

Restoring Strategic Competence

How to Manage Northeast Asian Alliance Dilemmas
amid a Nuclear North Korea

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About the Author



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Acknowledgments

This report was made possible by the generous funding of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. While the author alone accepts responsibility for what is written, this report would not have been possible without assistance from the CNAS staff, especially Melody Cook, Joshua Fitt, Allison Francis, Coby Goldberg, Daniel Kliman, Kristine Lee, Maura McCarthy, Ely Ratner, and Loren DeJonge Shulman.

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Executive Summary

For the foreseeable future, America's Northeast Asian allies Japan and South Korea must live in the shadow of a nuclear North Korea, whose capabilities they cannot match. During the Obama and Trump administrations, North Korea dramatically expanded and improved its ability to hold Japanese, South Korean, and even U.S. territory at risk with its nuclear and missile arsenal.¹ Despite high-profile summitry and promises to the contrary, there is no sign that this imbalance will be rectified, and its continuation exacerbates regional risks and ally insecurity.²

The mounting North Korea threat is compounded by poor timing—U.S. policy has proven exceptionally erratic, unreliable, and risk-prone in recent years. The very existence of Japan and South Korea depends on strategies built around a partnership with the United States that has become shaky, and on faith in the competence of U.S. statecraft—which both countries are starting to perceive as a risk rather than a source of security.

Ally perceptions of U.S. strategic incompetence generate real costs and risks for the United States and Northeast Asian security. If the United States continues to squander its deepest relationships in Asia, the allies could become rivals with each other, increase risks of nuclear instability, play a spoiler role in U.S. regional strategy, withhold basing and access rights to U.S. forces operating in the region, and potentially take independent aggressive actions against North Korea that unintentionally escalate to war.

A Guide to Restoring Alliance Management in Northeast Asia

Former Secretary of State George Schultz famously likened alliances to gardening—do the laborious work of tending to the needs of your garden in hopes that one day it might bear fruit. This report urges U.S. officials to embrace Secretary Schultz's gardening metaphor for statecraft. It proposes a series of guiding principles for alliance management and a number of specific initiatives. Together, these recommendations offer the best hope of restoring ally perceptions of U.S. strategic competence and avoiding the costs of further alliance deterioration.

PRINCIPLES

- *Align Word and Deed*—The United States should avoid making threats—toward North Korea, China, or allies—unless it intends to fulfill them, avoid making promises in private that contradict what U.S. officials

say in public, and avoid statements from U.S. officials at any level that appear in tension with others from the government.

- *Engage in Proportional Risk-Taking*—Brinkmanship is for rogues. The National Security Council should enforce a risk aversion bias in U.S. decisionmaking about Northeast Asia. While North Korea or China might present extreme scenarios that require the United States to manipulate risk to stave off war, as a general rule the threat that leaves something to chance is not going to serve alliances well in a context where the risk-taker's rationality is in question. To the extent the United States decides it needs to leverage rather than reduce risk in the region—whether through military signaling or attempts to change the balance of military power—it should seek ways of doing so that share or distribute the risk with allies, making them stakeholders rather than just clients.
- *Consult before Deciding*—The United States should commit to consulting with its allies before it makes decisions that impact them. This did not happen during the 2017 nuclear crisis, during the 2018 summit diplomacy processes, or when the United States levied a bill for alliance burden-sharing that quadrupled overnight the amount demanded. If alliances are to be the priority that U.S. officials often claim, then it is in the U.S. interest to consult with them accordingly.

INITIATIVES

- *Refrain from Alliance Taxation*—U.S. burden-sharing negotiators should agree to an in-principle provision that the United States will not seek compensation for new costs associated with troop basing and deployments without first consulting with allies about the pending financial imposition.
- *Forge an Alliance Innovation Base*—The United States should construct a community of practice focused on advanced technology protection and innovation with Japan and South Korea. Because it represents a costly signal of America's long-term investment in its allies, this should help strengthen the credibility of the U.S. general commitment to forward presence and alliance defense in Northeast Asia.
- *Launch an Alliance Wargaming Group*—The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), in conjunction with Japanese and South Korean counterparts, should establish a full-time, trilateral Track 1.5 office staffed by

think tank experts and civil servants from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. In this trilateral setting, analysts would conduct war games, tabletop exercises, scenario analysis, and simulations that would become inputs for strategic decisions in all three governments.

- *Provide a “No Missile Deployment” Promise*—The United States should commit to Japan and South Korea that it will avoid requesting deployment of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)-range missiles to their territory except as a last resort, and that it will investigate both the salience of any potential missile gap with China and alternative ways of potentially remedying it.
- *Establish a Trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue*—The State Department, in partnership with OSD, should propose an official, senior level, trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue with Japan and South Korea focused on not only extended deterrence but also nuclear stability concerns. To avoid biases and blind spots, the scope of extended deterrence conversations within the alliance needs to broaden and encourage discussions about measures that do not just strengthen the nuclear umbrella, but that can enhance stability and ultimately make the umbrella less central to regional security.
- *Modernize Deterrence Posture in South Korea*—The United States should modernize its deterrence posture in South Korea to emphasize rapid-reaction capabilities. U.S. troops need to show, in partnership with South Korean forces, that they are capable of prevailing in limited conflicts with North Korea without follow-on forces from off-Peninsula. Modernization done well has the potential to reinforce the U.S. alliance commitment while lowering overall troop numbers in South Korea, enhance deterrence of North Korean military adventurism, and reduce risks of nuclear war.

