

Vulnerable Alliances: U.S. Unpredictability and the Search for a “Plan B” in South Korea and Japan*

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For decades, scholars and practitioners of international relations have been predicting that China’s rise would prompt energetic balancing behavior by Asia’s “middle powers,” including a reconciled Japan and South Korea.¹ As one confident U.S. military officer told us in 2017, “Japan-ROK historical enmity will dissolve when self-interest kicks in.”² That this has not come to pass is attributed to various factors: Realists note the incentives for states to “buck pass” or to “cheap ride,” i.e., to follow the logic of moral hazard by which U.S. security guarantees obviate the need for its allies to balance. Arguing that Washington bears a disproportionate share of the burden for maintaining security and stability in East Asia, they suggest that the United States step back and force its allies to step forward. This argument has found a receptive audience among those who would prefer to rebuild at home, rather than buttress alliances overseas.³

Observing that bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo remain unsteady and that balancing and free riding have been uneven, other scholars suggest that Northeast Asian international relations may follow principles shaped by the inertia of institutions, by ideas, by leaders, and by history.⁴ While non-material factors matter, they cannot

* The authors gratefully acknowledge the support for this research provided by the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center.

¹ See, for example, Richard L. Armitage et al., “The United States and Japan: Advancing toward a Mature Partnership, INSS Special Report, October 11, 2000; Jason U. Manosevitz, “Japan and South Korea: Security Relations Reach Adolescence,” *Asian Survey*, September/October 2003.

² Interview, November 14, 2017, Camp Zama. This prediction was first cited in Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, “With Friends Like These: Japan-ROK Cooperation and U.S. Policy,” *The Asan Forum*, March - April 2018 Vol.6, No.2.

³ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder. “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization*, V.44, No.2, Spring, 1990, pp.137-168; Eugene Gholz, Harvey Sapolsky, and Daryl Press. “Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the face of Temptation,” *International Security*, V.21, No.4, Spring 1993, pp.5-48; Barry Posen. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014.

⁴ For a recent historical-institutional analysis of Asia’s security architecture, see Andrew Yeo, *Asia’s Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. For more on how politicians in Japan and South Korea confound efforts to reconcile, see Jennifer Lind. *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. For a particularly sanguine constructivist perspective, see Yoko Iwama. “What is a ‘Liberal’ East Asia Policy?”

adequately explain regional dynamics on their own. Predictions of cultural change stimulating reconciliation, like putative realist predictions of allied convergence, undervalue the different security conditions constraining America and its allies. Although Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul all confront a rising China, the material and ideational circumstances under which they do so vary; each faces different problems and considers different options in a different context as it contemplates how best to pursue security.

We examine the security problems facing Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States, the extent to which their national interests converge, and the differential impact of external and domestic change on extant alignments. Rather than rely on material or ideational factors alone, we demonstrate how practitioners and strategists in each country debate different means of addressing challenges, and how their debates—shaped primarily by external circumstances, but deeply affected by a wide array of historical, ideational, and structural factors—may affect U.S. strategy.⁵

We find that the degree and nature of threats faced by both Japan and Korea have changed markedly over the last decade, but note how the dilemmas facing the ROK are more severe and limiting. We also examine how these circumstances and perspectives feature in debates in Tokyo and Seoul about how best to respond to the oscillations and unpredictability of American foreign policy, the “900 pound gorilla” with the potential to further upend their security calculations.

Washington’s Northeast Asian allies are actively considering what sort of “Plan B” might be crafted to offset the impact of diminished alliance with the United States, and the available options are not entirely appealing – either for them or for the United States. In Seoul, these include an increasingly serious consideration of nuclear options, which could prompt Tokyo to follow suit. In Tokyo, the first options include experimenting with a new regional security architecture while hedging against U.S. abandonment. U.S. allies’ options should not, however, be equated with “stepping up” or “doing more.” Neither new allies nor nuclear weapons would empower these states to balance Chinese power more broadly. Indeed, they might instead be accompanied by greater accommodation.

Given this landscape and the potential for further misalignment, we conclude that remaining engaged as an active security partner is still Washington’s best option. Pushing U.S. allies to increase their financial support for U.S. forward deployed forces – by threatening withdrawal is likely to backfire. Such threats, if they work at all, will likely

Japan and the DPJ Government,” chapter 7 in T.J. Pempel and Chung-Min Lee, eds. *Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia: Architecture and Beyond*. London: Routledge, 2012.

⁵ This approach is often labeled “neo-classical realism” and is elaborated in Steven E. Lobell, et al., eds. *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

encourage allies to hedge against uncertainty by reproducing capabilities supplied by the United States, rather than produce a more rational division of labor.

Washington would do better to encourage regional allies to defend themselves within the existing alliance framework. This may come at the cost of some continued cheap riding, though the evolving security environment is likely to encourage greater effort even in the absence of U.S. table thumping. It also means that some adjustments will be necessary on the U.S. side. Given the evolution of China's assured nuclear retaliatory capability and a more survivable North Korean nuclear arsenal, as well as a more wide-ranging debate in the United States about its commitments abroad, the most important of these will likely be revisiting options for buttressing nuclear deterrence. With smart adjustments to its approach, Washington can sustain Northeast Asian alliances in ways that reduce, rather than increase, the chance that it will become involved in another Asian conflict.

THE PROBLEM: GROWING VULNERABILITIES

Japanese and South Korean leaders are grappling with twin challenges, specifically: a more dangerous regional security environment, with a rising China and nuclear-armed North Korea on the one hand; and a more unpredictable US ally on the other. Combined, these changes in the security environment have driven the discussion of alternative security options in both countries. It is, however, important to note that the magnitude and nature of the specific challenges faced by Seoul and Tokyo are not equal; different challenges have driven their policy preferences and relations with Washington in different directions.

ECONOMIC BASES OF POWER. Since 1999, China's GDP has grown some 775 percent in real terms (a compound annual growth rate of more than 11 percent), to some \$14 trillion by 2019. That growth has reshaped the global balance of power and Asia's geopolitics. China's growth has slowed over the last decade, but averaging around 8 percent since 2000, it remained several times greater than American, South Korean, or Japanese growth over the same period.

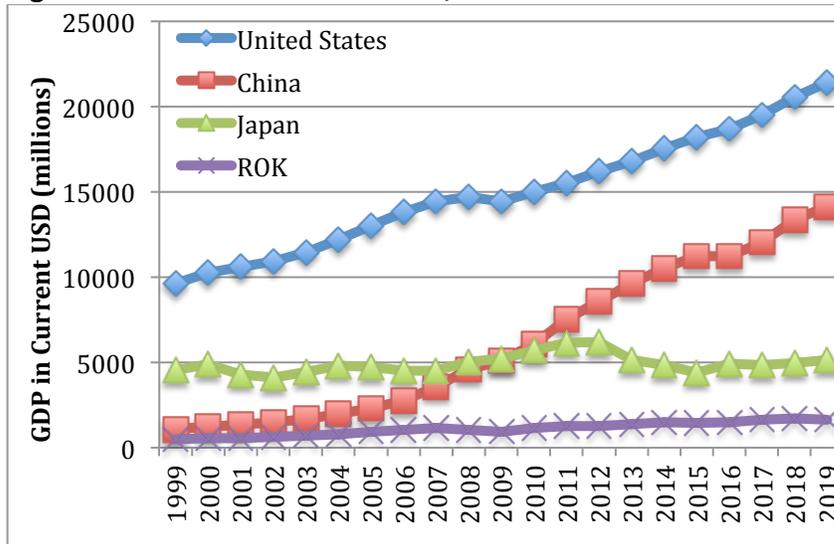
Of these actors, each of which will be made poorer by the pandemic, Japan has suffered the most notable reversal of economic fortunes. Once the regional powerhouse, Japan's economy was four times the size of China's as late as 1999. Laboring under the weight of an aging population, massive government debt, an often inflexible bureaucracy, and the deflationary consequences of a burst economic bubble, growth has been anemic. By 2019, Japan's economy had shrunk to slightly more than one third the size of China's. Nor is this merely a relative decline. In that same year—even before the Coronavirus

pandemic slammed the brakes on normal economic activity—Japanese economic growth contracted by 1.6 percent, fully 6.3 percent on an annualized basis.⁶

Despite this lackluster economic performance, Japan’s per capita GDP remains far higher than China’s, and its corporations continue to enjoy important technological advantages, dominating a number of high value added markets. As we explain below, Japan’s alliance with the United States combined with its relatively more favorable geographic position and economic and technological heft, provide it with a more secure position than that of the ROK –allowing it to joust for regional position with China from a secure base.

The Korean economy has fared far better than Japan’s in recent decades. After joining the OECD in 1998, its GDP was roughly 11 percent the size of Japan’s, and by 2019, it had grown to 32 percent that of Japan. It has become the twelfth largest economy in the world, a remarkable feat for a resource poor country ranked 28th in population.⁷ Over the last decade, Korea’s performance has suffered a number of setbacks, not least from demographics that mirror those of Japan – its fertility is the lowest in the world. Nevertheless, it produced a healthy 2.2 percent average rate of growth between 2010 and 2019.

Figure 1: Gross Domestic Product, 1999 - 2019



Despite impressive economic performance, however, Korea’s total economic heft – and national power – remain small compared to surrounding states. China’s economy is roughly nine times larger, and Japan’s is triple its size. Seoul faces a hostile, and now nuclear-armed, North Korean neighbor; and as we describe below, its geography, while

⁶ <https://www.statista.com/chart/18095/quarterly-gdp-growth-predicted-growth-selected-industrialized-nations-oecd/>

⁷ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/>

favoring defense against invasion, leaves it vulnerable to other forms of pressure and coercion. In security terms, Korea's remains the proverbial "shrimp among whales."

MILITARY THREATS. The balance of aggregate conventional military power is roughly commensurate with economic potential. Chinese equipment modernization over the last two decades has been stunning. Depending on how the calculation is made, China spends between 4 to 5 times as much as Japan on defense, and its margin over the ROK is larger. In 2019, China's defense budget grew by the equivalent of about 25 percent of Japan's total defense budget:

Every country has advantages and disadvantages in generating military power, and thus military spending is an imperfect guide to evaluating military capabilities or power. Japan, for example, has built up a stockpile of modern military equipment over many years and can draw on a wide variety of high-technology sectors in the civilian economy. China enjoys economies of scale – a significant advantage in the expensive world of military R&D and production – and it has lower costs for manpower and some other basic inputs. Despite different strengths and limitations, however, there is little reason to suspect that China's spending produces significant less capability, dollar-for-dollar, than that of Japan, ROK, or the United States. Possibly it provides more.

Areas of Chinese strength are no longer limited to so-called anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) – or asymmetric – capabilities, designed to frustrate U.S. efforts to deploy in and operate effectively from locations in Asia. China has built substantial combat capabilities in all domains. It deploys roughly four times more advanced (4th and 5th generation) combat aircraft than Japan, as well as significantly greater naval tonnage, and its margin over the ROK is larger. China is addressing remaining weaknesses in its equipment inventories, including anti-submarine warfare capability, ISR, and sustainment. Though it will take some years to fully address some of those weaknesses, and while the ROK and Japan continue to enjoy some qualitative advantages vis-à-vis China, Beijing's composite capabilities are now significantly greater than theirs. China now has qualitative advantages in a number of areas, including electronic warfare capabilities, air-to-air missiles, and, 4th generation aircraft radar.

The nature and magnitude of the military challenge posed by North Korea (DPRK) is different. It maintains a 1.1m man army, one of the world's largest, but its air and naval equipment are obsolescent, and training standards across services are low. The DPRK's conventional forces have little offensive maneuver capability, although given the rugged nature of the terrain, large artillery and infantry forces might impose enormous costs in an attrition battle.⁸ Its primary offensive threats are strike and WMD capabilities,

⁸ James Hackett and Mark Fitzpatrick, eds., "The Conventional Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula," IISS, 2018; and Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Conventional Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia," CSIS, August 2, 2016 (Working Draft), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160802_Korea_Conventional_Balance.pdf.

especially missiles armed with nuclear weapons, though other strike systems (aircraft and long-range artillery) and biological and chemical weapons should not be discounted.

