

RAND NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

MIYEON OH, MARK COZAD, BARRY PAVEL

Revitalizing the U.S.-ROK Alliance

A New Deterrence Framework

This research was made possible by National Defense Research Institute exploratory research funding that was provided through the federally funded research and development center contract and approved by the institute's primary sponsor.

Research Report

For more information on this publication, visit **www.rand.org/t/RRA3038-1**.

About RAND

RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. To learn more about RAND, visit www.rand.org.

Research Integrity

Our mission to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis is enabled through our core values of quality and objectivity and our unwavering commitment to the highest level of integrity and ethical behavior. To help ensure our research and analysis are rigorous, objective, and nonpartisan, we subject our research publications to a robust and exacting quality-assurance process; avoid both the appearance and reality of financial and other conflicts of interest through staff training, project screening, and a policy of mandatory disclosure; and pursue transparency in our research engagements through our commitment to the open publication of our research findings and recommendations, disclosure of the source of funding of published research, and policies to ensure intellectual independence. For more information, visit www.rand.org/about/research-integrity.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© 2026 RAND Corporation
RAND® is a registered trademark.

Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial 4.0 International License. All users of the publication are permitted to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and transform and build upon the material, including for any purpose (excluding commercial) without further permission or fees being required.

RR-A3038-1

About This Report

The convergence of interests and security concerns from Russia, China, and North Korea presents a complex and dangerous security environment with various challenges that require a modernized alliance between the United States and South Korea with a more comprehensive extended deterrence framework. This report presents a new extended deterrence framework that addresses the changes in the security environment and the guidance in the U.S. National Defense Strategy for South Korea to do more to defend itself with critical—but more limited—U.S. support.

RAND National Security Research Division

This work was conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Program of the RAND National Security Research Division, which operates the National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of War, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

For more information on the RAND International Security and Defense Policy Program, see www.rand.org/nsrd/isdp or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

Funding

This research was made possible by National Defense Research Institute exploratory research funding that was provided through the federally funded research and development center contract and approved by the institute's primary sponsor.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate substantive reviews by Patrick Cronin at the Hudson Institute and Kingston Reif at RAND. The authors would like to pay special thanks to RAND policy analyst Joe Haberman for conducting preliminary literature reviews.

Contents

About This Report iii
Revitalizing the U.S.-ROK Alliance: A New Deterrence Framework 1
Introduction 1
Part 1. Extended Deterrence for the Korean Peninsula in the Post–Cold War Era 4
Part 2. Defining the Problem for the Changing Security Environment 6
Part 3. A New Extended Deterrence Framework 12
Part 4. The Key Elements of a New Extended Deterrence Framework 13

Abbreviations 18
References 19

Revitalizing the U.S.-ROK Alliance: A New Deterrence Framework

Introduction

Several nuclear-armed states hostile to the United States and its allies are increasing their nuclear weapon arsenals in both quantity and quality, including on the Korean Peninsula. Between 2022 and 2025, North Korea conducted more than 150 missile launches of various types and ranges, and its nuclear and missile programs continue to advance at a rapid pace. The security environment in northeast Asia has changed fundamentally from the time of the first Trump administration and since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The evolving nature of North Korea–Russia military cooperation has made North Korea a broader threat to U.S. and allied security interests beyond northeast Asia.[1] In return for Pyongyang's support in Ukraine, Moscow has provided a variety of advanced military technologies, most notably attack drones and reconnaissance systems, to help modernize North Korea's conventional forces. Russia also might be sharing other advanced military and space-related technologies that could enhance North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.[2] North Korea now poses a wider challenge to U.S. and allied security interests across multiple theaters.

In addition to Moscow and Pyongyang's 2024 defense pact, enduring strategic cooperation between China and Russia—driven by U.S.-China competition and a deteriorated U.S.-Russia relationship—has raised concerns about the possibility of a more expansive partnership or coalition involving North Korea, China, and Russia.[3] At a minimum, these recent developments have led to policies that are much more permissive in Beijing and Moscow regarding denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, sanctions enforcement and support, and technological modernization of North Korea's military. These developments compound an already complex security dynamic on the Korean Peninsula, where Kim Jong Un has overseen dramatic improvements in North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, as well as provocative use of testing as a coercive signaling tool. Kim Jong Un also has declared a major policy shift toward South Korea by abandoning Pyongyang's long-standing goal

[1] Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed a treaty on mutual defense and cooperation in June 2024 (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty Between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, June 2024).

[2] Between 10,000 and 14,000 North Korean soldiers have been sent to fight Ukrainian troops. North Korea has sent more than 15,000 shipping containers of weapons and munitions to the front since August 2023. It also dispatched technicians and officers to help Russia operate its weapons and collect data on how its missiles fared in modern warfare, especially against Western air defense systems. See "North Korea's Kim Inspects Memorial for Soldiers Who Died in Russian Mission," Reuters, January 5, 2026; Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Unlawful Military Cooperation Including Arms Transfers Between North Korea and Russia*, May 29, 2025.

[3] U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, hearing to consider the nomination of Elbridge Colby to be Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, March 4, 2025.

of reunification of the Korean Peninsula.[4] Under the existing security landscape, China and Russia are less likely to attempt to constrain North Korea's nuclear development and future provocations.

The emergence of these four major threats in the Indo-Pacific region—the Russia–North Korea military partnership, North Korea's improved missile and nuclear capability, China's increasingly aggressive behavior, and the increasingly permissive and supportive relationship among China, Russia, and North Korea—presents multiple challenges to the U.S.–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance's efforts to deter aggression in northeast Asia. Aggression from North Korea is no longer the sole threat to the U.S.-ROK alliance's security from the U.S. perspective. The convergence of Russia, China, and North Korean interests and security concerns presents a more complex and dangerous security environment with various challenges that require a modernized U.S.-ROK alliance with a more comprehensive extended deterrence framework.

Consistent with the 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS), which calls for increasing allied burden-sharing, this report examines a new extended deterrence framework that goes beyond a North Korea–centric strategy and expands to address threats posed by China and Russia.[5] A robust and enduring U.S.-ROK alliance that takes on a greater share of the burden requires extended deterrence to address the broad security threats to the alliance. South Korea and the United States have agreed to work together to modernize the alliance and adapt it to meet the challenges presented by the changing regional security environment by readjusting the roles and responsibilities of United States Forces Korea (USFK) and the South Korean military.[6] Moving forward, U.S.-ROK extended deterrence must account for the following three objectives to better respond to the rapidly changing security environment by deterring (1) North Korean aggression and nuclear coercion, especially for a future scenario in which Pyongyang becomes more emboldened by its growing ties with Russia; (2) Chinese military and aggressive actions because China will likely view South Korea as a willing and active contributor to U.S. military operations and posture as parts of the ongoing "alliance modernization" efforts between the United States and the ROK; and (3) Russia from supporting North Korea in a future scenario involving North Korean aggression or coercion.

At the same time, recent U.S. strategic guidance suggests a more limited U.S. operational role in some regional contingencies and a greater expectation from U.S. policymakers that U.S. allies will assume more responsibilities for their own defense. The 2026 NDS states that "our allies and partners must shoulder their fair share of the burden of our collective defense. This is the right thing for them to do, especially after decades of the United States subsidizing their defense."[7] It further notes that the United States may provide "critical but more limited support."[8] For the U.S.-ROK alliance, this shift

---

[4] Kim Jong Un called South Korea a "complete enemy and eternal foe" in his report on the work of the Ninth Workers' Party Congress (see Kim Min-seo, "Kim Jong Un Declares South Korea Eternal Enemy, Threatens Collapse," *Chosun Daily*, February 26, 2026).

[5] U.S. Department of War (DOW), *2026 National Defense Strategy*, January 23, 2026. The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

[6] White House, "Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump's Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung," November 13, 2025; DOW, "57th Republic of Korea (ROK)–United States Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique," November 15, 2025.