Introduction

Through a mix of inaction and imprudent action, the United States is eroding two of its closest alliances. After risking nuclear war in a failed bid to reverse North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability, Washington has allowed North Korea not only to retain its nuclear arsenal in full, but also to make unprecedented advancements in size and quality. The United States has attempted to extract dramatically increased financial payments from Japan and South Korea while depending on both as part of U.S. competition with China. And while the U.S. strategy for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” is premised on a regime of free and fair trade, the U.S. tariff regime—which has impacted friends and rivals alike—amounts to outright mercantilism. U.S. allies have picked up on a common thread running through these inconsistent and incoherent actions: incompetence in the realm of strategy.

If the United States squanders its deepest relationships in Asia because of strategic incompetence, the allies could become rivals with each other, increase regional risks of nuclear instability, play a spoiler role in U.S. regional strategy, withhold basing and access rights to U.S. forces operating in the region, and potentially take independent aggressive actions against North Korea that unintentionally escalate to war.

Given the stakes, the United States has a substantial interest in ensuring its allies perceive that it understands and helps ameliorate their strategic vulnerabilities. But how might it actually do so? What policies, principles, or processes would help the United States offer the best chance of keeping Northeast Asia stable while preserving the credibility of its extended deterrence commitments to Japan and South Korea?

This report makes the case for a risk management approach to extended deterrence with Japan and South Korea, an approach aimed at restoring both ally confidence and perceptions of U.S. strategic competence. U.S. alliance policy in Northeast Asia must address intersecting problems—the North Korean nuclear and missile challenge, ally fears of abandonment and entrapment, and perceptions of U.S. volatility and poor judgment. Therefore, this report recommends a series of actions and principles for U.S. policy to reduce Japan’s and South Korea’s vulnerability to the North Korean nuclear threat, address their abandonment-entrapment fears, and demonstrate that the United States has not lost the strategic acumen necessary to keep them and the region secure.

The remainder of this report proceeds in three parts. The first describes growing fears and uncertainties—of abandonment and entrapment—that Japan and South Korea have experienced during the Trump era, and how perceptions of U.S. strategic incompetence inflame both fears. The second part explains the geopolitical consequences of failing to attend to ally trepidation, consequences that include arms competition between Japan and South Korea, increased nuclear-related risks in Northeast Asia, and the potential of both allies to play the role of strategic spoiler in U.S. grand strategy as they hedge against the uncertainty created by U.S. words and deeds. Finally, this report recommends a series of principles and actions that aim to improve perceptions of U.S. reliability and restore ally faith in U.S. strategic competence.

Even in the best of times, allies vacillate between fears of abandonment and entrapment, never fully certain about America’s willingness to defend them in a worst-case scenario, and never wanting to be dragged into a war not of their choosing.



Troublingly for South Korea and Japan, the Trump administration did not consult with either of the allies before President Trump declared a long-term suspension of military exercises in South Korea after meeting in Singapore with Kim Jong Un in June 2018. (Win McNamee/Getty Images)

Section One: Alliance Security Dilemmas

Ally fears of abandonment and entrapment are born of uncertainty. The fear of abandonment describes an ally’s lack of confidence in U.S. willingness to go to war on its behalf, and entrapment fear describes an ally’s concern that the United States will make decisions that prove costly for the ally.³ Even in the best of times, allies vacillate between fears of abandonment and entrapment, never fully certain about America’s willingness to defend them in a worst-case scenario, and never wanting to be dragged into a war not of their choosing.

But these are not the best of times. Japanese and South Korean officials have trouble tracking the policies and intentions of a United States on which they depend for extended deterrence against North Korea.⁴ They struggle to understand who actually speaks for the Trump administration, and how enduring any U.S. position actually might be. And, for the first time in recent memory, they question America’s strategic judgment. Not only do Japan and South Korea question the reliability of U.S. commitments to their defense; they also doubt whether the United States appreciates the risks and costs involved in its decisionmaking about North Korea and Asia.

From Abandonment to Entrapment and Back

An ally can never fully escape the nagging worry that its patron might abandon it or drag it into an unwanted conflict. This is certainly the case with Japan and South Korea, both of which have vacillated between fears of abandonment and entrapment under previous presidencies.⁵ That alliance relations did not deteriorate into catastrophe was due only to interventions by policy officials to mend fences and redouble efforts to take seriously the task of alliance management. But in the span of Donald Trump’s presidency, Japan and South Korea have not only experienced acute abandonment and entrapment fears, they have sometimes experienced both fears simultaneously—and with no observable effort from U.S. officials to address what plagues them.

In the North Korean nuclear crisis of 2017, South Korea and Japan were at the frontline of events but on the periphery of decisions, as Trump and Kim Jong Un traded gratuitous threats and insults.⁶ Had a war broken out, both countries would have been ravaged, yet neither was consulted before grand public threats were wielded, and neither had much input into how Washington navigated the crisis.⁷ South Korea experienced acute fears of entrapment—that through malice or missteps, the United States was going to end up in a nuclear war with

North Korea at the South’s expense.⁸ Japan, which was to be an early victim of North Korean missiles in a war, shared that sentiment, though in civil society more than in the government.⁹

