

Highlights from the 2025 RINSA/KNDU International Security Conference

Jessica Taylor

Fellow, Atlantic Council IPSI, PhD candidate, Princeton University

This year's International Security Conference focused on the deteriorating regional security environment, regional perspectives on prospects for the second U.S. Trump administration's National Security Strategy and challenges for the modernization of the ROK/US alliance in the evolving security environment. While there was overall concern among presenters surrounding the uncertainty of Trump's strategic outlook, there was also overall agreement that the best way forward for U.S. regional allies and partners is to strengthen security ties with the U.S. to maintain regional stability amid China's rise. This dynamic provides a few challenges but also opportunities for modernizing the ROK/U.S. alliance. Moving forward the U.S. will need to strengthen its enduring commitment to the region to better allow its allies to implement security policies in line with the U.S. despite the threat of retaliation from China.

Amid mounting concerns surrounding the strengthening of China and North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities, this year's KNDU/RINSA international security studies conference brought together some of the foremost experts on East Asia security to provide insights on the strategic outlooks of regional states. Central to the discussion was the prospects for the trajectory of regional alliances and partnerships with the United States ahead of the release of the second Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS). To varying degrees, the sentiment of the region's states leaned towards apprehension and concern due to the uncertainty of whether the Trump administration's strategic outlook would continue the U.S. administration's prioritization of the Indo-Pacific theater.

Yet, despite the apprehension, the conference's experts' recommendations leaned towards regional states continuing to strengthen their alliances and partnerships with the United States to maintain the stability and growing economic prosperity of the region. In this light, the conference included in-depth discussions on what the likely Trump administration's approach to the Republic of Korea (ROK) - U.S. alliance will be and provided recommendations for the nascent ROK Lee administration. Herein, I provide a synopsis of the overall takeaways from the conference and a summary of my discussant remarks in response to the panel that covered the challenges to modernizing the ROK-US alliance amid the deteriorating regional security environment.

Prospects for the Trump 2.0 NSS and the implications for East Asia

In his presentation remarks, Mr. Adam Farrar, previous

Special Advisor to Vice President Kamala Harris, amplified recent media reports that the second U.S. Trump administration may prioritize its focus on its own hemisphere, which would be a departure from recent U.S. administrations.¹) Mr. Farrar pointed to the Trump administration's recent operations in the Caribbean as some of the indicators of this coming shift.

I concur with Mr. Farrar's assessment that the Trump administration's delay in the release of its NSS is likely due to disagreements within the administration on what should be the administration's top strategic security priorities. Reportedly, some senior officials within the administration are advocating for the administration to focus on the United States' own backyard while seeking to deemphasize the importance of the Indo-Pacific region to the United States. Advocates of this view reportedly seek to lower tensions with China through the decrease of U.S. military involvement in the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, there are indicators that the Trump administration will continue to focus on the strategic stability of the Indo-Pacific. For instance, President Trump's recent visit to the region highlighted the importance of the U.S. relationships with its allies and partners.²) The visit was also buttressed by U.S. senior officials' visits to the region and their accompanying remarks substantiating this outlook. Significantly, U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, for instance, emphasized the significance of the region amid his

1) Paul McLeary and Daniel Lippman, "Pentagon plan prioritizes homeland over China threat," <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/05/pentagon-national-defense-strategy-china-homeland-western-hemisphere-00546310>

2) Alexandra Hutzler, Michelle Stoddart, and David Brennan, "Trump arrives in South Korea for final stop of Asia tour, high-stakes meeting with Xi" <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-japan-2nd-stop-asia-tour-high-stakes/story?id=126904467>

recent visit to South Korea.³⁾

Furthermore, the Trump administration has continued Biden administration initiatives to further multilateral cooperation in the region, such as the strengthening of trilateral ROK, Japan, and U.S. security cooperation and AUKUS. However, these signals amid the absence of a declared Trump administration national security strategy have not resulted in mounting apprehension among key U.S. regional allies and partners.

ASEAN's strategic outlook

In his address, Dr. Chang Jun Yan of Nanyang University discussed the general strategic outlook of ASEAN states as the second Trump administration has gotten underway. A key component of his remarks was his stressing that as the Trump administration moves to impose steep tariffs on even its closest of allies, the United States is arguably losing the trust of its regional allies and partners that the United States remains dedicated to upholding the region's stability. As such, ASEAN states are increasingly hedging between strengthening security cooperation with the United States while seeking to avoid confrontation and maintain economic ties with China.

