



## Reconstructing Resolve: The Changing Generational Landscape and the Will to Fight in South Korea

Taekbin Kim



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

Bee Yun Jo



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The war in Ukraine and North Korea’s nuclear threats underscore that a nation’s ultimate military power is a product of physical means and the Will to Fight. For South Korea, however, the traditional model of mobilized patriotism is failing as the younger generation shifts toward a contractual security mindset. Rather than blind nationalist devotion, the MZ and Alpha generations offer a conditional commitment rooted in fairness and reciprocity, questioning whether the state is just enough to warrant their sacrifice. This internal cognitive gap provides a strategic opening for North Korea’s reflexive control—a form of cognitive warfare designed to induce defeatism through nuclear coercion and social division.

To counter this, South Korea must reconstruct its resolve by benchmarking resilient democracies like Israel and Finland. This requires a three-fold shift: evolving security education into civic education for democratic values, transforming veterans affairs into a system of genuine social respect and realistic compensation, and strengthening strategic communication to foster collective confidence. Ultimately, a voluntary resolve anchored in freedom and justice is a more enduring asymmetric asset than any coerced mobilization, ensuring survival through a virtuous cycle of trust between the citizen and the state.

## 1. Beyond Hardware: The Evolving Centrality of the Will to Fight

In the security environment of the 21st century, the war in Ukraine has sounded a profound alarm for the global community. In the early stages of the conflict, military experts predicted an easy victory for Russia, which boasted

overwhelming armored forces and firepower. However, the tide of war turned in the opposite direction. The Russian military struggled despite its superior hardware, while Ukraine, objectively inferior in material power, successfully defended its capital. The decisive variable in this dramatic reversal was not the specifications of weapon systems. It was the intangible power held by the subjects of war—the people and the

soldiers: the ‘Will to Fight.’<sup>1)</sup> Clausewitz’s dictum that “war is the product of physical force and will” has proven to remain valid and more crucial than ever, even in an era of high-tech warfare where drones and AI traverse the battlefield.

For South Korea, a nation technically still at war and facing a nuclear-armed adversary, this lesson is not a distant story. Currently, South Korea boasts world-class military capabilities and defense industrial prowess, often referred to as K-Defense. The export of K2 tanks and K9 howitzers to Poland and the Middle East eloquently demonstrates that South Korea is no longer a peripheral weak state. However, to fully realize the potential of these impressive achievements in hardware, we must turn our attention to the ‘Cognitive Foundation’ within the minds of those who must operate and defend with these weapons. This signifies more than simple psychological laxity; it represents a state where South Korea faces an urgent need to redefine its social consensus on ‘who will fight, for what, and how’ in times of national crisis.

The precipitous decline in conscription resources due to the world’s lowest birth rate threatens the maintenance of physical military power. However, the more fundamental challenge lies in the psychological dimension. Social divisions across gender, generation, and ideology are posing a severe test to maintaining the unified will of the people—the most basic unit of national security. The older generation often laments that the security awareness of the youth (MZ and Alpha generations) has weakened. Criticism that “today’s young people are too individualistic to sacrifice for the country” is raised everywhere.

However, dismissing this phenomenon simply as a lack of patriotism or defeatism is a strategic miscalculation that misses the essence. We are currently standing at a massive civilizational turning point where the will to fight is not disappearing, but being fundamentally “Reconstructed.” If the will to fight of the past was an unconditional devotion based on nationalist imperatives, the will of the new generation is evolving into a conditional commitment based on fairness and reciprocity. If we fail to read the context of this shift and update our security “software” accordingly, no matter how many advanced weapons we pile up, we are essentially standing on a castle of sand.

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## 1. Theoretical Background: What is the Will to Fight?