In 2018 and 2019, the allies faced the opposite problem as the United States undertook high-wire diplomacy with North Korea in a manner that not only risked leaving them more militarily exposed, but that did not even arrest North Korean missile testing as diplomacy purportedly continued. Trump proceeded with hasty summit meetings and secret letters with Kim Jong Un without meaningful preparations.¹⁰ Troublingly for the allies, the Trump administration did not consult with either Japan or South Korea before the U.S. president weighed and made decisions involving their fate.¹¹ Neither ally knew Trump would declare a long-term suspension of military exercises in South Korea after meeting Kim in 2018, nor did they know that Trump would halt regular nuclear-capable bomber deployments aimed primarily at reassuring them that the U.S. extended deterrence commitment was credible.¹² It was hardly surprising, then, that Japanese officials and South Korea’s defense establishment worried President Trump would be manipulated into agreements with North Korea that would leave them without the U.S. nuclear umbrella, as well as more exposed than ever before to North Korean missiles.¹³

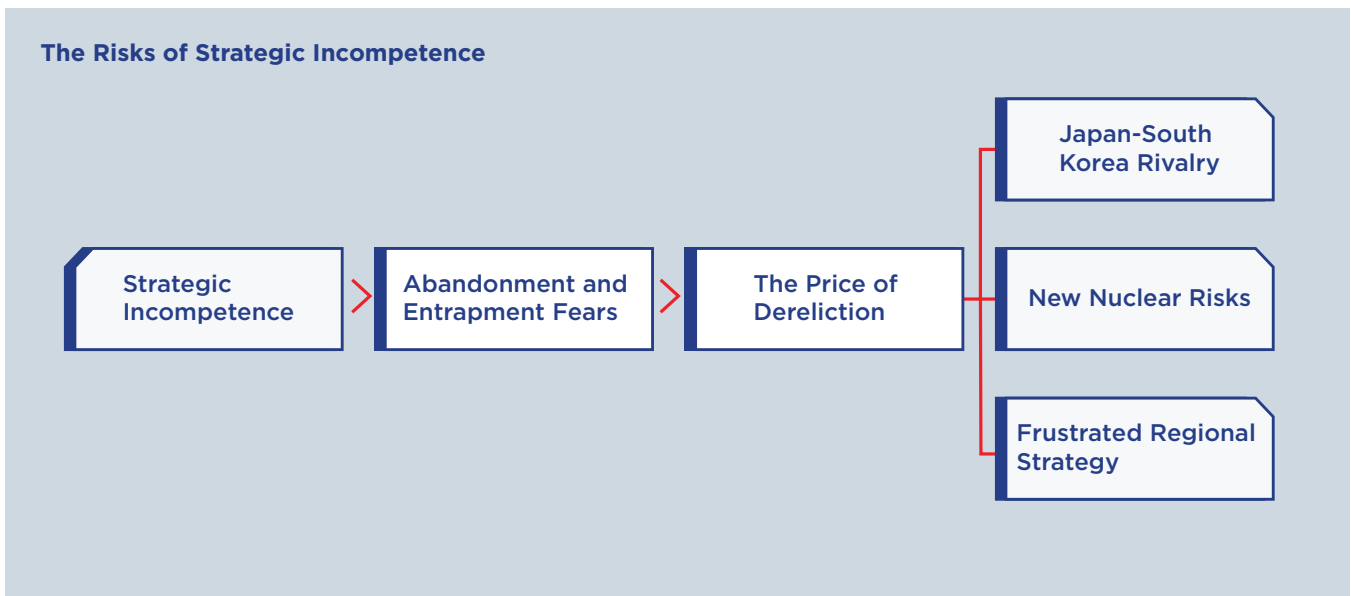
The erratic, seemingly cavalier way the Trump administration dealt with North Korea throughout and following the crisis undermined the allies’ confidence in the United States as a security patron. U.S. actions fueled the crisis in a way that forced them to carry the risk of

nuclear war as much as Washington—but with virtually no say in the matter. They then fretted about the price they would pay if Trump should be outfoxed by Kim Jong Un in negotiations precisely because no rational process preceded Trump’s diplomatic gambits.

Strategic Incompetence

But Japan and South Korea have not just lost confidence in the reliability of America’s commitments to their defense during the Trump era. They have also begun to doubt U.S. competence—that is, whether the United States is thinking and acting strategically. Even the greatest U.S. foreign policy blunders (Vietnam, Iraq) never led to a belief that the United States was self-sabotaging or had become a danger to the region; this indicates the magnitude of contemporary concern.

Japanese and South Korean officials worry about the incoherence of U.S. decisionmaking less because of any single decision reached than because of the pattern that has emerged. Even while some South Korean officials have supported engagement with Pyongyang, many share a belief with Japanese officials that the Trump administration has mismanaged North Korea policy and permitted the nuclear and missile threat to worsen.¹⁴ Both nations think the tariff war with China does not redound to America’s benefit, nor theirs.¹⁵ They not only disagree with the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but recognize it as abandoning the economic keystone of U.S. strategy toward Asia and competition with China.¹⁶ And they interpret Trump’s demands for financial compensation—in both cases a quadrupling of burden-sharing payments for the privilege of U.S. troops





U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper and South Korean National Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo held a news conference at the Pentagon in February 2020, as the two countries failed to reach an agreement on a defense cost-sharing deal and renew the Special Measures Agreement. The Trump administration had demanded a quadrupling of burden-sharing payments. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

in their respective countries—as not only unmerited, but also unwise. As a South Korean defense scholar explained, “If we are so important to U.S. strategy, why does the United States make veiled threats against us while squeezing every cent from our pocket?”¹⁷ Extreme rent-seeking from allies indicates either that the United States no longer understands how to evaluate bargaining leverage and is seeking concessions out of proportion to reality, or that it does not understand that North Korea and China ultimately benefit from weakening U.S. alliances and public fights over unreasonable demands. Either interpretation indicates incompetence in the realm of strategy.

