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Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy

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The United States has gone on a diplomatic offensive to assure its allies the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan of the U.S. commitment to their security. The Biden Administration hosted Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol at Camp David in August 2023, the first ever-standalone summit among the three leaders. The summit was preceded by months of high-level meetings among government officials from the three countries. In July 2023, the United States sent a nuclear-capable *Ohio*-class submarine in a first-ever port call to Busan and a first such a visit to South Korea in decades to visibly demonstrate its commitment to ROK's security. Gen. Anthony Cotton, U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) Commander, visited South Korea and Japan to discuss extended deterrence and hosted ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Kim Seung-Kyum and Japan's Chairman of the Joint Staff Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida in the United States in 2022 and 2023, respectively.¹ These steps are an indication of Washington's recognition that allied assurance and extended deterrence need new attention.

However necessary these steps are, they are unlikely to significantly improve the situation for as long as the United States does not address the structural nature of challenges to its allied assurance and extended deterrence commitments. These challenges are China's rapidly expanding nuclear and conventional forces, the revisionist nature of its national security claims, Beijing's and Moscow's common goal of remaking the world order in their authoritarian image, their apparent cooperation in doing so, and their aggressive use of nuclear threats to advance their respective expansionist goals. The United States will have to reevaluate its nuclear and conventional posture to account for these developments to preserve



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the viability of its extended deterrence guarantees. Failing to do so risks undermining U.S. deterrence and nonproliferation goals and alliance structures that the United States needs in order to protect the global system it built at great cost in blood and treasure after World War II.

Deterioration of National Security Environment and Structural Drivers of Allied Insecurity

Much has been written lately about the rapid deterioration of the national security environment, particularly with regard to the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) "breathtaking"² nuclear build up and Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³ The United States is reportedly "furiously" working on the problem.⁴ These are fundamental developments requiring a wholesale re-evaluation of the U.S. approach to nuclear deterrence and allied assurance. During the Cold War, the United States assumed that if its capabilities were sufficient to deter Moscow, they were adequate to deter the PRC because China had a much smaller nuclear arsenal than the Soviet Union. The problem is much more complicated today, not only because of China's increasing nuclear arsenal, but also because of the emergence of new nuclear powers, including the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea).

According to the Department of Defense's 2023 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China Annual Report to Congress*, "Over the next decade, the PRC will continue to rapidly modernize, diversify, and expand its nuclear forces. Compared to [its] nuclear modernization efforts a decade ago, current efforts dwarf previous attempts in both scale and complexity."⁵ In 2021, Admiral Charles Richard, then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, stated that "We are witnessing a strategic breakout by China. The explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking. And frankly, that word breathtaking may not be enough."⁶ China has the potential to add hundreds of nuclear warheads into its strategic forces in the coming years. Unlike the United States, which has let its nuclear infrastructure deteriorate to the point of being unable to meet a congressional mandate to produce 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030, China and Russia have kept their nuclear production complex proficient and capable. Both countries have been modernizing their nuclear warheads and delivery systems.⁷ The PRC's leadership is intent on making Taiwan a part of the PRC, regardless of Taiwanese desire, and some argue that efforts to deter China from doing so are failing.⁸

North Korea continues to advance its nuclear weapon and missile programs, including by staging an exercise simulating a "tactical nuclear attack."⁹ It also likely has a solid-fuel intercontinental-range ballistic missile.¹⁰ Solid-fuel missiles are generally harder to detect because they do not require fueling just before launch, which makes them potentially more difficult to eliminate pre-launch. The DPRK and Russia appear to be intent on strengthening their relationship, given Kim Jong Un's recent visit to Russia and North Korea's reported supplies of ammunition to Russia.¹¹ During the visit, the DPRK head was shown weapon



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systems, including Russia's strategic bombers, a space center, and an aviation plant, prompting speculation that North Korea was interested in advanced weapon technologies in return for supplying Russia's depleted munition stocks.¹² North Korea recently stopped its nuclear reactor in Yongbyon prompting concerns that the halt will be used for reprocessing spent fuel rods to extract weapons-grade plutonium.¹³

Russia, for its part, reportedly conducts nuclear yield producing testing that "would help it improve its nuclear weapon capabilities."¹⁴ Russia has maintained a significant and diverse thousands-strong tactical nuclear weapon arsenal in violation of its political commitments under the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and appears to be increasing the size of its arsenal.¹⁵ The United States reportedly retains only about 200 tactical nuclear weapons to be delivered by dual-capable aircraft; some of the weapons are forward deployed on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's European-members' territories, but they reportedly are not deployed to Japan, the ROK, or Taiwan. The plan to develop and deploy a nuclear-armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile, a capability that Japan and the ROK were particularly interested in for extended deterrence, has run into Biden Administration opposition that is shared by some members of Congress.¹⁶

