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Anxious and Indispensable: U.S. Allies and Partners Confronting New Challenges

Matthew R. Costlow

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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Executive Summary

The United States has the unrivaled ability to project overwhelming power anywhere in the world in large part due to its globe-spanning network of alliances and partnerships. Rather than waiting until an adversary's aggression reaches America's shores, the United States can deploy to or from an ally's or partner's country to counter adversary aggression before it spreads geographically or escalates. When allies and partners are strong, that benefits U.S. security and enables greater prosperity for all.

Yet, the United States now finds itself in a quandary in relation to its allies and partners. While U.S. alliances and partnerships have grown substantially since the Cold War, the United States, and in many cases allies and partners themselves, have not improved their defense capabilities to keep pace with the growing threats they both face. Now, as China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran menace the United States and its allies and partners, threatening to act on their explicitly revisionist hegemonic goals, there is great strain on the U.S.-led network of alliances and partnerships. Differences in threat perceptions, differences in preferred responses to the threats, resource constraints, and domestic policy shifts are all examples of the structural factors U.S. officials and their counterparts must address. Adversaries, of course, are tailoring their political and military strategies to highlight and further stress these divisions between the United States and its allies and partners, placing even greater strain on diplomatic relations.

These dynamics are clearly manifest in the U.S.-South Korea alliance as it has developed in the last few years. While both U.S. and ROK officials view China and North Korea as growing security threats, their primary focus has been split—with U.S. officials concentrating mainly on the Chinese threat and South Korean officials concentrating on the North Korean threat. Yet, even while they are united in

their desire to counter North Korean aggression, U.S. and ROK officials are apparently split on if and when the United States might employ nuclear weapons in defense of South Korea. Thus, South Korean leaders have sought greater assurances from the United States that it has the nuclear forces necessary for a North Korea contingency, while also seeking further consultations and insight into U.S. planning for that scenario. It is too soon to tell whether U.S. actions in response to South Korean concerns will be enough to satisfy ROK extended deterrence and assurance requirements, but the persistently high support among the South Korean populace for the ROK developing its own nuclear weapons program provides a glimpse of what may occur should U.S. efforts fail.

While the United States should tailor its extended deterrence and assurance efforts to each ally's and partner's unique circumstances, there are a number of process and capability improvements that are likely to be both broadly applicable and mutually beneficial for all parties involved. First, U.S. government and non-government dialogues with allies and partners should include a greater mix of nuclear, non-nuclear, and regional specialists. In its talks with allies and partners, U.S. officials should focus on the potential transition from a conventional crisis or conflict into a scenario when adversary nuclear threats or employment is likely; and, in that instance, what U.S. capabilities may be necessary to respond—resources from within that theater and outside that theater. U.S. officials should place calls for additional allied and partner investments in their defense postures in the broader context of illustrating how complex it will be for the United States to defend allies in one theater while at the same time deterring opportunistic aggression against other allies in geographically distant other theaters. In terms of additional military capabilities that will support and reinforce the messages in these dialogues, the United States should emphasize the strategic value of improved

and expanded regional and U.S. homeland missile defenses. These defensive capabilities will provide greater assurance to allies and partners that the United States will not be coerced by adversary threats to abandon them when attacked. And, should deterrence fail, such defenses will limit the damage of adversary attacks and make a *fait accompli* appear less viable as a military theory of victory. When combined with adjustments to the U.S. regional nuclear force posture, these investments in improved and expanded missile defenses will represent a generational improvement in the U.S. ability to defend and assure the critical enablers of its power projection: allies and partners.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The U.S.-led system of alliances is under strain globally, but at the same time, increasingly vital to U.S. national interests. Even as the United States seeks to focus more of its attention and resources on Asia generally, and China specifically, threats of Russian, North Korean, and Iranian aggression compel the United States to stay engaged in those theaters as well. For decades Washington has made it clear to its allies and partners that it cannot confront these threats with only minimal support from its friends; and, there are encouraging signs that allies and partners are stepping up their contributions to collective security.[1] Yet, there are a host of factors that, in combination, cause U.S. allied and partner leaderships to seek greater assurances about U.S. capability and will to extend credible deterrence threats and, if necessary, defeat adversary aggression.

Among the factors external to the United States, the rising threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression have been some of the major catalysts driving an increase in recent publications on the challenges that U.S. allies and partners will face in the emerging threat environment.[2]

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[1] See, for instance, Lorne Cook, Mike Corder, and Molly Quell, "NATO Leaders are set to Agree on a Historic Defense Spending Pledge, but the hike won't Apply to all," *Associated Press*, June 23, 2025, available at https://apnews.com/article/nato-spending-spain-trump-defense-ukraine-ac3c24bc71ca0aaf4d3c07f468d828ba; and, "Taiwan's President says the Defense Budget will Exceed 3% of GDP in Military Overhaul," *Associated Press*, March 20, 2025, available at https://apnews.com/article/china-taiwan-us-defense-budget-b15c2dc87297627a2ac12ea344fe94b8.

[2] See, for instance, Matthew R. Costlow, *Deterring the New Pacing Threats: Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2025), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Vol.-5-No.-3.pdf; and, Markus Garlauskas, "The United States and its allies must be ready to deter a two-front war and nuclear attacks in East Asia," *The Atlantic Council*, August 16, 2023, available at

Regarding conventional forces, the United States has continued since the end of the Cold War to adhere to a strategy featuring a less than a two major war force sizing metric for sufficiency—a growing concern for U.S. allies and partners in multiple geographically distant theaters facing multiple adversaries.[3] Regarding nuclear forces, U.S. officials must consider how adversaries' coercive regional nuclear strategies, backed by their increasingly capable and numerous forces, will affect U.S. extended deterrence and assurance efforts both now and in the future.[4]

As for internal or domestic factors in the United States, another growing concern for U.S. allies and partners is the apparent increased prevalence of anti-alliance rhetoric among some U.S. political leaders.[5] This rhetoric, of course,

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https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/.

[3] For a more extensive treatment of this subject, see, David J. Trachtenberg, *The Demise of the "Two-War Strategy" and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2024), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vol.-4-No.-6.pdf.

[4] On this point, see, Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), pp. 44-50, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf; and, Michaela Dodge, *Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2024), pp. 2-18, available at https://nipp.org/papers/trends-in-allied-assurance-challenges-and-questions/.

[5] See, for instance, Lalee Ibsaa and Soo Rin Kim, "Trump says he'd 'Encourage' Russia 'to do Whatever the Hell They Want' if a NATO Country Didn't Spend Enough on Defense," *ABC News*, February 11, 2024, available at https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-russia-nato-defense-funds/story?id=107136736; and, "Lee Introduces Withdrawal from NATO," *Lee.Senate.gov*, June 25, 2025, available at https://www.lee.senate.gov/2025/6/lee-introduces-withdrawal-from-nato.

does not always match U.S. actions, and perhaps is part of a broader negotiating strategy to prompt allies to contribute more to their defense. Plus, these stated positions have proven to be in the minority both among Americans generally and within the Republican Party specifically.[6] Deepening domestic political divisions within the United States, however, are causing some allies and partners to question just how "united" the United States may be when it comes to the question of defending another nation that is geographically distant and, according to at least some isolationists, of little concern to America or her interests.[7]

The first half of this *Occasional Paper*, therefore, will examine some of the structural problems facing U.S. allies and partners—both their causes and their consequences. Much like deterrence, assurance and extended deterrence must be tailored to allies and adversaries respectively in order to be more effective. Only after properly identifying the root causes of allied and partner concerns, and their broader strategic implications, can the United States begin to address the problems substantively. The second half of the *Occasional Paper* applies this structural analysis to a test case of U.S. assurance and extended deterrence efforts in South Korea. Seoul faces a more immediate North Korean threat and perhaps a longer-term challenge in Chinese aggression.

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[6] On these points, see, Keith B. Payne, "America First: Neither Cosmopolitan nor Isolationist," *Information* Series, No. 609 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 16, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IS-609.pdf.

[7] See, Michaela Dodge, *U.S. Domestic Polarization and Implications for Allied Assurance, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 2025), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Vol.-5-No.-4.pdf.

