

When the Umbrella Shakes: Allied Reactions to Doubts about U.S. Extended Deterrence—The Republic of Korea’s Critical Case

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Abstract

When a nuclear patron’s commitment becomes uncertain, how do protected, non-nuclear allies react—and why? This article advances and tests a mechanism of allied reactions under doubt using the Republic of Korea (hereafter used interchangeably as South Korea, but the official name is *‘the Republic of Korea [ROK]’*) as a critical case of a nuclear umbrella under stress. I theorize how exogenous “doubt shocks” (e.g., adversary ICBM range to the U.S. homeland, volatile presidential signaling) shift allied behavior across reassurance-seeking, institutional deepening, conventional substitution, and nuclear hedge rhetoric. Competing hypotheses are evaluated: a dissuasion-dominant model (U.S. signals primarily restrain allied proliferation), an institutional-assurance model (consultation mechanisms offset presidential ambiguity), and a domestic-politics model (elite competition drives outcomes). Theory-guided process tracing leverages four shocks (1998, 2006, 2017-18, 2025), elite discourse, policy moves (EDSCG/NCG), public opinion, and a brief Japan shadow case. Findings: as doubt rises, Washington’s assurance increasingly targets allied dissuasion, not adversary deterrence; institutionalization partially mutes doubt; and domestic politics conditions response intensity. The policy implication is twofold: an assurance architecture that codifies scenario-based consultation, predictable strategic asset presence, and integrated denial-punishment ladders—measures that stabilize credibility without inviting allied nuclearization; and, should credibility erode beyond repair, a proactively managed recalibration of deterrence responsibilities within the alliance as the alternative to unmanaged proliferation.

Keywords: Extended Deterrence, Strategic Dissuasion, Credibility Gap, Nuclear Proliferation

Introduction

Extended nuclear deterrence is a pillar of U.S. alliance policy, but an increasingly fraught one. Codified early in the Cold War then exported broadly across U.S.-led security alliances, extended deterrence has served two strategic goals: deter adversary attack on allies and dissuade allies from acquiring nuclear weapons (Gavin 2012, 76-77). Over time, however, questions have grown about the credibility of this proposition, particularly where the adversary has nuclear weapons and the willingness of the patron to escalate is in doubt. This issue has arisen with new intensity since 2025 in the case of the ROK.

The ROK faces a growing, multidomain nuclear threat from North Korea that includes tactical nuclear weapons, submarine-launched missiles, and an openly announced preemptive use doctrine (Choe 2024). Donald J. Trump's return to the US presidency has reintroduced uncertainty about Washington's alliance commitments. Whereas previous US administrations had consistently reaffirmed extended deterrence in explicit joint declarations and in detailed force posture statements, current U.S. declaratory policy is that any North Korean nuclear attack would face regime-ending retaliation; it is not a blanket promise of first use in every contingency. Recent U.S.-ROK statements affirm that any DPRK nuclear attack would be met with a 'swift, overwhelming, and decisive response.' Trump's previous administration featured rhetorical ambivalence, threats to abrogate the alliance through troop withdrawal, and demands for exorbitant cost sharing; his second administration has to date maintained that posture without replacing credible assurance language. The result is a noticeable diminution of deterrent credibility as subjectively experienced by the ROK's elites and the public.

This credibility gap presents a theoretically significant problem. Deterrence theory, most famously articulated by Thomas Schelling, holds that extended deterrence is inherently more difficult than direct deterrence, since it requires convincing an adversary of the patron's willingness to undertake existential risk on behalf of someone else

(Schelling 1966, 34-91). Daryl Press has further argued that past behavior is a poor indicator of credibility; rather, adversaries and allies alike respond to real-time indicators of political resolve, capabilities, and signals (Press 2005, 29-31). In the Korean case, these indicators point increasingly to strategic ambiguity rather than resolve. From an alliance politics perspective, this shift represents a skewed version of Glenn Snyder's abandonment-entrapment dilemma, in which the client state must confront a persistent prospect of abandonment without the corresponding influence over the patron's escalation decisions (Snyder 1997, 180-185).

The result is a disjuncture between official declaratory statements (threat of regime-ending retaliation if the DPRK uses nuclear weapons) and allied perceptions of U.S. reliability. While the U.S. continues to invoke the nuclear umbrella in general terms, South Korean public faith in the U.S. defense commitment has been eviscerated. Current polling from the Asan Institute in 2025 shows a record 76.2 percent of South Koreans now favor the acquisition of indigenous nuclear weapons—the highest figure since the institute began tracking the question in 2010—while confidence that the United States would actually use nuclear weapons in South Korea's defense has fallen below half, to 48.9 percent (Asan Institute for Policy Studies 2025). This growing public consensus in South Korea has paralleled an elite-level worry that U.S. strategic forces would not, in a moment of crisis, be mobilized in the defense of Seoul by a leadership committed to transactional burden sharing over existential deterrence. For many in South Korea, the "moment of truth" imagined in the deterrence literature—the test of whether extended deterrence is credible at the moment it is most needed—is no longer a thought experiment. Compounding this perception of abandonment has been the strategic insufficiency of South Korea's three-axis system: Kill Chain (preemptive strike), Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR), all of which are sufficiently sophisticated in design but practically limited in application to a nuclearized adversary. Kill Chain relies on early detection and rapid

decapitation; KAMD lacks the capacity to counter saturation or maneuverable reentry vehicles; and KMPR is operationally implausible against North Korea's hardened, redundant command structures (Bowers and Hiim 2021, 7–39). In deterrence terms, they offer denial and a measure of conventional punishment, but no punishment credible against a nuclear-armed adversary—a critical asymmetry.

South Korea's "three-axis" construct—Kill Chain (preemptive counter-strike), Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR)—was designed as an integrated suite of primarily denial-oriented capabilities. In brief, Kill Chain aims to detect and disrupt imminent attacks; KAMD seeks to intercept incoming missiles; and KMPR threatens rapid conventional retaliation against critical targets without relying on nuclear weapons. (In deterrence terms used here, denial reduces the adversary's ability to achieve objectives; punishment threatens costs the adversary cannot accept.)

Against a nuclear-armed DPRK fielding larger salvos, maneuvering re-entry vehicles, mobile launchers and decoys, and hardened or redundant command structures, however, the three-axis suite is necessary but insufficient on its own. Without visible integration with punishment options—U.S. or allied capabilities that credibly threaten costs beyond what denial alone can impose—the credibility gap persists and periodically fuels nuclear-hedge rhetoric in Seoul.

While this structural weakness exists, the United States continues to cling to a public policy of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, even though U.S. intelligence estimates internally have long assessed North Korea's nuclear status as irreversible. The primary reason why the United States maintains this position, then, cannot be explained in terms of strategic oversight, but must instead reflect a world in which alliance cohesion and normative legitimacy—of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—are the central objectives of the United States. As Elbridge Colby has argued, a nuclear South Korea presents its primary strategic threat not to the United States, but to the nonproliferation

regime and the U.S. role within it (Colby 2021, 236–238). Put differently, the result is a disjuncture between official declaratory statements (threat of regime-ending retaliation if the DPRK uses nuclear weapons) and allied perceptions of U.S. reliability.

This article asks a broader question: How do non-nuclear allies, who enjoy extended deterrence, react—and why—when their nuclear coverage is suddenly thrown into doubt? In the case of South Korea, where U.S. assurances have wavered amid North Korea's growing arsenal, I examine what strategies Seoul has pursued to safeguard its security. This central research question prompts a broader reconsideration of extended deterrence theory in situations of asymmetric alliance structures, especially when strategic ambiguity—not resolve—characterizes patron behavior.

