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South Korea's Grand Strategic Shift: From Strategic Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity

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Hegemony, Nonproliferation, and Burden-Sharing: The Narang-Colby Debate on South Korea's Nuclear Option

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[Book Review]

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South Korea's Grand Strategic Shift: From Strategic Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity

Osamu KOIKE

Abstract

South Korea is undergoing a significant transformation in its grand strategy, shifting from a posture of strategic ambiguity toward one of strategic clarity. This transition is prompted by several factors, including the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, the evolving threat from North Korea, and a growing domestic consensus in favor of a more proactive international role. The strategic vision and Indo-Pacific Strategy under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration exemplify this new orientation, highlighting a principled alignment with the U.S. and other democracies, a commitment to upholding the rules-based international order, and an expansion of regional engagement. This transformation is evident in stronger alliances, notably with the U.S. and Japan, as well as a more robust defense posture focused on deterrence and technological innovation. Although the concept of grand strategy for middle powers is still a topic of debate, South Korea's evolving trajectory demonstrates a coherent, long-term adjustment to a dramatically changing strategic landscape. The shift to strategic clarity, initiated under conservative leadership, appears to be ongoing even under progressive government, indicating that this change is more about structural adaptation than partisan preference. However, there are challenges to this strategy, including domestic polarization, ongoing threats from North Korea, and demographic decline, all of which test the sustainability of this new paradigm. Successfully addressing these issues will be critical for South Korea's ability to maintain its strategic clarity and contribute to regional and global stability in an era of heightened uncertainty.

Keywords: *South Korea, Grand Strategy, U.S.-China Rivalry, National Security Strategy, Indo-Pacific Strategy, ROK-China relations*

1. Introduction: A Turning Point for South Korea's Grand Strategy

The current international system surrounding the Korean Peninsula is undergoing significant transformation, characterized by escalating geopolitical competition between the United States and China, North Korea's stark declaration of a "hostile two-state" relationship that disrupts traditional inter-Korean ties, and a noticeable decline in the established global and regional order.¹⁾ Confronted with these complex, interrelated challenges, the Republic of Korea (South Korea or ROK hereinafter) finds it necessary to fundamentally reassess its grand strategy. South Korea's foreign and security policy has generally been characterized by a careful balancing act often described as "strategic ambiguity." However, it now appears to be transitioning toward a posture of relative "strategic clarity." This shift carries profound implications not only for the Korean Peninsula but also for the overall stability and structure of the Indo-Pacific region.

This article argues that South Korea's grand strategy is moving away from the paradigm rooted in the legacy of its "Northern Policy" or *Nordpolitik*—a framework defined by strategic ambiguity designed to navigate relations with both its U.S. ally and its increasingly important neighbor, China. Instead, a new grand strategic orientation emphasizing strategic clarity is emerging, driven by the realities of deepening great power rivalry, the evolving nature of the North Korean threat, and a growing domestic consensus for a more proactive international role. This emerging strategic clarity is primarily expressed through the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's strategic vision, which indicates Seoul's aspirations to engage more actively in shaping regional and global affairs.

While the concept of grand strategy itself, particularly its relevance to middle powers, is still debated in academic circles, this study posits that South Korea's evolving policy trajectory reflects a coherent, long-term effort to adapt its means and objectives to a dramatically altered strategic landscape, constituting a significant grand strategic shift.

1) Graham Allison describes the current situation as a "grave new world" defined by the end of the post-Cold War era, the emergence of multipolarity, the U.S.-China Thucydidean rivalry, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and persistent regional threats such as North Korea. For further insights, see Graham Allison, "Navigating a New World: The Evolving Challenges and Alliances in Global Security," *The Korean Journal of Security Affairs*, Vol. 28 No. 2 (December 2023), pp. 7-8. Similarly, Won Gon Park emphasizes the escalating confrontation between the U.S. and China confrontation. See Won Gon Park, "Changes in U.S.-China Relations and Korea's Strategy: Security Perspective," *The Korean Journal of Security Affairs*, Vol. 24 No. 2 (December 2019), p. 61. Masuda also points out that the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China is forcing many countries and regions to make difficult choices between economic interests and security or between the United States and China. For more on this topic, see Masayuki Masuda (Ed.), *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition [NIDS Perspective 1]*, (Tokyo: Interbooks, 2023), p. 7.

This study begins with a brief discussion of the concept of grand strategy and outlines the analytical framework used, contrasting the old paradigm of strategic ambiguity with the emerging one of strategic clarity. Following this conceptual groundwork, the analysis delves into the historical roots and characteristics of the previous paradigm, demonstrating its foundations in the *Nordpolitik* legacy. The next section examines the external and internal drivers that have led to the shift from strategic ambiguity to a new approach. The article, then, details the concrete manifestations of this new strategic clarity under the Yoon administration, focusing on key elements of its national security strategy, Indo-Pacific Strategy, evolving alliance management, and adjustments in defense posture. Finally, the study briefly addresses the strategic continuity in Lee Jae-myung administration and concludes by summarizing the central argument regarding South Korea's strategic shift and identifying key challenges and future prospects for its evolving grand strategy in an era of heightened uncertainty.

2. Defining Grand Strategy and the Analytical Framework

The term “grand strategy” lacks a single, universally accepted definition in academic literature. Its meaning has evolved over time, ranging from Liddell Hart's classic focus on directing all national resources toward achieving the political objectives of war,²⁾ to broader contemporary interpretations that include peacetime statecraft and the integration of various instruments of power, such as economic and diplomatic tools.³⁾ Nina Silove offers a useful typology that categorizes the concept into three distinct meanings: grand strategy as a grand plan (a deliberate and often documented blueprint, such as a national security strategy document); as an organizing principle (a central logic or shared understanding that guides policy, often expressed as a short phrase or doctrine); and as a pattern of behavior (indicative of consistent state actions over time, suggesting an underlying strategic logic even if not explicitly planned).⁴⁾ Hal Brands defines grand strategy as the “intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy,”⁵⁾ while Barry Posen characterizes it as “a nation-state's theory about how to produce security for itself,” often focusing on military threats, identifying threats,

2) Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*(New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 335.

3) For discussions on the definition of grand strategy, see for example: Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy’,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 1 (2018), pp. 27-57; Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich (eds.), *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

4) Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword,” p. 49.

5) Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, p. 3.

and devising countermeasures.⁶⁾ Other scholars emphasize the importance of having a long-term vision and the linkage between ends and means across various domains⁷⁾. Despite the diversity in definitions, key commonalities across these perspectives include a long-term outlook, a focus on the state's most crucial interests, and the integration of various means (military, economic, diplomatic, and ideological), all while recognizing the necessity of trade-offs.⁸⁾

Building on these perspectives, this research defines “grand strategy” specifically for a middle power like South Korea as an organizing principle and consistent pattern of behavior that integrates diplomatic, economic, and military resources to secure national survival and autonomy within structural constraints. This definition highlights that even middle powers possess the agency to prioritize resource allocation and shape their external environment, rather than merely reacting to the dynamics of great power politics.⁹⁾

A significant debate revolves around the applicability of grand strategy to middle powers including South Korea.¹⁰⁾ Traditionally, middle powers have been viewed as rule-takers or niche players primarily engaged in multilateralism and good international citizenship.¹¹⁾ The notion that middle powers could possess the

6) Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 1.

7) Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich (eds.), *Comparative Grand Strategy*, pp. 6-7 and Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword,” p. 46.

8) *Ibid.*

9) This aligns with broader definitions, such as Brands’ concept of “intellectual architecture” and Yamaguchi’s synthesis, which includes peacetime security. For reference, see Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 3, and Shinji Yamaguchi, *Mao Zedong’s Strategy for Strengthening the Nation*[毛沢東の強国化戦略] (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2022), p. 16.

10) In one of the few existing academic studies focusing specifically on South Korean grand strategy, Ramon Pacheco Pardo notes the lack of consensus on the definition of grand strategy and its application to middle powers. See Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *South Korea’s Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 16, pp. 19-27. Duyeon Kim also highlights this lack of specificity as a potential area for debate. Duyeon Kim, “South Korea’s Quest for a Grand Strategy,” in Andrew Yeo et al., “Book Review Roundtable,” *Asia Policy*, Vol. 19 No. 1 (Jan 2024), p. 146. A considerable body of literature exists on Japan’s grand strategy, which can similarly be considered that of a middle power. Notable works include Richard J. Samuels and Narushige Michishita, “Hugging and Hedging: Japanese Grand Strategy in the 21st Century” in Henry R. Nau, Deepa Ollapally (eds.), *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan and Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp 146–180; Christopher W. Hughes, Alessio Patalano and Robert Ward, “Japan’s Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and Its Aftermath,” *Survival*, Vol. 63 No. 1 (Feb-Mar 2021), pp. 125-160; Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan’s Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); and Robert Ward, *Evaluating Japan’s New Grand Strategy*(New York: Routledge, 2025).

agency and capacity for comprehensive, long-term strategic planning has often been dismissed. However, as Pacheco Pardo argues, middle powers are not merely passive recipients of great power politics; they have distinct interests—often centered on achieving autonomy and status¹²⁾—wield a range of capabilities (including economic, diplomatic, military, and cultural), and can make deliberate choices to navigate their complex environments.¹³⁾ South Korea, often described as a quintessential middle power, has clearly moved beyond a reactive foreign policy, particularly since the critical junctures of democratization, the end of the Cold War, and its remarkable economic development.¹⁴⁾ Its engagement in G20, proactive regional initiatives, and significant military and technological capabilities demonstrate its ability to engage in strategic thinking and action relevant to grand strategy analysis.

This study presents an analytical framework that contrasts two distinct strategic paradigms shaping South Korea's approach to its external environment since the late 1980s. The first, known as the Old Paradigm of Strategic Ambiguity, arose from the perceived success of *Nordpolitik* and prioritized the need for flexibility in navigating the complex geopolitical landscape, particularly in relation to its U.S. ally and its increasingly powerful neighbor, China. Its core tenets involved maintaining the U.S.-ROK alliance as the fundamental guarantee of security while simultaneously cultivating deep economic interdependence with China, often encapsulated in the phrase “*Anmi Kyongjung*” (安美經中), meaning “Security with the U.S., Economy with China.”¹⁵⁾ This paradigm often led South Korea to seek a mediating role as a regional balancer or bridge between major powers,¹⁶⁾ avoiding definitive alignments that could antagonize either side. In its approach to North Korea, this paradigm generally favored inter-Korean engagement and dialogue aimed at peaceful unification through the Three-Stage Plan established in

11) Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993).

12) In *South Korea's Grand Strategy*, adopting Martel's model, Pacheco Pardo emphasizes that a focus on status and autonomy are key goals of South Korea's grand strategy.

13) *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

14) Pacheco Pardo, *South Korea's Grand Strategy*, p. 8, 10.

15) Tadashi Kimiya, “South Korea's View of U.S.-China Relations” [韓国から見た米中関係], in Shin Kawashima and Satoshi Mori (eds.), *U.S.-China Relations and World Order in the Post-Corona Era* [アフターコロナ時代の米中関係と世界秩序] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2020), p. 232.

16) Chung-in Moon discusses Korea's potential role between major powers. Moon, Chung-in, “China's Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula,” in Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø (eds.), *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), pp. 206-207. Choi Kyungwon further explores the “balancer theory.” See Choi Kyungwon, “South Korean Diplomacy's ‘Balancer Theory’” [韓国外交における『均衡論』], *The Journal of the Faculty of Foreign Studies, Tokoha University* [常葉大学外国語学部紀要], No. 38 (2022), pp. 1-16.

the early 1990s, often implicitly relying on China to exercise a moderating influence on Pyongyang. Overall, this strategy tended towards reactive adaptation to the shifting balance of power rather than proactive efforts to shape the regional order according to a distinct South Korean vision.

Conversely, the Emerging Paradigm, known as Strategic Clarity, signifies a departure from the perceived limitations of ambiguity in the current geopolitical context. This approach emphasizes principled action based on universal values and advocates for a more distinct strategic positioning. Its core tenets include reaffirming and upgrading the U.S.-ROK alliance to transform it from a regional security arrangement into a “global comprehensive strategic alliance” that addresses broader regional and global challenges.¹⁷⁾ This new paradigm promotes active contributions toward maintaining and strengthening a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and globally,¹⁸⁾ indicating a shift away from a solely peninsula-centric focus. Regarding North Korea, it adopts a more principled, deterrence-focused approach, emphasizing reciprocity and countermeasures against provocations while still remaining open to dialogue under specific conditions.¹⁹⁾ Recognizing the vulnerabilities exposed by economic coercion and supply chain disruptions, the new paradigm advocates for the diversification of economic partnerships and prioritizes economic security. Significantly, Strategic Clarity emphasizes proactive engagement and aims to shape the regional environment through initiatives like the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy and substantially strengthened partnerships, notably revitalized trilateral cooperation with the U.S. and Japan.²⁰⁾

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative process-tracing approach to elucidate the causal mechanisms driving South Korea's strategic shift. By analyzing a hierarchy of primary sources, this approach validates how external structural pressures have led to a fundamental change in strategic orientation. This qualitative lens is essential for distinguishing between mere rhetorical changes driven by domestic politics and substantive structural adaptations that endure across administrations.

The following sections of this article argue that South Korea is clearly transitioning from the previous paradigm towards the new one, although this shift is complex, contested domestically, and faces significant external challenges.

17) Office of National Security, Office of the President, Republic of Korea, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy: Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity*(Seoul, June 2023), pp. 16-17, 36, 47.

18) *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 55. See also ROK Government, *Implementation Plan for the Indo-Pacific Strategy*[자유, 평화, 번영의 인도-태평양 이행계획] (Seoul, December 2023) .

19) *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, pp. 17, 96-100.

20) *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46, 55-63.

3. The Old Paradigm: Legacy of *Nordpolitik* and Strategic Ambiguity

South Korea's foreign policy orientation following its democratic transition in 1987 was significantly influenced by the legacy of President Roh Tae-woo's *Nordpolitik*, which is widely regarded as the country's first grand strategy.²¹⁾ Launched amidst the waning years of the Cold War, this initiative sought to bridge ideological divides by actively engaging with socialist countries, including the Soviet Union and China. The two main objectives were to gain diplomatic leverage over North Korea by securing recognition and ties with Pyongyang's traditional patrons, and to create a more favorable external environment for inter-Korean reconciliation and eventual peaceful unification. *Nordpolitik* achieved remarkable successes, including the establishment of diplomatic relations with Moscow in 1990 and Beijing in 1992, effectively isolating North Korea diplomatically and paving the way for the historic 1991 Basic Agreement between the two Koreas. This diplomatic breakthrough was perceived not just as a tactical victory but also as validation of a pragmatic, engagement-oriented approach that reflected South Korea's growing national capabilities and desire for a more prominent global role.²²⁾

The perceived success of *Nordpolitik* established enduring principles that guided subsequent administrations. One of the key concepts that emerged was the bifurcated approach referred to as "*Anmi Kyongjung*." This formula recognized South Korea's heavy reliance on the U.S.-ROK alliance for deterring North Korea and maintaining regional stability, while simultaneously acknowledging the burgeoning economic opportunities stemming from China's rapid growth and geographic proximity. This approach allowed Seoul to seemingly compartmentalize its relations, maximizing benefits from both great powers without making costly exclusive choices. This strategy worked well during the relatively stable post-Cold War era, characterized by U.S. primacy and China's focus on economic development, where the conflict between security and economic partnerships were less pronounced. Scholars noted that South Korea, like many Southeast Asian nations, benefited from this strategic equilibrium, which allowed for economic prosperity under the U.S. security umbrella while integrating more deeply with China's economy.

From this dualistic approach emerged a broader posture of strategic ambiguity.

21) Lee Keun "Roh Tae-woo Administration's Northern Diplomacy: A Grand Strategy Based on Elite Nationalism" [노태우정부의 북방외교: 엘리트 민족주의에 기반한 대전략], in Kang Won-taek(ed.), *Re-recognition of the Roh Tae-woo Era: Korean Society in Transition* [노태우 시대의 재인식: 전환기의 한국사회] (Paju: Nanam, 2012), pp. 172-178; Park Young-June, *Korea's National Security Strategy: Evolution and Challenges* [한국 국가안보전략의 전개와 과제] (Paju: Hanul, 2017), p.115.

22) Lee Keun, Roh Tae-woo Government's Northern Diplomacy, pp. 172-178.

Rather than definitively aligning with either Washington or Beijing amid their developing rivalry, Seoul sought to maintain a degree of flexibility to preserve its maneuvering room. As Ji-Young Lee termed it, South Korea often employed a “strategic nondecision,” deliberately avoiding choices that could alienate either major power or incur unacceptable costs.²³⁾ This ambiguity was further justified by various conceptualizations of South Korea’s desired regional role.

Under the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-2008), the idea of South Korea acting as a “regional balancer” in Northeast Asia gained traction, ostensibly aiming to mediate potential friction between China and Japan. However, critics interpreted it as a move toward greater autonomy or equidistance from both the U.S. and China,²⁴⁾ which generated significant suspicion in Washington and among conservative circles within South Korea. Subsequent administrations, while rhetorically reaffirming the U.S. alliance, continued to explore roles such as a “bridge nation” connecting continental and maritime powers or a facilitator of regional cooperation, implicitly seeking to avoid entanglement in great power conflicts.²⁵⁾ This desire for ambiguity also manifested in a reluctance to explicitly endorse U.S.-led regional initiatives perceived as targeting China, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) or certain aspects of missile defense cooperation. South Korea often preferred to frame its participation in regional forums through the lens of its relationship with Pyongyang or economic cooperation, downplaying geopolitical alignment.

This paradigm of strategic ambiguity persisted, albeit with varying nuances, through the conservative presidency of Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) and the progressive administration of Moon Jae-in (2017-2022). President Park pursued the “Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative” (NAPCI), which aimed to foster functional cooperation and build trust within the region, including with China. She made significant investments in her personal relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping, even attending China’s 2015 military parade commemorating the end of World War II—a move that raised concerns in Washington. While committed to the U.S. alliance, her approach suggested a

23) Ji-Young Lee. “South Korea’s Strategic Nondecision and Sino-U.S. Competition,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence* (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020), pp.75-101.

24) Moon, “China’s Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula,” pp. 206-207. Tomohiko Satake notes that Roh regarded China as a key player, rather than a threat. See Tomohiko Satake, “Explaining the Difference between Australia-Japan and Japan-ROK Security Cooperation,” *The Pacific Review* Vol. 38, No. 3 (May 2025), pp. 473-501.

25) Choi, “South Korean Diplomacy’s ‘Balancer Theory,’” p. 13. Junya Nishino discusses ROK’s regional order concepts. See Junya Nishino, “South Korean Diplomacy and Regional Order Concepts” [韓国外交と地域秩序構想], in Ryo Sahashi (ed.), *Post-Cold War East Asian Order* [冷戦後の東アジア秩序] (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2020), pp. 143-169.

belief that Seoul could maintain positive ties with both Beijing and Washington simultaneously, potentially underestimating the growing strategic contradictions.²⁶⁾ Ultimately, her strategy faltered following the controversy over the decision to deploy the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, which triggered unprecedented economic retaliation from China and highlighted the limits of trying to please both sides.²⁷⁾

After a period of political turmoil that resulted in the first presidential impeachment in South Korea's constitutional court, President Moon Jae-in entered office with a priority on rapprochement with North Korea, seeking China's cooperation to achieve this goal. His administration initially embraced China's "dual suspension" proposal (which suggested suspending North Korean nuclear/missile tests in exchange for a pause on U.S.-ROK military exercises) and effectively aligned its policy with China's "dual-track" approach (which emphasizes parallel pursuit of denuclearization and a peace mechanism). While achieving temporary diplomatic breakthroughs with North Korea in 2018, this focus often led to friction with the U.S., particularly regarding sanctions enforcement and the pace of denuclearization negotiations. As inter-Korean relations stalled and North Korea continued its provocations in the latter half of his term, President Moon began to cautiously align more closely with U.S. regional strategy. His government's stance toward the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy remained passive, if not negative, for much of his term. It framed cooperation primarily through the lens of harmonizing it with South Korea's own New Southern Policy, which deliberately excluded sensitive security issues to minimize geopolitical risks.

