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Deterrence Without Borders: The Taiwan Question in ROK-US Extended Deterrence

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines two key questions: 1) Can Republic of Korea (ROK)–United States (US) extended deterrence operate effectively “without borders,” encompassing contingencies beyond the Korean Peninsula? 2) What are the implications of incorporating the Taiwan issue for deterring the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)?

1.1. Key Findings

The paper identifies four primary drivers of strategic recalibration shaping the regional security landscape and pressing Seoul to weigh how a Taiwan contingency could affect its own security. These drivers include:

1. The United States’ two-peer challenge, as the need to deter China and Russia strains resources and increases burden-sharing expectations of allies
2. DPRK’s increasing collusion with regional powers including China and Russia
3. China’s increasing military encroachment around the Korean Peninsula
4. Anticipated changes to United States Forces Korea (USFK) and wartime Operational Control (OPCON) under the rubric of ‘alliance modernization.’

Additionally, the paper analyzes pros and cons of incorporating Taiwan into the ROK–US Extended Deterrence framework. These pros and cons are summarized in the table below, using the novel “4C Framework” of Communication, Capability, Credibility, and Continuity.

Category	Pros	Cons
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Including Taiwan in statements could signal alliance cohesion, proactive burden-sharing, and strategic robustness to Washington.• Enhances strategic messaging and alliance credibility in the Indo-Pacific region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May provoke strong Chinese responses and complicate diplomatic relations.• Overemphasis on Taiwan risks signaling reduced US focus on DPRK, undermining core deterrence.• Ambiguity in messaging could invite adversarial testing and exploitation.
Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding focus to Taiwan could prompt the alliance to enhance maritime, air, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR), missile defense, and nuclear deterrence capabilities.• Could strengthen Seoul’s strategic adaptability and preparedness in a multi-theater environment (adversaries in collusion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Current capabilities are primarily tailored to DPRK; Taiwan contingencies exceed operational reach.• Resource constraints make rapid capability expansion challenging, risking operational gaps.• Attempting to cover both DPRK and China without sufficient build-up may undermine deterrence credibility in both theaters.
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demonstrates proactive engagement by Seoul, reinforcing US resolve and alliance cohesion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk of overextending US commitments; adversaries may perceive dual-contingency assurances as aspirational rather than credible.

Category	Pros	Cons
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could deter a broader spectrum of regional threats if backed by capabilities and planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambiguity in prioritization could undermine perceived US commitment to the Korean Peninsula. • Domestic and regional audiences may question alliance coherence/assurance under multi-theater stress.
Continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals alliance adaptability and long-term commitment to regional security challenges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taiwan is exogenous to the alliance's DPRK-focused threat trajectory; integration disrupts existing doctrinal and operational continuity. • Premature inclusion could weaken existing and/or nascent institutional mechanisms (Nuclear Consultative Group, Tailored Deterrence Strategy, Conventional Nuclear Integration).

1.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on this analysis, the inclusion of Taiwan in the ROK-US extended deterrence framework presents both opportunities and risks for the alliance. While the inclusion of Taiwan may strengthen alliance credibility, regional signaling, and multi-theater preparedness, it also introduces serious challenges including the potential dilution of DPRK-focused deterrence, capability gaps, adversary exploitation, and institutional disruption. In light of these opportunities and challenges, this paper outlines the following policy recommendations for the ROK-US alliance:

- **Phased Capability Development:** Address Taiwan contingencies only after demonstrating the ability to manage simultaneous threats; Expand missile defense, ISR networks, regional basing, and review nuclear deterrence posture.
- **Calibrated Communication Strategy:** Maintain DPRK as core focus while gradually signaling broader regional engagement; Suggested weighting: ~80–85% DPRK, 15–20% Indo-Pacific stability; avoid explicit Taiwan references initially.
- **Context-Aware Sequencing:** Adaptive sequencing of capability development and narrative signaling; Phased approach without overcommitting or provoking unintended escalation
- **Expand Strategic Imagination:** Integrate Taiwan into long-term consultation and coordination even if not in immediate operational plans; Build flexible, credible, multi-theater deterrence while maintaining DPRK as the priority.

ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

Abbreviation	Definition
CNI	Conventional-Nuclear Integration
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
GPR	Global Posture Review
ISR	Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance
NCG	Nuclear Consultative Group
NDS	National Defense Strategy
OPCON	Operational Control
PDI	Pacific Deterrence Initiative
PMZ	Provisional Measure Zone
ROK	Republic of Korea
TDS	Tailored Deterrence Strategy
US	United States
USFJ	United States Forces Japan
USFK	United States Forces Korea

2. INTRODUCTION

Under President Trump's transactional approach to alliances, South Korea is likely to face increasing pressure to align more closely with the US threat perception on China. With looming uncertainties surrounding US demands to renegotiate defense cost-sharing, the potential reorientation of USFK, and/or the reduction of USFK to address the Chinese threat, Seoul remains divided over how far it should—or can afford to—become more 'China-focused.' Particularly in the field of extended deterrence, the "China question" has been considered more or less a taboo, as the need to keep the Korean Peninsula as the utmost priority has confined alliance consultations, joint planning, strategic deployments, and training narrowly concentrated on threats posed by the DPRK.

However, this study finds that both structural and agent-driven dynamics are reshaping the contours of ROK-US extended deterrence. Aside from the aforementioned Trump factor (agent), increasing multipolarity as a result of adversaries' military advancements and collusion is placing new demands on the US' deterrence at large, challenging its ability to manage multiple threats simultaneously. While fear of entrapment and Chinese retaliation have kept Seoul strategically cautious and reticent on anything involving China, the evolving regional security context demands Seoul revisit the Taiwan question. The central question of this paper is two-part: Can ROK-US extended deterrence be "without borders?" What are the net implications of incorporating Taiwan into the ROK-US extended deterrence framework for deterring DPRK?

