

**Asan Issue Brief Release:
“The Alliance Runway: The Capability-Expectations Gap
of Being a ‘Model Ally’ in Trump 2.0”**

SEOUL, February 20, 2026 – Dr. Peter K. LEE and Ms. Esther DUNAY, research fellow and research associate in the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, have published a new *Asan Issue Brief*, titled “The Alliance Runway: The Capability-Expectations Gap of Being a ‘Model Ally’ in Trump 2.0.” The *Issue Brief* analyzes the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) to identify how the Trump administration judges allies in the Indo-Pacific and why it calls South Korea a “model ally.”

First, it notes that the Trump administration’s definition of a model security ally has discarded many of the values-based diplomacy of the Biden administration in favor of a narrower focus on spending and burden-shifting. Second, it analyzes the 2025 NSS and 2026 NDS to identify overarching criteria:

- (1) higher defense spending, with a target of 3.5% core spending as a percentage of GDP with a total of 5% of GDP. In 2025, the Lee administration pledged to reach 3.5% “as soon as possible.”
- (2) new and increased orders for U.S. armaments and investments in the U.S. defense industrial base. The ROK agreed to spend \$25 billion on U.S. military purchases by 2030, and has also promised \$150 billion in shipbuilding investments under the MASGA initiative.
- (3) offering flexible access for U.S. military forces and leading efforts to deter or defend against other, “lesser threats.” The ROK has supported the transfer of wartime operational control though not yet endorsed “strategic flexibility” for U.S. Forces Korea.

The Issue Brief finds that the Trump administration has interpreted these statements as fulfilling each criterion despite limited change in the military balance or force posture in 2025. It then discusses the implications of a capability-expectations gap between the commitments and what allies can afford in the shorter timeframe that President Trump could demand, which may cost as much as \$90 billion in the next three years. It also considers the risks in encouraging a hasty U.S. decoupling or burden-shifting off the peninsula. Finally, it offers policy recommendations, including:

1. U.S. allies should be prepared for the Trump administration’s expectations to grow further. Allies will need to demonstrate tangible progress on pledges in 2026.
2. Allies need to prepare for potential shifts in U.S. force and nuclear posture, given that the Global Posture Review (GPR) and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) were not released with the NDS.
3. The ROK should propose and frame its contributions in terms of regional deterrence by initiating discussions to take part in informal regional multilateral security initiatives.

Dr. Lee and Ms. Dunay conclude that the measure of a “model ally” is defined as being “as close to self-sufficient for their own defense as possible.” But this begs the question of whether self-sufficient U.S. allies would still need to defer to American demands or even need to rely on alliances any longer.

The Asan Report is available for download at:

https://asaninst.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=s1_1_eng&wr_id=277

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