Before proceeding with the main discussion, it is necessary to clearly define the concept of the Will to Fight. This is not synonymous with simple patriotism or morale. Carl von Clausewitz, the master of war theory, defined war in *On War* as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>2)</sup> He explained military power with the

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1) Margaret MacMillan, “Ukraine’s War of Endurance: Why Victory Depends on Societies, Not Just Armies,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/ukraines-war-endurance>

2) Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

following formula:

$$\text{Military Power} = \text{Physical Means} \times \text{Strength of Will}$$

The crucial point here is that it is a multiplication, not an addition. No matter how powerful the physical means are, if the will is ‘0’, the total military power becomes ‘0’. Conversely, physical inferiority can be offset to some extent by a powerful will. For Clausewitz, the will to fight is the drive that enables one to achieve objectives by breaking through the friction and fog of war, and the ultimate goal of psychological strikes to crush the enemy’s resistance.

Recently, the RAND Corporation has modernized and concretized this classical concept. RAND defines the will to fight as the combination of the “disposition to fight” and the “decision to fight” (actually engaging in and enduring combat). In other words, the will to fight is not a fixed mental state, but a fluid cognitive and behavioral variable that changes according to situations and conditions.<sup>3)</sup> Especially in modern warfare, soldiers desert the battlefield when they lack confidence that their unit will win and the belief that their sacrifice is worthwhile.

According to this modern definition, a soldier’s will to fight is not determined solely by loyalty to the state. It is the result of a complex interaction of factors: ① trust in leadership, ② cohesion with comrades, ③ level of training, and above all, ④ a justifiable cause for why I must fight. Ultimately, the task for the South Korean military lies in establishing mechanisms that can convert the potential disposition held by the youth into a concrete decision to fight in actual crisis situations.

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## 2. From Blood-based Security to Contractual Security: The Essence of Generational Shift

For a long time, South Korea’s security outlook was sustained by two pillars: Anti-communism and Nation (Minjok). For the industrialization generation that led the ‘Miracle on the Han River’ through the devastation of the Korean War and absolute poverty, national security was a sanctuary that took precedence over individual liberty or life. Under the Developmental State model of the time, individuals were viewed as tools and components of national development. The collectivist mindset that “I exist because the State exists” provided a strong moral foundation for conscription, and sacrifice for the state was accepted as a man’s natural duty and inescapable destiny. For them, the will to fight was an a priori concept that required no questioning. The state was the father, and the people were the sons who complied with that authority.

However, for the new generation raised in a consolidated democracy and a globalized, competitive market economy, the state is no longer an object of unconditional loyalty. They have breathed the air of liberal democracy since

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3) Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 1-3, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2341.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2341.html)

birth and honed their survival instincts within the fierce competition of capitalism. Recent social indicators and qualitative studies suggest that the youth generation views national security through the lens of the Social Contract. For them, the will to fight is not an instinct triggered automatically, but the result of rational judgment and calculation.

The key mechanisms that trigger their resolve are fairness and reciprocity. First, they question the fairness of the system. Young people who have experienced inequality of opportunity amidst admissions scandals, hiring corruption, and skyrocketing real estate prices ask themselves: “Is this society just enough to be worth dying for?” When the state appears to be a tool for a privileged cartel, they perceive the security duty not as a sacred defense, but as exploitation forced only upon the powerless.

Second, they demand reciprocity from the state. The question is, “Does the state treat my sacrifice with the respect it deserves?” For a generation that rejects ‘passion pay’ (unpaid labor) and values work-life balance, ‘patriotism pay’—which offers neither honor nor substantial compensation—is no longer valid. If the state does not compensate for the opportunity cost of the service period, conscription feels not like a civic duty but a punishment by the state.

We must not disparage this change as merely the selfishness of today’s youth. Rather, it is evidence that South Korean society is maturing from a blood-based nationalism into a civic society that prioritizes individual freedom and rights. They are ready to fight not for an abstract ‘ethnic nation,’ but only when their concrete individual freedom, family, and the liberal democratic way of life they enjoy are threatened.

This paradoxically implies that if their will to fight is triggered, they have the potential to exert a combat power that is much more powerful and active than blind obedience. The problem is that the state, failing to provide new motivational mechanisms suitable for this shifted perception, still relies on the outdated logic of spiritual power reinforcement from the 1970s and 80s. The ‘can-do spirit’ rhetoric only provokes cynicism in a generation that values data and rationality.