However, as noted earlier, his administration eventually agreed to mention the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait in a joint statement with the U.S. in May 2021 and participated in U.S.-led multilateral military exercises. Wongi Choe interprets the alignment of Indo-Pacific language at the 2021 Moon-Biden summit not as a fundamental shift in Moon's China policy but rather as a calculated move to allay Washington's concerns about South Korean position between the U.S. and China, while securing U.S. support for engagement with North Korea—done carefully to remain acceptable to Beijing.²⁸⁾ This gradual, arguably reluctant, shift occurred late in his term and lacked the comprehensive

26) Moon, "China's Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula," pp. 216-223. Tomohiko Satake notes that Park believed China could be a responsible stakeholder while being hesitant to expand trilateral cooperation. See Satake, "Explaining the Difference between Australia-Japan and Japan-ROK Security Cooperation."

27) Linda Maduz, "Explaining Korea's Positioning in the U.S.-China Strategic Competition," in Simona A. Grano and David W. F. Huang (eds.), *China-U.S. Competition* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 248.

28) Wongi Choe, "Is Seoul Turning Toward the Indo-Pacific?: A Korean Perspective on the Moon-Biden Summit," *IFANS Perspectives*, IP2021-08E (August 10, 2021), p. 3.

strategic reorientation that would follow under his successor.²⁹⁾ It also took place amidst signals perceived as prioritizing China, such as the “Three Noes” policy regarding THAAD announced in late 2017 (which stated there would be no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in U.S. regional missile defense, and no trilateral military alliance with Japan). This policy aimed to repair relations with Beijing after the THAAD dispute.

Overall, the presidencies of Park and Moon demonstrated the increasing difficulty, and perhaps unsustainability, of maintaining strategic ambiguity in the fact of escalating great power competition and the persistent threat from North Korea.³⁰⁾

4. The Shift towards Strategic Clarity

The longstanding paradigm of strategic ambiguity, rooted in the legacy of *Nordpolitik*, began to unravel due to profound shifts in the external security environment and changing domestic perceptions within South Korea. Several key factors converged to necessitate a strategic re-evaluation.

First and foremost is the undeniable intensification of U.S.-China strategic competition. What began as trade friction under the Trump administration rapidly escalated into a comprehensive rivalry encompassing technology, security, ideology, and global influence. The U.S. explicitly identified China as a “revisionist power” and its primary strategic competitor, aiming to counter its influence through strengthened alliances and initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The U.S. Department of Defense designated the Indo-Pacific as its “priority theater,” explicitly framing the contest as a clash between “free and repressive world order visions.” China, under Xi Jinping, pursued its “China Dream” and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), projecting power and seeking to reshape both regional and global order. Although initially presented as an economic initiative, the BRI was increasingly perceived by the U.S. as having strategic and military dimensions, aiming to expand China’s sphere of influence through infrastructure investments and potential dual-use facilities. This deepening bipolar dynamic made the balancing act of “*Anmi Kyongjung*”

29) Maduz, “Explaining Korea’s Positioning in the U.S.–China Strategic Competition,” pp. 254–255. Seong-Ho Sheen, “A Beginning of New Global Partnership? The ROK-U.S. Relations under Biden and Moon,” *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 29 No. 1 (2022), pp. 79–96. Kotaro Ito describes Moon’s efforts to balance between the U.S. and China, especially early in his term. Kotaro Ito, “Continuity in South Korea’s Foreign and Security Policy” [韓国の外交所安全保障政策における連続性], *The Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies* [現代韓国朝鮮研究], No. 23 (November 2023), pp. 39–40.

30) Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), chapter 9.

increasingly untenable. As Chung Min Lee rightly noted, intensified Sino-U.S. competition would inevitably pressure Seoul to choose sides.³¹⁾

Second, South Korea's economic calculations regarding China began to shift. While China remained South Korea's largest trading partner, concerns grew about economic coercion—evidenced by the retaliatory measures following the THAAD deployment—unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and heightened technological competition. The assumption that economic interdependence would automatically lead to benign political relations faced significant challenges. Furthermore, global supply chain disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine highlighted the risks of over-reliance on any single country. Consequently, there emerged a shared understanding within policy circles, exemplified by a 2022 remark from the Senior Presidential Secretary for Economic Affairs that “the boom enjoyed over the past 20 years through exports to China is coming to an end.”³²⁾

Third, the nature and perception of the North Korean threat evolved significantly. Pyongyang relentlessly advanced its nuclear and missile capabilities, developing tactical nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. It also adopted a more aggressive nuclear doctrine, including scenarios for preemptive use, while rejecting dialogue and, in early 2024, declaring South Korea a principal enemy and formally characterizing inter-Korean relations as hostile two-state relationship. These developments further solidified North Korea's image as an intractable threat.³³⁾ The heightened perception of this threat diminished the appeal of engagement-centric approaches favored by progressive administrations, strengthening the case for robust deterrence. Critically, it also eroded South Korea's confidence in China's willingness or ability to effectively restrain Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. China's repeated shielding of North Korea from stronger UN sanctions following its provocations reinforced this view. Consequently, the assessment that cooperation with China would likely not

31) Chung Min Lee, “South Korea's Grand Strategy in Transition: Coping with Extant Threats and Emerging Political Dynamics,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2017–18: Power, Ideas, and Military Strategy in the Asia-Pacific* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), pp. 108-111.

32) Aran Jeong, “The Yoon administration is turning its attention to Europe, seeking to secure new growth engines and achieve a quantum leap in economic growth[유럽으로 눈돌리는尹정부… “신성장동력 확보해 경제 쿼텟점프,”] *Yonhap News*, June 29, 2022.

33) Lim Eul Chul assesses that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Nuclear Forces Policy Law, adopted by the Supreme People's Assembly on September 8, 2022, holds one of the most aggressive and radical nuclear doctrines among nuclear-armed states. See Lim Eul Chul, “The Legalization of North Korea's Nuclear Force Policy : Background, Characteristics and Implications” [김정은 정권의 핵무력 정책법령화: 배경, 특징과 함의], *Unification & Law* [통일과 법률], No. 53 (May 2023), pp. 74-103.

contribute to resolving North Korea's nuclear and missile issues, or improve inter-Korean relations, gained traction within the South Korean security establishment.

Fourth, shifts in domestic public opinion and political leadership played a crucial role. Public sentiment towards China, once relatively favorable, has soured considerably due to several factors like China's retaliation following the THAAD system deployment, perceived cultural appropriation, its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its assertive behavior in the region. Younger generations, in particular, have exhibited strong anti-China sentiments and a more conservative outlook on security issues.³⁴⁾ The election of Yoon Suk Yeol in March 2022, who campaigned on strengthening the U.S. alliance, improving ties with Japan, and taking a more principled stance towards China and North Korea, reflected and further catalyzed this shift.³⁵⁾ His victory, though narrow, indicated a public mandate, or at least an acceptance, for a course correction in foreign policy.

The convergence of these external threats and internal shifts pushed South Korea across a critical threshold. It transformed what began as incremental adjustments under the late Moon administration into a distinctive step change toward strategic clarity under President Yoon, representing a structural departure from the path dependence of the previous paradigm of ambiguity. The Yoon administration explicitly adopted strategic clarity as the cornerstone of its foreign policy, moving away from past ambiguity and aligning South Korea more clearly with the U.S. and other like-minded democracies based on shared values. While this shift was decisively articulated under Yoon, its roots can be traced to the latter years of the Moon administration. The mention of the Taiwan Strait in the 2021 U.S.-ROK joint statement and participation in exercises like Pacific Vanguard were early, albeit tentative, indications that Seoul was beginning to recognize the changing strategic realities and the limitations of its traditional approach. President Moon's retrospective assessment of the ROK-U.S. summit in May 2021 further underscores this evolving perspective:

34) Maduz, "Explaining Korea's Positioning in the U.S.–China Strategic Competition," pp. 257-258. Shin Gi-Wook, Haley Gordon, and Hannah June Kim also examine this trend in "South Koreans Are Rethinking What China Means to Their Nation," *The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Commentary*, February 8, 2022 [Available at <http://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/south-koreans-are-rethinking-what-china-means-their-nation> (accessed on Dec. 5, 2025)].

35) Maduz, "Explaining Korea's Positioning in the U.S.–China Strategic Competition," p. 248,255. Sue Mi Terry and Kayla Orta discuss Yoon's election promises in their article "What can we expect from the new South Korean President?" in *Wilson Center Insight & Analysis*, March 9, 2022 [Available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/what-can-we-expect-new-south-korean-president> (accessed on Dec. 5, 2025)].

It [the summit] became the highest caliber ever. Without a doubt, it was evaluated by both Korea and the United States as the most brilliant agreement in the history of Korea-U.S. summits. It elevated the Korea-U.S. alliance beyond a security alliance to a comprehensive alliance, raising it to the level of a values-based alliance and a global alliance... The agreements from that summit were subsequently incorporated into the summit agreement between President Yoon Suk Yeol and President Biden.³⁶⁾

Furthermore, despite the Moon administration's outward emphasis on inter-Korean reconciliation, it continued, albeit sometimes discreetly, the defense modernization efforts initiated by previous conservative governments. This includes the development of key components of the three-axis system and the introduction of advanced platforms like the F-35A. This continuity in enhancing capabilities provided a foundation upon which the Yoon administration could build its more robust defense posture.³⁷⁾

5. Manifestations of Strategic Clarity: Policies and Initiatives

The adoption of strategic clarity has manifested in a series of concrete policy initiatives and adjustments under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration, reshaping South Korea's engagement with the region and the world.

5.1. *The Universal Value-oriented Vision*

Embodied in the new strategic direction is the "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) vision. Outlined in the administration's National Security Strategy, this concept signifies South Korea's ambition to transcend its traditional focus on the Korean Peninsula and play a more active and constructive role in promoting freedom, peace, and prosperity globally. The GPS vision rests on the pillars of freedom and solidarity, emphasizing cooperation with countries that share universal values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, while pragmatically pursuing

36) Moon Jae-in, *From the Periphery to the Center: Moon Jae-in's Memoir on Foreign and Security Policy*[변방에서 중심으로: 문재인 회고록 외교안보편] (Paju: Kimyoungsa, 2024), p.350.

37) Ito points out a continuity in South Korea's foreign and security policy, noting that while Moon emphasized peace, he also spoke of the need for overwhelming military superiority over North Korea and pursued increases in the defense budget. See Ito, "Continuity in South Korea's Foreign and Security Policy." Choe also suggests that Moon's agreement to align the New Southern Policy with the U.S. Indo-Pacific vision at the 2021 summit was a significant, albeit carefully worded, step toward greater regional engagement. This alignment acknowledges the complementary nature of both initiatives while maintaining Seoul's independent branding. See Choe "Is Seoul Turning Toward the Indo-Pacific?"

national interests.³⁸⁾ It explicitly commits South Korea to actively contribute to upholding the rules-based international order and addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and supply chain issues, reflecting an expanded sense of responsibility commensurate with its enhanced international standing. This represents a significant departure from the more reactive and peninsula-focused foreign policy postures of the past.

5.2. Adoption and Implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

A key manifestation of strategic clarity is South Korea's formal adoption of its own Indo-Pacific Strategy in December 2022, titled "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific." This marked the first time Seoul articulated a comprehensive regional strategy. Built on the principles of inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity, it outlines nine core lines of effort, including strengthening the rules-based order; promoting democracy and human rights; enhancing security cooperation in maritime, cyber, and health sectors; building economic security networks; advancing science and technology; addressing climate change and energy security; expanding contributive diplomacy through development cooperation; and fostering mutual understanding and exchanges.³⁹⁾

Significantly, the strategy explicitly emphasizes the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as well as respect for freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, aligning Seoul more clearly with Washington and Tokyo on key regional security concerns. It also stresses the strengthening of partnerships with ASEAN through the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative, Pacific Island nations, India, Australia, and European partners. To bring this vision to life, the government released a detailed Implementation Plan in December 2023, outlining specific actions, initiatives (such as the Indo-Pacific Senior Officials' Forum and regional cooperation funds), and timelines across various ministries.⁴⁰⁾

5.3. Reconfiguring Alliances and Partnerships

The U.S.-ROK alliance remains central, but it is evolving into a "Global

38) *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, pp. 10, 16-17; Andrew Yeo, "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State," Brookings Institution, December 19, 2023[Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/articles/south-korea-as-a-global-pivotal-state> (accessed on Dec. 5, 2025)].

39) ROK Government, *Implementation Plan for the Indo-Pacific Strategy*(December 2023), pp. 8-9. *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, pp. 55-56.

40) Ito notes that while the Yoon administration has rebranded its strategy, it effectively inherited and expanded upon the substance of the New Southern Policy, adding diplomatic and security dimensions to Moon's primarily economic focus. See Ito, "Continuity in South Korea's Foreign and Security Policy," p. 44; ROK Government, *Implementation Plan for the Indo-Pacific Strategy*, p. 4.

Comprehensive Strategic Alliance.” Cooperation now extends beyond peninsula defense to encompass regional security in the Indo-Pacific, economic security (including supply chains and critical technologies), and global challenges. The Washington Declaration (April 2023) significantly bolstered U.S. extended deterrence commitments by establishing the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to enhance joint planning and execution concerning nuclear contingencies, thereby addressing South Korean concerns about North Korea’s nuclear threats.⁴¹⁾ The alliance is framed as value-based, rooted in shared principles of freedom, democracy, and human rights.

At the same time, there has been a dramatic rapprochement with Japan. Overcoming historical hurdles stemming from issues like forced labor compensation, President Yoon prioritized restoring trust and fostering future-oriented cooperation. Shuttle diplomacy has resumed, security dialogues have been normalized, and intelligence sharing under the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) which had been unstable during the period of turmoil in Japan-South Korea relations, has been fully restored. This laid the groundwork for unprecedented Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral cooperation. The landmark Camp David Summit (August 2023) institutionalized this cooperation across security (e.g., real-time missile warning data sharing, regular trilateral exercises), economic, and technological domains, along with creating a “Commitment to Consult” on regional challenges and establishing a new framework for regional stability.⁴²⁾

Regarding China, the Yoon administration emphasizes a “healthier and more mature relationship based on mutual respect, reciprocity, and common interests.” While pushing back against actions deemed contrary to international norms or South Korean interests (adopting a stance of “confident diplomacy anchored in principles”), Seoul seeks to maintain dialogue and cooperation on issues like supply chain stability and climate change. The ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy avoids explicitly targeting China but clearly promotes a rules-based order that implicitly challenges Beijing’s assertiveness. Seoul’s official statements regarding the South China Sea (for example, expressing “deep concern” over collisions and the use of water cannon) and the Taiwan Strait demonstrate a clearer alignment with international law and U.S./Japanese positions compared to the past. The Yoon administration has also made clear that the previous government’s “Three Noes” policy regarding THAAD was not a formal agreement or promise, signaling

41) *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, pp. 40-41.

42) Adam P. Liff analyzes the significance of the trilateral summit and extensively documents the growing trilateral convergence on regional security issues, including unprecedented statements concerning the peace of the Taiwan Strait. Adam P. Liff, “Beyond territorial defense...? The U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances and a ‘Taiwan Strait contingency’,” *The Pacific Review* Vol. 38, No. 3(May 2025), pp. 443-472.

greater flexibility.

Diplomatic horizons are also broadening through strengthened ties with Australia, India, Canada, and ASEAN, enhanced partnership with NATO (via the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme - ITPP), and increased engagement with the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Engagement with multilateral forums like the Quad is also increasing in specific functional areas, although stopping short of formal membership. This expanding network reflects the “confluence geopolitics” described by Ban Kil Joo, where traditional geographic and alliance boundaries become increasingly blurred.⁴³⁾

5.4. Adjustments in Defense Doctrine and Posture

In response to North Korea's advanced nuclear and missile capabilities, South Korea is accelerating the enhancement of its “Korean Three-Axis System,” which includes the Kill Chain (preemptive strike), KAMD (missile defense), and KMPR (massive punishment and retaliation).⁴⁴⁾ There is now a greater emphasis on securing “overwhelming capabilities” and achieving “peace through strength”. This involves acquiring advanced surveillance assets, such as reconnaissance satellites, developing more powerful and precise missiles such as the recent Hyunmoo-IV and V series, and improving missile defense layers (including enhancing PAC-3 and developing L-SAM/M-SAM). Even the previous administration, despite its focus on engagement, continued the development of the three-axis system initiated by historically conservative leaders, including the acquisition of components like the F-35A and Global Hawk, indicating a degree of continuity in capability enhancement driven by the North Korean threat. The Yoon administration has explicitly revived this terminology and prioritized the completion of these systems.

Cooperation with the U.S. on extended deterrence has been significantly deepened through the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), regular deployments of U.S. strategic assets—including visits by nuclear-capable submarines—and joint planning and exercises. ROK-U.S. combined military exercises, which were scaled back under the previous administration, have now been normalized and expanded in scope. Trilateral Japan-U.S.-ROK defense exercises, focusing on missile defense and anti-submarine warfare, are now conducted regularly following a multi-year plan. Even during periods of strained political relations between Japan and South Korea under Moon's presidency, some trilateral drills, such as Pacific

43) Ban Kil Joo, “The U.S.-China Strategic Competition and Alliance-Confluence Geopolitics: Implications from QUAD and AUKUS” [미중 전략적 경쟁과 동맹의 융합지정학: 쿼드와 오커스 동맹의 함의], *Review of International and Area Studies*[국제·지역연구], Vol. 31, No. 1 (March 2022), pp. 31-61.

44) *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, pp. 92-93. Lee, “South Korea's Grand Strategy in Transition,” pp. 122-124.

Dragon, continued, albeit without public announcements, highlighting their operational necessity at the working level.

The “Defense Innovation 4.0” initiative aims to build a technologically advanced military capable of addressing future warfare challenges by integrating capabilities such as AI, drones, cyber, space, and electromagnetic technology.⁴⁵⁾ This includes establishing a Strategic Command to oversee these new domains and a Drone Operations Command. While North Korea remains the primary adversary, the focus on advanced capabilities and multi-domain operations suggests a broader preparedness for various regional contingencies, potentially including those involving China’s growing military power.⁴⁶⁾ The expansion of South Korea’s defense exports also serves as a tool to forge security partnerships and enhance its regional influence, particularly with ASEAN nations and India. This continuity in promoting defense export spans both conservative and progressive administrations, illustrating its eventual contribution to regional deterrence, regardless of any explicit anti-China intent.

6. A Paradigm Tested: Strategic Clarity after the Yoon Administration

The shift toward strategic clarity under the Yoon Suk Yeol administration was foreshadowed by the pragmatic adjustments made during the late Moon Jae-in administration. This suggests that the foundations of this new paradigm may transcend partisan lines. However, a true test of this paradigm’s durability has emerged following the sudden political turmoil leading to President Yoon’s impeachment and the subsequent six-month political vacuum, culminating in the inauguration of the progressive Lee Jae-myung administration. The critical question now is whether this new government, led by a figure historically associated with the progressive camp’s traditional foreign policy tenets, will maintain or dismantle the shift toward strategic clarity.