Chapter 2. The Causes and Consequences of Degraded U.S. Alliances and Partnerships

The Context for Allied Decision-Making and the Role of U.S. Influence

The United States boasts over 30 allies and numerous partners around the world, a network that forms a pillar for the U.S. national defense strategy and the broader international system. Collective security agreements enable the United States to project its military power overseas to counter threats closer to adversaries' centers of power and allow the United States to use allied territory to stop aggression closer to its source, while also keeping the conflict as far from the homeland as possible. As the bipartisan and unanimous 2023 Strategic Posture Commission noted in its final report, the stakes for the United States and its allies and partners could not be higher when it comes to meeting the deterrence (including extended deterrence) and assurance requirements for the emerging two nuclear peer threat environment.[8] For many frontline allies and partners, the risks are, simply put, existential. For the United States, the international system that it helped create and lead, which has benefited so many both at home and abroad, is the primary target for China and Russia, in cooperation with their regional partners North Korea and Iran. They aim to weaken it by amplifying existing discord between the United States and its allies and partners, while trying to create new opportunities for division through coercive and militaristic actions. The

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[8] Madelyn R. Creedon and Jon L. Kyl, Chair and Vice Chair, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), pp. 3-6, available at https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

United States, for its part, has in some cases contributed to the discord within its alliances and partnerships by its own actions—a circumstance that adversaries are happy to exploit to cause further disruption. It is imperative for U.S. officials to understand why and how these structural challenges to U.S. alliances and partnerships come about and their implications for U.S. policy, strategy, and force posture.

Both the 2018 *National Defense Strategy Summary* document and the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* recognized the foundational role that allies play in the broader U.S. defense strategy but make few remarks about how the United States will likely need to rely on allies to an even greater extent when faced with the threats of opportunistic or coordinated aggression by China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran.[9] The harsh geographic and force posture reality facing the United States is that the military forces required to defeat an adversary in one theater cannot be used to deter, much less defeat, another adversary in a second theater that is contemplating opportunistic aggression. In this scenario, U.S. allies' and partners' capabilities and political wills would have to carry a far greater deterrence burden than would otherwise be the case.[10]

Indeed, what is worse is that the United States may be in the unenviable position of trying to address long-

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[9] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), pp. 8-10, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf; and, U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), pp. 14-16, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF.

[10] For additional discussion of the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression, see, Costlow, *Deterring the New Pacing Threats*, op. cit.

standing allied concerns about the adequacy of the U.S. force posture for credible extended deterrence threats *while simultaneously* asking those same allies to take on a greater part of the deterrence burden because U.S. resources are inadequate. These discordant messages from the United States may prove too much for some allies who might then, at best, scale back their expectations for cooperation with the United States, or, at worst, pursue what they believe might be a more effective long-term solution by beginning an indigenous nuclear weapons program. The dichotomy between the United States seeking to assure allies that they can rely on Washington, while simultaneously signaling that Washington will need to rely more on them to combat the threat of opportunistic or coordinated aggression will place greater pressure on all parties to understand each other's threat perceptions, deterrence requirements, and ability to meet those deterrence requirements in multiple scenarios.

The structural problems of opportunistic and coordinated aggression that face the United States and its allies are exacerbated even more by China's and Russia's determined strategies to undermine U.S. alliances. Indeed, both China and Russia are adept at finding ways to sow discord among U.S. allies and partners. China's playbook in this regard often entails building up trade partnerships with U.S. allies and partners to the point where Beijing can leverage its significant economic ties to pressure the ally or partner to adopt positions on China that are out of step with Washington. As Russia does not have the same level of economic might or integration with U.S. allies and partners as China does, it typically resorts to cruder means of creating divisions within the U.S. alliance structure, such as overt nuclear threats, sabotage, and extensive information warfare campaigns. China and Russia both recognize the asymmetric advantage that allies and partners provide the United States and have tailored their coercive political and

military strategies to minimize that U.S. advantage when and where possible.

China's and Russia's efforts especially at dividing U.S. alliances, however, are not limited to those U.S. allies and partners closest to them. Indeed, China and Russia are clearly building up their abilities to kinetically and non-kinetically strike the U.S. homeland to achieve a particular set of politico-military goals, namely: to deter, disrupt, or even defeat U.S. attempts to come to the aid of its allies before or during a military conflict, ideally in ways that exert pressure on U.S. political leaders to abandon their security commitments to particular allies and partners.[11] Since the U.S. national defense strategy clearly relies on projecting military power from the homeland to allies and partners overseas, it is logical that China and Russia would base their coercive strategies on disrupting the lynchpin of the U.S. strategy: alliances and partnerships. Understanding the root causes for allied and partner dissatisfaction with the United States is thus imperative to both better tailoring U.S. assurance strategies as well as countering Chinese and Russian attempts to sow intra-alliance division.

This chapter therefore categorizes and summarizes the apparent reasons why and how some allies and partners are distancing themselves from the United States or seeking further assurances. First, some allies and partners appear primarily driven by domestic pressures or internal factors. Second, some allies and partners appear to be hedging their bets, or playing the United States off of China, Russia, or both, as a way to advance their own national goals. Third, some allies and partners appear to genuinely prefer the U.S. security commitment but are unsure of certain aspects of U.S. credibility. The latter two categories of allies and

[11] For more on the coercive nature of these threats, and the capabilities behind them, see, Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., pp. 11-20, 65-67.

partners will be the focus of this chapter as they are likely to be more responsive to U.S. diplomatic and military relation-building efforts simply because the United States has a greater ability to modify its own actions versus influencing an ally's domestic base.

The second half of the chapter summarizes how these three categories of allies and partners impact how the United States should assess the adequacy of its deterrence and assurance efforts. First, there is a significant opportunity cost for the United States as it seeks to repair damaged alliances and partnerships; the time and resources spent on repairing these relations cannot be spent on countering the shared threats. Second, non-nuclear U.S. allies and partners may seek to retain the benefits of an alliance with the United States while at the same time supplementing their national military capabilities in ways the United States would vehemently object to, namely, obtaining their own nuclear weapons program—presenting a difficult diplomatic dilemma.

Domestic Priorities as Restraints on Alliances and Partnerships

States' leaderships must always balance their external/international goals with their internal/domestic priorities. Those state leaders who have formal or informal alliances or partnerships with the United States are no exception. The United States cannot expect allies or partners to place their foreign policy priorities above their domestic priorities at every point, and in some cases those priorities may be in conflict—leading to a worsening relationship with the United States, though by no fault of Washington.

Taiwan, for example, struggled until recently to raise its defense budget and adapt its conscription practices due to domestic resistance, leading to increased tensions with the

United States.[12] While Taiwan has a volunteer military, it also uses conscription to provide basic military training to a broad swath of young males—with refresher courses for those who have finished their service every other year.[13] These requirements do not have much public support, however, which has led successive Taipei administrations (until recently) to reduce the required training time and increase the number of available deferrals.[14] Experts in both Taiwan and the United States have noted the inadequacy of the military training program, and although Taiwan appears to be reforming its practices and requirements, Taipei must weigh the unpopularity of the programs against its desire to maintain its partnership with the United States and meeting its security goals.[15] In this case, the United States has limited ability to influence Taiwan's domestic politics—but it is an illustration of how changing incentives within an ally's or partner's state can affect U.S. expectations and strategy requirements.

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[12] John Dotson, "Taiwan Announces an Increased Defense Budget for 2024," *Global Taiwan Institute*, September 20, 2023, available at https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/09/taiwan-announces-an-increased-defense-budget-for-2024/; and, Yaroslav Trofimov and Joyu Wang, "Taiwan's Impossible Choice: Be Ukraine or Hong Kong," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2023, available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-china-ukraine-russia-hong-kong-military-war-517b87d.

[13] John Dotson, "Taiwan Initiates Its New One-Year Military Conscription Program," *Global Taiwan Institute*, February 4, 2024, available at https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/02/taiwan-initiates-its-new-one-year-military-conscription-program/.

[14] Loc cit.

[15] See especially Chapter 3 in, Keith B. Payne, et al, "Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2022), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Special-Issue-final.pdf.