For both Japan and the ROK, the United States remains the backstop against Chinese and North Korean threats. China has made relative gains vis-à-vis the United States in the military and economic realms, but the United States not only far outspends China on defense, but also has built up deep reserves of advanced equipment and, perhaps even more importantly, expertise. There is little chance that the United States would be defeated in a military conflict with China. Nevertheless, the likely costs and risks of such conflict, especially near China's borders, have risen greatly over the last two decades, and there are few prospects for a reversal of those trend lines in a post-pandemic world.⁹

U.S. nuclear forces provide extended deterrence against nuclear attack on allies – and remain vastly superior to any potential nuclear adversary other than Russia. The U.S. conventional strike complex – sophisticated ISR, accurate standoff strike systems, and stealthy aircraft in particular – offer some prospect for a damage limiting strike against North Korea. Nevertheless, China and, to a lesser extent, North Korea have gained secure second-strike capabilities, raising questions about whether the United States would actually retaliate against first use by either, however unlikely that possibility.¹⁰

As noted above, Japan's military budgets and aggregate power are more robust than those of the ROK, though Seoul has closed the gap rapidly in recent years. What sets the two apart – and leaves the ROK more vulnerable than Japan in the event of even partial defection by Washington – are differences in their geographic, economic, and political positions.

POWER, GEOGRAPHY, AND UNEVEN VULNERABILITY. In any military conflict, geography, distance, and time will affect the balance of power and any given state's ability to achieve its objectives. The effects are seldom one-sided, and Northeast Asia is no exception. In general, China's strategic depth confers substantial benefits on the PLA vis-à-vis U.S. and other forces operating in the maritime domain around China's immediate periphery. On the other hand, any PLA assault against the land territory of a neighboring state would face daunting challenges, requiring the acquisition of local air and sea control for days or weeks. The specific effects of geography on the military

⁹ Eric Heginbotham, et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015. On the dramatic gains made by the PLA Navy over the last several years, see Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, updated May 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Eric Heginbotham, et al., *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States*, RAND Corporation, 2017; Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "North Korea's Nuclear and Ballistic Missile Programs," CRS, In Focus, Updated June 6, 2019; and Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "North Korean Nuclear Capabilities, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:1, January 2018.

balance would be quite different in Korean and Japanese scenarios, and the impact of geography on the potential threat posed by the DPRK would be even greater.

Although Northeast Asian states appear close to one another on sub-regional maps of Asia, locational differences are of considerable importance. Part of the difference is determined by simple distance. The effective combat radius of modern fighters, roughly 1,000 km, is not much greater than that of their WWII counterparts. Although range can be extended with the use of aerial refueling, China’s inventory of tankers is small, and the PLA Air Force would face a steep learning curve in coordinating larger numbers should they be acquired. China has compensated for weakness in the air domain (relative to the United States) with a large inventory of accurate ballistic and cruise missiles. Short-range missiles are much cheaper (and in the case of ballistic missiles, more accurate) than longer-range system, and China’s inventory of the former is much larger.

Table 1: Chinese Ballistic Missile Inventories and Ranges

System	IOC	Number (launchers)	Number (Missiles)	Range
DF-26 IRBM	2015	30	60	3,000-5,000
DF-21C/D MRBM	2010	54	216	2,000
DF-16 SRBM	2015	24	120	800-1,000
DF-15B SRBM	2009	81	405	800
DF-11A	1999	108	540	600

Source: IISS, 2020. We assume 2 missiles per IRBM launcher; 4 missiles per MRBM launcher; and 5 missiles per SRBM launcher.

The ROK’s major air and naval bases are roughly 355 to 500 km from the nearest Chinese territory, and China’s entire inventory of ballistic missiles could, in theory, be brought to within range of all relevant targets in South Korea, while Chinese aircraft could range widely across the country. In the Japanese case, major military and civilian targets are between 650 and 1,140 km of Chinese territory, limiting the number of ballistic missiles that might be brought to bear against them. Fewer than 300 ballistic missiles could range the majority of bases on Honshu or Hokkaido – or about one-fifth as many as could strike the ROK. And although Chinese aircraft might reach a variety of targets in Japan, they would be operating at the outer edge of their combat radius and thus have limited loiter time.

It is not only distance that would make the ROK more vulnerable than Japan in a war involving China, but also other specific aspects of position and geography. Sensors (against air, missile, surface, and submarines) and missile systems deployed along the Japanese archipelago present a barrier to Chinese exit to the Philippine Sea and Western Pacific. The Japanese navy (and to an extent its air forces) could operate behind and reinforce this barrier, while still being able to influence the course of events on and even inside the first island chain. Moreover, Japan’s vital sea lines of

communication (SLOCs) could also be protected behind this barrier, since shipping through the South China Sea could be rerouted around Borneo and the Philippines.

The ROK is located within the first island chain and would not enjoy these same benefits. To be sure, ROK assets operating in the Sea of Japan might be somewhat better protected than those on the Yellow Sea or East China Sea side, but they would still be vulnerable to the modern fighters and strike aircraft, armed with advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, based in Jilin Province, north of the peninsula. Chinese submarines and, in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea, surface ships might also add to Korea's difficulties. The United States would likely support its ROK ally in the event of conflict with China, but ROK's vulnerability would nevertheless be acute.

Figure Two: East Asia



The threat from North Korea is very different, but geography still matters. As long as the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent remains credible, most analysts discount the possibility of a bolt from the blue attack by North Korea. During a crisis or war, however, miscalculation and escalation are imaginable, especially if the North's regime survival were at stake. The consequences could be catastrophic, but the allies would not be equally at risk.

Both Japan and South Korea are potentially vulnerable to North Korean nuclear weapons, but the ROK is more so and the difference on the conventional side is enormous. Pyongyang has no means to inflict significant damage on an alert Japan using conventional weapons. The northern suburbs of Seoul are, on the other hand, within range of many of North Korea's long-range artillery and multiple rocket launch systems (MLRS), and the largest of these, has the range to strike targets south of Seoul. As the North's 2010 bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island demonstrated, Pyongyang is willing to use artillery against civilian targets.

Table 2: DPRK Strike Systems, Estimates of Ballistic Missiles and Long Range Artillery*

System	First Test	Estimated Number of Missiles / Tubes	Range (km)
Ballistic Missile Systems			
Hwasong-14/15	2017	0-40	10,000-13,000
Hwasong-10	2016	50	3,000
Nodong	1990	<100	1,200
Hwasong-5/6 (Scud)	1980s	200	300
Long-Range Artillery / MLRS Systems			
170mm Arty		350	60
240mm MLRS		150	60
300mm MLRS	2014	18-36	180

* There is much speculation in the open source literature on DPRK missile numbers, particularly on the status and number of newer, longer-range missiles. Sources: IISS, *Military Balance*, 2020; Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "North Korean Nuclear Capabilities, 2018, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:1, 2018; Defense Intelligence Ballistic Missile Analysis Committee, *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat*, 2017, NASIC-1031-0985-17, June 2017.

END OF U.S. CONSENSUS ON DEEP ENGAGEMENT. Just as leaders in Seoul and Tokyo are confronting a more challenging security environment, they must also deal with an American ally questioning its post-World War II consensus on global deep engagement. Deep engagement – the U.S. commitment to defend allies and partners and the international institutions that have bound that community of nations together – has anchored U.S. foreign policy since the late 1940s, notwithstanding moments of doubt about the extent of U.S. commitment, particularly after the President Nixon’s Guam Doctrine and U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Today, however, a more fundamental rethinking is underway among U.S. strategic thinkers.

The logic of deep engagement has come under challenge from both academic and political figures – and the electoral success of the latter indicates that popular support for engagement is, at best, unsteady. Academic critiques of America’s forward leaning position began shortly after the end of the Cold War with calls to “bring the boys home.”¹¹ The United States had spent considerable blood and treasure to counter the Soviet threat, and it was time to rebuild the economy and keep the powder dry for whatever challenges might arise. Many critics predicted that an overt effort to extend and exploit American primacy would lead other countries to balance against the United

¹¹ Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 5-48.

States and believed, for example, that expanding NATO into the former Warsaw Pact states would trigger a backlash from Russia.¹²

Advocates of “restraint” argue that U.S. security guarantees lead allies and partners to impede, rather than encourage, balancing against hostile powers or potential hegemony.¹³ They hold that unconditional U.S. assurances lead its allies to “drive recklessly,” entangling Washington in affairs only marginally related to U.S. interests. They are confident that the global political and economic system would survive a less engaged U.S. security role. While acknowledging that a handful of current U.S. partners might become nuclear powers if left to their own devices, they suggest that such proliferation might be offset, to an extent, by the reduced incentives that Washington’s adversaries (e.g., Iran or North Korea) have to develop nuclear inventories.¹⁴

Advocates of continued deep engagement contest these arguments, arguing that the purported benefits (e.g., cost savings) would not be as great as averred, and that the costs (e.g., sacrifice of deference by allies on economic issues) would be larger.¹⁵ While acknowledging that U.S. commitments in Europe could be reduced and that U.S. policies in the Middle East are ripe for reevaluation, we align ourselves with the policy of deep engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, where there is no substitute for U.S. power and where the potential risks and costs of withdrawal would be enormous.

Regardless of the merits of the case, however, the coherent intellectual challenge to deep engagement represents a significant change, and the fact that prominent political figures on both the right and the left espouse points from the “restraint” menu highlights the new uncertainty foreign leaders must confront, not least those in Japan and South Korea. The Democratic Party selected centrist Joe Biden as its presidential candidate, but the runner up in the 2020 primaries, Bernie Sanders, advocated for a “smaller U.S. military footprint around the globe, reduced defense spending, and an end to unilateral military action.”¹⁶ He argued for coordination with allies on a range of issues, but the emphasis of his campaign was domestic. Other top Democratic candidates favored similar policies.¹⁷

¹² Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 86-124.

¹³ Posen, 2014, op. cit.; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 2016; Stephen M. Walt, “Restraint Isn’t Isolationism – and it Won’t Endanger America,” *Foreign Policy*, July 22, 2019.

¹⁴ Stephen Walt, “What Grand Strategy is Best for the United States,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, November 7, 2016.

¹⁵ See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13).

¹⁶ <https://www.cfr.org/election2020/candidate-tracker/bernie-sanders>

¹⁷ See, for example, “The 2020 Candidate on Foreign Policy,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 6, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/election2020/candidate-tracker>.

President Trump has attacked deep engagement from the other flank, pursuing what one scholar has called a policy of “illiberal hegemony.”¹⁸ The Trump administration increased defense spending 22 percent between 2017 and 2020 (from \$580b in 2016 to \$705b in 2020), signaling it could put the United States on a unilateral footing.¹⁹ Trump has argued that many of the international institutions, including many that the United States took the lead in establishing, no longer serve U.S. interests. He withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement on combating global climate change, undercut the W.T.O. by imposing unilateral tariffs and refusing appointment of key figures, and proposed deep cuts in U.N. budgets (which have largely been restored by Congress).²⁰ In Asia, he withdrew from as yet unratified Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. Under his administration, the United States has also withdrawn from arms control arrangements, such as the INF Treaty with Russia and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), aimed at limiting Iran’s nuclear programs.

Trump also appears to view alliances as limiting unilateral U.S. options and draining its resources. During the 2016 presidential campaign, he called the NATO alliance “obsolete,” and said that the United States “cannot be the policeman of the world.” He suggested that he would be willing to remove troops from Japan and Korea unless they paid more, commenting, “We cannot afford to be losing vast amounts of billions of dollars on all this.”²¹ And, reportedly, the president told administration officials several times in 2018 that he wanted to withdraw from NATO.²² In East Asia, negotiations over host nation support (HNS) – specifically, over the so-called special measures agreement (SMA) – with Korea in 2019-20 caused uncertainty about the U.S. military commitment and future in the region.

Unique to the U.S. alliances with Japan and Korea, SMA’s formalize a subset of HNS provided by those countries.²³ In the Korean case, SMA payments began in 1991 and increased an average of 7.2 percent a year through 2018.²⁴ Under Trump, negotiations over the 10th SMA agreement began in March 2018 with a request it be doubled. Eleven

¹⁸ Barry R. Posen, “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018.

¹⁹ Although the FY 2017 budget was already established, President Trump submitted a supplemental authorization in March 2017 that covered the remainder of the year.

²⁰ “Against Washington’s ‘Great Power’ Obsession: America Risks Forgetting the World System that Made it Great,” *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2019; “Trump Cripples W.T.O. as Trade War Rages,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2019; Lara Hillard and Amanda Shendruk, “Funding the United Nations: What Impact Do U.S. Contributions Have on UN Agencies and Programs” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 2, 2019; *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding to the U.N. System*, Congressional Research Service, March 10, 2020.

