

# THE ASAN SECURITY QUARTERLY

Volume 1

Issue No.2

April-June 2026



## Modernizing Alliances

### Feature Articles

Modernization Without Theory: The U.S.-ROK Alliance in an Age of Strategic Incoherence **Michael Schiffer**

Modernizing Indo-Pacific Partnerships:  
From the Japan-ROK Bilateral to the JAROK (Japan-Australia-ROK) Pillar **Iwama Yoko**

Modernizing Nuclear Deterrence in U.S. Alliances: Poland's Experience **Justyna Gotkowska**

Modern Threats, Modern Alliances: The Indo-Pacific's Evolving Security Architecture **Julia Macdonald**

Modernizing Alliances in an Age of Economic Security **Lim Ji Hye**

### Korea Corner

Korea Steps Up Global South Diplomacy: Four Summits and a New Direction **Choi Ina**



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|    |             |                              |
|----|-------------|------------------------------|
| 04 | Lee Jaehyon | <b>Editor's Introduction</b> |
|----|-------------|------------------------------|

---

### Feature Articles: "Modernizing Alliances"

---

|    |                   |                                                                                                                      |
|----|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 06 | Michael Schiffer  | <b>Modernization Without Theory: The U.S.-ROK Alliance in an Age of Strategic Incoherence</b>                        |
| 13 | Iwama Yoko        | <b>Modernizing Indo-Pacific Partnerships: From the Japan-ROK Bilateral to the JAROK (Japan-Australia-ROK) Pillar</b> |
| 21 | Justyna Gotkowska | <b>Modernizing Nuclear Deterrence in U.S. Alliances: Poland's Experience</b>                                         |
| 27 | Julia Macdonald   | <b>Modern Threats, Modern Alliances: The Indo-Pacific's Evolving Security Architecture</b>                           |
| 34 | Lim Ji Hye        | <b>Modernizing Alliances in an Age of Economic Security</b>                                                          |

---

### Korea Corner

---

|    |          |                                                                                |
|----|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 40 | Choi Ina | <b>Korea Steps Up Global South Diplomacy: Four Summits and a New Direction</b> |
|----|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Editorial Board

**Dr. Lee Jaehyon**, Editor-in-Chief

**Dr. Peter Lee**, Deputy Editor-in-Chief

**Dr. Kim Saeme**, Deputy Editor-in-Chief

**Dr. Ben Forney**, Managing Editor

**Ms. Kim Suhyeon**, Assistant Editor

**Ms. Dunay Esther**, Research Associate, Administrative Coordinator

# Introduction

*Dr. LEE Jaehyon*  
Editor-in-Chief

**Each** year, the Asan Plenum brings together leading experts, scholars, and policymakers to tackle the world's most pressing challenges. In 2026, the Plenum convened under the theme of Modernizing Alliances. The panels explored what alliance modernization demands from multiple perspectives. They began with the fundamental question of why alliances must evolve in the first place, before turning to the forces reshaping the global order—from the growing cohesion of the CRINK bloc (the increasingly coordinated alignment of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) to the emergence of new alliance frontiers such as technology and cyber cooperation. The panels also considered the future of trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic partnerships and grappled with the enduring challenge of North Korea's nuclear threat.

Taken together, the conference made clear that the alliance structures are under simultaneous pressure from two directions: the internal strains generated by the Trump administration's transactional and at

times disruptive approach to burden-sharing, and the external strains imposed by an increasingly coordinated revisionist coalition of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

The second issue of *The Asan Security Quarterly* continues this conversation. We invited leading academics and policy practitioners to elaborate on some of the most consequential questions raised in Korea, examining what alliance modernization looks like in practice.

Michael Schiffer, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, opens the issue with an assessment of the U.S.-ROK alliance, arguing that modernization has proceeded without the strategic coherence necessary to give it direction. Iwama Yoko, professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, then broadens the scope to the Indo-Pacific, making the case for a more institutionalized JAROK trilateral pillar. Justyna Gotkowska, deputy director at the Center for Eastern Studies, offers a transatlantic perspective, drawing on Poland's

experience to show what modernizing nuclear deterrence arrangements within U.S. alliances actually requires. Julia Macdonald, director at the Asia New Zealand Foundation, examines how modern threats are shaping the Indo-Pacific security architecture, while Lim Ji Hye, associate professor at George Mason University Korea, closes the Feature Articles section by situating alliance modernization within the broader framework of economic security.

This issue also marks the launch of a new section: the Korea Corner. The Korea Corner is dedicated to analysis of Korean foreign and security policy. For the inaugural Korea Corner, we invited Dr. Choi Ina, research fellow at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, to examine Korea's

recent diplomatic engagement with the Global South. Her article traces four recent summits and assesses what they reveal about the direction and ambition of Korea's emerging Global South strategy.

We hope this issue serves as a useful extension to the 2026 Asan Plenum's discussions. We look forward to your continued readership and engagement.

Sincerely yours,

*LEE Jaehyon*  
*Editor-in-Chief*  
*Asan Security Quarterly*

FEATURE ARTICLES

# Modernization Without Theory: The U.S.-ROK Alliance in an Age of Strategic Incoherence



*Mr. Michael SCHIFFER*  
Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

**The** architecture of American alliances in Northeast Asia was built for a world that no longer exists. The hub-and-spoke system that anchored U.S. security relationships in the Indo-Pacific was designed during the Cold War to manage a bipolar confrontation between two superpowers with functioning bureaucracies, rough nuclear parity, and a shared interest in avoiding direct conflict. The post-Cold War refinements assumed American

hegemonic primacy—a unipolar moment in which the question was not whether U.S. power could underwrite the system, but how far its guarantees should extend. Both assumptions are now obsolete.

The world in which U.S. alliances must operate today is defined by great-power competition among multiple actors with asymmetric capabilities and misaligned interests, the accelerating diffusion of advanced technology, and a United States whose

domestic politics have placed the foundational premises of alliance leadership under sustained pressure. Whether the system built for prior worlds can be transformed in time—and whether Washington and its allies can navigate that transformation together before the strategic environment makes the choice for them—is the question that animates every serious alliance debate now underway.

*The world in which U.S. alliances must operate today is defined by great power competition between multiple actors with asymmetric capabilities and misaligned interests.*

Although the competition is stiff, perhaps nowhere is this tension playing out more acutely than on the Korean Peninsula, where the consequences of mismanaging this period of alliance transformation to create new structures and new capabilities fit for the new realities of a new world are pressing, and where the need to be able to “fight tonight” remains paramount.

## THE THREAT IS CHANGING

Under a five-year defense program adopted at a Workers’ Party Congress this past February, North Korea called for the mass production and deployment of short-range ballistic missiles designed to greatly increase the “density and durability of concentrated attack” against South Korea, which the plan designates as its “most hostile enemy state.”<sup>1</sup> In April, Pyongyang tested cluster munitions and graphite bomb payloads drawn directly from lessons observed in the Middle East, while adding tank systems equipped with Russian-origin drone intercept technology gained from its soldiers’ battlefield exposure in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. director of national intelligence noted in March that the Ukraine war “will continue to have spillover effects in other parts of the globe, as shown with North Korean troops gaining valuable warfighting experience and military technology from Russia.”<sup>3</sup>

The evolving North Korean threat and the accumulation of these new capabilities are not just for deterrence signaling. It is doctrine-integrated warfighting preparation incorporating lessons from Ukraine, Iran, and elsewhere. And while deterring a North Korean nuclear strike remains necessary for the alliance, it is no longer sufficient. China, meanwhile, is on a trajectory toward nuclear near-peer status with the United States.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the five-year defense program adopted at the Ninth Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in February 2026, see 38 North, “North Korea Tests New Theater Launch Platforms as Party Congress Continues Nuclear/Missile Buildup,” April 15, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2026/04/north-korea-tests-new-theater-launch-platforms-as-party-congress-continues-nuclear-missile-buildup/>.

<sup>2</sup> North Korea tested short-range ballistic missiles armed with cluster-munition warheads and a graphite bomb during a three-day series of weapons tests on April 7–8, 2026, and conducted a second cluster-munition test on April 19; see Dzirhan Mahadzir, “North Korea Test Launches Short Range Ballistic Missiles with Cluster Munitions,” USNI News, April 24, 2026, [https://news.usni.org/2026/04/24/north-korea-test-launches-short-range-ballistic-missiles-with-cluster-](https://news.usni.org/2026/04/24/north-korea-test-launches-short-range-ballistic-missiles-with-cluster-munitions/)

[munitions/](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-tests-military-assets-including-ballistic-missile-kcna-reports-2026-04-08/); “North Korea Tests Military Assets Including Ballistic Missile, KCNA Reports,” Reuters, April 8, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-tests-military-assets-including-ballistic-missile-kcna-reports-2026-04-08/>; and “North Korea Says It Tested Missiles with Cluster Munitions, Blackout Bombs,” NK News, April 9, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2026 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (Washington, DC: ODNI, March 18, 2026), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2026-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China (Washington,

When that threshold is crossed, the logic of extended deterrence in Northeast Asia changes in ways existing alliance frameworks do not account for. A senior Japanese Cabinet aide, speaking in a personal capacity but speaking nonetheless, has publicly called for a nuclear deterrence debate in Japan, a development whose significance lies not in any imminent capability decision but in what it reveals about the stress the current environment is placing on the norms that have stabilized Northeast Asia for decades.<sup>5</sup>

With the DPRK now a multi-domain adversary that uses nuclear threats to create space for aggression below the retaliation threshold in the cyber domain, against critical infrastructure, and through increasingly sophisticated conventional forces, it is clear that alliance architecture needs to evolve and modernize to match the threat environment's level of strategic uncertainty. The alliance must also recognize that cross-domain deterrence is harder to sustain politically than the frameworks that still dominate the policy conversation.

## WASHINGTON WITHOUT THEORY

The architecture-threat gap would be more manageable if Washington were actively working to close it. The deeper problem is that the United States under the second Trump administration no longer

has an agreed-on theory of what it wants its alliances to do, nor the political coherence to do it. That internal incoherence is itself a form of strategic vulnerability.

*The United States under the second Trump administration no longer has an agreed-on theory of what it wants its alliances to do, nor the political coherence to do it.*

The December 2025 *National Security Strategy* omits North Korea entirely. Its Western Hemisphere emphasis stood out as much for what it said as for what it left out.<sup>6</sup> The January 2026 *National Defense Strategy* calls for South Korea's primary responsibility for deterrence on the Peninsula, but without completing the alliance modernization work required to make that rebalancing coherent.<sup>7</sup> The Trump administration has simultaneously described North Korea as a nuclear power and insisted that denuclearization remains the goal. No North Korea policy review has been completed. And the Iran war has run past all these documents and statements regardless, with a demonstration of what U.S. military power looks like that has illuminated the

---

DC: U.S. Department of Defense); and ODNI, 2026 Annual Threat Assessment.

<sup>5</sup> The remark was made off the record by a senior national-security aide in the Japanese Prime Minister's Office in December 2025; see Stimson Center, "When Denuclearization Fades, Japan Holds the Line," March 13, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2026/when-denuclearization-fades-japan-holds-the-line/>. On Prime Minister Takaichi's subsequent rejection of NATO-style nuclear sharing, see "Takaichi Draws a Red Line on Nuclear Sharing Amid Japan's Security Review," *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/02/takaichi-draws-a-red-line-on-nuclear-sharing-amid-japans-security-review/>.