While it is admittedly early to render a definitive verdict on an administration that has been in office for less than a year, developments during its first several months suggest a remarkable adaptation. This continuity should be interpreted as evidence of the maturation of South Korea’s grand strategy into a non-partisan imperative. Rather than being solely driven by external structural constraints, this trajectory reflects a deliberate strategic calculation that sustaining “strategic clarity” is the most effective pathway to secure national autonomy and influence. Consequently, the Lee administration’s approach indicates that South Korea’s

45) Ministry of National Defense (ROK), *Defense Innovation 4.0*, February 28, 2023.

46) Lee, “South Korea’s Grand Strategy in Transition,” p. 119, discusses the need to consider the capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

grand strategic shift has acquired a self-sustaining logic, grounded in a unified perception of long-term national interest that transcends domestic political divides.

A prominent example of this adaptation was observed during President Lee's first visit to the United States. In remarks delivered at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), he addressed South Korea's relationship with China in straightforward and realistic terms. During the question-and-answer session, he stated:

It is true that until the United States began its strong containment, or rather, blockade policy against China, South Korea maintained a position of *Anmi Kyongjung*. However, over the past few years, as the supply chain reorganization between the free camp and the China-centered camp has begun in earnest, and as U.S. policy has clearly moved in a direction to contain China, South Korea can no longer take the same attitude as in the past... China is in a situation where we must maintain the unavoidable relationship arising from its geographical proximity at a 'managed' level. From now on, South Korea is in a state where it cannot act or judge by deviating from the basic policies of the United States.⁴⁷⁾

Despite the “pro-China” label often applied to Lee Jae-myung in domestic political discourse, his analysis closely aligns with the threat perception articulated by the preceding Yoon administration. It acknowledges the structural reality of U.S.-China rivalry and supply chain realignment as a primary constraint, necessitating a strategic adaptation regardless of partisan ideology.

This emerging realism also appears to extend into the military domain. Under the Lee administration, the multilateral Japan-U.S.-ROK multi-domain joint exercises—which were institutionalized under Yoon—have reportedly continued without interruption, signaling continuity in practical defense cooperation. Moreover, some of President Lee's actions suggest an even bolder alignment with the U.S.-led containment policy toward China. During a subsequent summit meeting between President Lee and President Trump, discussions regarding South Korea's potential acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) resurfaced. President Lee reportedly contended that “diesel submarines have limited operational capacity for tracking submarines in the vicinity of North Korea and China due to their limited underwater endurance.”⁴⁸⁾ This statement was widely interpreted as a hint: if the United States were to permit South Korea to acquire

47) The video of the CSIS speech and Q&A is available at <http://www.youtube.com/live/GHcBSwe-s2M>(accessed on December 5, 2025).

48) Hyeonjeong Kim, “[Korea-U.S. Summit] Surprise Declaration of Nuclear Submarine Development... Impact on Korea-China Relations [[한미정상회담] 핵잠 추진'깜짝 선언'... 한중관계 영향은],” *Yonhap News*, October 29, 2025.

SSNs—a long-held ambition of the ROK—South Korea would, in turn, take on a greater share of the surveillance and anti-submarine warfare responsibilities in the waters surrounding the Korean Peninsula, including the Yellow Sea. This arrangement could free up U.S. naval assets to focus elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, representing a potentially significant strategic bargain that ties ROK capability upgrades directly to broader U.S. regional objectives concerning China.

The administration's approach to North Korea also exemplifies this adaptive realism. South Korea is confronting North Korea's "hostile two-state" concept, which fundamentally rejects the premise of national unification that has traditionally defined inter-Korean relations. Initially, the Lee administration, reflecting its progressive roots, attempted traditional engagement policies, such as suspending propaganda broadcasts and balloon leaflet launches, to elicit a positive response from Pyongyang.⁴⁹⁾ However, when these overtures failed to yield any change in North Korea's hostile stance, the administration quickly pivoted, accommodating the new reality of North Korea's declared "two-state" framework."

This adaptation appears to be reinforced by key appointments. Lee Jong-seok, the Director of the National Intelligence Service, previously supported the controversial idea of adopting North Korea's "two-state" definition as a new baseline. Additionally, Unification Minister Chung Dong-young, known for his experience in progressive engagement policies, has publicly proposed a "Peaceful Two-State" concept, arguing that the South and North Korea are already substantively two distinct states. He contends that the inter-Korean relationship should transition into a peaceful two-state relationship. This pragmatic, albeit controversial, acknowledgement of a *de facto* two-state reality marks a significant departure from the traditional progressive agenda of overcoming the "division system," reflecting a willingness to adapt policy to North Korea's new, more hostile stance.

7. Conclusion and Future Challenges

South Korea's grand strategy has undergone a considerable transformation. Confronted by the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, North Korea's growing nuclear threat, and shifts in domestic politics, Seoul has decisively moved away from the post-Cold War paradigm of strategic ambiguity that was rooted in the legacy of *Nordpolitik*. In its place, a new grand strategy emphasizing strategic clarity has

49) This approach reflects a traditional progressive stance favoring engagement, reminiscent of the Sunshine Policy. See Chung-in Moon, "China's Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula," in *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), p. 203.

been adopted. This new approach prioritizes alignment with the United States and other like-minded democracies based on shared universal values—freedom, democracy, and the rule of law—and a commitment to upholding the rules-based international order. It is articulated through the new vision and implemented via the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy; the deepening and diversification of the U.S.-ROK alliance; the normalization of ties with Japan; strengthened trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan; a principled yet pragmatic approach towards China; and the modernization of South Korea's defense posture with a focus on advanced technology and robust deterrence.

This shift, initiated implicitly by President Moon and materialized under the conservative Yoon administration, now appears to be adapting and continuing, albeit with different nuances, under the succeeding progressive Lee Jae-myung administration. This development suggests that the transition to strategic clarity may be a deep-seated, structural adaptation to the new geopolitical environment—driven by constraints and shared threat perceptions across the political spectrum—rather than a purely partisan policy preference.

Despite this new strategic direction and its emerging cross-partisan adoption, its long-term sustainability faces significant challenges. First, domestic political constraints remain a primary vulnerability. South Korea's deep ideological polarization means that while broad goals may be shared, there will continue to be fierce disagreements over the means—particularly concerning policy toward North Korea, China, and Japan.⁵⁰⁾ There is a high risk that a future administration could reverse course, undermining strategic consistency.

Second, regional geopolitical dynamics impose inherent constraints.⁵¹⁾ The rapprochement with Japan, a key pillar of the new strategy, remains vulnerable to historical disputes. In addition, a clearer alignment with the U.S. and Japan could create friction with China and Russia, who might perceive enhanced trilateral cooperation and the Indo-Pacific Strategy as containment efforts.⁵²⁾ If U.S.-China tensions escalate, South Korea will face intense pressure that could challenge its ability to maintain strategic clarity while managing its critical economic relationship with China.⁵³⁾ Consequently, it is essential for Seoul to prepare comprehensive “contingency plans” against potential Chinese economic coercion. As strategic clarity solidifies, the risk of “gray zone” retaliation—such as export restrictions on critical minerals—increases, necessitating a strategy that goes beyond supply chain diversification to include counter-coercion mechanisms with allies.

50) Kim, “South Korea's Quest for a Grand Strategy,” p. 145.

51) Lee, “South Korea's Strategic Nondecision and Sino-U.S. Competition,” p. 75.

52) Maduz, “Explaining Korea's Positioning in the U.S.-China Strategic Competition,” p. 266.

53) Park, “Changes in U.S.-China Relations and Korea's Strategy,” p. 67; Kim Sung-han and Kim Min-sung, “Indo-Pacific Strategy vs. Belt and Road Initiative,” p. 19.

Third, the North Korean nuclear issue remains unresolved. Pyongyang's escalating threat and its "hostile two-state" doctrine compel Seoul to prioritize deterrence. This pragmatic adaptation by the Lee administration, while realistic, underscores the failure of past engagement efforts and leaves the goal of denuclearization elusive.

Finally, demographic challenges loom large. South Korea's severe demographic decline threatens the long-term sustainability of any strategy that requires substantial national resources.⁵⁴⁾ Successfully navigating these challenges will be critical for the endurance of this strategic shift.

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54) Lam Peng Er, "The Future of South Korea's Grand Strategy," in Yeo et al., "Book Review Roundtable," p. 156

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Hegemony, Nonproliferation, and Burden-Sharing: The Narang-Colby Debate on South Korea's Nuclear Option

Jiyoung Kim

Abstract

This paper analyzes the current debate within U.S. grand strategy regarding South Korea's potential nuclear armament through a comparative study of two prominent strategists: Vipin Narang and Elbridge Colby. This theoretical divide has gained practical urgency, particularly after the United States approved South Korea's development of nuclear-powered submarines in 2025, signaling a potential shift towards a transactional, interest-based approach to alliance management. The divergence in their views represents a fundamental schism between the logic of "Nonproliferation Primacy," which prioritizes the maintenance of the liberal institutional order and views allied nuclear acquisition as destabilizing, and the logic of "Strategic Denial," which supports a realist focus on power balancing against China, potentially tolerating allied nuclear armament as a means of burden-sharing. By examining their competing perspectives on the hierarchy of threats, the role of alliances, and the calculus of risk, this study elucidates the structural dilemma facing South Korea. It concludes that neither relying solely on U.S. extended deterrence nor pursuing immediate independent nuclear armament is a viable option. Instead, the study proposes a "Parallel Autonomous Deterrence (PAD)" strategy, arguing that South Korea should simultaneously strengthen institutional ties with the U.S. while developing independent capabilities that are compatible with the alliance, thereby securing strategic autonomy amidst hegemonic flux.

Keywords: *Extended Deterrence, Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Hegemony, South Korea, Vipin Narang, Elbridge Colby*

Introduction

The credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, the cornerstone of its alliance system for over 70 years, is facing a profound crisis. North Korea's development of a credible nuclear arsenal capable of striking the U.S. mainland, coupled with Russia's assertive actions in Europe, has prompted a critical reassessment in allied capitals. The long-standing question, "Would the U.S. trade San Francisco for Seoul?" has shifted from a theoretical exercise to a pressing policy concern. Consequently, public and political support for independent nuclear armament in South Korea has surged to historic highs, with polls showing over 70 percent of South Koreans favoring nuclear weapons development, thereby challenging the foundations of the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime in Asia.¹⁾

In addition, the strategic ambiguity surrounding South Korea's nuclear potential ended abruptly in late October 2025. Following a summit with President Lee Jae-myung, U.S. President Donald Trump officially announced via his social media platform that he had approved South Korea's construction of nuclear-powered submarines (SSN). This historic decision, finalized the day after President Lee requested authorization for fuel procurement, marks a paradigm shift. Notably, President Trump explicitly linked this approval to the revitalization of the U.S. shipbuilding industry, requiring that the submarines be constructed at the Philly Shipyard, a facility acquired by the South Korean defense firm Hanwha. This 'Philly Deal' signifies a transition in the alliance from value-based inhibition to interest-based transactionalism.

This burgeoning debate within U.S. alliances reflects a deep divide in Washington's own strategic community. The core of the disagreement is not whether to maintain U.S. primacy, but how to do so. This study explores this central schism through a comparative analysis of two of its most influential voices: Vipin Narang and Elbridge Colby. While both strategists aim to secure U.S. interests, they represent fundamentally divergent "schools" of American grand strategy regarding the hierarchy of threats.

Vipin Narang, a prominent scholar of nuclear strategy and former Pentagon official, advocates for the logic of "Nonproliferation Primacy." Rooted in the tradition of liberal institutionalism and strategic stability, he argues that allied nuclear acquisition is inherently destabilizing. For Narang, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime is not merely a legal instrument but a critical pillar of U.S. global influence.²⁾ His prescription focuses on reinforcing

1) Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "The Evolution of South Korea's Nuclear Weapons Policy Debate," last modified August 2, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/evolution-south-koreas-nuclear-weapons-policy-debate>

2) Vipin Narang and Ankit Panda, "The Dangers of a Nuclear-Armed South Korea," *Foreign Affairs*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/south-korea/dangers-nuclear-armed-south-korea>.

extended deterrence to prevent the chaotic "domino effect" of proliferation, which he regards as a greater threat to global order than the costs associated with maintaining alliances.

In contrast, Elbridge Colby, a principal architect of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, advocates for a logic of "Strategic Denial and Burden-Sharing." Representing a realist shift focused on great power competition, Colby posits that the primary existential threat to the U.S. is the rise of China, not nuclear proliferation per se. He asserts that Washington is dangerously overstretched and must judiciously prioritize its resources. From this perspective, a nuclear-armed ally could, under certain circumstances, be transformed from a liability into a strategic asset that complicates China's calculus, thereby freeing the U.S. to concentrate its limited power on the primary theater.³⁾

This research argues that the Narang-Colby debate is not merely a policy disagreement but a manifestation of a deeper struggle between two competing strategic worldviews: one that prioritizes the maintenance of the liberal nonproliferation order and another that emphasizes the balance of power against a peer competitor. By deconstructing the core logic, historical assumptions, and hierarchy of interests in their respective arguments, this study provides a framework for understanding the future of U.S. alliances. It concludes that while Colby's diagnosis of U.S. strategic overstretch is acute, his prescription underestimates the risks of proliferation cascades. Conversely, Narang's approach offers stability but faces a growing credibility gap that requires more than mere rhetorical reassurance.

The study proceeds as follows. First, it develops a theoretical framework by situating Narang and Colby within the broader traditions of U.S. security strategy. Second, it compares their competing logics of hegemony and alliance management. Third, it applies these frameworks to the specific case of the Korean Peninsula. Finally, it derives policy implications for South Korea as it navigates an increasingly fractured strategic landscape.

Theoretical framework

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on South Korea's nuclear calculus, while extensive, is epistemologically confined to a paradigm that treats the proliferation debate in Seoul as a dependent variable, a reaction to external stimuli. This body of work, while valuable, can be broadly grouped into three strands: adversary-centric

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

analyses of the North Korean threat, ally-centric studies of South Korea's strategic choices, and historical or consequentialist accounts of regional security dynamics. Although these approaches provide a granular understanding of the dilemma, they consistently stop short of interrogating the foundational schism within American strategic thought, which this study argues constitutes the primary locus of causality.

The first and most populous strand is ally-centric, examining the calculus from Seoul's perspective. These works meticulously chart the ebb and flow of South Korea's domestic nuclear debate, correctly identifying diminishing faith in the U.S. security guarantee as a primary driver.⁴⁾ Some scholars apply international relations theory, such as defensive realism, to explain Seoul's policy choices,⁵⁾ while others develop conditional models to predict the circumstances under which South Korea might eventually decide to "go nuclear."⁶⁾ This research is often prescriptive, outlining various security options for Seoul, from strengthening conventional deterrence to enhancing the U.S. extended deterrence commitment.⁷⁾ However, it remains fundamentally concerned with the receiving end of U.S. policy. It treats the hegemon's strategic output as a given and focuses on the ally's response, leaving the internal dynamics of American strategy-making as an unexamined black box.

A second strand is adversary-centric, delving into the historical, structural, and operational drivers of North Korea's nuclear program. These studies offer critical insights into Pyongyang's motivations, framing its nuclear pursuit as a tool for regime survival,⁸⁾ and analyze the specifics of its evolving nuclear doctrine and military capabilities, such as its submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) program.⁹⁾ While essential for mapping the threat environment that gives rise to the debate, this line of analysis remains orthogonal to the core question of U.S. alliance management. It explains the adversary's behavior but does not link it to the subsequent, and equally critical, strategic dilemmas emerge within the United States.

Furthermore, a third strand provides historical context and consequentialist warnings. Historical-descriptive accounts, for instance, remind us that U.S.

4) See Ahn and Cho, "A nuclear South Korea?"; Roehrig, "The U.S. Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea"; and Jeon, "The Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis and ROK's Response."

5) Kim, Seok-joon, "A Theoretical Review and Implications of South Korea's Nuclear Policy."

6) Kim, Min-hyung, "Under What Conditions Would South Korea Go Nuclear?"

7) Jeong, "North Korea's Nuclear Capability Advancement and National Security Options."

8) See Oh, "The Essence of the North Korean Nuclear Issue and South Korea's Countermeasures"; and Ko, "A Historical-Structural Approach to the Factors of North Korea's Nuclear Possession."

9) See Lee et al., "North Korea's Nuclear Operation Strategy"; Park, Jae-wan, "South Korea's Response Strategy"; and Kim et al., "North Korea's Strategy to Acquire Nuclear-Weapon-State Status."

extended deterrence was once a physical reality with hundreds of nuclear weapons based in South Korea, making the current debate ontologically distinct.¹⁰⁾ Other scholars focus on the potential fallout of a South Korean nuclear bomb, detailing the immense diplomatic and economic costs of leaving the NPT¹¹⁾ and forecasting a destabilizing nuclear domino effect across East Asia.¹²⁾

However, a critical gap exists in connecting these regional studies to the broader scholarship on U.S. grand strategy, specifically the tension between Liberal Institutionalism and Offensive Realism. Much of the literature on South Korea assumes a monolithic U.S. commitment to nonproliferation, thereby neglecting the intense theoretical debate within Washington between "Strategies of Inhibition" and logics of "Restraint" and "Denial." Scholars like Francis Gavin and Scott Sagan have long articulated the logic of "inhibition," arguing that U.S. nuclear dominance is essential to prevent the destabilizing effects of allied proliferation. Conversely, realists like John Mearsheimer and Barry Posen have argued for a retrenchment of U.S. commitments, a logic that Elbridge Colby adapts into a "Strategy of Denial" against China. The current literature on South Korea rarely situates the Seoul debate within this overarching conflict, overlooking the fact that the U.S. response to a nuclear South Korea is not pre-determined but contingent on which of these strategic schools prevails.

Consequently, the specific works of Vipin Narang and Elbridge Colby are often cited independently as policy prescriptions, rather than as representatives of these deep-seated theoretical traditions. Narang's arguments against South Korean nuclearization are not merely policy preferences; they are grounded in the academic literature on the "stability-instability paradox" and the systemic risks of regional nuclear cascades. Similarly, Colby's openness to burden-sharing reflects structural realist concerns regarding the balance of power and resource scarcity in a multi-theater conflict. By failing to engage with the theoretical foundations of these two strategists, current studies risk interpreting their debate as a temporary policy disagreement rather than as a structural fissure in hegemonic logic.

This research undertakes a crucial analytical inversion to address this gap. It reframes the question from "What should Seoul do?" to "What does the debate in Seoul reveal about the fractured state of American grand strategy?" Instead of treating the South Korean nuclear debate as a dependent variable, it re-conceptualizes it as an epiphenomenon of deeper divisions within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. By focusing on the schism between the nonproliferationist logic championed by the Narang school and the burden-sharing realism of the Colby school, this study provides the missing link between regional security studies and U.S. grand strategy scholarship.

10) Kristensen and Norris, "A history of US nuclear weapons in South Korea."

11) Ferguson, "How South Korea Could Acquire and Deploy Nuclear Weapons."

12) Hughes, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons."

Theoretical Framework: Competing Strategic Logics in U.S. Grand Strategy

Foundations of U.S. Strategic Thought: Institutionalism vs. Realism

The first perspective, Liberal Institutionalism, posits that international cooperation is both possible and sustainable despite anarchy through the creation of regimes and norms. Theorists such as Robert Keohane and G. John Ikenberry argue that institutions reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, creating "sticky" rules that bind states together.¹³ In this view, U.S. hegemony is legitimate and durable precisely because it is built on a rules-based order—exemplified by the NPT—rather than merely on coercion. The stability of the international system depends on maintaining these institutions; allowing key norms to erode for short-term gains is seen as undermining the very foundation of American power.

