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From *K-Bangsan* to Global Top Four: Recent Trends and Future Strategies for the 2030s

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In his August 25, 2025 address at CSIS, President Lee Jae-myung stated that North Korea’s nuclear arsenal has grown 2.5 times since 2022, emphasizing that “the ROK and the U.S. will respond firmly to North Korean provocations,” while also underscoring that “appropriate mechanisms to manage such threats are also necessary.” Since the Nuclear Consultative Group’s establishment, extended deterrence has been strengthened through nuclear consultation procedures, table-top simulations, and military exercises. The second Trump administration is expected to enhance credibility and escalation dominance by promoting conventional-nuclear integration, modernizing low-yield nuclear weapons. Recognizing that the expansion of absolute escalation dominance could trigger an arms race and crisis instability, a balanced strategy is needed to address and mitigate these inherent limitations while complementing extended deterrence based on flexible nuclear capabilities.

Introduction

President Trump has emphasized increasing defense burden-sharing by allies and the leading role of allies in deterring regional threats such as North Korea, raising concerns that this could undermine the credibility of extended deterrence between South Korea and the United States. During the first Trump administration, there were instances of disagreement between South Korea and the United States, such as the possibility of reducing the number of United States Forces Korea during defense cost-sharing talks. The second Trump

administration is expected to continue emphasizing the importance of alliances to enhance the credibility of extended deterrence, building on the nuclear policy pursued by the first Trump administration.

The 21st century nuclear order is also changing into a multipolar, multilayered, and asymmetrical structure, amplifying concerns about the reliability of extended deterrence. Along with changes in the regional nuclear order, such as China’s strengthening of its nuclear capabilities and the emergence of new nuclear-developing countries,

the development of non-nuclear strategic weapons, such as AI-enhanced cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, and precision strike systems, is weakening the survivability of nuclear weapons infrastructure and increasing various risks of escalation. Despite the need to reduce defense spending, the United States is likely to pursue overwhelming superiority in the possibility of limited nuclear use at all stages of a crisis through nuclear weapon modernization, the development of low-yield nuclear weapons, the integration of nuclear and conventional forces, and the construction of the “Golden Dome.” The Trump administration’s nuclear policy direction reflects a strategy to secure escalation dominance and block the benefits that the opponent seeks through limited nuclear escalation.¹⁾ Although the Trump administration’s nuclear policy has not yet been formally announced, this paper seeks to project the direction of the Trump administration’s nuclear policy from the perspective of the escalation dominance and to suggest implications for extended deterrence.

Extended Deterrence and Escalation Dominance

Extended deterrence aims to defend allies and security partners from nuclear attacks by third countries by exercising deterrence against those third countries. Bruce Russett explains that cases of deterrence failure occur when the attacker does not trust the deterrent power of the deterrent country.²⁾

The essence of extended deterrence is to convince third countries that the United States will actually intervene, even at the risk of destroying its own territory, if a third country attacks one of its allies. If the United States’ commitment cannot be trusted, allies may doubt whether the threat will actually be carried out, and adversaries may accurately judge that the United States will not sacrifice its own vital interests for its allies.

As strategic competition between nuclear powers intensifies and China strengthens its nuclear capabilities, concerns are growing over the weakening credibility of extended deterrence amid a more complex geopolitical environment surrounding nuclear weapons. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China’s nuclear warhead stockpile is expected to exceed 1,000 by 2030, and if current trends continue, it could reach approximately 1,500 by 2035.³⁾ The quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of China’s nuclear forces are contributing to the resurgence of an arms race among major powers in the international nuclear order and the destabilization of arms control agreements that characterized the post-Cold War era. In particular, the hypersonic missiles being developed by both Russia and China enable accurate and rapid attacks

on nuclear infrastructure, which could ultimately undermine the survivability and deterrence stability of nuclear weapons.