[7] DOW, 2026.

[8] DOW, 2026.

implies that South Korea might be expected to take on a larger share of the burden in deterring and responding to threats from North Korea while also facing a more hostile regional environment shaped by China's military and its aggressive actions. However, important elements of this guidance remain ambiguous. In particular, it is not clear what "critical but more limited support" would mean in practice for the defense of the ROK, or what role the United States would play in protecting South Korea from military pressure from China, even as Seoul remains primarily focused on the North Korea threat. The objective of alliance modernization should not be to preserve a static division of labor or to expand the U.S. role across all contingencies. Rather, it should be to define a different and more sustainable allocation of responsibilities in which the United States continues to provide credible extended deterrence and critical support, while the ROK assumes a larger role in its own conventional defense and in selected regional contingencies. Clarifying these issues is essential to alliance modernization and to the credibility of extended deterrence in a more dangerous regional security environment.

Key Takeaways

The U.S.-ROK alliance faces an increasingly complex deterrence environment shaped by multidomain threats from North Korea, China, and Russia. To respond, a new extended deterrence framework should include the following steps:

- Address nuclear coercion, missile threats, cyber and space risks, and wider regional conflict.
- Strengthen nuclear consultation while avoiding a larger operational role for nuclear weapons.
- Improve air and missile defense; deepen cooperation in space, cyber, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and broaden combined exercises.
- Increase South Korea's defense contributions to support a stronger and more sustainable alliance framework.

This report is intended primarily for policymakers and defense planners in Washington and Seoul who are shaping the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance in a more contested regional environment. It is also relevant to military practitioners, analysts, and other stakeholders concerned with deterrence, alliance modernization, and security in northeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. By clarifying the changing threat environment and identifying practical elements of a broader deterrence framework, the authors seek to inform ongoing debates about how the alliance should adapt its roles, capabilities, and planning to meet new strategic demands. Although the analysis considers the possibility of closer alignment among Russia, North Korea, and China, it does not assess in detail the degree to which such cooperation exists or is likely to emerge in the near term. Rather, the framework presented here is intended to remain robust under a more adverse regional scenario. A separate report examines China's position on emerging North Korea–Russia military cooperation and its implications for the U.S.-ROK alliance.[9]

[9] Miyeon Oh and Mark Cozad, *China's Position on the Emerging Russia–North Korea Military Cooperation and Its Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, RAND Corporation, RR-A5044-1, 2026.

Part 1. Extended Deterrence for the Korean Peninsula in the Post–Cold War Era

Extended deterrence has been a cornerstone of the alliance between the ROK and the United States since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The primary objective of Washington's postwar security guarantee to Seoul was deterring another North Korean invasion of the South.[10] The threat of invasion persisted throughout the remainder of the Cold War, as support from the Soviet Union allowed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to maintain a significant advantage over United Nations Command (UNC) forces on the peninsula. The DPRK's army possessed long-range artillery capable of delivering massive firepower against UNC defenses and large numbers of maneuver forces to exploit breakthroughs created by initial artillery barrages.[11] DPRK special operations forces, chemical weapons, ballistic missiles, and air forces provided a means for Pyongyang to disrupt alliance mobilization efforts, airpower, critical infrastructure, and rear-area security.[12] By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, Pyongyang appeared to recognize that a repeat of the 1950 invasion model was untenable. During this period, then–North Korean leader Kim Il Sung emphasized political subversion, efforts to delegitimize the ROK government, and potential decapitation operations as alternative means to achieve his regime's objectives. The loss of Soviet support at the end of the Cold War began a marked decline in the DRPK's conventional military capabilities—and the rise of its nuclear and missile programs.[13]

The loss of Soviet patronage and assistance created a host of problems for the DPRK. Economically, Soviet grain deliveries and industrial support were critical to the DRPK's functioning throughout the Cold War. The loss of support in both areas following the Soviet Union's collapse weakened North Korea's industries and its ability to feed its population, a problem greatly exacerbated by severe weather conditions and ensuing years of famine beginning in the mid-1990s.[14] The loss of Soviet political support also left Pyongyang in a much weaker position geostrategically than at any point since the Korean War.[15] Although Russia faced internal problems, China proved to be an unreliable and mercurial neighbor. North Korea's relations with both Moscow and Beijing were

[10] Jonathan D. Pollack, Young Koo Cha, Changsu Kim, Richard L. Kugler, Chai-Ki Sung, Norman D. Levin, Choon-Il Chung, James A. Winnefeld, Choo-Suk Suh, Don Henry, Du-Hyeogn Cha, and Kongdan Oh, *A New Alliance for the Next Century: The Future of U.S.-Korean Security Cooperation*, RAND Corporation, MR-594-OSD, 1995.

[11] Richard L. Kugler, *Toward a Dangerous World: U.S. National Security Strategy for the Coming Turbulence*, RAND Corporation, MR-485-JS, 1995; Richard H. Solomon, ed., *Asian Security in the 1980's: Problems and Policies for a Time of Transitio*n, RAND Corporation, R-2492-ISA, 1979.

[12] David A. Shlapak and Alan J. Vick, *"Check Six Begins on the Ground": Responding to the Evolving Ground Threat to U.S. Air Force Bases*, RAND Corporation, MR-606-AF, 1995; Bruce W. Bennet, Kang Choi, Gregory S. Jones, Du-Hyeogn Cha, Jiyoung Park, Scott W. Harold, Myong-Hyun Go, and Yun Kang, *Characterizing the Risks of North Korean Chemical and Biological Weapons, Electromagnetic Pulse, and Cyber Threats*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2026-1, 2022.

[13] Zack Beauchamp, "A Brief History of North Korea's Nuclear Program and the Failed US Campaign to Stop It," Vox, January 7, 2016

[14] Michael J. Seth, "North Korea's 1990s Famine in Historical Perspective," *Education About Asia*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Winter 2011.

[15] Eric V. Larson, Norman D. Levin, Seonhae Baik, and Bogdan Savych, *Ambivalent Allies? A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.*, RAND Corporation, TR-141-SRF, 2004.

mostly nonthreatening: Neither was capable or willing to provide Pyongyang with the material and political support it enjoyed throughout the Cold War.[16]

More troubling for Pyongyang was the emergence of the United States' unrivaled political and military dominance. Operation Desert Storm was the first clear demonstration of U.S. military-technical advances; however, later operations in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya convinced DPRK leaders that Washington's political motivations and incentives threatened the Kim Il Sung regime's very existence.[17] The 1994 passing of Kim Il Sung, in particular, further compounded these vulnerabilities and may have reinforced the perceived need for more-robust deterrence.

Several of the United States' key adversaries during this period viewed Washington's use of military force to secure and protect human rights and democracy as a pretext to overthrow regimes that challenged the United States' hegemony as the sole global superpower.[18] More specifically, several factors played a significant role in shaping U.S. adversaries' insecurities and views of what was needed to survive in the post–Cold War security environment. These factors included

- a steadily increasing conventional force imbalance in favor of the United States and the ROK[19]
- the collapse and removal of regimes following U.S.-led operations in the post–Cold War era
- U.S. decapitation strikes carried out against adversary leadership[20]
- U.S. policy consideration under the Bush Doctrine of preemption and first use of nuclear weapons[21]
- accelerated U.S. development and deployment of missile defense capabilities.[22]

Although Pyongyang was not the sole intended audience for U.S. policies and action (Iran and Iraq also figured prominently as members of the "axis of evil," and Russia and China also took notice),[23] these U.S. factors have shaped North Korea's defense policy over the past three decades, particularly the idea that the survival of Kim Jong Un's regime could be guaranteed only by developing ballistic missile capabilities and, more importantly, nuclear weapons.[24] Without these two capabilities, the U.S.-ROK alliance would enjoy a substantial and increasingly lopsided conventional military

---

[16] Beauchamp, 2016.