The article proceeds in six sections. Section 1 introduces the research question—how non-nuclear allies react under doubt—and the paper's contribution. Section 2 sets out the research design and theoretical framework, defines key concepts (deterrence vs. assurance/dissuasion), and derives competing hypotheses about allied reactions. Section 3 examines the transplantation of the umbrella from NATO to South Korea and assesses the doctrinal and institutional asymmetries of its Korean manifestation. Section 4 traces how extended deterrence has functioned as an instrument of strategic dissuasion in the Korean alliance. Section 5 analyzes South Korea's reactions across four shocks (1998, 2006, 2017–18, 2025)—with a brief Japan shadow comparison—and adjudicates the hypotheses under Trump 2.0, closing with a postscript that carries the record through mid-2026. Section 6 concludes with implications for an assurance architecture and alliance burden-sharing. By revisiting the foundational logic of the nuclear umbrella and evaluating its evolution under contemporary strategic stress, this article contributes to a reevaluation of how credibility is produced, experienced, and eventually withdrawn in alliance structures shaped by nuclear asymmetry and shifting political resolve.

Extended deterrence is a patron's threat to retaliate—potentially

with nuclear weapons—against an adversary that attacks an ally; assurance (or dissuasion) is the patron's effort to keep the ally non-nuclear by reassuring its security. Credibility refers to the ally's belief that the patron would actually fight if the ally were attacked. Drawing on Schelling and the alliance literature, extended deterrence is intrinsically harder than direct deterrence and becomes most fragile when adversaries can strike the patron's homeland.

When coverage is thrown into doubt, allies may respond in different ways. I therefore propose two competing hypotheses:

H1 (Hedging / Autonomy). If an ally loses confidence in the patron's nuclear guarantee, it is likely to emphasize self-help. This takes the form of building indigenous military capacity—such as missile defense, long-range strike, and survivability measures—and, at the political level, considering but not pursuing nuclear weapons. Requests for reassurance may still be made, but they are secondary to the pursuit of greater autonomy.

H2 (Alliance Deepening). If an ally has serious doubts but still expects the patron to defend, it will seek to strengthen alliance dependence. This response involves doubling down on alliance commitments, pressing for renewed U.S. assurances, and reinforcing institutional mechanisms such as the EDSCG or NCG. In this scenario, hedging remains limited, and the nuclear option may be mentioned only in passing but is explicitly rejected, with no pursuit of an independent deterrent.

Predictions: H1 corresponds to greater autonomous capacity-building and sustained nuclear hedge talk; H2 corresponds to repeated alliance assurances and institutional deepening, with hedging and nuclear talk limited or fading. Section 5 evaluates these hypotheses across four shocks (1998, 2006, 2017–18, 2025) and a brief Japan shadow case.

Methodology and Research Design

This section examines the credibility and role of South Korean nuclear extended deterrence given the changing systemic and strategic

environment associated with the return of the Trump administration in 2025. Does the U.S. nuclear umbrella over South Korea still credibly deter adversary aggression or has it become a tool of strategic dissuasion—maintained not to defend but to dissuade the ROK from seeking a nuclear capability of its own? This section presents the research design used to evaluate this question, describes the theoretical basis of the analysis, justifies the methodological approach, and outlines empirical sources and case logic.

The central question I aim to answer is: To what extent is the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent credible to South Korea under conditions of adversary nuclear asymmetry and declining patron reassurance in Trump 2.0? My hypothesis is that the U.S. nuclear umbrella, originally designed to furnish deterrent assurance to otherwise non-nuclear allies, has long been strategically decoupled from any deterrent function in the Korean context and survives mainly as an instrument of strategic dissuasion – that is, to preclude South Korea's own nuclear armament. (South Korea is treated as the critical case study. I analyze four pivotal “shocks” when its nuclear umbrella's credibility came into question – the 1998 Taepodong missile test, North Korea's 2006 nuclear test, the 2017–18 U.S.–DPRK summit diplomacy, and the June 2025 U.S.–Israel strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities – and I document how South Korea reacted in each instance through reassurance-seeking, alliance institutionalization, hedging measures, or flirtation with an independent nuclear option.) This assumption draws from the classical canon of deterrence theory but breaks from the assumption that deterrence and dissuasion are mutually reinforcing, by proposing that even as deterrence credibility is corroded away, dissuasion logic might still prevail – particularly in cases of alliance asymmetry, threat divergence, and political ambiguity.

South Korea is a theoretically and empirically rich case for assessing extended deterrence. South Korea is a non-nuclear, technologically advanced U.S. ally whose main security concern has subjected it to increasingly explicit nuclear threats (Panda 2020). North Korea has

developed tactical nuclear weapons and diversified delivery platforms (including nascent submarine-launched missiles) backed by a doctrine of early nuclear use, significantly altering regional deterrence dynamics. The ROK-U.S. alliance is deeply institutionalized and historically close. Legally and normatively, South Korea remains tied to the NPT. Substantively, public discourse in the ROK has shifted markedly in favor of indigenous nuclear armament. These factors make South Korea the critical case of a nuclear umbrella under stress: if the nuclear umbrella is seen as non-credible here, it is almost certain to face analogous or greater difficulties in other asymmetric alliance contexts.

This study draws on three interrelated bodies of theory: (1) classical and contemporary deterrence theory; (2) alliance politics and the abandonment–entrapment dilemma; and (3) the concept of strategic dissuasion, which this article develops as a novel analytical lens. Firstly, Thomas Schelling emphasized that deterrence hinges on the threat that leaves something to chance, compelling an adversary to believe that escalation cannot be controlled once initiated (Schelling 1960, 187–203; 1966, 92–125). However, extended deterrence is structurally less credible than direct deterrence because it involves third-party risk. As Press has argued, states assess credibility not based on historical record but on contemporaneous assessments of interest alignment and resolve (Press 2005, 21–45). Secondly, Glenn Snyder’s concept of the alliance security dilemma offers a second analytical foundation (Snyder 1997, 180–185). Alliances must balance two opposing risks: abandonment, where the patron fails to uphold commitments, and entrapment, where the patron is dragged into unwanted wars. In asymmetrical alliances, smaller states tend to fear abandonment, while larger states fear entrapment. This framework is particularly relevant to the ROK-U.S. alliance, where South Korea’s threat perception is acute and growing, while the U.S. has signaled ambivalence. Thirdly, this article introduces strategic dissuasion as a parallel function of extended deterrence. While deterrence aims to prevent adversary aggression, dissuasion seeks to prevent allied defection—particularly the pursuit of nuclear sovereignty

(Crawford 2009, 277–303). This logic helps explain why the nuclear umbrella may persist as a performative structure, serving to suppress allied nuclearization despite declining credibility in the eyes of both adversaries and allies. By isolating strategic dissuasion as a distinct logic, the article contributes to alliance theory by decoupling assurance from action and credibility from commitment. It posits that an umbrella may survive as a dissuasive artifact even as its deterrent function collapses.

The article is designed as a qualitative, historical–interpretive study based on process-tracing methodology. Process tracing is well suited to inquiries that seek to uncover causal mechanisms as well as to evaluate the internal logic of institutional settings (George and Bennett 2005, 205–232). The research retraces the historical evolution of the nuclear umbrella as deterrent and dissuasive practice, tracking its trajectory from Cold War Europe to the Korean Peninsula and its transformation under the stewardship of different U.S. administrations. The inquiry also carries out elite discourse analysis on how U.S. and South Korean leaders have defined extended deterrence, especially under political leadership that departs from the orthodoxy of alliance politics (Allison and others 2022). Data include presidential speeches and remarks, summit statements, defense white papers, and strategic posture analyses. In particular, the study tracks changes in reassurance signaling—presence, absence, and ambiguity—and examines how these may have coincided with changes in threat perception and domestic readiness to rearm with nuclear weapons. Finally, the study draws on historical institutional analysis, exploring how past institutional legacies foreclose contemporary pathways (Fioretos 2011). It treats the nuclear umbrella as an institution with embedded strategic logics and functions, exploring how its strategic rationale may have been at odds with its operational value, and how these legacies structure contemporary security thinking.