In these decisions and others, the allies see uncertainty less in U.S. toughness or resolve to fight threats abroad than in the U.S. ability to reliably match ends and means in policy—a logical antecedent of effective deterrence. They are confused about who speaks for the U.S. government and whether U.S. decisions involving the fate of the region have considered the risks and reactions of others. Multiple South Korean officials who were interviewed in November 2019 conveyed, “Does the U.S. know what it’s doing in Asia or with North Korea? Does the U.S. understand what’s in its best interests? Who is even in charge?”¹⁸ And as an otherwise sympathetic Government of Japan official wrote in April 2020, “The Trump administration’s implementation of its confrontational policy with China . . . has caused considerable confusion . . . [and] raised doubts in many minds across the region. Japan is no exception.”¹⁹

Japanese officials also became unnerved as North Korea began resuming missile tests—more than 35 from May 2019 to May 2020, nearly all of which were successful—and the United States not only took no action, but Trump himself repeatedly downplayed the threat they posed while touting his personal relationship with Kim Jong Un.²⁰ Masashi Murano, an expert on Japanese defense policy, argued that this failure to arrest North Korean missile testing actually increased the risk of nuclear attacks on Japan. While speaking of the U.S. nuclear umbrella for Japan, he noted: “Kim would not choose to attack Japan if the U.S. retaliation was predictable . . . [but] the more confident [Kim] is in his deterrent options [which increase through missile testing], the more likely he is to misunderstand the credibility of the U.S. threat to retaliate.”²¹

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Although normally taken for granted, the perception of competence matters. The credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment depends on a presumption that the United States not only has its own theory of the case for preventing ally annihilation, but also that it will design and implement policies accordingly. But without rationality, there is no reassurance. Convincing allies of U.S. toughness or willingness to fight is less important than convincing them that the United States is aware of what it takes to make it unnecessary to have to defend them in the first place. When U.S. words and deeds—often outside the narrow bounds of nuclear umbrella considerations—start to cast doubt on the premise that the nation itself is a bastion of regional security, allies naturally experience a greater sense of uncertainty and more acute fears of abandonment and entrapment.

Section Two: The Price of Dereliction

One might be forgiven for thinking that ally perceptions should not be much of a concern for U.S. statecraft. After all, allies grappled with doubts about U.S. reliability well before Trump came to office.²² If Japan and South Korea did not defect from the alliance in the past, they will not do so now. And at any rate, allies have no Plan B for a failure of U.S. leadership. Japan and South Korea lack viable strategic alternatives to U.S. patronage in the foreseeable future.

But ally defection, while unlikely, is only one kind of extreme consequence that could result from a failure of alliance management. Forsaking two of America's closest and oldest alliances involves numerous other avoidable costs and risks, some of which have already occurred, and some of which are markedly worse than simply the disappearance of an alliance.

Japan–South Korea Rivalry

In response to the mixture of fear and uncertainty stimulated by the intersection of North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities with high-risk and inconsistent U.S. decisionmaking regarding Asia, the United States is rapidly losing the ability to buffer historical tensions between Japan and South Korea. In prior decades, the United States used its good offices and leverage as patron to buffer the political friction that intermittently arises between Japan and South Korea.²³ But when the same set of historical grievances arose in 2018 and 2019, the United States lacked the political capital to influence either party's behavior. U.S. calls for restraint were largely ignored as the two sides exchanged terse diplomatic rebukes, Japan imposed bilateral trade and technology restrictions, and South Korea conducted snap military exercises in defense of the contested Dokdo/Takeshima islands.²⁴ South Korea also declared a withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan in 2019,²⁵ suspending the declaration at the last minute only because holding GSOMIA at risk promised more leverage over Japan and the United States than simply walking away from it. As a South Korean national security official explained in Seoul at the time, "The United States is no longer a factor in our issues with Japan. But maybe if we postpone GSOMIA withdrawal, everyone will understand our perspective better."²⁶ For Japan's part, Sato Masaru, a former Foreign Ministry official, lamented that inconsistent U.S. involvement had "deepened the overall crisis of antagonism between the two neighbors . . . [and] cast a shadow over future bilateral relations."²⁷



On June 28, 2019, at the G20 summit in Osaka, South Korean President Moon Jae-in was welcomed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. South Korea had declared a withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan in 2019, suspending the declaration at the last minute only because holding GSOMIA at risk promised more leverage over Japan and the United States than simply walking away from it. (Kim Kyung-Hoon, Pool/Getty Images)

An unreliable patron fuels Japan–South Korea rivalry in other ways as well. The North Korean missile threat and the possibility of the United States going to war against North Korea has helped underwrite Prime Minister Abe's move toward a more conventional military, including increased defense spending, a new interpretation of Japan's ability to conduct military operations abroad, and a failed bid to revise Article 9 of Japan's pacifist constitution.²⁸ For decades, Japan has slowly shifted from a pacifist to a realist defense posture,²⁹ generating occasional concerns in Seoul about a resurgent "militarist" Japan. To be sure, part of South Korea's defense budget is driven by ambient threat perceptions of Japan.³⁰ But rhetorical worries about Japanese militarism have previously amounted to hyperbole of limited consequence, while the United States has until now acted as a reliable buffer and security guarantor in Northeast Asia. With U.S. influence steadily diminished, concern about Japanese militarism—and the low threshold for applying such a label to Japanese defense reforms—risks an unmitigated security dilemma and arms competition between otherwise liberal democratic neighbors.