<sup>6</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC, December 2025). On the omission of

North Korea and the Western Hemisphere emphasis, see "Unpacking a Trump Twist of the National Security Strategy," Council on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/unpacking-trump-twist-national-security-strategy>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC, January 23, 2026). On its treatment of the Korean Peninsula and U.S. strategic flexibility, see Center for Strategic and International Studies, "What Does the Trump Administration's New National Defense Strategy Say About China?," January 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-trump-administrations-new-national-defense-strategy-say-about-china>.

strategic logic of Pyongyang's nuclear investments and altered the strategic environment the NSS was attempting to describe.

If and when President Trump sits across from Kim for another effort at nuclear diplomacy, Kim's delegation will arrive with a clear theory of American objectives. The American delegation will not. That asymmetry is North Korea's leverage, and it has persisted across six administrations. Trump 2.0 is reprising it with less institutional capacity to manage it than at any previous point.

The pattern is not Korea-specific. On Taiwan, contradictory U.S. signals have generated genuine uncertainty about American intentions in Beijing and Taipei simultaneously. On NATO, burden-sharing demands have been framed as transactional rather than as part of a shared strategic logic, eroding the political foundations that make allied contributions sustainable. The through-line is a Washington conducting a fundamental renegotiation of its alliance relationships without a clear vision of what it wants the renegotiation to produce. Allies have responded rationally—hedging, building redundancy, deepening bilateral and multilateral ties—and those adjustments are, in aggregate, beginning to reshape the architecture in ways that may prove difficult to reverse.

## TWO DEFINITIONS OF MODERNIZATION

The Trump administration's instinct that allies should bear more of the costs of their own defense is not wrong as a general proposition. The ROK of 2026 has military, economic, and technological capabilities that the ROK of a decade ago, let alone two of three, did not. Expectations that Seoul takes on responsibilities that would not have been realistic to ask even recently are appropriate. The alliance

should reflect the partner South Korea has become.

But alliance modernization and burden-sharing conversations are happening across a definitional gap that the public framing obscures. When Washington says alliance modernization, it means something specific: ROK conventional capabilities sized to the peninsula fight, Korean ground forces taking on primary responsibility for that fight, and strategic flexibility for U.S. forces to be employed in regional contingencies, including in Taiwan. When Seoul says alliance modernization, it means something different: a nuclear-powered submarine, a political mechanism for OPCON transition, and an extended deterrence architecture updated to reflect the partner Korea understands itself to be. The two definitions are not incompatible. But they are also not the same. Last year's leaders' summits produced communiqués that each side could read through its own lens, while papering over concepts of operation that remain undefined.

That gap matters because alliance modernization—not to mention what constitutes burden sharing as opposed to burden shifting—cannot be coherently distinguished without it. A genuine renegotiation toward a new equilibrium in which greater Korean primary responsibility is matched by updated U.S. commitments, genuine consultation, and agreed frameworks for managing the risks being redistributed is one thing. Offloading burdens without transferring the architecture required to bear them or the development of unilateral capabilities or posture that no longer aligns with alliance needs is something else again entirely. Which one is on offer depends on what definition of modernization is operative—and right now, neither side has answered that question.

The nuclear submarine debate is one area where the

tension in this ambiguity is pronounced. Korean political expectations have hardened around the platform; many U.S. analysts question whether a nuclear sub makes sense as a primary investment given what Iran and Ukraine have revealed about the dominance of drones, sensors, and missiles in active conflict. A nuclear sub is, among other things, a platform whose strategic logic points toward an eventual nuclear option and whose acquisition cost will come at the expense of the conventional capabilities U.S. planners say they want Korea to develop. The platform debate and the question of U.S. strategic flexibility all sit downstream from unresolved questions about the future of the alliance. Asking the ROK to posture for primary peninsular defense while also accommodating USFK use in Taiwan contingencies, for example, pulls Korean force structure in incompatible directions: the posture optimized for a North Korean fight is not the posture optimized for surviving Chinese strikes on Korean bases used to support Taiwan operations. Seoul cannot do both well, and the alliance has not determined which to optimize for.

*The posture optimized for a North Korean fight is not the posture optimized for surviving Chinese strikes on Korean bases used to support Taiwan operations.*

Beyond the security domain, U.S. allies are also being asked simultaneously to absorb greater

responsibility for regional public goods, such as development, governance capacity, and economic architecture, in a moment when Washington's own contributions to those goods have contracted sharply. Korea is being asked to align economically and on trade as a condition of military assistance and alliance modernization, a conditioning that signals a transactional rather than a strategic logic. That transfer may be defensible. But it is not currently being managed as strategy.

### THE ILLUSION OF STABLE COEXISTENCE

The stable coexistence framing that appears to be emerging as the implicit U.S. posture on North Korea does not resolve these questions.<sup>8</sup> Just the opposite: it defers them to compounding interest. Soviet-American coexistence worked because it was a two-player symmetric game with rough parity and mutual survivability. The Korean Peninsula is a six-player asymmetric game where power disparities are extreme, interests are misaligned, and no single actor has the leverage to enforce the equilibrium coexistence requires. North Korea's doctrine of preemptive nuclear use and South Korea as the principal enemy is structurally incompatible with any coexistence worth calling stable. A bilateral U.S.-DPRK arrangement, moreover, cannot simultaneously satisfy the diverging interests of Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow.

Beneath the surface of "stable coexistence," then, a proliferation cascade in Northeast Asia is already underway. The greatest security cost North Korea's

<sup>8</sup> On the "stable coexistence" framing, see, in its softer (risk-reduction and engagement) form, Frank Aum and Ankit Panda, "Pursuing Stable Coexistence: A Reorientation of U.S. Policy Toward North Korea" (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 6, 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/pursuing-stable->

[coexistence-a-reorientation-of-us-policy-toward-north-korea](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/pursuing-stable-coexistence-a-reorientation-of-us-policy-toward-north-korea); and, in a harder (deterrence-forward) form, Victor D. Cha, "North Korea as It Is: The Case for a Cold Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-korea/north-korea-it-victor-cha>.

arsenal may impose on South Korea is not a missile. It is the pressure that arsenal places on a regional order that has depended on non-proliferation as a stabilizing norm.

China's evolving position adds an additional new dimension to the question, as the standard pressure-Beijing-to-pressure-Pyongyang framework for arresting North Korean proliferation now appears largely exhausted. Beijing is genuinely uncomfortable with the depth of the new Russia-DPRK relationship, with Russia now having disrupted decades of PRC efforts to serve as Pyongyang's indispensable patron. A North Korea strategically embedded with Russia and less dependent on China may also likely be less controllable, and the real diplomatic opening for a new non-proliferation regime may run through Beijing's anxiety about losing its buffer state to Russian influence. Exploiting that opening, however, requires a strategic sophistication and institutional capacity that the current policy environment has not demonstrated.

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The U.S.-ROK alliance can be held together. Will is not the limiting factor. What is required is a Washington that has resolved its own internal debate about what the alliance is for and is prepared to act on the answer with the consistency and institutional seriousness that an ally can trust and build on. That means an agreed theory of what modernization means before terms are renegotiated rather than after. It means updated, extended deterrence frameworks rather than reaffirmed ones. It means completing OPCON transition on a timeline anchored to an honest assessment of ROK capabilities and bridging and enduring U.S. capabilities.

It means institutionalizing the trilateral relationship

with Japan rather than leaving it dependent on the personal relationships of incumbent governments. And it means developing an agreed theory of cross-domain deterrence covering cyber, space, and nuclear that the alliance can communicate and sustain politically across administrations in Washington and Seoul.

It also means being honest about what burden-sharing requires in return. If Korea is being asked to absorb primary responsibility for its own defense and to fill regional public-goods gaps Washington is no longer providing, the consultative architecture, technology transfer arrangements, and extended deterrence commitments that underpin those demands need to be made explicit and credible. The alternative is a system that preserves the vocabulary of alliance while hollowing its strategic content—and that discovers, at the worst possible moment, that the form is not a substitute for the substance.

*The alternative is a system that preserves the vocabulary of alliance while hollowing its strategic content—and that discovers, at the worst possible moment, that the form is not a substitute for the substance*

Whether the ROK-U.S. alliance survives Washington's current ambivalence is perhaps the smaller question. The larger one is whether Washington will develop the strategic coherence needed to work with Seoul to develop a shared and realistic plan for modernization, and the discipline to implement it, and what Seoul will conclude if it does not.

A

---

Mr. Michael  
SCHIFFER



---

Mr. Michael SCHIFFER is a partner at Scalare Advisors and a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. He has served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia, on the professional staff of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and as the assistant administrator for Asia at USAID, and as co-manager of the Poipu Bed and Breakfast Inn, among other positions.

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Modernizing Indo-Pacific Partnerships: From the Japan-ROK Bilateral to the JAROK (Japan-Australia-ROK) Pillar



*Prof. IWAMA Yoko*

Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

## INTRODUCTION

**F**or several years, U.S. alliances both within the Indo-Pacific and between Europe and the Indo-Pacific blossomed. The trend started with the rise of China in the 2000s and accelerated with the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. The first NATO-IP4 (Indo-Pacific Four: Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand) meeting was held in 2022 in Madrid, and the format became an established forum. The Biden administration further solidified multilateralism in East Asia by forging a Japan-Korea-U.S. cooperation

mechanism at the Camp David summit in August 2023.

However, from the outset of the Trump 2.0 administration, there has been a resetting of American priorities. European alliances have been hardest hit. Since 2025, NATO seems to have been continuously in crisis. Europeans are spending much more on defense and are now mainly shouldering the burden of military support for Ukraine. They

have also initiated new consultations about nuclear and conventional deterrence in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to America's Asian alliances, three points can be made:

- (1) The United States is asking regional allies to shoulder more of the burden;
- (2) The Trump administration is more bilateral than multilateral in its approach; and
- (3) The Trump administration defines American national interest in economic rather than military terms.

America's 2025 *National Security Strategy* states that "the Indo-Pacific is already and will continue to be among the next century's key economic and geopolitical battlegrounds." This economic-centric view of the world is characteristic of the Trump administration. The U.S. national interest is defined more in economic terms, and security is viewed as secondary to the economic advantages that the region or issue will bring. The recent visit to Beijing by President Trump showed how much economic advantage counts even in strategic matters like Taiwan. Europe is already debating how to reimagine NATO and replace American extended deterrence.<sup>10</sup> Asia must also think about Plan B.

Although President Trump has never spoken of leaving Asia, the administration is clearly requiring the region's partners to do more. At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary Hegseth said that "it doesn't make sense for countries in Europe to do that

while key allies in Asia spend less on defense in the face of an even more formidable threat." The 2025 *National Security Strategy* speaks about "Burden-Sharing and Burden-Shifting," but the situation has become even more acute since then. America is bogged down in a protracted war in the Middle East and is so depleted of weapons that it cannot provide Japan with the Tomahawk missiles it promised.