NATO's Nuclear Umbrella Transplanted to Korea – Asymmetries and Credibility Gaps

Extended Deterrence Transplanted from NATO to Korea

The "nuclear umbrella" was transplanted from NATO to Asia. The idea of a U.S. nuclear umbrella shielding partners and allies originated in Cold War Europe, with the United States promising Allied NATO states that it would respond to a Soviet attack on them with a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. The U.S. subsequently imported this structure into Asia. South Korea came under de facto U.S. nuclear protection at the close of the Korean War, with the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty anchoring the commitment, and from 1958 American nuclear weapons were deployed on ROK soil as a tangible demonstration of extended deterrence (Kristensen and Norris 2017, 349–351). Although the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953 lacked an explicit nuclear guarantee, in practice the United States applied its postwar doctrine of massive retaliation to the Korean Peninsula. U.S. tactical nuclear arms (from nuclear artillery to warheads for Honest John rockets) were forward-deployed in South Korea as in Europe throughout the Cold War, albeit under exclusive American control. By the late 1960s, the United States stationed hundreds of warheads in the ROK, paralleling its NATO posture if on a smaller scale. This NATO-style institutional "transplant" (i.e., nuclear umbrella) occurred, however, in a very different strategic and institutional context. Unlike in Europe – where a multilateral alliance managed collective nuclear defense – in Korea the arrangement was strictly bilateral. Seoul was a protectorate of U.S. extended deterrence, but had little visibility or say in nuclear planning. Indeed, South Korean forces benefited from the protection of U.S. nuclear forces, yet decision-making remained wholly in Washington (Trachtenberg 2012). The umbrella's tangible and physical presence in Korea ended with the Cold War: as part of President George H.W. Bush's 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, the United States unilaterally withdrew all its remaining tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea

(Kristensen and Norris 2017, 355–356). Since then, the U.S. promise to defend South Korea with nuclear forces has been maintained through offshore capabilities (e.g., strategic bombers and submarines) and declaratory commitments, but without any permanent nuclear assets on Korean territory. This contrasts sharply with Europe, where even after the Cold War the U.S. kept a modest arsenal of B61 gravity bombs forward-deployed in NATO states. In short, the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" was indeed transplanted from NATO to Korea – but absent NATO's integrated framework, it took on a far more unilateral character in the ROK setting.

Doctrinal and Strategic Asymmetries: Europe vs. the Korean Peninsula

From the beginning, Europe and Korea's systems of extended deterrence differed in doctrinal and strategic terms. NATO in the 1960s evolved a strategy of flexible response that combined conventional and nuclear options along a graduated deterrence ladder. Nuclear use – from tactical warheads up through strategic strikes – was integrated into alliance doctrine and extensively exercised, debated and war gamed among allies (Kim and Simón 2024). NATO solidified an elaborate playbook for nuclear escalation (e.g., the use of theater nuclear forces to offset Soviet conventional superiority, as in the 1950s "massive retaliation" era, later tempered by flexible response). Doctrinal thinking on nuclear use in Korea remained much less elaborate. In the Korean War time frame, the basic scenario was relatively binary: if war resumed on the peninsula (notably through Chinese intervention as in 1950), U.S. commanders would consider early use of tactical nuclear strikes to blunt northern aggression. But there was no multinational forum for refining such plans with input from South Korean allies, nor any need for fine-grained escalation control in an alliance context – the U.S. alone would decide if/when/how to use nuclear weapons in Korea. This strategic asymmetry has continued into the post-Cold War era. Europe's nuclear umbrella was directed at a peer superpower (the USSR/Russia) and later

extended to new missions such as crisis management, whereas the Korean umbrella is directed at a regional adversary (North Korea) with a relatively small if growing nuclear arsenal. The scale and scope of the threat differs: NATO faced thousands of Soviet warheads, and large Warsaw Pact armies which made it vital to fully integrate nuclear doctrine into alliance strategy. Meanwhile in South Korea, the existential nuclear threat remains a localized threat of renewed North Korean attack (conventional or nuclear) – but now with a significant new factor: Pyongyang’s ability to hit the U.S. homeland with ICBMs. The latter raises a “decoupling” dynamic reminiscent of Cold War Europe: just as NATO states feared that Washington might reconsider a nuclear response once the USSR could hit American cities, so South Korean officials today fear that a nuclear-armed North Korea could “spare the US” while holding the peninsula. Indeed, South Korean analysts recall speculation during the Trump administration that Washington could strike a grand bargain for Pyongyang to dismantle ICBMs (which threaten the U.S.) while leaving in place short- and medium-range missiles that threaten South Korea – which would decouple U.S. security from that of its ally. Such fears underscore a core doctrinal asymmetry: NATO’s doctrine evolved to ensure the indivisibility of allied security (famously, that the United States would treat an attack on Europe as an attack on itself), whereas in the Korean case, a tactical doctrine for indivisibility has been elusive, with more fundamental doubts over whether the United States would really risk catastrophe at home in order to honor its nuclear guarantee abroad. The lack of a NATO-style joint doctrine has made those doubts all the more acute. While NATO declared as an alliance that a nuclear attack on any ally would trigger nuclear retaliation (backed by mechanisms to make that credible), U.S. declaratory policy for South Korea has been vaguer. Typically, U.S. leaders reaffirm that any North Korean nuclear attack would be met with a ‘swift, overwhelming, and decisive response,’ i.e., regime-ending retaliation — a declaratory stance that stops short of a blanket first-use promise in non-nuclear contingencies. Yet given the lack of South

Korean participation in such formulation, these commitments can look less like alliance doctrine and more like unilateral U.S. promises.

Missing Elements: Nuclear Sharing, Dual-Key Arrangements, and Integrated Planning

The nuclear deterrence arrangements of NATO and the ROK-U.S. alliance differ on a number of modalities. Significantly, nuclear sharing is the bedrock of the North Atlantic Alliance’s nuclear posture and translates into meaningful consultation between Allied members. The United States’ European allies—with the exception of France, which remains outside the NPG and maintains a fully independent deterrent—are deeply engaged in nuclear planning through their participation in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), some of them host U.S. nuclear weapons on their soil, and Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands combine these two elements with Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) enabling these non-nuclear allies to have a meaningful stake in potential nuclear use from their soil. While the United States remains the final authority over the use of its nuclear forces, the Alliance has developed arrangements to provide for use in defense of its allies. These arrangements, such as nuclear consultation, are aimed at steering Allies away from pursuing nuclear weapons through Allied buy-in to nuclear strategy and a significant bench of delivery candidates. These stakeholders are part of the robustness of the Alliance’s collective nuclear deterrence as it influences the credibility of the deterrent itself, of course, but also the Alliance’s cohesion (Roehrig 2017).

The ROK-U.S. alliance, meanwhile, has been characterized by a conspicuous lack of South Korean involvement in nuclear strategy and decision making. During the Cold War, the American nuclear weapons deployed to the Korean Peninsula were under sole U.S. control. South Korea had neither custodianship of the nuclear weapons based in the ROK nor formal decision-making authority over the use of these weapons. To this day when most of the U.S. nuclear forces are based outside of the Korean Peninsula, South Korea still lacks a permanent,

NATO-style nuclear consultation mechanism. Only in the 2010s did dedicated institutions for nuclear and extended deterrence consultations emerge, beginning with the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) in 2010 and culminating in the higher-level, vice-ministerial Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) established in 2016. And yet, South Korean officials regularly found themselves being briefed about U.S. strategic intent instead of actively cooperating to develop a joint nuclear policy, drawing frequent criticism and remaining a source of frustration in South Korea (Roehrig 2017).

In 2023, a major advance was made with the establishment of the ROK–U.S. Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), as stipulated in the Washington Declaration (The White House 2023; Shin 2023). Loosely modelled after NATO's NPG, the new body is intended to give South Korea more insight into U.S. nuclear planning and a clearer role in contingency planning. Nonetheless, the restrictions are still large. The NCG functions on a bilateral basis, as opposed to NATO's multilateralism, and it is primarily for information exchange and consultation rather than joint operational control. The United States maintains ultimate decision-making authority, particularly in wartime. In South Korea, the media and analysts have frequently identified the NCG's lack of meaningful decision-making power for Seoul in comparison with NATO's NPG. Importantly, there are no dual-key arrangements on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea, unlike some NATO countries, does not host U.S. nuclear weapons that would require joint approval to employ. Furthermore, the U.S. has pledged to consult Seoul prior to using nuclear weapons in a Korean contingency, but it is not a binding obligation and falls well short of NATO's robust mechanisms of joint control. The ROK–U.S. alliance therefore lacks the dense nuclear command architecture that underpins NATO's extended deterrence posture in Europe (NATO 2022). As a result, South Korea remains a well-informed audience—not a direct participant—in nuclear deterrence, directly leading to persistent concerns over the credibility of U.S. security guarantees.