To address these questions, the article introduces a '4C Framework'—Communication, Capability, Credibility, and Continuity—as an analytical tool for evaluating the Taiwan factor. It explores how a shift from a DPRK-centric threat perception to a broader, regionally inclusive scope impacts the 4Cs of ROK-US deterrence. Namely, how does the inclusion of the Taiwan issue affect alliance capabilities? What are the consequences for signaling allied resolve and cohesion? And how does the Taiwan issue influence the continuity of current declaratory policies, consultative mechanisms, exercises, and strategic planning? While the Korean Peninsula has long served as the unchallenged center of Seoul's strategic orientation, this paper argues that contemporary security dynamics require Seoul to move beyond existing 'single-threat paradigm/orientations,' to adopt a theater-wide, compound approach to deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. South Korea's new strategic priority should be to establish a new equilibrium between its traditional focus on DPRK and a broader regional division of labor within the alliance.

3. REVISITING THE TAIWAN QUESTION IN SEOUL

While South Korea's strategic discourse has historically evaded much of the Taiwan question, there are three 'waves' in which the Taiwan contingency has begun to surface in Seoul's policy circles. Beginning with concerns over entrapment during the era of the US Global Posture Review (GPR) and strategic flexibility in the 2000s (first wave), to discussions prompted by the strategic simultaneity discourse (second wave), and finally to emerging recalibrations under the US' 'China-first' posture (third wave), there appear to be meaningful changes in how Seoul has situated the Taiwan question within its broader alliance strategy and threat perception over time.

3.1. First Wave: Strategic Flexibility and Entrapment Question of the 2000s

The Taiwan question in Seoul first emerged in the 2000s, when the US GPR under the Bush administration began to raise the question of the 'strategic flexibility' of USFK. As a portion of ground troops left the Korean Peninsula to be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, experts in Seoul highlighted how US force maneuvers in the 21st century would be lighter and faster, with an increased need for flexibility of US forces in Korea to be deployable according to US strategic priorities.¹ Researchers delved into the transformation of each service and component of USFK, the wartime OPCON transfer issue, etc.² Experts also began to widen their scope of research to observe changes in the US' posture in US Forces Japan (USFJ).³ Strategic flexibility served as a lens through which Seoul began to assess the risk of possible entrapment in a potential US-China conflict, as allowing USFK to operate beyond the Korean Peninsula raised concerns that Seoul could be dragged into regional contingencies not directly tied to its core security interests. Discussions began to be framed around the tension between maintaining the 'status-quo' vis-à-vis 'adaptation.'

To elaborate, experts on one hand argued that increased flexibility would widen gaps in the alliance's threat perception, weaken deterrence against DPRK, and cause deterioration in relations with China. This group argued for maintaining the 'status-quo' and refraining from increasing US flexibility in the use of USFK forces. On the contrary, there were also voices calling for adaptation. Perceiving the US transformation in posturing as structural stimulus to the alliance, some argued that Seoul should stop arguing over strategic flexibility, as it would only weaken alliance cohesion, and instead focus on 'how to better leverage,' and 'what to give and what to get' from discussions with the US.⁴

3.2. Second Wave: Simultaneous Conflicts and Seoul's Strategic Ambivalence

Wrapped around the recurring concern of entanglement in the US-China rivalry, the Taiwan question gained more visibility in South Korea's strategic discourse as the US began articulating the

¹ Literatures in Korean: Kim, Myongsob. (2009). "Birth of the U.S. Containment Strategy in the Early Cold War: Was George F. Kennan the Only Mastermind?" *Korean Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 65-92.; Lee, Sang-hyun. (2005). "Changes in US Global Military Strategy and USFK Policy since 1945," in Han, Yong-sup. *Autonomy or Alliance: The Pathway for South Korea's Security and Foreign Policy in 21st Century*. Seoul: Orum.; Han, Yong-sup. (2008). "US' Military Strategy," in Han, Yong-sup et al. *Military Strategy of US, Japan, China, and Russia*. Paju: Hanul.

² Literatures in Korean: Lee, Sang-hyun. (2006). "ROK-US Alliance and Strategic Flexibility: Issues and Prospects." *Korean Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 155-178.; Bae, Sung-in. (2007). *Strategic Flexibility: Transformation of ROK-US Alliance*. Seoul: MayDay.; Lee, Geun. (2009). "Global Posture Review and Future of ROK-US Alliance," in Lee, Soo-hoon. *ROK-US Alliance in Transformation 2003-2008*. Seoul: Kyungnam University Press.

³ Literatures in Korean: Nam, Chang-hee. (1996). "The Role Change of USFK and USFJ in the Post-Cold War Era." *Korea and World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 361-380.; Bae, Jung-ho. (2005). "US-Japan Alliance and Transformation of USFJ." *Unification Analysis*, Vol. 18, pp. 1-15.; Park, Cheol-hee. (2004). "From Exclusive Defense to Active Defense: Changes in US-Japan Alliance, threat Perception and the Politics of Japanese Defense Policy Change." *Korean Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 169-190.

⁴ Literatures in Korean: Lee, Sang-hyun. (2006). "2006 QDR Analysis: Implications for the ROK-US Alliance." *Current Affairs and Policy*, No. 117.; Choi, Kang. (2006) "About Strategic Flexibility of USFK." *Future Strategy Institute Policy Paper* (Jan 26).; Cha, Du-hyeogn. (2006). "Implications of Strategic Flexibility for ROK and US." *News Korea*, March.

concept of strategic simultaneity—the possibility of multiple, near-simultaneous regional contingencies involving major powers, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. This second wave retained not only the same underlying tension between alliance adaptation and entrapment, but also the new conditions of potentially compounded threats.

Beginning in the early 2020s, for instance, a surge of literature and strategic analysis from Washington and its think tanks increasingly highlighted scenarios where the US might face concurrent crises—such as a Taiwan contingency involving China, and provocations or opportunistic aggression by DPRK.⁵ As these discussions gained traction, South Korean policy experts, particularly within the defense and security communities, responded with caution. There was broad consensus that publicly engaging in Taiwan-related scenarios offered little immediate strategic benefit for Seoul. Instead, most experts emphasized the need to preserve the focus of the ROK-US alliance on deterring DPRK, rather than risking dilution of that priority by stretching alliance commitments to contingencies not directly involving the Korean Peninsula.