[17] Samuel Ramani, "What North Korea Learned from the Kosovo War," *The Diplomat*, October 16, 2017; Stephen Evans, "The Saddam Factor in North Korea's Nuclear Strategy," BBC, September 9, 2016; Megan Specia and David Sanger, "How the 'Libya Model' Became a Sticking Point in North Korea Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, May 16, 2018; Mike Chinoy, "How Washington Hard-Liners Helped to Create the North Korean Crisis," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2017.

[18] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils," February 2023; Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017.

[19] Evan S. Medeiros, Keith Crane, Eric Heginbotham, Norman D. Levin, Julia F. Lowell, Angel Rabasa, and Somi Seong, *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise*, RAND Corporation, MG-736-AF, 2008.

[20] "'Decapitation Strike' Was Aimed at Saddam," CNN, March 20, 2003.

[21] James Woolsey, James Lindsay, Victor Davis Hanson, and Daniel Brumberg, "The Bush Doctrine," *FrontPage Magazine*, October 7, 2002.

[22] Steven Lee Myers, "Bush Stands by Plan for Missile Defenses," *New York Times*, October 24, 2007.

[23] White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," transcript of President George W. Bush speech, January 20, 2002.

[24] Bruce Bennett, "How Kim Jong Un's Fears Shape North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Agenda," commentary, RAND Corporation, April 19, 2023.

advantage that would leave the DPRK unable to counter what Kim Jong Un and other like-minded leaders viewed as the more aggressive and threatening U.S. approach to warfare in pursuit of more-expansive strategic objectives.

Another key element of the U.S.-ROK alliance's deterrence has centered on a long-standing policy objective of ensuring a non-nuclear North Korea.[25] Beginning in the 1990s and until the early 2010s, both China and Russia espoused similar goals and supported sanctions and counterproliferation efforts to limit Pyongyang's access to technologies that are critical to developing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.[26] Support for these sanctions began to erode following diplomatic summits in 2018, which temporarily eased regional tensions and reduced pressure on Beijing and Moscow to enforce restrictions. Between the early 2010s and 2022, enforcement weakened gradually—first after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then more noticeably after the 2018 summits. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the deterioration of U.S.-China relations, however, both countries' support for counterproliferation efforts has continued to decline; 2022 was a watershed moment in their disengagement from earlier nonproliferation commitments. Although the goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula remains China's official policy, Beijing has been much less willing to exercise leverage over North Korea, in part because of its concerns about the increasingly close relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow.[27] Russia, for its part, has abandoned its support for a nuclear-free peninsula and has begun supplying Pyongyang with advanced technology and weapon systems.[28] In light of China's and Russia's unwillingness to prevent North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons and Pyongyang's declaration of an active and growing arsenal, the U.S. and ROK objective of preventing North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons is no longer realistic. Denuclearization remains a desirable goal for Washington and Seoul; however, the reality of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, its willingness to coerce and threaten, and its closer relationship with Russia create an immediate new deterrence problem.

Part 2. Defining the Problem for the Changing Security Environment

In recent years, the security and geopolitical environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula has become more volatile and dangerous. Forces driving this trend include North Korea's enhanced nuclear and missile capabilities, its emerging military alliance with Russia, and the closer alignment of Russia and North Korea with China. Similarly, China's aggressive behavior and attempts to coerce several regional actors, such as Taiwan and U.S. allies, including the ROK, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, have contributed to heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing.[29] Although the

[25] Council on Foreign Relations, "1985–2024: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations," webpage, undated.

[26] Robert Einhorn, "Revitalizing Nonproliferation Cooperation With Russia and China," Arms Control Association, November 2020.

[27] Shuxian Luo, "China's North Korea Problem," *Foreign Affairs,* August 21, 2025.

[28] Micah McCartney, "Russia Lends Nuclear Support to New Combat Ally," *Newsweek*, August 7, 2025.

[29] Daniel Byman, *Improving Cooperation with Allies and Partners in Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 20, 2025.

second Trump administration's policy goals toward North Korea have not been publicly outlined, current regional security dynamics raise several questions about the future of the U.S.-ROK extended deterrence strategy.[30]

First, the regional security environment has changed fundamentally compared with the first decade of the post–Cold War era. The United States' relationships with both China and Russia have deteriorated and are unlikely to be repaired in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, China and Russia no longer attempt to constrain North Korea's nuclear development or provocations.[31] Similarly, both appear to tolerate North Korea's increasing gray-zone activities, such as virtual asset theft and cyberattacks. Estimates of North Korea's cryptocurrency thefts vary: One blockchain analysis assessed losses exceeding $1.3 billion in 2024, roughly twice the value that Pyongyang stole in 2023.[32] In February 2025, the largest single crypto theft to date, valued at approximately $1.5 billion, was attributed to a Lazarus Group–linked actor by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).[33] Indeed, cryptocurrency theft has been a primary means to develop and deploy nuclear weapons and delivery systems.[34]

Second, North Korea's military cooperation with Russia has eased Pyongyang's isolation from the international community and opened the door for a variety of economic, technological, and diplomatic engagements. North Korea already possesses nuclear weapons, and Russia continues to provide military and technological support to improve North Korea's conventional capabilities to compensate for its massive conventional military imbalance with South Korea.[35] North Korea has also established a strategic partnership with Iran that will include exchange of technologies and personnel in several areas.[36] In the past two years, both China and Russia have provided economic aid to North Korea in the areas of telecommunications, transportation, agriculture, energy, and luxury goods.[37] North Korea's successful efforts to rebuild its relationship with Russia seem to have paid dividends in the form of engagements with China and Iran. These efforts have led to Pyongyang's broader engagement, which has been critical to its military development and the Kim Jong Un regime's economic and political viability.

---

[30] The 2026 NDS identifies the DPRK as a direct threat to the ROK and Japan, with its increased conventional and nuclear weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction; see DOW, 2026.

[31] Luo, 2025; McCartney, 2025.

[32] Chainalysis, "$2.2 Billion Stolen from Crypto Platforms in 2024, but Hacked Volumes Stagnate Toward Year-End ans DPRK Slows Activity Post-July," December 19, 2024.

[33] Sunha Bae, "Deterrence Under Pressure: Sustaining U.S.-ROK Cyber Cooperation Against North Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 1, 2025a.

[34] Lazarus Group is a North Korean state-sponsored hacker group. Sunha Bae, "Hidden Enablers: Third Countries in North Korea's Cyber Playbook," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 25, 2025b; Justin McCurry, "North Korea Behind $1.5bn Hack of Crypto Exchange ByBit, Says FBI," *The Guardian*, February 26, 2025. These sources highlight uncertainty about the precise scale of North Korea's cyber thefts.

[35] Anton Sokolin, "Comprehensive but Not Limitless: How Russia-North Korea Ties Could Impact Pyongyang's Nuclear Arsenal," National Committee on North Korea, May 7, 2025a; Choong-Koo Lee, "Putting the Screws on the Partnership Between North Korea and Russia," *War on the Rocks*, April 1, 2025.

[36] "IntelBrief: Iran and North Korea Draw Closer," Soufan Center, May 7, 2024.

[37] Elizabeth Wishnick, "Russia-China-North Korea Relations: Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 25, 2025, p. 2; Seulkee Jang, "North Korean Diplomats Return from Russia with Luxury Goods," *Daily NK*, August 6, 2024; Jeong Seo-yeong, "China Plans Major Aid Initiative as N. Korea Relations Warm," *Daily NK*, July 7, 2025.