A Non-Nuclear Ally and the Credibility Gap

As a non-nuclear ally, South Korea has also contributed to perceptions of U.S. deterrent credibility. U.S. embassy reporting from Seoul in 1974 cited growing South Korean doubts about the durability of U.S. commitments in the face of North Korean threats—doubts that shaped allied deterrence decisions for much of the Cold War (Burr 2017). President Park Chung-hee sought a domestic nuclear program, which Washington quashed. Similar patterns emerged in every instance U.S. security assurance credibility appeared to come into question. Unlike their European or Japanese counterparts, South Korea has neither a domestic nuclear deterrent nor a formal role in allied nuclear operations. The credibility gap is rooted in asymmetries: First, asymmetry of stakes—North Korea threatens Seoul, while deterring U.S. intervention by threatening American cities. Recent surveys find that fewer than half of South Koreans believe Washington would actually use nuclear weapons in their defense (Asan Institute for Policy Studies 2025). Second, asymmetry of information—While NATO consultations give European allies insight into scenarios that builds confidence, South Korea had until recently limited insight. Third, asymmetry of decision-making power—the ultimate decision to employ nuclear weapons belongs only to the U.S. President. Extended deterrence, in short, is not only about capabilities; it is also about perception, credibility, and trust—and when that trust erodes, allies start thinking about more self-sufficient strategies. The Trump administration compounded the credibility problem. During Trump's first term (2017–2021), he approached U.S. alliances in a transactional and erratic manner. Trump's surprise pledge at the June 2018 Singapore Summit to suspend U.S.–ROK military exercises – calling them 'provocative' – caught Seoul off-guard, undercutting alliance readiness. South Korea's Blue House cautiously stated it needed 'to find out the precise meaning' of Trump's announcement – a diplomatic show of alarm that highlighted Seoul's fear of being sidelined. This unprecedented concession to Pyongyang reinforced South Korean concerns about alliance decoupling. In Trump's second

term, these patterns have continued. Allies describe a Trump 2.0 administration intent on great power competition with China and burden-shifting. There is concern Trump might use extended deterrence as a bargaining chip. The worst-case scenario for South Koreans is a bilateral deal in which North Korea dismantles ICBMs threatening America while retaining shorter-range nuclear threats against South Korea. South Korean lawmakers have suggested that if Washington will not maintain the umbrella, Seoul may have to consider developing its own nuclear arsenal (Bandow 2025).

The Trump 2.0 administration has kept up formal alliance mechanisms like the NCG, but the spirit of reassurance has all but evaporated. Trump's perceived indifference toward U.S. allies, "America First" rhetoric, and occasional words of admiration for Kim Jong-un undermine deterrence credibility. Extended deterrence remains Seoul's preferred policy for now, but security experts are openly canvassing other options—ranging from the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to an independent nuclear arsenal (Jaffery 2025). The alliance now faces a double burden that risks credibility: old doctrinal, institutional, and capability-related structural asymmetries, heightened by the kinds of political fluctuations that make managing those asymmetries less tenable. As the ROK-U.S. alliance moves ahead, it faces the urgent task of finding ways to reconcile these gaps—appropriating NATO's experience wherever applicable—or else risk an unraveling of the very deterrence it seeks to uphold.

Extended Deterrence as Strategic Dissuasion in the Korean Alliance

Extended Deterrence as an Instrument of Nonproliferation

In US terms, deterrence and reassurance on the Korean Peninsula have been two sides of the same coin. North Korea is the obvious reason that deterrence has been the traditional justification for American

extended deterrence on the peninsula. Perhaps less appreciated, however, has been the fact that American extended deterrence has always had two purposes with North Korea representing only one of those two purposes: (i) to deter North Korean aggression and to defend against such aggression if deterrence fails; and (ii) to assure South Korea that America's security commitments are sturdy, reliable, and credible enough so that it is unwise to develop an independent nuclear deterrent. America has just often been more preoccupied with preventing South Korea from placing itself on a trajectory toward acquiring nuclear weapons than in responding to the threat that North Korea poses (Sukin 2020).

America's extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula has repeatedly served to soothe South Korea's leaders, many of whom might have decided to break from the Western camp and develop an independent nuclear deterrent of its own. From America's perspective, preventing nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia and preserving the sanctity of the Non-Proliferation Treaty has taken precedence over the security challenge posed by Pyongyang itself. This is not by accident, since the underlying logic of American extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula has always privileged nonproliferation since it aligns with Washington's longstanding commitment to nonproliferation, South Korea's dependence on the alliance, and long held concerns in Washington that leaders in Seoul might hedge against America's security assurances.

A case in point of the constraints imposed by extended deterrence on South Korea occurred in the 1970s. After a U.S.-initiated troop withdrawal and the Nixon Doctrine's call for greater self-reliance by America's allies, President Park Chung Hee embarked on a nuclear weapons program. By late 1974, U.S. intelligence assessments had concluded that South Korea—not North Korea—was the country closest to a nuclear capability. Park had also ignored U.S. protests in his purchase of a plutonium reprocessing plant from France with civilian, but unmistakably military, purposes. Washington was aghast: U.S.

decision makers were deeply committed to nonproliferation and viewed the nuclear weapons program as an affront to American dominance over the alliance and its credibility (Burr 2017).

To counter South Korea's nuclear ambitions, behind the scenes, Washington pressured France and Canada to cancel or indefinitely delay their nuclear technology agreements with Seoul, helping build an international consensus against the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology—especially in the aftermath of the India nuclear test of 1974 (FRUS 2011). At the same time, U.S. diplomats, according to declassified cables, brandished carrots, offering to further peaceful nuclear research cooperation if South Korea abandoned its plans to reprocess plutonium. The American position was straightforward: South Korea could enjoy the fruits of civilian nuclear technology under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, but its pursuit of nuclear weapons for military purposes would undercut the bilateral alliance. Facing coordinated American pressure, President Park quietly restated South Korea's commitment to the NPT, even as he dropped hints that Seoul reserved the right to restart research if American nuclear guarantees eroded. Behind closed doors, U.S. strategists derived broader lessons from this near-crisis over nuclear proliferation, doubling down on the idea that extended deterrence was directly connected to nonproliferation by assuring allies they would be protected. Washington thus viewed its alliances as a backstop to the “nuclear jungle”—or regional proliferation spiral—that could ensue if South Korea or Japan lost faith in American security and guarantees. In turn, the U.S.-ROK alliance has consistently served as an organizing principle for U.S. policymakers to forestall a nuclear proliferation domino in East Asia.

Post-Cold War Continuity: Assurance over Credibility

The post-Cold War years marked a turning point in U.S.-ROK deterrence, when President Bush withdrew tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991. Yet Washington was also careful to couple this move with strengthened conventional forces and demonstrative

security assurances, to signal continued resolve and maintain South Korea's confidence in U.S. commitment. This strategy preserved the core bargain between extended deterrence and nonproliferation, while encouraging South Korean restraint even as North Korea moved in the opposite direction. As the North Korean nuclear threat emerged in the mid-1990s and worsened in the 2000s, South Korea's reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella was tested anew. North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, and a series of further nuclear and missile advances, meant growing anxiety in Seoul about whether the United States would risk “trading Seattle for Seoul” in an extreme scenario – the credibility dilemma of extended deterrence.

After the 1998 Taepodong-1 missile flew over Japan, Tokyo reacted with shock – Japan's parliament unanimously condemned Pyongyang, froze normalization talks, and cut off food aid. That launch also spurred Japan to join the U.S. in developing ballistic missile defenses, marking a historic shift in Japanese security policy. Similarly, following North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, Japan accelerated deployment of Patriot-3 missile interceptors around Tokyo (operational by 2007), doubling down on alliance defenses while still forgoing any indigenous nuclear armament.