The Indo-Pacific does not have a NATO, and for many reasons, it is not practical to think about one. But we must strengthen the regional pillar in the Indo-Pacific. We should do this first by strengthening the bilateral Japan-Korea relationship. Since the Trump administration has not shown as much interest as the previous government in strengthening multilateral cooperation, the Japan-U.S.-Korea trilateral is likely to remain stagnant. But we can strengthen the weakest link of the trilateral, the Japan-Korea link, in order to revive multilateralism when the time is ripe. We should also bind this Japan-Korea link with Australia, so that we have a strong Japan-Australia-ROK (JAROK) pillar in the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration is right to consider the Indo-Pacific as central to world affairs, and Asian nations should stop thinking in Eurocentric terms for alliances. Japan and Korea no longer belong to the "Far East," which is a term originating from Europe. In reality, Europe has become the "Far West," and Asia is central to the world balance of power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

---

<sup>9</sup> Kiel Institute for World Economy has been tracking aid to Ukraine. It is very clear that Trump administrations aid for Ukraine has decreased dramatically. <https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/news/ukraine-support-after-4-years-of-war-europe-steps-up/>

<sup>10</sup> European security specialists have started contemplating how to replace U.S. nuclear deterrence. See Report by European Nuclear Study Group "Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear

Options," (Feb 2026) DOI: 10.47342/SNSE5421. On discussions to replace NATO, see "Europe's secret Plan B to replace NATO: what if America quits," *The Economist*, May 19th 2026, [https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/05/19/europes-secret-plan-b-to-replace-nato?giftId=ZTBjYjcyY2UtYtE2Yi00N2M2LTNmMGUtNjE5OWUxODNmYTtFm&utm\\_campaign=gifted\\_article](https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/05/19/europes-secret-plan-b-to-replace-nato?giftId=ZTBjYjcyY2UtYtE2Yi00N2M2LTNmMGUtNjE5OWUxODNmYTtFm&utm_campaign=gifted_article)

*The Indo-Pacific does not have a NATO, and for many reasons, it is not practical to think about one. But we must strengthen the regional pillar in the Indo-Pacific*

## STRENGTHENING JAPAN-ROK RELATIONSHIP

How can we strengthen Japan-Korea ties? The 2025 NSS asks Japan and Korea to “increase defense spending, with a focus on the capabilities—including new capabilities—necessary to deter adversaries and protect the First Island Chain.” Much has already been discussed between the Prime Minister of Japan and the President of the ROK in their August 2025 and January 2026 meetings. In spite of worries from both sides, the two summits proceeded in a candid and cordial atmosphere. Following on from this, there are three things that need to be done.

### (1) *Institutional framework for strengthening political cooperation*

The two countries have been working in recent years to strengthen bilateral ties. The shuttle diplomacy between the leaders has become regular, and it has been reported that the two countries have agreed to set up a 2+2 (Defense and Foreign Ministries) dialogue on the vice-ministerial level. I have argued in the past for “Élysée Treaty”-type institutionalization of the ROK-Japan bilateral relationship, and this is needed now more than ever. Between France and Germany, the foreign and the

defense ministers are obligated to meet at least once every three months, and high-level talks of the foreign ministries need to take place every month. The chiefs of staff also need to come together once every two months. It has been more than 60 years since the normalization of the Japan-ROK relationship. Considering the importance of this relationship, the countries need a basic treaty to solidify the bond. Such a treaty should also encompass social and educational aspects, including the exchange of youths.<sup>11</sup>

### (2) *Alignment of defense-industrial production capabilities*

This is important in terms of both security and economics. The ROK now has robust production capabilities in many industries, including semiconductors, EV batteries, steel, and shipbuilding, which are key to a resilient crisis economy and supply chain. It also has a flourishing defense industry, with exports reaching \$15.4 billion in 2025. Poland is now the main purchaser, with huge contracts for K2 main battle tanks, K9 howitzers, K239 rocket launchers, FA-50 light fighters, and more. Japan has liberalized its defense exports, abolishing the so-called “five criteria” for the export of arms this year. The sale of the Mogami-class frigate made headlines in August 2025, and the Takaichi government is moving to push more defense industry development with public funding.

Japan and the ROK will benefit from clever coordination. What is remarkable about Korean weapons exports is the speed of delivery and companies’ willingness for technology transfer and local production. Being so close to each other

<sup>11</sup> Yoko IWAMA, “Time for a Japan-Korea Élysée Treaty: The two East Asian nations should Take inspiration from landmark treaty in Europe,” *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2023.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/time-for-a-japan-korea-elysee-treaty/>

The original Élysée Treaty (Treaty of Friendship between Germany and France) was signed on 22 January 1963. It has now been succeeded by Aachen Treaty on 22 January 2019.

geographically, Korea and Japan will need to assist each other in times of crisis. The two governments should sign the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) as quickly as possible, but they need to go further. With wars being fought simultaneously in Ukraine and the Middle East, we are already in a crisis economy mode. Japan and Korea need a framework to coordinate their economies so they can best assist each other and other allies, including the United States, in times of crisis. If the two countries can also come up with a common investment plan to reinvigorate production in the United States in certain sectors, that would be even more beneficial.

### *(3) Japan-ROK deterrence and non-proliferation dialogues*

With the United States redefining relationships with its allies, there is considerable risk that the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence will weaken and unprecedented nuclear proliferation will occur. Many Japanese suspect that the ROK is on its way to acquiring nuclear weapons, and the ROK's decision to construct nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) is the first step on that route. The Japanese security establishment is also considering the acquisition of a nuclear-powered submarine, and this project will likely be mentioned in the upcoming three national security documents due by the end of 2026. Despite the recent friendly tone, there is still ample rivalry between Japan and the ROK, and these suspicions could feed into an arms race.

*With the United States redefining relationships with its allies, there is considerable risk that the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence will weaken and unprecedented nuclear proliferation will occur.*

Both Japan and the ROK rely on the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. It is in the interest of both countries that they work together to strengthen this credibility and maintain the NPT regime, including the denuclearization of North Korea. In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings of each other's intentions, Japan and the ROK need to communicate with each other on these issues. France and the United States have initiated such a dialogue after President Macron's Ille-Longue speech on nuclear deterrence.<sup>12</sup> This included participants from both sides' foreign affairs, defense and energy agencies. They have decided to establish an annual bilateral dialogue and a working group. Japan-ROK also needs such a dialogue, which deals with both military and energy-related nuclear issues.

Further consideration should be given as to whether this strategic stability dialogue may at times be held with the United Kingdom and France. These two are nuclear weapon states but have far fewer nuclear weapons than the United States. Their deterrent forces are meant to be complementary to those of the United States. As the United States' position changes, they may feel the need to adjust their policies. Both have announced policies to strengthen their nuclear arsenals but have not changed their

<sup>12</sup> Joint Statement on the U.S.-France Deterrence, Strategic Stability, and Non-Proliferation Dialogue, the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, March 11, 2026.

<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/03/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-france-deterrence-strategic-stability-and-non-proliferation-dialogue>

fundamental thinking about deterrence. Countries like the ROK and Japan need to have a full understanding of the changes taking place, since this is a matter that affects global stability. They also need to understand that relatively smaller nuclear arsenals are only complementary to and not a substitute for the deterrence provided by the United States.

### **BUILDING JAROK (JAPAN-AUSTRALIA-ROK) PILLAR IN INDO-PACIFIC**

We need to be aware that the Indo-Pacific will be the center, not the periphery, of global events in the coming decades. This will be the theater where strategies of giants collide. The 2025 U.S. *National Security Strategy* admits that strengthening alliances here will make the Indo-Pacific “the bedrock of security and prosperity long into the future.” So it shall be, but the regional allies need to rethink their role. Rather than following what the United States dictates, Asian countries must shape the environment themselves. We need to create a regional pillar connecting Japan, Australia, and the ROK. Let us call it the “JAROK Pillar” of the Indo-Pacific. These three countries are the most stable and prosperous democracies in the region. They should hence try to consolidate this JAROK pillar as the foundation of the stability and prosperity of the region. Work in the Japan-Australia-ROK trilateral format started in June 2024 with an inaugural official-level Indo-Pacific dialogue between the countries. This was followed by a Track 1.5 dialogue hosted by the U.S. Studies Center of the University of Sydney.<sup>13</sup>

*We need to be aware that the Indo-Pacific will be the center, not the periphery, of global events in the coming decades.*

There are currently many minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific, including U.S.-Japan-Australia; U.S.-Japan-ROK-Philippines-New Zealand, and so on. Recently, the Balikatan exercise was conducted in the Philippines with several partners present, including Japan, Australia, the United States, and the ROK. There are also strong bilateral relations between Japan and Australia and between the ROK and Australia. But we need an institutional framework to promote military coordination in the absence of the United States. That is not to say the United States will retreat from Asia, but there may be situations in the early stages of a crisis where the United States is unable to be physically present from day one, and the local powers must take the lead. The United States will still be providing vital assistance, but we must be capable of planning and operating even without the Americans being present. Currently, we do not have the institutional capacity to plan and operate in the absence of America. But we must think about such scenarios.

This is not to say that we will create a new alliance, nor are we trying to create an Asian NATO. Such a rigid structure will not suit the Indo-Pacific’s varied members and geography. We must retain flexibility so that members and actions can be coordinated according to the needs of the scenario. But we need a control tower in order to coordinate the regional

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “Middle Power Minilateralism”: The Australia-Japan-Korea Trilateral Diplomacy,” JFIR Commentary, No. 158, January 24, 2025. [https://www.jfir.or.jp/en/commentary/4547/#\\_edn8](https://www.jfir.or.jp/en/commentary/4547/#_edn8); Christopher

Watterson, “Seizing the moment: Outcomes of the inaugural Australia-Japan-South Korea trilateral dialogue,” (18 Sept 2024). <https://www.ussc.edu.au/outcomes-of-the-inaugural-australia-japan-south-korea-trilateral-dialogue>

powers if the United States is engaged elsewhere. Japan, Australia, and the Republic of Korea are technologically and militarily advanced middle powers in the region with a willingness to collaborate and should take on this role. Other smaller powers and regional actors will collaborate according to their needs, case by case, but JAROK needs to be able to consult with each other immediately and come up with responses in an Indo-Pacific crisis. If the United States is there, so much the better, but we also need to be prepared to act regionally.

We also need a local supply chain of critical weapons and ammunition in case of crisis. Relying solely on the United States is not a solution, as ongoing conflicts have shown. We must consolidate the resources and the production capability of the region and design a robust logistics network. This will probably involve other regional players, but JAROK should be willing to lead.

Another way of strengthening the interaction between the three countries would be to associate Japan and the ROK with AUKUS and then create a minilateral within this framework. It is possible that we have three countries aspiring to operate nuclear-propelled submarines in this region in the coming decades. Currently, these three are pursuing their possibilities separately. It would at least be in the interest of regional stability that they exchange information about their intentions and progress. If they go ahead with the acquisition of nuclear-propelled submarines, they will all need to redefine their relationship with the IAEA in terms of the NPT regime.