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### 3. North Korea’s Reflexive Control and Cognitive Warfare: Targeting the Gap

This gap in security perception between generations and internal division presents a strategic opportunity that North Korea cannot afford to miss. Chairman Kim Jong Un’s recent declaration of “two hostile states” and the legislation of preemptive nuclear attack are not mere rhetoric for threatening the South. They are part of a highly calculated cognitive warfare designed to break the will to resist by stimulating fear in South Korean society and inciting internal conflict (South-South conflict).

Pyongyang has accurately discerned that South Korean society has become more averse to the ravages of war and more focused on individual safety. North Korea’s strategy is to employ Reflexive Control, a concept from Russian information warfare. This strategy involves injecting specific information into the adversary to induce them to voluntarily

make a decision favorable to the aggressor (North Korea). By showing off its nuclear capabilities, North Korea attempts to lead the South Korean public to the defeatist conclusion that “fighting North Korea leads to mutual destruction” or that “resisting a nuclear-armed North Korea is suicidal.”

In particular, the two-state narrative paradoxically risks planting a false illusion of peace in the minds of South Korean youth. The logic that “since we are strangers, there is no need to unify, nor to fight” aligns subtly with the pragmatic psychology of youth worried about unification costs and annoyed by entanglement with the North. This is a highly sophisticated psychological operation intended to make them view North Korea not as a threat to be managed but as an irrelevant other, thereby preemptively blocking the justification for intervention or sacrifice in a contingency. If young South Koreans choose psychological withdrawal amidst a sense of deprivation—feeling that “the state neither protects nor compensates me”—it provides the optimal soil for North Korea’s nuclear coercion strategy to succeed. The failure of deterrence occurs not when missile stockpiles are low, but when the adversary underestimates our will to fight and decides to provoke.

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### 4. Comparative Perspective: The Coexistence of Individualism and Patriotism

Some sectors of South Korean society pessimistically believe that the spread of individualism will inevitably lead to the decline of patriotism. However, the examples of small but strong security states around the world prove that this conventional wisdom is wrong. The cases of Israel and Finland, which maintain a powerful will to fight while possessing high levels of democracy and individualistic tendencies, offer us important implications.

The youth of Israel are the protagonists of the Start-up Nation, valuing individual success and creativity no less than Koreans. Yet, when war breaks out, they return from all over the world to rush to the front lines. Their resolve does not stem from blind statism. They clearly recognize the existential threat—that the survival of the state is directly linked to their own survival. Furthermore, through a system where service experience in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) acts as a ladder of fair opportunity when entering society, a social trust is formed that defense duty is a plus rather than a minus in an individual’s life.

Finland, which has maintained the concept of Total Defense even before joining NATO, sees over 80% of its citizens respond that they would “take up arms if the country is attacked.”<sup>4)</sup> The will to fight of Finnish youth is not for the sake of protecting a blood-based ethnicity. They fight to protect the high level of welfare, freedom, and the transparent democratic system they enjoy. High trust in the government translates directly into support for defense policy.

The cases of these two countries prove that “the will to fight has not weakened because individualism has

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4) Advisory Board for Defence Information (ABCI), *The Finns’ Opinions on Foreign and Defence Policy, National Defence and Security, Winter 2023* (Helsinki: Ministry of Defence of Finland, 2023)

strengthened,” but rather because “trust in the values and systems worth protecting has weakened.” South Korea faces a Double Bind: it carries an existential threat like Israel, yet lacks the social trust of Finland. The model of resolve we must reconstruct should not be the totalitarian mobilization of the past, but an advanced democratic model where individual freedom and national security operate in a complementary manner, as seen in these nations.

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## 5. Suggestions for Resilience: Seeking a New Social Contract

Therefore, South Korea’s security strategy must go beyond physical readiness and move toward strengthening cognitive resilience to rebuild the fractured hearts of its people. This requires a fundamental approach on three levels.

First, a paradigm shift in security education is required. Dogmatic indoctrination that “North Korea is our main enemy” can no longer persuade a generation that values fairness and rationality. Security education must evolve into civic education for democratic citizens. It must logically persuade the youth that the freedom, human rights, rule of law, and cultural prosperity represented by K-Culture were not obtained for free, and that defending them from totalitarian threats is ultimately the way to protect their own daily lives. In other words, we must internalize the value of defending freedom beyond simple anti-communism. We must make them face the cold reality that freedom comes with a cost, and prove that our society is worth paying that cost.