This was demonstrated most recently in 2025: Xi Jinping's invitation to Kim Jong Un to China's 80th anniversary celebration of the end of World War II in Beijing and the joint appearance of Kim, Xi, and Russia's Vladimir Putin at the military parade. As a result of North Korea's developing relationships with Russia, China, and Iran and its already existing weapon stockpile, existing strategies to deter North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons are no longer viable. The only strategies that remain for deterring North Korean possession of nuclear weapons are compellence or negotiation. With North Korea's emerging partnerships, the former risks a broader regional conflict; the latter is highly unlikely due to what North Korea would demand to surrender its weapons and what the United States, the ROK, and other interested parties would be willing to concede.[38]

Military cooperation between North Korea and Russia has led North Korea to become a global threat, dispatching both troops and lethal weapons to Russia to support the war in Ukraine. In terms of personnel, North Korea has deployed approximately 10,000 to 14,000 of its most capable soldiers to fight Ukrainian troops in Western Russia near Kursk.[39] Although these deployed forces took heavy casualties, they were able to acquire significant experience in a high-tech combat environment involving the use of artificial intelligence (AI), attack drones, and unconventional ISR collection.[40] North Korea has sent large volumes of weapons and ammunition to Russia; public estimates run into the tens of thousands of containers carrying millions of artillery shells and other systems, including short-range ballistic missiles (e.g., KN-23/KN-24) since August 2023. It also dispatched technicians and officers to help the Russian military operate its weapons.

In return for Pyongyang's support, Russia has provided a variety of key technologies, most notably reconnaissance and attack drones; Russia also might be providing high-end military and space-related technologies that are necessary to upgrade North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. In February 2025, North Korean aviation officials visited a drone training center in Russia before attending an aviation expo in Moscow.[41] In addition, North Korean workers have been assisting in the assembly of drones at a Russian factory.[42] Both examples suggest an increased level of Russian support for North Korea's drone program in the areas of design, production, and operations and training. These cooperative efforts align with Kim Jong Un's stated priorities, such as submarine-launched ballistic missiles, AI-enabled attack drones, and tactical nuclear artillery systems similar to the 600 mm launcher showcased before the 9th Workers' Party Congress.[43] In addition, North Korea test-fired an

[38] Additional potential problems with an agreement of this type would be North Korea's unwillingness to comply and China's and Russia's willingness to and ability to enforce its provisions.

[39] Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2025, p. 5.

[40] Jonathan Corrado, Chelsie Alexandre, and Anton Ponomarenko, "North Korea's Deadly Drone Bonanza Is Coming to a Peninsula Near You," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2025; Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2025, pp. 8–11; Choe Sang-Hun and Marc Santora, "What We Know About North Korea's Role in the Ukraine War," *New York Times*, November 5, 2024.

[41] Anton Sokolin, "North Korean Aviation Officials Tour Leading Russian Drone Training Center," *NK News*, February 13, 2025b.

[42] "With 25,000 North Koreans Sent to Alabuga, More Workers Will Make Shaheds Than Tanks and Tu-160M Bombers Combined," *Defense Express*, June 20, 2025.

[43] Sokolin, 2025b; Corrado, Alexandre, and Ponomarenko, 2025; Vann H. Van Diepen, "North Korea Emphasizes Theater Strike Missiles in the First Third of 2024," *38 North*, May 1, 2024; Katsuhisa Furukawa, "The 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (1)," Open Nuclear Network, February 9, 2021; Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Daniel M. Gettinger, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs," Congressional Research Service, IF10472, last updated May 23, 2025.

intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on October 31, 2024, for the first time in almost a year; it will likely conduct (1) more ICBM launches to advance its reentry ability for attacks on the mainland United States and (2) other missile tests, including of hypersonic and short-range ballistic systems, to pose a threat to regional missile defense systems.[44] It is also plausible to think that Russia could begin to provide technical assistance to North Korea's nuclear submarine and reconnaissance satellite programs.

Several considerations have driven Pyongyang's thinking about the value of nuclear weapons. First, U.S. operations against non-nuclear adversaries, including Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, demonstrated to the North Korean regime that the common factor among all of these actors who faced the United States was their lack of nuclear weapons.[45] The example of Libya—which abandoned its nuclear weapon program following negotiations with the United States and whose leader (Moammar Qaddafi) was killed in 2011—provides a particularly stark example of what could happen to powers that have and later abandon nuclear weapons.[46] Second, Putin's threat to use nuclear weapons to deter NATO's intervention in Ukraine reinforced and accelerated North Korea's long-standing effort to develop and operationalize tactical nuclear weapons, a program that predates 2022 but gained new urgency from Russia's example.[47] In the context of a potential military conflict over Taiwan involving China and the United States, it is unclear whether North Korea's possession of its own nuclear arsenal might change Kim Jong Un's decisionmaking, particularly in terms of his willingness to take bold or risky actions in response to perceived opportunities that emerge as the United States is consumed with fighting China.

Another major factor contributing to the new security environment in East Asia is Pyongyang's policy toward the ROK. Kim Jong Un's December 2023 declaration that the long-standing goal of reunification with South Korea was no longer an active policy objective —followed by the 2024 constitutional amendment designating the ROK as the "principal enemy"—marked a dramatic departure from 80 years of DPRK policy.[48] Although this shift signals that Kim is not currently seeking unification, it does not preclude his interest in dominating or controlling the Korean Peninsula should a favorable opportunity arise. It suggests that the primary North Korean threat to the ROK has shifted away from a full-scale invasion and that North Korea's strategy going forward will increasingly focus on targeted threats and coercion based on its nuclear and advanced conventional capabilities.[49] This coercion would likely be in pursuit of more-limited goals than Pyongyang's long-held objective of reunification of the peninsula on North Korea's terms. It would instead focus on asserting territorial claims and grievances (e.g., the Northern Limit Line), obtaining concessions or aid during times of hardship, or serving as a distraction during times of internal crisis. Kim Jong Un's

---

[44] Hyung-jin Kim, Kim Tong-hyung, and Mari Yamaguchi, "North Korea's Long-Range Missile Test Signals Its Improved, Potential Capability to Attack U.S.," Associated Press, October 31, 2024; Jack Burgess, "North Korean Leader Oversees New Missile Test, State Media Says," BBC, August 23, 2025.

[45] John J. Hamre, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Victor Cha, and Katrin Fraser, *Recommendations on North Korea Policy and Extended Deterrence*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023.

[46] Specia and Sanger, 2018.

[47] Hamre et al., 2023.

[48] Oliver Slow, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Abandons Unification Goal with South," BBC, January 16, 2024.

[49] Hanbyeol Sohn and Changwoo Kang, "North Korea's Nuclear Cognitive Warfare Strategy," *38 North*, April 10, 2025.

policy shift indicates that the U.S.-ROK alliance must expand its deterrence strategy to address a very different threat that is focused on coercion and intimidation backed by nuclear weapons and the threat to use them.