Conversely, Structural Realism, particularly the Offensive Realism articulated by scholars like John Mearsheimer, views the international system as a ruthless arena of security competition where states must maximize their relative power to ensure survival. From this perspective, institutions are merely reflections of the underlying distribution of power and have no independent effect on state behavior when vital interests are at stake. Realists argue that alliances are temporary conveniences formed to balance against threatening concentrations of power, rather than permanent moral communities. Therefore, when the distribution of power shifts—as seen with the rise of China—strategies must adapt ruthlessly, discarding obsolete norms that constrain a state's ability to balance against the primary threat.

This theoretical dichotomy shapes the modern debate on grand strategy. Proponents of "Deep Engagement" or "Liberal Hegemony" align with the institutionalist view, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the global order and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons as a key stabilizing factor. In contrast, proponents of "Restraint" or "Offshore Balancing" adopt the realist approach, arguing that the U.S. must reduce peripheral commitments and prioritize resource conservation to counter peer competitors. Narang and Colby serve as the contemporary operationalizers of these abstract theoretical traditions, applying them to the critical dilemma of the Korean Peninsula.

To understand the diverging recommendations of Narang and Colby, it is essential to look beyond their immediate policy proposals and examine the underlying strategic logics they embody. Their debate represents a contemporary iteration of a long-standing tension in U.S. grand strategy between Liberal Institutionalism (emphasizing nonproliferation norms) and Realism (emphasizing power balancing).

13) See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 85–109; and G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 50–79.

The Logic of Nonproliferation Primacy (The Narang School)

Vipin Narang's arguments are deeply embedded in the logic of "Nonproliferation Primacy," a school of thought that has dominated U.S. policy since the Cold War. In his seminal book, *Seeking the Bomb*, Narang develops a typology of proliferation strategies—hedging, sprinting, sheltered pursuit, and hiding—to explain how states seek to acquire nuclear weapons.¹⁴ His concern is that a South Korean "sprint" for the bomb would not be an isolated event. It would fatally undermine the very inhibition strategies, particularly U.S. security guarantees, that prevent other regional actors like Japan from moving beyond a "hedging" posture. This could trigger a "proliferation cascade," leading to the collapse of the NPT regime in Asia. This perspective, shared by scholars like Scott Sagan and Francis Gavin, views the spread of nuclear weapons as the most significant threat to global stability.¹⁵ The central premise is that an increase in the number of nuclear states raises the likelihood of accidental wars, miscalculation, and unauthorized use of nuclear weapons—a concept referred to by Sagan as the "limits of safety."

Supporters of this perspective argue that the NPT regime is not just a treaty but a structural mechanism of U.S. hegemony. By limiting the number of nuclear-armed states, the U.S. maintains a monopoly on supreme violence within the Western bloc, thereby retaining significant leverage over its allies. This "grand bargain" of extended deterrence involves trading American protection for allied non-proliferation. Narang builds upon this idea, asserting that allowing allies like South Korea to develop nuclear capabilities would not achieve "burden-sharing" but rather result in a "burden-shift" in a perilous manner, potentially triggering a chain reaction that could destabilize the entire U.S.-led order by prompting countries such as Japan and Taiwan to pursue their own nuclear weapons. Thus, proponents of this view contend that preserving the integrity of the nonproliferation regime justifies the high cost of extended deterrence.

The Logic of Denial and Realist Prioritization (The Colby School)

Elbridge Colby represents a resurgence of "Offensive Realism" and "Restraint" in the context of alliance management. Colby's framework, outlined in *The Strategy of Denial*, operates under a distinctly realist logic.¹⁶ He argues that

14) Vipin Narang, *Seeking the Bomb: Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

15) See Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), especially chap. 3, "Strategies of Inhibition."

16) Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

the primary threat to U.S. interests is no longer the breakdown of a global regime but a direct military challenge posed by a peer competitor: China.

Drawing from the realist tradition of scholars like John Mearsheimer and Barry Posen, this school views the international system as anarchic, where the distribution of power is the primary determinant of stability.¹⁷⁾ However, Colby departs from pure isolationism by advocating for a forward defense strategy focused singularly on preventing Chinese hegemony in Asia, which he terms the “Strategy of Denial.”

The core logic here revolves around “resource scarcity.” Unlike the post-Cold War era of unipolarity, the U.S. no longer possesses the resources to uphold every norm and defend every ally simultaneously. Therefore, a ruthless prioritization of its interests is necessary. In this framework, the NPT is seen as a “nice-to-have” norm that must be subordinated to the “must-have” objective of counterbalancing China. If the U.S. cannot effectively defend both South Korea and Taiwan simultaneously (the primary node), then helping South Korea develop its own defense capabilities—including nuclear weapons—becomes a rational, though risky, adaptation. This school views allies as essential partners in coalitions for balancing against a rising hegemon, rather than as wards to be shielded in order to uphold norms.

The fundamental difference between the two schools of thought, therefore, lies in their hierarchy of national interests. For the Narang perspective, preserving the nonproliferation order is a vital interest; allowing it to collapse in favor of balancing against China would result in a pyrrhic victory. In contrast, for the Colby school, preventing Chinese hegemony is the primary interest; from this standpoint, maintaining nonproliferation norms at the expense of forming a necessary coalition is viewed as strategically detrimental. Thus, this study examines the South Korean nuclear debate not merely as a technical issue of capability, but as a clash between these two strategic hierarchies.

Application of the Integrated Framework

By applying this comparative framework, this study goes beyond a simple comparison of policy options to analyze the competing “hierarchies of interest” within the U.S. strategic community. This approach allows us to interpret conflicting signals from Washington not as incoherence, but as a struggle between two distinct grand strategic logics. When Narang warns of “proliferation cascades,” he speaks to the need for hegemonic stability through institutional maintenance. Conversely, When Colby discusses an “anti-hegemonic coalition,” he refers to the logic of power balancing through capability aggregation. This

17) See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001); and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

framework clarifies that the determining variable for South Korea's nuclear future is not merely its technical capability, but which of these two strategic worldviews ultimately dominates the policymaking apparatus in Washington.

Furthermore, this integrated framework shifts the analysis of South Korea's strategic options. It suggests that Seoul's decision should not be viewed as a binary choice between "autonomy" and "alliance," but rather as a wager on the future trajectory of U.S. grand strategy. If the U.S. reaffirms to Liberal Institutionalism (Narang's perspective), Seoul's pursuit of nuclear weapons would lead to punishment and isolation. On the contrary, if the U.S. shifts toward Offensive Realism (Colby's perspective), Seoul's self-armament may be tacitly welcomed as a necessary measure for burden-sharing. Therefore, understanding the tension between these two strategic logics is essential for rational strategic planning by the South Korean government.

Vipin Narang: The Logic of Hegemonic Inhibition and Structural Stability

Vipin Narang's strategic framework is based on the belief that the nuclear nonproliferation regime is not merely a legal obligation but a critical U.S. national interest vital for maintaining hegemonic stability. His arguments extend beyond simple policy preferences and align with the broader "Nonproliferation Primacy" school, which posits that the spread of nuclear weapons to any new state—even a close ally integrated into the U.S. security architecture—poses an existential threat to the international order. Narang's reasoning builds on his research regarding nuclear postures and regional dynamics, resting on three interconnected theoretical pillars: the structural risk of proliferation cascades, the strategic danger of alliance entrapment, and the operational illusion of responsible proliferation.

The Structural Threat of Proliferation Cascades

IN Narang's theoretical framework, the most significant danger is the potential triggering of a "proliferation cascade" that would fundamentally alter the polarity of the regional system. He warns that a South Korean attempt to acquire nuclear weapons would not be an isolated event; rather, it would represent a systemic tipping point. If South Korea were to develop nuclear capabilities, the pressure on Japan and possibly Taiwan to follow its lead would be immense, leading to a "multipolar nuclear security dilemma" in Northeast Asia.

Faced with the same North Korean threat and an increasingly assertive China, Japan would find it politically impossible to remain a non-nuclear state if South Korea crossed that threshold. Taiwan, in an even more precarious position

regarding Beijing, would experience overwhelming domestic pressure to establish its own deterrent. Such developments would undermine the NPT, which has been a cornerstone of global nonproliferation efforts for over 50 years.¹⁸⁾

Narang emphasizes that the NPT functions as a “hegemonic ordering mechanism.” Its collapse would not be limited to Northeast Asia; if the U.S. permits proliferation by its allies in Asia, it risks losing the moral and political authority to enforce “inhibition strategies” elsewhere. This would likely encourage threshold states in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, to reassess their non-nuclear status. The resulting world—fragmented into numerous competing nuclear dyads—would be catastrophically unstable, characterized by a heightened risk of miscalculation and the erosion of the centralized deterrence management that has shaped the post-Cold War era.

The Logic of Alliance Coercion and Entrapment

A nuclear-armed ally significantly increases the risk of the United States being dragged into a nuclear conflict against its will, a phenomenon described by Narang and other scholars as “entrapment” through “alliance coercion.” Theoretical literature suggests that an ally with its own nuclear deterrent might pursue more aggressive conventional policies, succumbing to the “moral hazard” of believing that its nuclear arsenal (and the support of the U.S. alliance) provides a safety net against existential threats.

This dynamic fundamentally disrupts the “strategy of inhibition” that Francis Gavin argues has been central to U.S. grand strategy: the U.S. provides security primarily to retain veto power over its ally's decision to go to war.¹⁹⁾ Narang points to historical precedents where allies have tried to manipulate the U.S. into conflicts to serve their own parochial interests. A nuclear-armed South Korea, emboldened by its own arsenal, might adopt a “catalytic posture,” intentionally escalating a crisis with North Korea to compel U.S. intervention. In such a scenario, Washington would face a difficult choice: abandon an ally and undermine the credibility of its global alliance network or be drawn into a nuclear conflict it did not initiate. For Narang, nuclear weapons in the hands of an ally do not share the burden of deterrence; instead, they strip the hegemon of its ultimate leverage—the decision regarding the use of nuclear weapons—thereby undermining the command-and-control structure of the alliance.

18) Vipin Narang, “Vipin Narang on the Global Nuclear Landscape: Hype and Reality,” *The Diplomat*, October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/vipin-narang-on-the-global-nuclear-landscape-hype-and-reality/>.

19) Rebecca Davis Gibbons, *The Hegemon's Tool Kit: US Leadership and the Politics of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

The Illusion of a “Responsible” Proliferator and Operational Risks

Narang is quite skeptical of the idea that any new nuclear state can be inherently “responsible.” Proponents of allied proliferation often argue that liberal democracies, like South Korea or Japan, would be far more rational stewards of nuclear weapons than rogue states like North Korea. Narang rejects this “regime-type” optimism and instead focuses on “organizational” and “postural” realities.²⁰⁾

Drawing on organization theory and the “limits of safety” argument, he contends that the pressures from acute nuclear competition create inherent risks of accidents and unauthorized use, regardless of a state's political system. Even a well-intentioned ally could inadvertently trigger a nuclear crisis due to the immense technical challenges of securing a nascent arsenal and the psychological pressures on decision-makers during a “use-it-or-lose-it” scenario.

Moreover, Narang argues that the very existence of a new nuclear power exacerbates the “stability-instability paradox.” North Korea, fearing a shift in the balance of power, might feel compelled to launch a preemptive strike against South Korea's nuclear facilities before they become fully operational. Thus, the pursuit of nuclear weapons could provoke the very war it was meant to prevent, showing that proliferation is a dangerous gamble rather than a stabilizing measure.

Narang's Prescription: Institutionalizing Inhibition through Extended Deterrence

For Narang, the appropriate response is not to abandon the nonproliferation agreement but to strengthen it. This involves enhancing extended deterrence through more visible commitments, deeper consultations with allies, and deploying advanced conventional capabilities to increase the threshold for nuclear use. The goal is to make the U.S. guarantee so credible that allies feel no need to pursue their own nuclear options.

The 2023 Washington Declaration, which established the U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), represents a direct application of this logic. By granting Seoul a formal role in nuclear planning and increasing the visibility of U.S. strategic asset deployments, such as nuclear-armed submarines visiting South Korean ports, Washington aims to alleviate South Korean anxieties and make its independent nuclear pursuit unnecessary. Narang argues that this approach, while requiring sustained investment and attention, is far safer and more sustainable than the alternative of managed proliferation.

20) See Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)

Elbridge Colby: The Logic of Strategic Denial and Realist Burden-Sharing

Elbridge Colby's perspective signifies a significant shift from post-Cold War liberal internationalism to a more realist assessment of the changing global balance of power. Shaped by his pivotal role in crafting the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which formally reoriented U.S. priorities from counter-terrorism to great power competition, Colby argues that the primary existential threat to American interests is a revisionist China seeking regional hegemony. In *The Strategy of Denial*, he advances a framework grounded in the premise that the U.S. is dangerously unprepared for peer conflict and must therefore ruthlessly prioritize its commitments. His argument rests on three theoretically driven contentions: the imperative of resource prioritization under conditions of scarcity, the necessity of a self-reliant anti-hegemonic coalition, and the strategic utility of allied proliferation as an instrument of denial.

The Tyranny of Scarcity and the Hierarchy of Theaters

Colby's argument starts with the concept of "strategic scarcity." He contends that, unlike the unipolar era—when the U.S. could enforce global norms at relatively low cost—Washington now faces a "tyranny of distance and resources." A strategy aimed at denying a Chinese fait accompli against Taiwan—the key node in the first island chain—requires a substantial concentration of U.S. military power in the Western Pacific. Consequently, other commitments, including the defense of the Korean Peninsula, must be prioritized as secondary.²¹⁾

Colby contends that the U.S. is currently experiencing severe "strategic overstretch," as it attempts to maintain primacy in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia simultaneously despite finite resources. This diffusion of power, he argues, invites failure at critical points of competition, making realist prioritization imperative. The defense of Taiwan is therefore paramount: its loss would fundamentally alter the balance of power in Asia, undermine U.S. credibility, and allow China to establish hegemonic control over the region's economic engine. While the Korean Peninsula remains strategically important, it is viewed as a secondary theater. North Korea, despite its nuclear arsenal, does not pose a comparable systemic threat to the global order. As a result, the U.S. must limit its involvement in secondary conflicts to conserve its military resources for more decisive theaters of competition.

21) Colby, *Strategy of Denial*, 45–47.

The Necessity of an Autonomous Anti-Hegemonic Coalition

To effectively counter China without overextending itself, the U.S. must create what Colby refers to as a robust “anti-hegemonic coalition.” This concept extends beyond traditional burden-sharing; it calls for a structural transformation of alliance relationships. Colby advocates for a division of labor where allies take the lead in their own conventional defense (“binding strategy”), while the U.S. acts as a high-end “backstop” rather than being the frontline tripwire.²²⁾ This shift requires allies to take on much larger share of the burden—not just financially, but operationally and strategically.

This shift demands that allies like South Korea and Japan invest significantly in their own A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) capabilities and demonstrate a willingness to take existential risks for their own survival. Colby envisions a network of powerful, autonomous allies capable of independently deterring and, if necessary, defeating regional adversaries like North Korea. This approach allows the U.S. to “pass the buck” of local defense to these local powers, freeing up American naval and air assets to concentrate on the maritime challenge posed by China. In this realist framework, an ally’s value is measured not by its compliance with U.S. norms, but by its contribution to the aggregate power of the balancing coalition.

Allied Proliferation as a Strategic Asset for Denial

Within this logic of “denial” and “resource conservation,” Colby reassesses the utility of allied nuclear armament. Unlike the Narang school, which views proliferation as inherently destabilizing, Colby argues that a nuclear-armed ally could, under specific conditions, be a strategic asset. A South Korea with a secure second-strike capability would create a formidable new dilemma for Beijing, forcing China to spread its attention and military resources across multiple nuclear fronts. This scenario produces a “multi-vector deterrence” problem for China, complicating its calculus regarding regional aggression and reducing the operational burden on U.S. forces.²³⁾

Colby does not advocate for proliferation naïvely; rather, he approaches the issue with “tragic realism.” He views allied nuclear armament as a potentially “lesser evil” compared to the catastrophic failure of deterrence against a peer competitor. He argues that while the risk of regional nuclear war or a cascade

22) Elbridge Colby, “America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan: Being Ready Is the Best Way to Prevent a Fight with China,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-must-prepare-war-over-taiwan>

23) Doug Bandow, “Why South Korea Wants Nuclear Weapons Now More Than Ever,” *Cato Institute Commentary*, March 3 2025, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/why-south-korea-wants-nuclear-weapons-now-more-ever>

effect is real, it must be weighed against the certainty of U.S. defeat if it remains overstretched. His stance involved calculated risk-taking: trusting mature democracies like South Korea with nuclear weapons may be necessary to ensure the survival of the liberal coalition in Asia. Thus, the “normative cost” of breaking the NPT is outweighed by the “strategic gain” of enhancing the coalition’s survivability.

Colby’s Prescription: Transactional Nuclear Realism

Colby asserts that “all options must be on the table,” explicitly challenging the primacy of nonproliferation. He argues that the U.S. should not categorically rule out allied proliferation if it furthers the larger strategic goal of checking Chinese power. This stance implies engaging in honest, transactional discussions with allies about the full spectrum of security options—including indigenous nuclear weapons or nuclear sharing—and being willing to accept outcomes that were previously considered unthinkable.

This prescription marks a fundamental departure from decades of U.S. grand strategy. Colby is prepared to compromise the universality of the NPT regime if doing so strengthens the hard power of the anti-China coalition. He contends that the U.S. has elevated nonproliferation into a strategic dogma, allowing it to function as a constraint on adaptation in an increasingly multipolar world. For Colby, the era of norm-based hegemony has ended; the international system has entered an era of power-based survival, in which maintaining the balance of power must take precedence over adherence to legal frameworks.

Comparative Analysis: A Clash of Strategic Worldviews

The debate between Vipin Narang and Elbridge Colby is often simplified to a technical dispute over the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella or the operational feasibility of South Korean armament. However, as shown in the previous analysis, their disagreement is foundational, representing a clash between two divergent strategic worldviews: Liberal Institutional Stability versus Realist Power Balancing. This section synthesizes their competing perspectives across three critical dimensions: the hierarchy of threats, the function of alliances, and the calculation of risk.

The Hierarchy of Threats: Systemic Entropy vs. Hegemonic Transition

The most significant divergence between the two perspectives lies in how they define the primary existential threat to the United States. For the Narang school, the foremost danger is systemic entropy, which stems from the erosion of the

nonproliferation order. This worldview asserts that the proliferation of nuclear weapons creates a chaotic, multipolar nuclear environment that is inherently prone to miscalculations and accidents. In this view, the NPT regime is seen not merely as a legal framework but as a crucial structural safeguard against this chaos. Consequently, sacrificing the nonproliferation regime to counter a specific rival like China is viewed as a strategic mistake—a “pyrrhic victory” in which the U.S. might successfully check Beijing but ultimately lose the global order it intended to uphold.

In contrast, the Colby school identifies hegemonic transition as the overriding threat. The rise of a revisionist China, capable of dominating Asia, poses a direct challenge to U.S. survival and prosperity that overshadows abstract norms. From this realist perspective, the concept of “strategic scarcity” suggests that the U.S. cannot afford to uphold universal nonproliferation if it comes at the cost of losing its primary theater of influence. Colby views the NPT not as a sacred covenant but as a tool of statecraft that has reached its limits. Thus, clinging to nonproliferation norms at the expense of building a robust coalition against China is regarded as “strategic suicide.”

The Function of Alliances: Control vs. Effectiveness

This divergence in threat perception leads to fundamentally different approach to alliance management. Narang’s framework is deeply rooted in the logic of “hegemonic inhibition.” Here, the utility of an alliance is not just derived from power aggregation but also from the patron’s ability to control the behavior of its allies. Extended deterrence serves a dual purpose: it protects the ally and prevents the ally from acting independently. A nuclear-armed South Korea represents a breakdown of this control mechanism—a “decoupling” of strategic fates that exposes the U.S. to the risk of entrapment without delivering commensurate benefits.