Of the three countries, only Japan has enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. The U.S. Department of Energy announced in January 2026 its intention to invest \$2.7 billion to strengthen domestic uranium

enrichment services over the next ten years. But details are still unknown, and whether and in what forms the ROK will receive the fuel for its nuclear-propulsion submarine remains unclear. Nuclear energy technology is entering an inflection point where new technologies are being developed quickly. Depending on what kind of power plant technology becomes dominant in the future, different kinds of enriched uranium fuel will be needed. The three should coordinate amongst themselves rather than wait for U.S. leadership, since the United States will likely not play a dominant role in multilateral forums.

Japan and ROK participation will benefit AUKUS in many other ways as well. When it comes to Pillar II, Japan and the ROK together possess advanced capabilities, such as undersea sensing, anti-submarine warfare, semiconductors, shipbuilding, cyber capabilities, and ammunition production. Should Japan and Korea join AUKUS for these reasons, it would add up to “JAUKKUS (Japan-Australia-UK-Korea-US).”

But since the United States will likely not take the lead in multilateral settings in the next several years, we can create minilateral groupings within JAUKKUS in the meantime. A JAUKROK (Japan-Australia-UK-ROK) format would be useful in many cases, since all participants will benefit from the UK’s knowledge of nuclear submarines.

We could have willing partners in the region associate themselves with this pillar as necessary. New Zealand and the Philippines are probable partners in many situations, since they share many values and security concerns with other countries. The two may choose to become full members when the time is ripe. Other ASEAN partners will also be able to join in issue-oriented ways and conduct regular exercises. For these reasons, the United States

will benefit from an active JAROK pillar that helps prepare an environment on which U.S. armed forces can count.

### **TOWARD AN INDO-PACIFIC UNION**

The Trump administration is right in considering that economic viability is the decisive factor in alliances. The JAROK pillar needs to work to integrate other younger economies of the region to facilitate growth and stability. Here again, JAROK can lead, since the three have similar economic and social standards based on the rule of law, which provide the predictability and accountability essential for stable and reliable growth. Starting with major ASEAN countries, we should aim for more economic and social cooperation in the region. The CPTPP is an important framework, but we should strive for a region where not only goods but also people move much more freely. JAROK countries will benefit from the younger populations of ASEAN countries studying and working in their aging economies.

However, this needs to be done in a rules-based and orderly way that does not endanger the safety and security standards that JAROK countries have already achieved. In order to do this, work should be done to reform regulatory and administrative

standards in ASEAN and other partner countries, while at the same time reducing over-regulation in JAROK countries. The European Union provides a model in some ways, but the future “Indo-Pacific Union” should aim for less supranational integration. Although we do share some kind of Asian identity, the region is much more diverse in many ways, so our union need not be bound as closely together as the EU.

### **CONCLUSION**

Creativity is required in times of crisis. America may no longer be the country we used to know, but neither are we. The world keeps changing, and we need to keep reforming and modernizing. America will still remain committed to the Indo-Pacific, but it expects us to take the lead. The United States is still the largest economy in the world, but its share in the world GDP is now around 25%, compared to 40% in the 1960s. We should no longer be bound by past habits and instead start thinking outside the box. In the past, we were used to having an American “hub” that connects us all and gives us direction. That needs to change. We need to become the hub to which America will give assistance. So, this is why we need a strong Japan-Australia-ROK (JAROK) pillar in the region, to which other Asian nations can integrate socially, economically, and politically.

A

---



Prof. IWAMA Yoko

---

Prof. IWAMA Yoko is a professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) and the director of Security and Strategy Programme at GRIPS. Having served as a research assistant at Kyoto University (1994-97), special assistant of the Japanese Embassy in Germany (1998-2000), and associate professor at GRIPS (2000), she was appointed professor at GRIPS in 2009. Her specialty is international security and European diplomatic history, focusing on NATO, Germany, and nuclear strategy.

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Modernizing Nuclear Deterrence in U.S. Alliances: Poland's Experience



*Dr. Justyna GOTKOWSKA*  
Deputy Director, Center for Eastern Studies (OSW)

**Poland** is a non-nuclear country, and nuclear deterrence was a topic that preoccupied only a handful of experts and officials in the ministries of foreign affairs and defense until Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. However, the discussion in Poland surrounding nuclear deterrence has gained prominence following the modernization of Russia's nuclear forces, the expansion of its delivery systems, the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, and the execution of nuclear exercises

involving offensive scenarios against its neighbors. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian threats of the use of nuclear weapons not only against Kyiv but also against NATO allies intensified and led to a discussion in Warsaw on the necessity of changing NATO strategy. This has led to an enhancement of nuclear deterrence capabilities, particularly for countries on the eastern flank.

On top of these discussions, the second Trump administration has seriously unsettled the United

States' European allies, including Poland, regarding the U.S. commitment to European security. Following the U.S.–European confrontation over Greenland in January 2026 and fears that the United States would use military force against Denmark, a NATO ally, questions were raised across Europe about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. This has reignited the debate on nuclear deterrence to include discussions on both the European and national levels. In this context, the French proposals to extend France's nuclear deterrence to European allies were welcomed in Warsaw,<sup>14</sup> while discussions on developing Polish nuclear weapons lingered in the background.

#### NATO NUCLEAR DETERRENCE: THE U.S. SECURITY GUARANTEES

Nuclear deterrence in NATO is ensured by the United States, which provides the Alliance with its strategic nuclear capabilities. These are complemented by approximately 100 U.S. tactical nuclear B-61 bombs deployed in six bases located on the territories of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey under NATO's nuclear sharing program. Within these arrangements, the mentioned European countries provide aircraft (such as F-35 fighter jets) to carry out NATO nuclear missions using U.S. tactical weapons stationed in Europe. The nuclear sharing program is the most visible U.S. commitment to guaranteeing European security in the nuclear sphere, even if questions arise about the feasibility of these arrangements in real war scenarios.<sup>15</sup>

*The nuclear sharing program is the most visible U.S. commitment to guaranteeing European security in the nuclear sphere, even if questions arise about the feasibility of these arrangements in real war scenarios.*

Decisions on the use of nuclear weapons in NATO are made by all Allies (except France) within the Nuclear Planning Group, but they ultimately rest with the U.S. president. NATO's nuclear strategy reflects the U.S. doctrine, which does not specify under which circumstances Washington would decide to use nuclear weapons. Under the nuclear sharing program, NATO holds regular nuclear exercises in Europe involving U.S. strategic bombers, European aircraft, and fighter jets from other NATO countries (including Poland), which provide conventional support for nuclear missions.

At present, and for at least the coming decade, only the United States can provide Europe with credible nuclear deterrence. Russia is also convinced that only Washington has the political will and capabilities to use nuclear weapons in defense of its interests and alliances. Despite the uncertainty generated by President Donald Trump's statements questioning the value of NATO during his second presidency, and notwithstanding the U.S.–European confrontation over Greenland, the Alliance functions well on a day-to-day basis with substantial U.S. involvement. Moreover, following the Greenland episode, representatives of the Trump

<sup>14</sup> Artur Kacprzyk, "France Seeks to Strengthen Nuclear Deterrence in Europe", PISM Spotlight no 14-2026, 3 March 2026, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/france-seeks-to-strengthen-nuclear-deterrence-in-europe>

<sup>15</sup> Jakub Graca, Justyna Gotkowska, "NATO's nuclear deterrence: is it time for change?" OSW Commentary, 19 June 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2026-03-03/sovereign-yet-forward-oriented-towards-europe-evolution-frances>

administration traveled to Europe with a more conciliatory message within the new “burden shifting” approach. Europe is to assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defense, with critical but limited military capabilities provided by the United States, but Washington will be further responsible for nuclear deterrence.<sup>16</sup>

### EXTENDING THE NUCLEAR SHARING ARRANGEMENTS

For over a decade, the discussion in Warsaw has primarily focused on extending nuclear sharing arrangements to Poland by deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on Polish territory and/or certifying Polish F-35s as dual-capable aircraft capable of undertaking NATO nuclear missions.

The possibility of stationing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on Polish territory has been deemed in Warsaw as an additional demonstration of the U.S. will to defend the most threatened allies on NATO’s eastern flank. However, such a decision or even a meaningful debate within the Alliance has been hindered by the U.S. adherence to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. In this document, NATO committed itself, inter alia, not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states as part of the developing partnership with Russia in the late 1990s. These provisions implicitly included Poland, which joined NATO in 1999. Even if nowadays the Allies do not assess the NATO-Russia Founding Act as valid after Russian violations of its provisions and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States has not been willing so far to open this debate. Washington has, however,

quietly sent a message to Russia by redeploying its tactical nuclear bombs to Lakenheath Air Base in the UK, together with the British government ordering 12 F-35A dual-capable aircraft for nuclear missions within the nuclear sharing program, adding to the UK’s own nuclear capabilities.

Perceiving the deployment of U.S. tactical weapons on Polish territory as not feasible in the short term, Poland came up with a compromise for expanding the nuclear sharing program. This would involve certifying Polish F-35s as dual-capable aircraft, allowing them to carry out nuclear missions with U.S. tactical B-61 bombs stationed in existing European bases. It would require bilateral agreements with the United States, including arrangements with at least one of the base-hosting countries regarding exercises, training, and use of U.S. nuclear weapons from their bases.

*Poland came up with a compromise for expanding the nuclear sharing program. This would involve certifying Polish F-35s as dual-capable aircraft, allowing them to carry out nuclear missions with U.S. tactical B-61 bombs.*

The Polish government maintains continuous, albeit low-key, dialogue with the U.S. administration on the issue of certifying Polish F-35s. No decision on this has been taken or communicated yet. Poland ordered 32 F-35s to be delivered by 2030 and

<sup>16</sup> Elbridge Colby, Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (As Prepared), 12 February 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/re>

marks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/

considered buying additional fighter jets of this type. Beyond extending nuclear sharing arrangements, Warsaw would also wish for more visible NATO nuclear exercises and more robust strategic communication in this domain directed at Russia.

## EUROPEAN DIMENSION: THE FRENCH SUPPLEMENT

Perceiving the United States as the main guarantor of European security, especially for nuclear issues, Poland has been skeptical of discussions on creating a European nuclear deterrent, perceiving it as unfeasible both from political and practical perspectives. This debate reemerged in Europe in 2023 in anticipation of Donald Trump returning to the White House and the possibility of the U.S. withdrawing from NATO. It assumed the “Europeanization” of French and/or British nuclear potential, either within the European Union (with French participation) or by creating separate multinational European structures (with both French and British involvement).

The UK and France are the only European allies that are nuclear-armed, and since 1974, both have officially contributed their nuclear potential to NATO’s security. However, their potential is limited, and both countries maintain independent decision-making authority. In developing its nuclear capabilities, the UK is tightly linked to the United States, in contrast to France, which has developed its own nuclear capacity both in terms of weapons and means of delivery. France is also the only NATO ally that does not participate in the NATO Nuclear Planning Group. The French nuclear doctrine considers the use of nuclear weapons for self-defense

and the defense of France’s vital interests, with the latter being deliberately vague.