This caution was also shaped by an enduring recognition that Seoul's military contributions or political signaling on the Taiwan issue could provoke backlash from China—South Korea's largest trading partner—and complicate crisis stability on the Peninsula.⁶ While there was growing awareness that ignoring the implications of a Taiwan conflict could be equally destabilizing, especially if it weakened alliance cohesion, the Taiwan issue remained largely absent, if not nascent, in alliance discussions. As Clint Work's latest article articulated, incorporation of the Taiwan issue in alliance-level discussions and military planning continues to remain in its infancy.⁷

The second wave thus represented a phase of strategic ambivalence for Seoul. While the notion of simultaneous conflicts increased Seoul's exposure to concerns about alliance burden-sharing and potential spillover effects from a Taiwan Strait crisis, this wave also reflected Seoul's consolidating reluctance to commit to any declaratory or operational stance that could prematurely signal alignment or expose vulnerabilities. As such, the policy discourse remained at best⁸ attempting to maintain strategic clarity vis-à-vis DPRK, while preserving ambiguity, if not reticence, in relation to the Taiwan issue.

3.3. Emerging Third Wave: Seoul's Turning Point for Rhetorical Recalibration

Seoul's strategic ambivalence, however, is increasingly being tested by shifts in US expectations under evolving regional threat dynamics. Amid the backdrop of the Russia–Ukraine war and the intensifying US–China rivalry, Washington's sharpening 'China-first' strategy—whether under President Biden's integrated deterrence framework or President Trump's transactional approach—has pushed Seoul to assume a more proactive role in the region, including in a potential Taiwan contingency.

This 'third wave' is prompting incremental but discerning shifts in Seoul's official discourse.⁹ In 2021, ROK President Moon Jae-in and US President Joe Biden included language emphasizing the

⁵ Blackwill, Robert D & Philip Zelikow. (2021). "The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War." *CFR*,; CSIS. (2023). *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan*,; Garlauskas, Markus. (2023). "The United States and its allies must be ready to deter a two-front war and nuclear attacks in East Asia," *Atlantic Council*, August 16.

⁶ Cho, Sungmin. (2021). "South Korea's Taiwan Conundrum." *War on the Rocks*, December 31.

⁷ Work, Clint. (2025). "Siloed No More: The U.S.-ROK Alliance and a Taiwan Conflict." *Korea Economic Institute of America*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Yeo, Andrew & Hanna Foreman. (2025). "Is South Korea ready to define its role in a Taiwan Strait contingency?" *Brookings*, March 28.; Lee, Seong-hyon. (2022). "South Korean Angle on the Taiwan Strait: Familiar Issue, Unfamiliar Option." *Stimson*, February 23.; Work, Clint. (2022). "From Strategic Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity? The Dynamics of South Korea's Navigation of US-China Competition." *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, July 12.

“importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” as well as the “freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea,” for the first time in a bilateral joint statement.¹⁰ From then on, Seoul reiterated its official support for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea during multiple occasions, including in ROK-US-Japan trilateral joint statements at the East Asia Summit and Camp David.¹¹ Such developments were unprecedented compared to earlier years, reflecting the beginning of Seoul’s policy recalibration, albeit still limited in operational scope.

Indeed, one of the most notable and latest developments is a growing number of articles from Seoul elaborating the need to seriously consider the implications of a Taiwan contingency for the Korean Peninsula and alliance at large. For example, Dr. Sohn Hanbyeol, an associate professor at the Korea National Defense University (KNDU), published an article for the Pacific Forum in 2024 calling on the ROK-US alliance to move beyond current rhetorical statements on Taiwan to more concrete mechanisms.¹² In the article, Sohn argues that any kind of Taiwan contingency will create operational confusion in the region and invite opportunism by adversaries including DPRK, seriously impacting the security of the Korean Peninsula. Pinpointing the possibility of ‘simultaneous conflicts,’ wherein the US will have to deter both China and DPRK in the region, Sohn asserts that Seoul must assume greater responsibility.

In 2025, Sohn developed his argument further and posed this time that Seoul must move from “silent observer to strategic enabler” to the US in the event of a Taiwan contingency.¹³ Highlighting Seoul’s relations with the US and the inevitability of economic, operational, and logistical entanglements in Taiwan contingency scenarios, Sohn argues that ambiguity or neutrality on the Taiwan issue is untenable. The report provided a roadmap of phased-response strategy—ranging from diplomatic support and intelligence sharing to base access and limited deployments—while maintaining flexible “red lines” to manage escalation risks.¹⁴

3.4. Remaining Constraints

While the third wave marks a notable departure from the cautious ambiguity of past years—evidenced by rhetorical breakthroughs and a nascent policy recalibration—the Taiwan issue in South Korean strategic discourse continues to face critical limitations in both scope and depth. Despite growing awareness that the Peninsula’s security cannot be divorced from regional contingencies, the policy community remains constrained by several enduring factors.

First, discussions have yet to fully integrate how the second Trump administration—or a broader shift in US strategic posture—could intensify pressure on Seoul to redefine its role in regional security, including with respect to Taiwan. In this emerging context, the Taiwan question is no longer a peripheral or hypothetical issue, but rather a bargaining chip embedded in a broader matrix of alliance challenges: demands for increased burden-sharing, a possible downsizing or reconfiguration of USFK, friction over reciprocal trade arrangements, and an accelerated push for OPCON transfer. The Taiwan contingency, therefore, is not just a military scenario; it has become a

¹⁰ US Embassy & Consulate in the ROK. (2021). “US-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement.” May 21.

¹¹ US Mission to ASEAN. (2022). “Phnom Penh Statement on Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific.” November 14.; US Embassy & Consulate in the ROK. (2023). “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States.” August 19.

¹² Sohn, Hanbyeol. (2024). “How the Next Taiwan Crisis Connects to Korea.” PACNET, 17, March 19.

¹³ Sohn, Hanbyeol. (2025). “From Silent Observer to Strategic Enabler: South Korea’s Role in a Taiwan Contingency.” PACNET, 52, June 30.