In contrast, Colby’s framework emphasizes “combat effectiveness” and “burden-shifting.” Faced with a peer competitor that has numerical superiority in the theater, the U.S. needs allies that act as genuine force multipliers rather than dependencies. Colby acknowledges that a nuclear-armed ally would be more autonomous and harder to control (leading to a “loss of inhibition”), but he argues that a compliant yet defenseless ally poses a greater liability. In his analysis, the “agency costs” associated with a nuclear South Korea are outweighed by the “deterrence benefits” it contributes to collective defense against China.

The Calculus of Risk: Stability vs. Survival

Ultimately, the two schools offer competing visions of stability. Narang promotes a strategy of Maintenance, aimed at preserving the status quo of the

post-Cold War order through reinforced commitments and institutional adaptations like the NCG. He prioritizes avoiding the “stability-instability paradox,” fearing that allied nuclearization could trigger regional arms races and preemptive wars.

On the other hand, Colby advocates for a strategy of Adaptation, urging a ruthless restructuring of the international order necessary to survive a new era of great power competition. He is willing to accept the risks associated with potential proliferation cascades to avoid the certainty of hegemonic defeat. For Narang, the current strain on alliances is a management challenge to be addressed through reassurance; for Colby, it signals that the old bargain is obsolete and must be renegotiated. Therefore, South Korea faces a choice not only about selecting a weapons system but also about aligning its national destiny with one of these competing visions for America’s future.

<Table 1> Narang vs. Colby

Feature	Vipin Narang (Nonproliferation Primacy)	Elbridge Colby (Strategic Denial)
Primary Threat	Systemic Entropy (Proliferation Cascades)	Hegemonic Transition (Rise of China)
View on NPT	Structural Firewall (Must be preserved)	Tool of Statecraft (Disposable if necessary)
Role of Ally	Protected Dependent (Inhibition)	Force Multiplier (Burden-Sharing)
Nuclear ROK	Destabilizing (Risk of Entrapment)	Asset (Multi-vector Deterrence)
Key Logic	“Stability through Control”	“Stability through Power Balancing”

Applying the Frameworks to the Korean Peninsula: A Structural Collision

The Korean Peninsula serves as a critical empirical test case for the theoretical clash between the Narang and Colby schools. South Korea faces a distinctive and escalating security dilemma at the fault line of U.S. grand strategy: it confronts a nuclear-armed, revisionist North Korea that poses an immediate existential threat, while simultaneously operating in the shadow of an increasingly assertive hegemonic power, China. Evaluating the applicability of the logics of “Strategic Denial” and “Nonproliferation Primacy” in this context reveals that, although both frameworks are theoretically coherent, they face severe limitations when operationalized in the volatile strategic environment of Northeast Asia.

The Colby Framework: The Allure and Peril of "Denial" via Proliferation

Applying Colby's realist logic of "Strategic Denial," the prospect of a nuclear-armed South Korea initially appears to be an effective solution to the issue of U.S. resource scarcity. From this perspective, a robust South Korean nuclear force would serve as a way to shift the burden; it would independently deter North Korea through a localized balance of terror, theoretically freeing U.S. strategic assets from the peninsula to focus on the primary theater in the Taiwan Strait. In addition, it would create a "multi-front dilemma" for China, compelling Beijing to divert military and intelligence resources to counter a new nuclear axis along its border. This aligns seamlessly with Colby's vision of a self-reliant, anti-hegemonic coalition, where South Korea evolves from a security consumer into a formidable "hedgehog" capable of denying regional hegemony without constant U.S. assistance.

The 'Philly Deal' of October 2025 serves as an empirical grounding for this framework. By explicitly conditioning the authorization of the SSN program on the revitalization of U.S. shipyards, Washington has effectively demonstrated that the logic of 'Strategic Denial' prioritizes the aggregation of material capabilities over nonproliferation principles. This transaction validates Colby's central tenet: that in an era of scarcity, the U.S. is willing to tolerate the risks associated with allied proliferation provided it functions as a form of 'industrial burden-sharing' that directly sustains American hard power.

However, this application dangerously underestimates the structural instability inherent in such a strategic transition. While the U.S. has authorized the SSN program, any attempt by South Korea to cross the threshold and proceed with the manufacture of actual nuclear warheads—often referred to as a 'sprint' scenario—would entail catastrophic risks. First, the logic of denial neglects the concept of "transition peril." The gap between a declaration of nuclear intent and the deployment of a credible, survivable arsenal (the "hiatus") would create a window of extreme vulnerability. North Korea, threatened by the prospect of losing its sole strategic advantage, would be under intense pressure to act first, potentially leading to a preemptive conventional or even nuclear strike to prevent Seoul from crossing the nuclear threshold. The leadership in Pyongyang has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to take high risks, and the prospect of a nuclear-armed South Korea could trigger a desperate gamble that ignites the very war Colby seeks to deter.

Second, the realist assumption that a nuclear South Korea would remain a compliant member of an anti-China coalition overlooks the reality of "weaponized interdependence.²⁴⁾" China and Russia would almost certainly impose crippling

24) Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 42–79,

economic and diplomatic sanctions. South Korea’s economy is deeply integrated into global supply chains, and its prosperity hinges on access to international markets. A decision to pursue nuclear weapons would provoke immediate retaliation from Beijing, which could include trade embargoes and investment freezes. The economic repercussions could be catastrophic, potentially outweighing the security benefits of the nuclear arsenal.

Third, Colby’s model assumes a level of U.S. control over a newly nuclear-armed ally that contradicts the realist tenet of state self-interest. Once South Korea possesses its own nuclear deterrent, its strategic calculus may no longer align with Washington’s interests. Emboldened by its arsenal, Seoul might adopt a more confrontational posture toward North Korea or, conversely, seek to accommodate China to avoid economic pressure—potentially decoupling from U.S. strategy entirely. This creates risks of entrapment or neutralization that Narang warns against. The idea of “managed proliferation” is likely a dangerous illusion; history has shown that once a state acquires nuclear weapons, it gains a degree of autonomy that makes it difficult for its patron to exert control.

<Table 2> The Political Economy of the “Philly Bargain²⁵⁾”

Dimension	South Korea Gains (Security)	United States Gains (Economy/Strategy)
Core Asset	Nuclear-Powered Submarines (SSN) & Pyro-processing Capabilities	Revitalization of U.S. Shipbuilding (Construction at Hanwha-Philly Shipyard)
Strategic Logic	Securing “High-Level Latency” (Foundation of Autonomous Deterrence)	“Burden-Dumping” & Industrial Lock-in (Subsidizing the US Defense Base)
Theoretical Meaning	Transition from Passive Reliance to “Dependent Agency”	Shift from Values-based Alliance to “Transactional Realism”

The Narang Framework: The Stability of 'Inhibition' and its Credibility Deficit

In contrast, Narang’s framework of “Nonproliferation Primacy” prioritizes the stability of the existing order. It advocates for strengthening “strategies of inhibition” to prevent the destabilizing effects of proliferation. The 2023 Washington Declaration, which established the U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative

25) This table illustrates the transactional structure of the October 2025 agreement. Unlike traditional alliance bargains rooted in shared values, this deal represents a realist exchange where South Korea trades industrial investment—saving U.S. shipyards—for strategic latency in nuclear propulsion, thereby validating the Colby school’s focus on material capacity over nonproliferation norms.

Group (NCG), is a direct operationalization of this logic. By giving Seoul a seat at the table for nuclear planning and increasing the visibility of U.S. strategic asset deployments, Washington aims to assuage South Korean anxieties through institutional inclusion rather than material proliferation.

This approach offers significant theoretical and practical advantages. It avoids the acute dangers of “transition peril,” maintains the integrity of the NPT regime, and preserves the U.S. monopoly on the decision to use nuclear force, thereby minimizing the risk of entrapment. Additionally, it signals to other allies that the U.S. remains committed to the “grand bargain” of extended deterrence, reinforcing the credibility of the global alliance network. The NCG represents a meaningful institutional innovation, attempting to bind the ally closer to U.S. strategy by offering them a voice without a veto.

However, the Narang framework suffers from a fundamental weakness: a persistent “structural credibility gap.” No amount of institutional consultation can definitively resolve the fear of decoupling—the concern that a U.S. president would sacrifice an American city (like San Francisco) to defend a South Korean one (like Seoul). As North Korea enhances its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities, this doubt shifts from theoretical to existential. While Narang’s strategy avoids the acute dangers of proliferation, it may fail to address the underlying insecurity that drives the nuclear debate in South Korea, leaving the core security dilemma unresolved.

Moreover, the “Maintenance Strategy” advocated by Narang conflicts with the reality of “Strategic Scarcity” identified by Colby. This framework requires sustained, high-level U.S. investment and attention, demanding that Washington maintain a robust military presence, continue to deploy expensive strategic assets, and engage in continuous reassurance efforts. In an era of budget constraints and competing priorities (such as the need to balance against China), there is no guarantee that the U.S. will be willing or able to sustain this level of commitment indefinitely. If U.S. commitment wavers under internal resource pressures, the credibility gap will widen, intensifying systemic pressure for South Korean proliferation despite institutional efforts to prevent it.

Strategic Implications: Beyond the Binary of Dependence and Autonomy

The theoretical divergence between the Narang and Colby schools creates a structural dilemma for South Korea that transcends simple policy choices. The preceding analysis shows that South Korea’s security environment is now defined by the friction between two competing U.S. hegemonic logics: the logic of institutional maintenance (Narang) and the logic of realist adaptation (Colby). If

Seoul strictly adheres to the Narang framework, it risks becoming entrapped in a “credibility trap,” where its security remains dependent on a U.S. commitment that is increasingly questioned by realists who may soon hold power in Washington. Conversely, if it prematurely embraces the Colby logic and moves toward independent nuclear armament (INA), it risks catastrophic isolation and “transition peril” before securing a survivable deterrent.

Therefore, the strategic imperative for South Korea is not to choose one side of this U.S. debate, but to construct a “Dual-Track Strategy (Parallel Autonomous Deterrence, PAD)” that hedges against the uncertainties of both. This requires redefining autonomy not as a binary break from the alliance, but as “dependent agency”—the ability to expand independent capabilities within the permissive boundaries of the alliance structure.

The Limitations of Single-Track Approaches

Existing literature often treats “Deepening Extended Deterrence” (DED) and “Independent Nuclear Armament” (INA) as mutually exclusive pathways. However, the Narang-Colby debate reveals that neither path alone is sufficient.

The Trap of DED:

Relying exclusively on Narang-style institutional mechanisms, such as the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), strengthens political ties but fails to address the material imbalance created by North Korea’s tactical nuclear expansion. This reliance leaves South Korea’s fate entirely dependent on the political will of a U.S. president, a variable that has become increasingly unpredictable.

The Peril of INA:

Pursuing immediate nuclearization, as implied by Colby’s burden-shifting logic, underestimates the “punishment paradox.” While some realists in Washington might tacitly desire a stronger ally, the institutional inertia of the nonproliferation regime would compel the U.S. to sanction South Korea to prevent a global proliferation cascade. The resulting economic shock and security vacuum during this period could have severe consequences.

Synthesizing a Hybrid Model: Parallel Autonomous Deterrence (PAD)

Instead of a binary choice, this analysis proposes a hybrid model termed Parallel Autonomous Deterrence (PAD). This strategy aligns with recent scholarship on “nuclear latency” and “conditional nuclearization,” arguing that South Korea must develop independent capabilities that are compatible with the alliance but can operate autonomously in extreme situations.

Track 1: Institutional Binding (The Narang Track)

Seoul must continue to deepen the institutional structures of the alliance to satisfy the “inhibition” requirements of the Narang school. This involves making the NCG permanent and expanding its scope to include joint planning and execution simulations. By integrating South Korean conventional assets into U.S. nuclear operations (CNI), Seoul can increase its input in nuclear decision-making without violating the NPT. This track maximizes political reassurance and upholds the moral high ground of nonproliferation.

Track 2: Capability Aggregation (The Colby Track)

Simultaneously, Seoul must focus on operationalizing the ‘Philly Bargain’ struck in October 2025. With U.S. authorization for nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) and the corresponding fuel cycle processes now secured, the strategic imperative shifts from ‘acquisition’ to ‘integration.’ To achieve this, Seoul must swiftly commence SSN construction at the Hanwha-owned Philly Shipyard in line with the November Joint Statement of Facts. This industrial integration serves a dual strategic purpose: it physically secures nuclear propulsion technology while creating an irreversible ‘industrial lock-in’ within the U.S. defense supply chain. By embedding its capabilities into the U.S. system, Seoul ensures that this asset directly contributes to the anti-hegemonic coalition, making it politically costly for any future U.S. administration to reverse this authorization.

<Table 3> Parallel Autonomous Deterrence (PAD)

Track	Track 1: Institutional Binding	Track 2: Capability Aggregation
Theoretical Basis	Narang School (Inhibition)	Colby School (Denial)
Objective	Strengthen Political Assurance	Secure Material Latency
Key Mechanism	Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) (Joint Planning & Execution)	The “Philly Bargain” (SSN) (Industrial Integration)
Target Audience	U.S. Institutionalists & NPT Regime	U.S. Realists & Anti-China Coalition
Strategic Goal	Prevent Decoupling	Hedge against Abandonment

Securing Autonomy amidst Hegemonic Flux

Finally, South Korea must navigate the complex relationship between these two American schools of thought. The debate in Washington is fluid; the dominance of the Narang school today may give way to the Colby school tomorrow, depending on the outcome of U.S. elections.

Seoul's diplomacy should be agile. When engaging with a U.S. administration focused on norms (Narang style), Seoul should emphasize its commitment to the NPT and the NCG. Conversely, when dealing with an administration focused on power balancing (Colby style), Seoul should highlight its willingness to shoulder the burden of regional defense and its potential role as a "force multiplier" against China.

Ultimately, the goal of the PAD strategy is to acquire the option to decide. By securing both institutional commitments and material latency, South Korea transforms itself from a passive dependent variable into an active strategic player, preparing for a future where the U.S. nuclear umbrella remains strong while also hedging against the possibility of U.S. retrenchment.

Conclusion

This study began with a critical question: What does the intensifying debate over South Korea's nuclear option reveal about the current state of American grand strategy? The analysis confirms that the divergence between Vipin Narang and Elbridge Colby is not merely a technical dispute over the credibility of extended deterrence but rather a symptom of a profound structural schism within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. This debate highlights that the hegemonic power is in a period of volatile transition, oscillating between the inertia of its post-Cold War order and the imperatives of a new era of great power competition.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that two distinct hegemonic logics are now in direct competition. The "Logic of Nonproliferation Primacy," represented by the Narang school, seeks to sustain U.S. centralized leadership by upholding "strategies of inhibition." It views the NPT regime as a vital structural interest and considers allied proliferation a source of "systemic entropy" that must be contained to prevent global instability. In contrast, the "Logic of Strategic Denial," represented by the Colby school, aims to restructure the burden of hegemony to adapt to "strategic scarcity." This approach prioritizes the balance of power against China above all else, viewing allied proliferation as a potential "asset" for creating an anti-hegemonic coalition. This perspective treats capable allies as a form of strategic burden-sharing, enabling the U.S. to focus its finite resources on primary competition with China. The U.S. decision in October 2025 to authorize South Korea's SSN program marks the first empirical manifestation of this logic,

confirming that Washington has begun to prioritize the 'effectiveness' of the anti-China coalition over the 'norms' of the nonproliferation regime. While both schools aim to maximize U.S. interests, their methodologies are fundamentally opposed: one prioritizes control and norms, while the other prioritizes effectiveness and survival.

For South Korea, this fluidity in hegemony suggests that the "nuclear option" is fundamentally a political-economic calculus shaped by U.S. strategic choices. The analysis reaffirms that South Korea's fate is closely linked to which of these two schools prevails in Washington. A victory for the Narang school implies continued dependency but stability, while a victory for the Colby school implies greater autonomy but higher risk.

Therefore, this study concludes that South Korea must redefine its strategic autonomy beyond the binary of "alliance" versus "independence." The volatility of U.S. politics necessitates a "Dual-Track Strategy (Parallel Autonomous Deterrence)" that hedges against uncertainty. South Korea must simultaneously deepen institutional binding (NCG) to satisfy liberal internationalists and secure the material capabilities for independent deterrence (latency) to satisfy realists. This approach allows Seoul to cultivate "dependent agency"—maximizing its leverage within the alliance while preparing the groundwork to stand alone if the hegemonic order falters.

Ultimately, the Korean Peninsula remains the primary testing ground for the durability of the global nonproliferation regime. Future research should move beyond static comparisons of military capabilities to explore the dynamic interplay between great power strategy and middle power agency. Specifically, further exploration is needed into how middle powers like South Korea can utilize "weaponized interdependence" in the economic realm to mitigate the risks of security abandonment. As the U.S. grapples with the costs of hegemony, South Korea must achieve strategic clarity to ensure that its national survival depends not solely on the benevolence of a changing patron, but on its own capacity for autonomous decision-making.

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Armistice, If You Can Keep It: Lessons from the Korean War Armistice Framework for Russia-Ukraine War Negotiations

Jongeun Lee, Hanbyeol Sohn

Abstract

Is the Korean War Armistice an applicable model for the contemporary Russia-Ukraine War? This article examines the key components of the Korean Armistice framework and its enforcement, evaluating whether its achievements and limitations provide useful lessons for current negotiations regarding the Russia-Ukraine War. The article argues that contemporary negotiators can draw three key insights from the long-enduring Korean Armistice. First, until the Russia-Ukraine War reaches a stage where both countries are prepared to suspend military conflict, armistice talks will likely remain stalled. Second, any eventual agreement on an armistice will differ significantly from the Korean War's framework, particularly concerning security assurance and oversight bodies. Third, the negotiations surrounding the Russia-Ukraine War will face a similar diplomatic dilemma and trade-offs: whether to settle for a cease-fire that "freezes" the conflict without resolving it or to strive for a comprehensive, concrete roadmap for a permanent peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine.

Keywords: *Russia-Ukraine War, Korean War, Armistice, Peace Settlement, International Security*

Introduction

On 16 May 2025, Russia and Ukraine held their first direct negotiations since April 2022, when the early war negotiations were suspended.¹⁾ Pressured by the U.S. Trump administration to quickly end the war, the Russian and Ukrainian delegations met in Istanbul, Turkey. The resumed talks, however, failed to bridge the significant gap between the two sides. While negotiations stalled, military conflict continued. The Trump administration's latest effort to promote its 28-point peace plan also faced obstacles, with both Ukraine and Russia rejecting key components of the proposal.²⁾

Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine War, scholars and policymakers have debated over the validity of comparing it to the Korean War. Proponents of the comparison argue that the Russia-Ukraine War is a protracted warfare where a decisive military victory is neither realistic nor strategically desirable.³⁾ To end the largest conventional warfare in Europe since the end of WWII, they recommend for a Korean War-style armistice as a practical or “least bad” outcome.

In contrast, others argue against drawing parallels between the two wars.⁴⁾ First, the Korean War was a proxy war for the Soviet Union, whereas Russia acts as the primary warring actor in the Russia-Ukraine War. Second, while the United States and the UN Command (UNC) fought alongside South Korea, the United States and NATO have refrained from direct combat operations in Ukraine, leaving Ukrainian forces (albeit with Western support) to confront Russia alone. Third, the formal parties to the Korean Armistice were military commands—such as the UN Command (which had operational control over South Korea's military), North Korea's Korean Patriotic Army (KPA), and China's Chinese Patriotic Volunteers (CPV)—whereas any potential agreement in the Russia-Ukraine context would require a political resolution between the governments of both sovereign states.

