward a Northeast Asian OSCE analogue.<sup>15</sup>

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15 The idea is inspired by Tatsushi Arai, "Toward a Northeast Asian Conference on Peace and Security," *Transcend Media Service*, January 12, 2026, <https://www.transcend.org/tms/2026/01/toward-a-northeast-asian-conference-on-peace-and-security/>.

## Conclusion

The three trilateral configurations that structure Northeast Asia today present South Korea with both constraints and opportunities. The U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral offers security and leverage but carries the risk of entrapment in broader great-power rivalry. The China–Japan–ROK trilateral offers an avenue for functional leadership but is fragile and easily derailed. The China–Russia–DPRK counter-alignment poses serious security threats but also contains internal contradictions that can be managed and potentially exploited.

A Lee administration that recognizes these realities and acts with a clear, calibrated strategy can move South Korea from being primarily an object of other powers’ designs toward being a genuine shaper of the regional order. That will not eliminate the peninsula’s vulnerability or the uncertainty of great-power politics, but it will maximize Seoul’s ability to protect its interests, uphold its values, and contribute to a more stable Northeast Asia—one that is otherwise edging toward bloc confrontation and escalating conflict.

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# When Borders Shape Power: Migration Governance and the Future of Korean Statecraft

Soo Jung Kim

## Executive Summary

South Korea's migration governance has entered a structural turning point. What was once treated primarily as a supplementary labor policy now intersects directly with alliance credibility, industrial integration, demographic sustainability, and regional diplomatic perception. Migration policy is no longer peripheral to economic management or social administration. It has become strategic infrastructure embedded in the core architecture of South Korean statecraft.

In September 2025, U.S. immigration authorities conducted what was described as the largest single-site workplace enforcement operation in recent history at the Hyundai-LG Energy Solution electric vehicle battery plant in Georgia.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 475 workers linked to Korean firms were detained in disputes over visa classifications involving B-1 business status and visa waiver entries. Following bilateral consultations, U.S. authorities agreed to clarify the application of short-term visa categories for Korean technical personnel, signaling the sensitivity of mobility governance within alliance management.<sup>2</sup> The episode triggered diplomatic consultations between Seoul and Washington, including emergency task force meetings convened by the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and high-level vice-ministerial consultations with the U.S. State Department.<sup>3</sup>

The Georgia incident did not represent a rupture in the U.S.-ROK alliance. It revealed a structural vulnerability. At current levels of economic integration, workforce mobility governance has become inseparable from alliance management. Industrial localization under U.S. policy frameworks requires not only capital deployment but sustained cross-border technical mobility. When visa classification disputes escalate into large-scale enforcement

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1 "US Immigration Agents Arrest Hundreds at Hyundai Plant, Mostly Koreans," *Reuters*, September 6, 2025; "Homeland Security Official Says 475 People Were Detained During an Immigration Raid in Georgia," AP News, September 6, 2025.

2 Ibid.

3 Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "MOFA Task Force Meeting on U.S. Immigration Operation at Korean Company Site in Georgia," 2025; Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Outcome of ROK-U.S. Vice Foreign Ministers' Meeting," 2025.

actions, operational continuity, investor confidence, and diplomatic communication channels are simultaneously affected.

This event occurred amid unprecedented bilateral exposure. Korean financial assets in the United States reached USD 804.6 billion in 2023, accounting for 42.1 percent of Korea’s total external financial assets—the highest recorded share on record.<sup>4</sup> In 2024, Korean firms announced approximately USD 21.5 billion in new U.S. investment projects, making South Korea the largest source of newly announced foreign direct investment into the United States that year<sup>5</sup>. These flows are closely associated with incentives embedded in the Inflation Reduction Act and related U.S. industrial policy measures, which have reshaped supply-chain localization strategies among Korean conglomerates.<sup>6</sup> Capital integration has deepened rapidly, but capital does not move alone. Engineers, installation specialists, compliance officers, and technical supervisors must move with it. Mobility has become an operational pillar of alliance-linked industrial strategy.

Domestically, structural pressures significantly magnify this exposure. South Korea is confronting one of the most severe demographic contractions among advanced industrial economies. Persistently low fertility and rapid population aging are no longer abstract projections; they are material constraints reshaping labor markets, fiscal sustainability, and regional development patterns. Migration has consequently shifted from a supplementary labor policy to a structural component of economic continuity and demographic stabilization. Foreign residents are no longer peripheral actors in the national economy. They are embedded in production networks, local governance systems, educational institutions, and community life. Migration governance now intersects directly with long-term social incorporation and institutional adaptation.

*Migration has consequently shifted from a supplementary labor policy to a structural component of economic continuity and demographic stabilization.*

Across Asia, mobility governance has simultaneously acquired reputational weight. South Korea’s foreign resident population includes substantial communities from Southeast Asia

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4 Bank of Korea, *Regional and Currency-Based International Investment Position (Preliminary) 2023* (Seoul: Bank of Korea, June 25, 2024).

5 “S. Korea Becomes Top Investor in U.S. for 1st Time,” *Chosun Ilbo*, September 20, 2024. <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/09/20/JHIR4KYTRVHRNJ5JLFOPE6P5D4/>.

6 U.S. Department of Commerce, *Foreign Direct Investment in the United States Report* (Washington, DC, 2024); Korean Economic Institute of America (KEIA), *The United States and South Korea: A Vital Economic Partnership for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC, 2025).

whose presence is visible across manufacturing zones, agricultural regions, and urban neighborhoods. In this context, border enforcement, visa renewal procedures, and workplace regulation carry diplomatic implications. Administrative decisions made at airports, inspection sites, or immigration offices do not remain confined to bureaucratic discretion. They circulate through digital networks, diaspora communities, and partner-state media ecosystems, shaping perceptions of fairness, hierarchy, and reciprocity. Migration governance, therefore, operates as a form of everyday diplomacy, where procedural consistency reinforces—or undermines—regional trust.

The greatest risk facing South Korea is not migration itself. It is policy drift—reactive adjustments, fragmented inter-ministerial coordination, and politicized volatility—that gradually erodes alliance reliability and regional trust. Under conditions of deep capital concentration in the United States and accelerating demographic contraction at home, unmanaged drift compounds vulnerability.

To prevent cumulative erosion and embed migration governance within long-term strategic planning, this paper advances five policy recommendations.

**First,** Seoul and Washington should institutionalize a bilateral mobility coordination mechanism within the alliance framework. Regularized consultation on visa interpretation, compliance expectations, and sector-specific mobility needs would reduce the risk that enforcement actions escalate into diplomatic friction.

**Second,** South Korea should establish a consolidated migration governance authority capable of integrating labor forecasting, visa allocation planning, enforcement transparency, and high-skilled screening coordination. Fragmented institutional responsibility increases the likelihood of reactive policymaking.

**Third,** transparent and standardized border enforcement protocols should be formalized and publicly communicated. Predictability protects both regional reputation and domestic administrative credibility.

**Fourth,** high-skilled screening procedures should be calibrated through risk-tiered differentiation rather than broad-based tightening under economic security pressure. Over-securitization risks undermining the very industrial competitiveness it seeks to protect.

**Fifth,** migration governance should be depoliticized through the adoption of a multi-year national migration strategy that stabilizes policy across electoral cycles and aligns demographic planning with industrial and alliance objectives.

South Korea stands at a structural inflection point. Capital exposure to the United States has reached historic levels. Fertility has reached historic lows. Foreign resident incorporation

has reached an unprecedented scale. Migration governance now intersects simultaneously with alliance hierarchy, geoeconomics statecraft, demographic sustainability, and regional perception.

The central policy question is no longer whether migration will shape South Korea's future. It is whether migration governance will be managed strategically, or allowed to drift reactively within a rapidly transforming international and domestic environment.

## **Migration and the U.S.–ROK Alliance: From Labor Policy to Strategic Variable**

Contemporary international political economy increasingly reflects what has been described as geoeconomics statecraft—the strategic use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical objectives.<sup>7</sup> Industrial investment, supply-chain alignment, export controls, and regulatory coordination are no longer neutral market processes governed solely by comparative advantage. They are policy tools embedded within alliance systems and deployed within a competitive global environment shaped by strategic rivalry.

Under these conditions, alliance relationships are no longer confined to security commitments or military deterrence. They are institutional ecosystems that integrate financial flows, industrial localization, regulatory regimes, and cross-border mobility. The U.S.–ROK alliance has evolved accordingly. What began as a deterrence-centered security partnership has transformed into a deeply embedded geoeconomic relationship structured around semiconductor fabrication, electric vehicle battery production, advanced materials manufacturing, and supply-chain resilience.

Korean conglomerates now operate inside a U.S. regulatory and industrial policy ecosystem reshaped by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the CHIPS and Science Act. These legislative frameworks do more than subsidize investment. They condition market access, shape localization incentives, and tie industrial production to strategic objectives such as technological security and supply-chain diversification. Korean firms have responded by dramatically expanding U.S.-based manufacturing capacity.

Such concentration fundamentally alters the strategic calculus. When capital exposure becomes this deep, regulatory decisions within the host state carry systemic implications for the investing ally. Alliance management must therefore account for regulatory predictability alongside military coordination.

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7 R. D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Industrial integration, however, depends not only on capital flows but on labor mobility. Localization does not eliminate cross-border movement; it intensifies it. Engineers must install and calibrate production lines. Technical supervisors must oversee initial operational phases. Compliance specialists must interpret and implement regulatory requirements. Equipment manufacturers must dispatch installation teams for complex machinery. In advanced manufacturing sectors, production ramp-up frequently requires cycles of short-term, project-based deployment of specialized personnel.

Predictable and coordinated visa frameworks thus become an operational requirement of alliance-linked industrial strategy. Mobility governance is not an auxiliary administrative matter; it is embedded within production timelines and capital deployment schedules.

The 2025 Georgia enforcement episode demonstrated how embedded mobility governance has become within alliance-linked industrial ecosystems, and this episode exposed three structural realities.

**First,** regulatory asymmetry persists within even the closest alliances. The United States retains discretionary authority over immigration enforcement within its jurisdiction. Korean firms must operate within that legal framework. When enforcement intensity shifts—whether due to domestic political pressures, bureaucratic reinterpretation, or broader compliance campaigns—ally-linked firms are affected. The issue is not legality; it is predictability.

**Second,** industrial integration amplifies the impact of administrative actions. In an environment of deep financial concentration and supply-chain localization, regulatory misalignment can disrupt production schedules, delay capital deployment, and generate investor uncertainty. Even temporary disruptions carry reputational costs in competitive sectors such as semiconductors and batteries.

**Third,** mobility governance now contributes to alliance credibility. In a geoeconomic competition environment, allied reliability is evaluated across multiple domains—export controls, investment screening, sanctions compliance, industrial subsidies, and mobility governance alike. Administrative inconsistency in any one domain can erode confidence in the broader partnership architecture.

For Washington, these dynamics carry implications as well. Korean firms are among the largest contributors to U.S. industrial localization under the IRA and CHIPS frameworks. Their operational stability directly affects the success of U.S. supply-chain diversification strategies. Ensuring regulatory clarity and coordination in mobility governance, therefore, aligns with U.S. strategic objectives.

At current levels of bilateral exposure, visa stability is not a technical matter confined to immigration bureaucracies. It is a strategic infrastructure embedded within alliance management. Migration governance has thus shifted from a domestic labor instrument to an operational pillar of alliance reliability.

The policy implication is clear: mobility governance must be institutionalized within alliance coordination mechanisms. Failure to do so risks recurring friction as industrial integration deepens. Under geoeconomic statecraft, borders are not peripheral to strategy. They are part of it.

## **The Domestic Architecture: Hybrid Governance Under Demographic Pressure**

South Korea's migration system reflects a hybrid governance architecture combining centralized low-skilled recruitment, co-ethnic preferential pathways, and selectively managed high-skilled entry. This layered structure did not emerge accidentally. It evolved through incremental institutional design intended to balance economic necessity with social cohesion. For much of the 2000s and early 2010s, the system was widely regarded as administratively controlled and politically stable.

The Employment Permit System (EPS) institutionalized state-managed recruitment of low-skilled workers through bilateral labor agreements, minimizing the role of private brokers and reducing irregular migration channels. Co-ethnic pathways—particularly through F-4 (overseas Korean) visas—allowed the incorporation of Korean-Chinese and other diaspora populations under a framework that emphasized shared ethnic ties while maintaining regulatory differentiation from general immigration streams. High-skilled entry remained limited and sectorally targeted.

Historically, this hybrid structure provided three advantages. First, centralized low-skilled recruitment enabled bureaucratic oversight and numerical control. Second, co-ethnic channels reduced perceived cultural distance and mitigated public resistance. Third, limited high-skilled entry prevented rapid demographic diversification that might trigger political backlash. The model was therefore calibrated for social manageability rather than demographic transformation.

Demographic contraction has altered this equilibrium.

The total foreign resident population reached 2,650,783 in 2024.<sup>8</sup> This figure no longer represents temporary supplementation to a self-sustaining labor force. It represents structural incorporation within an aging society. Concurrently, fertility declined to 0.75, the lowest among OECD members.<sup>9</sup> Under sustained sub-replacement fertility, domestic labor supply contraction is not cyclical but cumulative.

Migration now functions as structural compensation for demographic decline.

Low-skilled labor mobility remains central to this compensation mechanism. E-9 (non-professional employment) residents numbered 276,755 in 2019 and increased to 337,279 in 2024 following pandemic-related contraction.<sup>10</sup> The rebound underscores persistent labor shortages in manufacturing, agriculture, fisheries, and construction. These sectors are not peripheral to the Korean economy; they anchor regional employment and supply-chain continuity. Without foreign labor participation, output volatility would increase, and wage inflation pressures would intensify.

At the same time, settlement-linked categories have expanded steadily. F-4 (overseas Koreans) residents increased from 464,152 in 2019 to 555,968 in 2024, while F-5 (permanent residents) rose from 153,291 to 202,968 over the same period.<sup>11</sup> These figures indicate not merely cyclical entry but cumulative settlement. Once settlement deepens, migration governance intersects with housing markets, education systems, healthcare provision, and local electoral politics.

Political salience increases as permanence increases.

High-skilled mobility introduces a different but equally significant structural shift. E-7 residents increased from 21,314 in 2019 to 63,580 in 2024—nearly tripling within five years.<sup>12</sup> Combined high-skilled categories (including D-8, E-1, E-3, E-4, E-5, and E-7) rose from 33,386 to 77,607 during the same period.<sup>13</sup> This trajectory reflects industrial demand driven by semiconductor manufacturing, advanced materials, biotechnology, and digital services.

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8 Republic of Korea Ministry of Justice, *Yearbook of Korea Immigration Statistics 2024* (Seoul: Ministry of Justice, 2024), 49–51.

9 Statistics Korea, *2024 Birth and Death Statistics (Preliminary Results)*, February 26, 2025, [https://www.kostat.go.kr/board.es?act=view&bid=11773&list\\_no=439008](https://www.kostat.go.kr/board.es?act=view&bid=11773&list_no=439008); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Society at a Glance 2024: Country Notes – Korea* (Paris: OECD, 2024), [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/06/society-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes\\_d98f4d80/korea\\_5c43a214.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/06/society-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_d98f4d80/korea_5c43a214.html).

10 Statistics Korea, “Status of Registered Foreign Residents by Nationality and Visa Category, 2019–2024,” *Korean Statistical Information Service*, accessed January 28, 2026, <https://kosis.kr>.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

However, high-skilled expansion unfolds within an environment of intensifying economic security scrutiny. Technology transfer concerns, supply-chain resilience debates, and strategic competition with China increase pressure for tighter screening mechanisms. The policy dilemma emerges clearly: industrial competitiveness requires expanded high-skilled mobility, while strategic vigilance incentivizes restriction.

This creates a regulatory balancing challenge.

South Korea's migration governance now operates under dual pressure: demographic necessity and strategic scrutiny. The hybrid architecture that once minimized social friction must now absorb demographic structural change while navigating alliance-centered geoeconomic integration.

Institutionally, fragmentation compounds the challenge. Migration governance responsibilities are distributed across the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, and other sectoral agencies. While this dispersion once allowed functional specialization, it now risks reactive policymaking. Demographic policy, labor forecasting, industrial strategy, and immigration enforcement are insufficiently integrated within a single long-term planning framework.

Reactive adjustments—temporary quota expansions in response to labor shortages, ad hoc tightening under political pressure, or sector-specific screening reforms introduced without cross-ministerial coordination—generate uncertainty. In a demographically contracting economy deeply integrated into alliance-centered industrial networks, uncertainty carries economic cost.