¹⁴ Jo, Bee Yun. (2025). Jo, Bee Yun. (2025). “Navigating the New Normal: Strategic Simultaneity, US Forces Korea Flexibility, and Alliance Imperatives.” *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, August 27.; More literatures in Korean, see, Shin, Beom-chul. (2025). “Assessing the OPCON Transition Process and Future Policy Directions.” Sejong Policy Brief, No. 2025-16.; Kim, Jung-sup. (2025). “Three Key Issues and Tasks for the ROK–US Alliance.” Sejong Policy Brief, No. 2025-20.; Jo, Bee Yun. (2025). “Strategic Flexibility of USFK and the Future of the ROK-US Alliance.” Sejong Policy Brief, No. 2025-19.

complex political lever that could reshape alliance dynamics and Seoul's strategic calculus in multiple domains.

Second, within the extended deterrence framework—often developed and debated in siloed ‘echo chambers’—the implications of simultaneous or dual-contingency threats remain under-theorized. Current alliance deterrence commitments rest on a declaratory posture featuring two core pillars: (1) any nuclear attack by DPRK will lead to the “end of the Kim regime,”¹⁵ and (2) the US will respond with the “full range of its capabilities.”¹⁶ However, these formulations largely presume a singular adversary and a single-theater conflict. Many questions remain: should Seoul and Washington seek to expand the scope of the extended deterrence framework to encompass dual threats/contingencies, does it entail ascribing what the alliance will do in case of simultaneous conflict? Does it require doubling US’ assurances to Seoul in case of simultaneous conflict? (e.g., the US would provide security for Seoul during any contingency in the region?) What are the strategic priorities? How can Seoul prevent diluting the alliance’s focus on the DPRK threat while also addressing the Taiwan issue?

Lastly, there remains a conceptual vacuum in how to reconcile expanded alliance responsibilities with the continued primacy of the DPRK threat. While Seoul acknowledges that strategic challenges in the region are interconnected, few concrete proposals exist for how to incorporate Taiwan into the alliance’s operational planning or extended deterrence mechanisms without diluting focus on the DPRK. In sum, despite rhetorical progress and a widening recognition of regional complexity, Seoul’s Taiwan discourse remains in transition—constrained by political hesitancy, conceptual rigidity, and alliance dynamics still largely structured around legacy threat perceptions. Bridging these gaps will require more than rhetorical recalibration; it will demand a reimagining of alliance roles, deterrence doctrines, and regional burden-sharing mechanisms that reflect the reality of multipolar, multi-theater threats.

¹⁵ US Department of Defense. (2018). 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, p. 33.; (2022). *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, p. 12.

¹⁶ US Department of Defense. (2024). “Joint Press Statement for the 25th Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue.” September 24.

4. DRIVERS OF FUNDAMENTAL RECALIBRATION

To better situate the Taiwan question within the ROK–US alliance, it is essential to delve into the ‘third wave’ of pressures reshaping the regional security landscape—ranging from the Ukraine war and China’s military rise to DPRK–Russia–China coordination and shifts in US force posture in the region. These dynamics sharpen Washington’s ‘China-first’ focus and press Seoul to weigh how a Taiwan contingency could affect its own security. In short, there are at least four structural drivers that demand Seoul revisit the Taiwan question in its own strategy vis-à-vis alliance management: the US’s two-peer nuclear challenge, DPRK’s closer alignment with its neighbors, China’s expanding presence near the Korean Peninsula, and the ongoing “alliance modernization”—a term that has featured prominently in the recent summit meeting between President Lee Jae-myung and President Trump, signaling forthcoming adjustments to wartime OPCON, burden-sharing expectations, and the future role and size of USFK within the Indo-Pacific.

4.1. The US and its Two Peer Problem

First, the US security commitment on the Korean Peninsula faces an unprecedented challenge, as the US has to deter and potentially confront two near-peer adversaries—China and Russia. As such, the US demand for allies’ burden-sharing ought to increase, not decrease. While the Trump administration has reiterated its prioritization of the China threat in the national strategy,¹⁷ China is not the sole concern of the United States. Instead, the US must also consider how to overcome the increasing gap in capabilities vis-à-vis adversaries in amalgamation. As New START is set to expire in 2026, for example, the US must contend with not only China’s latest rapid nuclear build-up, but also the threat of Russian (4,300 warheads) and Chinese (+600 warheads) nuclear forces in combination. These combined forces, not to mention those of the DPRK, will exceed those of the US (3,700 warheads).¹⁸ As China emerges as a “second nuclear peer,”¹⁹ the US confronts an unprecedented challenge of deterring two-peer or multiple nuclear adversaries. In practical terms, this means that US strategy will increasingly be shaped by hard choices about where to allocate finite resources and which capabilities to prioritize. Strategic prioritization and selective resourcing are likely to become sharper and more deliberate rather than mitigated, as the US seeks to maintain credible deterrence across multiple theaters while avoiding overextension. This intensifies the pressure not only on its nuclear modernization programs per se, but also on alliance management in general, including forward-deployed forces, requiring a careful balance between capability, credibility, and cost-efficiency in a more crowded nuclear arena.

As the credibility of US extended deterrence commitments remains critical to deterring DPRK’s aggressive and/or opportunistic behaviors in the region, Seoul needs to acknowledge that its ambivalence in US regional initiatives will accelerate the US’ own strategic recalibration in the region. This could in turn cause the US’ presence and commitment to appear ‘stretched thin’—an unintended and negative signal to DPRK, which continues to advance its nuclear and missile capabilities and develop closer relations with Russia and China. Any perception of ambiguity or hesitation in Washington’s commitments could encourage Pyongyang to test the limits of US and allied resolve or exploit gaps in alliance coordination. Seoul needs to reassess how the DPRK can leverage this multipolar nuclear context to increase its bargaining power and adopt more coercive

¹⁷ *Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance*, see The Washington Post. (2025. 3. 29.). “Secret Pentagon memo on China, homeland has Heritage fingerprints.”

¹⁸ See, Kristensen, Hans M. et al. (2025). “Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories, 2025.” *Federation of the American Scientists*.

¹⁹ The Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. (2023). *China’s Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: A Implications for US Nuclear Deterrence Strategy*.

tactics, knowing that Washington faces difficult trade-offs in prioritizing resources across multiple theaters. Seoul's stance toward US regional initiatives carries heightened significance.