New Nuclear Risks

Beyond the risk of an emergent Japan–South Korea rivalry, the allies’ belief that they might need to secure themselves in a world without the United States has sharpened nuclear discourses in both countries and pressured the United States to increase the presence of its nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia. This ultimately heightens risks of crisis instability vis-à-vis North Korea and makes diplomatic solutions harder to pursue.

In South Korea, public and elite opinion about nuclear weapons ebbs and flows, but in recent years fears have spiked. In the midst of the nuclear crisis with North Korea in 2017, a Gallup Korea poll found 60 percent of respondents favoring an independent nuclear capability for South Korea.³¹ A year later, when the crisis was over and an inter-Korean peace dominated news coverage, a separate survey of South Korean opinion found that favorability toward nuclear weapons had actually increased to 68 percent.³² The reasoning was that respondents feared entrapment by the United States—that it was too willing to resort to actions that could compel the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, through miscalculation.³³ Seizing on the recent pro-nuclear zeitgeist, a cross-section of mostly conservative South Korean policy elites—who have long favored nuclear weapons—have urged the United States to deploy low-yield nuclear weapons to South Korea.³⁴

In Japan, fear of U.S. abandonment threatens the durability of its decades long “Three Noes” principle forswearing possession, production, or presence of

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nuclear weapons on its territory. Foreign policy hawks such as former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba have begun advocating for a revision of the Three Noes principle and for Japan’s right to an independent nuclear capability.³⁵ As another Japanese defense official claimed, “Once Japan is a nuclear power, it won’t need to kowtow to the United States.”³⁶ Short of its own capability, the idea of “nuclear sharing” has also re-emerged: “In peacetime, the ownership would rest with the USA, but if there were a serious crisis, Japan would have a limited right to use those weapons.”³⁷ Nuclear sharing presupposes not only a revision of the Three Noes principle, but also an increase in the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia.³⁸ It also has the consequence of deepening ally dependencies on U.S. nuclear weapons, which makes it more likely that allies will pursue their own nuclear weapons when they determine they can no longer rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

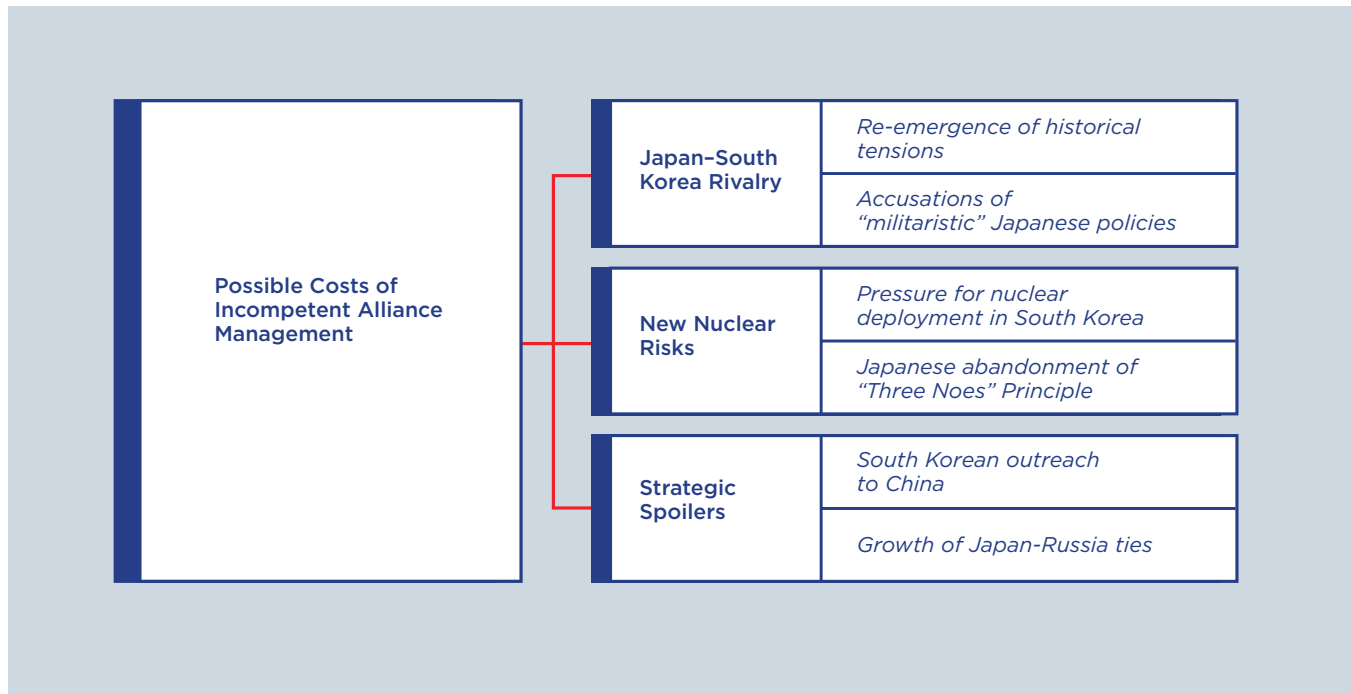
While there is no chance of either Japan or South Korea going nuclear while their alliances with the United States remain intact, there is unquestionably an alternative future in which both Japan and South Korea become nuclear weapons states. And even if both countries stop short of acquiring nuclear weapons, their insecurities about U.S. reliability and competence increase demands for a greater presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia, and this in turn increases dangers facing the region.³⁹