The hybrid model that once optimized control and social manageability must now transition toward strategic integration. Migration governance is no longer simply about regulating entry flows. It is about aligning demographic stabilization, industrial competitiveness, and alliance reliability within a coherent institutional architecture.

Under demographic pressure, governance architecture determines strategic resilience.

## **Migration Diplomacy and Middle Power Reputation in Asia**

Migration governance in South Korea operates not only as a domestic administrative system but as a daily signal of how the country understands partnership, hierarchy, and reciprocity within Asia. In a region where mobility flows are increasingly politicized and closely monitored by both governments and publics, the management of foreign residents

carries implications that extend well beyond border control. Administrative practice has diplomatic consequences.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes migration diplomacy as the strategic use of mobility governance within broader foreign policy objectives.<sup>14</sup> States deploy visa regimes, recruitment agreements, deportation practices, and regularization policies as instruments to negotiate, signal intentions, and exert leverage over partner states. Even in the absence of formal diplomatic confrontation, migration regimes communicate expectations about hierarchy, partnership, and reciprocity. A restrictive visa environment can signal distrust. Transparent labor protections can signal reliability. Administrative opacity can signal arbitrariness.

South Korea's migration system must therefore be understood as part of its regional diplomacy architecture.

Vietnamese nationals account for 11.5 percent and Thai nationals 7.1 percent of the foreign resident population in South Korea.<sup>15</sup> Together, these two communities represent nearly one-fifth of all foreign residents. This is not a marginal demographic footprint. Southeast Asian nationals constitute embedded social communities whose presence shapes manufacturing plants in provincial cities, agricultural districts, construction sites, small and medium-sized enterprises, and increasingly local schools and neighborhoods.

As a result, everyday administrative decisions carry diplomatic weight. Entry screening procedures, visa renewal processes, workplace dispute resolution mechanisms, and enforcement practices do not remain confined to bureaucratic spaces. They circulate through media networks, online communities, migrant advocacy organizations, and transnational family networks. A single-entry denial or workplace dispute can be amplified into a broader narrative about national treatment.

Even procedurally justified enforcement decisions can trigger reputational consequences if they are perceived as opaque, inconsistent, or discriminatory. In the digital era, administrative acts are not private events. They are public signals.

In early 2026, online controversy in Thailand followed a case in which a Thai civil servant reported being denied entry at Incheon International Airport. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Thailand publicly clarified that the denial reflected insufficient proof of accommodation and an unclear purpose of stay, underscoring that entry determinations remain

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14 Fiona Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Migration Diplomacy in World Politics," *International Studies Perspectives*, 20, no. 2 (2019): 113–128.

15 Republic of Korea Ministry of Justice, *Yearbook of Korea Immigration Statistics 2024* (Seoul: Ministry of Justice, 2024), 49–51.

discretionary even when travelers hold valid authorizations.<sup>16</sup> From a legal standpoint, such discretion is routine. From a reputational standpoint, however, high-visibility entry disputes can shape perceptions of fairness and reciprocity among partner publics.

The strategic significance lies not in any single case, but in accumulation. When episodes are perceived as inconsistent with diplomatic rhetoric emphasizing partnership and shared growth, reputational dissonance emerges. Migration governance thus becomes an arena where everyday practice either reinforces or undermines foreign policy messaging.

This reputational layer matters because South Korea's Indo-Pacific positioning relies heavily on soft power narratives emphasizing cultural appeal, technological sophistication, and rule-based governance. Korean popular culture, digital platforms, and educational exchanges contribute to regional influence. Yet soft power is not sustained by cultural exports alone. It is reinforced—or weakened—by administrative fairness.

Labor mobility forms a visible and tangible component of that image. If Southeast Asian publics perceive inconsistency between diplomatic rhetoric and migration practice, soft power narratives weaken. Perception gaps need not escalate into diplomatic crises to produce effect. They can gradually erode trust and alter negotiation dynamics in areas such as labor agreements, trade discussions, and broader regional initiatives.

Moreover, labor mobility relationships are embedded in intergovernmental expectations. Sending states such as Vietnam and Thailand must respond to domestic constituencies concerned with working conditions, wage fairness, contract enforcement, and legal protection abroad. When controversies arise, even minor ones, sending governments face pressure to request clarification or renegotiate safeguards. Migration governance controversies can therefore increase diplomatic transaction costs, even if they do not escalate into formal disputes.

Over time, reputational erosion may reduce Korea's leverage. If partner states perceive mobility governance as unpredictable or hierarchically imposed, they may adopt more cautious bargaining positions in bilateral labor agreements or regional forums. In competitive regional environments—where Japan, Australia, and increasingly China offer alternative labor and investment partnerships—perception matters.

The reputational dimension is further complicated by the demographic composition of

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16 “South Korea Rejects Reports of Entry Denials,” *Bangkok Post*, January 7, 2026, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/3170813/south-korea-rejects-reports-of-entry-denials>; “South Korean Embassy Explains Thai Official Entry Refusal,” *The Nation Thailand*, January 6, 2026, <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40060866>; “South Korea Says Thai Traveller’s Claim on Entry Refusal is Misleading,” *Thai PBS World*, 2026, <https://world.thaipbs.or.th/detail/south-korea-says-thai-travellers-claim-on-entry-refusal-is-misleading/60091>.

foreign residents. Chinese nationals constitute 36.2 percent of foreign residents in South Korea.<sup>17</sup> This concentration intersects with domestic political narratives and regional strategic competition. Migration governance decisions affecting Chinese residents may be interpreted externally through the lens of geopolitical rivalry, even when administratively neutral.

As U.S.–China competition intensifies, administrative measures such as visa tightening, research collaboration screening, or work authorization restrictions can be framed as alignment choices. South Korea must therefore navigate not only Southeast Asian perceptions of fairness but also Chinese perceptions of discrimination or securitization.

Migration governance thus operates simultaneously across three layers:

First, administrative management—visa issuance, entry screening, compliance monitoring. Second, domestic political signaling—electoral rhetoric, media framing, public opinion. Third, regional diplomatic perception—how partner governments and publics interpret practice.

Its cumulative effects are rarely dramatic. There is no singular “migration crisis” moment that redefines South Korea’s regional standing. Instead, reputation evolves through repetition. Small controversies accumulate. Perceptions solidify. Trust adjusts gradually.

For a middle power such as South Korea—whose regional standing depends on rule-based credibility, institutional reliability, and coalition-building capacity—migration governance becomes an everyday test of diplomatic consistency. Unlike great powers, middle powers cannot rely on coercive capacity or market size alone to shape regional narratives. They depend on credibility.

Andrew Cooper’s conception of middle power diplomacy emphasizes reliability, institutional engagement, and normative positioning as core assets.<sup>18</sup> Migration governance intersects directly with these assets. If administrative practice diverges from declared commitment to rule-based cooperation, normative credibility weakens.

The question is not whether isolated incidents occur—no migration system eliminates disputes. The question is whether governance structures are sufficiently transparent, standardized, and predictable to prevent episodic controversies from evolving into structural mistrust.

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17 Ministry of Justice, *Yearbook of Korea Immigration Statistics 2024*, 49–51.

18 Andrew F. Cooper, *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1997), *Studies in Diplomacy*.

Migration, in this sense, functions as quotidian diplomacy. Each entry decision, visa issuance, workplace inspection, and dispute resolution outcome participates in a broader narrative about partnership and fairness. The strategic challenge lies not in expanding or restricting mobility per se, but in ensuring that governance practice aligns with diplomatic messaging and long-term regional positioning.

For Seoul, the policy implication is not to eliminate enforcement. Enforcement is necessary for regulatory integrity. The implication is to institutionalize transparency, procedural clarity, and bilateral communication channels that prevent routine administrative acts from escalating into reputational liabilities.

In an Asia characterized by competitive regional influence and heightened public scrutiny of migration flows, everyday governance is foreign policy. Migration diplomacy is not a metaphor. It is a structural reality.

## Conclusion

South Korea stands at a structural inflection point defined not by episodic migration debates but by the convergence of alliance integration, geoeconomic restructuring, and demographic transformation. The country's alliance with the United States has evolved into a deeply embedded industrial and financial ecosystem. Production networks, regulatory coordination, and supply-chain localization now operate within a shared strategic framework. Yet the governance of mobility—the administrative architecture that enables personnel to move alongside capital—remains insufficiently institutionalized within that alliance structure. This gap does not constitute an immediate crisis. It represents systemic vulnerability.

Demographic contraction further intensifies the stakes. Migration is no longer a marginal supplement to domestic labor markets; it functions as structural compensation within an aging society. As settlement deepens and high-skilled mobility expands, migration governance increasingly intersects with industrial competitiveness, social incorporation, and long-term economic sustainability. The policy challenge is therefore not whether to expand or restrict migration in abstract terms, but how to align mobility governance with demographic planning and industrial strategy within a coherent national framework.

Regionally, migration governance has acquired reputational weight. Administrative practice—entry screening, visa renewal, enforcement standards, dispute resolution—constitutes everyday diplomacy. In a competitive Indo-Pacific environment, credibility is not sustained by rhetoric alone but by procedural consistency. Middle powers rarely experience abrupt reputational collapse; instead, credibility adjusts incrementally through

accumulated perceptions of reliability or unpredictability. Migration governance now participates in that reputational calculus.

The structural environment has shifted in three interlocking ways. First, an alliance-centered geoeconomic strategy has embedded industrial cooperation within regulatory systems that require predictable cross-border mobility. Second, demographic transformation has made labor incorporation a long-term necessity rather than a cyclical adjustment. Third, regional mobility flows have become politicized and publicly scrutinized, amplifying the diplomatic visibility of administrative decisions. Together, these shifts relocate migration governance from the periphery of policy to the core of strategic statecraft.

The principal risk is not migration itself but institutional drift—reactive adjustment without architectural integration. Drift emerges when visa categories are modified episodically, when enforcement standards fluctuate without transparency, when inter-ministerial coordination remains fragmented, and when political cycles introduce volatility into long-term planning. Such drift does not generate an immediate breakdown. It produces cumulative misalignment between alliance commitments, industrial objectives, demographic realities, and regional messaging.

Addressing this misalignment requires deliberate institutional design. Migration governance must be integrated into alliance consultation mechanisms appropriate to an era of geoeconomic interdependence. Domestically, governance architecture must align labor forecasting, industrial demand, demographic planning, and enforcement transparency within a consolidated strategic framework. High-skilled screening procedures must balance security vigilance with competitiveness, avoiding indiscriminate tightening that undermines strategic sectors. Above all, migration policy must be stabilized across electoral cycles through multi-year planning that embeds mobility governance within national strategy rather than short-term political calculation.

For Washington, the implication is parallel. Alliance-centered industrial policy depends on predictable mobility regimes. Regulatory clarity and structured consultation in visa governance reinforce—not dilute—the credibility of geoeconomic strategy. Institutionalized coordination reduces the likelihood that routine administrative actions escalate into diplomatic friction.

Migration governance is therefore best understood as strategic connective tissue linking alliance management, demographic sustainability, and regional diplomacy. In earlier phases of the alliance, defense coordination mechanisms were formalized to manage shared security risks. In the present era of industrial interdependence and demographic transformation, mobility governance requires comparable institutionalization.

South Korea's trajectory will not be determined solely by economic scale or security

alignment, but by the coherence of its institutional design. The choice is not about expanding or restricting migration in isolation. It is about governing mobility deliberately, predictably, and strategically under conditions of structural change. States that integrate migration governance into long-term strategic architecture will preserve credibility and resilience. Those that allow fragmentation and volatility to persist will experience erosion not through crisis, but through gradual misalignment.

Migration governance has moved to the center of statecraft. Its future significance will depend on whether institutions evolve as rapidly as the structural conditions that now define them.

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Her doctoral dissertation investigates changing migration patterns among the younger generation of Korean-Chinese (Joseonjok) and analyzes their implications for South Korea's migration policy. More specifically, it examines how shifting socio-economic conditions in both China and South Korea have reshaped migration trajectories, motivations, and settlement strategies among Korean-Chinese youth. Building on this empirical foundation, the dissertation interrogates the legal, institutional, and symbolic logics underpinning South Korea's management of Korean-Chinese returnees, arguing that these regimes reflect a dual imperative: harnessing diasporic labor under controlled conditions while maintaining the boundaries of national identity and social membership. Situating the Korean case within broader Indo-Pacific dynamics, her work contributes a comparative perspective on the securitization of mobility and the instrumentalization of ethnicity in contemporary migration governance.

She earned her Ph.D. in International Studies, along with an M.A. in Chinese Area Studies and a B.A. in Anthropology, all from Seoul National University. Her scholarly training combines ethnographic fieldwork, critical migration studies, and policy analysis. She has presented her research at major international academic venues, including the IPSA World Congress of Political Science (2025) and the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Conference (2026).

# Finding Common Ground: On-Ramps to U.S.–DPRK Talks under a Reassurance-First Approach

Joel N. Christoph

*The author thanks Frank Aum for generous feedback and guidance on earlier drafts of this paper. The views expressed are the author's own.*

## Executive Summary

The United States and North Korea have not held substantive talks since October 2019; yet, Kim Jong Un's September 2025 offer of "peaceful coexistence" and the Trump administration's "without preconditions" posture create a rare opportunity. This paper argues for a reassurance-first approach, one that prioritizes signaling benign intent and reducing tensions before attempting to resolve the fundamental disagreement over denuclearization. In the current context, the most important objective is to restart diplomatic engagement, which would immediately reduce tensions, clarify mutual intentions and interests, and enhance security. Historical evidence demonstrates a strong inverse correlation between diplomatic engagement and North Korean provocations. The year 2018 saw a halt in ballistic missile testing during summit diplomacy, while 2022 witnessed around ninety launches during the diplomatic freeze. The paper identifies three convergences between Washington and Pyongyang and distinguishes between communication channels for initiating contact (direct leader outreach, third-party convening) and policy measures that could create conditions for talks (graduated reciprocity initiatives, formalization of existing moratoria). Success would mean a return to sustained engagement, an interim agreement that freezes testing and enhances transparency, and a framework for continued dialogue. The goal is not denuclearization in the near term but managed rivalry rather than unmanaged risk.

## Key Recommendations

1. The United States should signal, through a public statement or direct communication, that it is prepared to discuss "peaceful coexistence" and mutual restraint without insisting on denuclearization as a precondition. North Korea has rejected outreach that does not include an explicit policy shift away from denuclearization demands.

2. The United States should pursue graduated unilateral initiatives by announcing reversible, conciliatory gestures designed to elicit reciprocal action from North Korea. These might include suspending specific strategic asset deployments during a defined period or providing humanitarian carve-outs to sanctions.
3. The two sides should formalize existing moratoria. North Korea has not conducted a nuclear test since September 2017, and this de facto moratorium offers a verifiable early deliverable. Given North Korea's constitutional commitment to nuclear development, the United States may need to take the first step by formalizing restraints on strategic bomber deployments, as it did in May 2018.
4. Communication channels should be established through direct leader-to-leader outreach (a letter or public statement from President Trump to Kim Jong Un), or through third-party convening via Sweden or the UN Secretary-General's good offices.
5. Any framework should establish automatic pause triggers with defined red lines. A nuclear test, an ICBM test during talks, or evidence of technology transfer would immediately suspend U.S. concessions.
6. If talks are reestablished, the parties should work to reinvigorate a comprehensive inter-Korean military agreement, including buffer zones, demilitarization measures, and restoration of military communication channels such as inter-Korean military hotlines. This would reduce the risk of miscalculation, particularly given North Korea's 2022 nuclear doctrine authorizing preemptive strikes.
7. Time-bound signaling remains critical. The DPRK's 9th Party Congress (February 19–25) reaffirmed the "peaceful coexistence" framework and Kim Jong Un's openness to engagement, while President Trump's Beijing summit, originally scheduled for early April but postponed due to the war in Iran, has been delayed by several weeks. The window has shifted but not closed: Kim's March 23 address to the Supreme People's Assembly accused Washington of "state terrorism" but pointedly did not name Trump, a signal that analysts interpret as leaving the door to diplomacy ajar.