In view of the U.S.-European tensions, the Polish government welcomed the 2026 French proposal on Europeanizing the French nuclear doctrine, as this time it was underpinned by more concrete ambitions. In March 2026, President Emmanuel Macron announced the transformation of France’s nuclear doctrine towards “forward deterrence,” aimed at strengthening European security. Paris proposed allied participation in French nuclear exercises, as well as overflights and temporary deployment of French nuclear-capable aircraft to Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, and Sweden. France would also like to increase its number of nuclear warheads and expects willing European allies to contribute key conventional capabilities (such as early warning signals, enhanced air defense, and long-range strike forces) to strengthen the credibility of this “forward deterrence.”<sup>17</sup>

In April 2026, during the first Polish-French summit, the countries announced the launch of a high-level strategic dialogue on “forward deterrence” to strengthen cooperation on European security in both conventional and nuclear dimensions. The goal is to complement NATO’s defense and deterrence posture, not substitute it. Under the proposal, French nuclear exercises are to take place in Poland and other countries. If cooperation develops further and the announcement materializes, it would constitute a major step forward in strengthening nuclear deterrence in Europe.

---

<sup>17</sup> Lukasz Maślanka, ‘Sovereign, yet forward-oriented towards Europe: the evolution of France’s nuclear deterrence doctrine’, 3 March 2026, OSW Analysis,

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2026-03-03/sovereign-yet-forward-oriented-towards-europe-evolution-frances>

## NATIONAL DISCUSSIONS: POLISH NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

With the shift in the international order, the United States redefining its priorities and alliances, and the increased uncertainties linked to Russian aggression in Ukraine, Polish public debate on nuclear deterrence has also included discussions on developing its own nuclear weapons. According to an IBRIS public opinion survey from February 2026, public support for Poland acquiring nuclear weapons rose to 50.9%, with 38.6% against and 10.5% having no opinion.<sup>18</sup> However, such a proposal is not backed by the Polish government, even if some politicians occasionally claim support for the idea, which results in allies taking Polish concerns regarding nuclear deterrence more seriously.

Poland developing a nuclear weapons program could theoretically be considered in the event of NATO's dissolution and the end of the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe, provided a replacement U.S.-Polish agreement or a credible European nuclear deterrent is not created. Such a move from the Polish side would imply the collapse of the international nuclear arms control regime, which would likely result in the proliferation of nuclear weapons worldwide.

In such a hypothetical situation, Polish society would probably be inclined to develop indigenous nuclear capabilities. However, the lack of a civilian nuclear program would be a serious impediment. The challenge for Warsaw would also lie in independently constructing its delivery systems. Poland would also face the risk of preventive strikes by Russia on nuclear installations. Hence, without

strong U.S. backing, the prospects of developing a Polish nuclear weapons program would be bleak.

## CONCLUSION

In light of a more aggressive Russia that treats nuclear weapons as a coercive instrument in its policy towards Europe, there is a clear need to further enhance nuclear deterrence within NATO. There are two most feasible options currently on the table to make it happen: extending U.S.-European nuclear sharing arrangements and implementing the "forward deterrence" dimension of the French nuclear program. This needs to be linked with an increase in conventional capabilities by the non-nuclear NATO allies to support nuclear missions. Poland perceives a clear need to enhance nuclear deterrence in Europe and is ready to contribute and cooperate both with the United States and France. It is now up to these two allies on how to proceed.

In terms of nuclear deterrence, Poland and the Republic of Korea find themselves in different positions but share some similarities. Poland is a member of a multilateral alliance, in which the United States is the main security guarantor in conventional and nuclear terms. The U.S.-European nuclear sharing arrangements in NATO provide a visible link between European and U.S. security, with Poland aiming to play an active part in the program. Additionally to the U.S. commitment to nuclear deterrence in Europe, European nuclear-armed states—France and the UK—have started to rethink their nuclear doctrines in order to strengthen deterrence on the continent. France is the most active ally willing to provide additional commitments to Europe's security, linked with a build-up of conventional capabilities needed for

<sup>18</sup> Mikołaj Pietraszewski, 'Polska powinna pozyskać broń jądrową? Polacy wyrazili zdanie', Radio Zet, 3 Marcu 2026,

<https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/polska/polska-powinna-pozyskac-bron-jadowa-polacy-wyrazili-zdanie>,

nuclear missions by some of the European allies, Poland included. A multilateral Alliance, a visible transatlantic link in the form of the nuclear sharing program, and supplemental commitments from nuclear-armed European states make the environment in which Warsaw develops its policy on nuclear deterrence different from the South Korean one.

What unites both Poland and the ROK, however, is the rising threat of the use of nuclear weapons by aggressive neighbours (Russia and North Korea, respectively), the non-nuclear status of both countries (with South Korea, contrary to Poland, being a nuclear threshold state possessing an advanced civilian nuclear programme and delivery systems) and a more demanding and unpredictable main ally, the United States, which is primarily focused on countering China while perceiving the European and Korean Peninsula theatres as secondary. The Polish experience that could be translated into the South Korean context could be: keeping the importance of nuclear deterrence high on the bilateral ROK-U.S. agenda and continuously reminding the United States of the necessity of greater participation - be it consultations on nuclear planning, the possibility of reintroducing nuclear sharing arrangements, or the integration of South Korean conventional capabilities with U.S. nuclear ones. Polish nuclear deterrence policy shows that non-nuclear states can contribute to creating an environment in which ground-breaking U.S. decisions can be made in the future.

A

Dr. Justyna  
GOTKOWSKA



Dr. Justyna GOTKOWSKA is Deputy Director and Head of the Security and Defence Department at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). She focuses on the security and defence policies of Germany, Nordic and Baltic states, NATO, and the EU. She also writes about Polish security and defence policy vis-à-vis NATO, the EU, and the United States.

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Modern Threats, Modern Alliances: The Indo-Pacific's Evolving Security Architecture



*Dr. Julia MACDONALD*  
Director, Asia New Zealand Foundation

**The** contemporary alliance architecture of the Indo-Pacific was forged in an environment defined by conventional deterrence, maritime control, and nuclear balancing. During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, the United States constructed a system of bilateral alliances—often described as a “hub-and-spokes” model—anchored in treaties with Japan, South

Korea, Taiwan and others. These arrangements were designed primarily to deter communist expansion through forward military presence, as well as to restrain potentially volatile partners whose actions risked entangling the United States in unwanted conflicts.<sup>19</sup>

This architecture reflected both geography and politics. The maritime character of the Indo-

<sup>19</sup> Victor Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia,” *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2010).

Pacific elevated the importance of naval power and access, while regional diversity limited the feasibility of a NATO-style multilateral alliance. As a result, alliances in the Indo-Pacific tended to be more fragmented, more bilateral, and more politically constrained than their Euro-Atlantic counterparts.<sup>20</sup> Countries in the region prioritized stability, alliance discipline, and strategic flexibility over collective decision-making, with alliances oriented more toward territorial defense and crisis stability than continuous operational integration.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence of their unique origins and intent, the Indo-Pacific alliances also did not prioritize technological integration. While interoperability and standardization were relevant, they were largely subordinate to the more immediate goals of deterrence and reassurance. Military power was understood primarily in terms of hardware like ships, aircraft, and ground forces rather than networks or data.<sup>22</sup>

That foundation is now under strain. As emerging technologies reshape both the conduct of warfare and the structure of strategic competition, the traditional purpose and function of the Indo-Pacific alliance architecture are being redefined. Security arrangements are increasingly valued not only for deterrence and forward presence, but also for their ability to integrate technology, coordinate industrial capacity, strengthen resilience, and enable networked operations across domains and

regions.<sup>23</sup> This shift is resulting in an evolution of alliance arrangements away from the traditional “hub-and-spokes” model to a more distributed networked security system designed to maximize flexibility, manage risk, and build resilience.<sup>24</sup>

*Security arrangements are increasingly valued [ ... ] for their ability to integrate technology, coordinate industrial capacity, strengthen resilience, and enable networked operations across domains and regions.*

## THE CHANGING NATURE OF WARFARE

Warfare in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaped by technologies that expand the battlespace, compress decision time, and blur the boundary between peace and conflict. Cyber operations, space-based systems, artificial intelligence, autonomous platforms, and long-range precision strike capabilities are now central to military competition, rather than peripheral.<sup>25</sup>

*Warfare in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaped by technologies that expand the battlespace, compress decision time, and blur the*

<sup>20</sup> Bruno Tertrais, “The Changing Nature of Military Alliances”, *The Washington Quarterly* (27:2), 135-150.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia.”

<sup>22</sup> Tertrais, “The Changing Nature of Military Alliances.”

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “A Hub-and-Spokes ‘Plus’ Model of US Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a New ‘Networked’ Design,” *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 3 (2022).

<sup>24</sup> Julia Maconald, “Why Indo-Pacific middle powers are building networks, not alliances” *Asia in Focus*, 17 April 2026:

<https://www.asianz.org.nz/why-indo-pacific-middle-powers-are-building-networks-not-alliances>

<sup>25</sup> Adam Segal, “The Future of Technology Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific,” *Perry World House*, May 19, 2025:

<https://perryworldhouse.upenn.edu/news-and-insight/the-future-of-technology-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific/>

*boundary between peace and conflict.*

One of the most significant developments is the growing importance of long-range missile systems and networked sensing. The proliferation of advanced strike capabilities, combined with improved targeting and surveillance, has created a battlespace in which operational success depends on the ability to rapidly integrate multiple systems.<sup>26</sup> In such an environment, traditional assumptions about safety, warning time, and escalation control become less reliable, and survivability depends more on dispersion and deception within a distributed network of sensors and shooters.<sup>27</sup>

These changes are not limited to large-scale, kinetic conflicts, however, as states increasingly pursue coercion below the threshold of war through cyber attacks, information operations, and gray-zone activities. Russia's cyberattacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, Iran- and Israel-linked disinformation and cyber campaigns, and China's use of maritime coercion in the South China Sea all demonstrate the increasing prevalence of such activities.<sup>28</sup> The result is a form of competition that is difficult to deter using conventional means alone. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and cyber capabilities are

reshaping deterrence by altering how states manage these escalating gray-zone tactics.<sup>29</sup>

Equally important is the growing role of infrastructure. Energy security, logistics networks, and access to data centers are becoming critical, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Military effectiveness now depends not only on frontline capabilities but also on the robustness of the systems that sustain them.<sup>30</sup>

Taken together, these developments point to a form of warfare that is more distributed, more data-driven, and more dependent on integration across domains. Success is less about individual platforms and more about the ability to bring capabilities together into a coherent system. This, in turn, has important implications for how states think about the purpose and design of security alliances.

*Success is less about individual platforms and more about the ability to bring capabilities together into a coherent system.*

## ALLIANCE ADAPTATION IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

As the character of warfare evolves, so too does the

<sup>26</sup> Tertrais, "The Changing Nature of Military Alliances."