Second, the restoration of reciprocity through the innovation of Veterans Affairs. The state must extend its hand first to the generation with conditional commitment. Realistic economic compensation for military service is the very basic foundation. However, more important than money is the symbolic capital of social respect. We must benchmark the culture in the United States where uniformed personnel are respected everywhere—in restaurants, airports, and on the streets. Only when young people feel that military service is not a waste of life or a losing deal but a respected civic contribution will the state recover the moral authority to ask them to take up arms. When the military uniform becomes a symbol of pride rather than shame, the social contract of security becomes effective again.

Third, the strengthening of the government’s Strategic Communication. The government must provide accurate information to the public regarding North Korea’s nuclear threat while managing the situation with sophistication so that excessive fear does not lead to defeatism. Leadership’s role is to instill confidence in victory—affirming that we possess sufficient deterrence assets, including the ROK-U.S. alliance, and that if the people are united, we will surely prevail. Especially in a cognitive warfare situation where fake news and rumors run rampant, transparent communication from the government is the breakwater that maintains social trust. Fear is contagious, but courage is also contagious.

The government must be the source of that courage.

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## 6. Conclusion: Beyond Mobilized Patriotism, Toward Voluntary Resolve

South Korea’s will to fight stands at a critical existential crossroads. A shrinking population, social fragmentation, and a sophisticated North Korean nuclear threat have combined to test our national resilience. However, this is not a sign of communal collapse. Rather, we are experiencing the labor pains of birthing a new security paradigm suited for a mature liberal democracy, as the legacy of totalitarian mobilization fades. We need not fear the end of old methods; while coerced patriotism evaporates at the first sound of gunfire, a resolve rooted in freedom and fairness is more enduring than any steel.

We should welcome the conditional commitment of the younger generation. Their insistence on fairness and reciprocity is the very catalyst needed to transform our military into a more professional and transparent organization. Their provocative question—“Is this a country worth my life?”—is legitimate, and the state must be prepared to answer with a resounding “Yes.” When provided with a cause and treatment they respect, South Korea’s youth will become rational patriots—more capable and resilient than any conscript of the past. While soldiers in autocracies fight out of fear, citizens of a free state fight to protect the lives they love. History consistently favors the latter.

Reconstructing this resolve is an essential task for survival. The responsibility now lies with the government and the older generation. It is time to silence the old rhetoric of unilateral sacrifice and sign a new security contract. This means evolving security education into persuasion, veterans’ affairs into genuine respect, and national defense into a shared civic right. When the military uniform commands the highest social honor, our psychological defenses will be restored.

An awakened citizenry ready to defend freedom, supported by a state that stands by them to the end—this virtuous cycle of trust is South Korea’s ultimate Asymmetric Asset. North Korea may possess nuclear weapons, but it lacks citizens who think, judge, and act voluntarily. By rebuilding this collective “power of the mind,” South Korea will achieve a level of resilience that no external shock can break. This crisis is our opportunity to move beyond the mobilized patriotism of the past and toward the voluntary resolve of free citizens.

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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.<sup>1)</sup> 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.<sup>2)</sup> 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.<sup>3)</sup>

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.”<sup>4)</sup>

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.<sup>5)</sup> 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.<sup>6)</sup> 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.<sup>7)</sup> As bridging capabilities to fill the gap, theater-level high-altitude ISR radar ATHENA-R<sup>8)</sup> and a mid-to long-term new capability HADES<sup>9)</sup> 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.<sup>10)</sup> 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.”

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### 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.<sup>11)</sup> 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.”<sup>12)</sup> As Zack Cooper, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), projects in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in February 2026,<sup>13)</sup> 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 unilateral cooperation. The catch is that deeper unilateralism 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. Unilateral 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.

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### 4. Policy Directions for South Korea

#### ① 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.

#### ② 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.”

#### ③ 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

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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.

#### ④ 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.

#### ⑤ 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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