²¹ “Donald Trump Open to Japan and South Korea Having Nuclear Weapons: Republican Frontrunner says East Asian Allies Should Shoulder more of Defence Burden,” *Financial Times*, March 26, 2016.

²² “Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say amid New Concerns Over Russia,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2019.

²³ HNS can include a wide variety of assistance – cash or in-kind support for the purposes of cost sharing, burden sharing, and/or relocation. Michael J. Lostumbo, et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits* (RAND Corporation, 2013), 133.

²⁴ Calculated by authors based on current won value.

months later, the two sides settled on an 8.1 percent increase to around \$920m – but with the United States side insisting that the agreement would be of only one-year duration (vis. the five years of the previous two iterations). When negotiations on the 11th SMA began eight months later, the United States upped the ante, insisting on a 400 percent increase (to roughly \$5b). The agreement would include new categories, such as payments to offset the costs of rotationally deployed troops, and would amount to about 12 percent of Korea’s total defense budget.²⁵

When Seoul resisted U.S. demands, Washington furloughed almost half of the South Korean workers at U.S. bases in Korea.²⁶ This incident shook Korea and Japan (which is due to begin negotiations on its own SMA with the United States in late 2020), not only because of the unprecedented scale of U.S. demands, but also because of the U.S. negotiators’ shift to an openly transactional approach to its partner.²⁷

Congress has demonstrated greater commitment to staying the course with U.S. allies, and may yet provide an important check on these demands. Concerned members inserted language into the 2019 and 2020 National Defense Authorization Acts that portend a spirited public debate in the event the president moves to withdraw troops from Korea.²⁸ That said, populism and the polarization of U.S. politics have changed the incentives of politicians and the foreign policy preferences of the electorate. Surveys suggest that Democratic voters strongly support working with international institutions and allies, but are less likely to support high levels of military spending, while Republican voters support military spending but take a dimmer view of international organizations.²⁹ The consensus that U.S. policy should combine both balance of power realism and liberal internationalism and that has undergirded deep engagement for seventy years has come undone. U.S. allies have been paying attention, and understand the new uncertainty.

JAPAN: DEFENDING THE REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER

There is no shortage of Japanese views on the proper definition of the state’s security interests and most revolve around how to balance relations with a risen China against

²⁵ “Seoul Stresses Sticking to Framework of Current SMA,” *JoongAng Daily*, December 20, 2019.

²⁶ “US military issues final furlough notices to nearly half its South Korean workforce, union says,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 25, 2020.

²⁷ In the words of a senior fellow at the Korea Institute for Military Affairs, the “SMA negotiations have devolved into a blatant shakedown.” Sukjoon Yoon, “US Interests are not Served by Making a Scapegoat of South Korea,” *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2020.

²⁸ The 2020 NDAA stipulates that NDAA funds cannot be employed to reduce troop levels beyond 28,500 unless the Secretary of Defense certifies to congress, 90 days in advance, that such action is in the national security interest and does not undermine the security of U.S. regional allies. S. 1790 – National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, became law December 20, 2019.

²⁹ See, for example, *In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions*, Chapter 6, Foreign Policy, Pew Research Center, December 17, 2019. On other aspects of the impact, see Kenneth A. Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2018.

relations with an allied United States. The near monopoly of political power by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) throughout the Cold War and during most of the period since—has limited the political salience of some of these views, shunning a full tilt in Beijing’s direction and eroding the political power of pacifist views in particular. Faced with a China that has become by far the largest economic and military force in Asia, Japanese leaders have defined security largely in terms of protecting the regional military balance of power and maintaining maximum freedom in the economic realm.³⁰

The manner in which Japan has pursued these interests reflects a degree of compromise between competing conservative visions each of which aims to make Japan’s military and diplomatic roles more “normal.”³¹ Specifically, three approaches have had influence within conservative circles. The first would boost autonomy in the security realm by distancing Japan from both Washington and Beijing. The second, a mercantilist school (supported by some in the business community), would maximize Japan’s economic strength through tighter linkages to China. The third is a military realist school that would double down on a strong U.S. alliance to produce security while being attentive to enhancing domestic capabilities.³²

Although the prevailing government view has derived from debate across these schools—and although the influence of the autonomists and mercantilists could grow if the Washington were to withdraw from the region (or appear too weak to deliver on its commitments)—the clear trend during most of the 2000s and 2010s (with the notable exception of the three years when the Democratic Party of Japan held power) was the consolidation of policy around military realism. In 2007, China’s official defense budget surpassed Japan’s; its economy overtook Japan’s in 2010; two years later, the Chinese Coast Guard began regular patrols within the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands; and in 2013, Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road initiative, posing new challenges to Japan’s leading political position in Southeast Asia and beyond. Japan responded by hugging its U.S. ally more tightly, strengthening its own defenses, and redoubling its regional diplomacy.³³

In 2007, Foreign Minister Aso Taro suggested that Japanese diplomacy should focus on developing an “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,” running from Western and Central Europe, through Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and terminating in

³⁰ Narushige Michishita and Richard J. Samuels, “Hugging and Hedging: Japanese Grand Strategy in the 21st Century” Chapter 5 in Henry Nau and Deepa Olapally, eds., *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers*. Oxford University Press, 2012, pp.146-180.

³¹ Ichiro Ozawa, *Blueprint for a New Japan*, New York: Kodansha International, 1994.

³² For the historical development of these preferences, see Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo’s Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

³³ For more on Japan’s outreach to the rest of the region, see Corey J. Wallace, “Leaving Northeast Asia? Japan’s Southern Strategy.” *International Affairs*, Volume 94, Issue 4, July 2018. pp.883–904.

Northeast Asia and Mongolia.³⁴ Notably, this arc described a perfect ring around Russia and China.

In a speech before the U.S. Congress in April 2015, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, the politician most closely associated with military realism, declared

“We will support the U.S. effort first, last, and throughout ... We must make the vast seas stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans seas of peace and freedom, where all follow the rule of law. For that very reason we must fortify the U.S.-Japan alliance.”³⁵

Abe went on to outline the steps Japan was taking to strengthen its own military. The list of his measures, taken both before and since that speech, is substantial. The Japanese Defense Agency was elevated to ministerial status in 2007. The following year, the Diet adopted a “Basic Space Law,” to permit the military use of space. In 2013, a National Security Council was created with enhanced intelligence capabilities to streamline foreign policy decision-making. Japan relaxed its ban on arms exports in 2014, and in 2015, it passed legislation allowing collective self-defense under particular circumstances. After years of stagnation, the Abe government has now raised the defense budget for eight consecutive years. The military has adopted new operational concepts, centered on the defense of the Ryukyu Islands stretching southwest from Kyushu, and it has shifted some of its best forces southwards. It has created an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade and authorized the employment of fixed wing aircraft from warships, effectively creating light aircraft carrier flotillas.

In 2016, Abe introduced a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy to foster stability and prosperity by combining two continents, Asia and Africa, and two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian, with member states in the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) serving a central role.³⁶ FOIP was designed to leverage Japanese strengths to compete with China. Its focus on enhancing connectivity, for example, is directed towards “quality infrastructure development,” language designed to distinguish Japan’s efforts from China’s, which have been criticized by local elites for opacity and, on their end, “capture.”³⁷

Japan also strengthened its security and military relationships throughout the expanded region. Australia and India became strategic partners with whom Tokyo could conduct significant military exercises, 2+2 strategic dialogues, and explore military-industrial cooperation. Japan concluded an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement with Australia and began exploring one with India. In Southeast Asia, it convened an ASEAN-

³⁴ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/pillar/address0703.html>.

³⁵ https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e_000241.html

³⁶ <https://www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000352880.pdf>.

³⁷ Reid Standish, “China’s Path Forward is Getting Bumpy,” *The Atlantic*, 1 October 2019.

Japan Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting in 2014 and Tokyo conducted its first 2+2 meeting with Jakarta in 2015. The following year, Defense Minister Tomomi Inada promoted a "Vientiane Vision" aimed at deepening defense cooperation with ASEAN states – a vision that was later expanded and made more concrete by one of her successors, Kōno Tarō, in 2019.³⁸ At the other end of the Indo-Pacific, in 2009 Japan began anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and ever since has conducted port calls on the route to and from there. To facilitate this, in 2009 it constructed its first overseas military base since the Asia-Pacific War in Djibouti, which it expanded in 2016—even after the piracy problem receded.³⁹

Japanese leaders are careful to frame the country's balancing behavior in terms of support for international norms and regional stability, an important, but somewhat thin veneer. Throughout this process, Japan has sought to maintain stable diplomatic and economic relations with China. U.S. economic pressures on both countries led Tokyo and Beijing to initiate measures to repair their deteriorated relationship. The first fruits of this new turn were harvested in October 2018 at a summit in Beijing when Prime Minister Abe and Premier Xi Jinping agreed on a long list of economic cooperation measures.⁴⁰ But, while Tokyo keeps its economic options open, it continues to balance against Beijing's hard power through both internal and external means, including enhanced diplomacy in Southeast Asia.⁴¹

Japan is executing its own "pivot" within Asia by building new relationships with regional players. Highlighting differences with China's Belt and Road, Japan's 2017 White Paper on foreign aid declared "the objective should not be to create the infrastructure itself, but rather ... to contribute to improving the lives of people in the region ... [by] stimulat[ing] economic activity..."⁴² Tokyo's broadened cultivation of its neighbors by militarizing its aid portfolio—including its so-called "capacity building assistance" to 16 countries from Mongolia to Papua New Guinea.⁴³ In February 2017, the NEC Corporation received a contract from Japan's foreign aid agency to improve cyber-defense capabilities in Southeast Asia.⁴⁴ With government encouragement, Japanese businesses have strengthened their already considerable position in Southeast Asia. Japan's share of total FDI in Southeast Asia rose from 12 percent of the global total

³⁸ https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/exc/admm/06/vv2_en.pdf.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2019/12/13/asean-stands-to-benefit-from-vientiane-vision-20>.

³⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/japan-to-expand-djibouti-base-despite-decline-in-piracy/a-46356825> and <https://www.stripes.com/news/the-pirates-are-mostly-gone-but-japan-sticks-around-in-djibouti-1.557739>

⁴⁰ Jonathan Pollack, "Abe in Beijing: The Quiet Accommodation in Chinese-Japanese Relations," Brookings Institution, 25 October 2018.

⁴¹ We introduced the "dual hedge" concept here: Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Japan's Dual Hedge," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, September/October 2002, pp. 110-121.

⁴² <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000406631.pdf>, p. 5.

⁴³ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000146830.pdf>

⁴⁴ <http://cc.pacforum.org/2017/05/push-pull-japan-steps-southeast-asia/>

in 2014 to 14 percent in 2018, and, perhaps more surprisingly, was more than twice that of China.⁴⁵

The military has also played a new role. In September 2018, a fleet comprised of a submarine, two destroyers, and the helicopter carrier Kaga conducted exercises in the South China Sea, southwest of the disputed Scarborough Shoal.⁴⁶ And, in August 2019, Tokyo responded to President Trump's call for a "coalition of the willing" to ensure safe passage for commercial tankers through the Persian Gulf by dispatching ships and aircraft to collect intelligence in Middle Eastern waters. Far from abandoning the alliance, Tokyo's overtures to Indo-Pacific states seem designed to ensure the alliance remains firm enough for Tokyo to benefit from Washington's network of security partners while it deepens other relationships and sharpens its own military capabilities. Its "pivot" to Asia is a cheap down payment on greater future independence.⁴⁷

Japanese strategists have never stopped discussing alternatives to their dependence on the United States, but the Trump presidency, together with a worsening security environment, have paired to invigorate discussions of a Japanese "Plan B." No publicly discussed option advocates a bottom-up replacement of the alliance. Indeed, China's rise and North Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons makes the alliance more important than ever. Most participants in the discussion therefore consider ways to strengthen the alliance while simultaneously hedging against its degradation. To varying degrees, they also seek to increase Japan's autonomy, though again, within the alliance framework.