Yet rather than entertain an indigenous nuclear arsenal, successive ROK governments largely doubled down on the alliance guarantee, while pressing Washington for ever-stronger assurances. For example, in the aftermath of North Korea's second nuclear test (2009), the U.S. and ROK presidents issued an unprecedented Joint Vision Statement in June 2009 strongly reaffirming America's “nuclear umbrella” over South Korea (The White House 2009). Such declaratory commitments were aimed as much at the South Korean public and elites as at Pyongyang. The U.S. extended deterrence pledge – now typically phrased as covering the “full range of U.S. capabilities, including nuclear” – became a core element of alliance communiqués and summit statements. In effect, the worse the North Korean threat became, the more the solution was framed in terms of more alliance cooperation.

This strategy was carefully designed to dissuade South Korea from seeking its own deterrent. U.S. diplomatic cables and memoirs from this period suggest a constant subtext: American envoys routinely lobbied South Korean officials and politicians to reject calls for nuclear armament. They consistently sent a message that any move down that path would endanger regional stability and the ROK-U.S. alliance itself.

South Korean leaders, for their part, remained publicly committed to non-nuclear status, but not without periodic expressions of frustration. Notably, ROK defense strategists began advocating for enhanced conventional strike and missile defense capabilities – the so-called “Kill Chain” and Korea Air and Missile Defense – as partial substitutes for the nuclear deterrent they were forbidden to acquire. The U.S. supported these efforts, again with an eye to undercut any argument that Seoul needed nuclear weapons. Therefore, if advanced conventional means and U.S. strategic forces together could neutralize the North Korean threat, the case for a South Korean bomb would remain off the table. In general, U.S. extended deterrence policy in Korea had evolved to stress “strategic dissuasion,” not only against the North, but also, crucially, against the South. The objective of deterring the North and the objective of dissuading the South became one in American strategic logic, and were defined in terms of convincing Pyongyang the war would not be worth the price and convincing Seoul that developing its own nuclear weapons would be both unnecessary and counterproductive.

The Trump Era and “Trump 2.0”: Tensions in the Umbrella

Donald Trump’s election posed the biggest test to U.S. extended deterrence policy in the postwar period. As an unconventional and at times erratic candidate, Trump had openly questioned the value of U.S. alliances and gone so far as to suggest publicly that Japan and South Korea might need to develop their own nuclear weapons in order to relieve the United States of their defense burdens (Sanger and Haberman 2016). Trump’s comments raised the specter of abandonment by a United States that was unwilling to defend it, or worse yet, actively

seeking to push its ally to arm itself with nuclear weapons in order to relieve its excessive burden of nuclear protection. Others in the U.S. administration, from National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster to Vice President Pence, repeated the same line to roll back any indication that Washington might ever accept a proliferation-accepting policy.

In practice, this equated to applying boiler-plate alliance reassurance playbooks. When South Korean conservatives made the case to return US tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula in 2017–18, citing North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, Washington demurred, concerned that reintroducing such weapons would constrain diplomacy with North Korea and that they would bolster arguments that Seoul and Washington had moved South Korea onto a covert nuclear course. Washington sought to close the trust gap with new deployments of strategic bombers and more consultation mechanisms. Even as the Trump administration pursued a surprise direct meeting with Kim Jong Un, the US administration continued to dissuade South Korea from developing nuclear weapons of its own. The two governments had set up the ROK-US Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) in late 2016. It became an important vehicle through which South Korea could “show its homework” and through which Washington could show that it remained engaged (Kim and Simón 2024).

The prospect of a second Trump administration is already being factored into strategic calculations in Seoul. By mid-2024, prominent voices in Seoul’s security debate were arguing that South Korea could no longer blindly depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella and should keep an indigenous nuclear option in reserve as a fallback (Bennett 2024). Then Defense Minister Shin Won-sik cautioned in 2024 that South Korea acquiring its own bomb might “rupture its alliance with the U.S. and shock financial markets” (Korea Times 2024). Preemptively heading off such pressures, the Biden administration and Seoul sought to further institutionalize extended deterrence consultations—an adaptation analysts had urged from the very start of Biden’s term (Dalton 2021). In the April 2023 Washington Declaration establishing a top-level

US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), South Korea “reaffirmed its longstanding commitment” to the NPT, under which it voluntarily forswears developing nuclear weapons, and the US committed to enhancing cooperative decision-making on nuclear contingencies (The White House 2023).

By 2025, it is apparent that the main utility of U.S. nuclear extended deterrence for the ROK is to dissuade South Korea from developing its own nuclear weapons. Yet, this subtext is obvious to any informed observer of South Korea's entire nuclear history to date. Deterring North Korea remains the official point of extended deterrence but measures to bolster deterrence have overwhelmingly had the effect of assuring Seoul of the United States' commitment. President Yoon's explicit acknowledgment of this and his subsequently retracted remarks that the ROK could host U.S. nuclear weapons or build a nuclear arsenal itself made clear what had already become evident: that there was and is an increasing feeling in South Korea that U.S. extended deterrence and B-52 flyovers were no longer enough (Choe 2024). North Korea was doing what North Korea does while U.S. guarantees to South Korea remained inert and needed to be met in a joint, collaborative way. In short, South Korea's policy makers see extended deterrence as above all reassurance and inhibition: “don't worry,” in this case, meant first and foremost “don't build your own bombs” (Sukin 2020). While North Korea continues to engage in provocations and nuclear weapons development, the growing doubt among South Koreans regarding the U.S. security commitment is a critical issue. The ultimate fear is that if there is insufficient reassurance, South Korea will decide to develop its own nuclear weapons. From this perspective, South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons itself constitutes a bigger risk than slightly perturbing North Korea—or China—by making U.S. nuclear commitments more visible.

U.S. extended nuclear deterrence to South Korea in 2025 functions on two interrelated but separate levels: deterrence of North Korea and reassurance of Seoul, ensuring that South Korea does not “go nuclear.”

This latter reassurance function is not as simple as direct deterrence of one's potential enemy and relies on acts of strategic dissuasion. Thus, reassurance-centered deterrence efforts have included B-52 bomber flyovers and presidential statements of commitment meant in part to ensure Seoul stays confident enough in Washington's nuclear umbrella to not pursue its own independent nuclear weapons program. But the larger and more credible North Korea's nuclear arsenal has grown, and the more unpredictable U.S. politics has become, the harder these contradictory objectives have become to sustain. In sum, American extended deterrence toward South Korea reveals a nuclear age paradox: to prevent nuclear proliferation, nuclear states sometimes promise to use their weapons for others. The American commitment to defend Seoul with nuclear force if necessary has been credible enough to prevent South Korea from developing its own nuclear arsenal. The nuclear umbrella represents a deliberate trade-off: South Korea forgoes nuclear weapons while the United States guarantees South Korea will not face nuclear aggression alone. Ultimately, credibility to the ally may matter more than credibility to the enemy (Murdock and others 2010).

Extended Deterrence Credibility under Trump 2.0

Trump 2.0's Reshaping of the U.S.-South Korea Security Alliance

Former President Donald Trump's second administration has significantly disrupted U.S. alliance management, especially regarding U.S. extended deterrence commitments to South Korea. During the 2024 campaign and in early 2025, Trump repeatedly assailed allies for freeloading off the United States by failing to contribute their fair share to their defense and called South Korea a “money machine” that should be paying the United States significantly more for U.S. military support. He even demanded, with no apparent basis, that the ROK pay \$10 billion a year—roughly nine times the amount Seoul had just agreed to pay for 2026 under the twelfth Special Measures Agreement (Kang

2024). His rhetoric echoes Trump's stated concerns with alliances during his first term, when the former commander-in-chief dismissed Seoul's contributions as trivial and threatened to pull U.S. forces absent increased payments. And Trump's challenges have only escalated—from cost-sharing questions to the central alliance security commitments themselves. On the campaign trail in 2016, Trump suggested Seoul could develop its own nuclear weapons—directly undermining U.S. nonproliferation policy (Roberts 2024, 13). His unilateral move to suspend joint U.S.-ROK military exercises in 2018–2019 as “tremendously expensive” further raised concerns in Seoul about American reliability and willingness to defend South Korea.