The emergence of new nuclear powers and the possibility of further nuclear proliferation are also complicating the nuclear order. Despite international sanctions and diplomatic pressure, North Korea has rapidly advanced its nuclear and missile programs in the 21st century, declaring itself a nuclear power. The advancement of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities has already sparked debate in neighboring South Korea and Japan about the credibility of extended deterrence and their own potential nuclear options. The intensification of the arms race between nuclear powers and the trend toward nuclear proliferation could exacerbate strategic entanglement, where military actions in one region affect stability in another, thereby increasing the risk of escalation.

A new nuclear strategy based on the possibility of limited use of nuclear weapons is having a negative impact by lowering the threshold for nuclear use. Over the past decade, Russia has repeatedly threatened nuclear attacks in Ukraine and the Baltic region, employing a strategy of “escalate to de-escalate” to defuse crises. This strategy involves threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons at the outset of a conflict to shock the opponent and force them to cease hostilities under favorable conditions. North Korea, which lags behind the United States and South Korea in conventional military capabilities, has also consistently emphasized its readiness to use nuclear weapons through various statements and publicized tactical nuclear unit training exercises. Such strategies employed by Russia, North Korea, and others pose a significant challenge to the United States’ extended deterrence strategy and are prompting changes in U.S. nuclear strategy.⁴⁾

In its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, the United States explicitly referred to this nuclear strategy as a “limited nuclear escalation strategy” and emphasized the need to secure various options to maintain deterrence even at low levels of escalation. It also suggests expanding cooperation in areas such as information sharing, exercises, and training to accelerate the integration of nuclear weapons and conventional forces with allied countries. A new nuclear strategy based on the possibility of using nuclear weapons could weaken the threshold between conventional war and nuclear war, ultimately undermining the credibility of extended deterrence.

It is generally believed that three key elements—capabilities, intentions, and communication—must be fulfilled in order to enhance the credibility of extended deterrence. In a crisis situation where the possibility of nuclear weapons use increases, for an attacker to trust the deterrence threat, they must believe in the following two conditions simultaneously: First, the deterrent state must possess the military capability to carry out a preemptive strike or lethal retaliation. Second,

1) Lonsdale, D. J. (2019). “The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review: A Return to Nuclear Warfighting?” *Comparative Strategy*. VOL. 38, NO. 2, 98-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2019.15730748>

2) Russett, B. (1985). “The Calculus of Deterrence.” *World Politics*, 37(4).

3) Kristensen, Hans M. et al. (March 12, 2025). “Chinese nuclear weapons, 2025.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2025-03/chinese-nuclear-weapons-2025/#:~:text=silos>

4) Waden, John K. (July 2018). “Limited Nuclear War: The 21st Century Challenge for the United States.” Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Center for Global Security Research. https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/CGSR_LP4-FINAL.pdf#:~:text=might%20make%20a%20strategy%20of,China%20has%20demonstrated%20considerable%20restraint

the deterrent state must clearly communicate its willingness to actually carry out a preemptive strike or retaliation, and the opponent must believe this.⁵⁾

Strengthening the credibility of extended deterrence is directly linked to the concept of escalation dominance, which ensures superiority in capabilities and will over the enemy in times of crisis. Escalation dominance is a strategic framework that prevents the opponent from attempting to further escalate a crisis by possessing both the capability and will to surpass the opponent at every stage of the conflict. This concept was systematized by Herman Kahn in the 1960s, who presented dozens of levels of conflict, from peaceful states to full-scale nuclear war, through the concept of the “escalation ladder.”⁶⁾

Escalation dominance refers to the ability to escalate a conflict in a way that imposes costs on the adversary without allowing them to respond. Possessing escalation dominance means having the ability to control the risk not to escalate to the next level. Strategies aimed at securing escalation dominance can play a positive role in addressing the credibility issues of extended deterrence by emphasizing superior capabilities and resolve against the adversary.