Strategic Spoilers

Perhaps the least appreciated risk of permitting alliances with Japan and South Korea to become either impotent or a liability is their potential to spoil America’s larger foreign policy agenda. Even putting aside that weak alliances make it easier for states such as China, North Korea, and Russia to pursue divide-and-conquer strategies, the allies themselves can impose direct geopolitical costs on the United States. Put simply, as the patron



North Korea launched a series of short-range ballistic missiles in the summer of 2019. Amid strategic uncertainty around the United States’ ability to successfully manage the North Korean nuclear threat, Japan’s and South Korea’s insecurities about U.S. reliability and competence increased demands for a greater presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia. (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)



becomes unreliable or an indirect source of danger for the client, the client’s loyalty wanes in tangible ways. Allies can deny the United States crucial basing and access rights for key weapons systems or personnel, refuse participation or support for U.S. initiatives outside the scope of the alliance, and pursue second-order policy independence that frustrates U.S. goals. Japan and South Korea have engaged in early examples of all three veto powers in response to their Trump-era worries about the United States.

The United States deployed four Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries to South Korea in early 2017. The THAAD system was part of U.S. deterrence and defense designs against the missile capabilities North Korea was rapidly improving during the 2017 nuclear crisis. But the deployment was politically contentious in South Korea, and was not cost-free—Seoul weathered an array of economic retaliation measures from Beijing, which viewed the ballistic missile defense system as a threat.⁴⁰ In spite of THAAD’s military value, South Korea’s foreign minister announced commitments on October 30, 2017, that substantially constrained future U.S. policy designs in Northeast Asia: no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in a regional missile defense network, and no trilateral alliance involving Japan.⁴¹ As a Republic of Korea defense official reasoned, “You might say we sold out future U.S. cooperation to fix the pressure from China. [But] President Trump was making big threats without consulting us

and not protecting us from the China problem . . . [So] we made a deal to take care of ourselves. What [else] can you expect?”⁴²

One of the most significant lines of effort in the U.S. approach to great power competition with China has been the prevention of Chinese telecommunications provider Huawei from establishing a foothold in the global 5G market. U.S. officials have invested substantially in a campaign explaining that Huawei gives the Chinese Communist Party backdoor access to user data and is therefore a national security threat. Even though this is apparently true, the United States has struggled to convince a number of fence-sitters and friends alike to avoid business with Huawei—including South Korea and Japan.⁴³ South Korea has thus far rebuffed U.S. calls to ban Huawei, instead applying to the company the same standard it applies to Samsung and others operating in their telecommunications market.⁴⁴ And while Japan views China as a strategic rival in the long term, in the near term U.S. unreliability has compelled Tokyo to pursue closer diplomatic and economic ties with China as a stabilizing compensatory measure, going as far as proposing a dialogue with China to resolve the longstanding dispute over ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.⁴⁵ Though Japanese outreach to China is a positive development, such hedging has prevented Japan from implementing the outright ban of Huawei that the United States has urged of all friendly governments.⁴⁶ If the United States values intimate allies such as Japan



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and South Korea adhering to its technology competition strategy, it will need to curry favor with them, which means taking their security concerns seriously.

Even if the United States can cajole loyalty on core alliance issues, doing so while allies lack confidence in the United States risks policy defections on issues separate from the alliance but still important to U.S. priorities elsewhere. South Korea, for instance, has expressed misgivings about the U.S. “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy of the Trump administration and withheld support for it even beyond the Huawei saga. For instance, when Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said the Pentagon would be looking to quickly develop and deploy ground-launched cruise missiles that previously had been prohibited by the INF Treaty, South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense immediately rejected the possibility of hosting the new missiles in Korea.⁴⁷ The Korean government likewise rejected repeated U.S. requests for some measure of military presence in the South China Sea and declined to backstop the U.S. protest of China’s illegal island-building campaign in contested maritime territory.⁴⁸ As a Korean defense official asked rhetorically, “How will the United States protect South Korea from Chinese threats and pressure? We are victims of President Trump’s [burden-sharing] extortion. Should we also be victims of Chinese extortion?”⁴⁹ A former South Korean Foreign Ministry official added, “Korea is in double trouble: If we help U.S. strategy in the South China Sea or [accept deployments of] INF missiles, it

will make the region more dangerous *and* we will become targets of Chinese pressure. [Yet] if we refuse this kind of U.S. requests, the U.S. might withdraw troops.”⁵⁰

Similarly, Japan, which in general closely aligns its foreign policy with the United States, also recently bucked U.S. preferences on a high-value issue in U.S. strategy—Russia policy. According to Director Shinji Hyodo of Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies, “strengthening ties with Russia,” including on security issues, is a necessary salve for a deteriorating security environment in which the U.S. role is at best unclear.⁵¹ As such, Tokyo’s national security thinking evinces no concerns about Russia, contrasting sharply with the common U.S. view that Russia is the greatest national security threat save perhaps China.⁵² And while the United States has imposed a punitive sanctions regime on Russia, Japan has doubled down on an eight-point economic cooperation plan with Russia that it started in 2016.⁵³ Without violating U.S. sanctions, Prime Minister Abe cultivated warm ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and promised even deeper economic ties with Russia in energy and gas sectors not constrained by sanctions.⁵⁴

The more Japan and South Korea feel exploited or ignored, the greater their ability to spoil U.S. strategic designs and make decisions that render Northeast Asia a more dangerous place.