Despite these concerns, Dr. Chang proclaims that ASEAN states assess that their best bet is to continue security cooperation with the United States to secure the region's strategic stability in the midst of a deteriorating security environment. The strongest example of this approach among ASEAN states would be the recent efforts of the Philippine and U.S. governments to strengthen and modernize their alliance. From Manila, President BongBong Marcos has noted that a conflict across the Taiwan Strait would likely involve the participation of the Philippines. His comments notably come as the Philippine-U.S. alliance seeks to strengthen cooperation through various measures such as the U.S. development of military installations and U.S. military rotations in the Philippines despite pushback from China.

Japan's Strategic Outlook

Relatedly, Dr. Narushige Michishita, Vice President at Japan's National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), proclaimed that Japan is doing less hedging in realizing the strategic threat China poses to Japan's national security. Instead, he noted that China's strengthening nuclear and missile capabilities are driving Japan's deteriorating threat perception. His assessment came amid China's threatening

3) Surina Venkat, "Hegseth tells China's defense chief US will 'stoutly defend its interests'" <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/5582809-hegseth-china-defense-indo-pacific/>

rhetoric in response to Japan's new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's statements, whereas she professed that Japan would likely be involved in the defense of Taiwan in the event Taiwan was attacked.⁴⁾ Therefore, amid concerns for Japan's security and regional security, Japan and the United States have moved to continue to strengthen their alliance. In addition, as the Trump administration is likely to request that its allies do more towards their own defense, Japan has increased its defense budget and made efforts towards increasing its defense capabilities.

Tangentially, Dr. Michisita provided insights on Japan's reaction to the ROK's advancing military capabilities. He noted that while Japan supports the ROK's obtaining a nuclear-powered submarine, Japan would not be in support of the ROK obtaining an indigenous nuclear weapon capability. As such Japan is likely closely assessing whether ROK-U.S. efforts to modernize the alliance will help to quell the ROK's public growing support for a ROK indigenous nuclear weapon capability in response to the ROK's deteriorating security environment.

Republic of Korea (ROK)

Overall, when considering regional states' approach to strengthening their alliances and partnerships with the U.S., the ROK is assessed to fall on the spectrum between the ASEAN states and Japan. Whereas South Korea is assessed as wanting to strengthen its alliance with the United States, South Korea is also seen as moving cautiously amid concerns for antagonizing China. As the Trump administration is likely to levy significant demands on the ROK towards modernizing its alliance with the United States, a significant portion of the conference focused on the challenges of modernizing the ROK-U.S. alliance.

To date, the Trump administration has indicated that modernization efforts need to include, but are not limited to, the ROK taking more of a lead in its own defense on the Korean Peninsula in response to the North Korean threat.⁵⁾

With this in mind, to set the stage for discussions on the Trump administration's motivations to call for the modernization of the ROK/US alliance, Dr. Lami Kim, of APCSS, provided framing remarks in her personal capacity. She stressed that much of the driving force for modernizing the alliance is that the U.S. under the Trump administration is seeking for its alliances to be more balanced, particularly following the economic strength of its regional allies and partners.

4) Koh Ewe, "What to know about China and Japan's escalating spat over Taiwan," <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crklvx2n7rzo>

5) Michael Lee, "U.S. calls to 'modernize' alliance with South Korea may put Seoul-Washington ties at a crossroads," <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-07-09/national/politics/US-calls-to-modernize-alliance-with-South-Korea-may-put-Seoul-Washington-ties-at-a-crossroads-/2349027>

To provide a ROK perspective, Dr. In-hyo Seol's presentation identified the challenges to modernizing the ROK-U.S. alliance. Dr. Seol pointed to factors such as the increased risk of simultaneous conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere in East Asia, as well as the growing cooperation among North Korea, China, Russia, and Iran as key motivators for modernizing the ROK-U.S. alliance. In this environment, Dr. Seol argued that the deteriorating security environment provides an opportunity for the ROK to take the lead in the defense of the Korean Peninsula. His assessment comes as the nascent ROK Lee administration seeks the return of wartime Operational Control (OPCON) of ROK forces from the United States.⁶⁾ However, discourse fails to address how efforts to modernize the ROK-U.S. alliance will also address how the allies could possibly work together to simultaneously deter North Korea and China. With these issues in mind, there are some additional areas that I assess that the ROK-U.S. alliance needs to consider.