The various plans have three and a half components, with individual advocates mixing and matching from among them: 1) increased Japanese conventional defense, 2) deepened partnership with other regional states, 3) cooperative defense arrangements that might include accommodation with China, and (3.5) acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The first, and one that virtually all advocates of other options endorse, emphasizes strengthening Japan's own military capabilities. Professor Takeda Yasuhiro of the National Defense Academy has written two widely cited books estimating how much it would cost Japan to assume certain missions currently executed by U.S. forward deployed forces and thereby increase Japan's autonomy within the alliance. He estimates it would cost roughly \$15b a year (average lifecycle cost) for systems and manpower associated with missile defense (sensors, interceptors, civil defense, and strike), sea-lane defense (light carriers and aircraft, surface combatants, and patrol

⁴⁵ UNCTAD, *ASEAN Investment Report*, 2019 and 2015 editions and Wallace, 2018, op. cit.

⁴⁶ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2164580/japan-challenges-china-submarine-military-exercise-south-china>

⁴⁷ For a set of essays that explore this "pivot," see Richard J. Samuels and Corey Wallace, eds. *Japan's Pivot in Asia. International Affairs* (Special Issue), July 2018.

aircraft), and outer island defense (bases and rapid response).⁴⁸ Another analyst, Kitamura Jun, writing in *Asahi Shimbun*, concluded that Japan might spend even less if it exploited “geographic, cultural, technological, economic, and political conditions.”⁴⁹

The second approach entails deepening strategic relations with other like-minded partners. Akita Hiroyuki, one of Japan’s leading security affairs journalists, asks “How far can we delegate our security to the United States?” He answers that while alignment with Washington is the most realistic option, “it is necessary to have a discussion” of how to replace the San Francisco “hub and spoke” system, adding that “we have entered an era when it is not only necessary to maintain the U.S. security umbrella, but it is also necessary to prepare for U.S. decline.” Citing Peter Jennings, a leading Australian defense strategist, Akita argues “we should consider and prepare for an alternative ‘Plan B’” that would include increased defense spending and a shift from the U.S.-dominated bilateral alliance to a U.S.-led regional security regime. He acknowledges this would require discussion of more autonomous alternatives.⁵⁰

The third Japanese option would be to rebalance its position between China and the United States. One of Japan’s most distinguished former diplomats, Tanaka Hitoshi suggests it is “time to review the US-Japan alliance.”⁵¹ He is concerned that President Trump’s “inward oriented” America first policy signals U.S. withdrawal from its leadership role in world affairs at a time when Japan lives with a “deteriorating security environment.” Tanaka is convinced that the loss of trust among U.S. allies will outlast the Trump presidency and, while acknowledging that Japan has no choice but to keep the U.S. in East Asia, he insists that the alliance structure needs adjustment. He proposes to begin by reducing the presence of U.S. marines in Okinawa, and, in a move reminiscent of the 1970s Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, urges Japan to adopt a new “multi-layered” security architecture, which he describes as “a soft security cooperation system that includes potential enemy nations.”⁵²

Tanaka, the architect of Prime Minister Koizumi’s failed effort to reconcile with North Korea in 2002, suggests new six party talks “in parallel” with US-North Korean nuclear

⁴⁸ Takeda Yoshihiro, *Nichibei Dōmei no Kosuto: Jishu Bōei to Jiritsu no Tsuikyū* (The Cost of the Japan-U.S. Alliance and Pursuit of Autonomy). Tokyo: Akishobō, 2019.

⁴⁹ Kitamura Jun. “*Chūryū keihi minaoshi mondai, Beikoku no rikutsu ni taikō suru tame ni hitsuyōna nihondokuji no bōei senryaku*” (Rethinking the Problem of Host Nation Support: Japan Needs its Own Defense Strategy to Deal with American Reasoning), *Asahi Shimbun Globe*, 28 February 2020.

⁵⁰ Akita Hiroyuki. “*Beikoku—Ittenbari no Otoshiana: Ajia Anzen Hoshō de Torubeki Michi*” (The Persistent Perils of the USA: The Path That Must be Taken to Achieve Asian Security), *Nikkei (on line)* 1 March 2019 and Hiroyuki Akita. “Time for Asia to Rethink its Deep Dependence on US for Security,” *Nikkei Asian Review* 3 March 2019.

⁵¹ See Tanaka Hitoshi, “*Ampo Jōyaku 60 nen: Kono Mama de Yoi no Ka?*” (The Japan-U.S. Security Treaty after 60 Years: Is it Still Serviceable in this Form?) *Mainichi Shimbun Premia*, 3 January 2020. An English version is Hitoshi Tanaka. “Five Steps to Bolster the US-Japan Alliance” *East Asia Insights*, March 2020.

⁵² Ibid.

negotiations to address the future of intermediate range nuclear weapons in the region and advocates reactivation of ASEAN-centered multilateral discussions among the defense ministers of ASEAN member states as well as those from Japan, China, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, the United States and Russia. By ending the “one-sided” U.S. relationship and establishing a “more appropriate” national security structure, Tanaka anticipates an enhanced Japanese role in the region now that Washington has abandoned multilateralism.⁵³

Each, of these options has real limits. Japan is increasing defense spending, but only slowly, and greater effort will undoubtedly be necessary for it to maintain basic defense capabilities. Japan’s relative position is slipping rapidly and it is becoming more, rather than less, dependent on the alliance with each passing month. In 2020, China’s defense budget rose by \$12.5b – or the equivalent of about 25 percent of Japan’s total defense budget – while Japan’s increased by \$0.5b, the equivalent of two weeks of China’s defense growth. The forward deployed U.S. forces that Takeda Yasuhiro suggests might be replaced by Japanese capabilities represent only the tip of the U.S. military iceberg that would be committed to a conflict with China. The same shifting balance of power that makes some Japanese doubt the U.S. willingness to ride to the rescue also undercuts Tokyo’s ability to find autonomy in the defense arena without resorting to nuclear weapons.

Deepening defense ties with other regional partners is also sensible within the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance, but, for similar reasons, is not a credible alternative to it. Asian allies can present a unified political front and cooperate to improve the efficiency of each military through joint training and military-industrial cooperation, but they do not have the resources to render much concrete assistance in the event of attack. Each of Asia’s other middle powers is far from Japan, has limited means to project power, and has geographically broad and remote approaches of its own to cover and defend. Australia – which maintains 3 destroyers, 8 frigates, 6 submarines, and about 100 fighter/strike aircraft – is 6,500 km from Kyushu and has northern approaches off its own coast of roughly 6,000 km. India’s military is even farther and more antiquated.

Regional solutions that include greater accommodation with China provide a plausible way to reduce reliance on the alliance, but they rely for their success on Beijing’s willingness to meet Tokyo halfway – or, alternatively, on Japan’s willingness to compromise its sovereignty vis-à-vis China. Based on the experience of ROK, Australia, and other regional states that have periodically edged closer to China, it is unclear whether Japanese leaders would voluntarily accept the terms that Beijing might assess for such partnership.

The first two “Plan Bs” discussed above can, to an extent, bolster the alliance and mitigate the shifting balance of power to hedge against a diminished alliance, even if

⁵³ These quotes are from Tanaka, “*Ampo Jōyaku 60 nen...*” op. cit., p.6.

they cannot, even under the best of circumstances, provide a replacement for it. The third option offers more of an alternative, but not one that is likely to be palatable without major changes in Chinese attitudes and behavior.

On the other hand, Japan's alignment cannot be taken for granted; we should expect Tokyo to adjust its posture based on credible options. After decades of accepting U.S. supremacy in Asia as the foundation of its foreign and security policies, finding the right distance between the United States and China has become the most important strategic challenge facing Japan. U.S. behavior, as well as Chinese, will shape how Japan addresses its "Goldilocks Challenge" and whether its adjustments will come more in the form of additional capability and partnership building or whether it will seek greater accommodation with China.

Finally, we should address a fourth option that has become an acceptable topic of conversation – nuclear weapons. For decades, Japanese strategists almost unanimously averred that, as long as the U.S. alliance—and the extended deterrence it provides—remained credible, nuclear breakout would not be in Japan's interest.⁵⁴ While this has been regularly reaffirmed, some mainstream strategists are now more willing to question the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and declare the benefits of Japan's tacit nuclear weapons posture.

In a 2018 interview, for example, former Defense Minister Ishiba Shigeru—an open advocate of Japan's nuclear latency since 2011 and a leading candidate to succeed Prime Minister Abe—suggested that "the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence... has to be scrutinized." He pointedly summarized the NATO allies' Cold War efforts to ensure their security by combining U.S. forward deployment, nuclear weapons sharing, and indigenous capability, and asked "Have we [Japan] always checked the credibility of nuclear extended deterrence at the working or political level? I do not think we have done enough."⁵⁵

Also in 2018, four researchers at the Security Strategy Research Institute of Japan, including prominent defense scholar Takai Susumu, published a volume on nuclear weapons, in which they argued:

[Japan] "could continue to depend on U.S. extended deterrence as it has in the past, or, if the relative position of the United States produces doubts about extended deterrence, another option would be to leave the NPT and become a nuclear weapons state. With surrounding nuclear powers presenting a clear threat and because becoming a nuclear state would be the only option available

⁵⁴ Richard J. Samuels and James L. Schoff, "Japan's Nuclear Hedge: Beyond 'Allergy' and Breakout," *Political Science Quarterly*, September 2015.

⁵⁵ Fumihiko Yoshida, "Japan Should Scrutinize the Credibility of the US Nuclear Umbrella: An Interview with Shigeru Ishiba," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 2, 464-473.

to Japan, we would probably gain the understanding and support of most other countries.”⁵⁶

They conclude that in the likely event that the nuclear balance continues to deteriorate, the best model would be Britain, which, unlike France, integrated its war planning with the United States, but unlike West Germany, maintained full control over actual use.⁵⁷

Less forward leaning, but similarly notable, academics at major civilian, as well as military, universities have also gotten into the act. Seven scholars contributed to a 2019 volume in which they review the rising salience of nuclear weapons in the security policies of a number of major powers, reversing the apparent trend evident from the negotiation of START to President Obama’s 2016 call for a “nuclear free world.” The authors argue that the nuclear situation in Asia is arguably the world’s most unsettled and dangerous and that a more nuanced and precise understanding of nuclear deterrence should accompany Japanese leadership in the area of global disarmament.⁵⁸ Within the normative limits on discourse within Japanese academia, this can be read as an injunction against hasty measures to advance further limits on Japan’s options.

The Japanese discussion of actualizing a nuclear option is nascent and still tentative. The government’s focus has centered primarily on policies that would enhance extended nuclear deterrence. For decades, LDP governments have lobbied against a U.S. declaration of no first use, and more recently, have discouraged the United States from acknowledging mutual vulnerability with China and pushed the United States to maintain a robust tactical nuclear weapons capability.⁵⁹ There is, moreover, little public appetite for an indigenous capability, though this has changed somewhat. According to a 2017 survey, 12 percent of Japanese favored nuclear armament in the event that North Korea does not surrender its own programs, up from 7 percent the preceding year.⁶⁰

Japanese leaders are poised to become more serious about the various “Plan B” options discussed above if the security environment continues to evolve in worrisome directions and the United States continues to demonstrate ambivalence about its Asian alliances. In the meantime, most acknowledge that a robust military alliance with the United

⁵⁶ Ogawa Kiyoshi, Takai Susumu, Tomita Minoru, Higuchi Jōji, and Yano Yoshiaki, *Nihonjin no tame no Kaku Daijiten* (Comprehensive Nuclear Dictionary for the Japanese People), 2018; Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, p.213.

⁵⁷ Ogawa et al., op.cit., p.206.

⁵⁸ Akiyama Nobumasa and Takahashi Sugio, eds., *“Kaku no Bōkyaku” no Owari: Kaku Heiki Fukken no Jidai* (The End of “Consigning Nuclear Weapons to Oblivion”: Their Rehabilitation), 2019.

⁵⁹ Masa Takubo, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons: Japan, the U.S., and ‘Sold Purpose,’” *Arms Control Today*, September 22, 2009; and *“Kaku no Kasa” Iji, Nihon ga Beikoku ni Yōkyū: Izon Tsutomeru Jirenma* (Japanese Demands the U.S. Maintain “The Nuclear Umbrella”: The Dilemma of Dependence). *Asahi Shimbun*, April 30, 2020.

⁶⁰ *“Kita Chōsen Mondai no Kaiketsu wo Nichibei no Ryōkokumin wa Dō Kangaete Iru no Ka”* (What do the Japanese and American People think about Solving the North Korea Problem?), *Genron*, December 28, 2017. <http://www.genron-npo.net/world/archives/6858.html>.