The development of North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities has been a central feature of the Kim Jong Un era with a strategy emphasizing nuclear weapons. Since taking power in 2011, Kim has overseen dramatic improvements in North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities—highlighted by increased numbers of missile launches of all types along with enhancements in range, payload, and survivability.[50] Approximately 80 percent of North Korea's ballistic missile launches known to date were conducted during Kim Jong Un's tenure.[51]

Following the breakdown of the Hanoi Summit between Trump and Kim in February 2019, Kim resumed the development of the KN-25 600 mm "super-large" multiple rocket launcher, short-range ballistic missiles, and medium-range cruise missiles.[52] North Korea conducted several tests of hypersonic missiles since its first launch of a missile equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle (known as the Hwasong-8) in September 2021, including the most recent launch of a new intermediate-range ballistic missile with a hypersonic glide vehicle.[53] These efforts form part of the broader modernization agenda that Kim outlined at the Ninth Workers' Party Congress in 2026, which also identified the development of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles as a key long-term objective.[54] Since the failure of the Hanoi Summit, North Korea has conducted multiple ICBM tests, including the most recent launch of the Hwasong-19 on October 31, 2024, which flew higher and remained airborne longer than any of its previous missiles, demonstrating that North Korea under Kim Jong Un has focused on improving the precision of these missiles, strengthening its evasion technology, and advancing the capability to carry nuclear warheads.[55]

As formalized in the 2021 Five-Year Defense Plan during the Eighth Congress of the Worker's Party of Korea, North Korea has been emphasizing the development of strategic and tactical weapons to enhance its military capabilities.[56] With the goal of enhancing its deterrence posture against the United States, South Korea, and Japan, North Korea is shifting toward more-diversified and survivable weapon systems. Along with this plan, Kim Jong Un announced the aforementioned significant shift in the country's unification policy in December 2023. He declared that the long-standing goal of reunification with South Korea, a policy initiated by his grandfather Kim Il Sung in 1972, had been unsuccessful because of South Korea's consistent hostile stance. In January 2024, following that announcement, Kim Jong Un called for constitutional amendments to remove

[50] Nikitin and Gettinger, 2025.

[51] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database," November 12, 2024.

[52] Van Diepen, 2024.

[53] Vann H. Van Diepen, "Six Takeaways from North Korea's 'Hypersonic Missile' Announcement, *38 North*, October 13, 2021; Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Successfully Tests New Intermediate-Range Missile, State Media Says," Reuters, January 7, 2025.

[54] Furukawa, 2021; Nikitin and Gettinger, 2025.

[55] Jack Kim and Kaori Kaneko, "North Korea Leader Says Longest ICBM Test 'Appropriate Military Action' Against Enemies," Reuters, October 31, 2024.

[56] Furukawa, 2021.

references to cooperation and reunification during his speech in the Supreme People's Assembly, designating South Korea as the "principal adversary."[57]

North Korea's nuclear arsenal enhancement is expanding beyond the goal of developing ICBMs equipped with nuclear warheads with a range that can strike the U.S. mainland to secure a second-strike capability (retaliatory deterrence). North Korea is also focused on targeting South Korea through upgrading various short-range ballistic missiles that are already deployed, have been tested for performance, and are supported by units that have accumulated operational experience; these missiles will serve as the primary delivery system for tactical nuclear weapons. These developments suggest that Pyongyang seeks to employ tactical nuclear capabilities in support of a denial-based deterrence strategy (one aimed at convincing the United States and the ROK that any attempt to defeat or disarm North Korea militarily would be prohibitively costly or likely to fail).[58] In this respect, North Korea's tactical nuclear missiles pose another level of direct threat to South Korea, which is different from the traditional threat of conventional missiles. The ultimate goal of the DPRK's new policy remains unclear, but it has been developing main weapon systems that offer several improvements in range, payload, and accuracy—all factors that provide Kim with a wider array of options for threatening the ROK. In addition, Pyongyang has severed diplomatic interactions, communications, and transportation links with South Korea.[59] According to some assessments, Kim could seek to assert expanded or redefined territorial claims around the Korean Peninsula, through limited small-scale provocations backed by nuclear coercion.[60] The rationale behind Kim Jong Un's policy shift could be based on several considerations—concerns about a long-term imbalance, a recognition that an invasion of the ROK is no longer feasible, fears about regime survival, or some combination of these and other factors. Regardless, policymakers in Washington and Seoul must now consider the implications of these changes for the alliance's deterrence efforts. If one takes the DPRK policy at its word, the threat of invasion that drove U.S.-ROK deterrence for 75 years is no longer the alliance's most pressing deterrence concern.

North Korea's expanding partnership with Russia and its expanding military modernization—particularly in nuclear and missile capabilities—present several challenges for the U.S.-ROK alliance and its extended deterrence posture. However, deteriorated U.S.-China relations and Beijing's aggressive actions throughout the Indo-Pacific region present new challenges that leaders in Washington and Seoul must also address in any future deterrence strategy. The long-term success of the U.S.-ROK alliance has heightened concerns in Beijing about the strength and scope of U.S. alliances in the region and the role that China's leaders fear individual allies might play in any future conflict or crisis. In recent years, several developments have led Beijing to be wary of developments in the U.S.-ROK military relationship as well as the future roles that military forces, installations, and resources in the ROK might play in a variety of regional scenarios. Beijing's reaction to the 2016 deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea is one

[57] Slow, 2024.

[58] Furukawa, 2021.

[59] Gawon Bae, Brad Lendon, Yoonjung Seo, and Mike Valerio, "North Korea to Cut Off Road and Rail Links to South Korea," CNN, October 9, 2024; Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Cuts Off All Communications Lines to South Korea," *New York Times*, June 8, 2020.

[60] "N. Korea Condemns Joint Military Exercise by S. Korea, US, Japan," *Korea Herald*, June 30, 2024.

indication of these mounting concerns. Notably, assurances from both Washington and Seoul that the deployed THAAD battery was focused on the threat from North Korea did little to persuade Chinese leaders.[61] Subsequent developments, including the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group in 2023 and the evolving role of USFK, suggest that China will likely look at both U.S. and ROK forces in South Korea as potential threats in future regional crises.[62]

At its core, Beijing perceives U.S. alliances in the region as inherently threatening and designed to constrain China's rise. Numerous official Chinese documents state that the United States through its alliances seeks to "encircle" and "contain" China.[63] In most potential conflict scenarios in the region, including in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and on the Korean Peninsula, China is faced with scenarios that directly involve allies of the United States. Similarly, a conflict over Taiwan is unlikely to remain contained in the narrow confines of the Taiwan Strait and, in most circumstances, will force allies, such as the ROK and Japan, to make decisions on both direct and indirect military support to the United States and Taiwan. The threat of conflict between the United States and China might be higher now than at any time since the Vietnam War, making such scenarios as a North Korean crisis or a Taiwan conflict particularly dangerous for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The development of these three threats over the past decade—the North Korea–Russia partnership, North Korea's improved missile and nuclear capability, and China's increasingly aggressive behavior—presents multiple challenges to the U.S.-ROK alliance's efforts to deter aggression in Northeast Asia. North Korean aggression is no longer the sole threat to the alliance's security. The convergence of Russia's, North Korea's, and China's interests and security concerns presents a new security environment with a host of challenges that require a new U.S.-ROK framework for extended deterrence.

Part 3. A New Extended Deterrence Framework

The North Korea threat is fundamentally different because the security environment in Northeast Asia has changed significantly from the time of the first Trump administration. This shift has also altered the dynamics within the U.S.-ROK alliance as both partners adapt their roles and responsibilities to the new threat environment. The strengthening of a North Korea–Russia military alliance and growing strategic cooperation between China and Russia have led to an increasing alignment among the three adversaries: North Korea, China, and Russia. In addition to nuclear and missile developments, Pyongyang's pursuit of advanced conventional systems—such as precision strike missiles, drones, and electronic warfare capabilities—further complicate deterrence and demands greater allied coordination. The premise that North Korea remains isolated from the international community no longer holds. As a result, North Korea's nuclear and missile threat is no longer just a regional issue but a global threat.

---

[61] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Response to U.S.-South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and its Implications*, July 26, 2017.

[62] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "The United States of America-Republic of Korea Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)," fact sheet, January 10, 2025; Jihoon Yu, "The Evolving Role of U.S. Forces in Korea," *Real Clear Defense*, May 23, 2025.

[63] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2024 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2024, pp. 461, 544.