While Russia, China, and North Korea are likely expanding and improving their respective nuclear capabilities, discussions in the United States are usually about whether the United States keeps too many nuclear weapons¹⁷ or whether nuclear weapons disparities matter at all.¹⁸ The Russians have been vocal in their emphasis that Moscow's numerical superiority and the increased diversity of its nuclear weapon arsenal matter. Putin recently noted "that we have more such nuclear weapons than NATO countries. They know about it and never stop trying to persuade us to start nuclear reduction talks. Like hell we will, right? A popular phrase. Because, putting it in the dry language of economic essays, it is our competitive advantage."¹⁹

While Russia likely is not the primary threat in the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. allies have articulated concerns over Russia's full-scale invasion and subsequent war crimes in Ukraine. Japan has a territorial dispute with Russia over the status of the Northern Territories (also known as the Kuril Islands) that Japan says Russia has illegally occupied since World War II.²⁰ Russia's overtures to the DPRK and a potential expansion in weapons cooperation is closely monitored by South Korea and the United States.²¹ China and Russia share an interest in overturning the U.S.-led international order, making them allies in the short- and perhaps medium-terms. How the United States continues to respond to Russia's war in Ukraine will likely influence the degree to which other countries perceive it as a reliable ally.

Threat-Driven Adjustments

Contemporary threat developments drive an increasing feeling of insecurity in the ROK and Japan. Tokyo's 2023 *Defense White Paper* stated that "China's current external stance, military activities, and other activities have become a matter of serious concern for Japan and the international community, and present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge," and that "North Korea's military activities pose an even more grave and imminent threat to



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Japan's national security than ever before."²² South Korea called the DPRK "our enemy" in its most recent *Defense White Paper*, reflecting the increase of tensions into the bilateral relationship.²³ The document also noted an intensifying competition between the United States and China and highlighted the importance of the alliance with the United States.²⁴

Given increasing threats, Japan and the ROK have focused on strengthening their bilateral relations, a development long supported by the United States and hampered by the inability of both countries to come to mutually acceptable terms with regard to Japan's past occupation of Korea. The topic remains sensitive in their contemporary relations and is susceptible to polarization and politicization. South Korean President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida face low public approval ratings, which could undermine further progress on advancing Japan-ROK relations; however, that does not diminish the historic steps both leaders have taken in this regard so far.²⁵ In August 2023, the leaders of both countries met at a trilateral first-ever summit hosted by President Biden at Camp David in the United States. The summit declaration re-affirms the ROK and Japan's commitment to operationalize their real time sharing of missile warning data on the DPRK by the end of 2023.²⁶ In January 2024, Japan, the United States, and South Korea shared real-time radar data pertaining to North Korea's missile launch.²⁷ The governments also committed to greater information-sharing, holding annual high-level meetings and multi-domain exercises, and increased economic cooperation.²⁸

Both Japan and the ROK are planning on significantly increasing their defense budgets. For example, Japan's defense budget increase between fiscal years 2022 and 2023 is 26 percent, and in absolute "yen terms is larger than Tokyo's combined defense budget increases of the past 30 years."²⁹ The ROK government plans for a 4.5 percent rise in the 2024 defense budget.³⁰ Japan is planning on procuring long-range strike capabilities, including the Tomahawk Land Attack cruise missiles that have the potential to complicate North Korea's and China's calculus in a potential conflict scenario.³¹ The procurement will happen in fiscal year 2025, a year earlier than planned.³² The challenge for the United States will be to ensure that South Korea's and Japan's increasing defense capabilities will be in sync as they expand, and that the doctrine of each country changes to account for these new capabilities.

Regional threat developments have also renewed the debate about South Korea and Japan developing their own nuclear deterrent. In 2017, Shigeru Ishiba, former Japanese defense minister, said that "Japan should have the technology to build a nuclear weapon if it wants to do so."³³ In 2022, former Prime Minister Abe said that it may be time for Japan to host U.S. nuclear weapons, and added that had Ukraine retained nuclear capabilities, Russia may not have invaded.³⁴ In February 2023, a Japanese defense study chaired by former military chief of staff Ryoichi Oriki reportedly suggested that "Japan ease its three nonnuclear principles that prohibit possessing, producing or allowing entry into Japan of nuclear weapons."³⁵ These publicly expressed sentiments would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

For their part, South Korean citizens have consistently supported a domestic nuclear weapons program, as many as 71 percent prior to the signature of the Washington Declaration in April 2023.³⁶ Even after the document marking the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance was signed, 60 percent still support South Korea's nuclear armament.³⁷ This support includes



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prominent public policy figures. For example, Song Min-soon, South Korea's former foreign minister, argued that "It's necessary for South Korea to move on to a self-reliant alliance from a dependent alliance," and that "a defensive nuclear capacity, with a missile range limited to the Korean Peninsula" was "justified."³⁸