4.2. DPRK and its Neighbors

Second, DPRK is no longer operating in isolation but increasingly engages in military-technological and political coordination with neighboring countries, including China and Russia. Most concerning developments include Pyongyang and Moscow ratifying the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in June 2024—prescribing mutual defense commitments—and DPRK's dispatch of troops to the Russia-Ukraine War. This cooperation is far from symbolic—it enables North Korea to acquire advanced military technologies including nuclear, missile, and drone technology, etc., as well as battlefield experience in concert with Russia's armed forces. China's support for DPRK has also grown markedly as well. According to *NK Pro Analysis*, sanctioned DPRK oil tankers are now broadcasting their locations in Chinese waters.²⁰ While China is mandated under UN Resolution 2397 to seize and inspect the vessels, China is now openly “turning a blind eye to illicit DPRK activity.” These vessels are also reported to appear at Russia's Vostochny Port frequently. What is most troubling is not merely DPRK's continued sanctions evasion, but the freer movement of DPRK vessels, particularly in Chinese waters. Since May 2025, UN sanctioned vessels, included Kum Jin Gang 3, Chong Ryong San, Song Won 2, are making voyages to the Taiwan Strait. Other blacklisted ships, including An San 1 and Sin Phyeong 9, are also making round trips between DPRK's ports to contingent destinations in China and Russia.

A new normal of trilateral cooperation will likely complicate Seoul's own security challenge in the region. Most critically, it signals a prolonged and institutionalized DPRK nuclear threat that cannot be contained through conventional deterrence alone. By leveraging advanced technologies, operational experience, and freer logistical networks, North Korea can sustain and expand its nuclear and missile capabilities, increasingly integrating them into broader regional strategic dynamics. For Seoul, this means that planning must account not only for the DPRK's growing strike capabilities but also for the strategic leverage it gains through structured collaboration with China and Russia. In effect, the DPRK is shifting from a regional spoiler to a persistent, normalized nuclear actor, forcing Seoul to recalibrate force posture, alliance coordination, and deterrence strategies to address this nuclear environment that is likely to endure.

4.3. China's Growing Military Presence

China's military footprint is extending rapidly across key domains that flank the Korean Peninsula. According to *The Chosun Ilbo*, Chinese warships entered South Korean waters more than 330 times in 2024, compared to about 110 such entries in 2017.²¹ These incursions occurred not only in the Provisional Measure Zone (PMZ) of the Yellow Sea but also in the areas of South Korea's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). While no Chinese warship is reported to have entered South Korea's territorial waters, China's crossing into South Korea's EEZ without notice is the new norm. Additionally, a Chinese patrol ship crossed the 124th meridian and came within 40 kilometers of Baengnyeong Island in 2020, prompting the South Korean Navy to respond by dispatching its warship.

Chinese maritime installations have also grown since 2018 in the West Sea, now accumulating to a total of 13 buoys. Out of the 13, three are directly within the PMZ where the two countries' EEZs

²⁰ Sokolin, Anton. (2025. 7. 31.). “Sanctioned North Korean tankers sail freely in Chinese waters, defying UN rules.” *NK Pro*.

²¹ As reported, the incursions continued to increase: 110 (2017), 230 (2018), 290 (2019), about 200 (2020-2022), 360 (2023). See, Roh, Suk-jo & Jung-soo Lee. (2025. 4. 30.). “Exclusive: Chinese Warships Cross into S. Korea's EEZ over 330 Times in 2024.” *The Chosun Ilbo*.

overlap. They are the Shenlan No. 1, Shenlan No. 2, and an operating platform called the Atlantic Amsterdam. The former two are floating structures described as aquaculture facilities, while the latter is a fixed platform with three steel legs.²² While debates remain whether these installations constitute direct violations of the South Korea-China Fisheries Agreement, the Chinese Coast Guard's prevention of approach by South Korean civilian marine research vessel and the South Korean Coast Guard clearly harms the safety of navigation and fishing operations in the region²³ and signals "potential military use" of these installations.²⁴

Regions such as the West Sea (Yellow Sea), South Sea, and East Sea are already perceived as strategic choke-points, prompting China to project power and contest US ally corridors.²⁵ Even if Seoul maintains Taiwan and/or China outside of Seoul's direct threat sphere, these geographic domains are increasingly integrated into China's larger Indo-Pacific competition strategy—intersecting with Seoul's security environment in ways that make China/Taiwan-related contingencies indirectly consequential. Taking into account China's nuclear and conventional build-up, Seoul cannot succeed on its own in leveraging, pushing off, deterring, and responding to continued encroachments by China in the region.

4.4. 'Modernization of the Alliance' in the Above Context

The ROK-US Director-General level consultation, held July 10-11, 2025, noted in a joint press release that Seoul and Washington have discussed ways to strengthen the alliance "into a future-oriented, comprehensive strategic alliance, and to modernize the Alliance in a mutually beneficial manner in the face of an evolving regional security environment."²⁶ Although what 'modernization of the Alliance' exactly entails remains unclear, it is clearly an umbrella term for upcoming changes and transformation of the US' alliance policy and military presence in the region, including the USFK.

Indeed, while the full US FY2026 defense budget remains undisclosed,²⁷ the FY2026 Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), which mandates the Secretary of Defense highlight efforts (budget components) to strengthen US military presence and capabilities in the Indo-Pacific,²⁸ is laden with implications for the upcoming 'global posture review.' The most explicit finding from the PDI is that the budget for US Army presence in the region will be reduced by 68%, from \$370 million in the previous year to \$117 million in FY2026. As the PDI's 'military presence' category budget in total is decreased by 25%, from \$2.7 billion to \$2 billion, most of the cuts will probably take place in the ground Army forces, signaling US efforts to reduce overseas ground force presence while rebalancing with more agile and flexibly deployed air and maritime forces. Indeed, in the PDI's 'infrastructure modernization' category, 88% of the budget will be allocated to Navy and maritime-related facilities, 7% to the Air Force, and only 5% to ground forces.²⁹

Jennifer Kavanagh and Dan Caldwell's projections at *Defense Priorities*—reducing USFK to a troop level of 10,000, leaving a maximum of two air squadrons³⁰—may be too drastic. But what appears

²² Roh, Suk-jo & Jung-in Yu. (2025. 6. 30.). "China's Maritime Installations in the PMZ 'May Serve Dual-Use Purposes beyond Aquaculture.'" *The Chosun Ilbo*; The Korea Times. (2025. 5. 31.). "China Installs 3 More Buoys Near Overlapping Waters with Korea."

