Between Reality & Alarm: The 2026 National Defense Strategy and the Future of Alliance

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From allies' perspective, the 2026 National Defense Strategy embeds significant signals for U.S.'s alliance policy. The emphasis on allies taking "primary responsibility" in defense, U.S. providing "critical but limited support," and prioritizing the "First Island Chain(FIC)" widen ambiguity about what Washington will deliver in a crisis. While allies' concerns are intuitive, this paper aims to highlight that there is also a 'duality': it signals not only U.S. reprioritization, but also, codifies role adjustments within the alliance that have been accumulating over time. Against this backdrop, the article examines how "critical but limited support" may affect the ROK-U.S. alliance and how the FIC emphasis could reshape the Korean Peninsula's strategic environment, then proposes policy recommendations for Seoul.

1. Introduction

At a 1.5-track extended deterrence workshop hosted by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) in early February 2026, a tabletop exercise assumed a return of a U.S. Democratic administration in 2028.[1] A striking takeaway was the broad expectation among many participants that Washington's alliance policy will retain substantial continuity even after Trump 2.0. This expectation matters because the 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS) articulates allied burden-sharing in unusually explicit terms: allies should assume "primary responsibility" for their own defense, while the United States provides "critical but limited support from U.S. forces." While the phrasing and tone are distinctively Trumpian, the underlying direction—deepening allies' contributions for regional deterrence—is perceived as continuity rather than rupture by the Trump administration. Indeed, the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy advanced a "latticework" concept—strengthening regional deterrence by knitting together allied participation and contributions. The underlying logic was straightforward: even if allies prioritize different threats, denser alliance ties can widen the menu of collective action. Put in Trumpian terms, the same idea reads as: allies should carry more of the load—only now, substantially more.

It may simply reiterate the alliance status quo—just spelled out more clearly. However, it is hard to dismiss the 2026 NDS's unusually explicit insistence on "allied burden-sharing" and emphasis on the First Island Chain (FIC). The phrase "critical but limited support," in particular, can widen the interpretive space around what Washington will actually deliver in a crisis, and that ambiguity alone is enough to unsettle allies and shape adversaries' calculations.

This duality is precisely what makes the 2026 NDS worth close attention. On the one hand, it introduces language that can be read as a signal of the U.S.'s reprioritization; on the other, it also codifies—more plainly than before—role adjustments that have been accumulating within the alliance over time. Against this backdrop, the article seeks to examine (1)how the NDS's "critical but limited support" framing may affect the ROK-U.S. alliance and (2)how the NDS's FIC emphasis could reshape the strategic environment around the Korean Peninsula. In conclusion, this paper interprets Trump's second-term NDS not as mere rhetoric but as a principle of alliance policy that the United States has been moving toward, and, on that premise, proposes directions for South Korea's response—how to implement its share of 'primary responsibility' going forward, and how to maintain the credibility of extended deterrence and alliance cohesion.

2. The 2026 NDS: Between Alarm and Reality for Allies

From an alliance perspective, the 2026 NDS is sensitive in at least two ways. First, the United States is placing "allied burden-sharing" at the very forefront of alliance strategy.[2] This differs from the Trump administration's first-term NDS, which described alliances as "asymmetric strategic advantages" possessed by the United States and emphasized the importance of deepening the cooperation.[3]

1) February 3-4, 2026, "Toward Improved Theories of Victory in Conflicts with Nuclear-Armed Adversaries," hosted by the Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL).

2) US DoW. (2026). *2026 National Defense Strategy*, pp. 13, 18-21.

3) US DoD. (2018). *2018 National Defense Strategy*, p. 8. "Mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial to our strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match."

Now, it openly declares a division of roles in which allies bear "primary responsibility" for the defense of their own countries, and U.S. forces provide "critical but limited support."[4]

Second, the Korean Peninsula is described as separated from the Indo-Pacific and the "First Island Chain (FIC)." As Adam Farrar of CSIS has pointed out, this could give the impression that the strategic priority of the Korean Peninsula has relatively declined in U.S. defense strategy.[5] As a result, although the NDS explicitly labels South Korea a "model ally," the anxiety triggered by such phrasing is intuitive. From an alliance standpoint, "limitation" is easily interpreted as a weakening of U.S. commitment, and in a space like the Korean Peninsula—where the success or failure of deterrence is highly sensitive to credibility—the change in wording itself can affect not only allies' but also adversaries' calculations. In particular, given that the NDS does not explicitly address extended deterrence, it is unclear whether "critical but limited support from U.S. forces" is limited only to conventional support, or whether it also carries implications for the scope and operation of extended deterrence, including the nuclear umbrella.