The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Policy

The Trump administration is likely to continue pursuing a strategy of escalation dominance, securing step-by-step options against nuclear or non-nuclear strategic threats, in line with the nuclear policy of the previous Trump administration. First, the Trump administration’s 2018 NPR also pointed out the deterioration of the international security environment and the return of competition among major powers, and pursued the establishment of escalation dominance to suppress the development of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities of potential adversaries such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. The second Trump administration cannot rule out the possibility of expanding the methods of nuclear weapons use to develop a strategy combining nuclear and conventional deterrence with missile defense to deter attacks across the entire spectrum, as outlined in the 2018 NPR. As mentioned in the NPR in 2018, it seems that nuclear weapons could be considered in response to “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks” targeting national nuclear command and control systems (NC3), early warning systems, nuclear forces, and civilians in cyberspace and space, which are emerging as factors that could weaken nuclear deterrence. To this end, the Trump administration plans to invest more budget and effort into building the necessary capabilities and systems, as indicated by the “left of launch” operational concept—which involves using advanced

surveillance, reconnaissance, and intercept capabilities to preemptively eliminate enemy missiles—and the ‘Gold Dome.’

Second, the Trump administration is likely to further strengthen the joint planning system for nuclear crises through continued cooperation on the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG). Concerns were raised that the Trump administration’s approach to extended deterrence might change after President Trump referred to North Korea as a “nuclear power” and flaunted his friendship with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The Trump administration has stated that it will continue to strengthen U.S. extended deterrence by emphasizing ties with Asian allies in order to achieve its MAGA goals in the Indo-Pacific region. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has also emphasized the role of allies in responding to the real threat posed by China in the Indo-Pacific region. On May 31, 2025 (local time), a delegation from the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate visited the Ministry of National Defense and reaffirmed the U.S.’s defense commitment to South Korea and its intention to provide extended deterrence using all of the U.S. military’s capabilities. At the 4th NCG held in January 2025, South Korea and the U.S. agreed to continue to achieve rapid and substantial progress on the NCG.

The NCG has played an important role in enhancing the credibility of extended deterrence, and it is expected to continue functioning as a mechanism to promote cooperation between South Korea and the United States in response to North Korea’s growing nuclear threat. At the 4th NCG, the ROK and the U.S. evaluated the importance of joint planning in preparation for a nuclear crisis, including nuclear and strategic planning, exercises, simulations, training, strategic communication procedures in times of crisis or similar situations, the establishment of a dedicated secure communication system, and tabletop exercises between military authorities. Amid budget cuts under the Trump administration, the confirmation of the extended deterrence commitment by the U.S. Congress and administration signifies that the second Trump administration has reaffirmed the importance of ROK-U.S. extended deterrence and demonstrated its commitment to the Washington Declaration and the NCG at the policy level.

Third, the current Trump administration’s NPR is expected to maintain the basic direction of the 2022 NPR while allocating more budget to nuclear force modernization and the development of low-yield nuclear weapons. In March 2025, The Washington Post reported that the Department of Defense’s “Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance” presented the core guidelines of focusing on deterring China and defending the U.S. mainland, with allies taking the lead in deterring regional threats such as North Korea. Since the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance serves as the basis and framework for the NDS and NPR, there are views that it may signal a potential shift in the Trump administration’s nuclear policy toward North Korea. The 2022 NPR issued by the Biden administration maintains the core nuclear policy framework of the 2018 NPR issued by the first Trump administration. The Trump administration’s second-term

5) Rudolf, Peter. (November 2018). “U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy and Its Problems.” German Institute for International and Security Affairs. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2018RP10_rdf.pdf

6) Kahn, Herman. (1969). *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. Praeger. New York: Frederick A Praeger.

NPR is likely to maintain strategic ambiguity regarding the “single purpose” of nuclear weapons and the “no first use (NFU)” policy to address allies’ concerns about extended deterrence, while sending a clear signal that potential provocative nations cannot gain benefits through limited nuclear escalation through the modernization of U.S. nuclear capabilities.