States will come at greater cost, shifting roles and missions, and new modes of burden sharing—an interim situation that would have come to pass even if Donald Trump had not been elected.

SOUTH KOREA: LIMITED DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS, EXPANDING AUTONOMOUS DEFENSE

The ROK's "Plan B" discussion is more advanced than Japan's. Not only is Seoul's predicament more dire, but its relationship to Washington has been rockier. Moreover, given decades of alternation in power between progressives and conservatives, ROK's alternatives have been vetted more thoroughly. As the threats facing Korea have increased and as Seoul's diplomatic options have narrowed, the government has sought to keep diplomatic and political options open while building up its autonomous military capabilities. The discussion a nuclear weapons option widespread involves security experts in both political camps.

Since democratization, Korea's political parties have differed starkly on how to define and operationalize national security interests, but conservatives and progressives alike have focused on threats from within Northeast Asia (and particularly from North Korea). Each proposes different solutions about how best to mitigate them, though as we shall see, ideological differences have narrowed as different solutions have been tested and found wanting.

Until the late-1980s—with considerable U.S. support—Korean strongmen maintained a single-minded focus on economic growth and security competition with the North, while aligning Korea unambiguously in the U.S.-led anti-communist bloc. Korea supplied more than 300,000 troops to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam – by far the largest allied contribution. Much changed with the introduction of democratic rule in 1988. Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993), the former army general who midwived Korea's democratic transition, introduced *Nordpolitik*, designed to neutralize the North Korean threat by engaging the Soviet Union (soon to be Russia) and China, with which Korea normalized relations in 1991 and 1992 respectively.

Korea's progressive leaders have maintained a broadly consistent view of Korea's national interests. First, they have prioritized deconfliction of the peninsula, with the short-term goal of reducing tensions and the risk of conflict, and the long-term goal of reunification. Toward that end, progressives have directly engaged Pyongyang, most optimistically and energetically under Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy after 1998, but equally persistently since then. They acknowledge that this will take time, but argue that establishing preconditions for talks and aid will prevent the actors from becoming locked into patterns of distrust and conflict.⁶¹

⁶¹ Yang Chang-seok, "Review of Previous ROK Government Policies for Reunification and Future Policy Options in View of German Reunification," U.S. Korea Institute at SAIS, December 2016.

At the same time, ROK progressives have sought to increase national autonomy, which they see as constrained by U.S. domination of the bilateral alliance. To accomplish this, they have sought to leverage relations with neighbors, including China. In 2005, Roh Moo-hyun announced that his government would play a “balancer role” between China and Japan – though ROK officials made it clear that the real foil was Washington.⁶² Roh was determined that the ROK would decide its own destiny and that it would, therefore, be a central player in negotiations with the North over nuclear issues.⁶³ Progressive administrations have, since the early 1990s, also consistently pushed for the return of wartime operational control of coalition forces to Korea.⁶⁴

Across the aisle, Korean conservatives have pursued national security through defense and deterrence. But given Korea’s limited power relative to its neighbors, conservatives place heavy emphasis on maintaining and enhancing strong defense ties with the United States.⁶⁵ They have supported the idea of peaceful reunification in principle, but downgrade the priority of inter-Korean relations and reject unconditional aid to the North. President Lee Myung-bak’s 2009 initiative to provide Pyongyang fertilizer and grain aid, for example, required a North Korean request for the assistance, which proved unacceptable to North Korea.⁶⁶

In 2009, President Lee ordered a review of the “Defense Reform Plan 2020,” crafted in 2005 by progressive Roh Moo-hyun calling for a substantial reduction in the ROK military force structure. Lee’s review, published 2011, modified many of the earlier provisions and stated that the state must “maintain military superiority to North Korea.”⁶⁷ It also introduced a policy of “proactive deterrence,” threatening proportional retaliation in the event of North Korean provocation.⁶⁸ Lee’s government extended the range of its ballistic missiles from 300 kms to 800 kms and the payload of unmanned aerial vehicles from 500 kg to 2,500 kg, developments that would confer both the

⁶² S. Nathan Park, “South Korea’s President May Be Just the Man to Solve the North Korea Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, 18 July 2017; “South Korea’s ‘Balancer’ Policy Attacked,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2005.

⁶³ Snyder, 129.

⁶⁴ A recent example of this testing came last year when the Moon administration’s 2019 Diplomatic White Paper 2019 omitted the description of Japan as a “partner” and described Russia as “a strategic partner.” <https://eastasiaresearch.org/2019/12/01/south-koreas-moon-administration-names-russia-not-japan-as-partner-in-its-white-paper/>

⁶⁵ Believing that the ROK military was not ready to assume wartime operational control and that forcing the issue might harm the alliance, conservative governments under Lee Myung Bak and Park Geun-hye first pushed back transfer of operational control (OPCON) and then delayed it indefinitely, making it “conditions based.” “South Korea Delays Shift in Control of Military,” *NYT*, October 24, 2014; Steven Denney, “South Korean Politics Drive OPCON Transfer,” *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2014.

⁶⁶ Scott Snyder, “Lee Myung-bak’s Foreign Policy: A 250-Day Assessment,” Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2009.

⁶⁷ Bernard Cole, *Asian Maritime Strategies: Navigating Troubled Waters*, Naval Institute Press, 2013, p. 86; and Rhee Sang-woo, “From Defense to Deterrence: The Core of Defense Reform Plan 307,” CSIS, September 7, 2011.

⁶⁸ Michael McDevitt, “Deterring North Korean Provocation,” Brookings, February 7, 2011.

surveillance and strike capability to hit targets anywhere in North Korea from locations deep inside the ROK.⁶⁹

Conservatives have sought to maintain balanced and cooperative relations with other regional actors, but have generally prioritized relations with other democratic states. Important trilateral missile defense exercises with the United States and Japan, were initiated in 2012 and repeated in 2014 and 2016. The ROK and Japanese defense ministries concluded a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in late 2016.⁷⁰ Early in Lee's term, Seoul also initiated a security dialogue, later upgraded to a regular 2+2 meeting, with Australia.⁷¹

The worsening threat environment and Korea's isolation has limited the room for maneuver by both conservative and progressive governments. While conservatives have long been suspicious of Chinese motives, they have nevertheless sought to avoid antagonizing Beijing on issues that are not critical to Korea's immediate security. When the Permanent Court of Arbitration handed down its ruling against China on its nine-dash line in the South China Sea in 2016, the United States, Japan, and Australia declared the ruling "final and legally binding" and called out China to "comply" with the obligation.⁷² Despite pressure from Washington to present a united front, the response by Park's conservative government was equivocal: "The Government of the Republic of Korea takes note of the arbitration award issued on July 12, and hopes, following the award, that the South China Sea dispute will be resolved through peaceful and creative diplomatic efforts."⁷³

Progressives, for their part, acknowledge that South Korea's alliance with the United States remains necessary, and China's actions have foreclosed the possibility of finding anything resembling true partnership with Beijing. Shortly after taking office, Moon Jae-in agreed to execute the agreement made by his predecessor to allow the U.S. deployment of THAAD missiles. Although THAAD was designed to address the North Korean missile threat, Beijing believed that its associated radars would compromise its strategic deterrent against the United States and reacted with a harsh campaign of targeted sanctions in 2016-17.⁷⁴ In order to reestablish normal relations with China,

⁶⁹ Daniel Pinkston, "The New South Korean Missile Guidelines and Future Prospects for Regional Stability," International Crisis Group, October 25, 2012.

⁷⁰ For more on ROK-Japan bilateral security cooperation, see Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "With Friends Like These: Japan-ROK Cooperation and US Policy," *The Asan Forum*, March 1, 2018. On the bilateral GSOMIA in particular, see Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

⁷¹ "A 2+2 for the Future: The First Korea-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting," *Asan Institute Policy Brief*, July 24, 2013.

⁷² <https://web.archive.org/web/20160712123942/https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/259587.htm>; https://www.hsfk.de/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk_publicationen/prif140.pdf.

⁷³ http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/752372.html.

⁷⁴ On the sanctions, see Darren J. Lim, "Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute," *The Asan Forum*, December 28, 2019.

President Moon acceded to the so-called “three nos”: Korea will not deploy additional THAAD, will not participate in U.S. missile defense, and will not sign on to trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan. But while Beijing won a tactical victory with the “three nos,” its sanctions alienated Korean public opinion. Moon, unlike his progressive predecessors, has not suggested enhanced partnerships with China.⁷⁵

Beijing’s openly coercive reaction to Seoul’s deployment of THAAD undermined the progressive’s idea that China might prove a willing political, as well as economic, partner. And President Moon Jae-in has never wavered from his pledge to engage Pyongyang directly.⁷⁶ Kim Jong-un, however, spurned Seoul’s outreach and resumed missile testing in May 2019. Meanwhile, Washington’s erratic behavior has dented conservative confidence in and support for the American alliance, even as that behavior is viewed (and even celebrated) by progressives as vindication of their longstanding views about America’s true self-interested behavior.

While Moon inherited the standoff with China over THAAD, he initiated one with Japan when he took office by pledging to reexamine the 2015 agreement on the “comfort women” issue – an action which stimulated a tit-for-tat series of escalations that have all but collapsed the relationship between the two neighbors.⁷⁷ Faced with obstacles in Korea’s own immediate vicinity, Moon has launched two initiatives to deepen ties with other states. Shortly after taking office, he launched a New Northern Policy (NNP), aimed primarily at Russia, and a New Southern Policy (NSP), to deepen ties with the ASEAN states. While outreach to Southeast Asia has met with some success, progress with Russia has been impeded by lukewarm interest, as well as by U.S. sanctions on Russia.⁷⁸ Both of these efforts are primarily economic and would, even if successful, do little to address Korean security problems.

U.S. policy toward North Korea, meanwhile, has undergone head-spinning shifts. After the DPRK accelerated its weapons testing in 2017, the Trump administration signaled

⁷⁵ Whereas a 2015 Pew survey found that 61 percent of South Koreans had a favorable attitude towards China, while 37 percent had an unfavorable view, the numbers flipped in Pew’s May 2019 survey, with 63 percent unfavorable and 34 percent favorable. “Views of China and the Global Balance of Power,” *Pew Research Center*, June 23, 2015; “People around the globe are divided in their opinions of China,” *Pew Research Center*, December 5, 2019.

⁷⁶ “South Korea President Moon Jae-in stresses ‘desperate need’ to improve ties with North” *Straits Times*, January 7, 2020. Kim, who has rebuffed previous appeals, sent a condolence note to South Korea over its COVID-19 problem in March. “N. Korea’s Kim sends letter to S. Korea’s Moon over virus outbreak,” *Kyodo News*, March 5, 2020.

⁷⁷ “South Korea says ‘comfort women’ deal flawed, but Japan warns against Change,” *Reuters*, December 27, 2017; “US uneasy as South Korea’s Moon Jae-in tilts towards China,” *Financial Times*, June 9, 2017; “South Korea’s Moon demands official apology from Japan over ‘comfort women,’” *South China Morning Post*, June 21, 2017; “Seoul guts the ‘comfort women’ agreement,” *Japan Times*, November 23, 2018.

⁷⁸ “New Southern Policy: A View from South Korea,” *The Asan Forum*, January 7, 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-view-from-south-korea-3/>. “Moon urges ‘tangible results from New Northern Policy this Year,’” *Yonhap News Agency*, April 15, 2020.

that it might consider preventive war.⁷⁹ Soon thereafter, in June 2018, Trump met Kim Jong-un in Singapore and declared that North Korea was “no longer a nuclear threat.”⁸⁰ Since the unpublished Singapore agreement apparently covered only long-range systems, Kim continued testing short and medium range ballistic missiles with Trump’s tacit approval: “These missile tests are not a violation of our signed Singapore agreement,” the U.S. president tweeted.⁸¹ By 2019, Washington redirected its pressure away from Pyongyang and toward its ally in Seoul by demanding a 400 percent increase in SMA payments to support U.S. troops stationed on the peninsula. This unprecedented demand has made those negotiations a major topic among ordinary citizens and are accompanied by rumors that President Trump favors removing elements of the 2nd Infantry Division if no agreement is reached.