For one, while it's significant that the ROK and U.S. governments are furthering discussions on a flexible role for U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula, absent from the discussion is the Access, Basing and Overflight (ABO) privileges of military installations and territory in the ROK that the U.S. forces would require to operate within and from the ROK in support of armed conflict outside of the Korean Theater of Operations.⁷⁾ Furthermore, I offered that as the ROK continues to obtain advanced military capabilities, also missing from the discussion is whether the ROK would move to work with the U.S. to deter not only North Korean but also Chinese aggression. Increasingly, these debates will also extend to the growing ROK-U.S. cooperation surrounding shipbuilding and Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) cooperation. Strengthening cooperation in these areas in peacetime lends to questions about whether the ROK would also be willing to extend similar cooperation amid an armed conflict, particularly with China.

However, as indicators point to the U.S. pushing the ROK to take more of a lead on the Korean Peninsula while the U.S. is likely to focus on China, ROK security experts question whether the U.S. commitment will weather additional moves by China to punish South Korea for its efforts to strengthen its alliance with the United. In this light, in particular amid Japan's concerns that the ROK may eventually seek to develop its own indigenous nuclear weapon capability, some ROK experts call for the U.S. to strengthen its displays of commitment to the ROK's defense. For instance, as part of the conference's ROK Alliance Policy Roundtable, Ms. Mi Sook Lee, Editorial Writer for MunhwaIlbo, called for the U.S. to increase its deployments of U.S. strategic assets to the ROK in support of alliance exercises.

6) Hwang Joo-young, "Lee proposes wartime OPCON transfer by 2030," <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10553383>

7) Soo-Hyang Choi, "Hegseth Says US Forces in South Korea Have Regional Flexibility," <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/hegseth-says-us-forces-in-south-korea-have-regional-flexibility/ar-AA1PLmjv>

The panel on South Korea closed with a robust presentation on UNC by Professor Baek Soon Lee, former ROK Ambassador to Australia. Professor Lee noted how ROK public support for the possible future expansion of UNC has significantly ebbed and flowed over the years. While some panel commentators displayed support for an expansion of UNC as South Korea's military capabilities, others strongly refuted efforts to expand UNC. Furthermore, debate about the future of UNC amid an official end to the Korean War also sparked debate among the panelists. Going forward, UNC will likely need to increasingly be a part of the ROK-U.S. alliance modernization discussion, particularly among efforts to transfer wartime OPCON to the ROK and likewise question surrounding the future of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC).

Considerations for the Trump administration 2.0

While it remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will continue recent U.S. policy aims of pivoting to Asia, it is clear that the Trump administration will seek for all of its allies to take a greater share of the burden for their own defense. Thus, as allies simultaneously seek to strengthen their security ties with the U.S. amid rising concerns about China and North Korea to varying degrees, the U.S. should seek ways to ensure that allies have the political capital to make the best decisions for its alliances with the United States.

However, what was abundantly clear from the conference's panelists is that the Trump administration's policies in areas beyond security have the ability to greatly hinder or facilitate the ability of allied governments to support U.S. security policies in the region. Arguably, the Trump administration's moves to increase tariffs and further America First policies hinder U.S. ally governments' ability to risk implementing U.S. security initiatives that China views as against their interest. Thus, if the Trump administration will indeed continue efforts to maintain stability in the region, the U.S. will need a more integrated security approach to the region; one that understands that economic matters can impact efforts to increase security cooperation. Absent a shift in its approach in short order, the Trump administration not only risks not furthering its eventual NSS but also a further deterioration of the region's security environment.

Jessica Taylor is a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security's Indo-Pacific Security Initiative (IPSI), a Logistics Readiness officer in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and a PhD candidate in Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs Security Studies program. Jessica has over twenty years of public service in the U.S. government serving in civil service, U.S. Air Force activity duty and U.S. Air Force reserve roles in the U.S. State Department and in the U.S. Department of Defense. Her most recent roles include serving as a geopolitical advisor on the headquarters staffs of United Nations Command, ROK/US Combined Forces Command and U.S. Forces Korea. And she recently served as a Senior Advisor to the U.S. State Department's Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security where she focused primarily on Korean Peninsula security issues. Jessica holds a Bachelors of Arts in Biology from Baylor University, and a Master of Science in Foreign Affairs from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. While at Princeton University her PhD dissertation will focus on the driving forces that motivate U.S. Indo-Pacific ally decision making in response to U.S. requests for operational flexibility.



RINSA, KNDU
1040, Hwangsangbeol-ro, Yangchon-myeon, Nonsan-si
Chungcheongnam-do, 33021, Rep. of KOREA
Tel : +82-41-831-6414
Publisher : Young Ho Kim
Editor : Park Young-June

The views expressed in the RINSA FORUM do not necessarily reflect views or policies of RINSA or KNDU