## Introduction

The United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have not held substantive talks since October 2019, making this the longest diplomatic hiatus since the early 1990s. During this period of diplomatic silence, North Korea has conducted over 120 missile tests, legally codified its nuclear status as "irreversible," and deepened its military partnership with Russia. The conventional policy response to such provocations has been to double down on deterrence, tightening sanctions and expanding military exercises in hopes that

sufficient pressure will eventually compel Pyongyang to negotiate on Washington’s terms. Yet this approach has demonstrably failed to arrest North Korea’s nuclear and missile development or bring Kim Jong Un back to the negotiating table. The current moment is a consequential inflection point: the DPRK convened its 9th Workers’ Party Congress from February 19 to 25, 2026, where it set a new five-year plan, reaffirmed the “peaceful coexistence” framework, and formalized its nuclear doctrine for the newly elected Party leadership. President Trump had been expected to travel to Beijing in the first week of April 2026 for a summit with Xi Jinping, placing him in the region at a time when a side meeting with Kim Jong Un would be logistically feasible. However, the outbreak of war between the United States, Israel, and Iran in late February and the resulting closure of the Strait of Hormuz prompted Trump to delay the Beijing summit by several weeks. Kim Jong Un is unlikely to travel to Washington; if a leader-level meeting occurs, it will almost certainly take place in the region. The rescheduled Beijing summit, whenever it occurs, preserves this possibility. The war in Iran has also reshaped the diplomatic context: in a March 23 address to the Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim accused the United States of “state terrorism and aggression” and cited the Iran conflict as vindication of North Korea’s nuclear program, but he pointedly refrained from naming Trump, a calculated omission that analysts interpret as preserving space for future engagement.

This paper argues for an alternative: a reassurance-first approach that prioritizes signaling benign intent and reducing tensions before attempting to resolve the fundamental disagreement over denuclearization. Reassurance, in this context, means communicating to North Korea that the United States does not seek regime change or the forcible elimination of its government, and backing up this message with concrete measures.<sup>1</sup> Reassurance is distinct from engagement, though the two are related. Engagement provides the venue through which reassurance can be communicated and verified; reassurance is the broader strategic objective that engagement serves.

The empirical record supports elevating reassurance alongside deterrence. A 2017 study by Lisa Collins at the Center for Strategic and International Studies documented a strong inverse correlation between diplomatic engagement and North Korean provocations across nearly three decades. The pattern held regardless of which party controlled the White House. During periods of active diplomacy, North Korea conducted fewer missile tests and refrained from nuclear detonations, apparently preserving diplomatic space for potential gains. During periods of confrontation, provocations surged. In 2018, when summit diplomacy was at its peak, North Korean ballistic missile testing came to a halt. The year 2022, following three years of diplomatic freeze, witnessed around ninety missile

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1 Reid B.C. Pauly, “Reassurance on the Korean Peninsula: Lessons from Scholarship to Stabilize Deterrence,” Toda Peace Institute Policy Brief, no. 252 (September 2025), <https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/policy-briefs/reassurance-on-the-korean-peninsula-lessons-from-scholarship-to-stabilize-deterrence.html>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

launches, a record-breaking surge. This correlation suggests that engagement allows for the possibility of North Korea receiving benefits, including reassurance, which in turn moderates behavior.

The primary counterargument to a reassurance-first approach is not that engagement itself is harmful, but rather: how can Washington return to the table without conceding too much? How can talks resume without effectively accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state? These are legitimate concerns that this paper addresses through its emphasis on reversible measures, automatic pause triggers, and the distinction between procedural flexibility and substantive concessions.

A reassurance-first approach does not require abandoning the goal of denuclearization or providing formal recognition of North Korea's nuclear status. Rather, it recognizes that because denuclearization is unlikely in the foreseeable future, the focus must be on enhancing security and reducing tensions through other means. As Frank Aum has argued, both sides need to develop a way to manage the conflict even while their ultimate visions remain irreconcilable. The question of whether ultimate political outcomes should remain unresolved is, in a sense, beside the point. They will remain unresolved regardless, and the policy choice is how to manage that reality. (Note: Since the initial draft of this paper, the 9th Party Congress has concluded and the U.S.–China summit has been postponed due to the war in Iran. The text has been updated to reflect these developments. The underlying logic and recommendations remain applicable as long as the current stalemate persists.)

## Stated Interests and Priorities

Understanding each party's core interests is essential to identifying where reassurance can be effective and where convergences might enable progress.

### DPRK: Regime security and “Peaceful Coexistence”

North Korea's fundamental interest is regime survival. To achieve this objective, Pyongyang has prioritized maintaining nuclear deterrence, strengthening control over its domestic population, preventing foreign meddling and information access, diversifying income generation opportunities, and boosting international prestige. The September 2022 Law on the State Policy on Nuclear Forces, which declared North Korea's nuclear status “irreversible” and authorized preemptive nuclear use under specified conditions, reflects this calculus.<sup>2</sup>

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2 “North Korea Passes Nuclear Law,” *Arms Control Association*, October 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/news/north-korea-passes-nuclear-law>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

The following year, Article 58 of the revised DPRK constitution mandated the “permanent expansion of the nuclear arsenal” as state policy.<sup>3</sup> Events in Ukraine and Venezuela may have further solidified Pyongyang’s commitment to maintaining nuclear deterrence as a guarantee against externally imposed regime change.

In January 2024, Kim Jong Un formally renounced unification as a policy goal, designated South Korea as North Korea’s “principal enemy,” and declared that Pyongyang would not engage with Seoul due to its hostile approach. This represents a significant departure from decades of rhetorical commitment to eventual reunification and reflects the regime’s judgment that inter-Korean engagement poses risks to domestic control.

Yet within this hardened posture, a potential opening emerged in September 2025. At the 13th Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim Jong Un stated that if the United States drops its “hollow obsession with denuclearization” and wants to pursue “peaceful coexistence” with North Korea “based on the recognition of reality,” there is “no reason for the two countries not to sit down together.” He added that he “personally still has good memories” of President Trump.<sup>4</sup> Earlier that summer, Kim Yo Jong articulated the precondition more explicitly: “Recognition of the irreversible position of the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state should be a prerequisite for predicting and thinking about everything in the future.”<sup>5</sup>

## United States: Denuclearization, Alliance Management, and Regional Stability

American interests on the Korean Peninsula include strengthening peace and security by eliminating or mitigating the nuclear threat, preventing war and major North Korean aggression, supporting the U.S.-ROK alliance and South Korea’s interests, and promoting economic prosperity and regional stability. Official policy documents have consistently

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- 3 Salma Shaheen, “North Korea’s Nuclear Use Doctrine,” *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, October 2022, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/north-koreas-nuclear-use-doctrine>. Accessed December 30, 2025; Ankit Panda, “North Korea’s New Nuclear Law Drives Nail in the Coffin of Denuclearization,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 12, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/09/north-koreas-new-nuclear-law-drives-nail-in-the-coffin-of-denuclearization>. Accessed December 30, 2025.
  - 4 Kim Jong Un, speech at the 13th Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly, September 20–21, 2025. See Anthony Kuhn, “North Korea’s Kim Jong Un Ready to Talk if U.S. Drops Denuclearization Demand,” *NPR*, September 22, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/22/nx-s1-5549984/talks-north-korea-denuclearization>. Accessed December 30, 2025.
  - 5 Kim Yo Jong, “Hope of Seoul Is Nothing but a Foolish Dream,” *KCNA*, July 29, 2025, <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/37243df9f780a7da82eec0c4627d9ee0.kcmsf>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

maintained that complete denuclearization remains the objective. The Singapore Summit Joint Statement committed the DPRK to “work toward complete denuclearization.”<sup>6</sup>

President Trump’s second-term rhetoric has signaled greater flexibility. Upon returning to office, Trump indicated in August 2025 that he would welcome a meeting with Kim, and during his November 2025 summit with South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, the White House stated that the two leaders “reaffirmed their commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” while also noting Trump’s “openness to diplomacy with the DPRK.” The White House confirmed in October 2025 that President Trump remains open to talking with Kim Jong Un “without any preconditions.” However, North Korea appears to interpret “without preconditions” as still leaving open the possibility that the United States will raise denuclearization in talks, which Pyongyang rejects.

## South Korea: The Lee Jae-myung administration

The election of Lee Jae-myung in June 2025 marked a return to progressive engagement policies. President Lee has articulated his approach through the “END initiative,” unveiled at the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2025. END stands for Exchange, Normalization, and Denuclearization, representing a sequenced vision that begins with humanitarian exchanges, builds toward diplomatic normalization, and ultimately achieves denuclearization. Lee has described this as a pragmatic and phased solution: halting weapons development, reducing the arsenal, and final dismantlement.<sup>7</sup>

However, North Korea has categorically rejected these overtures. In July 2025, Kim Yo Jong dismissed Seoul’s proposals as an “appeasement offensive” and stated flatly that there was no interest in dialogue from Pyongyang with South Korea. Given North Korea’s formal designation of South Korea as its principal enemy, progress may require U.S.-DPRK bilateral channels that can function independently of inter-Korean relations.

While the United States does not take a strong position on Korean unification, it has historically supported unification under a ROK-led government consistent with market-oriented principles, in support of its South Korean ally. This represents a point of divergence with North Korea’s interests.

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6 White House, “Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un at the Singapore Summit,” June 12, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

7 Lee Jae-myung, address to the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly, September 24, 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10581929>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

## What is a Reassurance-First Approach?

A reassurance-first approach elevates reassurance as a significant strategic objective alongside deterrence. Because denuclearization is unlikely in the foreseeable future, the focus must shift to enhancing security and reducing tensions through measures that signal benign intent. This stands in contrast to approaches that focus primarily on deterrence and pressure, and to comprehensive approaches that attempt to resolve all issues simultaneously.

The logic of reassurance-first rests on several propositions. First, the absence of communication increases the risk of miscalculation. Without functioning diplomatic channels, both sides must interpret the other's intentions through public statements and military signals, a process prone to error that becomes especially dangerous given North Korea's 2022 nuclear doctrine authorizing preemptive strikes under certain conditions. Second, when North Korea perceives a credible diplomatic pathway, it has historically moderated its provocations to preserve that pathway. Third, trust must be built incrementally through small, reversible steps that can be verified and reciprocated.

The reassurance-first approach draws on the Graduated Reciprocation in Tension Reduction (GRIT) framework originally developed by Charles Osgood during the Cold War and adapted for the Korean context by Aum and Lopez.<sup>8</sup> Under this framework, one side initiates a series of conciliatory gestures designed to induce reciprocation from the other. The gestures are announced publicly to maximize their signaling value, are unambiguous in their conciliatory intent, and are calibrated to be reversible if reciprocation does not follow.

The historical record demonstrates both the potential and the fragility of this approach. The Agreed Framework of 1994 froze North Korea's plutonium production at Yongbyon for eight years, demonstrating that Pyongyang could be induced to accept meaningful constraints when it perceived sustained commitment from Washington. The agreement ultimately collapsed because both sides failed to maintain reassurance: the United States by slowing fuel shipments, delaying light-water reactor construction, and adopting a hostile tone in 2002; North Korea by pursuing a covert uranium enrichment program.<sup>9</sup> The Six-Party Talks, held from 2003 to 2008, offer a similar lesson. The September 2005 Joint Statement was undermined when the United States imposed sanctions on Banco Delta Asia

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8 Charles E. Osgood, *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962); Frank Aum and George A. Lopez, "A Bold Peace Offensive to Engage North Korea," *War on the Rocks*, December 4, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/a-bold-peace-offensive-to-engage-north-korea/>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

9 Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

just days before the agreement was signed, signaling to Pyongyang that Washington was not fully committed to the diplomatic track.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2012, U.S. policy has emphasized deterrence and pressure over engagement and reassurance. The term “strategic patience” originated with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who used it in late 2009 to describe Washington’s posture of maintaining pressure in consultation with allies while waiting for Pyongyang to return to serious negotiations.<sup>11</sup> Following the collapse of the Leap Day Deal and North Korea’s third nuclear test in 2013, the Obama administration hardened this posture into what then-Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken later characterized as a “comprehensive, sustained and relentless international pressure campaign” aimed at compelling Pyongyang to negotiate seriously.<sup>12</sup> This approach continued through the Biden administration. The result has been the longest period without substantive U.S.-DPRK dialogue since the early 1990s, during which North Korea has tested ICBMs capable of reaching the continental United States, developed solid-fuel technology, expanded its fissile material stockpile, and formalized a military partnership with Russia. The reassurance-first approach assumes only that the current trajectory serves neither American nor North Korean interests. The question is whether managed rivalry is preferable to unmanaged risk.

## Convergences Between Washington and Pyongyang

Despite the fundamental disagreement over denuclearization, several areas of overlapping interest could provide a foundation for dialogue. These do not represent shared values or mutual trust, but rather parallel calculations that might create space for limited cooperation.

The most basic convergence is the shared interest in avoiding large-scale military conflict. Kim Jong Un has offered “peaceful coexistence” as a framework, while Trump has

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10 Christopher R. Hill, *Outpost: Life on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014). The Treasury Department designated BDA on September 15, 2005; the Joint Statement was signed on September 19, 2005.

11 Secretary Clinton used the phrase “strategic patience” in December 2009 to describe the administration’s approach of maintaining pressure on Pyongyang in consultation with allies while awaiting a credible return to negotiations. See “The U.S., North Korea, and Nuclear Diplomacy,” National Committee on North Korea, <https://ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/u.s.-north-korea-and-nuclear-diplomacy>. Accessed February 10, 2026.

12 Antony J. Blinken, “Will Rex Tillerson Pass North Korea’s Nuclear Test?” *New York Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/opinion/will-rex-tillerson-pass-north-koreas-nuclear-test.html>. In this op-ed, Blinken called for a “comprehensive, sustained and relentless international pressure campaign” that would sever North Korea’s political, economic, and diplomatic ties worldwide and raise the price of Pyongyang’s obstinacy.

repeatedly emphasized that his good relationship with Kim reduces the risk of war. This creates an opening for discussions framed around crisis prevention rather than political settlement.

A second convergence relates to international status. Kim seeks acknowledgment of North Korea's position as a nuclear-armed state, while Trump values the diplomatic achievement of renewed engagement. Without formal legal recognition, summit-level talks themselves serve as a form of de facto acknowledgment. Trump's March 2025 reference to North Korea as a "big nuclear nation" illustrates the kind of rhetorical flexibility that might satisfy both sides without formal concessions.<sup>13</sup>

A third convergence involves managing the Russia-DPRK relationship. Washington is concerned about deepening military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, particularly the transfer of North Korean artillery shells and ballistic missiles to support Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> North Korea may have reservations about excessive dependence on a single partner. A U.S. diplomatic channel could offer Pyongyang alternatives that reduce its vulnerability to Russian leverage.

## Pathways to Talks: Channels and Policy Measures

Restarting dialogue requires both communication channels and policy measures that create conditions for North Korea to engage. These are distinct categories that deserve separate consideration.

### Communication channels

North Korea has rejected recent U.S. outreach, reportedly refusing to accept a letter delivered to its UN mission.<sup>15</sup> Pyongyang appears unwilling to engage until the United States signals an explicit policy shift away from denuclearization demands. Several channels remain available for conveying such a shift.

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13 Kelsey Davenport, "Trump Says U.S. Is Communicating With North Korea," *Arms Control Association*, May 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-05/news/trump-says-us-communicating-north-korea>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

14 Congressional Research Service, "Russia-North Korea Relations," IF12760, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12760>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

15 Chad O'Carroll, "North Korea Refusing to Accept Trump Letter Aimed at Restarting Dialogue: Source," *NK News*, June 11, 2025, <https://www.nknews.org/2025/06/north-korea-refusing-to-accept-trump-letter-aimed-at-restarting-dialogue-source/>. Accessed January 14, 2026.

The most direct, and most likely, channel involves leader-level communication. President Trump has demonstrated that he does not rely heavily on interlocutors or bureaucratic channels in his dealings with Kim Jong Un, making direct outreach the most plausible pathway. A public statement or social media post from President Trump expressing willingness to discuss “peaceful coexistence” and mutual restraint, without insisting on denuclearization as a precondition, could open space for dialogue. The June 2019 Panmunjom meeting, arranged via Twitter, demonstrates that unconventional channels can produce results. Trump’s planned visit to Beijing, originally scheduled for early April 2026 but postponed due to the war in Iran, creates the next major opportunity for a possible Trump–Kim meeting once rescheduled, as the president will be in the region. APEC later in the year offers an additional window. In either case, public signaling of a policy shift should precede any presidential travel to the region.