Yet, with the ROK largely isolated in Northeast Asia—and facing periodic bouts of North Korean and Chinese belligerence—popular support for the alliance remains high. In response to a March 2016 survey asking respondents whether Korea should strengthen ties with the United States or China, 60 percent chose the United States, while 33 percent chose China. By July 2019, the gap had grown to 78 percent favoring the United States and only 14 percent choosing China.⁸² Even in December 2019, after SMA negotiations restarted, 92 percent of the South Korean public supported the U.S. alliance.⁸³ At the same time, however, U.S. demands on SMA clearly rankle. A majority (68 percent) believe South Korea should negotiate a lower cost than the request made by the United States, and fully 26 percent say the ROK should refuse to pay.⁸⁴

As uncertainties mount in the ROK’s relationships with its partners, a common element has crept into the discussion of Korea’s “Plan B”: greater self-reliance, particularly in security affairs, including consideration of nuclear options. The spirit of self-reliance has long been alive and well in Korea—and not just among conservatives. Progressives have sought to position South Korea in a more equidistant position from the major powers, and have advocated autonomy since Roh Moo-hyun’s administration (2003-2008). Following this line, Moon has pushed a more “autonomous defense” as well as

⁷⁹ “Nikki Haley to UN on North Korea’s Nuclear Program: ‘Enough is Enough,’” ABC News, September 4, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/nikki-haley-north-koreas-nuclear-program/story?id=49608965>; “In Latest Test, North Korea Detonates its Most Powerful Nuclear Device Yet,” *Washington Post*, September 3, 2017.

⁸⁰ “Trump Said North Korea was ‘No Longer a Nuclear Threat.’ His Spies Disagree,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 2018.

⁸¹ @realDonaldTrump, August 2, 2019, 11:05 AM.

⁸² “Cooperation and hedging: Comparing U.S. and South Korean Views of China,” the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, October 2019, p. 4.

⁸³ Karl Friedhoff, “While Positive Towards U.S. Alliance, South Koreans Want to Counter Trump’s Demands on Host-Nation Support,” the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Lester Crown Center on U.S. Foreign Policy, December 2019, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Karl Friedhoff, “While Positive Towards U.S. Alliance, South Koreans Want to Counter Trump’s Demands on Host-Nation Support,” the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Lester Crown Center on U.S. Foreign Policy, December 2019, p. 1.

independent diplomacy.⁸⁵ His administration's 7 percent increase to defense spending in 2018 was the steepest increase since 2009, and the average defense budget increase for the 2019-2023 National Defense Plan is expected to be 7.5 percent, outpacing both of the last two conservative administrations.⁸⁶ While part of this is aimed at improving command and control to set the stage for the return of wartime operational control, much will be allocated for general capabilities improvements – more Aegis-equipped ships, additional F-35s, strike systems, and a light aircraft carrier much like Japan's Izumo-class.⁸⁷

But the most startling change is the increased discussion of nuclear options. A long list of former, and even serving, policymakers – including many who were appointed to senior national security positions under progressive administrations – have proposed buttressing nuclear deterrence. While conservatives have long argued for such a course of action, often through the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Peninsula, advocacy—including support for an indigenous nuclear weapons capability—has grown even in progressive circles.

Conservatives, for their part, remain outspoken about nuclear options. The government of Park Geung-hye reportedly approached the Obama administration to explore returning tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula. In late 2017, the chairman of the Liberal Korea Party (LKP), Hong Joon-pyo, took a delegation to Washington to appeal for this. If Washington refused, he suggested, South Korea and Japan should develop their own weapons to level the playing field.⁸⁸ Two years later, Won Yoo-chul, the chairman of the LKP's committee on security and foreign affairs, announced that the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons would be included in the party's platform.⁸⁹

Although conservatives have in the past viewed the redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons as the best way to strengthen the alliance and nuclear deterrence simultaneously, they became more open to other alternatives after President Trump dismissed the importance of North Korea's short-range ballistic missile testing and raised pressure on Korea to pay more for the U.S. alliance. KLP floor leader Na Kyung-won suggested consideration of a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement, while Cho Kyoung-tae, another party leader, argued for a fully indigenous weapon.⁹⁰ A September

⁸⁵ Cited in Takuya Matsuda and Jaehan Park, "Geopolitics Redux: Explaining the Japan-Korea Dispute and its Implications for Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, November 7, 2019.

⁸⁶ "S. Korean defense budget to be increased 7.5% per year until 2023," *Hankyoreh*, January 13, 2019.

⁸⁷ "South Korea to Build Ship for Short-Takeoff-and-Vertical-Landing Aircraft," *Defense News*, July 22, 2019.

⁸⁸ Eunjung Lim, "South Korea's Nuclear Dilemmas," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 2:1, 2019, p. 300.

⁸⁹ "Redeploying Nuclear Weapons in S. Korea Would Ignite Arms Race Across NE Asia," *Hankyoreh*, August 9, 2019.

⁹⁰ "Redeploying Nuclear Weapons in S. Korea Would Ignite Arms Race Across NE Asia," *Hankyoreh*, August 9, 2019.

2019 editorial in the conservative Joongan Ilbo, argued that increased SMA spending “would be unnecessary if we had our own nuclear weapons.”⁹¹

Perhaps even more notable has been nuclear advocacy by progressives. In September 2017, President Moon’s defense minister Song Young-moo, told a parliamentary hearing that he had asked Defense Secretary James Mattis to increase patrols by U.S. strategic assets in the air and waters around Korea, adding “the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons is an alternative worth a full review.”⁹² Although President Moon himself has disavowed the comments, a number of other officials have made even more dramatic statements. In a November 2019 op-ed Song Min-soon, who served as Roh Moo-hyun’s minister for foreign affairs and trade, called for an end to the ROK’s “dependent alliance,” noting that “a defensive nuclear capacity, with a missile range limited to the Korean Peninsula, is justified.”⁹³

Another progressive, Lee Byong-chul, who served on the foreign and national security policy staff of Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, pointed to U.S. unreliability and suggested “if these trends continue, a nuclear South Korea is a question of ‘when,’ not ‘if.’” While acknowledging the domestic and international obstacles in the way of such a path, Lee wrote, “support for nuclear weapons is more and more in fashion.” “South Korean elites understand,” he said, “that the country is fundamentally responsible for ensuring its own security in an anarchic world.”⁹⁴

To be sure, many progressives continue to oppose what they label “nuclear populism” and the instability that would follow in its wake. Nuclear breakout, an article in the left-leaning Hankyoreh argues, “would also likely trigger Japan’s acquisition of a nuclear arsenal, providing a pretext for the Abe administration’s dreams of acquiring the capacity to wage war.”⁹⁵ Notably, the former members of progressive administrations who have spoken in favor of nuclear weapons are largely from the foreign policy and security establishment, while those with labor backgrounds see nuclear acquisition as an obstacle to the denuclearization of the peninsula and, ultimately, reunification.

There is considerable public support for strengthening nuclear deterrence. Two national surveys were conducted in 2017. One indicated that 60 percent support a Korean nuclear weapon, while 35 percent were opposed; the second poll found that some 68

⁹¹ Nam Jeong-ho, “Korea’s Nuclear Option,” *JoongAng Daily*, September 18, 2019.

⁹² “South Korea’s Defense Minister Suggests Bring Back Tactical U.S. Nuclear Weapons,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2017.

⁹³ *Japan Times*, November 12, 2019.

⁹⁴ *Byong-chul Lee*, “Don’t be Surprised when South Korea Wants Nuclear Weapons,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*,

⁹⁵ “Redeploying Nuclear Weapons in S. Korea Would Ignite Arms Race Across NE Asia,” *Hankyoreh*, August 9, 2019.

percent supported redeploying tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.⁹⁶ A separate survey conducted in December 2018, after North Korea had temporarily halted nuclear testing and before negotiations for the 11th SMA, found that support (54 percent) for an indigenous weapon had decreased but still exceeded opposition (43 percent).⁹⁷

Although Korean popular support is not overwhelming and may vary depending on how questions are posed, support need not be universal for governments to act. A survey of nuclear opinion among the professional classes in India just four years before the Pkhran-II nuclear tests indicated that just 33 percent of those surveyed supported the development of nuclear.⁹⁸ More important than general (or elite) public opinion in the Indian case were the views of security elites and the BJP government. While it would be difficult to compare decisionmaking in the two democracies, we note again the range of security and foreign policy officials who have expressed support for dramatic measures to buttress nuclear deterrence in Korea, as well as conservative political support for the same.

Like Japan, Korea has assembled components of a nuclear weapons program. Indeed, after President Nixon's Guam Doctrine and the withdrawal of the Seventh Infantry Division from Korea, President Park Chung-hee authorized a program to develop nuclear weapons, though he later halted it when Washington discovered it and objected.⁹⁹ In 2009, after North Korea detonated a nuclear device, Korean officials began to advocate for "peaceful nuclear sovereignty." Invoking the Japanese example, the government of Lee Myung-bak began to push for the inclusion of reprocessing in the U.S.-ROK Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, due for renewal in 2014. The Obama administration was concerned about the proliferation potential, but nevertheless agreed to permit the operation of an advanced spent fuel conditioning process facility – the first stage of pyroprocessing.¹⁰⁰

Korea has also enhanced its missile capability. When Washington first transferred ballistic missile-related technology to Seoul in 1979, it did so with the agreement that the ROK would limit the range of its systems to 180 km. After the DPRK tested its Taepodong-1 missile, Seoul negotiated an extension to 300 km in 2001, and after DPRK's

⁹⁶ "More than Ever: South Koreans Want their own Nuclear Weapons," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2017. See also Se Young Jang, "Do South Koreans Really Want U.S. Tactical Nukes Back on the Korean Peninsula?" *The National Interest*, September 19, 2017.

⁹⁷ "South Koreans See Improved Security, Confident in US Security Guarantee," Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, January 2019.

⁹⁸ David Cortright and Amitabh Mattoo, eds., *India and the Bomb: Public Opinion and Nuclear Weapons* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 117.

⁹⁹ Peter Hayes and Chung-in Moon, "Park Cheng Hee, the CIA, and the Bomb," The Nautilus Institute, September 23, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Mark Holt, "U.S.-Republic of Korea Nuclear Cooperation Agreement," CRS Insights, June 30, 2015; and Toby Dalton and Alexandra Francis, "South Korea's Search for Nuclear Sovereignty," January 2015.

shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, it secured another revision to 800 km.¹⁰¹ The ROK maintains land attack cruise missiles with ranges twice that long, and is developing a cruise missile with a 3,000 km range. Ballistic missiles were incorporated into South Korea's "proactive deterrent" strategy. While not necessarily—or even primarily—preparation for a nuclear program, they would certainly be relevant for one.

Perhaps the most dramatic development has been the design and production of submarines equipped with vertical launch cells designed for ballistic as well as cruise missiles. Korea laid the keel for its first KSS-III ballistic missile submarine, equipped with vertical launch tubes for both cruise and ballistic missiles, in 2016. As of April 2020, one boat had been launched with two more under construction.¹⁰² Current plans call for nine boats in three variants, the last of which may be nuclear powered. These submarines are, to the authors' knowledge, the only submarines in the world with VLS cells for launching conventionally armed ballistic missiles, which are both more expensive and less accurate than cruise missiles. If modified to carry nuclear warheads, however, accuracy and cost would matter less and the superior penetration capability of the ballistic vehicle would make eminent sense.

U.S. INTERESTS AND ITS EAST ASIA ALLIANCES

Full congruence of U.S. interests with those of its Asian allies is a misplaced hope. Yet the United States has separate common interests with both Japan and the ROK. And, as importantly, any serious breach in either alliance would carry risks and dangers for the United States and its allies. At the broadest level, Japan and Korea are both OECD members and share an interest with the United States in maintaining the liberal international economic order. They both participate in and contribute to the international economic institutions that underpin that order, and each has a bilateral free trade agreement with Washington. They contribute to international order and stability through their humanitarian, developmental, and peacekeeping activities within the United Nations framework and sometimes outside of it.

Overlapping hard security interests are easier to identify in the case of the U.S.-Japan alliance than in the ROK case. Despite the erosion of U.S. support for deep engagement, virtually all U.S. strategists see balancing against Chinese power as a central goal of foreign policy, even as they acknowledge the need to maintain stable relations with Beijing and cooperate with it where possible. President Trump's National Security Strategy announced the return of great power competition – a phrase similarly employed by President Obama's Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter— and declared that the United States would ensure that "regions of the world are not dominated by one

¹⁰¹ Nuclear Threat Initiative, "South Korea: Missile," updated April 2016; "U.S. Agrees to Let South Korea Extend Range of Ballistic Missiles," *New York Times*, October 7, 2012.

