



## Alliance Modernization and the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance

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Alliance modernization, which was largely a political slogan during Trump’s first term, is now becoming far more likely to be implemented in concrete and practical ways under a second Trump administration, especially given his strong emphasis on burden sharing and expanded allied responsibility. Redesigning roles and posture is a logical response to U.S. resource constraints and China’s expanding A2/AD capabilities, yet it also introduces significant risks, including deterrence gaps, misperceptions, and heightened uncertainty during the transition. These risks are not hypothetical; they could materialize if changes to U.S. force posture, OPCON arrangements, or extended-deterrence signaling are misread by North Korea or misunderstood by the South Korean public. Because multiple modernization pathways—from gradual adjustment to rapid, politically charged restructuring—carry different levels of instability, South Korea must prepare for a wide range of scenarios while actively shaping the process.

## 1. Introduction

Alliances rarely rest on complete convergence of national interests. Even close partners diverge in priorities and domestic constraints. A strong alliance expands common interests while managing differences through institutional mechanisms and sustained dialogue. Its strength lies in the capacity to adjust disagreements without eroding trust.

Strategic transitions heighten the risk of weakening alliances. Short-term frictions often arise even when long-

term goals are aligned, and if left unmanaged, these tensions can erode political confidence. The present security order exemplifies such strain: the U.S.-China rivalry has become structural, while Russia, Iran, and North Korea coordinate strategically to challenge Western influence. The post-Cold War alliance system, built for another era, is now under pressure to adapt.

The ROK-U.S. alliance faces similar imperatives. Shifting power balances, new technologies, and evolving regional threats require recalibration of roles and commitments.

President Donald Trump's long-standing emphasis on allied burden-sharing and self-reliance is likely, in his second term, to evolve into formal policies of "alliance modernization." The idea is to redistribute roles and costs—encouraging allies to build autonomous defense capabilities while the United States provides limited but decisive support when needed.

Alliance modernization entails huge risks and challenges. However, if unavoidable, we should recognize opportunistic factors. Its outcome depends on whether the two sides can minimize risks, overcome challenges, and exploit emerging opportunities. At this turning point, experts and policymakers in both countries must define the logic, structure, and public understanding of modernization to preserve deterrence and alliance credibility, which we have accomplished for several decades.

## 2. Analyzing Alliance Modernization

Under a second Trump administration, alliance modernization would move from political rhetoric to strategic planning. It seems that what remained as a transactional approach during his first term has evolved into a coherent defense and military strategic vision. The United States aims not only to ease its burdens but to construct a more sustainable deterrence framework suited to changing power realities.

Two structural dynamics drive this transformation: limited U.S. capacity and an enduring "multi-war" environment.<sup>1)</sup> The combination of long-term U.S.-China rivalry, the Ukraine war, and Middle Eastern instability reveals that Washington can no longer maintain large-scale interventions on multiple fronts. Meanwhile, closer coordination among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran amplifies pressure on the U.S. deterrence system. These conditions make traditional "preponderance-based deterrence" reliant on forward dominance, increasingly untenable, and push U.S. strategy toward "denial-based deterrence," which ensures that any aggression fails to meet its goals rather than relying on constant superiority.<sup>2)</sup>

China's expanding A2/AD (anti-access/area-denial) capability underscores this shift. Advances in long-range precision strike systems have rendered U.S. forward bases such as Okinawa, the northern Philippines, and Pyeongtaek more vulnerable to surprise first strikes.<sup>3)</sup> The possibility of losing critical assets early in a conflict threatens deterrence credibility and invites miscalculation. To counter this, the United States is dispersing forces, enhancing mobility, and

prioritizing survivability over static forward presence. The goal is to ensure that sufficient forces survive initial attacks to deny adversaries their objectives.

Within this logic, allies must assume greater responsibility for territorial defense. The United States intends to maintain limited but decisive enabling roles while allies provide the first line of deterrence.<sup>4)</sup> This new division-of-labor model requires allies to develop self-reliant capabilities integrated with U.S. command, control, and reinforcement systems. Properly implemented, it sustains deterrence while allowing Washington to avoid overstretch.

For South Korea, this shift implies that U.S. Forces Korea will evolve from a symbolic tripwire to part of a more flexible, networked deterrence structure. Dispersal of assets across the region would not signal withdrawal, but adaptation to the new situation. It would, however, require stronger Korean leadership in deterrence, greater interoperability with U.S. systems, and continued credibility of combined readiness. If successful, deterrence could be maintained across both the Korean Peninsula and other regional areas while reducing escalation risks. Ultimately, alliance modernization could represent not retrenchment but optimization—aligning commitments with available resources and a changing threat environment.

## 3. Prospects for Future Development

A second Trump administration would likely pursue an alliance policy marked by competing internal lines and deliberate ambiguity.<sup>5)</sup> Within the administration, multiple factions—ranging from traditional hawks to isolationists and fiscal conservatives—would compete for influence, none enjoying lasting dominance.<sup>6)</sup> Trump himself would blend these views pragmatically to preserve flexibility and bargaining leverage.

For allies, this ambiguity creates uncertainty; for Washington, it offers negotiating space. The most likely course would be a gradual, managed transition, with roles redefined through consultation and phased implementation. Some U.S. Forces Korea missions could shift to the ROK Armed Forces while deterrence and operational continuity are maintained. This process would require meticulous calibration and mutual transparency.

