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Executive Summary

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The Reconfiguration of the ROK-U.S. Alliance and Korean-Adapted Nuclear Sharing

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Introduction

The contemporary international system is witnessing a fundamental reconfiguration of global power dynamics, with the Indo-Pacific emerging as the principal theater of great-power competition and the epicenter of twenty-first-century geopolitical contestation. This systemic transformation necessitates a comprehensive reevaluation of existing alliance structures, particularly bilateral security arrangements that have traditionally operated within circumscribed geographical and functional parameters. The ROK-U.S. alliance, historically configured as a peninsula-centric bilateral security arrangement primarily focused on North Korean containment, now confronts unprecedented strategic pressures for modernization and functional expansion within the broader framework of U.S. grand strategy vis-à-vis China.

The Trump administration's second-term advocacy for "ROK-U.S. alliance modernization" represents a manifestation of broader structural pressures inherent in contemporary great-power competition, demanding alliance reconfiguration to address emerging security complexities. This paradigmatic shift from traditional bilateral deterrence frameworks toward multilateral, region-wide strategic coordination reflects the imperatives of balancing against rising revisionist powers while maintaining alliance cohesion and burden-sharing equilibrium.

Contemporary alliance theory posits that alliance structures undergo continuous adaptation in response to evolving threat perceptions, capability distributions, and strategic environmental changes. The Indo-Pacific region's emergence as the gravitational center of the international political economy creates new structural imperatives for alliance reconfiguration, particularly as traditional hub-and-spoke bilateral arrangements confront the complexities of multilateral strategic coordination and extended deterrence in a multipolar system.

South Korea's geostrategic positioning within this transformed security landscape presents both opportunities and constraints. According to official statistics from the ROK government's inaugural Indo-Pacific Strategy (December 2022), the region accounts for 78% of South Korean exports and 67% of imports, establishing an indissoluble nexus between regional stability and national economic prosperity. This economic interdependence creates structural incentives for active engagement in regional order-building while simultaneously constraining strategic autonomy in great-power competition.

Alliance Evolution and Extended Deterrence Dynamics

The ROK-U.S. extended deterrence architecture exemplifies the evolutionary nature of alliance commitments and the progressive institutionalization of security guarantees. The developmental trajectory from declaratory commitments to operational integration demonstrates how alliance structures adapt to evolving threat landscapes and technological transformations.

The institutional genesis of extended deterrence can be traced to the 11th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in 1978, which formally codified U.S. nuclear umbrella provisions. However, the transition from political declarations to operational mechanisms remained incomplete until North Korea's nuclear proliferation fundamentally altered the regional threat calculus. The establishment of institutional mechanisms—the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) in 2010, followed by the Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC) and the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) in 2015—represents the progressive operationalization of alliance commitments.

The 2017 North Korean demonstration of intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities carrying nuclear payloads constituted a strategic inflection point, fundamentally altering extended deterrence dynamics. This technological breakthrough introduced the classical “decoupling dilemma” inherent in extended deterrence arrangements: the credibility of superpower security guarantees diminishes when the guarantor faces direct nuclear threats from the target state.

The emergence of this strategic paradox—encapsulated in the question, “*Would Washington sacrifice Los Angeles to save Seoul?*”—necessitated unprecedented alliance innovation to restore extended deterrence credibility. North Korea's subsequent nuclear force

modernization, including tactical nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles (KN-23, KN-24) and the 2022 Nuclear Forces Policy Law liberalizing nuclear employment doctrine, further exacerbated extended deterrence challenges.

The April 2023 Washington Declaration represents a watershed moment in alliance evolution, establishing unprecedented mechanisms for extended deterrence consultation and operational coordination. The Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) institutionalizes previously ad hoc consultation processes, creating systematic frameworks for information sharing, strategic planning, and operational coordination.

The July 2024 “Joint Statement on ROK-U.S. Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations on the Korean Peninsula” constitutes a remarkable achievement in alliance institutionalization. The rapid progression from NCG establishment to nuclear operational guidelines—accomplished within twelve months—demonstrates both the urgency of extended deterrence challenges and the political commitment to alliance strengthening. This temporal compression contrasts favorably with NATO’s decades-long institutionalization process, suggesting accelerated alliance adaptation under acute threat environments.