Early moves in 2025 deepened South Korean anxieties. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's conspicuous omission of South Korea from his first Indo-Pacific tour, which took him to Japan and the Philippines, was read in Seoul as a diplomatic snub—though it also reflected the leadership vacuum then prevailing in Seoul (Cha 2025). More alarmingly, Hegseth's written confirmation testimony referred to North Korea's “status as a nuclear power,” appearing to accept Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal as permanent. South Korea's Foreign Ministry swiftly objected, insisting that North Korea “can never be recognized as a nuclear-armed state” and that denuclearization remains a principle consistently upheld by Seoul, Washington, and the international community (Korea Herald 2025). Despite these unsettling signals, the Trump administration maintained some formal assurances of extended deterrence, though many observers noted the gap between official statements and Trump's personal rhetoric. A February 15, 2025 trilateral statement issued with Seoul and Tokyo in Munich reiterated ironclad U.S. commitments to the defense of both allies, backed by American military strength “including its nuclear capabilities,” alongside a pledge to pursue the complete denuclearization of the DPRK (U.S. Department of State 2025). Working-level defense dialogues also continued, including the 26th Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue in May 2025 (USFK 2025).

Notably, U.S. officials agreed to maintain the Nuclear Consultative Group established under President Biden in 2023, even as the group's meeting rhythm slowed markedly. Simultaneously, Trump's team has pressured Seoul to expand the alliance's scope beyond the Korean Peninsula, particularly regarding China, raising concerns that U.S. protection might become conditional on South Korea's alignment with broader American interests. This transactional approach has sparked unprecedented discussions in Seoul. Following Trump's 2024 election victory, prominent strategist Cheong Seong-chang argued that “the reelection of Trump is an opportunity for South Korea to create its own nuclear weapons,” reflecting growing sentiment that the U.S. nuclear umbrella now carries a negotiable price (Bandow 2025). Some analysts have even proposed an “Extended Deterrence Cost-Sharing Agreement” where Seoul would substantially increase host-nation support in exchange for concrete nuclear assurances, potentially including nuclear-sharing arrangements or rotational deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear assets.

Rhetoric vs. Policy: Alliance Reassurance and Strategic Posture in 2025

In 2025, the U.S.–South Korea alliance is characterized by a widening gulf between U.S. official policy assurances and President Trump's erratic rhetoric, creating increased anxiety in Seoul over the reliability of American security guarantees. U.S. official statements—notably, the February 2025 Munich trilateral declaration issued with Seoul and Tokyo—continue to affirm ironclad commitments to the defense of South Korea and Japan, backed by American military strength “including its nuclear capabilities” (U.S. Department of State 2025). But South Korean policymakers increasingly see those scripted public U.S. commitments as inadequate. Even though there is a modicum of continuity in Washington's extended deterrence policy, including through American national security appointees who stress deterrence, the alliance's credibility is beset by Trump's personal

distrust of multilateral commitments and his transactional view of alliances.

The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, still in development, is geared toward counterbalancing China's rise and therefore continues to regard forward-deployed U.S. alliances in Asia as having geostrategic value. Yet, ambiguity and contradictions remain in U.S. deterrence policy, troubling Seoul. By mid-2025 the Trump administration has yet to release a new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and early signals suggest the administration is internally divided over the future role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. Trump's first-term NPR in 2018 had advocated flexible, tailored deterrence options backed by supplemental low-yield capabilities. But in 2025 Trump has also hinted at a possible pivot to arms control, musing publicly in early 2025 about the prospect of denuclearization talks with Russia and China and suggesting the three powers could ultimately halve their military budgets, a break from prior policy (Miller and Price 2025).

For South Korea, this pivot cuts both ways. Genuine arms control progress would reduce nuclear threats over the long run; but prematurely capping or drawing down U.S. nuclear arms could degrade deterrence over the short run. South Koreans are reminded of the madcap diplomacy Trump conducted with his enemies last time around: during his first term, Trump's summit-centric diplomacy with Kim Jong-un resulted in the suspension of joint drills and talk of a peace declaration, often without consulting his allies. In 2025, a swirl of rumors about rekindled backchannel communications and possible summits with North Korea have stoked fears in Seoul of again being left in the lurch by U.S.–North Korea diplomacy.

The risk of being sidelined in US–North Korea talks is compounded by South Korea's own political turmoil: in the absence of a president (a successor, Lee Jae-myung, would not be elected until June 2025) Seoul lacks both the bandwidth and the diplomatic intermediaries that might help inform Washington's strategy. South Korean strategists insist that Trump's penchant for personal dealmaking with authoritarian leaders —

Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping — injects its own uncertainty into extended deterrence—a concern analysts had flagged even before the second term began (Grossman 2024). For South Koreans, deterrence is not just a balance of military capabilities, but the perception that the US would be willing to use those capabilities on its ally's behalf. Each time Trump praises Kim, or questions the logic of defending faraway allies, South Koreans sense just a fractional diminution of that willingness.

Trump's disinclination toward multilateralism has also translated into a freeze on the kind of trilateral cooperation that had warmed so fast under his U.S. predecessor. In August 2023, President Biden hosted a historic Camp David summit of U.S.–Japan–South Korea cooperation, generating new trilateral security coordination mechanisms. Trump 2.0, by contrast, has little evident appetite for institutionalizing such trilateral mechanisms. Nor is Trump too attracted to the classic U.S. extended deterrence playbook of building allied confidence in U.S. security commitment by bringing them into multilateral fora such as NATO's Nuclear Planning Group or Northeast Asia's hitherto moribund six-party talks to seek nuclear disarmament. Without the U.S. acting as a strong advocate of multilateral reassurance, South Korea loses an important diplomatic buffer from surprising and fast-changing U.S. policy shifts. Seoul has few “allies versus adversaries” contests that bolster its confidence in being on the “good” side and is drawn to bargain from a position of weakness on a bilateral basis, prone to negotiating according to the whims and preferences of Trump.

As analysts had warned even before the second term began, Trump's transactional approach—including toward allies—raises doubts about the reliability of U.S. treaty commitments (Grossman 2024). Even as U.S. military and diplomatic officials maintain working-level cooperation, the political signals from the top have introduced unprecedented ambiguity into ROK–U.S. extended deterrence relations. This uncertainty has prompted South Korean officials and strategists to question whether the alliance can still be relied upon as a credible bulwark against North

Korean threats, whether Seoul must therefore contemplate alternative security options for the future.

South Korean Reactions: Elite Debate and Erosion of Public Trust

US policy changes have prompted a wholesale reappraisal in South Korea of its security dependence on the United States. Elite and public opinion alike indicate, consistently since 2025, growing contradictions and doubts over US credibility, as well as an increasing inclination towards autonomous options. South Korean policymakers are faced with a “quiet crisis” of alliance confidence that had begun under Trump’s first term but grew in magnitude under Trump 2.0 (Cha 2025). At the same time, hawkish South Korean voices have become more active in speaking about contingencies, with some advocating that South Korea ought to obtain nuclear armaments of its own. While the Washington Declaration and Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) set up in 2023 were ostensibly meant to tamp down such talk, Trump 2.0’s equivocality has reanimated domestic debates over nuclear self-reliance. In early 2025 alone, several National Assembly members have suggested revisiting the question of US tactical nuclear weapons redeployment, or even going so far as to pursue an independent nuclear weapons program in case US guarantees remain untrustworthy (Jaffery 2025).

Although South Korean officials oppose NPT violations on record, they stress “realistic” hedging, ranging from accelerated development of conventional long-range strike capabilities to hypothetical consideration of indigenous nuclear weapons. South Korea’s security elite is doubling down on alliance ties in public while quietly considering “Plan B” options in private. Public opinion has already shifted in this regard, underscoring eroded confidence in U.S. guarantees. South Koreans have witnessed a series of events that call into question Washington’s reliability: Obama’s Syria “red line,” Trump’s threats to abandon allies, and Afghanistan’s chaotic collapse in the face of a Taliban advance (Grossman 2024).