While the concerns are well deserved, I should also note that there is a strong case for reading these points through the lens of the NDS's emphasis on being "clear-eyed" about reality. This is because the logic that the ROK carries the primary burden in defense—while U.S. support remains critical but limited—is not an impossible or far-fetched description of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Rather, there is an aspect in which the NDS outwardly summarizes the alliance realities that have accumulated over time.

One of the concrete indicators could be the changing role of the U.S. Army on the Korean Peninsula.[6] In short, the U.S. Army's long-assumed role in the early ground battle of a Korean Peninsula contingency—centered on permanently stationed formations and mid-to-heavy armor—has shown a trend of gradual reduction and adjustment for years. The most symbolic example is the Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT). Since July 2022, a structure has taken hold in which SBCTs from the U.S. mainland fill the gap created by the absence of a permanently stationed Brigade Combat Team (BCT) on the peninsula through rotations of roughly nine months. Moreover, the core of this change is that the character of USFK's principal armored platforms itself has changed. The M1 Abrams and M2 Bradley—once premised to conduct maneuver and breakthrough missions centered on heavier armor in the early ground battle—have been reorganized into the Stryker, which places emphasis on rapid mobility (see Table 1). While the M1, with high protection and firepower designed to withstand heavy hits, and the M2, with protection at the level of 14.5mm heavy machine-gun rounds, are platforms focused on defeating enemy armored forces, the Stryker is, at its core, an 8×8 wheeled armored vehicle designed primarily for infantry transport. In order to enable rapid transport, the vehicle body is lightweight, and its protection (survivability) depends less on armor itself and more on speed and situational awareness.

Table 1. Previous/Current Main Armored Vehicle Specifications of USFK Army

Category	M1 Abrams	M2 Bradley	Stryker
Primary mission	Defeat enemy armored forces	Infantry fighting vehicle: fire support and defeat enemy fighting vehicles	Infantry fighting vehicle: fire support and defeat enemy fighting vehicles
Mobility	Can move across rough terrain but slow	Strong in off-road mobility	Faster, quieter, and easier to transport (8×8 wheeled)
Protection	Heavy armor capable of withstanding direct hits from tank guns	Protection against 14.5mm heavy machine gun rounds and other munitions	Lightweight (survivability based on speed and situational awareness)
Armament	120mm M256 tank gun	25mm M242 cannon + TOW	12.7mm M2HB or MK19 40mm

Source: Jo, Bee Yun. (2026). "ROK-US Alliance Modernization: Road to USFK's Incremental Mission Creep." *Journal of Peace and Unification*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 5-24.

Furthermore, the turboprop RC-12 (Guardrail) and RC-7 (ARL-M: Airborne Reconnaissance Low-Multifunction), which had long served as key reconnaissance aircraft of the U.S. Army in Korea, have also completed retirement as of July 2025.[7] As bridging capabilities to fill the gap, theater-level high-altitude ISR radar ATHENA-R[8] and a mid- to long-term new capability HADES[9] are being considered; however, ISR assets of the U.S. Army in Korea are being reorganized, and the possibility of deactivating the Air Cavalry Squadron—including Apache attack helicopters—has also been raised.[10] Conversely, there is a trend toward strengthening the U.S. Army's long-range precision fires and air and missile defense capabilities, as well as theater-level sustainment capacity.

Against this backdrop, the alliance's "primary responsibility" and U.S. forces' "limited support" explicitly stated in the 2026 NDS can be seen not so much as a change in U.S. grand strategy or an excessive imposition of demands on allies, but rather as a more explicit articulation of the reality that alliance roles have been gradually adjusted over time. While the 2026 NDS has undoubtedly increased alliance anxiety and widened the space for interpretation, it is also necessary to consider that role-sharing has gradually shifted on the premise of strengthening the ROK military's capabilities for defense of the Korean Peninsula.

4) US DoW. (2026). *2026 National Defense Strategy*, pp. 18-21.

5) Adam Farrar, CSIS Podcast, Impossible State, February 11, 2026.

6) Jo, Bee Yun. (Forthcoming, February 2026). "The Meaning of 'Critical but Limited Support': Focusing on U.S. Army Modernization in USFK." *Sejong Policy Brief*.