²³ Shim, Sangmin. (2025). "Controversy Surrounding China's Structures in the West Sea (Yellow Sea) and Their Implications under International Law." *Asian Issue Brief*, May 19.; Yoon, Sukjoon. (2025. 8. 2.). "How Should South Korea Respond to China's Yellow Sea Project?" *The Diplomat*.

²⁴ Jun, Jennifer & Victor Cha. (2025). "Chinese Platforms in the Yellow Sea's South Korea-China PMZ." *Beyond Parallel*, June 23.

²⁵ Walters, Riley. (2025). "China's Military Expansion toward the Southwest Pacific and Oceania." *GIS*, July 15.

²⁶ US Department of State. (2025. 7. 11.). "The US-ROK Alliance Consultations Joint Press Release."

²⁷ As of August 6, 2025.

²⁸ It is not a separate budget item but it delineates the priorities of the department.

²⁹ From author's analysis, Jo, Bee Yun. (2025). "Strategic Flexibility of USFK and the Future of the ROK-US Alliance." *Sejong Policy Brief*, No. 2025-19, p. 4.; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense. (2025). "Pacific Deterrence Initiative: Department of Defense Budget FY2026." June.

³⁰ Kavanagh, Jennifer & Dan Caldwell. (2025). "Aligning Global Military Posture with US Interests." *Defense Priorities*, July 9.

certain is that a fundamental shift in the alliance structure is forthcoming, demanding high levels of coordination, consultation, and strategic messaging to maintain the credibility of US extended deterrence and prevent opportunistic aggression in the region.

While DPRK remains Seoul's most imminent and pressing threat, the four drivers collectively press Seoul to move beyond earlier ambivalence to reconceptualize its strategic posture. To cope with increasing complexities of the security environment and seek new measures to articulate Seoul's core interests and priorities, Seoul needs to assess how embedding the Taiwan question into the alliance framework could unfold, along with the potential risks and opportunities such integration could pose. With a particular focus on ROK-US extended deterrence, the next chapter will seek to explore what a Taiwan contingency could mean for the alliance.

5. ADDRESSING TAIWAN IN ROK-US EXTENDED DETERRENCE

In order to assess how the Taiwan issue changes (benefits and/or risks) the deterrence effects and/or equation of ROK-US extended deterrence (short for US' extended deterrence strategy/policy to Seoul), this article seeks to deliberate using what I call the '4Cs' of extended deterrence: communication, capabilities, credibility, and continuity.³¹ Revisiting ROK-US joint declaratory policy, institutionalization, deployment of strategic assets, and exercises, etc., within the '4C framework,' we can scrutinize how a Taiwan contingency affects maintaining Seoul's primary strategic priority: deterring DPRK.

5.1. The '4Cs' of Extended Deterrence

For extended deterrence to work, there are four critical components: communication, capabilities, credibility, and continuity (4Cs). First, to deter an adversary's aggression by convincing it that the costs will outweigh the benefits of an action,³² what state needs is credible 'communication' that it will deny and retaliate against the attack, raising the costs of adversarial action. Communication alone, however, does not suffice, as the state needs to have the 'capabilities'—the second component—to credibly signal its resolve to dissuade an adversary's action. Then, as alluded, communication and capabilities are necessary conditions for the third component, 'credibility.' If an adversary perceives that the communication and/or capabilities are less credible, its perceived benefits of aggressive action may increase. The fourth interrelated component of deterrence is 'continuity.' Swerving and inconsistent statements, for instance, weaken the credibility of the committed use of capabilities. A state may choose to be ambivalent or erratic in declaratory policy to increase an adversary's uncertainties. Whatever the policy is, however, discontinuity of the existing policy trajectory can call into question the credibility of a state's deterrence capabilities and commitments. As elaborated below, the 4Cs are indeed very much interconnected in effects.

5.2. Taiwan and Alliance Communication

Effective deterrence relies on clear and consistent signaling, both internally within the alliance and externally toward adversaries. In recent years, the ROK-US alliance has enhanced strategic communication through regular high-level meetings, joint statements, institutionalization, and military exercises. As of 2025, the US has pledged to use its "full range of capabilities" to bring the "end of the Kim regime" against any nuclear attack by DPRK. Amid the backdrop of the 2023 Washington Declaration, the US' deployment of strategic assets has increased in both frequency and visibility around the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, the alliance has made notable strides in establishing the first high-level consultative mechanism on nuclear extended deterrence, the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), updating the Tailored Deterrence Strategy (TDS), and devising the concept of 'conventional-nuclear integration (CNI)' to enhance allies' information-sharing, joint planning, and consultation.

However, Taiwan remains absent altogether from existing extended deterrence narratives. None of the NCG statements mention Taiwan. As elaborated in the previous chapters, Taiwan remains compartmentalized under non-bilateral settings such as the ROK-US-Japan joint statements. Should

³¹ Jo, Bee Yun. (2025). "Conventional-Nuclear Coordination as a Way Forward for U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation." *Asia Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 71-76.; Dr. Cho Nam-hoon, Senior Research Fellow at Korea Institute for Analyses (KIDA) have proposed '3Cs' – capability, communication, and credibility – in his earlier report in 2018. See, Cho, Nam-hoon et al. (2018). *Trends in Nuclear Deterrence Strategy and their Applications to the Korean Peninsula*. Seoul: KIDA.

³² Snyder, Glenn H. (1961). *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Seoul and Washington decide to include the Taiwan issue in their declaratory statements, what could be the repercussions?

First, this decision could influence Chinese signaling. When former ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol stated during his interview with Reuters in 2023 that “the Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue,”³³ Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin officially called on Seoul to “prudently handle matters” related to Taiwan, which is “a matter for Chinese, who do not need to be told what should or should not be done.” The South Korean foreign ministry then responded by summoning the Chinese Ambassador to South Korea, Xing Haiming, and officially protested that such a response by China was “unspeakable” “diplomatic discourtesy.”³⁴ Should Seoul begin to address the Taiwan issue in an official bilateral ROK-US context, Seoul should anticipate China’s reactions to go beyond this 2023 incident.