The Why and How of Hedging

Among U.S. allies and partners worldwide, there is a select group that may most accurately be described as "hedging" their security commitments from the United States by cooperating, to varying degrees, with U.S. adversaries like China and Russia. The term "hedging," as it is used in this chapter, requires cooperation with an adversarial third party and should not be confused with the broader meaning of "hedging," such as an ally exploring the potential for an independent nuclear arsenal while still retaining an alliance with the United States. U.S. allies like Turkey, Hungary, Slovakia, and Israel, and partner India, have different reasons for keeping their alliances and partnerships with the United States but still cooperating with China and/or Russia in particular areas because they see such actions as a net gain in their security, and not costly enough to cause the United States to reconsider its diplomatic relationship with them.

Turkey, for instance, has long chafed at what it perceives as U.S. meddling in its internal affairs, with issues ranging from disagreements over economic tariffs to the origins of the 2016 failed coup d'état.[16] Turkey has responded by openly pursuing Russian air and missile defense systems while also seeking the U.S. F-35 fighter-jet. Hungary, for its part, joined with Turkey in opposing Finland's and Sweden's plan to join NATO while also opposing European Union sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine—likely due to its dependence on Russian natural gas.[17] Moreover, Hungary is seeking

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[16] For more on the disagreements and responses, see Steven A. Cook, *Neither Friend nor Foe: The Future of U.S.-Turkey Relations* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, November 2018), pp. 3-6, available at https://www.cfr.org/report/future-u.s.-turkey.

[17] Henry Ridgewell, "Hungary Appears to Be Strengthening Ties With Russia, China," *Voice of America*, February 23, 2024, available at

improved ties with China—with a recent joint pledge calling the relationship an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership."[18] Slovakia has opposed imposing more sanctions on Russia and remains dependent on Russian energy.[19] Israel likewise has opposed sanctioning Russia over its invasion of Ukraine and has broadly refused to send weapons to Ukraine to defend itself against Russian aggression; yet, it appears that Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack and Russia's subsequent supportive rhetoric for Palestine have angered Israeli leaders.[20] Finally, despite years of focused U.S. diplomatic efforts to influence India away from partnering with Russia, New Delhi continues to purchase vast amounts Russian oil and military systems, recently becoming Russia's "number one export destination."[21] In return, India has shied away from publicly condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

These states have all hedged their bets by cooperating with Russia, China, or both while still seeking to retain their alliance or partnership, and the potential security benefits thereof, with the United States. In these cases, the United

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https://www.voanews.com/a/hungary-appears-to-be-strengthening-ties-with-russia-china/7499682.html.

[18] Andrew Higgins, "In Budapest, Xi Hails China's 'Deep Friendship' With Hungary," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2024, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/09/world/europe/xi-jinping-china-hungary-orban.html.

[19] Jason Hovet, "Slovakia will block EU's Russia sanctions if they harm national interests, Fico says," *Reuters*, June 8, 2025, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/pm-fico-says-slovakia-will-block-eu-sanctions-russia-if-they-harm-national-2025-06-08/.

[20] "Russian-Israeli Relations Crumble over the Gaza War: Analysts," *AFP*, December 12, 2023, available at https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231220-russian-israeli-relations-crumble-over-gaza-war-analysts.

[21] Derek Grossman, "U.S.-India Ties Remain Fundamentally Fragile," *RAND*, April 7, 2024, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/04/us-india-ties-remain-fundamentally-fragile.html.

States has only limited leverage to affect the leadership calculations of these hedging states as they are only partly dissatisfied with the United States and often wish to serve as a bridge between the liberal democratic West and the authoritarian systems of China and Russia. To the extent U.S. allies continue this type of behavior, it may progressively weaken the larger alliance structures, like NATO, by lowering their ability to respond effectively to coercive military acts.[22]

Cooperative but Cautious Allies and Partners

The final broad category of U.S. allies and partners that can be described as dissatisfied in some measure with the United States are states that appear to clearly prefer U.S. security guarantees over any type of cooperation with China or Russia, but who believe U.S. commitments are becoming insufficiently credible. This lack of credibility may arise from an ally perceiving the United States does not have the requisite capabilities, strategy, political will, or some combination of these factors to meet the range of dynamic threats facing both the ally and the United States itself. In these instances, U.S. allies and partners are less likely to seek Chinese and Russian cooperation and more likely to supplement those areas in which they believe the United States is lacking, assuming of course the United States cannot or chooses not to resolve the issue itself. Thus, when allies perceive a lack of credible extended deterrence threats from the United States, they are more likely to seek ways to increase their security themselves—again, absent successful U.S. attempts to address allied concerns.

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[22] Eric S. Edelman, David Manning, and Franklin C. Miller, "NATO's Decision Process has an Achilles' Heel," *The Atlantic Council*, March 12, 2024, available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/natos-decision-process-has-an-achilles-heel/.

South Korea, for instance, has sought and received increased attention from the U.S. government on a range of nuclear weapons-focused activities, including joint planning, deeper dialogue, and demonstrations of force.[23] These U.S. actions almost certainly stem from the South Korean government's belief that U.S. extended deterrence threats were not sufficient to meet the type and scale of the threats they perceived, while the United States, for its part, seeks to quell popular domestic support within South Korea for initiating an indigenous nuclear weapons program.[24] Even within historically anti-nuclear Germany, there is a growing debate about whether a German nuclear weapons program, or perhaps one headed by the European Union, could strengthen deterrence in light of perceived U.S. unreliability.[25]

Summary

Washington's diverse and geographically dispersed array of alliances and partnerships are indeed an asymmetric advantage against China and Russia. Yet, that diversity also

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[23] The White House, "Washington Declaration," *The White House*, April 26, 2023, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/.

[24] See Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, *Comparing Allied Public Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence* (Seoul, SK: The Asan Institute, March 27, 2024), available at https://en.asaninst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Issue-Brief-Comparing-Allied-Public-Confidence-in-U.S.-Extended-Nuclear-Deterrence.pdf.

[25] See, for instance, Michael Rühle, "German Musings About a European Nuclear Deterrent," *Information Series*, No. 571 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, January 3, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/IS-571.pdf; and, Gustav Meibauer and Christopher David LaRoche, "German Atomwaffen and the Superweapon Trap," *War on the Rocks*, May 8, 2024, available at https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/german-atomwaffen-and-the-superweapon-trap/.

presents its own unique set of challenges. The reasons why some allies and partners are dissatisfied with their relations with the United States range from domestic-driven debates to wariness of relying on U.S. security guarantees based on previous leaders and policies—meaning that the ways allies and partners supplement their security are likely to be as varied as the reasons they are seeking greater assurance. Indeed, in some cases, the United States faces competing demands from allies on opposite sides of the world. Germany, for example, was concerned in 2022 that the U.S. "pivot to Asia" would mean reduced security for NATO, yet that same "pivot" was part of U.S. efforts to assure its allies and partners in Asia.[26] There is growing evidence that U.S. allies now perceive the possibility that a state like China or Russia may take opportunity to act on its revisionist aims while the United States is engaged in conflict elsewhere, i.e., opportunistic aggression.[27]

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[26] See, for instance, Matthew Karnitschnig, "Germany's Pivot from America," *Politico*, January 20, 2022, available at https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-pivot-from-america/.

[27] See, for instance, Song Sang-ho, "Yoon sees Greater Likelihood of N. Korean Provocation in case of Taiwan Conflict," *Yonhap News Agency*, September 26, 2022, available at https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220926002900325; and, Kyung-joo Jeon and Hanbyeol Sohn, "Mind the Gap: 5 Debates to Address in the South Korea-US Deterrence Posturem," *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2024, available at https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/mind-the-gap-5-points-of-divergence-in-the-south-korea-us-alliance/; and, Markus Garlauskas, as quoted in, "Experts React: Are the US and South Korea Following Through on the Washington Declaration?," *The Atlantic Council*, November 15, 2023, available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-are-the-us-and-south-korea-following-through-on-the-washington-declaration/; and, Jyri Lavikainen, *China as the Second Nuclear Peer of the United States: Implications for Deterrence in Europe* (Helsinki, FI: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, February 2024), available at https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/bp383_china-as-the-second-nuclear-peer-of-the-united-states.pdf.