7) US Army. (September 15, 2025). "U.S. Army Retires Two Most Distinguished Aerial Intelligence Platforms."

8) Army Theater-level High Altitude Expeditionary Next Airborne ISR-Radar (ATHENA-R).

9) Next-generation manned-unmanned integrated ISR called "HADES (High Accuracy Detection and Exploitation System)."

10) CRS. (January 22, 2026). "2025 Army Transformation Initiative (ATI) Force Structure and Organizational Proposals: Background and Issues for Congress."

3. U.S. First Island Chain (FIC) Policy and Implications for the ROK-U.S. Alliance

As discussed above, the signals that the 2026 NDS sends to allies may not be fundamentally different from the incremental trajectory of change in the ROK-U.S. alliance. Nevertheless, a remaining issue for South Korea is the FIC policy for countering China that the NDS emphasizes. This NDS names homeland defense as the top priority, followed by "countering China in the Indo-Pacific" and FIC as the next top priority.[11] By contrast, it describes the Korean Peninsula, together with Europe and the Middle East, as a region where "allies must take primary responsibility for their own defense," with only "critical but limited support from U.S. forces."[12] As Zack Cooper, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), projects in an article published in Foreign Affairs in February 2026,[13] the United States will likely align its deterrence center of gravity in the Indo-Pacific around the FIC and induce allies and partners to participate in collective defense with a larger share.

If such an FIC-centered defense strategy continues, at least three challenges become unavoidable for South Korea. First is strengthening capabilities for a leading role in defense of the Korean Peninsula—self-reliance. If simultaneous crises erupt across multiple theaters, as NDS implies, the United States will "choose" and "prioritize" support. In line with the phrase "critical but limited support," U.S. support in a Korean Peninsula contingency may arrive later, the mode of support may differ, and the visibility of support may be reduced. Seoul will not be able to undo these structural dynamics simply by seeking repeated reaffirmations of U.S. commitments. Instead, the priority is to build an ROK-led defense posture that can absorb and integrate even constrained U.S. inputs as a decisive —"critical"—effect, generating multiplier gains in deterrence.

Second is managing the China variable. The more Washington leans into an FIC-centered posture, the more unavoidable—and politically charged—the question becomes of how Seoul positions China in its own threat perceptions and strategy. Sitting next to a China that is rapidly expanding both nuclear and conventional capabilities, South Korea faces a structural bind: it is costly to confront China directly, yet equally risky to ignore the implications of China's buildup. As long as the United States continues to calibrate its posture on and beyond the Peninsula through an FIC lens, debates over USFK's strategic flexibility and potential extra-peninsular roles will repeatedly resurface.

Third is the challenge of bolstering primary defense of the peninsula through expanded minilateral cooperation. The catch is that deeper minilateralism can provoke backlash from North Korea and China—raising South Korea's security costs. In a setting where Seoul is expected to carry primary responsibility while U.S. support is "critical but limited," the worst case is not simply friction with Beijing or Pyongyang, but an environment in which North Korea tightens coordination with nearby great powers and sustained pressure on South Korea becomes structural. Minilateral cooperation, therefore, must be designed with a clear-eyed assessment of how backlash might also strengthen strategic alignment among North Korea, China, and Russia. The task for Seoul is to find a manageable "sweet spot"—one that increases deterrence effects without accelerating a sharp deterioration in U.S.-China relations or hardening the DPRK-China-Russia axis.

4. Policy Directions for South Korea

❶ Make ROK-led defense capacity operationally credible and visible.

First, South Korea's capability build-up should not be reduced to simply spending more to fill perceived gaps left by U.S. forces. The central task is to ensure that an ROK-led defense posture can actually perform under crisis conditions—and that it is visibly credible enough, on its own, to deny North Korea the temptation of provocation and miscalculation. Put differently, U.S. "limited support" can reinforce deterrence only if Seoul's will and capacity to hold the line independently are already convincing; only then can constrained U.S. inputs combine in ways that multiply credibility.

On that premise, Seoul's capability build-up should advance along three lines. First, South Korea needs stronger early-phase capabilities—and the confidence to use them—to stabilize the battlefield at the outset of a contingency. Second, it must deepen the foundations of war sustainability—munitions, maintenance, transportation, and stockpiles —so that ROK-led defense remains credible even in a protracted scenario. Third, it should preserve the continuity of combined exercises to ensure the alliance's operational habits remain intact. In short, Seoul's capability build-up is not a zero-sum substitute—"we do more as the United States does less"—but a deliberate effort to build the conditions under which even limited U.S. support can deliver genuinely critical effects.