Second, more importantly, increased emphasis on China could entail or signal lesser emphasis on DPRK. Combined with President Trump’s upcoming National Defense Strategy (NDS), anticipated to again reemphasize the US’ number one priority on China and demand Seoul “take more of the lead in a strong defense against DPRK,”³⁵ novel inclusion of the Taiwan issue in bilateral extended deterrence narratives could be perceived as US diminished interest or involvement in Korean Peninsula matters. This would fundamentally affect Seoul’s strategic priority—maintaining credible deterrence against DPRK.

Third, incorporating Taiwan into bilateral statements could open up a new ‘capability gap’ for the alliance, ultimately negatively affecting credibility of security commitments in dealing with both the DPRK and China threats. While closing the alliance’s ‘communication gap’ on the Taiwan issue could signal robustness of the alliance and extended deterrence commitments in the region, it could also embolden adversaries to test such statements, exploit any room for division, and also raise a new kind of ‘capability gap’—whether Seoul is capable of actually coordinating its limited resources to address threats beyond the Korean Peninsula.

Going back to the ‘four fundamental drivers,’ however, failing to address the Taiwan issue could invite sharp criticism or complaints from the US over Seoul’s perceived lukewarm commitment to rising regional security challenges. As President Trump has emphasized the need for greater burden-sharing, any perceived hesitation could prompt him to present Seoul with new, more demanding, or even radical expectations. From a signaling perspective, such pressures risk undermining the credibility of the alliance and, by extension, its deterrence value. Proactive rephrasing of the Taiwan issue, in other words, could benefit Seoul to foster more amicable relations with Washington, while reinforcing the alliance’s strategic signaling and cohesion.

5.3. Taiwan and Alliance Capability

Another fundamental question is whether Seoul and Washington possess sufficient capabilities in the region to credibly deter both China and DPRK. Should Seoul and Washington issue clearer and more inclusive statement on Taiwan, would this be a credible signal to China and DPRK? Even now, when the US commitment in a bilateral context is to deter DPRK by using its “full range of capabilities,” there is inherent skepticism about whether this promise remains operationally credible under conditions of resource strain and strategic prioritization. This concern is especially salient

³³ Reuters. (2023. 4. 19.). “Exclusive: South Korea’s Yoon opens door for possible military aid to Ukraine.”

³⁴ Reuters. (2023. 4. 20.). “S.Korea summons Chinese ambassador over reaction to Yoon’s Taiwan remarks.”

³⁵ As in the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, and also Elbridge Colby’s statement on X after a call between ROK-US defense ministers on July 31, 2025. See, The Chosun Ilbo. (2025. 8. 6.). “US official calls South Korea a “model” for defense burden sharing.”

when considering the size and components of forward-deployed USFK. Of the 28,500 troops, 20,000 are ground forces, 8,000 air forces, and 500 are navy and marine corps. The air force based in Osan and Kunsan operates F-16s, whose operating range falls short of the distance to Taiwan without refueling. The capability issue could become further compounded by the Trump administration's push to scale down the deployment, especially if the US decides to take Caldwell's drastic option to keep only two air squadrons and pull out much of the rest.

Moreover, alliance capability, particularly in the context of deterrence, is not just about possessing overwhelming firepower, but also ensuring interoperability, responsiveness, and joint readiness. In this regard, the key challenge is that ROK-US efforts—until the latest efforts to advance CNI or operationalize the NCG—remain narrowly (purposefully) tailored to DPRK-specific scenarios. They are not yet designed to address the strategic demands of a Taiwan contingency, which would require greater maritime and air projection capabilities, as well as regional coordination beyond the Korean Peninsula.

If Seoul and Washington were to consider deterring China and DPRK together, both sides would need strong assurances that alliance capabilities could withstand the resulting strain without creating exploitable vulnerabilities on the Peninsula. This would require a more robust assessment of current force posture and joint operations. Furthermore, areas such as missile defense architecture, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, and regional basing access—currently configured around DPRK threat profiles—must be reevaluated and possibly expanded to support credible deterrence across broader regional contingencies. Considering China's increasing military build-up in the region, such transformation of capabilities—to deter both China and DPRK—could be beneficial to Seoul's capability build-up. Novel nuclear extended deterrence measures could be also prompted for the alliance to navigate an increasingly complex and collusive security environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

The challenge is how Seoul and Washington could bring about such change in a short period of time, especially given the resource constraints. Capability build-up, especially in the conventional realm, demands more time for Seoul and Washington to consider their bilateral commitment on Taiwan Strait issues. Without significant capability build-up or introduction/enhancement of the nuclear dimension of forces in the region, the ROK-US alliance can hardly address the Taiwan issue without diluting or undermining the core mission of deterring DPRK, which remains Seoul's most immediate and persistent threat.

5.4. Taiwan and Alliance Credibility

From Seoul's perspective, the credibility of extended deterrence in the ROK-US alliance has relied on a relatively clear strategic configuration: the Korean Peninsula as the singular theater of concern, with the DPRK as the primary adversary. The inclusion of Taiwan-related contingencies into the extended deterrence framework would therefore entail both pros and cons for Seoul. On the positive side, Seoul's proactive engagement could enhance the credibility of US resolve across the region. By actively sharing burdens and participating in planning for dual or multiple contingencies, Seoul could strengthen alliance cohesion, improve capability integration, and contribute to deterring a broader spectrum of regional threats. At the same time, however, expanding the alliance's focus risks diluting its strategic clarity regarding the DPRK, potentially undermining the perceived coherence and credibility of the US security commitment on the peninsula. In essence, Seoul faces a delicate trade-off: contributing to a broader regional deterrence posture could reinforce ROK-US alliance influence and adaptability, but it must be carefully calibrated to avoid signaling diminished focus on the DPRK or introducing ambiguity in extended deterrence assurances. To elaborate, the

foremost challenge to maintaining alliance credibility appears to lie in perception management. If the US signals that it is prepared to simultaneously uphold its commitments in both the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula, adversaries may test the limits of that assurance—especially if those signals are not backed by meaningful capabilities or planning structures. In the absence of tangible demonstrations—through deployments, exercises, or institutional frameworks—such commitments may appear overextended or aspirational, weakening their deterrent value. Furthermore, the risk of misperception is not confined to adversaries alone; domestic and regional audiences may begin to doubt the alliance’s cohesion and resolve under multi-theater stress.