Consistent with the 2026 U.S. NDS, which calls for increased alliance burden-sharing, a new extended deterrence framework must move beyond a North Korea–centric strategy and expand to include threats posed by China and Russia. The robust and enduring U.S.-ROK alliance, the tense security environment in East Asia, and North Korea's new relationship with Russia require expansion of extended deterrence to address the broad alliance security problems that confront it. Moving forward, U.S.-ROK extended deterrence must account for the following three objectives in response to the evolving regional security environment:

1. **Deter North Korean aggression and nuclear coercion**, particularly considering the possibility that Pyongyang becomes more emboldened by its rapidly growing relationship with Russia.
2. **Deter Chinese military and aggressive actions** because in any future scenario, China will likely view the ROK as a willing and active contributor to U.S. military operations and posture as parts of the ongoing *alliance modernization* efforts, and North Korea is highly unlikely to sit idly in any major Chinese contingency.
3. **Deter Russia's support for North Korea** in a future crisis or conflict scenario while also seeking to disrupt peacetime military and technological cooperation that strengthens Pyongyang's coercive capabilities.

Part 4. The Key Elements of a New Extended Deterrence Framework

Nearly all recent studies about the United States' extended deterrence guarantee to the ROK have provided policy recommendations but no clear definition of what specific DPRK actions the U.S.-ROK alliance seeks to deter. Most scenarios are unclear and provide a mixed bag of problems, including general war (an invasion of South Korea), use of nuclear weapons, or some form of nuclear coercion. As a result, many of these studies present alarming perspectives on the state of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula (i.e., deterrence is on the verge of failing or is in a precarious, fragile state). As a result, many of the policy recommendations that we present do not tailor suggested actions to any specific problem.

More specifically, based on the state of the military balance on the peninsula and Kim Jong Un's recent policy statements, it appears that the U.S.-ROK deterrence has driven North Korea to abandon its long-standing objective of reunification through invasion under the Kim Jong Un regime. Likewise, at no point since 1953 has Pyongyang made serious preparations for or attempted another invasion of South Korea. Washington and Seoul will need clarity on the *focus* of the alliance's deterrence strategy to develop an effective strategy that will address Pyongyang's priority policy objectives, capabilities, and perceptions of alliance resolve.

Policymakers in Washington and Seoul must address not only what specific North Korean actions they seek to deter but also what actions they are *willing* to deter. Provocative North Korean actions, such as artillery firings on South Korean military positions on islands in the West Sea, sinking ROK Navy ships, or taking captive South Korean fishermen, are all actions that the DPRK has taken

in the past.[64] These and other gray zone activities have been assessed correctly as being below the threshold for U.S. and ROK military responses. However, in the future, if Pyongyang attempts to assert its sovereignty or challenge South Korea in contested areas, the use of nuclear threats could become a more central component of North Korea's strategy. These dangerous yet lower-level provocations and actions that the DPRK has taken in the past will thus require Washington and Seoul to agree on what actions they are indeed trying to deter and what their threshold for action will be in the future. Not all potential actions by North Korea merit deterrent approaches.

One of the most significant factors that will drive these deliberations is the likelihood that a U.S. or ROK response could lead to escalation with a nuclear-armed North Korea. Accordingly, policymakers will need to consider possible escalation scenarios, the means at their disposal in those situations, and whether responding to a provocation will outweigh the risk of escalation. In the vast majority of cases, North Korea's provocations have been limited. Missile tests might last for multiple days, but kinetic actions have been isolated events with few or no follow-on actions. Accordingly, the capabilities required for deterring a major military threat from the DPRK (i.e., a large-scale invasion or the use of one or several nuclear weapons against the ROK) include a strong, technologically advanced, and proficient conventional military force and weapons that Kim perceives as being capable of holding his regime at risk.[65] The United States has used long-range precision strike capabilities on multiple other occasions to hold regimes similar to Kim Jong Un's at risk.[66] U.S. nuclear capabilities also are likely to factor heavily into Kim's thinking about the threat he faces from the United States and shape his thinking about what types of actions the DRPK is willing to take. Although North Korea has a variety of tools at its disposal for conducting this type of escalatory behavior, the United States and ROK have considerably more options for escalation if they are willing to use or threaten to use them against future DRPK provocations.

In several of these scenarios, a destabilizing factor is Pyongyang's belief that Russia will provide assistance if the United States and/or ROK respond.[67] If Kim Jong Un believes this to be true, North Korea is likely to consider substantially more aggressive and provocative actions against the ROK. Potential transfer of Russia's advanced air defense systems, submarine technology, and destroyers would, if provided, further reinforce Pyongyang's perception that it could defend against U.S.-ROK responses and that the allies might hesitate to act for fear of escalation.

The primary threat from China that must be deterred is any potential preemptive or early stage action that would be intended to reduce the reaction times and readiness of U.S. or ROK forces in the event of a crisis or conflict.[68] As previous examples involving the deployment of THAAD have

---

[64] Anthony H. Cordesman and Aaron Lin, *The Changing Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2025.

[65] Terence Roehrig and David C. Logan, "Deterring a Nuclear North Korea: What Does the Theory Tell Us," Stimson Center, October 2024.

[66] Adam R. Grissom, Caitlin Lee, and Karl P. Mueller, *Innovation in the United States Air Force: Evidence from Six Cases*, RAND Corporation, RR-1207-AF, 2016.

[67] Patricia M. Kim, "Putin and Kim Are Creating a Crisis—Can the U.S. and China Rein Them In?" commentary, Brookings Institution, June 21, 2024.

[68] Thomas Shugart, "Deterring the Powerful Enemy: China's Counter-Intervention Capability in a Regional Conflict," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, hearing on China's Evolving Counterintervention

demonstrated, China is willing to use many forms of coercion to prevent or constrain alliance security cooperation. This is especially true in situations in which Beijing perceives U.S.-ROK security cooperation to be a direct challenge to China's security interests. This threat is likely to increase significantly in scenarios involving U.S.-ROK military action against North Korea. Similarly, in Taiwan scenarios, Beijing is unlikely to overlook (1) the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea, (2) their proximity to strategic locations on the Chinese mainland,[69] and (3) the basing, command and control, and logistics infrastructure that can support U.S. operations against China.[70] Assurances from the United States and South Korea are unlikely to assuage these fears. Therefore, the U.S.-ROK alliance must factor possible Chinese actions into its future approach to extended deterrence.

There is also the likelihood that in any major China-Taiwan-U.S. contingency, North Korea will not sit idly and simply observe. There is a wide variety of plausible scenarios that might provide motivation for Kim to commit more-intense acts of aggression and coercion. U.S.-ROK extended deterrence must address this threat, too.

The new security environment that confronts the U.S.-ROK alliance is largely centered on multi-domain threats from potentially three actors. North Korea remains the most likely threat to South Korea and Northeast Asia, while China and Russia factor heavily into multiple scenarios. In general, the primary categories of threats that must be deterred have expanded to include (1) nuclear coercion, (2) air and missile strikes, (3) space and cyber threats, and (4) large-scale combat operations involving multiple parties. Accordingly, the key elements of a new extended deterrence framework should emphasize the following:

- The Nuclear Consultative Group or a nuclear consultative approach should be updated to provide an effective framework for renewed planning and consultation regarding the defense of the ROK and of U.S. forces and interests against both nuclear and non-nuclear threats as discussed in this report. This approach is consistent with broader U.S. strategic guidance that emphasizes allied burden-sharing, deterrence credibility, and closer coordination with allies. The United States should continue to reiterate the credibility of its extended nuclear deterrent while deepening consultation, planning, and transparency with Seoul. This approach should emphasize enhanced coordination and transparency rather than an expanded operational role for nuclear weapons, reflecting the allies' shared objective of strengthening deterrence credibility while avoiding steps that could lower the nuclear threshold or provoke regional instability.
- The United States and the ROK should deepen cooperation in air and missile defense efforts to mitigate North Korea's, Russia's, and China's missile capabilities in future scenarios,

Capabilities and Implications for the United States and Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners, U.S. Government Publishing Office, March 21, 2024.