President Yoon Suk Yeol stated that South Korea could potentially develop its own nuclear capabilities, and made a point of saying it could do that "pretty quickly, given our scientific and technological capabilities."³⁹ These comments likely spurred the Biden Administration to devise additional steps to assure South Korea.⁴⁰ Yet, despite the administration's efforts, "Only nukes can counter nukes," Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon said recently.⁴¹ He is seen as the country's second most powerful elected official. U.S. domestic polarization is likely undermining the degree to which South Koreans perceive the United States as willing to come to their defense with all means available, with more than 60 percent of South Koreans skeptical that "Washington would use its nuclear weapons in the event of a Korean Peninsula contingency."⁴²

U.S. Steps to Assure Japan and the ROK

The United States pledged to increase the rotations of nuclear-capable platforms to the ROK. While the ROK government welcomed the presence of a U.S. nuclear-armed submarine in its port, there are challenges to using the system in such a manner to assure allies. After all, the main advantage of the system is that it is survivable; roaming in deep blue oceans undetectable to the adversaries, yet able to instantly respond to an attack when necessary. Port calls potentially compromise the survivability of the system, even if temporarily. Nevertheless, the visit follows a string of similar port calls, including an Ohio-class guided-missile submarine, the USS *Michigan* in mid-June 2023.⁴³ The United States has also rotated other nuclear-capable platforms to the peninsula, including the B-52 bombers that took part in joint U.S.-ROK aerial drills over the peninsula the same month.⁴⁴

In addition to high-level visits and presidential summits, the United States and the ROK have also reinvigorated their consultative mechanisms and have recently announced the update to the "Tailored Deterrence Strategy," the joint deterrence strategy against the DPRK's evolving military threats.⁴⁵ The Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) established by the 2023 Washington Declaration serves as a forum to discuss joint planning with the ROK in contingencies potentially involving nuclear use on the peninsula and exercises with USSTRATCOM.⁴⁶

Just as significant are Japan's and the ROK's rapprochement steps both preceding and during the trilateral Camp David summit with the United States. The ROK and Japan pledged an unprecedented commitment to consult.⁴⁷ The thaw in their relations, driven by geopolitics as much as the personal leadership of each country's representatives, would benefit the United States, long interested in such a rapprochement. Because of a complex alliance dynamic in a potential crisis on the peninsula (e.g., a North Korean strike against U.S. forces in Guam), developing direct communications channels and establishing procedures for trilateral consultations is essential to conflict management in the region.



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U.S. presence will continue to be critical for allied assurance. The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission found that “Given the geographic distance between the U.S. homeland and its Allies overseas and the long lead time for force projection from the U.S. homeland, Allies stressed the importance of U.S. military forces being available in theater for deterrence and assurance purposes.”⁴⁸ And according to a recent poll, more than half of the ROK respondents wish for the alliance with the United States to be strengthened, particularly among the younger generation.⁴⁹ This presence must be supported by sufficient military capabilities dedicated to the region. At the same time, allies observe U.S. leadership, or lack thereof, in Ukraine and draw conclusions for tailoring their own defense strategies and forces.

The recent U.S. measures to improve communications and rotate forces temporarily are likely helpful to demonstrate U.S. recognition of the challenges to extended deterrence and assurance that need to be addressed. But they hardly address the structural causes of those challenges—China’s growing military might, conventional and nuclear, Russia’s aggressive use of nuclear threats to provide cover for its expansionism, the emerging Sino-Russian entente intended to displace the United States and revise the existing world order, and Washington’s slow efforts to rebuild its military forces after three decades of “strategic holiday” with regard to great power threats. Small steps and robust rhetoric about “integrated deterrence” will not suffice.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The U.S. alliance network is indispensable to achieving the goal of a stable and prosperous international order and remains one of the main U.S. competitive advantages over its adversaries. U.S. alliances are also under an increasing strain from revisionist powers, particularly Russia and China.

These structural developments undermine allied assurance, especially if they view U.S. extended deterrence threats as insufficiently credible relative to their threat perceptions. While facilitating allied consultations and cooperation is necessary to counter negative national security developments, it is not sufficient. U.S. policies and defense acquisition must reflect and adjust to unprecedented trends in adversary capabilities to maintain the credibility of extended deterrence and assurance commitments. The United States has moved at a glacial pace to expand its military capabilities and make its defense industrial base more capable, including with regard to nuclear weapons. The U.S. inability to compete with the armament pace of its adversaries has the potential to significantly undermine U.S. regional assurance efforts and the alliance structures that currently sustain one of its main geopolitical advantages and are more necessary by the day given the trajectories the U.S. adversaries are choosing.



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⁴⁸ *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, DC: Institute for Defense Analysis, 2023), p. 75, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

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⁵⁰ See the discussion in, Robert Gates, “The Dysfunctional Superpower: Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia?” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2023), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower>.

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