<sup>27</sup> See Jacquelyn Schneider and Julia Macdonald, *The Hand Behind Unmanned: Origins of the US Autonomous Military Arsenal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025); "How to Lose the Drone War: American Military Doctrine is Stifling Innovation," *Foreign Affairs*, 31 July 2025: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-lose-drone-war>

<sup>28</sup> Matt Murphy, Olga Robinson & Shayan Sardarizadeh, "Israel-Iran conflict unleashes wave of AI disinformation," *BBC*, 21 June 2025; Carl Thayer, "The State of the South China Sea: Coercion at

Sea, Slow Progress on a Code of Conduct," *The Diplomat*, January 27 2025; Reuters, "Russia conducted mass cyberattack on Ukraine's state registries, deputy PM says," 20 December 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Segal, "The Future of Technology Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific."

<sup>30</sup> Charles McEnany, "Contested Logistics in the Indo-Pacific: Joint Sustainability Through Positional Advantage," *Association of the United States Army*, Spotlight 24-1, January 2025, <https://www.ausa.org/publications/spotlight/contested-logistics-in-the-indo-pacific>

role of alliances. No longer defined solely by mutual defense commitments, alliances in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly becoming mechanisms for technological integration, industrial cooperation, and operational coordination.<sup>31</sup>

This shift reflects a basic reality: no single state can independently develop, field, and sustain the full range of capabilities required for modern warfare. Advanced military technologies are complex, expensive, and often dual-use, requiring close collaboration between governments and industry. Alliances, therefore, are becoming platforms for pooling resources and accelerating innovation.

At the operational level, the demands of networked warfare are driving deeper forms of integration. Effective coalition defense now requires shared sensing, interoperable command-and-control systems, and coordinated logistics. The ability to offset adversary advantages, such as China's growing missile arsenal, depends on the degree to which partners can function as a cohesive operational network rather than a collection of independent forces.<sup>32</sup>

The changed nature of regional threats and the consequent imperative for increased coordination is why there have been growing calls for versions of an "Asian NATO" or more formalized

collective defence pact in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>33</sup> Yet geographic constraints, political sensitivities, and divergent threat perceptions continue to shape how far and fast regional alliances can evolve.<sup>34</sup> The result has not been a single model of alliance transformation, but multiple pathways reflecting different levels of ambition and integration.

Three examples—AUKUS Pillar II, the Quad, and the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4)—illustrate this modular approach and how alliances in the Indo-Pacific are adapting to the demands of a new technological era.

#### *AUKUS Pillar II: Deep Capability Integration*

Among contemporary initiatives, AUKUS Pillar II represents the most ambitious effort to align alliance structures with the demands of emerging military technology. While AUKUS—the defence arrangement signed between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom—is often associated with its submarine component, Pillar II focuses explicitly on advanced technologies, including cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum, and autonomous systems.<sup>35</sup>

What distinguishes Pillar II is its emphasis on co-development and co-production. Rather than simply coordinating existing capabilities, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia are seeking to jointly develop new technologies

---

<sup>31</sup> Segal, "The Future of Technology Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific."

<sup>32</sup> Peter Dean and Christopher Watterson, *Missiles and Multipolarity: Can an Indo-Pacific Coalition Defeat China's Missile Overmatch* (Sydney: United States Studies Centre, 2026).

<sup>33</sup> Ely Ratner, "The Case for a Pacific Defence Pact," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2025): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/case-pacific-defense-pact-ely-ratner>; Tim Kelly, "Incoming Japan PM Ishiba's 'Asian NATO' idea test for US diplomacy," *Reuters*, September 27 2024: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/incoming-japan-pm-ishiba-asian-nato-idea-test-us-diplomacy-2024-09-27/>

<sup>34</sup> Bec Strating, "The wrong time for a Pacific defence pact in Asia," *The Interpreter*, 29 May 2025: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/wrong-time-collective-defence-pact-asia>; Julia Macdonald, "Why Indo-Pacific middle powers are building networks, not alliances."

<sup>35</sup> Frank A. Rose, "Beyond Submarines: Why AUKUS Pillar II matters now," *The Interpreter*, September 2025: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beyond-submarines-why-aukus-pillar-ii-matters-now>

and accelerate their deployment. This reflects a recognition that technological advantage is increasingly central to deterrence and that maintaining it requires sustained collaboration.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, Pillar II underscores the growing importance of critical infrastructure. As research on emerging energy technologies suggests, the resilience of power supplies, data, and logistics networks is critical to sustaining operations in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>37</sup> By focusing on a broad set of capabilities, AUKUS reflects an understanding that military effectiveness increasingly depends on the integration of these supporting elements.<sup>38</sup>

#### *The Quad: Flexible Coordination*

In contrast to the deep integration pursued under AUKUS, the Quad—comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—represents a more flexible and less formal approach to security cooperation. Lacking a mutual defense treaty, the Quad operates as a platform for coordination on shared challenges, including maritime security, supply chains, and emerging technologies.<sup>39</sup>

This flexibility reflects how Indo-Pacific states often seek to balance cooperation with strategic autonomy, avoiding commitments that could constrain their policy choices or entangle them in unwanted conflicts. The Quad's structure allows members to collaborate where interests align

while maintaining independence in other areas. Yet despite its informal nature, the Quad plays a meaningful role in shaping the regional security environment. Initiatives on maritime domain awareness, for example, enhance the ability of regional states to monitor and respond to activities in their waters. Similarly, cooperation on critical and emerging technologies contributes to the development of standards and the resilience of supply chains.<sup>40</sup>

From the perspective of alliance adaptation, the Quad illustrates how “alliance-like” functions can be performed outside formal alliance structures. Such arrangements can reinforce deterrence by strengthening coordination and resilience, even in the absence of binding commitments.<sup>41</sup> At the operational level, though, the Quad's contributions are likely to remain indirect. While it may support coordination in areas such as logistics and information-sharing, it is less suited to the kind of tightly integrated warfighting envisioned under AUKUS.

#### *The Indo-Pacific Four: Cross-Regional Networking*

A third pathway is emerging through the growing interaction between Indo-Pacific partners and Euro-Atlantic institutions, exemplified by the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4)—Australia, South Korea, Japan, and New Zealand. Engagement between

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Frank L. Smith, *Integrating deterrence into defence science and technology cooperation* (Sydney: US Studies Centre, 18 April 2023): <https://www.ussc.edu.au/integrating-deterrence-into-defence-science-and-technology-cooperation>

<sup>37</sup> Jason Van der Schyff, “Infrastructure resilience underpins national power,” *ASPI Strategist*, 2 December 2025: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/infrastructure-resilience-underpins-national-power/>

<sup>38</sup> Segal, “The Future of Technology Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.”

<sup>39</sup> Dominique Fraser, “The QUAD: A Backgrounder,” *Asia Society*, 16 May 2023: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/quad-backgrounder>

<sup>40</sup> Peter Parsons, “Quad's maritime domain awareness initiative strengthens Indo-Pacific security,” *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 19 June 2025: <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/06/quads-maritime-domain-awareness-initiative-strengthens-indo-pacific-security/>; Hayley Channer, “The Quad should share intel on critical-mineral supply risks,” *The Strategist*, 30 April 2026: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-quad-should-share-intel-on-critical-mineral-supply-risks/>

<sup>41</sup> Segal, “The Future of Technology Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.”

these countries and NATO reflects an expanding recognition that security challenges are increasingly transregional.<sup>42</sup> The IP4 does not constitute a formal alliance, nor is it intended to replicate NATO in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, it functions as a bridge between regions, facilitating dialogue and cooperation on four main areas: support for Ukraine, cyber defense, countering disinformation, and emerging technologies.<sup>43</sup>

This cross-regional networking reflects the changing nature of strategic competition. As the alignment between North Korea, Iran, Russia, and China has laid bare, the challenges posed by new military technologies, nuclear weapons, cyber threats, disinformation, and critical infrastructure vulnerabilities are not confined to any single theater. By linking Indo-Pacific partners with Euro-Atlantic institutions, the IP4 contributes to a broader effort to align approaches to these issues.

Beyond the immediate security threats, there is also recognition that technologies underpinning military power, such as semiconductors and communications infrastructure, are embedded in global supply chains that can be easily disrupted, as shown most recently by the war in Iran. Disruptions in Europe can have cascading effects in the Indo-Pacific, and vice versa, making coordination across regions essential.<sup>44</sup>

From an alliance perspective, the IP4 illustrates how security cooperation is becoming more networked and less geographically bounded. Rather than operating within discrete alliance systems, states are increasingly participating in

overlapping frameworks that connect different regions and issue areas.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of alliances in the Indo-Pacific reflects a broader transformation in the character of warfare. What began as a system designed for conventional deterrence and nuclear stability is being reshaped by technologies that make conflict more distributed, more data-driven, and more complex. In this environment, alliances are adapting in multiple ways. AUKUS Pillar II represents the deepest form of adaptation, emphasizing technological integration and capability development. The Quad shows how flexible, issue-based cooperation can support regional security without formal alliance commitments, whereas the Indo-Pacific Four highlights the growing importance of cross-regional networking in addressing transnational challenges.

Together, these examples demonstrate that alliance adaptation is not a singular process but can take a variety of forms depending on the issues at stake and the interests of the countries involved. As technological change continues to accelerate, the effectiveness of alliances will depend not only on their formal commitments but on their ability to integrate capabilities and coordinate across regions. The Indo-Pacific's layered, networked security architecture is well-suited to adapting to these new demands.

---

<sup>42</sup> NATO, "Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region," 13 April 2026: <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-partners-in-the-indo-pacific-region>

<sup>43</sup> Kawashima Shin, "NATO and the IP4: Potential and Limitations," *The Diplomat*, 12 March 2026: <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/ip4-potential-and-limitations/>

<sup>44</sup> Segal, "The Future of Technology Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific."

A

Dr. Julia  
MACDONALD



Dr. Julia MACDONALD is Director of Research and Engagement at the Asia New Zealand Foundation and a senior fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies, Victoria University of Wellington. She is the co-author of *The Hand Behind Unmanned: Origins of the US Autonomous Military Arsenal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025). Julia holds a PhD from the George Washington University, MA from the University of Chicago, and BA (Hons) from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

FEATURE ARTICLES

## Modernizing Alliances in an Age of Economic Security



*Dr. LIM Ji Hye*

Associate Professor, George Mason University Korea

**For** most of the post-Cold War era, alliance politics and economic policy could be discussed on separate tracks. Over the last decade, this separation has broken down. Economic relations are now increasingly viewed through a strategic lens, with states treating industrial capacity, technological leadership, and supply-chain resilience as sources of geopolitical leverage. This shift has brought economic policy more directly into alliance politics and blurred lines that once seemed clear across military security, trade, and technology.

Alliance modernization appears to involve the reconfiguration of relationships defined by shared threats into a broader management of burdens and benefits across security and economic domains. At the bargaining table, economic and military issues are deliberately coupled. The recent ROK-U.S. deal, which links substantial South Korean investment and shipbuilding cooperation with U.S. backing for Seoul's nuclear-powered submarine ambitions within a broader trade and security package, captures this duality. It shows how alliance modernization

under Trump 2.0 turns shared threat perceptions into a negotiated balance of costs and benefits. It also suggests why describing such arrangements as an “economic security alliance” can obscure the difference between military commitments and contingent economic deals. South Korea’s key challenge is to deepen economic security cooperation with the United States while maintaining the distinction between alliance commitments and negotiable economic arrangements.