A less balanced path could emerge if Washington concentrates overwhelmingly on China and Taiwan,

1) In Hyo Seol, "Simultaneous Multi-War Situations and South Korea's Security Strategy," *Peace Studies*, No. 32, Vol. 2, 2024, pp. 43-72.

2) Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2021.

3) Jennifer Kavanagh and Dan Caldwell, *Aligning global military posture with U.S. interests*, Defense Priorities Report, July 9, 2025.

4) Alexander Velez-Green and Robert Peters, *The Prioritization Imperative: A Strategy to Defend America's Interests in a More Dangerous World*, The Heritage Foundation Special Report, Aug. 1, 2024.

5) In Hyo Seol and Hackyoung Bae, "Prospects for Trump's Second Term Foreign Strategy and Alliance Policy through the Analysis of the First Term: Focused on Implications for South Korea," *The Korean Journal of Area Studies*, No. 42, Vol. 3, 2024, pp. 1-34.

6) Bruce Klingner, "The U.S.-ROK Alliance under the Trump and Lee Administrations" (presentation, Korea Policy Forum, GW Institute for Korean Studies, George Washington University, 2025).

relegating the Korean Peninsula to a lower priority. Rapid restructuring without sufficient preparation could produce deterrence gaps and embolden North Korea. A third, politically volatile trajectory could arise if Trump links alliance issues directly to economic or technological bargaining, using commitments as leverage over cost-sharing, trade, or high-tech supply chains. Such linkage would risk public controversy and short-term strain.

Still, large-scale force adjustments face institutional limits in the United States. Congressional oversight and bureaucratic inertia would constrain abrupt changes. Multiple outcomes are therefore possible. Seoul must prepare for diverse scenarios, strengthening autonomous deterrence and engaging Washington continuously to ensure modernization serves mutual strategic interests.

#### 4. Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities

Alliance modernization carries tangible risks, beginning with perception. Many South Koreans might view modernization as a dilution of U.S. guarantees. If restructuring coincides with contentious negotiations over defense costs or trade, anxiety could grow into political polarization or anti-American sentiment. Questions about extended deterrence credibility could intensify if operational control transition or adjustments to U.S. posture are seen as precursors to withdrawal. Such perceptions could invite North Korean miscalculation.

Practical challenges are also substantial. Redesigning combined defense arrangements, defining U.S. reinforcement scales, and integrating new operational concepts and technologies all require careful coordination. Institutional structures built over decades cannot be altered easily, and joint planning remains incomplete. Without thorough preparation, reform could inadvertently produce instability.

Yet modernization also presents valuable opportunities. If managed transparently and incrementally, the ROK-U.S. alliance could become a model of adaptive transformation with which the United States would pursue regionally and globally from now on. For Washington, success in Korea would demonstrate that modernization can sustain deterrence efficiently. For Seoul, it would ensure a predictable, phased transition under clear mutual guarantees while firmly demanding that the United States provide all necessary support without reservation to ensure the success of the modernization during and after the transition.

The conditions for success are clear. Extended deterrence must remain visible through regular strategic deployments and combined exercises. Public communication must convey that modernization enhances rather than weakens the alliance. Both governments should view risks as manageable, challenges as tools for improvement, and opportunities as pathways to institutionalization.

South Korea's advanced conventional power, strong defense industry, and progress toward operational control transition make it a capable partner. By leveraging these strengths, Seoul can shape modernization outcomes that safeguard

national interests while reinforcing deterrence credibility and regional stability.

## 5. Conclusion

Alliance modernization should be understood as renewal rather than retrenchment. It must adapt the ROK-U.S. partnership to a transformed strategic landscape and reflect South Korea's enhanced capacity and status. The process demands prudence to sustain deterrence and trust, and ambition to build an alliance fit for future challenges.

Its success rests on several fundamentals. Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined so that each side understands its obligations. Interoperability should deepen across doctrines, systems, and decision-making. Public trust must be maintained through transparency and consistent explanation. Without these elements, modernization could cause misunderstanding and instability; with them, it can reinforce deterrence while expanding Korea's strategic autonomy.

If guided wisely, alliance modernization will mark a constructive phase of evolution rather than decline. It will represent an intentional step toward a more resilient and balanced partnership. Through this process, the ROK-U.S. alliance can enter a new stage of structural maturity—one grounded in mutual confidence, enduring deterrence, and shared responsibility for peace and stability in the decades ahead.

**Professor Seol In-hyo** graduated from Seoul National University's Department of International Relations in 1999 and awarded a doctorate in Diplomacy in 2011 from the Graduate School of Department of International Relations at the Seoul National University. He served as a visiting researcher at the University of Maryland's CIDCM Institute, and in 2012, he served as a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Seoul National University and a post-doctoral researcher at Yonsei University. Since 2013, he has worked at the Division of Defense Strategy of the Korea Institute for National Defense(KIDA) and researched the U.S. defense and military strategy, and the ROK-U.S. alliance, and served as the head of the current defense issues analyses team from 2018 to 2021. In 2017, he served as a visiting fellow at the U.S. National Defense University (NDU) INSS, and served as a director of the Defense Division of the Korean International Political Science Association, and an advisor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As of 2022, From 2021 to 2022, he worked as an administrator(a staff member) of the Blue House Security Office. He is a professor of military strategy division at the Korea National Defense University(KNDU), since 2022. He has also served as the director of the Nuclear/WMD Response Research Center of the Research Institute for National Security Affairs(RINSA) at the Korea National Defense University.