This paper now examines the June 2025 U.S.–Israel airstrikes on

Iran’s nuclear facilities as an instructive analog. Pyongyang drew clear lessons: those strikes validated North Korea’s belief that only a robust nuclear arsenal deters U.S.-led attacks. Conversely, South Korean strategists saw a cautionary tale: a U.S. ally (Israel) openly attacked a proliferator’s facilities, implying that if Seoul were ever to pursue nuclear weapons, it might invite similar preventive strikes by adversaries. This new analysis underscores how the Iran strikes simultaneously bolstered North Korea’s justifications and warned South Korea of the risks of nuclear hedging.

The upshot is a public more open to the case that “Korea cannot always depend on others for its national security.” In effect, both public opinion and elite opinion now share a conditional view of the alliance: if the U.S. fails to make good on its commitment, South Korea must take extreme measures. The widespread presence of such contingencies reflects a collective anxiety that Trump 2.0 is the event that has concretized the “decoupling” fear, not only at the technical level but also at the political level. Will Trump keep faith in his security promises if he no longer sees the alliance as a profitable venture? (Cha 2025)

Seoul has responded with damage control contingency planning, seeking constant high-level meetings to lock down pockets of commitment. Korean diplomats have quietly engaged Congressional leaders and Pentagon officials as “alliance guardrails” from dramatic White House moves. However, Yoon’s impeachment (finalized April 4, 2025) created a leadership vacuum just as Trump began a raft of protectionist measures, including a 25% tariff on Korean imports. Seoul was left essentially leaderless and hamstrung, unable to conclude successful negotiations over either tariffs or security (Kim and others 2025). The South Korean authorities have also launched an information campaign highlighting continued military cooperation in an attempt to reassure the public, while U.S. officials have sought to speak directly to the South Korean public. American officials in Seoul, for example, have publicly reiterated Washington’s pledge to defend Korea. But sceptics point out that such reassurances count for little so long as President Trump does not himself articulate a clear affirmation of U.S. extended deterrence commitments,

while continuing to emphasize trade surpluses, burden-sharing and defense cost sharing—that in other words, defending South Korea is not an end in itself but a hostage to other aims.

A Fundamental Departure from Traditional Assurance Behavior

Trump 2.0's assurance behavior for extended deterrence marks a fundamental departure from the traditional, post-1950s U.S. approach to extended deterrence. Traditional "assurance behavior" has included regular high-level verbal affirmations, integrated military planning, and displays of attention to allies' perceptions of the threat. Since the Cold War, U.S. presidents routinely sent senior officials to Seoul during heightened tensions, often issued joint statements including strong assurance terminology—such as "ironclad" or "extended deterrence"—and refrained from conflating security commitments with economic or political issues. Indeed, security assurances were never conditioned on transactional concessions even amid contentious issues such as trade disputes throughout the 1990s. Meanwhile, such mechanisms as the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) and the regular deployment of strategic assets—such as the B-52 bomber and nuclear submarine—have further coordinated the deterrence posture and attempted to assure Seoul and deter Pyongyang (Lee and Choi 2024). Trump 2.0 has made sharp departures. Whereas Jimmy Carter's late-1970s proposal to withdraw troops was based on strategic and human rights reasons, Trump has suggested pointblank that he would withdraw troops and security guarantees unless allies "pay"—literally. Analysts have interpreted the shift as a reformulation of alliances as a form of "defense welfare": in other words, it is something that can be cut the moment costs exceed benefits, calling into question the psychological basis for the alliance.

Strategically, Trump's policy is a combination of passivity and unpredictability that all but vitiates credibility. On the one hand, Trump is passive about the growth of the North Korean nuclear threat. He has expressed satisfaction that North Korea has been quiet, so long as the

regime refrains from long-range missile tests—nuclear developments apparently do not move the deterrence needle for Trump. On the other, Trump's erratic and impulsive decision-making neuters credibility: his abrupt cancellation of military exercises in 2018, and his potential impulsive deal with Kim Jong-un over the heads of American generals in 2025, illustrate the point. Deterrence relies primarily on credibility. Credibility requires the qualities of resolve and predictability. On both counts, Trump's credibility is lacking. Credibility is a matter of perception. U.S. allies increasingly worry that Trump would not trade American cities for Seoul in a nuclear crisis, amplifying classic decoupling fears. Trump's pendulum diplomacy could hardly help but trigger this reaction. Trump's mercurial North Korea policy oscillates from threats of "fire and fury" to praising personal correspondence—further exacerbating uncertainty and emboldening adversaries to test boundaries (Panda 2025).

Another important distinction with Trump 2.0 is the decay of normative commitments. In the past, U.S. assurances have been based not only on military capabilities, but also on a broad sense of moral and treaty obligation, and a commitment to shared democratic values. Trump has been more open in dismissing those values-based rationales and is explicit in framing alliances in a purely transactional manner. This decay was starkly highlighted by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, when candidate Trump suggested that he would withhold support to NATO allies caught in the crossfire as a bargaining chip. While there has not yet been an analogous conflict in Asia, Trump's demonstrated equivocation over Ukraine is deeply troubling to Seoul, which now fears that it would encounter future American foot-dragging in an analogous Asian conflict. South Koreans now openly question whether Trump would truly risk American cities defending Seoul, and whether they would be on the losing end of a "blood for FDI" arrangement with the United States.

Analysts and students of deterrence have long argued that trust and perception are key variables in extended deterrence. Extended

deterrence is not only about capabilities; it is inescapably about perception, credibility, and trust—and when trust erodes, allies begin looking for more self-reliant options (Rodgers 2025). This is an apt description of South Korea's strategic predicament under Trump 2.0. The erosion of trust precipitated by Trump's transactionalism is forcing Seoul to reconsider its reliance on U.S. extended deterrence and actively consider self-reliant alternatives that have until now been unneeded.

Donald Trump's transactional diplomacy toward South Korea is a significant contributor to the weakening credibility of the U.S.-ROK alliance. In contrast to the past, another traditional ally is doubting U.S. security guarantees. The combined effects of disparaging alliances in public, diluting strategic reassurances, and cozying up to authoritarian adversaries have congealed into the perception in Seoul that U.S. extended deterrence can no longer be automatically assumed to hold. From Seoul's perspective, the strategic onus will be on getting through the remainder of the Trump Administration without making a Nixon-goes-to-China exit from its longstanding position as a non-nuclear state—a formidable challenge that will test both the foreign policy aptitude of the ROK leadership and the resilience of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Postscript: The Alliance Recalibrated, June 2025–July 2026

This article's empirical narrative closes in mid-2025, at the height of the credibility crisis it describes. The twelve months that followed moved quickly, and they merit a brief accounting here because they bear directly on the argument. The election of Lee Jae-myung on June 3, 2025 ended Seoul's leadership vacuum, and the new government moved with striking speed to stabilize relations with Washington on terms that were openly transactional. A framework agreement announced on July 30, 2025 lowered the threatened U.S. reciprocal tariff from 25 to 15 percent in exchange for commitments eventually totaling \$350 billion in U.S.-bound investment—\$150 billion of it earmarked for rebuilding American shipbuilding—alongside \$100 billion in energy

purchases. At their first summit on August 25, 2025, Trump and Lee traded warm words while leaving the hardest questions of “alliance modernization,” including defense cost sharing, U.S. Forces Korea troop levels, and the future role of USFK beyond the peninsula, unresolved (Congressional Research Service 2025).

The Gyeongju summit of October 29, 2025 and the Joint Fact Sheet issued on November 14 sealed the new bargain. The United States reaffirmed extended deterrence backed by the full range of its capabilities, including nuclear; endorsed South Korea's construction of nuclear-powered attack submarines; and committed to support ROK civil uranium enrichment and spent-fuel reprocessing—concessions no previous administration had been willing to contemplate. Seoul, in turn, committed to raise defense spending to 3.5 percent of GDP, to purchase \$25 billion in American military equipment by 2030, and to assume “a leading role in the conventional defense of the Korean Peninsula” (The White House 2025). The 57th Security Consultative Meeting, held in Seoul on November 4, 2025, translated the bargain into alliance machinery: its communiqué reaffirmed nuclear-backed extended deterrence and the work of the Nuclear Consultative Group, and—significantly—set verification of the future combined command's full operational capability for 2026, accelerating the long-deferred transition of wartime operational control (U.S. Department of War 2025a).