These differences in geostrategic and military contexts will likely lead to substantial divergences between a future Russia-Ukraine War settlement and the Korean Armistice. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of the two wars can still

1) Paul Sonne, Safak Timur, and Maria Varenikova, “Peace Talks Between Russia and Ukraine Stop After Short Meeting,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-peace-talks.html>

2) Helen Regan and Nina Subkhanberdina, “Russia-US talks on Ukraine peace deal end without breakthrough, Putin aide says,” December 2, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/02/europe/russia-ukraine-putin-us-witkoff-talks-intl-hnk>

3) See Freedman 2022, Landen 2022, Rachman 2022, Graham 2023, Kluth 2023, Malkasian 2023, Radchenko 2023, Nye 2024, Thomas 2024, French 2025, Popescu 2025

4) See Carpenter 2023, Feffer 2023, Goldstein 2023, Noh 2023, Smith 2023, Yi 2023, Bryen 2025, Zagorodnyuk 2025

yield valuable insights; both involve negotiating similar contentious issues and navigating anxieties regarding post-war outcome. Thus, the Korean Armistice framework serves as a useful reference for contemporary policymakers and scholars conceptualizing a settlement framework for the Russia-Ukraine War.

This paper addresses two key questions regarding the comparison between the Korean Armistice and ongoing negotiations related to the Russia-Ukraine War conflict. First, what were the key components of the Korean armistice framework, and how might they apply to the current Russia-Ukraine war negotiations? Second, how was the Korean armistice enforced after its signing, and what lessons can be drawn for a future settlement regarding the Russia-Ukraine war? By providing a comparative analysis of the establishment and enforcement of the Korean Armistice, this study aims to present relevant lessons for the prospective armistice regime and its implementation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Literature Review

As wars and conflicts have been recurring features of human civilization, many scholarly works have analyzed their causes and escalation, as well as the contexts in which adversarial countries may negotiate settlements to end their wars. Warring parties often seek a negotiated settlement when faced with the risks of prolonged war or potential defeat.⁵⁾ Several studies adopt a rationalist approach to examine the primary motives of countries for accepting peace treaties or armistices.

Stymied in a prolonged, mutually “hurting stalemate,” countries may make a rational calculation to avoid futile losses.⁶⁾ They may pursue a temporary ceasefire to recuperate their losses and prepare for potential future conflicts. Alternatively, a war settlement can serve as a “signpost” toward permanent peace, creating a more conducive environment for a long-term diplomatic resolution to the root causes of conflicts.⁷⁾ External pressure, specifically from outside actors, can also incentivize countries to settle their wars.⁸⁾

Negotiating a war settlement often presents multiple challenges. James Fearon identifies three key obstacles to suspending military conflict: information disagreement, commitment problems, and issue indivisibility.⁹⁾ Other scholarly

5) See Levie 1956, Smith 1995, Bercovitch and Gartner, 2006, Akebo 2016, Bara 2021, Clayton Nathan and Wiehler, 2021.

6) Dan, Reiter. *How Wars End*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

7) See Smith 1995, Smith 2003, Darby and Mac Ginty 2008, Tonge 2014, Wallenstein 2015, Ramsbotham Woodhouse and Miall 2016, Bara 2021

8) See Smith 1995, Werner and Yuen 2005

9) James D. Fearon “Rationalist Explanations for War.” *International Organization* 49, no. 3

works highlight internal constraints on conflict actors that may hinder the signing of a war settlement.¹⁰⁾ A study by the U.S.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which analyzed data from 1946 to 2021 compiled by Uppsala University, found that while half of interstate wars lasted less than a year, those extending beyond one year often continued for over a decade on average.¹¹⁾ Another study observed that conflicts are likely to persist while negotiation talks are in progress, such as during the Korean War, whose negotiations spanned two years and involved over five hundred meetings.¹²⁾

Even if a settlement is achieved, there may be challenges to its enforcement. Factors that complicate maintaining an armistice or peace agreement include the temptation to defect, uncertainty about actions and motives, and the risk of accidental violence. A conflict actor might perceive a new opportunity for military victory by renegeing on the armistice.¹³⁾ Mutual suspicion regarding each other's intentions and actions may prompt former adversaries to take preemptive actions against each other. Furthermore, an unforeseen event could trigger small-scale violence that provokes disproportionate responses, escalating into broader conflict and renewed hostilities.¹⁴⁾ Suzanne Werner and Amy Yuan analyze that a prematurely imposed, externally enforced war settlement may be more difficult to sustain.¹⁵⁾ If a conflict has been primarily halted due to external pressure, a decline in the enforcement capabilities of third party actors can incentivize warring actors to re-engage in hostilities.

Other scholars offer policy recommendations to improve the likelihood of maintaining a war settlement.¹⁶⁾ Establishing a demarcation line and a demilitarized zone, which would spatially separate adversarial combatants, along with monitoring by international peacekeepers, could reduce the risk of accidental conflicts and mitigate commitment problems. Security guarantees from third-party actors and establishment of dispute resolution mechanisms can lower the "cost of cooperation" and increase the "cost of defection" for participants in an armistice.¹⁷⁾

(1995): 379–414.

10) See Smith 1995; Sticher, 2021

11) Benjamin Jensen, "How Does It End? What Past Wars Tell Us about How to Save Ukraine," *CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies)*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-does-it-end-what-past-wars-tell-us-about-how-save-ukraine>

12) Samuel Charap. "A Pathway to Peace in Ukraine: Trump Needs a Realistic Game Plan, Strong Incentives, and Patience." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/pathway-peace-ukraine>.

13) Reiter, *How Wars End*.

14) Caludia Wiehler. "Deciding on the Tit for the Tat: Decision Making in the Wake of Ceasefire Violations." *International Peacekeeping* 28, no. 3 (2021): 416–43.

15) Werner, Suzanne, and Amy Yuen. "Making and Keeping Peace." *International Organization* 59, no. 2 (2005): 261–92.

16) See Piller 1983, Fortna 2004, Iyer and Mitchell 2007

Korean War Armistice: Establishment and Enforcement

Armistice Negotiations in Context

The institutional framework of the Korean Armistice resulted from three years of negotiation, compromise, and recalibration across military and political channels.¹⁸⁾ Talks began on 10 July 1951, after the battlefield stabilized near the 38th parallel (the pre-war border), and both sides recognized that a swift resolution on battlefield was unlikely.¹⁹⁾

The armistice talks encountered gridlocks, particularly over two issues: the military demarcation line and the repatriation of prisoners of war. The United Nations Command (UNC) insisted on the voluntary repatriation of prisoners of war (POWs) due to concerns that forced returns would generate negative publicity, whereas the Communist side demanded unconditional repatriation. In addition, neither side was willing to relinquish territory gained during the conflict, making the precise delineation of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) a test of resolve.²⁰⁾

In 1952, the UNC negotiators staged walkouts from the talks three times, signaling their resolve that a cease-fire would not occur without a mutually acceptable solution regarding the MDL and the exchange of POWs. In the meantime, combat operations continued across the battlefield as both sides fought to capture more territory, with the UNC's air force conducting large-scale bombing operations on North Korea to pressure the communist delegation.

The death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin on 5 March 1953 led to a diplomatic breakthrough. The post-Stalin Soviet government ordered its allies to suspend what the former now viewed as an expensive strategic diversion. Subsequently, Beijing and Pyongyang—already staggering under mounting manpower and logistical costs—accepted India's proposal for a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) to screen each POW. The principle of voluntary return was formalized on June 8, removing a major obstacle to negotiations. Both sides also agreed to establish the MDL roughly along the existing battlefield, resulting in minor territorial changes for both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) compared to their pre-war borders.

ROK President Syngman Rhee opposed the armistice, fearing it would prevent

17) Fortna, Virginia Page. "Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace." *International Organization* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 337–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818303572046>

18) William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.15.

19) Institute for Military History Compilation, *The Battle for Hilltops and the Signing of the Armistice* (Seoul: Institute for Military History Compilation, Ministry of National Defense, 2013).

20) Andrew Harrison and Sangbum Shin, (Seoul: The War Memorial of Korea, 2023), <https://archives.warmemo.or.kr:8443/rsrch/detail/rsrchDetail.do?MID=UM00023&archvNttNo=6343>

the reunification of Korea and compromise his country's post-armistice security. In an attempt to obstruct the armistice deal, he unilaterally released more than 27,000 anti-Communist POWs on 18 June 1953.²¹⁾ The Eisenhower administration in the United States, seeking to uphold the armistice while maintaining its alliance with Seoul, brokered a separate deal with Rhee. Under this deal, the ROK would refrain from taking independent military action (with the UNC retaining operational control over ROK forces), even though it would not formally sign the armistice. In return, the United States would sign a Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROK, provide economic and military aid, and pledge diplomatic support for peaceful unification.²²⁾

On 27 July 1953, the UNC, KPA, and CPV formally signed the Korean Armistice. The ROK was not a signatory, although its forces adhered to the terms of the armistice. The agreement required each side to withdraw two kilometers from the established MDL, establishing a 4 km-wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). To monitor the DMZ, two oversight bodies were established: the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). Both institutions faced structural constraints; MAC meetings became largely ineffective after North Korea ceased participation in 1954, while the NNSC's inspection authority was progressively curtailed by both sides. Despite these limitations, the presence of these bodies helped reduce unintentional escalations and offered at least a minimal procedural channel for addressing alleged violations.

The armistice deferred political questions, such as the reunification of the two Koreas, to a later "higher-level conference." This post-armistice conference was held in Geneva from April to July 1954. However, it became deadlocked over the two sides' incompatible proposals regarding inter-Korean elections and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the Korean Peninsula.²³⁾ When the conference adjourned without any resolution, the armistice solidified into the peninsula's default security regime. The failure of the Geneva talks confirmed that the armistice would operate as a conflict-management device in the absence of any viable political settlement.

Institutional Components of the Korean Armistice Regime

After the armistice was signed, the security structure on the Korean Peninsula coalesced around three interlocking institutional pillars.

21) Yeol-soo Kim, *70 Years of the ROK-US Alliance, 140 Years of Korea-US History* (Paju: Beommunsa, 2023), 81-86.

22) The U.S.-ROK Defense treaty, signed on 1 Oct 1953, fulfilled the U.S.'s security guarantees.

23) H. W. Brands, "The Dwight D. Eisenhower Administration, Syngman Rhee, and the 'Other' Geneva Conference of 1954," *Pacific Historical Review* 56, no. 1 (1987): 59-85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638826>

First, the Armistice Agreement established the MDL, which separated adversarial forces and created a 4-kilometre buffer zone (the DMZ).²⁴⁾ The 10-member MAC, composed of senior officers from the UNC and communist forces, could convene at either side's request to log complaints, investigate incidents, and de-escalate crises. The four-nation NNSC—Swedish and Swiss officers nominated by the UNC side and Polish and Czechoslovak officers nominated by the Communist side—was tasked with verifying that neither side violated the armistice.²⁵⁾

Second, the ROK–U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty bolstered the external enforcement of the armistice, providing strategic reassurance to South Korea.²⁶⁾ For Seoul, the treaty (which stipulated a continued U.S. troop presence south of the DMZ) compensated for its non-signature of the armistice and acted as a security guarantee; for Washington, it ensured a long-term military presence on the Asian mainland, aligning with its broader Cold War containment objectives.

Third, the ROK–U.S. Agreed Minutes of May 1954 codified wartime command arrangements: should hostilities resume, operational control of South Korean forces would revert to the United Nations Command.²⁷⁾ This clause enabled integrated planning and fast decision-making in times of crisis, while ensuring that any military response from the ROK remained aligned with U.S. strategy. In exchange, Seoul secured a substantial infusion of American aid—funding for ten new infantry divisions and extensive support for its air and naval forces—cementing a modernized defense posture under a unified command framework.²⁸⁾

In the absence of a formal peace treaty, these three institutional pillars—cease-fire rules, security guarantees, and shared command authority—formed an armistice framework aimed at maintaining military stability and deterring a large-scale conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Enforcing the Armistice

In the first decade following the signing of the Korean Armistice, the cease-fire

24) U.S. National Archives, “Armistice Agreement for the Restoration of the South Korean State (1953),” *Milestone Documents*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/armistice-agreement-restoration-south-korean-state>.

25) Wilson Center Digital Archive, “Korean War Armistice Collection,” *Digital Archive*, available at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/topics/korean-war-armistice> (accessed on August 1, 2025).

26) Gye-dong Kim, *Negotiations on the Conclusion of the ROK–US Mutual Defense Treaty Before and After the Armistice Agreement* (Paju: Kyungin Munhwasa, 2022), 56–57.

27) Sang-chul Cha, “Syngman Rhee and the ROK–U.S. Agreed Minutes,” *Military Studies* 135 (2013): 39–71.

28) Seong-ho Jhe, “International Legal or Diplomatic Implications and Ripple Effects of the Korea–U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 47, no. 3 (2023).

regime demonstrated a resilient—albeit limited—capacity for self-enforcement. This initial phase of implementation involved regular use of the rules and bodies established at Panmunjom.

The most visible indicator of success was the maintenance of the MDL and the DMZ. Guard posts, observation towers, and strict movement controls on both sides physically separated the forces, significantly reducing the risk of accidental clashes.²⁹⁾ Throughout the 1950s, the MAC convened regularly at Panmunjom, bringing senior commanders from both sides together. This created a direct channel for reporting incidents, addressing clashes, and seeking immediate resolutions. The NNSC's inspection teams monitored that neither side deployed new troops or heavy weapons across the cease-fire line. While inspectors had broader access south of the DMZ than north, their presence added a neutral, internationally recognized layer to the armistice regime.³⁰⁾

However, the oversight bodies faced significant enforcement challenges. In 1954, both the ROK and the DPRK restricted NNSC's inspections in their respective zones. Neither the MAC nor the NNSC possessed enforcement powers beyond documenting and protesting violations. As global Cold War tensions intensified, the neutrality of the NNSC's Eastern European inspectors also came under growing scrutiny, leading to a deterioration of mutual trust.

Moreover, an important structural flaw of the armistice framework resurfaced: Article IV of the armistice postponed the question of reunification to a future political conference. However, when the Geneva Political Conference adjourned without reaching a political settlement, the diplomatic path toward reunification was effectively blocked. Syngman Rhee then advocated for armed reunification (“pukchin”), expressing his opposition to a geopolitical status quo that perpetuated Korea's division.³¹⁾ Relying on the U.S.-ROK Agreed Minutes, the Eisenhower administration had to assert its operational control over ROK forces to deter the latter's unilateral military action.³²⁾

The armistice framework would continue to influence security on the peninsula in the following decades. The “double deterrence” provided by the ROK-U.S. Defense Treaty and the Agreed Minutes restrained both Koreas from significantly violating the armistice line.³³⁾ Two favorable events also contributed to a reduced

29) United Nations Command, “1951–1953 Armistice Negotiations,” *United Nations Command*, available at <https://www.unc.mil/History/1951-1953-Armistice-Negotiations/>.

30) Gabriel Jonsson, “The Foundation of the MAC and the NNSC and the First Turbulent Years,” *International Journal of Korea Unification Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 112–128.

31) Syngman Rhee, “Rhee's Letter to Eisenhower,” June 24, 1954, Presidential Letters, Central Files, Presidential Archives (National Archives of Korea), Sejong, South Korea.

32) Sang-chul Cha, “Syngman Rhee and the ROK-U.S. Agreed Minutes,” *Military Studies* 135 (2013): 39–71.

33) This article uses the term “double deterrence” to describe Washington's simultaneous effort to restrain the ROK from escalating the conflict while deterring renewed North Korean

risk of a return to war: the voluntary withdrawal of Chinese forces in 1958 and the ROK's abandonment of the "pukchin" reunification strategy in 1960 following the end of Rhee's presidency.

Nonetheless, the weaknesses of the oversight bodies and unresolved political questions, such as reunification, contributed to ongoing security tensions. Both the ROK and the DPRK claimed sovereignty over the entire Korean Peninsula, maintaining adversarial relations. After a relatively stable first decade of the armistice, the ROK encountered a series of military provocations from the DPRK in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Blue House raid (ROK's presidential residence), gunfire exchanges in the DMZ, a failed assassination attempt on President Park Chung-hee, and the killing of U.S. officers within the DMZ (the "Panmunjom Axe Murder Incident"). Such incidents demonstrated that while the Korean Armistice had suspended large-scale military conflicts, it functioned as a conflict-management mechanism rather than establishing a true peace regime.

Russia-Ukraine War Armistice Negotiation

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a "special military operation" against Ukraine. The first bilateral negotiation talks took place on 28 February 2022, even as Russia continued its military offensive against Ukraine.³⁴⁾ These talks were initially held in Belarus and later in Istanbul, Turkey, where Ukrainian and Russian delegations aimed to find a quick resolution to the conflict.

Russia justified its military actions by claiming it needed to prevent Ukraine's strategic alignment with the West and alleging discrimination against the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.³⁵⁾ Russia's terms for a settlement included Ukraine's acceptance of "strategic neutrality" (a permanent ban on NATO membership), restrictions on Ukraine's military capabilities, and a so-called "denazification" of Ukraine's domestic policies to protect the rights of the Russian speaker.³⁶⁾

In contrast, Ukraine's delegation demanded reassurance regarding Ukraine's security and territorial integrity.³⁷⁾ While expressing a willingness to delay its

aggression—constituting a dual deterrent structure directed both within the alliance and toward the adversary.

34) *Al Jazeera*, "No Breakthrough at Ukraine Talks as Russian Assault Continues," February 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/russia-ukraine-talks-to-continue-putin-aide>

35) TASS, Russian News Agency. "Putin Declares Beginning of Military Operation in Ukraine," February 24, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1409329>

36) TASS, "Putin's aide Medinsky heads Russian delegation at talks with Ukraine held via video link," March 13, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1421303>

37) Official Website of the President of Ukraine, "During the negotiations with Russia, the Ukrainian

pursuit of NATO membership and to pledge neutrality, the Ukrainian delegation demanded robust international reassurance for its post-war security from Russia. In addition, Ukraine called for a political pathway—such as through future referendums—to recover its sovereign territories occupied by Russia, including Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014.³⁸⁾

Despite early negotiations coming close to drafting the Istanbul Communique, they ultimately failed to end the war.³⁹⁾ Various factors contributed to this failure. Ukraine condemned Russia's alleged war crimes against Ukrainian civilians, displayed increased confidence in repelling Russia's military offensive, and faced the West's reluctance to provide post-war security reassurance for Ukraine. At the same time, Russia refused to return its occupied territories. With talks suspended, Ukraine vowed to continue its fight until Russian forces were completely expelled and Russia paid reparations for the war. Russia, in response, intensified its military operations to completely occupy four southern provinces of Ukraine: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, which it formally annexed in the fall of 2022.⁴⁰⁾

As the war prolonged, the scale of military conflict escalated. In the fall of 2024, North Korean forces entered the war, supporting Russia's military operations against Ukraine.⁴¹⁾ Western involvement also expanded, with the gradual lifting of restrictions on military assistance to Ukraine. The West eventually provided tanks, fighter jets, air defense systems, and long-range missiles to Ukraine's forces. Using Western-supplied equipment, along with domestically produced arms and drones, Ukraine launched airstrikes into Russian territory.⁴²⁾

However, despite escalating military efforts, neither side was able to overcome the overall military stalemate. Russia's offensives, despite heavy losses, failed to

delegation officially outlined its proposals for a new system of security guarantees for our country," March 29, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/na-peregovorah-iz-rosiyeyu-ukrayinska-delegaciya-oficijno-pr-73933>.

38) Iryna Balachuk, "Ukraine proposes talks on Crimea over the next 15 years," *Ukrainska Pravda (English)*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/29/7335514/>.