*Alliance modernization under Trump 2.0 turns shared threat perceptions into a negotiated balance of costs and benefits.*

## ECONOMIC SECURITY AND THE REFRAMING OF ALLIANCE MODERNIZATION

The evolution of the economic security agenda reflects a change in how states understand vulnerability and leverage. Whereas the post-Cold War liberal order treated interdependence as benign and efficient, the current era treats certain forms of interdependence as dangerous. Concentration of semiconductor fabrication, dependence on Chinese processing of critical minerals, and limited shipbuilding capacity are now seen as strategic liabilities that can be exploited by adversaries or that could paralyze military operations in a crisis.

In response, Washington has elevated economic security to the level of a primary strategic priority and has begun to expect allies to participate directly in

this project. The 2025 *National Security Strategy* (NSS)<sup>45</sup> makes clear that balanced trade, securing access to critical supply chains and materials, reindustrialization, reviving the defense industrial base, energy dominance, and financial sector dominance are now explicitly defined as national security goals, not just economic policy goals. Under the banner of “reciprocity and fairness” mentioned in the NSS, the U.S. no longer accepts a situation in which it provides security guarantees, runs chronic trade deficits, and absorbs industrial decline while allies benefit from both protection and market access at relatively low cost.<sup>46</sup>

In this setting, alliance modernization is not just about updating plans or platforms but about redesigning the alliance contract. The core move is to translate a shared sense of threat into a renegotiated distribution of roles, burdens, and benefits across issue areas from military defense to economic relations. The question is whether allies will view this transition of alliance logic as mutual burden-sharing or as the stronger partner demanding greater concessions.

## THE EVOLVING ROK-U.S. RELATIONSHIP

The way the second Trump administration has approached the ROK-U.S. relationship offers a textbook example of alliance modernization in today’s world. South Korea is still cast as a frontline democracy facing North Korean nuclear and missile threats and as a crucial partner in managing China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific. Yet the alliance relationship has taken on more transactional terms. Seoul has faced steep tariffs on key exports, as well as persistent

<sup>45</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, D.C.: The White House, November 2025.

<sup>46</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, D.C.: The White House, November 2025, p. 20.

U.S. demands for higher defense spending and greater host-nation support.

The 2025 NSS justifies this practice. It reflects growing concerns within U.S. policy circles about the distribution of economic and strategic contributions underpinning the existing order. In this view, longstanding arrangements in which allies benefit from U.S. security guarantees and access to its market are subject to reassessment. The 2026 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) reinforces this logic from the defense side by treating the capacity and resilience of the U.S. defense industrial base as central to national security and linking allied burden-sharing to the task of expanding and sustaining the capacity.<sup>47</sup>

This logic has shaped transactional, cross-domain deals with the ROK. In November 2025, Seoul and Washington announced major new South Korean investments in U.S. shipyards and related industries.<sup>48</sup> In return, the U.S. backed South Korea's pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines. On the Korean side, the agreement combined these shipbuilding commitments with pledges to raise defense spending and purchase more U.S. defense equipment. On the U.S. side, it created a ROK-U.S. shipbuilding working group and expressed support for a process that would allow South Korea to develop nuclear-powered attack submarines within bilateral and U.S. legal constraints.

The ROK-U.S. relationship is evolving beyond a conventional military alliance. The NSS and the NDS place South Korea within a broader U.S. strategy that connects regional security to supply chains in critical industries. The bargain at the 2025

summit was straightforward in that economic concessions were tied to access to advanced military capabilities. In that sense, alliance modernization here is not merely rhetorical but reflects a real shift. Korean capital and technology were folded more directly into a broader U.S. strategic agenda in return for continued security cooperation.

## TENSIONS IN U.S. ECONOMIC SECURITY STRATEGY

U.S. economic security strategy in this period can appear contradictory. On one hand, Washington has used tariffs and extraterritorial export controls in ways that undermine the traditional image of the U.S. as guardian of a rules-based liberal trading order. On the other hand, it has pursued deepening economic security cooperation with allies, prioritizing sectors such as critical minerals, semiconductors, shipbuilding, and energy.

The NSS and NDS reflect this duality. They acknowledge that the U.S. will no longer treat trade and investment as separate from security and that economic instruments will be deployed to protect national interests, even at the cost of friction with partners. At the same time, they insist that allies and partners should form the core of a new economic security framework. The result is a strategy that moves away from universal liberalism and leans more on club-based liberalism, in which the benefits of openness are limited to trusted partners.

From this perspective, it seems that tariffs and preferential arrangements work as complementary tools within the same strategy. The tariffs and other unilateral measures create pressure and make clear

---

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of War, January 2026.

<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Joint Fact Sheet on President Lee Jae Myung's Meeting with President Donald J. Trump*. Seoul, Republic of Korea: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 2025.

that unconditional openness is over. In the meantime, the preferential arrangements define a narrower circle within which economic cooperation continues to function. Even for allies and partners, this means that market access and protection are no longer treated as public goods, but as conditional benefits tied to alignment and contribution.

*Even for allies and partners, this means that market access and protection are no longer treated as public goods, but as conditional benefits tied to alignment and contribution.*

The U.S. approach to shipbuilding and nuclear-powered submarines under the ROK-U.S. agreement fits neatly into this pattern. Korean industrial capacity and investment are welcome but only as part of the U.S.-centered effort to rebuild naval and defense industrial power. Tariff pressure and the threat of exclusion from U.S. markets loom in the background, while preferential access and strategic cooperation are offered upfront. Meanwhile, the tension between retreat from universal liberalism and reliance on allied cooperation remains unsolved.

#### RISKS OF THE “ECONOMIC SECURITY ALLIANCE” FRAMEWORK

Given these developments, the temptation to speak of emerging “economic security alliances” is understandable but misleading. The term suggests that what is happening in the economic realm is similar to what exists in the military realm and that there are now alliance-like obligations to come to each other’s aid in the face of economic security threats.

In reality, the two domains operate under very different logic. A military alliance is about the possibility of war. It codifies the conditions under which parties are expected to fight and the means they are expected to employ in response to grave threats. Its credibility depends on commitments that endure, even when they are costly. Economic security frameworks, by contrast, are conditional and revisable because they are embedded in markets where private actors and changing commercial conditions constrain what governments can credibly commit to over time. The terms of cooperation can be rewritten as governments change and priorities and market conditions evolve.

Calling these arrangements an “economic security alliance” blurs that difference. It risks importing the emotional and political weight of the alliance into what should remain open to negotiation. For an ally like South Korea, this is particularly risky. If every U.S. demand is framed as a test of alliance loyalty, policy autonomy will shrink dramatically. Domestic debates about costs and tradeoffs will start to look less like ordinary disagreements over policy and more like a proxy debate about abandoning the alliance itself.

*Calling these arrangements an “economic security alliance” blurs that difference. It risks importing the emotional and political weight of the alliance into what should remain open to negotiation.*

There is also a risk on the American side. Presenting asymmetric, coercive economic methods like tariffs as legitimate alliance management tools may

encourage Washington to abuse them. Over time, that erodes trust and feeds the perception that alliance modernization is simply a cover for one-sided exploitation. For alliances that already face domestic skepticism, this can make sustaining public support far more difficult.

### MANAGING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ALLIANCE AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

The ROK now occupies a central position in key sectors of the U.S. economic security strategy. This centrality gives Seoul leverage, but it also magnifies the costs of mismanaging the boundary between military and economic security cooperation. In practice, South Korea can no longer keep these domains separate, as the United States now insists on integrating the two. What Seoul can do, however, is shape how this linkage is managed. While cross-domain bargaining may be unavoidable at the negotiation stage, implementation should separate these domains by their managing institutions, ensuring that military commitments remain durable and unconditional, while economic arrangements retain flexibility based on changing market conditions.

The recent dispute over U.S. plans to withdraw thousands of troops from Germany after Berlin refused to support U.S. military action against Iran offers a cautionary example. Although this episode unfolded in the military realm rather than over economic relations, it signals a willingness in Washington to treat even longstanding arrangements as conditional on allied alignment. In addition, it emphasizes why Seoul has an interest in keeping the line between military alliance commitments and economic security cooperation as clear as possible.

This should play out in three ways. First, Korean policymakers should resist language that collapses the military alliance into a broader “economic security alliance” and instead keep a clear distinction between treaty-based defense commitments and wider economic relationships, including with China and other partners. Treating every economic security initiative with Washington as if it were part of the alliance blurs the line between binding obligations and revisable policy choices and encourages the oversecuritization of economic decisions that should remain open to adjustment. Second, Seoul should work to ensure that defense and economic security issues are handled through distinct institutional channels, with separate mechanisms for deterrence and military planning, and issue-specific frameworks for economic security.

Third, Korea can use its leverage in strategic sectors to negotiate arrangements that strengthen the competitiveness of its own firms across supply chains. In doing so, large conglomerates and mid- and small-sized companies can become part of a more resilient production network, instead of channeling support into one-way contributions that primarily benefit U.S. capacity.

***Stability requires a two-track framework in which military commitments remain credible and economic security cooperation remains flexible***

In sum, contemporary alliance modernization is a new strategic arrangement that converts shared threats into a balance of burdens and interests both in security and economic areas. However, the policy lesson is not that economics and security should be

integrated, nor that a new “economic security alliance” has emerged. Although the linkage between economics and security is sometimes unavoidable, stability requires a two-track framework in which military commitments remain credible and economic security cooperation remains flexible. For allies such as South Korea, it is crucial to manage this growing overlap in a way that protects alliance credibility but does not automatically push economic policy into a subordinate role to security.

A



Dr. LIM Ji Hye

Dr. LIM Ji Hye is an Associate Professor in the Global Affairs Program at George Mason University Korea. Her research focuses on the economic security of South Korea, Japan, and the United States, with particular attention to industrial policy, state-business relations, and supply chain resilience.