All these examples highlight the core problem: The more Japan and South Korea feel exploited or ignored, the greater their ability to spoil U.S. strategic designs and make decisions that render Northeast Asia a more dangerous place. Former Secretary of State George Schultz famously compared alliance management to tending a garden—you cultivate relationships over the long term so that one day they might bear fruit. This may have understated their importance. Alliances can be assets if properly tended, but they become substantial liabilities if neglected or forsaken.

Section Three: Restoring Confidence and Competence in Alliance Management

If the United States hopes to preserve its Northeast Asian alliances and avoid the geopolitical costs associated with their hollowing out, its policies will have to convince Japan and South Korea of several things. This means the United States must take their security seriously; understand the threat from North Korea and have a plausible strategy for reducing it; and reliably conceive, talk about, and implement policies that minimize risks of ally abandonment or entrapment. This section of the report recommends specific principles and actions required of an approach that helps manage these entangled risks.

| PRINCIPLES FOR RESTORING CONFIDENCE IN ALLIANCES |
|--|
| Align Word and Deed |
| Engage in Proportional Risk-Taking |
| Consult Before Deciding |

Principles

Everything the United States does concerning Northeast Asia—especially Japan and South Korea—needs to be grounded in guiding principles. Volatility and unpredictability are not virtues for a great power patron. Having a set of principles to which everything from trip planning to talking points must conform improves the consistency—and by extension the reassuring effect—of U.S. policy. It also helps reduce strategic risk by reducing the ambiguity about U.S. interests and U.S. resolve toward North Korea that has historically encouraged it to probe with provocative military actions that have occasionally led to crisis.⁵⁵

ALIGN WORD AND DEED

Staying on message matters. A prerequisite for restoring perceptions of reliability and competence is aligning the words and deeds of the U.S. government. What U.S. officials and strategy documents say needs to be consistent with what U.S. defense budget decisions, patterns of military signaling, and U.S. Treasury Department

designations actually do. The gap between U.S. strategy and its implementation has rendered the former not credible. The Government of Japan, for instance, broadly approved the thinking outlined in U.S. strategy documents but has been vexed by how much U.S. policy often deviates from strategy in practice.⁵⁶ South Korean officials have said they will not bear the geopolitical costs of U.S. requests—for example, to host new weapons systems, ban Huawei, or conduct patrols in the South China Sea—when they cannot even understand who reliably speaks for the United States.⁵⁷ To remedy this, the United States should avoid making threats—toward North Korea, China, or allies—unless it intends to fulfill them, avoid making promises in private that contradict what U.S. officials say in public, and avoid U.S. officials at any level making statements that appear in tension with the statements of others in the government. Everyone recognizes that positions (and talking points) can change when circumstances change. But everyone similarly recognizes that too often in recent years, the United States has confused all audiences about what its positions and intentions are.

ENGAGE IN PROPORTIONAL RISK-TAKING

Brinkmanship is for rogues—it should be rare because effective strategies typically involve risks commensurate with the objective sought, and circumstances rarely require an existential gamble.⁵⁸ In trying to recover lost perceptions of competence, the National Security Council should enforce a risk aversion bias in U.S. decisionmaking toward Northeast Asia. While North Korea or China might present extreme scenarios that require the United States to manipulate risk to stave off war, as a general rule the threat that leaves something to chance is not going to serve alliances well in a context where the risk-taker’s rationality is in question. To the extent the United States decides it needs to leverage rather than reduce risk in the region—whether through military signaling or attempts to change the balance of military power—it should seek ways of doing so that share or distribute the risk with allies, making them stakeholders rather than just clients.

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CONSULT BEFORE DECIDING

In keeping with George Schultz’s gardening dictum, the United States should commit to consulting with its allies before it makes decisions that impact them. This did not happen during the 2017 nuclear crisis, during the 2018 summit diplomacy processes, or when the United States levied a bill for alliance burden-sharing that quadrupled overnight the amount demanded.⁵⁹ If alliances are to be the priority that U.S. officials often claim, then it is in the U.S. interest to consult with them accordingly. Soliciting pre-decisional input from allies increases the likelihood they become stakeholders in, rather than opponents or victims of, U.S. decisions. When President Richard Nixon declared his Guam Doctrine in 1969, precipitating the reduction of U.S. military presence by 20,000, South Korea’s President Park Chung-hee was floored. Japan and South Korea were consulted about the decision only after Nixon had made it. Predictably upset, President Park promptly began a clandestine nuclear weapons program and bogged down the United States in years of negotiations over how the United States would reduce troops in South Korea.⁶⁰ The decision to draw down troops had strategic merits, but proved costly because of how it was conducted—without prior consultation with the allies it affected.

Recommendations

In conjunction with the principles above, the following recommendations are intended to help manage regional risks and ally perceptions of U.S. reliability and strategic competence.

| SIX STEPS FOR SHORING UP AMERICA’S EAST ASIAN ALLIANCES |
|---|
| Refrain from Alliance Taxation |
| Forge an Alliance Innovation Base |
| Launch an Alliance Wargaming Group |
| Provide a “No Missile Deployment” Promise |
| Establish a Trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue |
| Modernize Deterrence Posture in South Korea |

Refrain from Alliance Taxation

A host nation should never feel hostage to U.S. extortion. The most immediate threat to the health of alliances with both Japan and South Korea is the ongoing burden-sharing talks, in which U.S. negotiators initially presented a demand for \$5 billion in compensation from South Korea and \$8 billion from Japan—four times the cost that each previously absorbed as part of hosting U.S. forces. This kind of rent-seeking not only treats the U.S. military as a mercenary force, it also raises serious questions about U.S. rationality. It amounts to a very large tax imposed on allies in exchange for a continuation of the status quo. The United States—ideally its president—should pledge to never impose a tax on allies for what is both a shared benefit and liability of hosting U.S. troops on their territory. U.S. negotiators should agree to an in-principle provision that the United States will not seek compensation for new costs associated with troop basing and deployments without first consulting with allies about the pending financial imposition.