39) Samuel Charap and Sergey Radchenko, "The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine: A Hidden History of Diplomacy That Came Up Short—but Holds Lessons for Future Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine>

40) TASS, "Putin signs laws admitting four new regions to Russia," October 5, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1517929>.

41) Keith Johnson, "Why North Korea Sending Troops to Russia Matters," *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/23/north-korea-troops-russia-war-ukraine-explained/>

42) Pjotr Sauer, "First Thing: Putin Warns US Over Using Long Range Missiles by Signing New Nuclear Doctrine," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/19/putin-warns-us-over-using-long-range-missiles-by-signing-new-nuclear-doctrine-ukraine>

decisively break through Ukraine's defenses. Ukraine also achieved only limited successes in its counteroffensives to reclaim its territories. Efforts such as Ukraine's air and ground operations into Russian territory, along with the West's sanctions on Russia, failed to weaken the Russian government's commitment to the war or to incite significant resistance among Russian citizens.⁴³⁾

As frustrations and fatigue over the prolonged war grew, calls for a diplomatic settlement gained traction in Europe and the United States.⁴⁴⁾ After Donald Trump was re-elected as U.S. President, U.S. foreign policy shifted to pressuring Ukraine and Russia to accept a settlement, contrasting the previous Biden administration's stance, which encouraged Ukraine to lead negotiations.⁴⁵⁾ On 12 February 2025, Trump spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin; this was the first phone call between the two countries' leaders since the war began. Trump also publicly berated Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, during his visit to the White House, warning that Zelensky had "no cards" without U.S. support and pressuring him to resume negotiations with Russia.⁴⁶⁾

The pressure from the Trump administration incentivized both Russia and Ukraine to resume negotiations. The Ukrainian and Russian delegations engaged in several rounds of talks in Istanbul to address humanitarian concerns and discuss terms for a potential settlement. Following the meeting on May 16, the two countries exchanged 1,000 prisoners.⁴⁷⁾ In a subsequent meeting on June 2, an agreement was reached to exchange wounded prisoners, those under the age of 25, and the bodies of fallen soldiers. However, there was no progress on other key issues, as the two countries maintained their divergent positions.⁴⁸⁾

43) Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, "Alternate Reality: How Russian Society Learned to Stop Worrying About the War," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 28, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/alternate-reality-how-russian-society-learned-to-stop-worrying-about-the-war?lang=en>.

44) Blaise Malley, "Freedom Caucus Won't Support Ukraine 'Blank Check.' What's That Mean?" *Responsible Statecraft*, September 14, 2023, available at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/republicans-ukraine-aid/>

45) Matt Berg, "Biden Promises to Follow Ukraine's Lead on Talks, Push Russia on Griner," *Politico*, November 9, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/09/biden-ukraine-griner-russia-00066114>.

46) Peter Baker, "Trump Berates Zelensky in Fiery Exchange at the White House," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/28/us/politics/trump-zelensky-us-ukraine-russia.html> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

47) Veronika Melkozerova, "Russia and Ukraine Agree on 1,000 Prisoner Exchange — but No Ceasefire," *Politico Europe*, May 16, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/istanbul-russia-ukraine-agree-1000-prisoners-exchange-no-ceasefire/> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

48) Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Russia and Ukraine Met Again. Here's Where the Peace Talks Stand," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/23/world/europe/russia-ukraine-peace-talks.html> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

Military Demarcation Line: The Ukrainian delegation proposed using the current line of contact as the military demarcation line for the ceasefire.⁴⁹⁾ This ceasefire would be comprehensive and unconditional, suspending Russia's ground and air operations against Ukraine. Ukraine, in turn, would also cease air strikes on Russia and Russia-occupied territories.

In contrast, the Russian delegation demanded Ukraine's complete withdrawal from the two provinces of the Donbas region (Donetsk, Luhansk), allowing for the total occupation of the area by Russian forces.⁵⁰⁾ However, Russia did concede to "freezing" the existing frontline lines in the other two regions (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia) that it had claimed annexation.

Post-War Security Reassurances: The Ukrainian delegation advocated for robust post-war security assurances to counter any future Russian threats. Ukraine rejected a neutrality status, reaffirming its commitment to political and security alignment with the West.⁵¹⁾ Ukraine intends to continue its pursuit of EU membership and refused to explicitly renounce its pursuit of NATO membership, opting to defer this issue to a future consultation with NATO.⁵²⁾

The Russian delegation, in contrast, called for Ukraine's demilitarization as necessary for ensuring Russia's post-war security. Russia also demanded a permanent ban on Ukraine's NATO membership, along with a prohibition on any foreign military presence in Ukraine. In addition, Russia proposed restrictions on Ukraine's military capabilities, such as limits on the ranges and types of weapons Ukraine could possess. Furthermore, Russia proposed comprehensive negotiations with the West regarding the "root causes" of their dispute, citing NATO's expansion into Central Europe and the Baltic states as a threat to Russia's security.⁵³⁾

49) *Ukrinform*, "Ukraine will not withdraw troops from its own territory – president," May 19, 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3994792-ukraine-will-not-withdraw-troops-from-its-own-territory-president.html>.

50) Tom Balmforth, "Outline Emerges of Putin's Offer to End His War in Ukraine," *Reuters*, August 17, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/outline-emerges-putins-offer-end-his-war-ukraine-2025-08-17/>

51) Mariya Yemets and Alona Mazurenko, "Zelenskyy brands Russian peace memorandum an ultimatum and explains why," *Ukrainska Pravda (English)*, June 4, 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/06/04/7515617/>.

52) Serhiy Sydorenko, "Ukraine will not accept Russia's demand to give up NATO membership, says Ukraine's foreign minister," *Ukrainska Pravda (English)*, April 4, 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/04/04/7506014/>

53) Elena Teslova, "Trump's Push to End Ukraine War: What Terms Could Russia Accept – and Why," *Anadolu Agency*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/trump-s-push-to-end-ukraine-war-what-terms-could-russia-accept-and-why/3451258>.

Policies regarding the Civilian Populace: The Ukrainian delegation criticized Russia's treatment of civilians and children living in occupied territories. Ukraine demanded that Russia release civilian captives and return Ukrainian children who had been relocated to Russia.⁵⁴⁾

In contrast, the Russian delegation criticized Ukraine's domestic policies as hostile toward the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. Russia demanded the protection of Russian cultural and historical sites in Ukraine, recognition of Russian as a dual national language, and lifting of legal restrictions on Orthodox churches affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁵⁾

Territorial, Political Settlement: The Ukrainian delegation, while agreeing to accept the temporary ceasefire line, opposed international recognition of Russia's annexation of its sovereign territory. Instead, Ukraine proposed resolving the political status of Russia-occupied territory in future negotiations, preserving its opportunity for eventual territorial recovery.

The Russian delegation defended its annexation of Ukraine's regions as settled and demanded legal international recognition of Russia's territorial claims.⁵⁶⁾

With the failure to achieve a ceasefire, military conflicts have continued both on the ground and in the air, affecting the battlefield and the interior of both Russia and Ukraine.⁵⁷⁾ The mutual distrust and divergent interests have created challenges in bridging the positions of the two countries.

For Ukraine, Russia's "special military operations" in 2022 were viewed as an extension of its military aggression that began in 2014.⁵⁸⁾ Russia has violated the security assurances it provided to Ukraine in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 2015 Minsk Accord, undermining its credibility. Furthermore, Putin's justification of intervention by referencing the shared historical heritage of the two countries and disputing the legitimacy of Zelensky's government has heightened Ukraine's concern that Russia does not respect its political sovereignty.⁵⁹⁾

54) Fredrik Wesslau and Maksimas Milta, "Putin's Abduction of Ukrainian Children," *Politico Europe*, June 19, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-abduction-ukrainian-children-russia-invasion-war-crime-icc-vladimir-medinsky/>

55) TASS, "Ukraine's Neutrality, Recognition of Donbass, Novorossiya: Key Ideas of Russian Memorandum," June 2, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/1967467>

56) TASS, "Territorial Realities Need to Be Recognized for Lasting Peace in Ukraine — Lavrov," September 3, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/2011249>

57) David Brennan, "Russia Launches 6,400 Drones, Missiles into Ukraine in Record-Breaking Month," *ABC News*, August 1, 2025, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-launches-6400-drones-missiles-ukraine-record-breaking/story?id=124201916>

58) Andrew E. Kramer, "For Many Ukrainians, It's Been a 10-Year War, Not a 2-Year One," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/23/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-maidan-square.html> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

Consequently, Ukraine fears that a war settlement could be exploited by Russia to prepare for future political and military interventions.⁶⁰⁾

On the other hand, despite its military actions aimed at preventing Ukraine's alignment with the West, Russia has experienced an increase in its geopolitical vulnerabilities. Ukraine has solidified its anti-Russian, pro-Western foreign policy stances.⁶¹⁾ Although NATO did not deploy troops to Ukraine, it provided substantial aid and imposed sanctions on Russia, turning the war (from Russia's perspective) into a geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia.⁶²⁾ Russia fears that a ceasefire could leave it in a more geopolitically vulnerable position than it was before the war. Regardless of Ukraine's formal NATO membership, it could function as a de facto NATO ally, receiving support from NATO to strengthen its military capabilities.⁶³⁾

Furthermore, neither Russia nor Ukraine currently has strong incentives to make diplomatic concessions in the peace talks. The Trump administration's critical rhetoric toward Europe regarding "free-riding" on U.S.-provided security, along with its openness to re-engaging with Russia, appears to have encouraged Russia's belief that it could achieve favorable gains from a war settlement. To avoid direct conflict with the Trump administration, Russia has expressed its willingness to participate in negotiation talks.⁶⁴⁾ However, it appears that Russia believes Trump's impatience for a quick settlement will incentivize his administration to exert more pressure on Ukraine and Europe to make concessions to Russia.⁶⁵⁾

On the other hand, Ukraine has reasons to withhold costly concessions as well.

59) Olena Goncharova, "Ukrainian FM Calls Putin's Remarks on Zelensky's Legitimacy 'Absurd,'" *The Kyiv Independent*, February 3, 2025, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/ukrainian-fm-calls-putins-remarks-on-zelenskys-legitimacy-absurd/> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

60) Taryn Kaur Pedler, "President Zelensky Warns Frozen Conflict Could Lead to Vladimir Putin Returning Ukraine Aggression — Footage Shows Wounded Russian Troops Hobbling on Crutches," *Daily Mail*, June 2025, available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14370541/President-Zelensky-warns-frozen-conflict-lead-Vladimir-Putin-returning-Ukraine-aggression-footage-shows-wounded-Russian-troops-hobbling-battle-crutches.html> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

61) Anton Grushetskyi and Volodymyr Paniotto, "How the War in Ukraine Has Changed Ukrainians," *Foreign Affairs*, December 30, 2024, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-war-ukraine-has-changed-ukrainians> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

62) TASS, "Russian Envoy Slams NATO for Waging Proxy War against Moscow," May 3, 2023, available at <https://tass.com/politics/1613135> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

63) *РИА Новосту [Ria Novosti]*, "НАТО де-факто воюет с Россией, заявил Песков [NATO Is De Facto at War with Russia, Peskov Said]," September 15, 2025, <https://ria.ru/20250915/voyna-2042013567.html>

64) Gabriela Pomeroy and James Landale, "Putin Sets Out Conditions for Ukraine Ceasefire," *BBC News*, March 2025, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8100l4rejo>

65) Lawrence D. Freedman, "Why Putin Still Fights," *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-putin-still-fights>.

Ukraine believes that Trump will eventually become frustrated by Russia's unyielding stance and impose more pressure on Moscow to make concessions instead.⁶⁶⁾

In addition, Ukraine's military situation is not yet dire enough to warrant accepting an unfavorable settlement.⁶⁷⁾ Although the prolonged war has caused significant military and economic losses, Ukraine still possesses a capable military for resilient defense against larger Russian forces and can conduct air strikes into Russia.⁶⁸⁾ Despite potential decline in U.S. military support, Ukraine assesses that losses can be partially offset by continued support from European countries, many of which have increased their defense spending since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War.⁶⁹⁾

The Trump administration has repeatedly expressed frustrations with both Ukraine and Russia due to the stalled peace talks.⁷⁰⁾ Trump has threatened to impose additional sanctions on Russia while threatening to suspend support for Ukraine.⁷¹⁾ In November 2025, the Trump administration proposed a 28-point peace plan,⁷²⁾ which aimed to balance the demands of both Ukraine and Russia but was widely perceived as favoring Russia's position. Both countries rejected it,⁷³⁾ with Ukraine requesting revisions. Reports indicate that the Trump administration partially accommodated these requests with a revised 19-point peace plan,⁷⁴⁾

66) Andrew E. Kramer, "Ukraine, Russia and U.S. Weapons: The Latest Under Trump's Agenda," *The New York Times*, July 8, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/08/world/europe/ukraine-russia-us-weapons-trump.html>

67) Dmytro Kuleba, "The Delusions of Peacemaking in Ukraine: Kyiv Won't Compromise on Its Sovereignty Because It Isn't Facing Defeat," *Foreign Affairs*, May 30, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/delusions-peacemaking-ukraine-dmytro-kuleba>

68) Seth G. Jones and Riley McCabe, "Russia's Battlefield Woes in Ukraine," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine>

69) Steven Erlanger, "If America Walks Away From Ukraine, What Will Europe Do?" *The New York Times*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/24/world/europe/europe-ukraine-russia-trump.html>

70) *RFE/RL*, "Trump Again Says 'Very Disappointed' In Putin, Vows To Do 'Something' Soon," September 3, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-putin-zelenskyy-russia-china-sanctions/33519952.html>

71) Tim Lister, "Trump's signals to Zelensky and Europe: Accept this plan or you're on your own," *CNN*, November 23, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/23/europe/zelensky-ukraine-europe-trump-plan-intl>

72) Barak Ravid and Dave Lawler, "Trump's Full 28-Point Ukraine-Russia Peace Plan," *Axios*, November 20, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/11/20/trump-ukraine-peace-plan-28-points-russia>

73) Mansur Mirovalev, "Trump 'Wants Us to Capitulate' to Russia: Ukrainians Aghast at Peace Plan," *Al Jazeera*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/25/trump-wants-us-to-capitulate-to-russia-ukrainians-aghast-at-peace-plan>; The Economist, "Donald Trump's Peace Plan Would Be Bad for Ukraine, Europe and America," November 22, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/11/22/donald-trumps-peace-plan-would-be-bad-for-ukraine-europe-and-america>

which Russia, however, deemed insufficient to meet its objectives.⁷⁵⁾ Consequently, uncertainties continue regarding the eventual resolution of the Russia-Ukraine War.⁷⁶⁾

Applicability of the Korean War Armistice to Russia-Ukraine War Negotiations

The current state of the Russia-Ukraine War can be compared to the period of the Korean War from 1951 to 1953. The conflict has largely developed into attrition, incentivizing the U.S. administration to support a ceasefire. Nevertheless, negotiations are hindered by the incompatible stances of Russia and Ukraine. The war has not yet reached a stage where an armistice is achievable, as a “mutually hurting stalemate” has not sufficiently convinced Russia and Ukraine to suspend the costly conflict.⁷⁷⁾

A comparative analysis of these two conflicts draws on established theories of ceasefire establishment and durability. Scholars of war termination emphasize that ceasefires typically emerge when belligerents reach a mutually hurting stalemate, face credible commitment problems that prevent full political settlements, or seek external security guarantees to stabilize a temporary halt in hostilities. These theoretical insights can clarify the circumstances under which some armistices endure while others collapse, providing a structured analytical lens for examining both the Korean armistice and the prospects for a Russia–Ukraine ceasefire.

In this broader context, a Korean War–style armistice could become applicable if several geostrategic changes occur. First, the United States and Europe must continue to exert pressure on Russia through increased sanctions and the transfer of more sophisticated weapons to Ukraine.⁷⁸⁾ Second, internal changes within Russia—such as a worsening economic recessions or a weakening of Putin’s political leadership—could lead the Russian government to reassess its strategy,

74) Sophie Watson, “Has Trump’s 28-Point Peace Plan Been Knocked Down to 19?” *Kyiv Post*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/64893>

75) *The Moscow Times*, “Compromise on Ukraine Still Elusive After Meeting With U.S. Delegation, Kremlin Says,” December 3, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/12/03/compromise-on-ukraine-still-elusive-after-meeting-with-us-delegation-kremlin-says-a91316>

76) Julia Struck, “Putin Sets Ultimatum for Kyiv: Withdraw or Russia Will ‘Take Territories by Force,’” *Kyiv Post*, November 27, 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/65126>

77) Anne Applebaum, “Nobody in Ukraine Thinks the War Will End Soon,” *The Atlantic*, May 19, 2025, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/05/ukraine-war-russia-trump-putin/682843/> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

78) Elizabeth Crisp, “Graham, Blumenthal Hail Trump’s New Russia Sanctions Plan,” *The Hill*, July 15, 2025, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/5400430-graham-blumenthal-trump-russia-sanctions/> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

shifting from prolonging the war to considering at least a temporary military respite.⁷⁹⁾ If these changes take place, more favorable conditions for an armistice may arise.⁸⁰⁾ However, even if the prospects for an armistice improve, there will likely be key differences in the framework of the armistice between the two wars.

As discussed in the introduction, several structural differences between the two wars are likely to lead to distinct outcomes of the settlement process. First, Russia serves as the primary warring party in the Russia-Ukraine War, which increases the strategic stakes for contemporary Russia in negotiating a settlement. Russia has significant incentives to achieve tangible gains from the war, as well as to secure its own security reassurances.⁸¹⁾ Second, the United States and NATO have refrained from direct military intervention in Ukraine. The lack of an allied military presence creates different dynamics in the U.S.-Ukraine negotiations compared to those of the U.S.-ROK negotiations. The U.S. administration has opposed the deployment of U.S. troops to Ukraine as part of its security assurances. In response, Ukraine has indicated that it seeks aid and weapons, rather than troops deployments for its defense against Russia.⁸²⁾

Third, the Korean Armistice was a military convention signed by military commanders, rather than a formal treaty among states. The ROK, whose military was under the UNC's operational control, was not a signatory to the armistice. Although ROK Foreign Minister Byun Young-tae later participated in the 1954 Geneva Political Conference, the lack of formal signatory status limited the ROK's ability to influence the agenda on reunification and postwar political arrangements. In contrast, any prospective Russia-Ukraine armistice would require direct political agreement between the two sovereign governments. This difference grants Ukraine relatively more negotiating leverage and creates more opportunities for the inclusion of political agreements in the settlement.

The Korean Armistice regime included several key components: a military demarcation line, oversight bodies, POW exchanges, and a political settlement. In

79) Marc R. DeVore and Alexander Mertens, "Russia's War Economy Is Hitting Its Limits," *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/14/russia-war-putin-economy-weapons-production-labor-shortage-demographics/> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

80) The diplomatic breakthrough in the Korean War armistice talks in the spring of 1953 was facilitated by two factors: Stalin's death and the Eisenhower administration's threats to escalate the war into China's territory should the communist delegation refuse to compromise on prisoner exchanges (Rosemary J. Foot, "Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (1988): 92-112.).

81) Lawrence D. Freedman, "Why Putin Still Fights: The Kremlin Will End Its War in Ukraine Only When It Knows That Victory Is Impossible," *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-putin-still-fights>

82) Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "We Stand, We Fight and We Will Win. Because We Are United. Ukraine, America and the Entire Free World" - Address by Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a Joint Meeting of the US Congress," *Official website of the President of Ukraine*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-stoyimo-boremos-i-vigrayemo-bo-mi-razom-ukrayina-amerika-80017>

addition to the armistice text itself, two complementary documents were crucial for maintaining the armistice regime: the U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty and the U.S.-ROK Agreed Minutes. The anticipated Russia-Ukraine War armistice will likely address similar issues, but will differ in the agreed framework between Ukraine and Russia, as well as between Ukraine and the West. The following analysis compares the two armistice frameworks across these five dimensions.