¹⁰² Sebastien Roblin, "Are South Korean Submarines About to go Nuclear?" *The National Interest*, March 9, 2019.

power.”¹⁰³ Even prominent advocates of offshore balancing acknowledge the magnitude of emerging Chinese power and see Asia as the one region where U.S. power is indispensable.¹⁰⁴

As noted, Japanese strategists similarly view China’s rise as their most formidable challenge, and Tokyo has adopted policies to balance Chinese power. Naturally, both Washington and Tokyo have other interests to consider, and their respective policies towards China are not always in lockstep. At one moment, Tokyo may fear the emergence of a U.S.-China G-2, while at other times, the United States may observe a Japanese tilt toward Beijing in the economic domain. Overall, however, there is broad congruence between Washington and Tokyo in their regional priorities and in the definition of hard security interests.

The common security agenda with Korea is narrower. Korea shows little interest in balancing Chinese power. As we have argued, strategic vulnerability and the complexity of the ROK’s security environment explain this reticence better than ideology. The ROK’s democratic governments have continued to cooperate with the United States in operations from Iraq to the Gulf of Aden, but Seoul’s reluctance to balance Chinese power places it at odds with America’s most salient interest – ensuring that no single power can dominate the region – and is sometimes a major point of frustration within the alliance.

Observing that there are limits on a common U.S.-ROK agenda for shaping the region, however, does not imply that it is not in the U.S. interest to maintain the alliance. We should also consider the likely impact of alliance failure or degradation. What would Asia, and the world, look like in the absence of strong Northeast Asian alliances? In the event of a rupture in the U.S.-ROK alliance, Korea would find itself in an extraordinarily vulnerable position, surrounded on three sides by nuclear-armed states, all of which were adversaries (or adversary suppliers) during the Korean War, and adjacent to Japan, its colonial overlord from 1910 to 1945.

Securing nuclear weapons of its own – which would produce secondary regional and global effects – would likely be considered imperative. If the alliance rupture were fast and complete, the ROK might find itself unable to secure its own nuclear weapons without coming under intense pressure from China and Russia or, not inconceivably, being subject to a preventive nuclear attack or blackmail by North Korea. Under such circumstances, its political and military options would be severely circumscribed, at least in the short term, though it might nevertheless attempt to secure nuclear weapons surreptitiously in the longer term.

¹⁰³ National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016.

If the degradation of the alliance is more gradual or less complete, Seoul could take a more deliberate but open course towards nuclear armament, accelerating the pace of preparations already under way. In this event, Korea would face uncertainties that might give the United States and other opponents of proliferation significant leverage to pressure the ROK to abandon its nuclear efforts and hew to the non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Chief among these is Korea's heavy dependence on nuclear power (about 30 percent of total energy consumption) and its lack of access to fuel and other critical components, which are currently supplied largely by the United States and, to a lesser extent, by other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.¹⁰⁵

The United States might, however, acquiesce to Korea's nuclear-weapons status, as it did with India, Israel, and North Korea. During the 2016 presidential campaign, then-candidate Trump voiced support for Japanese and South Korean nuclear breakout.¹⁰⁶ Even in the event of U.S. opposition, however, Korea might, if it is isolated and believes that extended deterrence is not credible, plough ahead in the hopes that it could thread the growing cracks in the international community's non-proliferation framework.

A major rupture in or degradation of the U.S.-Japan alliance, less likely than in that of the U.S.-ROK alliance, would also have a significant impact on Japan's nuclear thinking. As we have seen, there is a small but growing discussion among mainstream Japanese strategists about the erosion of extended deterrence credibility and the viability of its longstanding nuclear hedging strategy, which includes solid fueled rockets, 45 tons of plutonium, and development of both boost glide hypersonic missiles and hypervelocity cruise missiles.¹⁰⁷ While a Japanese withdrawal from the NPT would surely meet with disapprobation and possible punitive measures from parts of the international community, Tokyo is less dependent on foreign (especially U.S.) sources of nuclear-related material and technology than is the ROK.

Nuclear breakout by either Korea or Japan undoubtedly would influence the other. The consensus among regional experts has long been that Japan would not move first, but Tokyo is acutely aware of military developments in the ROK, particularly now that its defense budget has almost caught up to Japan's. An editor with the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, Suzuki Takabumi, has penned a book, *Isolated Korea: Running Toward "Nuclear Armament,"* in which he makes clear that nuclear developments in the South are

¹⁰⁵ Eunjung Lim, "South Korea's Nuclear Dilemmas," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 297-318; and Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Mark Holt, "U.S.- Republic of Korea Nuclear Cooperation Agreement," *CRS Insights*, June 30, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ *Financial Times*, March 26, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/c927017c-f398-11e5-9afe-dd2472ea263d>

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Yoshida, op.cit.; Ogawa, et al. op.cit.; Takahashi, op.cit.; and "Kaku no Kasa" Iji, *Nihon ga Beikoku ni Yōkyū: Izon Tsutomeru Jirenma* (Japanese Demands of the U.S. to Maintain "The Nuclear Umbrella": The Dilemma of Increased Dependence). *Asahi Shimbun*, April 30, 2020.

tracked particularly closely.¹⁰⁸ And the worst scenario would be a nuclear-armed ROK that is untethered from the U.S. alliance or leaning towards China.¹⁰⁹

In the absence of firm U.S. security commitments, a Japanese nuclear breakout would only solve some of Tokyo's security problems, and would create others. As Keir Lieber and Daryl Press argue, a state's possession of nuclear weapons may reduce the probability of invasion, but it has typically failed to slow arms racing or security competition.¹¹⁰ The circumstances in Japan's case are not propitious. China would likely seek to keep its conventional options open by neutralizing the deterrence leverage provided by Japanese nuclear weapons. It might find damage limiting nuclear options of its own, even at the expense of changing its nuclear policy.¹¹¹ Or it might compete or act in ways that make nuclear use less likely, without abandoning its strategic objectives.

Either way, nuclear acquisition might fulfill Japan's most basic security requirement while adding a dangerous nuclear layer of competition onto the existing conventional one. Significantly, nuclear weapons would not redress the imbalance of power between China and Japan anywhere but on Japan's home islands. Without U.S. backup Japanese forces dispatched to the South China Sea or elsewhere in the region would be dwarfed by China's. In short, Japan's going nuclear would not equate to "doing more," nor would it deliver the rewards sought by U.S. advocates of offshore balancing. A nuclear-armed Japan intent on protecting its own independence would not, in other words, be inconsistent with one that might acquiesce to China on important regional issues.

In sum, then, notwithstanding Japanese and ROK military autonomy—even under conditions of nuclear breakout—the regional economic system, as well as its political order, would almost certainly come to reflect Chinese priorities. Without America's Northeast Asian alliances, East Asia would operate under Chinese rules. On both the military and economic fronts, the costs of alliance failure, while uncertain, would be high for the United States and its allies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

So, what does this mean for U.S. policy? First, America's bilateral alliances should be sustained and supported. The United States has overlapping interests and a common agenda with the ROK and, especially, Japan, even if those interests will never be fully congruent. More broadly, maintaining a regional balance of power is in the U.S. interest regardless of whether a larger common agenda exists. The much-maligned hub and

¹⁰⁸ Suzuki Takabumi, *Koritsu Suru Kankoku, "Kakubusou" ni Hashiru* (Isolated Korea: Running Toward "Nuclear Armament), Tokyo: Nikkei Business Publications, Inc., 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Mark Fitzpatrick, *Asia's Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan*, IISS, 2016, p. 100.

¹¹⁰ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹¹¹ Changes could be wholesale or, more likely, in interpretation. On flexibility in China's nuclear policy, see Heginbotham, et al., 2017, op. cit., especially pp. 129-148.

spokes model of U.S. alliance in East Asia has served the United States well to date and should continue to do so in the future. Our cheap riding allies have neither “driven recklessly,” nor have their “more traditional (i.e., nationalistic and geographic) conceptions of identity” produced a “subsequent enlargement of more ‘regional’ identities and groupings...in Northeast Asia.”¹¹²

To say that America’s bilateral alliances provide the most important security scaffolding in East Asia is not to say that more ambitious structures can never be built. The United States should hold the door open to multilateral defense arrangements, such a more institutionalized Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – the dialogue initiated in 2007 and revived in 2017 among U.S., Japanese, Indian, and Australian leaders. But while the “Quad’s” day may come, it remains a perennial underperformer, as India, in particular, and occasionally the other members recoil from formal commitments that may smack of openly balancing against Chinese power.¹¹³

Perhaps more importantly, Washington should encourage its allies to deepen their own defense and security ties with one another, a trend that is already evident in each bilateral relationship within the Quad. Japan and the ROK, with diplomatic relations that range between cautiously cooperative and openly hostile, are a special and more difficult case. President Moon Jae-in has declared that he “does not believe a militarily stronger Japan is needed to help address the tension on the Korean Peninsula.”¹¹⁴ Likewise, it is hard to find anyone in Japan with a stomach for deepened trilateral military cooperation. U.S. efforts to engineer fundamental political reconciliation or deep security cooperation (e.g., the sharing of sensor data) are unlikely to yield returns, and some U.S. efforts to settle nettlesome political issues have backfired spectacularly. Nevertheless, Washington can discourage acts of open hostility and perform a convening function in bringing the two together to discuss concrete, if modest, improvements to security cooperation.¹¹⁵

Second and most immediately, the United States should adjust its approach to burden sharing. In general, establishing targets for allied defense spending, as it has in NATO, will be more enthusiastically received than requests to increase host nation support. Indeed, requests for greater defense spending will almost certainly meet with strong

¹¹² Lee, Chung-Min and T.J. Pempel, “The Northeast Asian Security Complex: History, Power, and Strategic Choices,” Chapter 1 in T.J. Pempel and Chung-Min Lee, eds. *Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia: Architecture and Beyond*. London: Routledge, 2012, p.6.

¹¹³ “Is the Quad Dead (Again)?” *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2019; and “U.S. Asia Strategy: Beyond the Quad,” *The Diplomat*, March 9, 2019.

¹¹⁴ Cooperation with the US, Japan important to deal with tension with Pyongyang: South Korea’s Moon,” *Channel News Asia*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/cooperation-with-the-us-japan-important-to-deal-with-tension-9373348>

¹¹⁵ On the extent and limits of bilateral security cooperation, see Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, “With Friends Like These: Japan-ROK Cooperation and U.S. Policy,” *The Asan Forum*, March - April 2018 Vol.6, No.2.

support from the security communities in both the ROK and Japan, whereas demands for inflated transfer payments will engender resentment. Moreover, proportional increases to defense spending will yield far larger gains to overall alliance resources than would the same gains in host nation support.

As importantly, standards should be consistent, though they can be tailored within reason to individual circumstances. To the extent that defense effort is the measure of burden sharing, it will be evident that U.S. attention should be focused on Japan, rather than Korea, which already spends roughly 2.5 percent of GDP on defense. Indeed, Korea spends more as a percentage of GDP than any NATO state with the exception of the United States, and demands for Korea dramatically to increase HNS can only be regarded as extortion, an effort to leverage whatever the market will bear from an ally facing dire security challenges.

Japan, for its part, contributes to the larger U.S. agenda in other ways and its fiscal situation is cloudier. It is, therefore, reasonable that targets for defense spending should be incremental. Nevertheless, Japanese defense spending of one percent of GDP is clearly an inadequate performance by a country that spends generously on national health insurance, national universities, and ambitious infrastructure projects, areas where its U.S. ally struggles. In May 2018, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's Security Research Committee proposed establishing a target of 2 percent of GDP.¹¹⁶ Establishing clear targets and tracking performance is a reasonable approach within this mature defense relationship.

Third, the United States and its allies should reinvigorate discussions of conventional roles and missions and the division of labor within each of America's Northeast Asian alliances. The contents of defense efforts are as important as the level, and evolving Chinese capabilities make it imperative that the United States and its allies employ limited resources rationally. Given different relative advantages of the partners within each alliance, as well as the different peacetime location of forces and the timelines for their deployment, it stands to reason that partner force structures should not be identical to that of the United States with allies playing the role of a U.S. "mini-me." Unfortunately, the trend towards mirroring is evident in the force structures of both Japan and South Korea.