[69] Camp Humphreys is located approximately 158 miles from Pyongyang, 612 miles from Beijing, and 500 miles from Vladivostok (USFK, "The East-Up Map: Revealing Hidden Strategic Advantages in the Indo-Pacific," November 16, 2025c; Xavier T. Brunson, "Statement of General Xavier T. Brunson Before the House Armed Services Committee," U.S. Forces Korea, April 9, 2025.

[70] Christopher Johnstone, "Deterring the Powerful Enemy: China's Counter-Intervention Capability in a Regional Conflict," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, hearing on China's Evolving Counterintervention Capabilities and Implications for the United States and Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners, U.S. Government Publishing Office, March 21, 2024.

especially in light of the U.S. development of Golden Dome. In practical terms, critical but more limited support should include enhanced information-sharing, greater interoperability for integrated air and missile defense, improved command and control links, and selected U.S. enabling capabilities that strengthen the ROK's ability to defend itself. U.S. military defense modernization should continue to pace the North Korean long-range missile threat while ensuring interoperability with ROK systems. At the same time, the ROK should expand its own investments in air and missile defense, resilience, and strike capabilities that are required to defend critical targets and infrastructure on the peninsula.

- Improvements in North Korea's missile capabilities as well as its acquisition of advanced fighters from Russia present a variety of new threats against critical targets and infrastructure in the ROK and expand the number of tools at Pyongyang's disposal for coercion. The Golden Dome initiative is being repurposed to emphasize advanced conventional ROK capabilities and allied integration rather than reassurance alone. China's already large and advanced force structure and Beijing's continued concerns about U.S.-ROK cooperation—both on and off the Korean Peninsula—raise the prospect that, in multiple scenarios, the People's Liberation Army could view strikes against targets in the ROK as critical to their war efforts. It is especially important to prioritize air and missile defenses in the context of the United States' rapidly advancing and deep investments in such defenses for the U.S. homeland, particularly in light of existing U.S. capacity gaps in this area and the need to consider the more–technologically advanced and high volume of delivery systems that China possesses.
- Partnerships among Russia, China, and North Korea present a wide variety of opportunities for coercive actions across multiple domains. Alliance cooperation in space, cyber, and ISR to protect against these multidomain threats and ensure situational awareness of regional threats will be essential to an effective deterrence strategy. Such cooperation should also align with broader regional defense coordination efforts that connect Indo-Pacific regional and Korean Peninsula contingencies, including practical trilateral information-sharing and early warning collaboration with Japan.
- Most exercises conducted by the United States and the ROK involve North Korean aggression against the South. In the future, and consistent with the strategic priority of increasing burden-sharing, the alliance should expand the scope of their combined training to include contingencies involving China and Russia. This effort should include broader multinational exercises, more-regular planning for cross-domain contingencies, and clearer procedures for information-sharing, command relationships, and crisis communication. As the U.S.-ROK alliance implements the principles of strategic flexibility under the new NDS, both sides will need to ensure that expanded training and operations are carefully aligned with shared deterrence objectives and mutual expectations.
- As U.S. expectations regarding burden-sharing with its allies evolve, the United States and South Korea should continue consultations aimed at readjusting alliance roles and

responsibilities to respond more flexibly to the rapidly changing security environment.[71] Similar to many U.S. allies, the ROK is among the world's most advanced economies and a thriving democracy. South Korea can and should do more to contribute to its self-defense in the context of the long-standing U.S.-ROK alliance. South Korea should expand the capabilities that are most relevant to the new deterrence framework, including missile defense, long-range precision strike, ISR, cyber resilience, munitions stockpiles, logistics, and the capacity to sustain high-end conventional operations. South Korea should also assume a larger role in selected conventional missions on and around the peninsula, thereby allowing U.S. forces to focus more on critical functions and broader regional requirements. Such efforts would serve to greatly strengthen, undergird, and make credible the new, broader deterrence framework. Greatly increased ROK contributions to deterrence efforts across the board are imperative so that the new, much higher demand signal for U.S. roles in extended deterrence in Northeast Asia are not seen as outsized, disproportionate contributions to protecting mutual interests.

[71] USFK, "Full Joint Statement of the 50th Republic of Korea and United States Military Committee Meeting Between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine and Chairman of the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Jin Yong-Sung," press release, November 3, 2025a.

Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
DOW	U.S. Department of War
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
NDS	National Defense Strategy
ROK	Republic of Korea
THAAD	Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense
UNC	United Nations Command
USFK	United States Forces Korea

References

Bae, Gawon, Brad Lendon, Yoonjung Seo, and Mike Valerio, "North Korea to Cut Off Road and Rail Links to South Korea," CNN, October 9, 2024.

Bae, Sunha, "Deterrence Under Pressure: Sustaining U.S.-ROK Cyber Cooperation Against North Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 1, 2025a.

Bae, Sunha, "Hidden Enablers: Third Countries in North Korea's Cyber Playbook," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 25, 2025b.

Beauchamp, Zack, "A Brief History of North Korea's Nuclear Program and the Failed US Campaign to Stop It," Vox, January 7, 2016.

Bennett W., Bruce, "How Kim Jong Un's Fears Shape North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Agenda," commentary, RAND Corporation, April 19, 2023. As of April 29, 2026: https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/04/how-kim-jong-uns-fears-shape-north-koreas-nuclear-weapons.html

Bennett, Bruce W., Kang Choi, Gregory S. Jones, Du-Hyeogn Cha, Jiyoung Park, Scott W. Harold, Myong-Hyun Go, and Yun Kang, *Characterizing the Risks of North Korean Chemical and Biological Weapons, Electromagnetic Pulse, and Cyber Threats*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2026-1, 2022. As of August 21, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2026-1.html

Brunson, Xavier T., "Statement of General Xavier T. Brunson Before the House Armed Services Committee—April 9, 2025," U.S. Forces Korea, April 9, 2025.

Burgess, Jack, "North Korean Leader Oversees New Missile Test, State Media Says," BBC, August 23, 2025.

Byman, Daniel, *Improving Cooperation with Allies and Partners in Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 20, 2025.

Chainalysis, "$2.2 Billion Stolen from Crypto Platforms in 2024, but Hacked Volumes Stagnate Toward Year-End as DPRK Slows Activity Post-July," December 19, 2024.

Chinoy, Mike, "How Washington Hard-Liners Helped to Create the North Korean Crisis," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2017.

Choe, Sang-Hun, "North Korea Cuts Off All Communications Lines to South Korea," *New York Times*, June 8, 2020.

Choe, Sang-Hun, and Marc Santora, "What We Know About North Korea's Role in the Ukraine War," *New York Times*, November 5, 2024.

Cordesman, Anthony H., and Aaron Lin, *The Changing Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2025.

Corrado, Jonathan, Chelsie Alexandre, and Anton Ponomarenko, "North Korea's Deadly Drone Bonanza Is Coming to a Peninsula Near You," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2025.

Council on Foreign Relations, "1985–2024: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations," webpage, undated. As of April 29, 2026:
https://www.cfr.org/articles/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations

"'Decapitation Strike' Was Aimed at Saddam," CNN, March 20, 2003.

DOW—*See* U.S. Department of War.

Einhorn, Robert, "Revitalizing Nonproliferation Cooperation with Russia and China," Arms Control Association, November 2020.

Evans, Stephen, "The Saddam Factor in North Korea's Nuclear Strategy," BBC, September 9, 2016.

Furukawa, Katsuhisa, "The 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (1)," Open Nuclear Network, February 9, 2021.

Grissom, Adam R., Caitlin Lee, and Karl P. Mueller, *Innovation in the United States Air Force: Evidence from Six Cases*, RAND Corporation, RR-1207-AF, 2016. As of August 21, 2025:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1207.html

Hamre, John J., Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Victor Cha, and Katrin Fraser Katz, *Recommendations on North Korea Policy and Extended Deterrence*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023.