Third-party convening offers an alternative, though its utility should not be overstated. Sweden, which has maintained a DPRK embassy since 1975 and serves as protecting power for the United States, could host confidential preparatory discussions; it served this role when Stockholm hosted the last U.S.-DPRK working-level talks in October 2019.<sup>1617</sup>

The UN Secretary-General could in principle offer good offices to convene technical talks on humanitarian issues, such as POW/MIA remains recovery, but this pathway is considerably less likely: the United States would be unlikely to channel engagement through the UN, and the Secretary-General has been largely uninvolved in U.S.-DPRK discussions in recent years.

*The single most important policy measure is a clear public signal from President Trump, whether through a State of the Union address, social media, or direct remarks to reporters, that he is willing to engage Kim Jong Un without denuclearization on the table, and that the United States is open to discussing a different framework such as peaceful coexistence.*

## Policy measures

Beyond establishing communication, the United States would need to signal through concrete actions that it is serious about a different approach. Several measures could demonstrate this commitment while remaining reversible. The single most important policy measure is a clear public signal from President Trump, whether through a State

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16 The last U.S.-DPRK working-level talks were held in Stockholm on October 5, 2019, hosted by Sweden at the Villa Elfvik Strand conference center in Lidingö. See “North Korea Breaks off Nuclear Talks with US in Sweden,” *CNBC*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/05/us-north-korea-nuclear-talks-have-broken-off-north-korean-negotiator-says.html>. Accessed February 10, 2026.

17 Sweden has served as protecting power for the United States in North Korea since 1995. See Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

of the Union address, social media, or direct remarks to reporters, that he is willing to engage Kim Jong Un without denuclearization on the table, and that the United States is open to discussing a different framework such as peaceful coexistence. This represents the indispensable first step: without it, none of the subsequent measures are likely to elicit a North Korean response.

First, the United States could pursue graduated unilateral initiatives under the GRIT framework. Announcing a temporary suspension of specific strategic asset deployments, providing humanitarian carve-outs to sanctions, or lifting the travel ban would signal conciliatory intent. These gestures should be time-limited and explicitly tied to expectations of reciprocation.

Second, the two sides could formalize existing moratoria. North Korea has not conducted a nuclear test since September 2017. This de facto restraint could be codified as a verifiable commitment. Given North Korea's constitutional commitment to nuclear development, the United States may need to take the first step—for example, by formally suspending B-1B and B-52 bomber deployments during a defined period, as it did in May 2018.<sup>18</sup>

If talks are reestablished, additional confidence-building measures become possible. The parties should work toward reinvigorating a comprehensive inter-Korean military agreement, encompassing buffer zones, demilitarization of the DMZ Joint Security Area, and restoration of military communication channels including the inter-Korean military hotlines. These measures would reduce the risk of miscalculation, particularly given the heightened sensitivity around North Korea's 2022 nuclear doctrine. However, such measures are outcomes of successful engagement rather than preconditions for it.

## Risks and Guardrails

A reassurance-first approach carries risks that must be managed carefully. The primary risk is that reassurance measures could embolden North Korean provocations, undermine deterrence if concessions are perceived as too generous, damage U.S. credibility with allies, or erode the nonproliferation regime by appearing to accept North Korea's nuclear status.

Addressing these risks requires framing reassurance as risk reduction rather than reward, maintaining core deterrence capabilities and sanctions enforcement, and requiring

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18 Frank Aum and Ankit Panda, "Pursuing Stable Coexistence: A Reorientation of US Policy Toward North Korea," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/pursuing-stable-coexistence-a-reorientation-of-us-policy-toward-north-korea>. Accessed December 30, 2025.

verifiable reciprocation before proceeding to more substantial measures. All concessions should be reversible and time-limited. Each identified risk warrants a corresponding guardrail. First, to mitigate the risk of emboldening DPRK provocations, Washington should secure commitments from Pyongyang to maintain its moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile testing, to re-engage with South Korea through diplomatic and military channels, and to reduce hostile rhetoric in favor of a stated commitment to diplomacy for resolving outstanding issues. Second, to address the risk of undermining deterrence, the United States should maintain core deterrence capabilities and extended deterrence commitments to its allies throughout the process, adjusting only specific deployments rather than overall force posture. Third, to prevent damage to U.S. credibility with allies, Washington should conduct close consultations with Seoul and Tokyo at every stage and maintain its alliance commitments in both word and deed. Fourth, the risk of eroding the nonproliferation regime is the most difficult to manage, as any framework that sets aside near-term denuclearization will inevitably raise nonproliferation concerns. One approach is to reaffirm denuclearization as a long-term objective while arguing that by securing North Korean commitments to disarmament measures, such as a testing moratorium, transparency provisions, and limits on fissile material production, the framework reduces tensions on the peninsula and strengthens, rather than weakens, the practical goals of the nonproliferation regime.

*Addressing these risks requires framing reassurance as risk reduction rather than reward, maintaining core deterrence capabilities and sanctions enforcement, and requiring verifiable reciprocation before proceeding to more substantial measures.*

To prevent exploitation, any framework should include automatic pause triggers. A nuclear test would result in the immediate suspension of all U.S. concessions and resumption of full strategic asset deployments. An ICBM test during negotiations would pause talks. Evidence of technology transfer to third parties would trigger an escalation of sanctions. All concessions would carry time limits of six to twelve months, requiring renewal based on verified compliance.

Neither side is likely to cross core red lines. The United States will not provide formal recognition of North Korea's nuclear status, withdraw forces from South Korea, or abandon its alliance commitments. North Korea will not accept arsenal reductions or return to denuclearization negotiations as currently framed. But within these constraints, both sides retain flexibility. The United States can accept "peaceful coexistence" framing, adjust certain military activities, and provide targeted sanctions relief. North Korea can formalize its testing moratorium and accept transparency measures.

## Conclusion

The central finding of this analysis is that meaningful U.S.-DPRK dialogue can resume without requiring either side to accept positions it has explicitly rejected. Denuclearization remains a stated U.S. goal. Nuclear status remains constitutionally enshrined in Pyongyang. Neither position needs to change for crisis-reduction talks to proceed, because the purpose of such talks is to manage the rivalry rather than resolve it.

Kim Jong Un's September 2025 statement represents the clearest DPRK signal in years that dialogue is possible under conditions short of capitulation. The Trump administration's openness to engagement creates reciprocal space. However, North Korea appears to require an explicit signal that the United States is willing to set aside denuclearization demands, not merely an offer of talks "without preconditions." The policy measures outlined here offer ways to send that signal while preserving core American interests and maintaining reversibility.

What would success look like? Not denuclearization, at least not in the near term. Success would mean a return to sustained diplomatic engagement; an interim agreement that freezes nuclear and long-range missile testing, enhances transparency, and prevents proliferation; and a framework for continued dialogue that manages tensions even as fundamental disagreements persist.<sup>19</sup> The goal is to achieve a more stable and predictable security environment than the current trajectory, even if the fundamental disagreement remains unresolved. The policy choice before Washington is not between ideal outcomes and failure. It is between managed rivalry and unmanaged risk.

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19 These metrics draw on Aum, "Building Mutual Reassurance," which outlines similar benchmarks for measuring progress.

# Identity, Illicit Finance, and Deterrence: Rethinking U.S. Strategy toward a Nuclear North Korea

Il-Gyu Lee

## Executive Summary

North Korea's nuclear posture has evolved from a bargaining tool into a central pillar of the state. Most importantly, nuclear capability now plays a central role in how the regime defines its security and position in the international system. Since 2022, Pyongyang has legally and politically codified its status as a nuclear-armed state, presenting nuclear capability as a permanent element of national security.

Recent North Korean actions demonstrate a pattern of global strategic learning. Pyongyang closely monitors U.S. military interventions and regime change efforts elsewhere, such as recent U.S. operations and pressure campaigns in Venezuela. To North Korea, these are not distant events but test cases for U.S. intent. By timing missile launches or political rhetoric in response to international crises, North Korea signals that it is learning from U.S. coercion tactics elsewhere. These actions suggest an effort to adjust its own escalation strategy to avoid a similar fate.

This shift means that traditional transactional diplomacy, which offers economic carrots for denuclearization, is increasingly misaligned with Pyongyang's priorities. When nuclear weapons are tied to identity, material incentives (sanctions relief or aid) lose their coercive power. Consequently, U.S. policy must shift from denuclearization-first to a risk-management framework. This requires disrupting the illicit financial networks that sustain the regime's weapons development, including cyber theft and cryptocurrency laundering. At the same time, the United States and its allies should strengthen trilateral deterrence and pursue pragmatic engagement that acknowledges North Korea's security perceptions without formally recognizing its nuclear status.

Given North Korea's shifting nuclear identity, U.S. strategy must move beyond a binary choice between denuclearization and acceptance. Instead, it should adopt a phased approach centered on behavioral management and strategic stability.

### **Short-term: Risk reduction and coercive accountability**

In the immediate term, the priority is to constrain Pyongyang's ability to destabilize the region while managing the risk of miscalculation.

- Expansion control & deterrence: Strengthen trilateral security cooperation (U.S.-ROK-Japan) to raise the costs of nuclear use and signal that North Korea's nuclear identity will only result in deeper strategic isolation.
- Disrupting illicit finance: Intensify targeted sanctions and private-public partnerships to choke off the illicit financial networks (cyber-theft and crypto-laundering) that provide the regime with a nuclear-identity subsidy.
- Crisis communication: Establish reliable military-to-military communication channels to prevent unintended escalation stemming from North Korea's responsive signaling to global events.

### **Long-term: The path toward a regional security architecture**

While full denuclearization remains the ultimate goal, it must be reframed as a long-term process within a broader regional security framework.

- Phased negotiations: Move away from all-or-nothing demands. Instead, take gradual steps toward arms-control-style agreements that provide incentives for restraint in exchange for conditional sanctions relief.
- Comprehensive security architecture: Explore the creation of a regional security dialogue that addresses North Korea's identity-based security concerns through structural guarantees, rather than mere transactional promises.
- Gradual confidence building: Implement non-security-related engagement (e.g., global health or climate initiatives) to create alternative avenues for regime legitimacy that do not rely solely on nuclear posture.

## **Introduction**

Since 2022, North Korea has undergone a fundamental transformation in its nuclear posture, legally codifying its arsenal as a permanent and non-negotiable pillar of the state. This shift means that the nuclear program is no longer merely a bargaining tool, but a central element of how the regime defines its sovereignty and survival. As a result, Pyongyang's behavior is increasingly driven by strategic learning and the need to perform its role as a nuclear power, rather than simple transactional logic.

Consequently, North Korea has become highly sensitive to global shifts in U.S. power and prestige. Pyongyang does not observe international crises in isolation; it analyzes events, such as U.S. military pressures in Venezuela or diplomatic reconfigurations in the Indo-Pacific, as critical precedents for regime vulnerability. These external test cases often prompt symbolic but provocative demonstrations, such as missile tests, aimed at signaling resolve and reinforcing North Korea's nuclear status to both domestic and international audiences.

However, recent U.S. strategic documents, including the 2025 National Defense Strategy (NDS), reflect a period of relative de-prioritization of the DPRK. While intended to maintain flexibility, this ambiguity may create signaling gaps that Pyongyang could exploit to test U.S. thresholds and alliance cohesion.

This paper argues that an identity-driven North Korea requires a fundamental recalibration of U.S. strategy. By examining the transition from a transactional to an identity-based model, this paper outlines a multi-layered policy framework focused on enhanced deterrence, disruption of illicit financial networks, and trilateral coordination. The goal is not only to manage immediate escalation risks but also to preserve a realistic pathway for future diplomacy in an increasingly uncertain security environment.

## **Context: From Bargaining Chip to Existential Identity**

For decades following the 1990s, the international community viewed North Korea's nuclear program through a transactional lens. It was widely framed as a strategic asset meant to be traded for security guarantees and economic normalization. However, this dynamic underwent a structural shift as Pyongyang's technical capabilities matured during the 2010s.

The year 2022 marked a definitive turning point. With the adoption of the "Law on the DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces," Pyongyang officially moved beyond the possibility of denuclearization. This was not merely a rhetorical flourish; by constitutionally codifying its nuclear status, the regime signaled that its nuclear arsenal had become integral to national sovereignty and regime survival. These legal and institutional shifts have fundamentally altered the domestic function of nuclear weapons. They no longer serve as

*This explains why traditional inducements, such as sanctions relief, now yield diminishing returns: for a regime that has tied its very identity to nuclear possession, material trade-offs are perceived not as opportunities, but as threats to its foundational stability.*

a shield against external threats but act as an existential pillar of legitimacy, reinforcing succession narratives and a national identity defined by permanent resistance to U.S. hegemony. Consequently, the nuclear identity has become institutionalized within the North Korean state apparatus. This explains why traditional inducements, such as sanctions relief, now yield diminishing returns: for a regime that has tied its very identity to nuclear possession, material trade-offs are perceived not as opportunities, but as threats to its foundational stability.

## Analysis

North Korea's nuclear posture can no longer be understood through the traditional assumption that its weapons program functions primarily as a transactional tool for extracting concessions. Since 2022, Pyongyang has embedded nuclear status into its legal and ideological foundations, codifying the principle of irreversibility through constitutional amendments and nuclear-use legislation. These moves, reinforced by leadership rhetoric and symbolic acts such as the public elevation of Kim Ju Ae, indicate that nuclear weapons now serve as pillars of regime legitimacy, succession planning, and national identity. In this context, the public elevation of Kim Ju Ae functions as a potent symbol of nuclear permanence. Her presence at missile launches and military banquets signals that the nuclear program is not a temporary asset for Kim Jong Un's generation, but a hereditary legacy to be passed down. This institutionalizes the nuclear identity within the regime's succession planning, making the prospect of future denuclearization even more remote as it becomes tied to the survival of the Kim bloodline itself. Nuclear capability is not merely a means of deterrence but a defining marker of what the regime believes it is and must remain.

This shift has important behavioral consequences. Rather than responding narrowly to developments on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea increasingly interprets external events through an identity-driven lens that links global coercive actions to regime survival. From this perspective, military pressure, regime-change precedents, and shifts in great-power alignment are not discrete signals but part of a broader narrative about the vulnerability of authoritarian states to foreign intervention. As a result, actions that Washington views as calibrated deterrence or unrelated crisis management may be interpreted in Pyongyang as existential challenges to sovereignty and autonomy, narrowing the regime's perceived policy space and reducing the attractiveness of compromise.

In early January 2026, Pyongyang launched ballistic missiles shortly after U.S. military operations in Venezuela and timed additional tests around the South Korean president's visit to China. North Korean state media framed these launches as demonstrations of

resolute self-defense<sup>1</sup> and regime strength, emphasizing domestic stability and deterrent credibility rather than listing specific diplomatic demands. The recent conflict in Iran further reinforces this defensive crouch. As Washington pressures Tehran to dismantle its nuclear infrastructure, Pyongyang observes the situation as a zero-sum struggle for sovereignty. For the North Korean leadership, the U.S. approach toward Iran, combined with the earlier capture of Maduro in Venezuela, provides the ultimate existential justification for its nuclear arsenal. From their perspective, these global events prove that without a credible nuclear deterrent, any authoritarian regime remains vulnerable to U.S.-led regime change operations. The framing matters: when tests are presented primarily for internal audiences and status signaling, they function as lessons-testing, probing how the United States and its partners respond to distant coercive actions and whether such responses create precedents that threaten regime survival. The practical consequences are clear: (1) tests become more frequent and symbolic, not tightly linked to bargaining; (2) Pyongyang grows less responsive to material inducements because signaling serves domestic legitimacy; and (3) allied leverage from sanctions or incentives is reduced, increasing the risk that misinterpreted responses will produce escalation rather than de-escalation.

Recent behavior illustrates this pattern. In early January 2026, North Korea launched ballistic missiles shortly after U.S. military operations in Venezuela and just ahead of the South Korean president's visit to China. These launches were not linked to immediate military necessity on the Peninsula, nor were they accompanied by clear demands or negotiating signals. Instead, they reflected a process of strategic observation and testing. Pyongyang appears to treat international crises involving coercion, leadership vulnerability, or regime pressure as learning opportunities; moments to assess how the United States applies force, how allies respond, and where escalation thresholds may lie.

Given this, missile launches following such events function less as bargaining tools and more as performative signals aimed at reinforcing domestic legitimacy, asserting relevance, and probing external reactions. This behavior differs from earlier transactional patterns in which demonstrations of capability were more clearly tied to inducements or diplomatic openings. An identity-driven approach produces different outcomes: signaling becomes more globally responsive, less predictable, and more detached from immediate negotiation. Misinterpreting these actions through a purely transactional framework risks policy miscalculation and inadvertent escalation, as responses designed to coerce or deter may instead reinforce Pyongyang's perception of existential threat. This identity-driven defiance, however, triggers a dangerous risk production loop. As North Korea reacts to global crises with renewed provocations, it forces a military response from the U.S. and its allies, which in turn provides China with a pretext to increase its regional footprint.