Compounding the issue is the problem of prioritization. If Washington’s strategic bandwidth becomes overly stretched due to a Taiwan contingency, Seoul may perceive that the US is de facto elevating its commitment to Taiwan over the Korean Peninsula—especially if force posture or consultative mechanisms begin to favor Taiwan scenarios. In such a context, even without the explicit downgrading of US commitments to Seoul, ambiguity in US prioritization can itself undermine the credibility of deterrence.

Therefore, alliance credibility in a dual-contingency environment cannot be presumed; it must be actively maintained. This requires not only a realistic assessment of capabilities, but also concrete institutional commitments—such as contingency planning, shared burden arrangements, and transparent prioritization logic—that assure Seoul its security will not be compromised, even amid escalating demands elsewhere in the region.

5.5. Taiwan and Alliance Continuity

As elaborated above, continuity has long been a pillar of effective deterrence. It signals to adversaries and allies alike that a state’s commitments are not easily swayed by changing circumstances or political transitions. While inclusion of Taiwan could signal ‘continuity’ of alliance cohesion and adaptability, it could also at the same time risk disrupting existing ROK-US extended deterrence framework in several ways.

First, the Taiwan contingency introduces an entirely new vector of commitment that does not follow the alliance’s existing threat trajectory. While the ROK-US alliance has incrementally adapted to North Korea’s evolving nuclear and missile capabilities, the Taiwan issue is exogenous to that evolution. Integrating it into alliance planning would therefore require recalibration of doctrine, exercises, and declaratory policies—all of which introduce uncertainty, both in content and implementation. If not managed carefully, these shifts could generate mixed messages about the alliance’s core purpose, particularly if they imply a diversion of resources or strategic attention away from the Peninsula.

Second, the alliance’s deterrence architecture is still in the early stages of institutional modernization—such as the creation of the NCG and revision of the TDS. Prematurely overlaying Taiwan-related contingencies onto these fragile structures could disrupt their continuity and reduce their effectiveness. Institutional learning, bureaucratic routinization, and military interoperability all take time to mature. Injecting a second, complex threat into this process may create inconsistencies in execution and weaken the very deterrence mechanisms the alliance seeks to strengthen.

Lastly, continuity requires narrative coherence. Sudden shifts in public messaging, joint statements, or strategic documents to include Taiwan—without gradual buildup or alignment of supporting policies—can be perceived as opportunistic or externally driven. This weakens the perceived autonomy and strategic maturity of Seoul’s security policy and complicates alliance burden-sharing debates.

6. POLICY SUGGESTIONS

While this article believes in the need to reshape and modernize the alliance and extended deterrence framework to meet new strategic realities, the array of potential benefits and significant challenges calls for a deliberate, phased approach. In order to address the new security environment in the region, Seoul and Washington should prioritize a phased approach anchored in two key principles: 1) capability-driven planning, and 2) narrative calibration, avoiding abrupt doctrinal shifts or capability reduction. As part of this phased approach, I make the following policy recommendations:

First, transparency regarding Taiwan-related contingencies must follow—not precede—the development of requisite alliance capabilities. The credibility of signaling on broader regional contingencies depends on demonstrating that the alliance can simultaneously manage threats on the Korean Peninsula without weakening deterrence against the DPRK. In practical terms, this means that Seoul and Washington must first enhance their ability to respond effectively to dual or multiple contingencies. Key initiatives could include expanding conventional missile defense networks to cover overlapping threat vectors, strengthening ISR integration to ensure timely and actionable information, and reassessing basing arrangements—not only on the Korean Peninsula but also across the broader Indo-Pacific theater to improve operational flexibility and rapid response capability. These steps may also require revisiting the nuclear dimension of deterrence, ensuring that US extended deterrence commitments remain credible against the backdrop of a multi-peer nuclear environment that includes China, Russia, and the DPRK. Only after such capabilities are demonstrably in place can Seoul credibly engage in signaling broader commitments without risking a perception of overextension or misaligned priorities.

Second, the alliance must adopt a carefully calibrated communication strategy. Messaging should reflect South Korea's core priority of deterring the DPRK while gradually preparing for broader regional contingencies. Seoul could implement a phased approach to declaratory language—for instance, assigning approximately 80% of public statements, exercises, and consultations to the DPRK and 20% to broader regional stability concerns. By referencing Indo-Pacific security in a general sense, rather than explicitly naming Taiwan, Seoul and Washington can maintain strategic ambiguity while gradually acclimating domestic and regional audiences to the possibility of broader engagement. Incremental adjustments in signaling—through military exercises, joint statements, or consultative processes—allow both allies to demonstrate cohesion, readiness, and shared responsibility, without triggering premature backlash either domestically in Seoul or in the wider region.

This phased approach also allows the alliance to respond to the evolving political context. A second Trump administration in Washington is likely to emphasize burden-sharing, reduce strategic bandwidth, and push Seoul toward a more active role in regional contingencies. Simultaneously, a Lee Jae-myung administration in Seoul may remain economically cautious or politically ambivalent vis-à-vis China, making overt commitments to Taiwan politically sensitive or infeasible in the near term. By sequencing capability development and narrative signaling, Seoul and Washington can maintain alliance credibility, reduce the risk of misperception, and gradually expand the strategic imagination of the alliance without overcommitting or provoking unintended escalation.

Ultimately, even if the Taiwan issue remains outside Seoul's immediate operational defense plans, it can no longer remain outside its strategic imagination. The goal is to foster an alliance posture that is flexible, credible, and capable of responding to multiple contingencies while maintaining the primacy of the DPRK threat. By mapping the structural and operational implications of emerging regional threats, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader discourse on

modernizing extended deterrence, highlighting both opportunities and constraints. As the regional security environment becomes more volatile, adversaries more capable, and alliances more contingent, Seoul must develop a forward-looking and adaptive framework. Such a framework should integrate capability development, alliance cohesion, and strategic communication, ensuring that the ROK–US alliance can address complex challenges without losing sight of its core priority: maintaining credible deterrence against the DPRK.