In the terms of this article, late 2025 is best read as the monetization of the dissuasion bargain. Where earlier administrations purchased South Korean nuclear restraint with declaratory reassurance and consultative mechanisms, the second Trump administration priced the umbrella explicitly—in tariffs, investment, procurement, and burden shifting—and paid for continued restraint in kind, with capability concessions that deliberately raise Seoul's nuclear latency while keeping it inside the NPT. President Lee has paired this hedging with unusually explicit renunciation, ruling out both an indigenous arsenal and the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons and calling the denuclearization of the peninsula “a fundamental principle” (Congressional Research

Service 2026). The emerging pattern is therefore neither pure H1 nor pure H2 but a hedged deepening: alliance institutionalization at the surface, with the material foundations of autonomy—naval propulsion reactors, fuel-cycle access, conventional primacy, operational control—accumulating underneath (Hersman 2026).

Washington's declaratory trajectory has meanwhile validated this article's warning about creeping *de facto* acceptance of North Korea's arsenal. The National Security Strategy released in December 2025 dropped the denuclearization of North Korea—an objective present in every published U.S. strategy since the early 2000s—without replacement (South China Morning Post 2025). The National Defense Strategy of January 2026 went further, stating that South Korea is capable of taking “primary responsibility for deterring North Korea” with critical but more limited American support (U.S. Department of War 2026). It is difficult to miss how closely this formulation tracks the division of labor proposed in the conclusion below, with one crucial difference: the new strategy assigns Seoul conventional primacy while reserving the nuclear tier exclusively to the United States—precisely the configuration whose long-run credibility this article questions. The Nuclear Consultative Group has continued to meet—its fifth session convened in December 2025, eleven months after the fourth, with a sixth following in Seoul in June 2026—each reaffirming the nuclear umbrella even as assurance slipped down the new posture's list of priorities (U.S. Department of War 2025b).

Pyongyang and Beijing have hardened the environment in which any recalibration must operate. Kim Jong Un told the Supreme People's Assembly in September 2025 that North Korea's nuclear status is irreversible and that he would sit down with Washington only if it dropped what he called its “absurd obsession” with denuclearization (CNN 2025); the following month he unveiled the Hwasong-20, billed as the North's most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile (NBC News 2025). Xi Jinping's June 2026 visit to Pyongyang—his first since 2019—signaled deepening strategic alignment and raised the price of

any future U.S.-DPRK bargain (AEI 2026), while China's first publicly demonstrated submarine-launched ballistic missile test into the Pacific, on July 6, 2026, dramatized the two-peer strain now stretching the American umbrella across the region (CSIS 2026). Trump's repeated overtures to Kim have so far gone unanswered, and no summit had materialized as of this writing (Panda 2025). The pattern documented across this article's four shocks thus persists into a fifth iteration: dissuasion is outliving deterrence, but its currency has shifted from declaratory reassurance to negotiated capability—a shift whose long-term stability the proposals of the concluding section are intended to secure.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution, credibility, and future of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence in South Korea at a critical inflection point in 2025–2026. The analysis reveals that the nuclear umbrella, while nominally serving to deter North Korean aggression, has increasingly functioned as a mechanism of strategic dissuasion—restraining South Korea from pursuing its own nuclear weapons rather than providing credible protection against Pyongyang's growing nuclear threat. The Trump 2.0 administration has accelerated this credibility crisis through its transactional approach to alliances, inconsistent reassurance signaling, and strategic ambiguity that has fundamentally departed from traditional U.S. assurance behavior.

The historical analysis demonstrates that extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula was never a simple transplant of the NATO model. From its inception, U.S. nuclear protection of South Korea lacked the institutionalized consultation mechanisms, nuclear sharing arrangements, and joint planning that characterized European extended deterrence. This asymmetry has become increasingly problematic as North Korea's nuclear capabilities have advanced, creating a

"decoupling" fear reminiscent of Cold War Europe but with fewer safeguards against abandonment.

The credibility gap in extended deterrence stems from three interrelated factors. First, the structural asymmetry between U.S. and South Korean interests and capabilities has widened as North Korea has developed the means to directly threaten the American homeland, raising questions about whether the U.S. would risk Los Angeles for Seoul. Second, the absence of institutionalized nuclear cooperation—unlike NATO's nuclear planning group and shared nuclear assets—has left South Korea with limited voice and visibility in deterrence planning. Third, the Trump administration's explicit transactional framing of alliances as conditional bargains rather than enduring security commitments has introduced unprecedented ambiguity into alliance dynamics.

By 2025, I find that U.S. extended deterrence in Korea operates primarily as a tool of strategic dissuasion—more focused on preventing South Korean nuclear proliferation than credibly deterring North Korea. This strategic dissuasion function has been the consistent thread throughout the alliance's history, from Washington's forceful suppression of Park Chung Hee's nuclear program in the 1970s to contemporary efforts to mollify South Korean nuclear ambitions through consultation mechanisms and bomber flyovers. The paradox is that as the deterrent credibility toward North Korea has deteriorated, the dissuasive pressure on South Korea has intensified.

Trump 2.0's approach represents a fundamental departure from traditional U.S. assurance behavior. Where previous administrations treated security guarantees as sacrosanct—separate from economic disputes or burden-sharing negotiations—Trump has explicitly conditioned security on payment, transforming alliances into what analysts call "defense welfare." His combination of passivity toward North Korean nuclear advances and impulsive, unpredictable decision-making has further eroded the credibility requirements of resolve and predictability essential to effective deterrence. This deterioration

in trust has prompted South Korean officials and public alike to seriously reconsider nuclear self-reliance, with more than three-quarters of South Koreans now favoring indigenous nuclear weapons.

Looking forward, the alliance faces what I have termed a "Zeitenwende" or turning point in extended deterrence—one that demands a strategic recalibration of deterrence responsibilities. The traditional hegemonic model of one-sided U.S. nuclear guarantees appears increasingly untenable in a world where North Korea can directly threaten the U.S. homeland while advancing tactical nuclear capabilities aimed at South Korea. I propose a new strategic division of labor: South Korea would gradually assume primary responsibility for deterring North Korean nuclear aggression through indigenous capabilities, while the United States refocuses its nuclear posture on broader strategic competition with China.

This approach recognizes that credible deterrence is enhanced when it is local and directly vested. Rather than adhering to a rigid nonproliferation orthodoxy that may ultimately fail to prevent South Korean nuclear acquisition, the alliance could proactively manage a transition toward what I call "extended deterrence 2.0"—a framework where allied nuclear capabilities are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. South Korea's nuclear deterrent would focus exclusively on North Korean threats, coordinated with but distinct from U.S. strategic forces oriented toward great-power deterrence.

Such a division would address both the credibility problem of extended deterrence and the insecurity driving South Korean nuclear ambitions. It would transform the current dilemma into a strategic opportunity—strengthening rather than fracturing the alliance by acknowledging South Korea's maturation as a security partner and the reality that nuclear threats are most credibly deterred by those who face them most directly. Through coordinated planning, transparent communication, and shared strategic objectives, the allies could develop a synergistic deterrence architecture more resilient to political fluctuations and better adapted to 21st-century strategic challenges.

This recalibration would not signal American disengagement or alliance dissolution, but rather a more sustainable burden-sharing arrangement. The U.S.-ROK alliance would evolve from a patron-client relationship toward a more balanced partnership where both parties contribute to deterrence in complementary spheres. By proactively managing South Korea's nuclear trajectory within the alliance framework, the partners could strengthen deterrence credibility while preserving alliance cohesion—turning what might otherwise become a crisis of confidence into a strategic reinvention.

In conclusion, U.S. extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula stands at a crossroads in 2026. The traditional nuclear umbrella model faces unprecedented credibility challenges, yet the strategic dissuasion function remains critically important. By recognizing the limitations of the current arrangement and embracing a more equitable division of deterrence responsibilities, the U.S.-ROK alliance can adapt to evolving threats while maintaining its core purpose. The future of extended deterrence may well depend on whether policymakers can overcome rigid orthodoxies and embrace a more flexible, coordinated approach to nuclear security in Northeast Asia.

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