The Strategic Consequences of Degraded Alliances and Partnerships

The United States has successfully led an international network of alliances for decades, managing the inevitable highs and lows that come with diverse state leaderships, strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and more. Because of this relative success, there is comparatively less analytical focus on the potential consequences for degraded alliances and partnerships and the effects on the United States. Indeed, the emerging two nuclear peer threat environment will likely be uniquely stressful on U.S. alliances and partnerships as China and Russia contemplate opportunistic or coordinated aggression in geographically distant theaters to maximize their chances of success.

This section, therefore, places the U.S. alliance and partnership dilemma in the context of this dynamic new threat landscape. First, there is a necessary, but real, opportunity cost in American diplomats addressing allied concerns about the developing structural problems—the time and resources spent "getting on the same page" about the nature of the threat are time and resources that are not spent on countering that threat. Second, given the intra-alliance and external pressures, and potential allied perceptions that the United States will be unable to meet the growing deterrence and assurance requirements, allies may seek alternative means for strengthening their security situation, including potentially nuclear proliferation. Third, should the United States find itself in a conflict with Russia and/or China in the future, weak or degraded U.S. alliances and partnerships may cause some U.S. allies to contribute to the war effort only sparingly, or worse, stay neutral, in a bid to hedge their bets against a U.S. loss. Suffice to say that such outcomes would fundamentally increase risks and alter the U.S. national defense strategy.

The Opportunity Costs of Repairing Relationships

The immediate post-Cold War environment was a boon to U.S. alliances and partnerships around the world as NATO membership grew and the U.S. led system of free trade among nations allowed economic ties to further strengthen newly forged political ties. Yet, the United States was a victim of its own success in this regard as it was late, relative to its allies, in recognizing the revanchist aims of China and Russia. As the scholar Colin S. Gray wrote in 1990, "When the peace is not challenged, deterrence can seem to be easily achieved."[28] The logic can apply to U.S. efforts to lend credibility to its extended deterrence threats as well, an easier task when there is seemingly little to be deterred. Yet, as the United States withdrew and eliminated many of its regional-based nuclear capabilities and sized its conventional forces for a "one war" standard in the early post-Cold War years, it has more recently (re)discovered that adjusting the U.S. force posture to increased deterrence and assurance requirements is both costly and a lengthy process—leading some allies to perceive potential gaps in the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence threats on their behalf.

Repairing these perceived gaps, whether through the "hardware" of new or more military forces or through the "software" of alliance meetings and planning, is necessary but time-consuming. Regrettably though, the time and resources the United States spends forging agreement on the nature of the threats and the associated deterrence requirements are time and resources that cannot be spent countering those threats. In essence, the United States and the allies and partners with whom it has strained relationships are playing catchup to the advancing threats,

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[28] Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 10.

like China and Russia, who are not nearly so concerned with crafting their defense strategies to match allied deterrence requirements. Trust between the United States and its allies is more easily lost than won, and factors like the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, former President Biden's perceived overriding fear of escalation, and President Trump's perceived harsh language, at least to some, on alliances all may contribute to allied anxieties about whether they can count on U.S. security guarantees. Addressing these serious concerns in ways that allies find credible and tailored to their unique deterrence and assurance requirements is a necessary, but time-consuming precondition to cooperating effectively against China and Russia.

Nuclear Proliferation as a Gap-Filler

As noted previously, non-nuclear U.S. allies in Europe and Asia may seek their own independent nuclear weapons programs to fill what they perceive as a gap in their deterrence capabilities that they believe the United States cannot or may not reliably fill with its nuclear arsenal. Most analyses of this topic end the discussion noting that such an outcome would be detrimental to U.S. national interests and a clear failure of U.S. nonproliferation policy. While true, the implications for the continued alliance between the United States and the new nuclear power extend well beyond the ally's initial decision to pursue a nuclear weapons program. For instance, the ally may still sincerely seek to maintain an alliance with the United States while, in its mind, reluctantly pursuing its own nuclear weapons program. Relations with the United States would, in this case, obviously be damaged enough to cause the ally to pursue its own nuclear weapons program, but U.S. policymakers would need to decide how the United States should respond, and to what degree, perhaps on a case-by-

case basis. All U.S. allies are important, but some may be especially important (that is, relevant) in the threat environment at the time of their decision to potentially pursue nuclear weapons—a factor that U.S. policymakers must weigh in deciding how to balance alliance benefits and nonproliferation goals.

This calculation becomes especially agonizing when the ally or partner is hedging in their relationship with the United States by also pursuing improved ties with China, Russia, or both. The prospect of inadvertently pushing a new nuclear-armed erstwhile ally into the arms of adversaries through punishing nonproliferation sanctions may appear too costly for some U.S. policymakers. On the other hand, allowing allies and partners to flaunt nonproliferation norms with impunity, especially with other potential proliferant allies watching, may also appear unacceptable. To reemphasize, the potential for opportunistic or coordinated aggression from Moscow and Beijing and the associated increased value of U.S. allies and partners to counter those threats, overshadows all of these extended deterrence and assurance decisions facing U.S. policymakers.

Weaker Support in the Hour of Need

A final major risk of degraded or weakened U.S. alliances and partnerships is that allies and partners may be less willing to support the United States in a conflict against China, Russia, or both. Allies or partners that are uncertain as to whether the United States will win in a conflict against China, Russia, or both, may be unwilling to commit significant resources in defense of an alliance that it views as less-than-ideal for its security needs under some circumstances. Indeed, public polling in Europe indicates that a sizable majority of the population would, as of 2021, prefer to stay neutral if the United States were to enter into

a conflict with China.[29] Ironically, in a future conflict, the United States may be on the receiving end of military aid from allies with varying levels of reluctance and restraints placed on the use of their weapons—a dynamic at play each day with the roles reversed in Ukraine and the United States.

Again, the potential implications of reluctant allies or partners on the U.S. defense strategy are vast. Some allies, for example, may perceive the United States launching military attacks from their territory to be too potentially costly should the adversary respond with strikes on their homelands. Other allies may lend some military aid, but place restrictive conditions on its use, such as the types of targets it can be launched against or their location. Or, in another potential scenario, allies and partners may be willing to only lend token amounts of military aid to the United States in a bid to improve its post-war position with the adversary should the United States lose the conflict.

Conclusion

An unprecedented combination of factors in the emerging threat environment will likely stress U.S. alliances and partnerships to degrees and in ways not seen since the Cold War. For some allies and partners that must bow to domestic pressures and not cooperate fully with the United States, there is little Washington can do to improve the situation. For other allies and partners that are perhaps cooperating with China and Russia to hedge their bets, or for those who still value U.S. security commitments but question U.S. credibility in some pertinent cases, there is more the United States can do to shore up its assurance and

[29] Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "The Crisis of American Power: How Europeans see Biden's America," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 19, 2021, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/.

extended deterrence efforts. Yet, there are significant costs in time and resources to restrengthen diplomatic relations—costs that are expended playing catch up to advancing threats.

The United States, in fact, may soon face the difficult task of seeking to assure allies that the U.S. strategy and its capabilities are sufficient for their security, while simultaneously signaling to those same allies that the United States will need to rely more on them to deter and defeat the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression. China and Russia recognize the foundational importance of allies and partners to the U.S. defense strategy, which is why they are actively pursuing those capabilities needed to disrupt U.S. alliances globally: from the U.S. homeland, over the oceans, and in the allied homeland. The scope and severity of these threats can easily become overwhelming, but, the sooner U.S. and allied officials recognize these realities, the sooner they can tailor their deterrence and assurance strategies for an effective response.

Chapter 3. An Alliance, if you can keep it: Aligning U.S.-ROK Strategies and Requirements

Introduction

The United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) recently celebrated the 70th anniversary of their signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty; however, this anniversary finds the alliance strained in the face of external threats and internal domestic political divisions within the United States and South Korea.[30] Washington and Seoul signed the "Washington Declaration" in 2023, a document focused on reinforcing the nuclear weapons-based foundations of the U.S.-ROK alliance, to provide greater credibility to U.S. extended deterrence threats and assurance efforts—yet recent public polling in South Korea indicates even these additional measures are generally viewed as insufficient to meet the growing threats.[31] This chapter examines the origins of some of the most apparent factors causing division, or dissatisfaction within the ROK about the alliance and how the United States has sought to mitigate those concerns. A better understanding of ROK concerns, combined with judgment on the apparent efficacy of U.S. responses to those concerns, can aid U.S. defense officials

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[30] "Defense Vision of the U.S.-ROK Alliance," *Defense.gov*, November 13, 2023, available at https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3586528/defense-vision-of-the-us-rok-alliance/.