KOREA CORNER

## Korea Steps Up Global South Diplomacy: Four Summits and a New Direction



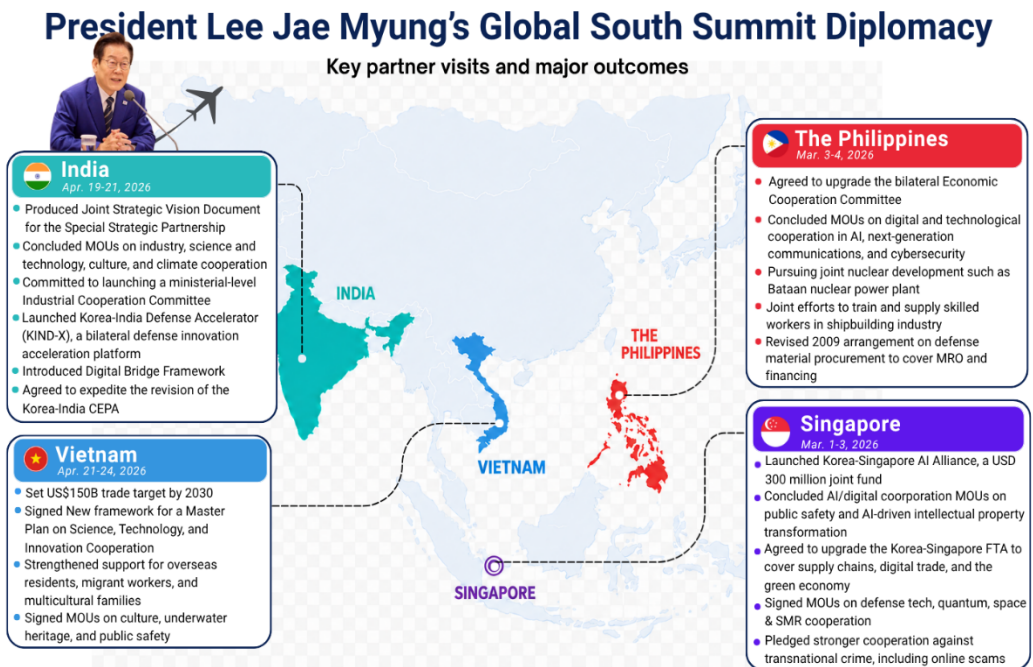
Dr. CHOI Ina

Research Fellow, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy

Upon taking office, President Lee Jae Myung pledged to expand Korea's engagement with the Global South. His March visits to Singapore and the Philippines, followed by India and Vietnam in April, marked an initial effort to translate this vision into practice. The selection of three ASEAN member states as early destinations—including both the current and incoming ASEAN chairs—signaled that ASEAN remains central to Korea's foreign policy. While President Lee had previously visited Kuala Lumpur for the ASEAN-ROK summit last year, these were his first dedicated bilateral visits to ASEAN member states. The visit to India carried

particular strategic weight, as India represents both a leading voice of the Global South and a key partner in Korea's economic diversification efforts.

*The selection of three ASEAN member states as early destinations, including both the current and incoming ASEAN chairs, signaled that ASEAN remains central to Korea's foreign policy.*



**Figure 1: President Lee Jae Myung's Global South Summit Diplomacy:**  
Key Partner Visits and Major Outcomes Source: Compiled from the author's manuscript

### SINGAPORE: AI AS THE CORNERSTONE OF A NEW ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The Singapore summit stood out for the sheer ambition of its agenda. The centerpiece was the Korea-Singapore AI Alliance, a USD 300 million joint fund for AI development. Managed through Korea Venture Capital Corporation and anchored in Singapore, the Alliance is designed to attract private capital and accelerate bilateral AI collaboration. It is also poised to springboard Korea's venture and start-up ecosystem into global markets. Relevant MOUs followed, covering AI and digital cooperation in public safety and AI-driven transformation in intellectual property. The Alliance underscores both countries' growing ambitions in the global AI race, while offering a pathway to

develop credible AI capabilities independent of both Washington and Beijing.

The significance of the summit was not confined to AI. The two sides agreed to launch new negotiations to reframe the Korea-Singapore FTA as a forward-looking framework encompassing supply chains, digital trade, and the green economy. Korea's work with Singapore in shaping next-generation trade rules will likely serve as a useful reference for the forthcoming upgrade of the ASEAN-Korea FTA. The summit also produced a range of MOUs covering advanced defense technology, quantum computing, space and satellite systems, environmental data sharing, and small modular reactors. The two leaders further pledged to step up

cooperation on transnational crime, including online scams.

Ultimately, the summit solidified a shared strategic outlook, deepening ties with a partner that mirrors Korea's own ambitions in next-generation industries. With Singapore assuming the ASEAN chair next year, the visit also lays the groundwork for advancing Korea's broader regional agenda, from economic and technological cooperation to transnational crime.

### **THE PHILIPPINES: DEEPENING ECONOMIC TIES ON A HISTORIC FOUNDATION**

Despite 77 years of diplomatic relations, the Philippines has received less strategic attention in Korea's economic engagement with ASEAN. The March summit marked a deliberate effort to address that imbalance, elevating the long-standing relationship into a more substantive economic and industrial partnership.

Building on the Korea–Philippines FTA, which entered into force in December 2024, the summit focused on deepening economic cooperation across trade, investment, and high-potential industries. Both sides committed to maximizing the FTA's utilization to facilitate market entry and expand bilateral trade. To this end, the two governments agreed to upgrade the Korea–Philippines Economic Cooperation Committee into a standing ministerial platform, sharpening its agenda toward high-potential sectors such as shipbuilding, semiconductors, electronics, and the digital economy. Two MOUs on digital and technological cooperation further extended the partnership into AI, next-generation communications and cybersecurity.

The summit also set out a broad strategic industrial agenda. President Lee emphasized critical mineral cooperation as a strategic priority, highlighting the Philippines' resource base as a key foundation for Korea's industrial resilience. On energy, the two sides agreed to continue pursuing joint nuclear development, building on feasibility studies for reviving the Bataan nuclear power plant. On shipbuilding, cooperation is set to expand through joint efforts to train and supply skilled workers for the local industry. On defense, the two governments revised a 2009 arrangement on defense material procurement to expand the contractor pool and broaden cooperation into maintenance, repair, logistics and financing. With Korean defense exports to the Philippines on the rise—including the recent order of two additional frigates—the revision is expected to improve contracting conditions for Korean firms and deepen their role beyond one-off sales.

Building on long-standing historical ties, the Philippines summit added a stronger economic dimension to the bilateral relationship. President Lee also pledged Korea's active support for the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship, with both leaders agreeing to align Manila's priorities with Korea's broader ASEAN vision throughout the year.

### **INDIA: FROM EMERGING MARKET TO STRATEGIC INDUSTRIAL PARTNER**

As India's economic and geopolitical weight continues to grow, Seoul increasingly views New Delhi as a key partner in its broader Global South outreach. While Korean firms have rapidly expanded their presence in India, government-to-government engagement has not kept pace with private-sector momentum. President Lee's visit sought to close that gap, establishing a more strategic and institutional footing for bilateral partnership.

The summit produced a dense set of deliverables, headlined by a 52-point Joint Strategic Vision Document for the Special Strategic Partnership with three thematic annexes covering shipbuilding and maritime logistics, sustainability cooperation, and energy security. Fifteen MOUs spanning industry, science and technology, culture, and climate cooperation rounded out the package.

The summit placed strategic industrial cooperation at its core. Both sides committed to launching a new ministerial-level Industrial Cooperation Committee, dedicated to advancing cooperation in strategic sectors including critical minerals, nuclear energy, and clean energy. The two countries also agreed to strengthen AI and digital cooperation through the Digital Bridge Framework, opening new pathways for Korean firms in India's rapidly expanding AI market. In shipbuilding, Korea's technological expertise will be paired with Indian policy support to build a competitive shipbuilding industry. On defense, the 2020 Defense Cooperation Roadmap MOU is set to be reactivated, alongside the launch of Korea-India Defense Accelerator (KIND-X), a bilateral defense innovation acceleration platform. On finance, MOUs on financial hub development and QR code payment interoperability are likely to expand the scope of bilateral financial cooperation.

On the trade front, President Lee pledged to double bilateral trade from approximately USD 25 billion to USD 50 billion by 2030. To support this, both sides vowed to accelerate negotiations for an upgraded India-Korea CEPA, expanding its scope to encompass supply chains, digital trade, and the green economy. They also agreed to establish a bilateral working group to provide systematic support for Korean SMEs entering the Indian market.

The summit reflected a broader recalibration in Seoul's approach to New Delhi—from emerging market to strategic industrial partner. The dense agenda of agreements and institutional commitments helped the two sides cement a more structured and action-oriented partnership with a clearer strategic direction.

### **VIETNAM: UPGRADING THE KOREA-VIETNAM STRATEGIC BOND**

As Korea's third-largest trading partner and the largest recipient of Korean FDI, Vietnam shares an exceptionally dense web of economic interdependence with Korea. President Lee's April visit was, therefore, less about opening new ground than about future-proofing one of Korea's most vital partnerships.

The summit focused on deepening the strategic substance of the bilateral relationship. Both sides committed to reaching USD 150 billion in bilateral trade by 2030, while emphasizing supply chain resilience and reciprocal investment expansion. Energy and infrastructure featured prominently, with agreements covering nuclear energy cooperation and electricity infrastructure. The two governments also pledged close consultation on potential Korean participation in Vietnam's large-scale infrastructure projects.

The summit underscored Vietnam's gradual transition from a manufacturing hub into a more advanced technology partner. A new framework for a Master Plan on Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation is expected to deepen cooperation in AI, semiconductors, biotechnology and digital technology. The framework is designed to integrate joint research, talent development, knowledge dissemination, and infrastructure

support—with the Korea-Vietnam Institute of Science and Technology anchoring the network across Vietnam. Existing Korean investments, including Samsung Electronics' R&D operations, also provide a strong foundation for expanding higher-value-added industrial cooperation.

People-to-people ties received equal attention. With large Korean and Vietnamese communities residing in their respective countries, both governments agreed to strengthen support for overseas residents, migrant workers, and multicultural families. Such commitments captured a growing recognition that Korea-Vietnam ties have evolved well beyond economic cooperation into a partnership sustained by dense people-to-people connections. Three additional MOUs on culture, underwater cultural heritage, and public safety cooperation further broadened the partnership's scope.

President Lee's visit to Hanoi came just eight months after General Secretary To Lam's trip to Seoul in August 2025—the first state guest received under the Lee administration. It was also the first state visit hosted by Vietnam's new leadership since taking office in April. The pace of these reciprocal visits points to the exceptional closeness of the Korea-Vietnam relationship and the shared effort to further upgrade an already mature partnership.

*The road ahead, however, lies in implementation. Summit-level agreements are only as consequential as the follow-through they generate*

## NOT A NEW DEPARTURE, BUT A NEW DIRECTION

President Lee's four-nation tour builds on the legacy of the Moon administration's New Southern Policy, which first elevated ASEAN and India as priorities for Korea's economic diversification. But beneath this continuity lies a meaningful shift in strategic logic. While the New Southern Policy focused primarily on expanding market access in traditional sectors, these summits signal a more ambitious reorientation—one that positions ASEAN and India not merely as export destinations, but as core partners in Korea's strategic industries. AI, semiconductors, clean energy, defense procurement, and critical minerals now define the agenda. The upgrading of trade frameworks to incorporate next-generation trade rules and commitments to industrial partnership across all four visits reflects a Korea intent on building ties that go beyond trade into shared industrial futures.

The reinvigoration of the partnership with India deserves particular note. Bilateral momentum had stalled under the Yoon administration, making the Lee government's early and substantive engagement with New Delhi one of the more significant outcomes of this diplomatic push.

The road ahead, however, lies in implementation. Summit-level agreements are only as consequential as the follow-through they generate. Translating commitments into tangible outcomes will be the true measure of this new direction. For Korea's broader Global South strategy, these four visits offer a promising benchmark: building partnerships grounded in institutional depth, anchored in future industries, and resilient enough to weather a shifting global order.

A



Dr. CHOI Ina

Dr. CHOI Ina is a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP). Her research focuses on regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, particularly ASEAN-Korea relations. Previously, she was a Senior Researcher at the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Singapore. She received her Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Bristol.

# THE **ASAN** **SECURITY** **QUARTERLY**

Volume 1

---

Issue No.2

April-June 2026



THE ASAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY STUDIES