❷ Shrink the interpretive space around "limited support."

The most destabilizing effect of the NDS may be the ambiguity created by the word "limited." The alliance should reduce room for adversary exploitation and allied doubt by clarifying essential tasks in a peninsula contingency, the core capabilities and enablers required to execute them The strategic communication task is not only reassurance, but specificity—so that "limited" is not read as "hollow."

❸ Expand the domains where limited U.S. inputs yield decisive combined effects.

Seoul should push alliance cooperation toward areas that increase combined advantage even under constraints: faster ISR-C2-decision cycles; cyber/electronic/space cooperation that complicates adversary calculations; and sustainment

11) US DoW. (2026). 2026 National Defense Strategy, p. 3.

12) Ibid., p. 19. "the Department will prioritize strengthening incentives for allies and partners to take primary responsibility for their own defense in Europe, the Middle East, and on the Korean Peninsula, with critical but limited support from U.S. forces."

13) Cooper, Zack. (2026). "Asia After America: How U.S. Strategy Failed —and Ceded the Advantage to China." *Foreign Affairs*, March/April.

systems that shorten deployment timelines and strengthen endurance.

❹ Face the China dilemma

As FIC-centered deterrence policy strengthens, South Korea cannot avoid the China issue. However, what South Korea needs is not so much a declaratory statement of "how to define China," but optimizing national interests in an environment where alliance demands and China's backlash occur simultaneously. To do so, South Korea should (1)clearly establish the principle of prioritizing defense of the Korean Peninsula, while (2)strengthening alliance combined effects in areas that directly contribute to peace and stability of the region. For minilateral cooperation: (1)priority should be placed on practical and operational cooperation that directly contributes to responding to the North Korean threat, while (2)managing burdens stemming from the rigidification of U.S.-China and DPRK-China-Russia dynamics.

❺ Continuity of Extended Deterrence

Finally, where an NDS is thin on extended deterrence language, credibility will hinge on whether the alliance can institutionalize and demonstrate continuity—consultation, decision, and linkage—through mechanisms such as the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and realistic combined exercises.

5. Conclusion

All in all, the "clear-eyed" realism reflected in the 2026 NDS invites a dual reading. On the one hand, it can be unsettling: the language of allied "primary responsibility" and "critical but limited support" signals constraint, prioritization, and the possibility of thinner—or less visible—U.S. contributions in a crisis. On the other hand, it is not necessarily a declaration of retrenchment. It can also be read as a more explicit codification of an alliance trajectory already underway—one in which the United States seeks to sustain alliances by reordering methods, expectations, and divisions of labor, especially as an FIC-centered deterrence posture reshapes regional prioritization and resource allocation. For South Korea, the practical implication is to move beyond the question of 'how much will the United States do' and toward 'what must South Korea build—and how—so that even limited U.S. support can combine to produce decisive effects.'

Three conclusions follow. First, Seoul should neither dismiss the NDS as mere rhetoric nor treat it as a definitive blueprint for alliance waning; it should instead confront the structural direction of greater burden-sharing and role reallocation. Second, alliance anxiety is driven less by the absence of declaratory statements than by the absence of operational clarity. Reaffirmations alone will not narrow uncertainty. What matters is substantiating the capabilities required for primary responsibility and refining alliance operating concepts—so that "limited support" is translated into predictable, executable mechanisms that still yield desired effects. Third, as the FIC grows more central, the China variable and minilateral cooperation become inseparable: Seoul must expand cooperation in ways that strengthen deterrence while managing the pathways through which backlash could return as intensified pressure and deeper DPRK-China-Russia coordination.

Ultimately, the task is not to amplify the unease the NDS can provoke, but to reduce it by strengthening deterrence credibility. "Primary responsibility" is a heavier burden, but also an opportunity to mature the ROK-U.S. alliance's operational logic. And "critical but limited support" may read as a constraint, yet it need not function as a hollow or diminishing promise. If South Korea consolidates enhanced self-reliance and upgrades the alliance's integration and strategic communication, "limited" can become a discipline of combination—using finite U.S. inputs in ways that reliably multiply effects.

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