America's Northeast Asian alliances should have different divisions of labor, appropriate to their strategic problems. In the ROK case, any conflict would require a rapid, damage-limiting conventional attack on North Korean nuclear sites. Such a campaign would likely be combined with ground forces moving north as quickly as possible to secure WMD sites and prevent their reconstitution. Given the long lead-time required for deploying heavy U.S. forces, ROK priority should be on developing offensive-capable ground units

¹¹⁶ Bōeihi GDP Hi 2% Meyasu: Jimin ga Teigenan (LDP Draft Proposal for a Defense Spending Standard of 2% of GDP), *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, May 24, 2018.

(e.g., armored and air assault divisions), with the United States supplying the bulk of air- and sea-power from more secure bases to the rear (along with some rapid deployable ground forces), as well as additional ground forces as they become available in theater.

In the case of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the possibility of conventional conflict with China – with escalation of a clash in the East China Sea or over Taiwan– looms relatively larger. Any campaign will be a phased affair, in which resiliency will be the watchword for allies and forward deployed forces, while larger, offensive forces can only be massed as adversary surveillance networks are degraded and missile inventories depleted. U.S. concerns about the possession of offensive weapons by Japan have long since receded. Nevertheless, allied forces, as well as forward deployed U.S. forces, should be structured as the “inside force” and be endowed with the ability to maneuver and survive, rather than optimized for a heavy knockout blow.¹¹⁷ Emphasis, therefore, should be on survivable air and naval forces, with infrastructure developed to facilitate dispersion of the force.

Both states confront other potential missions, and no strategy can or should be entirely optimized against one scenario, but Japanese spending overemphasizes ground forces, while the ROK maintains an army that was designed for a different era and a growing navy that seems oriented more towards Japan than North Korea. In addition to sustaining a dialogue on roles on missions, the United States might limit the problem by demonstrating that it will remain in the region, thereby indicating that adjustments to hedge by rounding out the force structure are not necessary. Needless to say, there will always be some hedging by allies, and U.S. indications of ambivalence over the last several years have contributed to relatively more hedging and mirroring of U.S. force structure.

Finally, the United States will have to redouble efforts to meet the nuclear insecurities of allies while discouraging movement towards indigenous capability. The growth, reach, and improved survivability of Chinese and North Korean nuclear inventories have raised South Korean and Japanese concerns about the credibility of extended deterrence. They question whether adversaries will believe U.S. threats to retaliate if the United States itself is vulnerable to counter-strike. In the case of the ROK, the immediacy of the problem is brought home by open threats from the North, business as usual in one sense, but with far more dangerous connotations today.¹¹⁸ Should the

¹¹⁷ Evolving U.S. doctrine, established in the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), suggests that forces operating near the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threat, the so-called “inside force” should be dispersed and mobile, while the “outside force,” more distant from the threat, can operate in more traditional ways and deliver massed fires. On the general concept of modern denial strategies, see Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, “Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity,” *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2015. For an application to Japan, see Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, “Active Denial: Redesigning Japan’s Response to China’s Military Challenge,” *International Security*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2018.

¹¹⁸ “Kim Jong Un’s sister Threatens Military Action Against South Korea,” DW, June 15, 2020.

North employ limited force, the South would be confronted with the difficult dilemma of doing nothing, at cost to its credibility and future vulnerability to coercion, or risking catastrophic miscalculation by acting proportionately with conventional forces.

The United States and its allies have made some efforts to strengthen extended deterrence in recent years. The U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Korea extended deterrence dialogues, have provided venues to enhance mutual understanding on nuclear issues within the alliances as well as opportunities to reiterate U.S. nuclear assurances since 2011. The Trump administration's commitment to reviving tactical nuclear options, combined with the more forward leaning message in its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, was warmly welcomed in Korean and Japanese security circles.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, these dialogues are "expert groups," not policy bodies, and new U.S. tactical systems are intended to address European, rather than Asian problems, though they do offer some damage limitation capability against North Korea.¹²⁰

Since doubts about the robustness of extended deterrence in Asia are growing fast, a situation unlikely to change anytime soon, and since U.S. interests are better served without proliferation, Washington should consider additional measures to keep its allies from viewing nuclear breakout as their best choice going forward. The issue is not entirely new, and a range of options have been proposed, from redeploying tactical nuclear weapons to Korea and/or Japan and nuclear weapons sharing to measures that demonstrate solidarity (e.g., the introduction of an Asian version of "Support for Nuclear Operations with Conventional Air Tactics," a NATO program better known as SNOWCAT).¹²¹

There are inevitable tradeoffs between the different options available to the United States and its allies. Placing nuclear weapons in Korea would undoubtedly offer the strongest deterrent signal but might also come with the steepest costs. Weapons there would be vulnerable, would require protection (and hence draw away resources from other military tasks), and would invite public backlash. Since small yield weapons could be launched by aircraft based elsewhere or ships and submarines floating offshore (once current plans for updating the U.S. stockpile are complete), basing weapons on the

¹¹⁹ "Japan Welcomes US 'Nuclear Posture Review,'" *Asia Times*, February 6, 2018; Ogawa, et al. op. cit, 2018 p.206; "U.S. Nuclear Review Reaffirms Commitment to Extended Deterrence for Allies: Seoul Official," *Yonhap News Agency*, February 4, 2018.

¹²⁰ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons, 2019," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 75:5, 2019, 252-261; and Fred Kaplan, "The Senseless Danger of the Military's New 'Low-Yield' Nuclear Warhead," *Slate*, February 18, 2020.

¹²¹ For positive proposals, see Ryan W. Kort, Carlos R. Bersabe, Dalton H. Clarke, and Derek J. Di Bellow, "Twenty-First Century Nuclear Deterrence: Operationalizing the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 3rd Quarter 2019; David Santoro, "Deterring North Korea: The Next Nuclear-Tailoring Agenda," *War on the Rocks*, August 8, 2017; and Shane Smith, "Renewing U.S. Extended Deterrence Commitments Against North Korea," *38 North*, May 13, 2020.

Peninsula or Japan is also not necessary from an operational viewpoint even if a tactical capability is desired.¹²²

In acknowledging both the downsides of redeploying tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula itself but also the likelihood that unilateral signaling is unlikely to be sufficient to assure allies and deter potential adversaries, we agree with Shane Smith's suggestion that there are a variety of measures we might adopt with our Asian allies as part of a "phased and adaptive" menu of options to strengthen extended deterrence and we lean towards measures that would provide more active participation by allies.¹²³ These would include, most importantly, establishing nuclear planning groups with Seoul and Tokyo to ensure more robust coordination. Other measures might include the preparation of bunkers for the deployment of nuclear weapons in the event of crisis and war. A more direct signal might be sent by preparation for the wartime sharing of nuclear weapons with one or both Northeast Asian ally.

Preparation for the wartime sharing of nuclear weapons could include hardware modifications, such as the modification and certification of F-35s to accommodate B61-12 nuclear bombs, or acquisition of other agreed delivery systems. More important to deterrent impact would be software preparation, such as training of air or naval crews in procedures for delivering such weapons and the strengthening of command and control procedures. Unlike the redeployment of nuclear weapons to Korea and/or Japan, sharing might be accomplished off of allied territory, avoiding many of the problems associated with the physical presence of nuclear weapons in Korea or Japan. Training could take place in the United States, for example, and any hypothetical allied nuclear operations might be launched from Guam or (in the more distant future) from a handful of offshore ships or submarines equipped with nuclear-armed cruise missiles.¹²⁴

The proposals presented here draw on precedents established in U.S. nuclear relations with Asian allies (particularly Korea), as well as European NATO partners, but with the understanding that any policy adopted should reflect and be tailored to the current problem and conditions. We assume that the United States would keep custody of all nuclear weapons during peacetime and retain full power over the release or use of nuclear weapons, as it did throughout the Cold War and today in Europe, and that training would be conducted using simulated, rather than real, nuclear warheads.

¹²² For arguments against redeploying nuclear weapons to Korea, see Richard Sokolsky, "The Folly of Deploying U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons to South Korea," *38 North*, December 1, 2017; Bruce Klingner, "The Case Against Nukes in South Korea," *The Diplomat*, October 17, 2017; and Toby Dalton and Jon Wolfsthal, "Seven Reasons Why Putting U.S. Nukes Back in South Korea is a Terrible Idea," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2017. For a neutral assessment of redeploying nuclear weapons to Korea, See Amy F. Woolf and Emma Chanlett-Avery, "Redeploying U.S. Nuclear Weapons to South Korea: Background and Implications in Brief," Congressional Research Service, September 14, 2017.

¹²³ Smith, 2020, op. cit..

¹²⁴ Specific systems would depend largely on the future evolution of the U.S. non-strategic nuclear stockpile, as well as strategic and political considerations. See "Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons," Congressional Research Service, Updated May 4, 2020.

Hence, these measures would differ substantially from the ill-fated Multilateral Force (MLF) of the 1960s, for which collective decisionmaking on use was proposed, and instead adopt principles that have been employed with NATO allies.¹²⁵

In keeping with the deterrence problem today, our proposals are far more restrained than the effort made during the Cold War. The earlier deployments of U.S. tactical nuclear systems to Europe and, to a lesser extent, Korea were intended to signal a willingness to use nuclear weapons first against conventional attack, and the likelihood of escalation with or without an executive decision. By the mid-1970s, roughly 7,000 nuclear weapons were deployed in Europe, and the European allies operated a wide range of systems designed to deliver U.S. warheads (in addition French and British weapons).¹²⁶ The deterrent problem in Asia today addresses adversary nuclear use or coercion, rather than conventional attack, against which allied conventional forces are well equipped. The requirement is to amplify that the United States would likely employ nuclear weapons if its allies are attacked by nuclear weapons (or, if conditions permit, to guarantee rapid regime change against a nuclear attacker). Hence, the focus should be on coordination and a demonstrated willingness to cooperate in the face of nuclear attack, rather than on hardware and large numbers.

It is to be expected that China, Russia, and North Korea will portray any strengthening of nuclear deterrence as provocation and “arms racing.” But China, arguably the most important in the Asian context, may also appreciate that the possible alternative – independent ROK and Japanese weapons – would be far worse, much as the Soviet did with regard to the Federal Republic of Germany’s incorporation into NATO nuclear sharing arrangements during the Cold War. The launch of any allied initiatives could and should be accompanied by allied statements highlighting the fact that arrangements might be modified as the security environment permits, possibly including language that specifies North Korea’s nuclear breakout and the most important driver.

In considering the potential impact on the current non-proliferation regime, it bears repeating that the primary purpose of buttressing deterrence is to prevent nuclear breakout by America’s Northeast Asian allies – and that the primary driver of pressure for such a move is the international community’s failure to restrain North Korean nuclear ambitions, rather than the loose lips of analysts suggesting solutions. The fact that nuclear security and release authority would remain consistent with past practice in Europe and that the number of systems involved would be far smaller and their location

¹²⁵ On the various nuclear sharing arrangements considered in the NATO context during the 1960s, as well as the ultimate agreement reached with the Soviet Union on acceptable parameters, see William Alberque, “The NPT and the Origins of NATO’s Nuclear Sharing Arrangements,” *Institute Francais des Relations Internationales Security Studies Center*, February 2017. See also Beatrice Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949-2000* (New York: MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1997).

¹²⁶ Ivo H. Daalder, *The Nature and Practice of Flexible Response: NATO Strategy and Theater Nuclear Forces Since 1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 110-111.

of weapons would remain more distant from potential battlefields should mitigate any additional pressure on the non-proliferation regime.

In our view, the bigger issue is whether the measures outlined above would be sufficiently meaningful to address the concerns of allies and the arguments in Seoul and Tokyo, now attracting mainstream attention, for additional nuclear hedging and possible breakout. Limited nuclear sharing with full U.S. authority on release cannot fully address allied concerns about America's commitment to their security. But there is perhaps a parallel here with the Anglo-French army staff talks conducted between 1905 and 1914, which could not guarantee that a British expeditionary force would arrive on the continent in the event of war, but which nevertheless greatly strengthened London's sense of moral obligation, a fact well understood and appreciated in Paris. In the current case, with coordination and preparation evident to potential adversaries as well as partners, the demonstration should contribute powerfully to deterrence as well as assurance. Given the current configuration of interests and capabilities in Northeast Asia, formal coordination and preparation for the potential wartime combined use of nuclear weapons may be the (admittedly high) cost of maintaining stability and prosperity.