"IntelBrief: Iran and North Korea Draw Closer," Soufan Center, May 7, 2024.

Jang, Seulkee, "North Korean Diplomats Return from Russia with Luxury Goods," *Daily NK*, August 6, 2024.

Jeong, Seo-yeong, "China Plans Major Aid Initiative as N. Korea Relations Warm," *Daily NK*, July 7, 2025.

Johnstone, Christopher, "Deterring the Powerful Enemy: China's Counter-Intervention Capability in a Regional Conflict," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, hearing on China's Evolving Counterintervention Capabilities and Implications for the United States and Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners, U.S. Government Publishing Office, March 21, 2024.

Kim, Hyung-jin, Kim Tong-hyung, and Mari Yamaguchi, "North Korea's Long-Range Missile Test Signals Its Improved, Potential Capability to Attack US," Associated Press, October 31, 2024.

Kim, Jack, and Kaori Kaneko, "North Korea Leader Says Longest ICBM Test 'Appropriate Military Action' Against Enemies," Reuters, October 31, 2024.

Kim, Min-seo, "Kim Jong Un Declares South Korea Eternal Enemy, Threatens Collapse," *Chosun Daily*, February 26, 2026.

Kim, Patricia M., "Putin and Kim Are Creating a Crisis—Can the U.S. and China Rein Them In?" commentary, Brookings Institution, June 21, 2024.

Kugler, Richard L., *Toward a Dangerous World: U.S. National Security Strategy for the Coming Turbulence*, RAND Corporation, MR-485-JS, 1995. As of August 21, 2025:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR485.html

Larson, Eric V., Norman D. Levin, Seonhae Baik, and Bogdan Savych, *Ambivalent Allies? A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.*, RAND Corporation, TR-141-SRF, 2004. As of August 25, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR141.html

Lee, Choong-Koo, "Putting the Screws on the Partnership Between North Korea and Russia," *War on the Rocks*, April 1, 2025.

Luo, Shuxian, "China's North Korea Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2025.

McCartney, Micah, "Russia Lends Nuclear Support to New Combat Ally," *Newsweek*, August 7, 2025.

McCurry, Justin, "North Korea Behind $1.5bn Hack of Crypto Exchange ByBit, Says FBI," *The Guardian*, February 26, 2025.

Medeiros, Evan S., Keith Crane, Eric Heginbotham, Norman D. Levin, Julia F. Lowell, Angel Rabasa, and Somi Seong, *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise*, RAND Corporation, MG-736-AF, 2008. As of August 27, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG736.html

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils," February 2023.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty Between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, June 2024.

Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Unlawful Military Cooperation Including Arms Transfers Between North Korea and Russia*, May 29, 2025.

Myers, Steven Lee, "Bush Stands by Plan for Missile Defenses," *New York Times*, October 24, 2007.

"N. Korea Condemns Joint Military Exercise by S. Korea, US, Japan," *Korea Herald*, June 30, 2024.

Nikitin, Mary Beth D., and Daniel M. Gettinger, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs," Congressional Research Service, IF 10472, last updated May 23, 2025.

"North Korea's Kim Inspects Memorial for Soldiers Who Died in Russian Mission," Reuters, January 5, 2026.

Nuclear Threat Initiative, "The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database," November 12, 2024.

Oh, Miyeon, and Mark Cozad, *China's Position on the Emerging Russia–North Korea Military Cooperation and Its Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, RAND Corporation, RR-A5044-1, 2026. As of August 19, 2026: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA5044-1.html

Pollack, Jonathan D., Young Koo Cha, Changsu Kim, Richard L. Kugler, Chai-Ki Sung, Norman D. Levin, Choon-Il Chung, James A. Winnefeld, Choo-Suk Suh, Don Henry, Du-Hyeogn Cha, and Kongdan Oh, *A New Alliance for the Next Century: The Future of U.S.-Korean Security Cooperation*, RAND Corporation, MR-594-OSD, 1995. As of August 21, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR594.html

Radin, Andrew, and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017. As of August 27, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html

Ramani, Samuel, "What North Korea Learned from the Kosovo War," *The Diplomat*, October 16, 2017.

Roehrig, Terence, and David C. Logan, "Deterring a Nuclear North Korea: What Does the Theory Tell Us," Stimson Center, October 2024.

Seth, Michael J., "North Korea's 1990s Famine in Historical Perspective," *Education About Asia*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Winter 2011.

Shin, Hyonhee, "North Korea Successfully Tests New Intermediate-Range Missile, State Media Says," Reuters, January 7, 2025.

Shlapak, David A., and Alan J. Vick, *"Check Six Begins on the Ground": Responding to the Evolving Ground Threat to U.S. Air Force Bases*, RAND Corporation, MR-606-AF, 1995. As of August 21, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR606.html

Shugart, Thomas, "Deterring the Powerful Enemy: China's Counter-Intervention Capability in a Regional Conflict," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, hearing on China's Evolving Counterintervention Capabilities and Implications for the United States and Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners, U.S. Government Publishing Office, March 21, 2024.

Slow, Oliver, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Abandons Unification Goal with South," BBC, January 16, 2024.

Sohn, Hanbyeol, and Changwoo Kang, "North Korea's Nuclear Cognitive Warfare Strategy," *38 North*, April 10, 2025.

Sokolin, Anton, "Comprehensive but Not Limitless: How Russia-North Korea Ties Could Impact Pyongyang's Nuclear Arsenal," National Committee on North Korea, May 7, 2025a. As of April 29, 2026: https://www.ncnk.org/news/nuclear-notions-comprehensive-not-limitless-how-russia-north-korea-ties-could-impact

Sokolin, Anton, "North Korean Aviation Officials Tour Leading Russian Drone Training Center," *NK News*, February 13, 2025b.

Solomon, Richard H., ed., *Asian Security in the 1980's: Problems and Policies for a Time of Transition*, RAND Corporation, R-2492-ISA, 1979. As of August 22, 2025: https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R2492.html

Specia, Megan, and David Sanger, "How the 'Libya Model' Became a Sticking Point in North Korea Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, May 16, 2018.

United States Forces Korea, "Full Joint Statement of the 50th Republic of Korea and United States Military Committee Meeting Between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine and Chairman of the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Jin Yong-Sung," press release, November 3, 2025a.

United States Forces Korea, "The East-Up Map: Revealing Hidden Strategic Advantages in the Indo-Pacific," November 16, 2025b.

U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Response to U.S.-South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and its Implications*, July 26, 2017.

U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2024 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2024.

U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "The United States of America-Republic of Korea Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)," fact sheet, January 10, 2025.

U.S. Department of War, "57th Republic of Korea (ROK)–United States Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique," November 15, 2025.

U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, January 23, 2026.

USFK—*See* United States Forces Korea.

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, hearing to consider the nomination of Elbridge Colby to be Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, March 4, 2025.

Van Diepen, Vann H., "Six Takeaways from North Korea's 'Hypersonic Missile' Announcement," *38 North*, October 13, 2021.

Van Diepen, Vann H., "North Korea Emphasizes Theater Strike Missiles in the First Third of 2024," *38 North*, May 1, 2024.

White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," transcript of President George W. Bush speech, January 20, 2002.

White House, "Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump's Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung," November 13, 2025.

Wishnick, Elizabeth, "Russia-China-North Korea Relations: Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 25, 2025.

"With 25,000 North Koreans Sent to Alabuga, More Workers Will Make Shaheds Than Tanks and Tu-160M Bombers Combined," *Defense Express*, June 20, 2025.

Woolsey, James, James Lindsay, Victor Davis Hanson, and Daniel Brumberg, "The Bush Doctrine," *FrontPage Magazine*, October 7, 2002.

Yu, Jihoon, "The Evolving Role of U.S. Forces in Korea," *Real Clear Defense*, May 23, 2025.