Forge an Alliance Innovation Base

The U.S. government should construct a community of practice focused on advanced technology protection and innovation with Japan and South Korea. An Alliance Innovation Base, which involves many lines of effort outlined in a previously published CNAS report,⁶¹ will generate manifold benefits. It promises to increase research and procurement efficiencies by pooling scientific knowledge. It can enhance the security protections of military technologies and underlying intellectual property. It will help keep the United States and its allies at the technological forefront of a long-term competition with China. And, because it represents a costly signal of America's long-term investment in its allies, it can help strengthen the credibility of the U.S. general commitment to forward presence and alliance defense in Northeast Asia.

Launch an Alliance Wargaming Group

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), in conjunction with Japanese and South Korean counterparts, should establish a full-time, trilateral Track 1.5 office staffed by think tank experts and civil servants from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. This group will conduct war games, tabletop exercises, scenario analysis, and simulations based on requirements it receives from both the previously proposed Alliance Innovation Base and the trilateral Strategic Security Dialogues proposed next. The group's work will help evaluate the analytical merits of pursuing different co-development projects as well as specialized divisions of labor in national force structure development. The group will also give the allies greater access to U.S. strategic thinking and intentions, including how all three countries understand thresholds of retaliation versus restraint during a crisis. And it will generate the added benefit of habitualizing cooperative interactions and information-sharing among officials and security specialists from the three countries.

Provide a "No Missile Deployment" Promise

The United States should commit to Japan and South Korea that it will avoid requesting deployment of INF-range missiles to their territory except as a last resort. When the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019, it immediately began floating the idea of deploying ground-launched, long-range missiles to Asia that would have previously violated the restrictions of

the INF Treaty. The purported reason was to rectify a perceived missile gap against China, which has a substantial number of INF-range missiles because it was never party to the treaty.⁶² Both the Japanese and South Korean governments reacted coldly to the notion of having U.S. INF-range missiles on their soil, viewing them as politically costly and strategically risky.⁶³ A promise to reevaluate the importance of this missile gap, and to search for other ways of mitigation that do not subject U.S. allies to Chinese coercion, will substantially improve perceptions of U.S. strategic competence.⁶⁴

Establish a Trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue

The State Department, in partnership with OSD, should propose an official, senior level, trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue with Japan and South Korea focused on not only extended deterrence but also nuclear stability. In 2010, following the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review and multiple acts of North Korean militarized violence that year, OSD launched separate extended deterrence consultation mechanisms with Japan and South Korea respectively. Over time, the allies have occasionally come together trilaterally to explore extended deterrence requirements and thinking, but only under the cover of unofficial Track 1.5 dialogues. Creating a Strategic Security Dialogue, as proposed here, makes three major advancements on this sporadic history. First, it symbolically elevates consultations on nuclear strategy that in recent years have been substantially lowered in level of importance and in the rank of participating officials.⁶⁵ Second, an official trilateral mechanism makes it possible to adjudicate disagreements between Japan and South Korea regarding the optimal nuclear policies that will reassure them in the face of the North Korea threat.⁶⁶ Third and most important, a trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue will create space to engage Japanese and Korean defense thinkers on ways of reducing regional risks. If the point of extended deterrence is to ensure allies are never attacked with nuclear weapons, then they should value U.S. policies that plausibly reduce the danger they face, regardless of whether the policies involve coercion and nuclear weapons or arms control and diplomacy. To avoid biases and blind spots, the scope of alliance extended deterrence conversations needs to broaden, and to encourage discussions about not just strengthening the nuclear umbrella, but also measures that can enhance stability and ultimately make the nuclear umbrella less central to regional security.

Modernize Deterrence Posture in South Korea

The U.S. troop level in South Korea (28,500 as of this writing) is not driven by the requirements of deterrence against a second-tier nuclear-armed adversary with a history of military adventurism. Rather, it is a political legacy of the Obama era. As recommended in a CNAS report published in 2019, the United States should modernize its deterrence posture in South Korea to emphasize rapid-reaction capabilities.⁶⁷ U.S. troops need to show, in partnership with South Korean forces, that they are capable of prevailing in limited conflicts with North Korea without follow-on forces from off-Peninsula. This can be achieved with fewer ground forces, the introduction of amphibious forces, special forces operators, short-range cruise missiles, and supporting intelligence platforms. The net impact on U.S. force levels will be a reduction in the U.S. footprint in South Korea from 28,500 to as low as 18,000, but will be driven only by strategic requirements. This has the potential to reinforce the U.S. alliance commitment (because lower force levels are more politically sustainable), enhance deterrence of North Korean military adventurism, and reduce risks of nuclear war.

Conclusion

Alliance management is a process. There is no silver bullet, and no outcome from it lasts forever. Enjoying the advantages of alliances and avoiding the costs of their atrophy demands consistency, competency, and long-term investment. It necessitates solidarity—having empathy for allies' security concerns and showing responsiveness to them. Above all, it means treating them as partners and not customers, or worse. The erosion of America's alliances with Japan and South Korea cannot be reversed overnight. But over time, ally fears of abandonment, entrapment, and patron incompetence can be restored with astute statecraft.

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