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1 Lee Hyo-jin, "N. Korea Fires Ballistic Missiles as US Capture of Maduro Unnerves Kim Jong-un," *Korea Times*, January 4, 2026, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20260104/n-korea-fires-ballistic-missiles-as-us-capture-of-maduro-unnerves-kim-jong-un>.

Beijing may interpret enhanced U.S. deterrence measures as a latent containment strategy, leading to a boomerang effect where U.S. efforts to stabilize the Peninsula inadvertently heighten great-power tensions and solidify the China-DPRK strategic alignment.

Western analysis often misreads these signals. Media and policy discourse tend to focus on the spectacle of missile tests or military parades while overlooking the deeper narratives that structure DPRK behavior. This leads to recurring analytical errors: overestimating coercive bargaining intent and underestimating the identity functions of nuclear weapons.

Without understanding how Pyongyang constructs legitimacy through language, symbolism, and historical memory, U.S. policymakers risk misinterpreting actions meant primarily for domestic consolidation or role performance.

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) heightens this risk. By prioritizing competition with China and Russia and placing limited emphasis on North Korea, Washington may default to generic deterrence frameworks that assume rational, material cost-benefit

calculations. Yet Pyongyang's identity-bound posture means that deterrence signals may be interpreted in ways that diverge sharply from U.S. expectations. As U.S. attention shifts elsewhere, the likelihood of miscalculation increases, particularly if North Korea perceives reduced U.S. focus as both an opportunity to assert its status and a threat to its autonomy.

Taken together, these dynamics show that North Korea's nuclear behavior cannot be understood without accounting for identity. Its actions reflect a deeply internalized narrative of sovereignty, dignity, and resistance, which shapes how it interprets crises, alliances, and external pressure. Any effective U.S. strategy must therefore integrate identity-based analysis into deterrence, crisis management, and alliance coordination. Without this approach, Washington risks relying on frameworks that no longer match the realities of Pyongyang's decision-making.

## Strategic Implications

North Korea's identity-bound nuclear posture creates strategic challenges that differ fundamentally from those assumed in traditional U.S. deterrence frameworks. If Pyongyang views its nuclear arsenal as inseparable from regime legitimacy and national dignity, then the U.S. faces a counterpart that is less responsive to material pressure and more sensitive

*Without understanding how Pyongyang constructs legitimacy through language, symbolism, and historical memory, U.S. policymakers risk misinterpreting actions meant primarily for domestic consolidation or role performance.*

to perceived threats to status or autonomy. This complicates crisis signaling: actions intended by Washington as a stabilizing force or deterrent may be interpreted in Pyongyang as escalatory, humiliating, or even existential.

The 2025 U.S. NSS, by de-prioritizing the DPRK in favor of great-power competition, may inadvertently create a degree of strategic ambiguity. This neglect may be interpreted by an identity-driven Pyongyang not as a de-escalation, but as an opportunity to accelerate its nuclear status-seeking without immediate U.S. pushback. This creates a dangerous asymmetry in signaling: while Washington practices strategic patience or calculated inattention, Pyongyang interprets this as a green light for further provocations to force itself back onto the global agenda. The resulting gap in interpretive coherence between the U.S. and its regional allies, who face the direct brunt of these provocations, risks fracturing the unified deterrence front.

Recent crises illustrate how these dynamics can escalate unpredictably. North Korea's missile launches that coincided with U.S. military action in Venezuela and during the South Korean president's visit to China suggest that Pyongyang may react not only to direct military threats but to symbolic challenges to regime survival or regional alignment. These reactions suggest that the DPRK's escalation calculus is shaped as much by perceived affronts to its identity as by shifts in the military balance. As a result, the threshold for signaling, coercion, or crisis response may be lower or more unstable than U.S. planners assume.

These dynamics also complicate long-term strategic objectives. If nuclear weapons are embedded in the regime's identity, then near-term denuclearization is unrealistic. Yet accepting North Korea as a permanent nuclear state risks undermining non-proliferation norms and encouraging further nuclearization in the region. The U.S. must therefore navigate a narrow path: maintaining credible deterrence, preventing further nuclear expansion, and managing crises without reinforcing Pyongyang's siege narrative or inadvertently validating its nuclear identity.

Finally, the DPRK's growing alignment with Russia, coupled with China's strategic tolerance, introduces a new layer of complexity. This emerging alignment of defiance allows Pyongyang to outsource its economic and technological needs, making it even more immune to U.S.-led sanctions. This shift turns North Korea from a peripheral threat into a more integrated member of broader revisionist cooperation networks, complicating the U.S. National Defense Strategy's focus on major power competition.

Taken together, these implications point to a strategic environment in which deterrence must be paired with identity-aware crisis management, and alliance coordination becomes essential not only for military readiness but for interpretive coherence. Without such adjustments, the U.S. risks operating with outdated assumptions that fail to account for the

*These strategic implications suggest that effective policy toward North Korea must move beyond traditional deterrence frameworks and incorporate mechanisms that account for identity-driven signaling and crisis perception.*

identity-driven logic shaping North Korea's nuclear behavior. Thus, these strategic implications suggest that effective policy toward North Korea must move beyond traditional deterrence frameworks and incorporate mechanisms that account for identity-driven signaling and crisis perception.

## **Policy Recommendations: A Pragmatic Framework for Risk Management**

A sustainable U.S. strategy toward North Korea must recognize that Pyongyang's nuclear posture is now deeply intertwined with regime identity and legitimacy. This does not require abandoning denuclearization as a long-term objective, but it does require reframing near-term policy around deterrence, disruption, and diplomatic coordination. The following recommendations outline a pragmatic approach that aligns with the 2025 U.S. NSS while addressing the identity-driven dynamics shaping DPRK's behavior.

### **1. Short-term: Risk reduction and coercive accountability**

The immediate objective is to constrain Pyongyang's strategic space while reducing the likelihood of unintended escalation. Given North Korea's identity-driven responsiveness to global events, U.S. policy must move beyond static deterrence toward a dynamic, inter-regional management strategy.

#### **a. Expansion control & calibrated deterrence**

To counter the identity-driven escalation, the U.S. must qualitatively sharpen its deterrence signals while rhetorically constraining existential threats.

- **Implementation:** Establish a trilateral mechanism within existing U.S.-ROK-Japan coordination frameworks to synchronize real-time interpretation of North Korea's signals. For instance, when Pyongyang conducts tests in response to distant events (e.g., the 2026 Venezuela or Iran crises), the three allies must issue a unified, pre-calibrated response that addresses the global learning aspect of the provocation, reducing the risk that North Korea exploits differences in allied signaling.

- Operationalizing restraint: Deterrence should be sharpened through enhanced tri-lateral nuclear planning and deeper integration of conventional and nuclear assets. However, this must be paired with a rhetorical restraint. Washington should explicitly avoid regime-ending language in day-to-day strategic communications, thereby reducing crisis pressure on Pyongyang’s leadership.

b. Disrupting the identity subsidy (illicit finance)

If nuclear weapons are an existential pillar of the regime, then the illicit funds, primarily from cyber-theft and cryptocurrency laundering, effectively subsidize the regime’s ability to sustain its nuclear posture.

- Implementation: Transition from broad financial sanctions toward faster financial interdiction targeting cyber theft. The U.S. Treasury, in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), should lead a Public-Private Crypto-Defense Initiative. This involves sharing real-time blockchain forensics with major global cryptocurrency exchanges and stablecoin issuers to enable the prompt freezing of stolen assets.
- Goal: By drastically shortening the window between a cyber-heist and its laundering, the U.S. can raise the operational costs for Pyongyang’s cyber units (e.g., Lazarus Group), effectively choking off the liquid capital required to maintain its resistance identity without relying on the cooperation of Russia or China.

c. Crisis communication and de-confliction

To manage an actor that interprets external pressure as an existential challenge, reliable communication channels are not a concession but a strategic necessity.

- Implementation: Propose a non-political technical hotline specifically designed for crisis de-confliction. Unlike the Panmunjom channel, which is often severed during political tensions, this hotline should be framed as a military-to-military communication channel (potentially facilitated through a neutral third party like Switzerland) focused solely on avoiding mid-air collisions or unintended maritime conflicts.
- Implicit incentives: The incentive for Pyongyang is the implicit recognition of its status as a military actor that must be communicated with professionally. This appeals to their status-seeking identity while providing Washington with a guardrail to prevent a local conflict from escalating into a nuclear confrontation.

## 2. Long-Term: The path toward a regional security architecture

In the long term, U.S. strategy must shift from seeking an immediate transactional collapse of the nuclear program to fostering a regional environment where North Korea's nuclear identity becomes a strategic liability rather than a source of legitimacy.

### a. Phased negotiations: An arms-control-style roadmap

To move beyond the binary choice of denuclearization or acceptance, the U.S. should introduce a phased roadmap that utilizes arms-control-style frameworks.

- **Implementation:** Instead of demanding Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Denuclearization (CVID) as an immediate prerequisite, Washington should propose a strategic stability dialogue. This framework focuses on capping capabilities, such as a verified moratorium on ICBM launches and nuclear tests, in exchange for status-based concessions.
- **Implicit incentives:** The primary incentive for Pyongyang is the implicit recognition of its de facto status as a serious nuclear interlocutor. By engaging in arms-control-style talk, the U.S. offers the prestige the regime craves, while practically constraining the growth of its arsenal. This creates a long-term freeze that serves as a necessary bridge toward eventual denuclearization.

### b. Establishing a comprehensive security architecture

A sustainable solution requires a structural shift in Northeast Asia that addresses the siege identity of the North Korean regime.

- **Implementation:** The U.S. should take the lead in proposing a trilateral security dialogue between the Northeast Asian countries. This is not a revival of the Six-Party Talks but a permanent regional body aimed at creating regional security guarantees. This includes multilateral non-aggression pacts and the formalization of rules of the road for military activities in the Yellow Sea and across the DMZ.
- **Justifying the denuclearization goal:** Within this architecture, denuclearization remains the ultimate goal. However, it is framed as the final stage of a broad regional peace process rather than an isolated demand. This preserves the integrity of the 2025 NSS and the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) while providing a realistic path for diplomacy.

### c. Gradual confidence building: Alternative avenues for legitimacy

For North Korea to move away from its nuclear identity, it must find alternative pillars of legitimacy.

- **Implementation:** The U.S. should initiate non-security engagement tracks focused on climate resilience and global health (e.g., carbon capture initiatives or vaccine cold-chain infrastructure).
- **How to convince them:** By framing these as global challenges for sovereign states, the U.S. allows Kim Jong Un to perform the role of a responsible national leader on the global stage without relying solely on military displays. This gradually creates internal friction between his nuclear resistance identity and a new modernizing national leader identity, offering a potential restraint for future generations of North Korean leadership.

Taken together, these recommendations acknowledge the durability of North Korea's nuclear identity while seeking to limit the most dangerous behaviors, reduce escalation risks, and maintain strategic stability. They offer a framework for managing, not resolving, the nuclear challenge in the near term, while keeping open the long-term possibility of denuclearization under different political conditions.

## Conclusion

North Korea's nuclear posture has moved beyond the realm of negotiable strategy and into the core of regime identity. This shift fundamentally alters the assumptions that have guided U.S. policy for decades. A state that views nuclear weapons as inseparable from its sovereignty and legitimacy will not respond to traditional transactional diplomacy. Instead, its behavior is now shaped by an identity-driven learning loop, where distant crises, from Venezuela to Iran, are interpreted as existential precedents for its own survival.

In this uncertain security environment, the U.S. cannot afford the strategic inattention suggested by the limited emphasis on North Korea in the 2025 NSS. Such a gap in focus may create space for Pyongyang to test allied thresholds. Managing this challenge requires an adjusted strategy that acknowledges the durability of the DPRK's nuclear identity while seeking to constrain its most dangerous manifestations in a proactive manner.

The path forward lies in a dual-track of qualitative sharpening and strategic recognition. The U.S. and its allies must sharpen trilateral deterrence through integrated planning and disrupt the illicit financial subsidies that sustain the regime's autonomy. Simultaneously, they should offer implicit, status-based incentives, such as arms-control-style dialogues, that appeal to the regime's desire for prestige without prematurely granting legal recognition.

Ultimately, acknowledging the identity-bound nature of North Korea’s nuclear posture is not an admission of defeat; it is a strategic prerequisite. By integrating identity-based analysis into our deterrence and diplomatic frameworks, the United States can move from a policy of reactive crisis management to one of active risk production control. This approach preserves the ultimate “North Star” of denuclearization, not as a failed immediate demand, but as the final outcome of a newly constructed, stable regional security architecture.

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# The Case for Institutionalizing NATO-IP4 Relations

Saeme Kim

## Executive Summary

Security dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are becoming increasingly interconnected. Russia's war in Ukraine, sustained in part by North Korea's provision of munitions and personnel and China's political and economic support, has underscored how developments in one theatre can directly affect the other. These trends have contributed to a growing recognition among policymakers that the security environments of Europe and the Indo-Pacific can no longer be regarded as separate.

Against this backdrop, cooperation between NATO and four Indo-Pacific partners, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand (the IP4), has expanded significantly. Since 2022, the IP4 has participated in NATO summits and identified several areas of cooperation, including cyber defense, emerging technologies, hybrid threats, and support for Ukraine. However, the current NATO-IP4 framework remains limited. Engagement largely occurs on the margins of NATO summits and relies heavily on U.S. leadership priorities, resulting in cooperation that remains largely ad hoc.

This paper argues that institutionalizing NATO-IP4 cooperation would help ensure continuity and enhance the effectiveness of transregional security cooperation. Institutionalization in this context does not imply the creation of a formal alliance or treaty framework. Rather, it refers to the establishment of regularized mechanisms, including predictable consultations, working-level coordination, and structured agendas, that can build habits of cooperation over time.

The paper identifies three main rationales for institutionalization. First, a NATO-IP4 framework could fill an institutional gap by providing a dedicated platform for region-to-region security dialogue between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific. Second, deeper NATO-IP4 cooperation could help sustain U.S. engagement while supporting Washington's goal of encouraging allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security. Third, cooperation between NATO and the IP4 is already emerging and primarily requires modest structuring rather than major institutional innovation.

To support this process, the paper proposes recommendations across two domains. Functional recommendations focus on practical cooperation, including working groups on shared security challenges, a regionally tailored partnership program, an annual transregional threat assessment, and a roadmap for transregional military exercises. Organizational recommendations include establishing clear institutional counterparts, holding routine working-level meetings in the Indo-Pacific, institutionalizing NATO–IP4 summits, and eventually, creating a small coordination unit.

Taken together, these measures would help transform NATO–IP4 engagement from an ad hoc dialogue into a more durable framework capable of addressing increasingly transregional security challenges.

## Introduction

In June 2022, the leaders of South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, collectively referred to as the IP4, met in Madrid and participated in the first NATO–IP4 Summit. Here, the two sides affirmed the importance of closer transregional cooperation. While this was a historic milestone, NATO’s engagement with the IP4 countries long preceded 2022. Bilaterally, relations between NATO and each of the IP4 countries began to develop in the 2000s. As a grouping, NATO and the IP4 also convened on several occasions to address the threat posed by North Korea, particularly in response to its nuclear tests in 2016 and 2017. By 2020, discussions had expanded to include broader strategic concerns, most notably the rise of China.

Seen in this context, the summit-level meeting of the NATO–IP4 framework in 2022 was the culmination of years of evolving cooperation. It was also a symbolic moment that reinforced the growing recognition that security developments in one region have important implications for the other.

NATO–IP4 summit-level meetings continued in 2023 and 2024, but the format was discontinued in 2025, and it remains unclear whether a summit-level NATO–IP4 meeting will be held at the 2026 NATO Summit in Turkey. Regardless of whether another summit-level meeting is held, given that both sides have already identified numerous areas of potential cooperation, and in light of the increasing interconnectedness of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, this report raises a central question: should NATO–IP4 cooperation be institutionalized to ensure continuity and effectiveness? If so, what form should such institutionalization take?

The goal is not to argue for a formal alliance or a new treaty-based architecture. Rather, this study examines whether more regularized mechanisms, such as predictable consultations,

working-level coordination, structured agendas, and shared planning processes, could enhance the effectiveness and resilience of transregional cooperation.