[31] "Washington Declaration," *TheWhiteHouse.gov*, April 26, 2023, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/; and, Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, *Comparing Allied Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence* (Seoul, SK: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 27, 2024), available at https://en.asaninst.org/contents/comparing-allied-public-confidence-in-u-s-extended-nuclear-deterrence/.

and policymakers in repairing the U.S.-ROK alliance and tailoring both its extended deterrence and assurance efforts for the intended effects.

This chapter proceeds by first examining three of the most prominent apparent strains on the U.S.-ROK alliance: the worsening threat environment, and North Korea in particular; ROK concerns about the adequacy of U.S. extended deterrence threats; and ROK concerns about U.S. political commitment to the alliance. After examining these external and internal strains on the U.S.-ROK alliance, this chapter briefly outlines the implications, or potential consequences, of continued ROK discontent. Finally, this chapter examines the ways in which the United States has sought to strengthen the credibility of its extended deterrence threats and assurance efforts regarding South Korea—with some initial data on the sufficiency of these actions and potential additional efforts U.S. officials may consider.

Worsening Threat Environment

A major external factor apparently straining the U.S.-ROK alliance is the worsening threat environment, and in particular, the threat from North Korea. The ROK military's assessment of the North Korean threat is stark:

> North Korea is exploring a military strategy focused on surprise attacks, combination warfare, blitzkriegs and is pursuing various strategies and tactics with [sic] based on its nuclear weapons strategy. While strengthening nuclear weapons and WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction), missiles, long-range artillery, submarines, and asymmetric forces such as special warfare units and cyber and electronic warfare units, North Korea is also improving the performance of a [sic] select conventional weapons. Under the goal of

> advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, North Korea is continuing to conduct test launches.[32]

The South Korean threat perception, understandably, is focused on two aspects of the North Korean threat: its theory of military victory and the operational means that support it. In this case, it is the potential for a highly destructive North Korean surprise attack that perhaps utilizes nuclear and/or chemical and biological weapons, combined with the widespread use of conventional weapons like artillery.

The U.S. threat perception, again, understandably, is focused on the potential for a North Korean strike against the homeland, be it Guam, Hawaii, Alaska, or the continental United States. As Gen. Gregory Guillot, Commander, U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), recently testified:

> Ballistic missiles that the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] has successfully tested since 2022 include a new and more capable liquid-propellant ICBM as well as the country's first solid-propellant ICBM, which will further compound warning challenges due to its smaller logistical footprint. Both systems likely have sufficient boost to deliver a nuclear payload to the entire United States… I am concerned that Kim Jong Un's growing ICBM stockpile could approach our capacity to defend North America—a challenge that will only expand in the coming years if Kim Jong Un looks to add multiple reentry vehicles to his missiles and transition his ICBM

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[32] Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, *2022 Defense White Paper* (Seoul, SK: Ministry of National Defense, 2022), p. 25, available at https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblictn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202307280406019810.pdf.

> program from research and development to serialized production and deployment.[33]

The different emphases in the South Korean and U.S. military officials' description of the North Korean threat are perhaps indicative of why the alliance has required additional attention from its national leaders. While South Korea focuses on a coercive or surprise nuclear attack from North Korea, U.S. military officials in their testimony do not share that same focus, even in the testimony of, until recently, the most senior U.S. military official on the peninsula, Commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), Gen. Paul LaCamera.[34]

In addition to threats from North Korea, ROK officials increasingly are discussing China's aggressive stance toward South Korea and its growing military capabilities.[35] Since China remains South Korea's largest trading partner,

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[33] Gregory M. Guillot, *Statement of General Gregory M. Guillot, United States Air Force, Commander, United States North Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command* (Washington, D.C.: House Armed Servies Committee, March 12, 2024), pp. 8-9, available at https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/NNC%202024%20Posture%20Statement_HASC_FINAL.pdf.

[34] Paul J. LaCamera, *Statement of Commander, United Nations Command; Commander, United States-Republic of Korea Combined Forces Command; Commander, United States Forces Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, March 21, 2024), available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/lacamera_statement_3212024.pdf.

[35] See, for instance, See, for example, Jacob Stokes and Joshua Fitt, *Peninsula Plus: Enhancing U.S.–South Korea Alliance Cooperation on China, Multilateralism, and Military and Security Technologies* (Washington, D.C.: CNAS, March 2023), pp. 3-4, available at https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/PeninsulaPlus_Final.pdf; and, John J. Hamre and Joseph S. Nye Jr., Co-Chairs, *Recommendations on North Korea Policy and Extended Deterrence* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, January 2023), p. 15, available at https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-01/230119_Korean_Commission_2023.pdf?VersionId=93zTcEue3STUbr6v8IfjQ6z6B_3mNTr4.

ROK officials rarely make direct reference to their unease about China's assertiveness. It is clear from multiple news accounts, however, that they see the possibility of a PRC-U.S. war over Taiwan, and perhaps opportunistic aggression by North Korea at that time, as a growing threat to South Korean security.[36] Additionally, Russia's recent mutual defense agreement with North Korea signals a further worsening of South Korea's perceived security threats—especially the prospect of a militarily more capable North Korea aided by Russian technical assistance.[37]

ROK Concerns about U.S. Credibility

The worsening threat environment described above exacerbates the second major factor placing pressure on the U.S.-ROK alliance, ROK concerns about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence threats. For instance, ROK officials have reportedly been consistent in their opposition to the United States adopting a policy of "no first use"—a commitment to never employ nuclear weapons first in a conflict.[38] Although the United States has not adopted such

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[36] Ibid.; see also, Soyoung Kim, Jack Kim and Josh Smith, "Exclusive: South Korea's Yoon Warns of Unprecedented Response to North Korea Nuclear Test, calls on China to do more," *Reuters*, November 29, 2022, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-says-china-can-change-north-koreas-behaviour-if-it-wants-2022-11-28/; and, Andrew Restuccia, Vivian Salama, and Catherine Lucey, "U.S., Japan and South Korea Boost Alliance to Counter China, North Korea," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2023, available at https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/u-s-japan-and-south-korea-boost-alliance-to-counter-china-north-korea-50772c41.

[37] The Associated Press, "With its New Pact with North Korea, Russia Raises the Stakes with the West over Ukraine," *AP News*, June 23, 2024, available at https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-kim-north-korea-pact-556492779b6a32c4cf74b992741d91a8.

[38] David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Obama Unlikely to vow No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2016, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/science/obama-

a policy, Presidents Obama and Biden stated that their ultimate goals were to eventually achieve a "sole purpose" declaratory policy—a commitment very similar to a "no first use policy—when the security environment allowed.[39] Given the fact that South Korea and its capital Seoul are well within range of North Korea's substantial non-nuclear arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), it is little wonder that ROK officials are reportedly concerned about the prospect of the United States refusing to employ any portion of its nuclear arsenal in defense of ROK sovereignty, unless the DPRK makes such a move first. As the unanimous and bipartisan report of the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission concluded from its interactions with allied representatives, "Allies expressed an aversion to any major change in the current U.S. nuclear declaratory policy of calculated ambiguity."[40] Thus, in what appears to be becoming a habit of U.S. presidents, continuing to resurface the ambition to achieve a "no first use" or "sole purpose"

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unlikely-to-vow-no-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons.html; and, Demetri Sevastopulo and Henry Foy, "Allies Lobby Biden to Prevent shift to 'no first use' of Nuclear Arms," *Financial Times*, October 29, 2021, available at https://www.ft.com/content/8b96a60a-759b-4972-ae89-c8ffbb36878e.