Geopolitical Imperatives for Reconfigured Alliance

Contemporary U.S. grand strategy increasingly emphasizes distributed deterrence across multiple theaters, requiring alliance partners to assume greater regional security responsibilities. This strategic reorientation reflects resource constraints inherent in great-power competition and the imperative of burden-sharing in contested strategic domains.

USFK leadership’s public articulation of expanded mission parameters—extending beyond North Korean deterrence to encompass China containment and Taiwan Strait stabilization—signals a fundamental reconfiguration of alliance operational concepts. This doctrinal evolution reflects broader U.S. strategic priorities while creating new opportunities and challenges for South Korean strategic autonomy.

South Korea’s geostrategic positioning offers significant advantages for maritime domain control and power-projection capabilities vis-à-vis Chinese naval expansion. The characterization of South Korea as a “fixed aircraft carrier” by USFK Commander Brunson underscores this geostrategic calculus, emphasizing peninsular advantages for forward deployment and strategic flexibility.

Alliance modernization is creating strategic value propositions that transcend traditional security-provision relationships. Rather than unidirectional security guarantees, contemporary alliance dynamics emphasize mutual strategic benefits and complementary capabilities. South Korean acceptance of expanded USFK operational parameters could generate reciprocal U.S. commitments to alliance strengthening rather than force-reduction pressures.

Recent U.S. military academic analyses advocating tactical nuclear redeployment to the Korean Peninsula reflect evolving strategic calculations regarding alliance burden-sharing and deterrence requirements. The 2024 U.S. Strategic Command Deterrence Essay Award recognition of such advocacy suggests growing acceptance within U.S. defense establishments of forward nuclear deployment for both North Korean deterrence and China containment.

Historically, U.S. resistance to Korean Peninsula tactical nuclear redeployment reflected assessments that existing strategic nuclear capabilities provided adequate extended deterrence against North Korean threats. However, expanded alliance missions encompassing China deterrence create new strategic rationales for forward nuclear deployment, potentially overcoming traditional bureaucratic resistance.

Strategic Bifurcation: Conventional and Nuclear Deterrence Architectures

Alliance modernization necessitates strategic burden redistribution, with South Korea assuming primary responsibility for conventional deterrence while the United States maintains nuclear umbrella provisions. This functional specialization reflects broader alliance efficiency considerations and capability complementarity principles.

Contemporary ROK conventional military capabilities demonstrate significant advantages over North Korean forces across multiple domains. Continued indigenous defense technological advancement and force-modernization programs suggest feasible conventional deterrence autonomy, contingent upon sustained defense investment and capability-development priorities.

Yet, North Korea's nuclear force expansion—encompassing warhead proliferation, delivery system diversification, and command-and-control sophistication—remains the critical security threat to South Korea. The complexity and resource requirements of credible nuclear deterrence necessitate continued reliance on U.S. extended deterrence provisions.

Alliance modernization discussions must therefore prioritize extended deterrence credibility enhancement through multiple mechanisms: tactical nuclear forward deployment, joint nuclear planning processes, and operational integration initiatives. Detailed bilateral agreements regarding tactical nuclear deployment parameters and joint operational planning could significantly strengthen deterrence credibility while maintaining alliance cohesion.

Conclusion

The ROK-U.S. alliance confronts fundamental transformation pressures arising from systemic power transitions and evolving threat landscapes. Strategic adaptation requires

innovative institutional arrangements that reconcile traditional security-provision functions with emerging regional security responsibilities.

Successful alliance modernization demands a strategic synthesis combining expanded geographical and functional scope with enhanced deterrence credibility. South Korean strategic flexibility regarding USFK operational parameters, coupled with U.S. commitments to strengthened extended deterrence provisions, could generate positive-sum outcomes transcending traditional alliance dilemmas.

The trajectory of alliance evolution will significantly influence broader Indo-Pacific strategic stability and regional order construction. Strategic choices regarding ROK-U.S. alliance modernization will establish precedents for alliance adaptation in an era of renewed great-power competition, with implications extending far beyond bilateral security arrangements to encompass regional multilateral security architectures and global strategic stability considerations.

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