This report contributes to the emerging debate by outlining the rationale for deeper institutionalization, identifying the unique functions a NATO–IP4 framework could serve, and offering both short- and long-term recommendations regarding the form of institutionalization and the agenda of cooperation. In doing so, it highlights why this current moment, marked by shifting power dynamics, growing alignment among authoritarian states, and renewed questions about U.S. global commitments, presents a critical opportunity to strengthen the transregional link between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

## Context

Recent events have elevated the importance of security cooperation between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. For example, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and particularly North Korea’s provision of munitions and soldiers to Russia<sup>1</sup>, as well as China’s support<sup>2</sup>, have underscored how external actors can sustain Russia’s war effort. These developments have accelerated the growing recognition that the European and Indo-Pacific security theatres can no longer be treated separately. More broadly, it points to greater alignment among revisionist countries, often captured by the term “CRINK.”

It is within this environment that NATO’s value of IP4 has increased significantly. In addition to NATO-IP4 summits held in 2022 (Madrid), 2023 (Vilnius), and 2024 (Washington, DC), the two sides have signed key documents outlining specific areas of cooperation. These include the *Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges*, signed in April 2022, which identified areas for cooperation, including cybersecurity, emerging technologies, hybrid threats, maritime security, and climate change. This was also the period in which NATO, in its 2022 *Strategic Concept*, identified China for the first time as a “systemic challenge,” citing China’s coercive policies, malicious hybrid and cyber activities, efforts to subvert the rules-based international order, and its deepening strategic partnership with Russia.<sup>3</sup> The same document also emphasized NATO’s growing interest in the Indo-Pacific and stated that the Alliance would strengthen dialogue and cooperation with partners in the region. In 2024, NATO and the IP4 agreed to focus on four “flagship projects”: support for Ukraine, cyber defense, information sharing on disinformation threats, and cooperation on artificial intelligence.

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- 1 Josh Pennington, “North Korea Allegedly Sends Weapons to Russia for War in Ukraine,” *CNN*, May 30, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/30/asia/north-korea-russia-ukraine-weapons-report-intl-hnk>.
  - 2 Khaled Robert Maalouf, “China in Russia and Ukraine: October 2025,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 7, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-russia-and-ukraine-october-2025>.
  - 3 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, (Madrid: NATO, June 29, 2022).

The boost in NATO-IP4 dialogue had occurred largely during the Biden administration. Former President Joe Biden was a strong advocate of NATO and its partnerships worldwide. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy likewise emphasized the importance of strengthening connections between allies in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Senior officials in the Biden administration reinforced this message. For example, Kurt Campbell, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, noted that Washington sought to institutionalize cooperation with the IP4 grouping,<sup>5</sup> while former Secretary of State Antony Blinken repeatedly highlighted the need for closer coordination between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific partners.<sup>6</sup>

However, since President Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the idea of security connectivity between Europe and the Indo-Pacific—as well as cooperation between NATO and the IP4—has been considerably diluted. The 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy states that allies will need to increase burden-sharing and take primary responsibility for their own defense in Europe, the Middle East, and the Korean Peninsula, with critical but limited support from the United States. The strategy also describes Russia as a persistent but manageable threat to NATO's eastern members and suggests that it should primarily be addressed by European allies themselves.<sup>7</sup> In effect, Washington expects European partners to concentrate their efforts and resources on European security. The implication is that, unlike the Biden administration, which viewed interregional cooperation as essential to countering China, the Trump administration prioritizes regional actors taking responsibility for security within their own theaters. This highlights a limitation of the current NATO-IP4 framework: the pace and visibility of cooperation are closely tied to the priorities of U.S. leadership.

Possibly as a result, the current NATO-IP4 framework remains limited. The IP4 meets only on the margins of NATO summits, and cooperation remains largely ad hoc. While progress has been made, including joint statements, expanded consultations, and cooperation on cyber defense and resilience, there is no dedicated structure to drive an agenda or produce sustained policy outcomes. As a result, the IP4's potential contributions to NATO initiatives and NATO's ability to draw on Indo-Pacific perspectives remain underutilized.

These trends indicate the case for strengthening cooperation between NATO and the Indo-Pacific democracies. Both regions are confronting similar challenges, including revisionist

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4 *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022).

5 Song Sang-ho and Cho Joon-hyung, "U.S. Wants to 'Institutionalize' Grouping of NATO's Four Indo-Pacific Partners: Campbell," *Yonhap News Agency*, July 11, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240711000400315>.

6 U.S. Department of State, "Joint Press Availability with Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, and Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun," October 31, 2024.

7 U.S. Department of Defense, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, January 23, 2026).

alignment, gray-zone pressure, cyberattacks, disinformation, and vulnerabilities in critical supply chains, driven by actors that increasingly operate across regions. A more institutionalized NATO–IP4 framework would help ensure that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific do not remain compartmentalized and that democracies are better positioned to respond to challenges that are inherently transregional.

## Argument

There is a compelling case for institutionalizing NATO–IP4 relations. By “institutionalization,” this paper does not refer to a formal alliance commitment, but rather to the creation of regularized mechanisms for cooperation. This would include standing consultation formats, predictable working-level coordination, and structured agendas that can build habits of cooperation and generate path dependency over time. Such arrangements would also help insulate the relationship from abrupt political shifts within individual countries.

*A more institutionalized NATO–IP4 framework would help ensure that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific do not remain compartmentalized and that democracies are better positioned to respond to challenges that are inherently transregional.*

This section outlines the need for and the potential role of such institutionalization. A more structured NATO–IP4 framework would contribute to long-term stability by reducing uncertainty, facilitating information-sharing, and lowering transaction costs among partners. In doing so, it would represent a modest but meaningful revival of the liberal rules-based order in the security domain.

## NATO-IP4 can fill an institutional gap

The NATO–IP4 partnership offers a unique opportunity to establish a region-to-region security platform that fills a gap not covered by existing unilateral mechanisms. Unlike frameworks such as the Quad, AUKUS, or ASEAN-led arrangements, which focus on specific countries or subregions, a NATO–IP4 framework would link the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security environments. This would enable more structured cooperation on shared security challenges that span both regions.

NATO members and the IP4 countries face a range of overlapping security concerns, including China’s growing assertiveness, Russia’s revisionist actions, North Korea’s missile and nuclear threats, and expanding risks in cyber and maritime domains. These challenges are interconnected and increasingly transregional. Yet there is currently no single venue that enables sustained dialogue and coordination on these issues across both regions.

A common criticism is that formalizing a NATO–IP4 framework could sideline ASEAN or contribute to the proliferation of Indo-Pacific groupings “in search of a mission.” Such concerns reflect a broader sensitivity in the region regarding external institutions that may appear to dilute ASEAN centrality or duplicate existing platforms. Yet this critique overlooks the specific functional gap that a NATO–IP4 mechanism is intended to fill. The goal is not to supplant regional organizations or to compete with established minilaterals such as the Quad. Rather, it is to provide a venue for transregional defense coordination, which is something neither ASEAN-led mechanisms nor the Quad are structured or mandated to deliver.

ASEAN’s strength lies in political convening, consensus-building, and maintaining a stable regional diplomatic environment, but it is not designed to lead on regional security cooperation. Similarly, the Quad focuses on select areas of coordination among its four members, without the institutional depth or geographic scope required to bridge the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. A NATO–IP4 framework would complement, rather than challenge, these bodies by addressing issues where Europe and the Indo-Pacific increasingly intersect.

In practice, such cooperation could focus on functional domains including cyber and hybrid threats, sanctions coordination, defense industrial resilience, and monitoring the evolving dynamics of the China–Russia partnership. These are areas where transregional perspectives are increasingly necessary. A NATO–IP4 framework could also create structured avenues for coordinating responses to North Korea’s provocations, an issue that directly connects security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula with broader Euro-Atlantic interests.

*A NATO–IP4 framework could also create structured avenues for coordinating responses to North Korea’s provocations, an issue that directly connects security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula with broader Euro-Atlantic interests.*

If designed carefully, NATO–IP4 cooperation would reinforce the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture by operating alongside—and in support of—existing regional mechanisms. Rather than creating redundancy, institutionalization would fill a missing link by enabling Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific partners to coordinate more systematically on shared security concerns, without undermining ASEAN’s role or the purpose of existing minilateral frameworks.

## **NATO-IP4 can serve as a mechanism for sustaining US engagement and enabling better burden sharing**

Another driver for institutionalizing NATO–IP4 relations stems from the evolving strategic direction of the United States. Washington has repeatedly emphasized the need for European allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defense, while encouraging

Asian partners to do the same. The underlying message is that the United States cannot indefinitely remain the primary guarantor and coordinator of allied security, particularly as it confronts simultaneous challenges from China, Russia, and other global pressures. This shift in U.S. strategic thinking reinforces the need for allies to deepen cooperation among themselves, rather than relying on Washington as the perpetual intermediary.

The United States' broader vision—transitioning from the traditional hub-and-spokes system in Asia toward a more interconnected “lattice-work” of alliances and partnerships—also aligns closely with the logic of a structured NATO–IP4 framework. A formalized platform would embody this approach by fostering direct and predictable interaction between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. Instead of relying on fragmented or ad hoc engagements, NATO and the IP4 could develop sustained cooperative habits that support the U.S. objective of a more resilient and networked security architecture.

Strengthening coordination between Europe and the Indo-Pacific would also reduce the burden on Washington to act as the constant broker of interregional cooperation. As NATO–IP4 mechanisms mature, they would enable allies to address shared challenges, including those posed by China, Russia, North Korea, cyber threats, and maritime instability, without requiring the United States to initiate or manage every effort. In this way, stronger trans-regional coordination would complement U.S. leadership while allowing Washington to concentrate its resources and attention on its highest strategic priorities.

At the same time, both Europe and the Indo-Pacific face parallel challenges in managing uncertainty surrounding U.S. policy. The United States is unlikely to withdraw from NATO and pursue openly confrontational policies toward China, at least for the time being. Nevertheless, significant uncertainties remain. Tariff disputes, shifting industrial priorities, questions about U.S. force posture, and Washington's expectations for burden-sharing continue to raise concerns among allies. In this context, both European and Indo-Pacific partners are increasingly motivated to deepen cooperation, not to replace the United States, but to enhance resilience against policy volatility in Washington.

*A more structured NATO–IP4 framework would help sustain meaningful U.S. engagement while simultaneously encouraging a more interconnected and self-reliant alliance network.*

In this sense, institutionalization becomes a practical tool. A more structured NATO–IP4 framework would help sustain meaningful U.S. engagement while simultaneously encouraging a more interconnected and self-reliant alliance network.

## NATO-IP4 institutionalization is already emerging and simply requires some structuring

Institutionalizing NATO–IP4 cooperation would not require a major overhaul of existing arrangements. Rather, it would involve modest steps to provide structure to a partnership that has already begun to take shape. Since 2022, the IP4 countries have participated at the leaders’ level in NATO summits, underscoring the growing strategic relevance of the relationship. Although the absence of a NATO–IP4 meeting in 2025 was a missed opportunity, it should not be interpreted as a permanent decline in interest on either side. The four flagship projects (support to Ukraine, cyber defense, information-sharing on disinformation threats, and cooperation on artificial intelligence) demonstrate that NATO and the IP4 already recognize concrete areas of cooperation and share a commitment to addressing emerging security challenges together.

Given this foundation, the next step should be to introduce a more structured framework that can sustain momentum. At present, however, NATO–IP4 engagement largely consists of four parallel conversations between NATO and each Indo-Pacific partner individually. If the partnership is to function as a genuine region-to-region platform, the IP4 countries themselves will also need to strengthen coordination among their own governments. More regular consultations among Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand could help align priorities, develop shared initiatives, and present more coherent positions in NATO–IP4 discussions.

Analysis of security in the Indo-Pacific is already evolving in ways that include discussions of new forms of regional coordination. Senior officials in Japan have openly proposed a “one-theatre” approach, arguing that the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula are so operationally interconnected that they should be treated as part of a single strategic environment.<sup>8</sup> Related conversations have also emerged around the idea of a “Security Quad” (or “SQUAD”) among the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines—an informal grouping aimed at deepening operational coordination in response to China’s maritime coercion.<sup>9</sup> However, such proposals are not uniformly supported across the region, and countries such as South Korea have adopted a more cautious stance. These differing perspectives highlight the importance of platforms where allies and partners can exchange views and better understand each other’s threat perceptions. In this respect, a more structured IP4 framework could serve as a useful venue for sharing assessments and exploring areas of practical cooperation, even where strategic approaches do not fully align.

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8 “Japan Broaches ‘One-Theater’ Concept to U.S. for Indo-Pacific,” *Asahi Shimbun*, April 15, 2025.

9 Kim Ji-hye, “United States, Japan Push for Asia-Pacific NATO with Australia and Philippines on Board,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 4, 2025.

## Policy Recommendations

To institutionalize NATO–IP4 cooperation, this paper presents recommendations across two domains: the functional domain, which focuses on areas of practical cooperation, and the organizational domain, which focuses on the institutional structures required to sustain that cooperation. Within each domain, the recommendations are sequenced from short- to medium-term steps, which can be implemented relatively quickly within existing frameworks, to medium- to long-term initiatives that would deepen and consolidate the partnership over time.

	Functional domain	Organizational domain
<b>Short-to-mid term</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Working groups or study groups on shared security challenges</li><li>2. Regionally tailored partnership program</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Establish clear counterparts among members (among IP4 and between NATO and IP4)</li><li>2. Establish working level routine meeting in the Indo-Pacific</li></ol>
<b>Medium-to-long term</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Draft an annual transregional threat assessment</li><li>4. Transregional military exercises</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Hold routine NATO-IP4 Summit</li><li>4. Establish NATO-IP4 secretariat</li></ol>

### Functional domain

#### 1. Working groups on shared security challenges

The first step in strengthening NATO–IP4 cooperation should be the creation of joint working groups on shared security challenges. These groups would convene officials and subject-matter experts from NATO and the IP4 to develop shared assessments and identify areas of policy convergence.

Such working groups could initially focus on issues already addressed in recent NATO–IP4 joint statements, including hybrid threats, cybersecurity, maritime domain awareness, sanctions enforcement, and defense supply chain resilience. For example, monitoring sanctions evasion related to Russia or North Korea requires information-sharing across regions, while cyber and disinformation threats increasingly target democratic societies across both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters.

The purpose of these study groups would not be to create new bureaucratic structures but to generate shared analytical foundations that can inform future cooperation. Over time, they would also help harmonize threat perceptions and identify areas where NATO and the IP4 can coordinate their responses more effectively.

## **2. A regionally tailored partnership program**

A second functional recommendation is to develop a regionally tailored NATO–IP4 partnership program building on the existing Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPPs) that NATO maintains with each of the four Indo-Pacific partners. These bilateral frameworks already outline areas of cooperation between NATO and Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. While each program reflects national priorities, they also contain significant overlap in domains such as cyber defense, emerging technologies, maritime security, and resilience against hybrid threats.

By identifying these common elements, NATO and the IP4 should consolidate them into a regionally tailored partnership agenda that defines shared objectives, priority areas, and concrete action points for cooperation. Such a framework would not replace the existing bilateral ITPPs but would complement them by providing a platform for coordination among all four Indo-Pacific partners.

This approach would also signal that NATO–IP4 cooperation is not an attempt to extend NATO’s institutional footprint into the Indo-Pacific, but rather an effort to better coordinate existing partnerships around shared strategic priorities.

## **3. Draft an annual transregional threat assessment**

In the longer term, and as cooperation deepens, NATO and the IP4 should jointly produce an Annual Transregional Threat Assessment that consolidates analysis on the full range of shared security challenges.

Such a report should examine issues including hybrid threats, Chinese gray-zone activities, North Korea–Russia military cooperation, maritime security risks, cyber-attacks, and vulnerabilities in critical technologies and supply chains. By bringing together perspectives from both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, the assessment would contribute to a broader strategic understanding of how security dynamics increasingly span both theatres.

Importantly, the purpose of this exercise would not be to force consensus among the participants. NATO members and the IP4 countries inevitably hold different threat perceptions shaped by geography, alliance commitments, and national priorities. Instead, the goal would be to promote clarity and transparency by allowing partners to understand better how others assess emerging risks.

Over time, the report would also help build a cumulative analytical foundation. By compiling assessments year after year, NATO and the IP4 could develop a shared database of threat analysis that tracks evolving patterns across regions. In this

way, the Annual Transregional Threat Assessment would serve as a practical tool to inform policy coordination and to identify areas where cooperation is both feasible and strategically valuable.