[39] For President Obama, see, U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 2010), p. 16, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf; and, for President Biden, see, U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 9, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF. For more on the purported distinctions between "sole purpose" and "no first use" policies, see, Matthew R. Costlow, *A Net Assessment of 'No First Use' and 'Sole Purpose' Nuclear Policies* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, July 2021), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/OP-7-for-web-final.pdf.

[40] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 75.

nuclear policy in the face of adamant South Korean, and other allied, objections—and plainly worsening threat environment—the potential for a change in U.S. nuclear declaratory policy is likely to remain a persistent irritant in the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Yet, even if the United States were to continue rejecting changes to its nuclear declaratory policy, it appears ROK and U.S. officials still diverge on how to respond to a North Korean nuclear attack on South Korea. ROK officials appear to be seeking a "shared nuclear strategy" with the United States to deter North Korea's nuclear threats, but with greater assurances that the United States would employ nuclear weapons in case of a North Korean nuclear strike.[41] Indeed, South Korean defense analysts note that, "Many South Korean experts want the United States to make a declaration that it would use nuclear weapons in response to a North Korean nuclear attack because they believe such a U.S. statement could become the strongest deterrence message to Pyongyang," yet the United States is reportedly loathe to make such an explicit commitment given the president's sole authority for nuclear employment.[42] The diverging preferences between U.S. and ROK officials on response options extends below the nuclear threshold as well, with ROK officials favoring disproportionate responses to North Korean provocation, while U.S. officials reportedly favor less potentially-escalatory responses.[43]

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[41] Kim Eun-jung, "S. Korea's Defense Ministry and Pentagon to Lead 3rd Nuclear Consultative Meeting," *Yonhap News Agency*, February 14, 2024, available at https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240214003000315.

[42] Kyung-joo Jeon and Hanbyeol Sohn, "Mind the Gap: 5 Debates to Address in the South Korea-US Deterrence Posturem," *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2024, available at https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/mind-the-gap-5-points-of-divergence-in-the-south-korea-us-alliance/.

[43] Timothy W. Martin, "Top U.S. General Sees Changing Nuclear Threat From North Korea," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2024, available at https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/top-u-s-general-sees-changing-nuclear-threat-from-north-korea-4788270a?mod=hp_lista_pos1.

Indeed, the latest joint U.S.-ROK statement on nuclear deterrence is carefully worded to not commit a U.S. President to a nuclear response in the case of a North Korean nuclear attack.[44]

Unless U.S. and ROK officials can agree on a shared strategy for deterring and responding to North Korean provocations and potential conflict, then the diverging preferences will likely weaken cooperation and potentially reduce the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence threats—both in the eyes of North Korea and South Korea.

Another ROK concern is centered on the U.S. nuclear forces that underpin its extended deterrence threats. The 2023 Washington Declaration's focus on U.S. nuclear capabilities and how they relate to extended deterrence for South Korea is likely highly indicative of the value that ROK officials place on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The fact that the Biden Administration, whose stated goal in the *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* was to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, agreed to more visible displays of U.S. nuclear forces and greater integration with South Korea strongly suggests that ROK concerns about U.S. extended deterrence were significant enough to overcome White House reluctance to signal with nuclear forces.

There are also indications outside of the public U.S.-ROK alliance declarations that South Korea has significant concerns about the adequacy of the U.S. nuclear arsenal to support sufficiently credible extended deterrence threats. As the former Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

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[44] "Joint Statement by President Joseph R. Biden of the United States of America and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea on U.S.-ROK Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations on the Korean Peninsula," *The White House*, July 11, 2024, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/11/joint-statement-by-president-joseph-r-biden-of-the-united-states-of-america-and-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-on-u-s-rok-guidelines-for-nuclear-deterrence-and-nuclear-operations-o/.

(INDOPACOM) ADM Harry Harris Jr. stated recently, "Our allies don't trust the United States enough on extended nuclear deterrence... when they believe that we're not going to extend our nuclear deterrence to them, that's when they will proliferate and build their own nuclear weapons. And you can't blame them for that. So I think it's imperative that we continue to underscore our commitment to extended nuclear deterrent [sic] of our allies, that we've provided that deterrent too. Japan, and Korea, Australia come to mind. I think that we must resource completely, whatever it takes, our nuclear triad."[45] Additionally, the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission concluded that "[the] U.S. theater nuclear force posture should be urgently modified in order to… address allied concerns regarding extended deterrence"—again, indicating that there is a significant "hardware" component that underpins whether allies like South Korea believe U.S. extended deterrence threats are sufficiently credible.[46]

ROK Concerns about U.S. Political Will

Even if the United States were able to assuage ROK concerns about the sufficiency of the U.S. strategic posture supporting extended deterrence threats, there would still remain significant ROK doubt about the U.S. political will to support the alliance as it enters an era of more dangerous threats. ROK concerns about U.S. political will are not confined solely to the question of whether the United States will come to its aid if attacked by North Korea, as overriding

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[45] Harry B. Harris Jr., as quoted in, Eric Sayers, moderator, *Peace in the Pacific: A Conversation with Former Indo-Pacific Commanders* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, October 16, 2023), p. 8, available at https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/231016-Peace-in-the-Pacific-A-Conversation-with-Former-Indo-Pacific-Commanders-Transcript-1.pdf?x91208.

[46] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 48.

an issue as that is; instead, these concerns appear to extend into the realm of inter-Korean diplomatic relations. For example, South Korean officials are concerned that U.S. policy towards North Korea's nuclear weapons program could shift from "denuclearization" to "freeze"—potentially the result of a potential Trump Administration policy change that could conceivably allow a North Korean arsenal under "certain conditions."[47]

On the larger question of whether the United States would come to the aid of South Korea in the event of a conflict with North Korea, there are a host of factors at play. While President Biden did support the Washington Declaration, some in South Korea are concerned that Ukraine's experience in asking for U.S. support and not receiving enough could happen again during a conflict between North Korea and South Korea.[48] Indeed, even if the United States did come to South Korea's aid in such a conflict, the remarks by then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Austin disapproving of Ukraine's targeting of Russian oil refineries raises the possibility that South Korea may be hamstrung by American domestic politics in how it crafts its response to North Korean attacks.[49]

Moreover, there are substantial ROK concerns about the U.S. willingness to bear significant costs should deterrence against North Korea, or another adversary, fail. As multiple

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[47] See, for example, Yonhap, "Defense Chief Downplays Concerns over US Possibly Taking Softer Stance on NK Nukes," *The Korea Herald*, February 22, 2024, available at https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240222050727.

[48] See, for example, Kim Won-soo, "Looming Nuclear Turmoil," *The Korea Times*, March 6, 2024, available at https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2024/03/137_370136.html.

[49] Peter Martin and Roxana Tiron, "US Slams Strikes on Russia Oil Refineries as Risk to Oil Markets," *Bloomberg*, April 9, 2024, available at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-09/us-slams-strikes-on-russia-oil-refineries-as-risk-to-oil-markets.

regional analysts have written, there is growing concern among ROK officials about the possibility of opportunistic aggression—that is, the United States might become involved in a conflict with China over Taiwan, at which point North Korea could decide to attack South Korea while the United States is less prepared to come to South Korea's aid.[50] ROK President Yoon even stated that in the event of a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan, "… the top priority for Korea and the U.S.-Korea alliance on the Korean Peninsula would be based on our robust defense posture. We must deal with the North Korean threat first."[51] In this case, the United States may not be willing to bear the costs of a two-front conflict and would have to make difficult prioritization choices that could upend the U.S.-ROK alliance. Or, similarly, South Korean analysts have noticed the North Korean ICBM threat to the U.S. homeland could soon outpace the limits of the U.S. homeland missile defense system—which again potentially raises doubts about whether the United States would still be willing to absorb costs within the U.S. homeland in defense of South Korea.[52]

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[50] See, for instance, Song Sang-ho, "Yoon sees Greater Likelihood of N. Korean Provocation in case of Taiwan Conflict," *Yonhap News Agency*, September 26, 2022, available at https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220926002900325; and, Kyung-joo and Hanbyeol, "Mind the Gap," op. cit.; and, Markus Garlauskas, as quoted in, "Experts React: Are the US and South Korea Following Through on the Washington Declaration?," *The Atlantic Council*, November 15, 2023, available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-are-the-us-and-south-korea-following-through-on-the-washington-declaration/.