In January 2025, the United States is estimated to have approximately 3,700 nuclear warheads, of which approximately 1,770 are deployed, and hundreds of those in storage are scheduled to be retired before 2030.⁷⁾

The modernization of nuclear forces, which began due to the aging of existing nuclear warheads, was a core nuclear policy of the Trump administration during his first term, and it is likely to serve as an opportunity to revitalize the nuclear capabilities necessary to pursue a policy of extended deterrence during his second term. In addition, the 2018 NPR outlined nine capabilities that the nuclear triad must possess in order to threaten targets in Russia, China, and North Korea at all stages of crisis and conflict. The second Trump administration is likely to push even harder for the modernization of nuclear forces in order to achieve capabilities such as survivability, mobility, diversity, accuracy, penetration, responsiveness, diverse ranges, visibility, and redeployment capabilities.

Fourth, the Trump administration is likely to continue developing conventional-nuclear integration (CNI) so that conventional and nuclear forces can be integrated at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels in order to strengthen various options, both conventional and nuclear. Even during the first Trump administration, the United States sought to expand flexible response options by integrating conventional and nuclear forces in order to neutralize the asymmetric interests of potential adversaries such as Russia and North Korea. This was achieved by clearly conveying the message that the United States possesses the capability for effective retaliation even in the event of a limited nuclear conflict. This policy includes a “deterrence by denial” approach, which structurally eliminates the military and political gains that an adversary could achieve through a nuclear attack, rather than relying solely on the threat of punishment for nuclear deterrence.

South Korea also needs to continue developing CNI in order to prevent strategic miscalculations that the U.S. would be unable to respond appropriately even if potential adversaries such as Russia or North Korea carried out small-scale nuclear attacks. The Trump administration is likely to continue its efforts to further concretize the integration of U.S. and allied capabilities in order to apply NATO’s concept of simultaneous conventional and nuclear operations to the Indo-Pacific region. If the North Korean regime under Kim Jong-un considers a limited nuclear attack or a non-nuclear strategic attack on U.S. military bases or specific strategic targets, signaling that the United States possesses decisive retaliatory capabilities could

reduce the likelihood of North Korean miscalculations and contribute to deterring provocative actions.

Conclusion

Despite the erosion of strategic stability in the 21st century and debates over the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, the ROK-U.S. extended deterrence has continued to develop in terms of declaratory policy, institutionalization. The Trump administration’s escalation dominance strategy also has several strengths in terms of the ROK-U.S. extended deterrence. First, it can enhance the assurance effect by emphasizing the U.S. extended deterrence commitment in various ways. For allies exposed to nuclear threats, such as South Korea and Japan, the United States can respond to the classic question of “Would the United States risk nuclear war for its allies?” with actual military capabilities and options, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of its extended deterrence commitment. Second, it can provide various means to apply customized deterrence strategies to asymmetric threats, such as Russia’s low-yield nuclear doctrine and North Korea’s limited nuclear strategy. Third, as stated in the 2018 NPR, securing response capabilities across the entire escalation ladder could provide reliable extended deterrence response measures at each stage of crisis.

In fact, the United States’ allies, including South Korea and Japan, generally gave positive assessments of the Trump administration’s nuclear policy, stating that it contributed to strengthening deterrence and enhancing the credibility of extended deterrence. This suggests that the Trump administration’s policy achieved some of its intended effects by providing strategic clarity, thereby reducing security uncertainty among allies and curbing incentives for nuclear proliferation. On the other hand, a strategy that pursues absolute escalation dominance may cause arms race, or provide incentives for preemptive strikes or escalation due to misperceptions in crisis situations, thereby weakening crisis stability. Russia and China have strongly criticized the U.S. for returning to a Cold War mentality with its nuclear policy.⁸⁾ For the sustainable development of extended deterrence between South Korea and the U.S., efforts to complement the advantages and limitations of the escalation dominance strategy must be pursued in parallel.

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7) Kristensen, Hans M. Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight. (2025). “United States Nuclear Weapons, 2025,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 81, No. 1.

8) Carbone, Christopher. (February 4, 2018). “China Accuses U.S. of Cold War Mentality Over Nuclear Policy,” *Fox News*, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/2018/02/04/china-accuses-us-cold-war-mentality-over-nuclear-policy.html>