#### **4. Develop a roadmap for transregional military exercises**

Another long-term functional priority is the development of a roadmap for transregional military exercises. This roadmap should include maritime drills, cyber defense exercises, and tabletop crisis simulations.

Embedding such exercises into national planning cycles would ensure that NATO–IP4 cooperation remains sustainable beyond the tenure of any particular government. Regular exercises would strengthen interoperability among forces, improve crisis response coordination, and build trust among participating militaries.

Importantly, these activities would not require NATO to operate directly in the Indo-Pacific or IP4 militaries to participate routinely in European operations. Instead, they would focus on scenarios where transregional coordination is essential, such as protecting maritime supply routes or responding to hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure.

## **Organizational domain**

### **1. Establish clear counterparts among members**

Institutionalization requires identifiable points of contact. In the short to medium term, each IP4 country should designate and strengthen links among official counterparts to NATO’s Indo-Pacific Section and among the IP4 members.

These counterparts could take the form of small liaison units located within foreign ministries, defense ministries, or national security agencies. Their role would be to coordinate communication with NATO, track developments across NATO–IP4 initiatives, and prepare national positions for consultations.

By establishing these counterparts, NATO and the IP4 would significantly improve day-to-day coordination. Such mechanisms would also ensure continuity across political transitions and reduce the risk that cooperation becomes episodic or dependent on individual leadership.

### **2. Establish working-level routine meetings in the Indo-Pacific region**

A second organizational step is the creation of regular working-level meetings between NATO officials and IP4 representatives held in the Indo-Pacific region.

Currently, most NATO–IP4 interactions occur on the margins of NATO meetings in Europe. Establishing routine consultations hosted by IP4 members would broaden participation across government agencies and reinforce the perception that NATO–IP4 cooperation is a two-way region-to-region partnership rather than a Europe-centered initiative.

### **3. Hold routine NATO–IP4 summits**

NATO and the IP4 should institutionalize high-level engagement by holding a routine NATO–IP4 leaders’ meeting alongside the NATO Summit. Formalizing this arrangement would ensure predictability while avoiding the administrative burden of creating a new summit format.

Regular summit-level meetings would provide strategic direction to NATO–IP4 cooperation and signal to both domestic audiences and external actors that the partnership carries long-term political commitment.

### **4. Establish a NATO–IP4 coordination unit**

Finally, the long-term institutionalization of NATO–IP4 cooperation should include establishing a small coordination unit.

Precedents from other multilateral frameworks demonstrate the importance of even modest institutional support structures. For example, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) operated for years without a secretariat before establishing one in 2008, while the ASEAN Secretariat gradually expanded its role as regional cooperation deepened. Its primary role would be to preserve institutional memory, coordinate ongoing initiatives, and support long-term projects.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that institutionalizing NATO–IP4 cooperation offers a practical way to strengthen transregional coordination without creating new treaty obligations or formal alliance commitments. By establishing predictable consultation mechanisms, working-level coordination, and structured agendas, NATO and the IP4 can build habits of cooperation that enhance resilience against shifting geopolitical dynamics and policy volatility.

The recommendations outlined in this report demonstrate that meaningful institutionalization does not require a major institutional overhaul. Rather, modest but deliberate steps—ranging from working groups and partnership programs to regular summits and coordination mechanisms—can gradually transform NATO–IP4 engagement into a more

stable and effective platform. In doing so, NATO and the IP4 would be better positioned to address the increasingly transregional security challenges confronting democratic partners in both regions.

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# Is North Korea the Biggest Winner from the Russo-Ukrainian War?

Ria Roy

## Executive Summary

War usually brings many tragedies to those directly involved, but at the same time, it is possible for people to gain greatly from someone else's war. As we approach the beginning of the end of the Russo-Ukrainian War, North Korea is at the moment the biggest winner of this war.

North Korea, as a small power, has oddly found a way to avoid falling under the thumb of any of the big superpowers. While there remains no clear winner on either side of this tragedy—Ukraine has suffered so much, while Russia has hardly emerged victorious—North Korea itself has managed to accrue political, diplomatic, and material gains. But the North Korean deployment of troops to Russia signals a shift in the state's foreign policy calculus, in what can be seen as a Faustian gamble—an alarming game of high risk and high return—for Kim Jong Un's North Korea.

Kim Jong Un is not shaped by the same fears as his father or his grandfather. An enduring tactic of the North Korean state has usually been to measure very carefully how much they want events to escalate, relying on the strategic prudence of the international community to de-escalate conflicts. And that tactic has usually worked thus far. However, sending DPRK soldiers to Russia is a highly unusual decision even for North Korea. Dispatching North Korean soldiers abroad has been a Faustian gamble, especially in the early months. And the gamble has paid off, at least until now. This marked shift in North Korea's foreign policy calculus deserves attention. Three conceptual pieces of the puzzle are useful for assessing this shift in the state's national security calculus: the tension in culture, the bold foreign policy strides, and the historical context that has shaped Kim Jong Un.

Despite the regime's enduring traditions and domestic constraints, Kim Jong Un's North Korea is changing. Policymakers should pay attention to how Kim Jong Un differs from his forebears when assessing this shift in the state's national security calculus.

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The pressure points that apply to liberal democracies and market economies do not influence the North Korean state in the same way. Crucially, historians and practitioners alike have repeatedly predicted the collapse of the economically, politically, and socially broken North Korean state since the 1990s. But the state has also repeatedly defied such predictions. One of the reasons why pundits and experts failed to have an accurate understanding of this state is due to their lack of awareness of North Korea's culture and history; dismissing what makes the state 'tick' internally comes with a price.

Take, for example, what happened in North Korea after Kim Il Sung's death. When Kim Il Sung died in 1994, just as North Korea was heading towards the height of the famine, it is estimated that the state spent 800,000 dollars just on embalming the leader's dead body. Over the next few years, it is estimated to have spent 69 million dollars on the posthumous celebration of Kim Il Sung's birth date.<sup>1</sup> This was a political choice made ultimately by the North Korean political leadership and the elite. Equally, this was the political choice overlooked by national security advisors outside of North Korea. If there had been nothing either tangible or intangible to be gained from this by the state, one would have to conclude that they were spending a fortune on something completely inconsequential in such moments of crisis.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the singular focus on North Korea's security and technological developments, without a grasp of the state's culture and history, leads to an uneven, at times even misleading, analysis of the state's policies.

In this context, 2024 marked a watershed moment in North Korea's foreign and domestic policies. As remarked above, there are three conceptual pieces of the puzzle needed when assessing this critical juncture: the tension in culture, the foreign policy strides, and the historical context that has shaped Kim Jong Un. Culture and history, two elements that seldom feature in national security debates about North Korea, are in fact highly valuable for risk assessment and to reduce the problem of mirroring.

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1 Namgung Min, "\$800,000 Spent Preserving Kim Il Sung's Body," *Daily NK*, April 16, 2008. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/800000-spent-preserving-kim-il-sun/>.

2 See also Ria Roy, "The Paradoxes of Power in North Korea: A New Approach," in *History's Dead-Hand Grip: Politics, Statecraft, and 'Lessons' of the Past*, ed. Joseph Ledford (Hoover Institution Press, forthcoming).

## What Historical Fears Have Shaped Kim Jong Un?: The Sources of Political Control V. the Sources of Political Decision

Kim Jong Un is not shaped by the same fears and challenges as either his father, Kim Jong Il, or his grandfather, Kim Il Sung. Political leaders often turn to the past when deciding how to deal with the present, but it is equally true that not all the events of the past linger into the present in the same way, although some reverberations continue to be useful for making sense of present decisions. In this regard, understanding why and how Kim Jong Un is different from his forebears is important.

Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un have all been shaped by different historical milieux. Kim Il Sung was born in 1912, only two years after the annexation of Korea by Japan. Kim Il Sung's sensibilities were shaped by the struggles against Japanese imperialism, nationalism, and the struggles for liberation and nation-building after the Korean War. To every North Korean, this is what made Kim Il Sung Kim Il Sung for the people. Certainly, Kim Il Sung himself was not unaware of the element of exaggeration and fabrication in the published accounts of his anti-Japanese struggles, but in his words, even if there were elements of exaggeration, "isn't it better than to not having fought at all?"<sup>3</sup>

For Kim Jong Il, the historical milieu that shaped him was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kim Jong Il knew of the consequences of the end of the personality cult in Russia with the death of Stalin in 1953, followed by Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956. In the 1990s, he witnessed the consequences of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Predictably, Kim Jong Il chose the state's political and cultural stability over economic reform. This shaped the conservative limits of the state's foreign policy calculus.

But Kim Jong Un is different. Kim Jong Un is neither a student of the Soviet collapse nor is he as culturally adroit as his father in shaping the cultural sphere to further his political agenda. In fact, Kim Jong Un spent his formative years in Switzerland, eating cheese and drinking fine beverages. It has been the failure of the Hanoi Summit, the wars in Ukraine, the capture of Maduro, and the American involvement in the killing of Iran's leadership that have shaped Kim Jong Un's sensibilities. These events proved to him that his father's reliance on nuclear power was the correct political strategy.

But it is important to separate two aspects of Kim Jong Un's North Korea from that of his forebear: *the sources of political control v. the sources of political decision*. The sources of political control in Kim Jong Un's North Korea are what he has inherited from his

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3 Chang-yöp Hwang, Hwang Chang-yöp hoegorok: nanün yöksa üi chilli rül poatta, Kaejōngp'an (Seoul: Sidae chōngsin, 2016), 133.

grandfather, having been passed on to his father. But the sources of political decision in Kim Jong Un's North Korea are different from those of his father. Kim Jong Un is a product of his own history.

The most conspicuous shift in North Korea's foreign policy calculus is that, unlike his father who was shaped by a fear of opening doors to change, Kim Jong Un's foreign policy calculus consists of breaking the chain of limited options, and opting for a new momentum, even if that may come with risks. In his foreign policy, this was exemplified by the dispatch of the troops to Russia. In the cultural sphere, it is exemplified by the shadows of Stalin and the reassertion of the Kim Il Sung era orthodoxies, even as he attempts to produce a new cultural content that speaks to the people.

## Tensions in Kim Jong Un's North Korea: The Shadows of Stalin

Months after the failure of the Hanoi Summit, the U.S. interpreter commented that she struggled to understand fully the North Korean language.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, disagreement on the content of an agreement made at a high-level diplomatic table is not uncommon. But being unclear about the very content of the disagreement is problematic. The North Korean language, or the “Cultured Language”, *munhwaŏ* in Korean— ‘*munhwa*’ meaning culture and ‘*ŏ*’ meaning language) is once again pertinent for understanding the tensions in Kim Jong Un's North Korea.

During the COVID pandemic years, North Korea introduced an added layer of state control, leading to a heavy national lockdown. In the cultural sphere, key laws were passed: the “Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act” (2020), the “Youth Culture Education Guarantee Act” (2021), and the “Pyongyang Cultured Language Protection Law” (2023).<sup>5</sup> The repeated appearance of the words, “culture”, “ideology”, and “cultured language” warrants attention.

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4 Ki-uk Yi, “Kim Chŏngŭn-T’ŭrŏmp’ŭ hoedam t’ongyŏk, Pukhanmal 100% molla chinttam,” *Tonga ilbo*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.donga.com/news/Culture/article/all/20240229/123746034/1>.

5 United Nations General Assembly, *Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Report of the Secretary-General A/79/277*, 5-6, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/230/41/pdf/n2423041.pdf>. For an unofficial translation, see *Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Unofficial Translation)*, DailyNK, n.d., accessed April 7 2026, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/03/PDF-%EB%B0%98%EB%8F%99%EC%82%AC%EC%83%81%EB%AC%B8%ED%99%94%EB%B0%B0%EA%B2%A9%EB%B2%95%EC%98%81%ED%95%9C%EB%B3%B8.pdf>.

Certainly, the vigorous propaganda, the language of the cult and the distinct rhetoric employed by the North Korean state, as well as the attempt at a cultural crackdown, are hardly new. However, the “culture” and the “language” that the state attempts to protect should not be taken lightly. The adherence to the “Pyongyang Cultured Language” or “Cultured Language” is linked to Stalin-era precursors. This is neither simply a case of regional accents nor an overly verbose, histrionic propaganda language, harmless enough to be pushed aside.

The “Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act”, as the name denotes, aims to strengthen the state’s “ideology, revolution, and social class by launching a powerful battle to obstruct the inflow and distribution of reactionary ideology and culture and anti-socialist ideology and culture.”<sup>6</sup> This targets the crackdown on the inflow and the consumption of foreign media from “enemy” states, most significantly South Korean media content, or “K-drama”. Similarly, the “Youth Culture Education Guarantee Act” aims to eliminate “anti-socialist” and “non-socialist” thought among the youth.

In other words, with the inflow of foreign content with pluralist views undermining the political and cultural norms of the state, the state calls for the protection of the distinct language and culture that North Korea developed proactively in the Kim Il Sung era from the 1960s onward. But what goes largely unnoticed is how the very development of the Cultured Language under Kim Il Sung was calqued on Stalin-era linguistic and cultural precursors.<sup>7</sup> In 1950, Stalin intervened in now obscure debates in linguistics, rejecting the theories of the then-famous linguist, Nikolai Marr, the recipient of the Lenin Prize in 1928. Marr had been the first to apply Marxism-Leninism to linguistics. The significance of Stalin’s intervention in linguistics, in a nutshell, was less concerned with the technicalities of language per se than with bolstering his status as a knowledgeable leader, a “master external to the authoritative discourse”. This came to an end with Stalin’s death in 1953, followed shortly by Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Kim Il Sung, the birth of the Cultured Language similarly took place with Kim Il Sung’s purge of his political rival and famous linguist, Kim Tu-bong. The Cultured Language, in essence, is defined as the highest form of socialist national language, where the “culture” here means pursuing the civilizational mores determined by the state— the conformity to cultural values and norms in line with the values espoused by the party and the state, one that is inseparable from nationalism, the political legitimacy of the state, and most importantly, the leader. In other words, the state treated culture and language

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6 *Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (Unofficial Translation)*. Daily NK, n.d., accessed April 7, 2026, 5.

7 Ria Roy, “The Sacred Text and the Language of the Leader: ‘Cultured Language’ and the Rhetorical Turn in North Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 29, no.2 (2024): 210–211, 220–221.

8 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 47.

as important media for creating social and ideological cohesion. Watching South Korean drama or other foreign media content undermines this effort.

What is striking is how sophisticated and complex the cultural and linguistic fabric of North Korea has become, developing from the initial Stalin-era precursors. By 1975, North Korea possessed a highly sophisticated “sacred text” or language of the leader, with a manual that attempted to permeate the cultural sphere.<sup>9</sup> This meant the codification of the leader cult in the cultural and linguistic fabric of the North Korean state became solid and pervasive. The Stalin-era language of the Soviet Union pales by comparison, as the special status of the leader itself died with the death of Stalin.

The most crucial political effect of the Cultured language in the North is the consolidation of power in carving out a distinct political and rhetorical space for the leader.<sup>10</sup> The culture and the language that the Kim Jong Un regime is calling the people to adhere to is this Kim Il Sung era orthodoxy.

Naturally, societies that rely on a politically monolithic narrative are resistant to pluralistic viewpoints. Such states struggle more with changes unendorsed by the Party and therefore remain more brittle and allergic to change. This is why North Korea reacts with alarm when they encounter foreign media content or balloons from South Korea filled with flyers, dollars, and USB sticks with ‘non-socialist’ content defaming the political leadership and spreading viewpoints out of line with the Party. Consequently, North Korea attempts to reassert the cultural and linguistic orthodoxies developed and initiated in the post-Korean War Kim Il Sung era—hence the call for the return to the cultured language.

Based on satellite image analysis and defector testimonies, human rights advocates claim that the state has witnessed an increase in the domestic execution of youths charged with transmitting and watching politically and culturally indecent content, ill-fitting the values of the state.<sup>11</sup> The opaqueness of the exact numbers aside, the cultural crackdown, and the attempted reassertion of state-endorsed cultural orthodoxies are significant. Certainly, the state sporadically putting out culturally inappropriate wildfires in this way is something that can be expected.

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9 Roy, “The Sacred Text and the Language of the Leader,” 224–230.

10 Ibid., 231–232.

11 For example, see Jooheon Kim, “North Korea Has ‘Expanded’ Executions under Crackdown on Foreign Media, UN Finds,” *NK News*, September 15, 2025, <https://www.nknews.org/?p=961025>. Emma Farge, “North Korea Executes People for Sharing Foreign Films and TV, UN Report Says,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-executes-people-sharing-foreign-films-tv-un-report-says-2025-09-12/>.