[51] Song, "Yoon sees Greater Likelihood of N. Korean Provocation," op. cit.

[52] Kyung-joo and Hanbyeol, "Mind the Gap," op. cit.

The Potential Consequences of Unaddressed ROK Concerns

Given the pressures on the U.S.-ROK alliance, both internal and external, it is valuable to examine what is at stake should the alliance weaken significantly, or worse, collapse. The first and most obvious potential consequence, as mentioned above, is that South Korea decides to pursue its own nuclear weapons program.[53] Since South Korea has pursued this option once before, and was only persuaded by the United States to abandon it after significant effort, the prospect of a renewed ROK indigenous nuclear weapons program remains salient.[54] Moreover, if South Korea were to begin building its own nuclear weapons program, there could be numerous additional proliferation possibilities throughout the Indo-Pacific. For example, if South Korea were to obtain its own nuclear weapons, Japan may face significant pressure to follow suit. Alternatively, an indigenous ROK nuclear weapons program may prompt China and/or North Korea to intensify their own nuclear buildups and aggressive foreign policies (vertical proliferation), which leads Japan to perceive a dangerously deteriorating threat environment that requires developing its own nuclear weapons program (indirect horizontal proliferation). Such a proliferation cascade would plainly conflict with decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy and perhaps lead to a severe weakening, or collapse, of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

If South Korea pursued its own nuclear weapons program and/or the United States and South Korea could not reconcile their different preferred approaches to North Korea, then the relationship as a whole could deteriorate to

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[53] Harris, *Peace in the Pacific*, op. cit.

[54] See, for instance, Mark Fitzpatrick, *Asia's Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2016).

an alliance in name only, or perhaps collapse altogether. A severely weakened or dissolved U.S.-ROK alliance could have profound consequences for the Indo-Pacific, including: an emboldened China that seeks to further upend U.S. alliances in the region; discouraged allies such as Japan and Australia that may decline to join the United States in a future conflict against China over Taiwan; and, a weaker NATO alliance that loses trust in U.S. extended deterrence threats. In short, given its prominence and strategic location, losing South Korea as a U.S. ally would be a severe setback to the U.S. defense strategy, alliances in the Indo-Pacific, and likely alliances worldwide.

U.S. Reactions to ROK Concerns

The United States has sought to address ROK concerns, as evidenced by the Washington Declaration, through a mix of increased dialogue, integration, and displays of force. Among the policy clarifications and amplifications contained in the Washington Declaration are the assurance that Washington would consult with Seoul before any potential employment of nuclear weapons on the peninsula, the re-affirmation that extended deterrence threats are backed by the full range of U.S. capabilities, including nuclear, and a commitment to improve integration on conventional-nuclear planning.[55] The establishment of the U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) also indicates that the United States is trying to address the ROK concern over diverging threat perceptions and preferred deterrence strategies.

In addition to the policy and diplomatic elements of the Washington Declaration, the United States also pledged to "further enhance the regular visibility of strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula," including the visit of a U.S. nuclear

[55] The White House, "Washington Declaration," op. cit.

ballistic submarine.[56] In the months that followed the Washington Declaration, the United States followed through on its commitments and included actions across the whole U.S. nuclear triad, namely, "the ballistic missile submarine the USS KENTUCKY port visit to Busan in July [2023], B-52 strategic bomber flyover and landing on the Korean Peninsula in October [2023], and joint observation of an ICBM test launch in November [2023]."[57] The NCG also discussed, "future plans to demonstrate a strengthening of deterrence"—again, illustrating the apparent ROK focus on tangible, visible signals to improve the perceived credibility of U.S. extended deterrence threats.[58]

Given the relatively recent implementation of the Washington Declaration, it is difficult to assess whether U.S. actions are addressing sufficiently ROK concerns, but there are some initial indications that do not bode well for the alliance. Recent public survey results in South Korea conducted after the Washington Declaration and the related shows of force across the U.S. nuclear triad indicate that not only has ROK public trust "in the credibility of U.S. nuclear assurances," not increased, it has in fact decreased.[59] As two regional analysts recently explained, South Korean dissatisfaction appears to stem in part from the perceived temporary and limited nature of U.S. assurance actions:

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[56] Loc cit.

[57] The White House, "Joint Press Statement on Nuclear Consultative Group Meeting," *The White House*, December 16, 2023, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/16/joint-press-statement-on-nuclear-consultative-group-meeting/.

[58] Loc. cit.

[59] Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, *Comparing Allied Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence* (Seoul, SK: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 27, 2024), pp. 2-3, available at https://en.asaninst.org/contents/comparing-allied-public-confidence-in-u-s-extended-nuclear-deterrence/.

> Current South Korean public anxiety about U.S. extended deterrence stems from a lack of comparable and concrete assurances like those provided to European U.S. allies. ROK and U.S. officials therefore need to explain in clearer detail the operational benefits of current NCG activities for U.S. extended deterrence and why they believe these measures are comparable to NATO arrangements. At the moment, these U.S. steps have the appearance of being one-off or isolated events, such as a SSBN port visit or a B52 strategic bomber landing, rather than incremental measures as part of a broader nuclear strategy.[60]

This conclusion appears to support the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission's finding, "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."[61]

Indeed, the value that South Korea places on the deployment of U.S. strategic assets (which it defines as weapons that can cause strategic effects) is evident both in the emphasis on such deployments in the Washington Declaration and its devotion of a whole subsection on the topic in South Korea's biannual Ministry of Defense white paper.[62] Moreover, President Yoon promoted the idea that the Washington Declaration has "elevated" the U.S.-ROK

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[60] Ibid., p. 7.

[61] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 75.

[62] Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, *2022 Defense White Paper* (Seoul, SK: Ministry of National Defense, 2022), pp. 161-162, available at https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblictn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202307280406019810.pdf.

alliance to a "nuclear-based" alliance—placing the U.S. nuclear force at the center of the relationship.[63]

As stated before, the Biden Administration's stated goal of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy may have prevented the United States from further assuaging ROK concerns about the limited and temporary demonstrations of U.S. extended deterrence. For instance, the Biden Administration gave no public indication that it was willing to consider stationing U.S. nuclear weapons, and nuclear-certified dual-capable aircraft (DCA), on the Korean peninsula—or even preparing facilities in South Korea as a contingency for that option. Additionally, the Biden Administration opposed the development of the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, first introduced in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, until the final months of the administration—causing delays in providing needed assurance effects.[64] And, despite the worsening threat, the Biden Administration declined to adjust the U.S. homeland ballistic missile defense posture to reduce vulnerability to North Korea's ICBMs beyond what the Trump Administration was planning in its first term. All three actions would address ROK concerns to a greater extent than what was outlined in the Washington Declaration, yet it appears the Trump Administration will be left to consider

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[63] Jack Kim, "South Korea's Yoon says Alliance with U.S. 'Nuclear-based,'" *Reuters*, June 6, 2023, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/south-koreas-yoon-says-alliance-with-us-nuclear-based-2023-06-06/.

[64] The White House, *Statement of Administration Policy: H.R. 2670 – National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, July 10, 2023), p. 2, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/H.R.-2670-NDAA.pdf; Vipin Narang, as quoted in, "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies: A Conversation with Acting Assistant Secretary Vipin Narang," *CSIS.org*, August 1, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/nuclear-threats-and-role-allies-conversation-acting-assistant-secretary-vipin-narang.

these steps. Indeed, it may have already begun to do so with its announcement of what is now labelled "Golden Dome," increased and improved U.S. homeland missile defenses will, as one benefit, strengthen U.S. extended deterrence threats.[65]

Conclusion

The U.S.-ROK alliance has been a cornerstone in U.S. defense strategy for decades, and whether that foundational importance will continue for decades to come hinges on whether the United States can tailor its extended deterrence and assurance efforts to match ROK threat perceptions and intra-alliance concerns. Some U.S. efforts are clearly addressing ROK concerns, especially on the need for greater senior official involvement, force integration, and planning. Yet the U.S. demonstrations of force involving the nuclear triad appear, at least initially, to be insufficient to assuage ROK concerns about the long-term credibility of U.S. extended deterrence threats. The Biden Administration publicly made two discordant commitments: to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. defense strategy and to strengthen the credibility of its extended deterrence threats to South Korea. The stakes for insufficiently addressing ROK concerns are already high, but they are now growing even greater given the increasing threats from North Korea and China. How the United States addresses its extended deterrence and assurance requirements on the Korean peninsula today will generate consequences, whether good or ill, for decades to come in the Indo-Pacific, and beyond.

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[65] Donald J. Trump, "Iron Dome for America," *WhiteHouse.gov*, January 27, 2025, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/.

Chapter 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Allies and partners have formed close political and security bonds with the United States, in some cases over the course of decades. While cooperation can never be perfect in practice, some best practices can mitigate allied and partner concerns before they grow, including long-standing communication channels, joint operations, declaratory statements, and defense investment. The rapidly emerging threat environment and shifting domestic constituencies and their influence in the United States, however, have combined to create allied and partner anxieties that cannot be easily solved by statements from senior government officials or joint exercises—no matter their intrinsic value. Instead, the United States must tailor its extended deterrence threats against specific adversaries based on input from U.S. allies and partners—a process that will help assure those same allies and partners in turn. In addition, U.S. officials must work with their allied and partner counterparts to uncover the root causes of their concerns. Just as U.S. security commitments and investments in its allies and partners are vital to their security, so too are their contributions vital to U.S. national security. In short, strong diplomatic and security relations are not simply nice to have, they are critical to preventing deterrence failure and enabling prosperity.

South Korea, as discussed, illustrates many of the structural problems facing the U.S. allies and partners more broadly. ROK and U.S. officials appear to not only perceive the threats differently, but also differ on how best to mitigate those threats. The United States, moreover, may require South Korea's shipbuilding capabilities while at the same time asking Seoul to contribute more to its own defense—a difficult set of messages for the United States to send while it still assures South Korea that its commitment

to the alliance and supporting capabilities are "ironclad."[66] The threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression will only increase the value of allies and partners that are both militarily capable as well as understanding of the limits of U.S. power given its worldwide security commitments. To the extent that U.S. and ROK officials can cultivate that shared understanding of the threats that each face and a common set of capabilities that will enhance deterrence, the more likely the United States can make credible extended deterrence threats in defense of allies and partners.

Even though allies and partners have unique assurance and extended deterrence requirements such that no single U.S. approach will be equally effective, there are certain practices and capabilities that may be broadly applicable to different regions. Expanded Track I and Track II dialogues, official and non-official respectively, that include *both* nuclear and conventional force posture experts may help in identifying the nuclear and non-nuclear areas of a potential crisis or conflict that improved U.S.-allied cooperation may be most effective. Such discussions may be especially useful in examining the planning assumptions and operational considerations for scenarios when a conventional crisis or conflict may transition into nuclear threats or employment. Similarly, U.S. discussions with regional allies and partners

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[66] On shipbuilding, see, Joyce Lee, "South Korea's Hanwha Ocean Targets US Navy Orders as Trump Seeks Shipbuilding Ties," *Reuters*, May 5, 2025, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-hanwha-ocean-targets-us-navy-orders-trump-seeks-shipbuilding-ties-2025-05-05/. On asking South Korea for additional investment, see, Lim Hui Jie, "Trump Wants a 'one-stop Shopping' Deal with South Korea on Trade and Defense, but There is a Cost," *CNBC*, May 19, 2025, available at https://www.cnbc.com/2025/05/19/trump-south-korea-pay-more-us-troops-defense-trade-deal.html. On alliance strength, see, "White House says S. Korea-US Alliance is 'Ironclad,' after NK Missile Launches," *The Korea Herald*, March 12, 2025, available at https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10439373.

may be enhanced by including other U.S. officials whose responsibilities lie in other regions. For example, when Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) is holding talks with allies in Asia, it should consider including representatives from European Command (EUCOM) who can discuss what their planning considerations may be in their theater deterring opportunistic aggression while U.S. forces are primarily engaged in Asia. These insights may provide allies with more concrete examples of why the United States is asking them to invest more in their defenses and, at the same time, help to build a more shared view of the multiple threats facing both allies and the United States.

In terms of capabilities, U.S. officials should consider the ways in which improved and expanded regional and U.S. homeland missile defenses can contribute to more effective extended deterrence threats on behalf of allies and partners as well as assurance. President Trump's "Iron Dome for America" executive order, now called "Golden Dome," covers regional and U.S. homeland air and missile defenses as priority capabilities for both the United States as well as allies and partners.[67] More, and more capable, homeland and regional missile defenses can strengthen U.S. extended deterrence threats against adversary aggression while regional defenses in particular may prove to be especially important in deterring adversary beliefs that *faits accomplis* are viable paths to victory. Integrating and optimizing regional missile defenses are also potential opportunities for the United States to work with allies and partners to strengthen their defenses against potential opportunistic or coordinated aggression. In Europe, for instance, the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) may incorporate additional U.S. Patriot missile defenses, providing an opportunity for the United States to lend its expertise in integrating multiple interceptors and sensors to achieve the

[67] Trump, "Iron Dome for America," op. cit.

greatest effect.[68] In Asia, the United States already cooperates with Japan in developing the Standard Missile family of interceptors and provides South Korea with THAAD and Patriot missile defense systems—making the possibility of further integration all the more feasible.[69] If combined with the recommended adjustments to the U.S. regional nuclear force posture that the bipartisan 2023 Strategic Posture Commission highlighted, then the United States would be undertaking a generational improvement in the extended deterrence and assurance capabilities of U.S. forces globally.[70]

U.S. allies and partners are showing increased willingness to invest far more in their defense than they have previously, a major improvement from the U.S. perspective and helpful to U.S. goals. The current challenge for U.S. officials is determining how best to channel this short-term progress into long-term success, both in fortifying alliances diplomatically between their capitals and outwardly against shared threats.

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[68] Ralf Bosen, "Sky Shield Initiative: Can it protect Europe?," *DW.com*, September 28, 2023, available at https://www.dw.com/en/sky-shield-initiative-can-it-protect-europe/a-66900967.

[69] "U.S.-Japan missile development project to cost over $3 billion," *Kyodo News*, May 3, 2024, available at https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/47653; and, Kim Ji-hwan, "U.S. Transfers Patriot Missiles from South Korea to Middle East for Defense Strategy, *Biz.Chosun.com*, April 4, 2025, available at https://biz.chosun.com/en/en-policy/2025/04/04/JW5G3XYCOFFRZF5R6UZRLFZRUM/; and, Kosuke Takahashi, "Japan proposes co-production of SM-6 missiles to the U.S.," *NavalNews.com*, April 3, 2025, available at https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/04/japan-proposes-co-production-of-sm-6-missiles-to-the-u-s/.

[70] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

About the Author

Matthew R. Costlow is a Senior Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy. His areas of expertise are in nuclear deterrence, missile defense policy, arms control, and Russia's and China's nuclear doctrine. His work has been published by *Comparative Strategy*, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. He has also published numerous opinion pieces in the Institute's *Information Series* as well as the *Wall Street Journal*, *War on the Rocks*, *Defense News*, and *Defense One*.

While working for the National Institute, Mr. Costlow graduated in 2012 from Missouri State University with an M.S. in Defense and Strategic Studies. His thesis, "Gunboat Diplomacy in the South China Sea" was chosen for publication at the U.S. Air Force Institute for National Security Studies. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at George Mason University.

From 2012-2019, Mr. Costlow worked as an Analyst at National Institute, specializing in many of the same areas he currently writes on. In 2018, he assisted former Senator Jon Kyl in drafting nuclear and missile defense policy recommendations on the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission. Before 2012, he researched cybersecurity, emergency management, and foreign airpower acquisition at the Congressional Research Service. Prior to that, he worked at SAIC on federal and state emergency management best practices.

From 2019-2021, Mr. Costlow served as a Special Assistant in the office of Nuclear and Missile Defense policy, Department of Defense. He received the Office of the Secretary of Defense Award for Exceptional Public Service. Mr. Costlow also serves as a Special Advisor to the USSTRATCOM Strategic Advisory Group.

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