However, at the same time, there have been some notable changes—both unprecedented and palpable—in the cultural sphere of North Korea under Kim Jong Un. This follows closely the state’s bold foreign policy strides taken as it aligned itself more tightly with Russia from 2024 and made the eventual deployment of its troops to Russia, which shocked the world. In 2025, North Korea’s Korea Central Television aired a drama which featured a number of novel and interesting scenes: a husband with a flowery apron preparing meals for the family, criticism of a party official who has been told to “tone it down a bit” for being too strict on farmers, a romance between a male prosecutor and a female agricultural researcher, and a rather snobbish potential mother-in-law wishing that the woman leave her son alone as he has a bright future ahead of him.<sup>12</sup> The conspicuous parallel with South Korean dramas is difficult to ignore. It is equally significant that the state feels compelled to produce something new that speaks to and assuages the youth at such a moment. The uneasy cohabitation of the cultural crackdowns through public executions and the cultural production of something new that appeals to the masses needs close monitoring. Another and even more striking example of a break with the past is the fact that, recently in 2026, when he was inspecting a cheese factory, Kim Jong Un made a startling comment on the socialist agricultural system created by his grandfather. After tasting a piece of Emmental cheese, Kim Jong Un said, “Quite frankly, apart from just words, what has been done in the last half century?”<sup>13</sup> This suggests an attempt to soften the cultic element of the memory of his father and grandfather.

## The Tyranny of a Small Power in Geopolitics

Equally troubling is the North Korean state’s bold foreign policy strides in recent months. The question at stake is not simply what the state is pursuing, but why and how the state is pursuing it. Much of the strategic community’s engagement with North Korea since the 1990s has focused on the state’s nuclear and military capabilities. The waxing and waning of North Korea’s provocations, and the tug-of-war of reform and opening up to the international community has undergone different phases, at times leading to revolving doors of hope, deep strategic concerns, disappointments of “almost” negotiations, bitterness from both conservatives and progressives, and again a swing back to wishful thinking—a pattern of sorts. Even for what is dubbed as an “unpredictable and enigmatic” state, an

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12 The quote is from *Paekhakpöl üi sae pom, episode 2, directed by TV-kükch’angjaksä che 2 ch’angjaktan, aired 2025, on Chosön chungang TV, 52 min*; Cha-a Kim, “Apch’ima turügo pap ch’aryöjunün appa...puk tūramae tūngjangghan nollaun changmyön,” *Chosön ilbo*, October 7, 2025, [https://www.chosun.com/politics/north\\_korea/2025/07/10/PAK4RORWSRF7XCV5PVEPIWRWUU/](https://www.chosun.com/politics/north_korea/2025/07/10/PAK4RORWSRF7XCV5PVEPIWRWUU/).

13 Sim Sög-yong, “‘Taech’ung haenot’ön pörüt tteböryöya’...Kim Chöng-ün, ‘Kim Il-söng’ ch’ijök kyönyanghaenna,” *Chungang ilbo*, February 3, 2026, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25402295>. Mun-gi Cho, “Kim Chöng-ün, Kim Il-söng pip’an...ch’ijü mat poda taettüm ‘pansegi nömgge pyöllo ke öpta,’” *P’ürijin nyusü*, February 8 2026, <https://www.freezinews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=22788>.

enduring tactic of the state has usually been to very carefully measure how much they want events to escalate, relying on the strategic prudence of the international community to de-escalate conflicts.

Nevertheless, such patterns were premised upon North Korea's foreign policy calculus not crossing an unspoken "red line" that could lead to dire consequences of a kind for the state, militarily or otherwise. North Korea from the 1990s very much resembled a chess piece in geopolitics that could neither go forward nor backward: going forward and opening a door to change might result in something like perestroika and glasnost; rewinding backward would mean further isolation, an improbable move—how much more isolated could it get?

Ironically, the North Korean leadership, despite being led by a charismatic leader who could do anything and everything on paper, was confined to smaller moves and provocations in geopolitics, because a major reform would mean that the leader too would have to consider how far he could go without compromising the very political legitimacy of the state that sustained him. Naturally, asserting relevance by being the boy who cried wolf was better for North Korea than being forgotten in the international arena. However, sending North Korean troops to the Russo-Ukrainian war deviates from this tradition. This is a game of high risk and high return—a Faustian gamble.

Aligning with a great power is not itself new. Aligning with a great power may often come with benefits while the friendship lasts. However, deviating too far from the state's own strategic tradition, comes with a price. The existing path of a low-risk, gamble-free approach may have led to an economic dead-end, but it assured the state's political resilience. In the case of North Korea, these new bold moves introduce strategic ambiguity and unprecedented geopolitical vectors in its national security calculus. Just as in chess, small moves are certainly manageable. But big moves come with their own baggage. On the day when the news of the North Korean deployment in Russia broke out, confusion and shock swept the media. In the South Korean media, there were initially concerns and speculations of a proxy war or the conflict evolving into an international war. This was a novel card in the foreign policy deck that was neither foreseeable nor calculable.

Both Russia and North Korea consolidated the pragmatic alliance in several culminating waves, rather than in one brushstroke. From July 2023 to 2024, it is estimated that North Korea and Russia have had more than two dozen diplomatic and economic exchanges<sup>14</sup>—each an attempt to add a layer of justification to the military and diplomatic partnership at a measured pace.

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14 Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea and Russia Trade Record Number of Delegations," *Reuters*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-russia-trade-record-number-delegations-2024-06-18/>.

Moscow and Pyongyang both played the emperor's new clothes game for months in acknowledging North Korea's deployment in Russia's war.<sup>15</sup> On October 18, 2024, the South Korean Minister of Defense officially announced the high likelihood of North Korean military personnel being in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> On the same day, the U.S. and NATO expressed deep concern, albeit without making an official confirmation, erring on the side of caution. Russia had denied the possibility of North Korean soldiers being in Ukraine just a week prior to that. It was only on October 23 that the U.S. confirmed North Korean deployment in Russia.<sup>17</sup> A day or so after that, on the last day of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Putin neither confirmed nor denied North Korean military involvement. He responded deliberately ambiguously to the satellite images of North Korean troops in Russia, saying defensively and hypothetically that "Images are a serious thing. If there are images, then they reflect something."<sup>18</sup>

Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, had previously denied any military weapons transfer.<sup>19</sup> But of course, it was telling that North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Sun-hui rushed to Moscow a few days afterwards. This was her second trip to Russia in six weeks. Choosing her words carefully, Choi praised the bilateral ties for "rising to a new level of relations of invincible military comradeship," and said that North Korea would back Russia until there was victory in Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> Both Russia and North Korea finally confirmed the troop deployment on April 28, 2025—a (cleverly) belated acknowledgement of a shocking move.

In the game of high risk and high return, the more obvious gains have been in the material and technological domains. Significant transfers of advanced military hardware and technology have been made, most notably the mobile air defense system Pantsir-class combat vehicle, short-range air defense systems, and advanced electronic warfare systems. Russia's technological transfer of operational knowledge, support, and data feedback on

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15 For instance, see Victor Cha and Andy Lim, "Timeline of North Korea-Russia Cooperation Since 2022," *CSIS Beyond Parallel*, May 19, 2025, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/timeline-of-north-korea-russia-cooperation-since-2022/>.

16 Che-hun Yi, "Han'guk 'Pukhan'gun p'abyōng hwagin' palp'yo e kakkuk chōngbu 'sasiramyōn uryō,'" *Han'gyōrye*, October 19, 2024, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/defense/1163314.html>.

17 Hyung-Jin Kim, Lolita C. Baldor, and Aamer Madhani, "US confirms North Korea has sent 3,000 troops to Russia for training and possible Ukraine combat," *The Associated Press*, October 23, 2024, reprinted in NPR, October 24, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/24/g-s1-29659/us-north-korea-troops-russia-ukraine>.

18 Patrick Wintour, "Putin Does Not Deny North Korea Has Sent Soldiers to Russia," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/24/putin-does-not-deny-north-korea-has-sent-soldiers-to-russia>.

19 Ju-min Park et al., "North Korea Leader's Sister Denies Arms Exchange with Russia, KCNA Says," *Reuters*, May 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-leaders-sister-denies-arms-exchange-with-russia-kcna-says-2024-05-16/>.

20 Dmitry Antonov, "North Korea Will Back Russia until Victory in Ukraine, Foreign Minister Says," *Reuters*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korean-foreign-minister-arrives-moscow-talks-2024-11-01/>.

North Korea's ballistic missile programs, too, are highly useful in enhancing the state's missile guidance performance.<sup>21</sup> The knowledge and the experience of contemporary warfare with advanced technology are also assets for North Korea. This serves as an important litmus test, a kind of a sobering reality check for the state, on what a potential hot war with an enemy might look like. The experience in a real war contrasts with the state's previous provocations, propaganda drumming up for war, and the familiar language of brinkmanship in the hypothetical realm. There is a lot to gain vicariously from someone else's war.

North Korea's involvement has also come with economic gains. For example, the extended duration of the war and the growing demands for military supplies has led to the new development of a military ammunition facility in Chagang province aimed at exporting to Russia.<sup>22</sup> But it would be misleading to take the 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as a singular moment that enabled the development of the military and economic complex in North Korea.

North Korea operates on a two-tiered economic system broadly split into two parts—the “people's economy”, the official, Cabinet-led planned economy, and the “second economy”, the parallel system that sustains the regime's strategic projects, such as the development of the WMD program, its complex network of military-run factories and enterprises, and more<sup>23</sup>—and it is helpful to understand that the history of North Korea's labor export program to Russia (and its Soviet precursor) cannot be neatly separated from contemporary security concerns. It is said that the second economy takes priority over the officially planned state economy.<sup>24</sup>

North Korea has long had the practice of sending workers to Russia. There have been reports of the human rights abuses that North Korean workers in Russia have been subject to, particularly since the 2000s. What has been relatively overlooked is how the hard currency from the export labor is one of the strategic drivers of the military-economic complex in North Korea. The hard currency earned by the laborers sent abroad by abusing student and tourist visas in Russia are funneled to develop the state's aforementioned strategic projects such as the WMDs. It is estimated that several hundred million dollars to over two billion dollars are funneled to Pyongyang every year through such foreign currency schemes.<sup>25</sup>

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21 Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), *Unlawful Military Cooperation Including Arms Transfers between North Korea and Russia*, 2025, 13, [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2025/multilateral-sanctions-monitoring-team-report\\_msmt\\_20250529.pdf](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2025/multilateral-sanctions-monitoring-team-report_msmt_20250529.pdf).

22 Chŏng-han Pak, “Kim Chŏngŭn kyumo ch'oedae kunsugongjang ch'akkong... Rŏsia mugisuch'ul nŭlligi p'osŏk,” *Kŭllobŏl ik'onomik*, June 22, 2025, [https://www.g-enews.com/article/Global-Biz/2025/06/20250622080908184fbbec65dfb\\_1](https://www.g-enews.com/article/Global-Biz/2025/06/20250622080908184fbbec65dfb_1).

23 Unique Kim, *Transnational Repression and Exploitation of North Korean Workers in Russia: Research Reports* (Seoul: North Korea Database Center, 2025), 35–6, <https://en.nkdb.org/researchreport/?bmode=view&idx=167892918>.

24 *Ibid.*, 36.

25 *Ibid.*, 37.

The reforms in the Kim Jong Un era, in particular, the re-centralization of authority and the expansion of the military's economic role overseas, have facilitated and justified the state's mobilization of conventional military forces to serve also as a state workforce for its economic development.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the historical precursors should not be forgotten. The Soviet Union and North Korea have long had an important partnership in overseas laborers. An interesting parallel is that after World War II, the Soviet Union initiated "organized recruitment" to bring North Korean laborers to Russia as the state confronted an acute manpower shortage.<sup>27</sup>

More significant have been the political gains of Kim Jong Un. What has become more conspicuous in the past year is the emergence of an illiberal order led by Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim. In the Victory Day Parade in Moscow earlier in May 2025, Kim Jong Un was replaced by North Korean generals thanking "Comrade Putin" and their great ally Russia. In September, an iconic photo of Kim, Xi, and Putin leading the crowd of leaders that was taken in Beijing is difficult to forget. While the Soviet Union is no longer around, many heard echoes of the Cold War.

In the shifting global order, being united by hatred of a common enemy is not always enough to sustain a friendship. Nevertheless, having a common enemy in a time when

the global order of war and peace is shifting can be of use to North Korea, especially after the debacle of the Hanoi Summit. In this sense, Kim Jong Un's bold choice of seeing Russia's invasion as a kind of an initial "exit" plan is telling.

In the Gordian knot of North Korean foreign policy and governance, the perennial dilemma is how far the leader can go in terms of reform without bringing down the very political legitimacy that sustains him. But deploying troops to Russia shuffles the

existing cards in the foreign policy deck. Having the momentum to pursue something new introduces new cards—some may be good in the short run, while some may be bad in the long run. With the bold move of military deployment, Kim Jong Un, as leader of a small power, is no longer on the periphery, but on the center-stage with Xi and Putin, accruing political capital. The bold move also broke the shackles of the narrow parameters of the state's foreign policy calculus.

*With the bold move of military deployment, Kim Jong Un, as leader of a small power, is no longer on the periphery, but on the center-stage with Xi and Putin, accruing political capital.*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29.

## Policy Recommendation

Then how should we cope with Kim Jong Un’s North Korea? Policymakers may consider the three aspects of the North Korean question—the tension in culture, the foreign policy strides, and the historical context that has shaped Kim Jong Un—when assessing their strategic choices. Indeed, these three pieces are linked to one another. Kim Jong Un’s bold move in foreign policy certainly is not an isolated phenomenon. In fact, he is carving out a space for who he is as a leader, one marked by different fears and sources of decision and therefore different from those of his forebears and the domestic tradition that anchor him. Despite the regime’s enduring traditions and domestic constraints, Kim Jong Un’s North Korea is changing.

First, monitoring cultural changes deserves far greater policy attention than it currently receives. Too often, the strategic community treats North Korea’s cultural sphere as peripheral to “hard” security questions. Yet as this analysis has shown, culture and language are not ornamental—they are instruments of political control and barometers of internal change. Policymakers should pay closer attention to North Korea’s cultural output, including its television programming, its party Congress decisions on ideological matters, and the evolving content of state media.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, policymakers should interrogate the basis of North Korea’s relationship with Russia far more rigorously than they have thus far. The present alignment is treated by much of the strategic community as a fact of geopolitics, yet the underlying question remains largely unexplored: what, precisely, is the foundation of this partnership? The material and technological gains are evident, but gains alone do not explain why a state so historically cautious about exposing itself to the risks of great power entanglement would make such a leap. The question of how much the present alignment is simply one of convenience, born of shared enmity toward the United States and the West rather than of durable strategic convergence, warrants more careful examination, drawing parallels from the past.

The parallel with China is instructive. China and Russia proclaim an undying friendship, yet the ideological basis for that friendship is far from self-evident—Russia is no longer a communist state, and the two countries’ strategic interests diverge on numerous fronts. If even the Sino-Russian relationship rests on foundations that are more contingent than they appear, the North Korea-Russia alignment may prove still more fragile. The basis of the partnership is, in many respects, flimsy: it is sustained by the exigencies of the war in Ukraine, by mutual isolation from the West, and by the personal political calculus of Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin. Whether it can endure beyond these immediate circumstances

*Culture and language are not ornamental—they are instruments of political control and barometers of internal change.*

is an open and consequential question. Policymakers who treat this alignment as a fixed feature of the strategic landscape risk being caught off guard if and when its foundations shift.

As we approach the beginning of the end of the Russo-Ukraine War, there remain no clear winners. The definition of peace is under constraint. However, if we were to put a stop to the clock now, we would see that North Korea, as a small power, has managed to maintain its independence from any of the big superpowers that it is involved with. It remains the biggest winner of the Russo-Ukrainian War, earning political, diplomatic and material gains, as of now. What is striking is how North Korean military deployment in Russia signals a shift in the state's foreign policy calculus in Kim Jong Un's North Korea, despite the shadow of his predecessors. As we enter a period of geopolitical tension and uncertainty, the most fundamental corrective available to policymakers and experts may also be the most overlooked: taking North Korean culture and history seriously. Understanding what makes the state tick internally—not merely what it builds or deploys—remains a useful basis for sound strategic judgement.

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