Military demarcation line: The Russia-Ukraine War is expected to mirror the Korean Armistice in this aspect. Neither Russia nor Ukraine is likely to voluntarily relinquish the territory they currently occupy.⁸³⁾ If a mutual stalemate leads to an armistice, the existing front line will likely become the military demarcation line. The demilitarized zone will be established alongside the MDL to create a physical separation between the two adversarial forces.

Oversight bodies: The armistice oversight bodies will need to monitor a demilitarized zone approximately 1,250 km long, five times longer than the DMZ on the Korean Peninsula.⁸⁴⁾ Consequently, more robust enforcement mechanisms will be necessary. One potential solution is the deployment of armed peacekeepers along the MDL. However, Russia is likely to reject European peacekeepers, questioning their impartiality. As an alternative, a UN peacekeeping mission or peacekeepers from Global South countries may be considered.⁸⁵⁾ Additionally, a military armistice commission, comprised of Russian and Ukrainian officials, may be established to maintain regular communication. If Russia and Ukraine only agree to a light supervisory committee, similar to the Korean Armistice's NNSC, the inspectors could face significant constraints in their activities and may struggle to prevent violations of the armistice.⁸⁶⁾

Exchange of POWs: In comparison to the Korean War, this issue may be less

83) Simon Shuster, "Ukraine Says It Won't Give Up Land to Russia," *The Atlantic*, November 27, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/2025/11/ukraine-zelensky-russia-trump-peace-land-red-line/685090/>; Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Indonesian Newspaper Kompas," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, September 3, 2025, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2044621

84) Hanna Arhirova and Barry Hatton, "Ukraine's Front Line Grows Bigger as Russia Shifts Tactics, Top Commander Says," *Associated Press*, September 26, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-commander-battlefield-b5f634be2e87641a2f6bf627fd99b0e3>

85) Charles A. Kupchan, "The Carrot Stick Approach to Ending the War in Ukraine," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 1, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/securing-ukraine-next-steps>.

86) Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Russia and Ukraine Met Again. Here's Where the Peace Talks Stand," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/23/world/europe/russia-ukraine-peace-talks.html>.

controversial in the Russia-Ukraine War, as both countries have already conducted a series of prisoner exchanges. One potential challenge is addressing Ukraine's demand for the return of Ukrainian children who have been relocated to Russia. Fortunately, during the talks on July 23, 2025, Russia showed a willingness to return these children, raising hopes that this issue will not become a serious obstacle to the armistice.

Political Question: It is unlikely that either Ukraine or Russia will formally abandon their territorial claims. Ukraine may partially accommodate Russia's demands concerning the protection of Russian cultural heritage and the rights of Russian-speaking people within Ukraine, while continuing to reinforce its independent national identity. Whether an armistice includes a political framework for resolving territorial disputes and addressing Ukraine's domestic politics will largely depend on the future military situation—specifically, which side holds more leverage. One possibility is that Ukraine and Russia may agree to hold a formal post-armistice political conference without a commitment to a diplomatic resolution. Alternatively, a more concrete roadmap could be agreed upon for addressing political questions. The third possibility is that no procedures are established for a political settlement. In this scenario, Russia would solidify its de facto control over the territories annexed from Ukraine, while Ukraine would continue to strengthen its national identity independent of Russian influence.

Post-Armistice security reassurance: This issue may present the most significant differences between the Korean Armistice and a potential armistice for the Russia-Ukraine War. The Trump administration has opposed Ukraine's admission into NATO and has also been averse to providing robust bilateral security assurances to Ukraine.⁸⁷⁾ As a result, Ukraine is less likely to obtain a formal defense pact similar to the ROK-U.S. Defense Treaty. An alternative proposal for the deployment of European peacekeepers in Ukraine has also faced strong opposition from Russia, though Trump has shown some willingness to consider it.⁸⁸⁾

However, Ukraine may still receive military aid from Europe and the United States.⁸⁹⁾ Since Ukraine has been fighting this war without direct military

87) *Le Monde*, "Trump Says No Security Promises or NATO for Ukraine," February 26, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/united-states/article/2025/02/26/trump-says-no-security-promises-or-nato-for-ukraine_6738609_133.html

88) Clea Caulcutt and Eli Stokols, "Trump Says Putin Will Accept European Peacekeepers in Ukraine," *Politico Europe*, February 24, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-donald-trump-vladimir-putin-european-troops-peacekeeping/>

89) Rajan Menon, "Europe's Best Bet for Protecting Postwar Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/03/19/russia-ukraine-war-trump-nato-united-states-negotiations-military-neutrality/>

involvement from the West, the continuation of foreign aid may still be viewed as significant security reassurance. The extent of aid could, however, be influenced by the armistice negotiations and the military balance. While Russia is unlikely to

<Table> Comparison of the Korean Armistice and the prospective Russia-Ukraine War settlement

	Korean War Armistice Framework	Russia-Ukraine War Settlement Prospects
Military Demarcation Line	Based on existing line of contact; a demilitarized zone established on either side of the MDL	Likely similar, based on existing line of contact; a demilitarized zone established on either side of the MDL
Oversight Bodies	Military Armistice Commission; Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). Limited in enforcement capacity	Possibility 1. Armed peacekeepers (from UN, or neutral nations) with broad enforcement capacity Possibility 2. Supervisory commission (similar to NNSC, MAC) with limited enforcement capacity
POW, Civilian Return	Return of remaining POWs screened by the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC)	Exchanges of POWs conducted by Russia and Ukraine Prospects for resolving the return of Ukrainian children
Political Settlement	Postponed to the post-armistice political conference held in Geneva, which ultimately adjourned without a settlement	Possibility 1. Agreement to hold a post-armistice political conference (with uncertain outcome) to discuss territorial and geopolitical issues Possibility 2: No formal agreement to hold a post-armistice political conference Possibility 3: A more concrete roadmap for a political settlement included in the armistice framework
Post-Armistice Security Reassurances	U.S.-ROK Defense Treaty, U.S.-ROK Agreed Minutes	Unlikely to have explicit security assurances by the U.S. or NATO for Ukraine Alternative 1: European peacekeepers, security reassurance Alternative 2: U.S. and European military aid to Ukraine for self-defense against Russia's threats Alternative 3: Constraints in the scope of U.S. and European aid to Ukraine

achieve its maximalist demands for Ukraine's "demilitarization," more favorable military conditions could enable Russia to gain concessions from the West regarding the types of military equipment supplied to Ukraine, such as limitations on long-range weapons.⁹⁰⁾

The framework for the Russia-Ukraine War armistice will likely establish a similar military demarcation line, which may not fully address the territorial claims of the involved countries. Some form of oversight bodies will also likely be established to enforce the armistice. However, the political settlement and security reassurance may be either more robust or more fragile compared to the Korean War. It may establish a concrete framework for resolving territorial and political disputes, while also addressing the West-Russia geopolitical conflict. Alternatively, the armistice might only include a vague affirmation of a political settlement. To compensate for the absence of an explicit military pact, the United States and Europe may provide an alternative structure for military assistance, bolstering Ukraine's deterrent capabilities. Conversely, if Russia opposes or the West hesitates to support Ukraine, military assistance from the West could be curtailed, placing pressure on Ukraine to accept a more vulnerable post-armistice military situation.

Can the Russia-Ukraine War armistice prevent the return to large-scale military conflict? The four lessons learned from the enforcement of the Korean Armistice provide relevant insights for the enforcement of a future Russia-Ukraine War settlement.

First, a buffer zone is more effective when there is a clear "trip-wire" force present as a deterrent. While the DMZ physically separated the opposing armies, it was the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea that convinced Pyongyang—and Beijing—that any breach would result in retaliation. Similarly, maintaining the armistice in the Russia-Ukraine conflict would be strengthened by a third-party peacekeeping force deployed in the military buffer zone; having a mandate to retaliate against violations of the armistice is crucial for deterrence. Since Ukraine is unlikely to have an explicit defense pact with the U.S. or NATO, the presence of neutral peacekeepers serving as an alternative "trip-wire" should be considered in armistice talks.

Second, supervisory bodies need to have meaningful capacity and leverage. The activities of MAC and the NNSC contributed to some successes in diffusing military tensions that might have otherwise escalated. However, these supervisory bodies had limitations, such as the absence of subpoena power, sanctions, or independent logistics. Their reports eventually became perfunctory, fostering a perception that small-scale violations would not incur meaningful penalties. For

90) Elena Teslova, "Trump's Push to End Ukraine War: What Terms Could Russia Accept – and Why," *Anadolu Agency*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/trump-s-push-to-end-ukraine-war-what-terms-could-russia-accept-and-why/3451258>

the implementations of the Russia-Ukraine armistice to be more effective, oversight bodies should be granted unfettered inspection access, autonomous transportation capabilities, and automatic penalties for violations.

Third, those opposing the settlement tend to respond better to inducements than to exclusion. Rhee's unilateral release of POWs nearly derailed the armistice talks, demonstrating that hardline actors can obstruct diplomatic agreements and that excluding them increases the risk of sabotage. A sustainable settlement for the Russia-Ukraine conflict will likely face similar obstacles in appeasing hard-liners on both sides.⁹¹⁾ Inducements for armistice opponents could include various measures such as reconstruction funds for Ukraine, phased sanctions relief for Russia, and Ukraine's nominal acknowledgement of "denazification." However, there is a challenge in ensuring that placating one side does not provoke backlash from hardliners on the other side. The Eisenhower administration successfully balanced the ROK-U.S. mutual defense pact with the ROK-U.S. Agreed Minutes, placing ROK forces under the UN Command's operational control. This model of "double deterrence" maintained stability on Korean Peninsula and is a crucial approach for achieving a successful armistice in the Russia-Ukraine War.

Fourth, the eventual political settlement is more likely to be successful if it is accompanied by a detailed roadmap from the outset. The Korean Armistice deferred discussions about political unification to a later political conference, which ultimately failed largely due to a lack of a concrete timetable, agenda, or decision rules agreed upon in advance. The 1952 Geneva Conference ended after a prolonged blame-shifting exercise between communist and UNC delegations. However, the ambiguous postponement of political discussions should also be understood in the context of the Eisenhower administration's strategic calculation, which prioritized an immediate end to hostilities over a permanent political settlement.⁹²⁾

Ideally, an armistice that defers political questions—such as territorial sovereignty, Ukraine's national identity and political alignment, and NATO-Russia relations—should set clear dates, formats, and agendas for future negotiations, along with benchmarks for reciprocal, transparent peace-building measures by both sides. Nonetheless, the impasse over political matters poses a challenge for negotiators who must weigh strategic trade-offs: whether to risk

91) Andrew E. Kramer and Maria Varenikova, "Red Line on Crimea Isn't Just Zelensky's. It's Ukraine's," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/24/world/europe/zelensky-crimea-ceasefire-trump.html> (accessed on October 29, 2025); Francesca Ebel, "If Peace Comes, Putin Could Face the Ire of His Most Hard-Line Backers," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2025, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/14/russia-putin-nationalist-ukraine-war-peace/> (accessed on October 29, 2025).

92) Walter Treumann, "Memorandum for the Record," June 9, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Korea*, vol. XV, pt. 2, doc. 900, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d900>

prolonging the war until there is consensus on a detailed political roadmap or to focus narrowly on suspending hostilities, thereby “freezing” the military conflict, despite leaving political questions in uncertain future circumstances.

Conclusion

An armistice, when viewed as a whole, does not equate to permanent peace. The Korean Peninsula has continued to experience cycles of escalating and de-escalating security tensions in the post-armistice period. Although inter-Korean tensions and provocations have not escalated into large-scale conflict, they reveal that “frozen conflicts” can thaw into violent confrontations.

On a more positive note, the Korean Armistice can also be evaluated favorably. The carefully crafted cease-fire—reinforced by alliance commitments and modest monitoring mechanisms—has lasted well beyond the Cold War. Under the armistice framework, the ROK achieved dramatic economic and political transformation. Once an impoverished, war-devastated country in 1953, the ROK is now one of the world’s major advanced economies. This transformation is one of the reasons some policy experts regard a Korean War-style armistice as an acceptable outcome for Ukraine’s future, despite the absence of a formal peace settlement.

Is the Korean Armistice then a relevant model for the contemporary Russia-Ukraine War? Comparing the negotiations of the two wars provides three important insights for today’s policymakers.

First, the Russia-Ukraine War has not yet reached a point where Ukraine and, notably, Russia are ready to make compromises for an armistice.⁹³⁾ Subsequently, despite ultimatums and threats from the Trump administration, negotiations remain gridlocked. Changes in geopolitics or military conflicts could also create a different trajectory for this war compared to the Korean War. Russia hopes that the West’s abandonment will lead to its victory over Ukraine;⁹⁴⁾ conversely, Ukraine hopes for an eventual internal collapse within Russia.⁹⁵⁾

Second, should the Russia-Ukraine War eventually reach a point where the warring parties agree to suspend hostilities based largely on the military status quo, the post-conflict framework will likely differ from that of the Korean War. While some elements of the Korean armistice, such as the U.S.-ROK defense

93) Paul Sonne and Adam Entous, “Taking Inches in Battle, Russia Demands Miles in Talks,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/14/world/europe/russia-ukraine-ceasefire-putin-zelensky-sanctions.html>

94) Gideon Rachman, “Ukraine and the Shadow of Korea,” *Financial Times*, December 12, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a1340286-772c-4c4e-bc4f-c65f636f5e6a>

95) Michael Kimmage, “Russia Has Started Losing the War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, May 19, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/19/russia-military-putin-war-ukraine-nato-europe/>

treaty, may not be available, there may also be alternative mechanisms (such as Ukraine's domestic military and economic capacity, along with Europe's security assistance) to deter a renewal of large-scale military conflict.

Third, negotiations over the Russia-Ukraine War will face a similar dilemma: whether to settle for a ceasefire that merely "freezes" the conflict or to strive for a permanent political settlement. In the Korean War, the decision was made to separate military and political issues, thereby suspending military conflict while postponing and ultimately leaving political conflicts unresolved. Today, the Korean Peninsula continues to grapple with the consequences of this decision, resulting in "no war, yet no peace" in the inter-Korean relations. An armistice between Russia and Ukraine may also lead to similar long-term risks and challenges. While large-scale conflict may be deterred, adversarial relations between the two countries and between Russia and the West could persist, leading to future incidents of provocations and conflicts.

Sustained peace requires far more than the cessation of hostilities. It necessitates continuous diplomacy, humanitarian cooperation, and economic ties that can raise the opportunity cost of renewed conflict and foster mutual trust between former adversaries. Today, the ROK continues to pursue strategies for engagement with the DPRK aimed at transforming the armistice regime into a permanent peace settlement. Whether Russia and Ukraine will ultimately agree to an armistice remains to be seen. Should such a choice be made, Ukraine and Europe should learn from the Korean Armistice to enhance the armistice framework by incorporating parallel political, social, and economic tracks, ensuring that the armistice with Russia is not only maintained but also has the potential to evolve into a lasting peace settlement.

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Maritime State of Exception: An Agambenian Analysis of the ROK Cheonghae Unit Deployment

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Abstract

This study employs Giorgio Agamben's 'State of Exception' theory to analyze the legal and institutional implications of the Republic of Korea's (ROK) Cheonghae Unit deployment. The ROK's traditional maritime security policy has been overly reliant on the threat posed by North Korea, leading to a strategic structural vulnerability. Consequently, the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit, which occur in a legal vacuum (anomie), can be interpreted as a normalization of the state of exception. This research identifies the risk that kidnapped seafarers and deployed military personnel may face in terms of being reduced to the status of 'bare life'—a condition characterized by ambiguous legal protection. This situation prompts an exploration of sustainable policy alternatives. The continued reliance on simple National Assembly consent for the Cheonghae Unit's deployment indicates a trend where what should be considered an exceptional measure has transformed into a regular governmental practice. This mechanism allows sovereign power to maintain maximum discretion without the constraints of law, thereby weakening democratic oversight and increasing the risk of an unintended emergence of the state of exception in response to exogenous structural changes. To mitigate these risks and re-establish the rule of law, there is a structural imperative to enact statutory legislation that clearly defines the purpose, scope, and legal mandate of the Cheonghae Unit. Such legislation would effectively address the legal vacuum and clarify the state's responsibilities, providing a practical solution.

Keywords: *State of Exception, Homo Sacer, Maritime Security, Securitization, Deployment*

I. Introduction

The international community confronts not only traditional security threats, such as territorial disputes between states, but also non-traditional security threats, including piracy, terrorism, and cyber-attacks. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben noted that, during state responses to these threats, the 'State of Exception' can suspend the normal legal order and reduce specific entities to the status of 'Homo Sacer' or bare life. Agamben's insights carry significant implications for analyzing the security situation in the Republic of Korea (ROK), which has historically focused primarily on traditional security threats and the Korean Peninsula issue. Due to the unique circumstance involving military confrontation with North Korea, the ROK's security capabilities have concentrated on the North Korean military threat, treating maritime security beyond the peninsula as a secondary concern. However, maritime security policies and strategies developed under this perception reveal significant inadequacy and fragility when confronted with new types of crises. The current deployment of the Cheonghae Unit exemplifies this issue.

The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit was intended to rescue kidnapped ROK citizens and to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs). However, this action can be viewed as a representation of the State of Exception in the international maritime domain—a scenario resembling a state of sovereign void—where the ROK government asserts its sovereignty while simultaneously defining both pirates and kidnapped citizens as entities stripped of legal protection. This interpretation stems from criticism and concern within ROK society surrounding the decision to deploy the Cheonghae Unit. Some argue that this deployment was made without adequate discussion with the National Assembly or sufficient public consensus, raising concerns that the state is establishing a precedent for the State of Exception by circumventing democratic procedures under the guise of an emergency situation. Furthermore, it suggests that an allied request significantly influenced the decision to deploy, potentially complicating alliance dynamics. This raises worries that such overseas military operations could spark debates over strategic autonomy by creating tension between alliance benefits and the need for self-reliance, which could lead to unintended consequences.

In this context, the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit serves as a valuable case study that can be analyzed through Agamben's concept of the State of Exception—a mechanism in modern politics. It also provides an important framework for examining the tension between sovereign decisions and democratic oversight. Moreover, the domestic criticism and concerns regarding the deployment will offer crucial insights into why the ROK's maritime security discourse remains entrenched in existing practices despite the structural pressures stemming from the Sino-U.S. hegemonic competition, resulting in little progress

in securitization.

From the perspective of securitization theory, the ROK's maritime security remains stalled at the discourse formation stage, with the lack of further progress attributed to concerns about entanglement arising from great power rivalry. This study posits that the fundamental cause of this stagnation is rooted in the securitization mechanism itself, which complicates the formation of a robust maritime security discourse for the ROK. The ROK relies heavily on its existing regime of practices pertaining to maritime security. This regime perpetuates the notion that special measures are unnecessary for ensuring maritime security and that threats can be managed within the existing framework of maritime security policies and strategies. Despite the undeniable structural threat posed by the Sino-U.S. hegemonic competition, the prevailing perception is that the Korean Peninsula issue and its resolution are inherent linked to this rivalry structure, thus necessitating no change to the ROK's existing regime of practices. (Park, 2025: 149) The attempt to address various maritime security issues solely through conventional politics, while avoiding exceptional measures, reveals inherent limitations. This study broadens the research horizon by moving beyond the constraints of the ROK's maritime security, which is typically confined to traditional security threats and the discourse-formation stage of securitization theory, instead examining the fundamental tension between sovereign decisions and legal order through the lens of the State of Exception theory.

Recent global geopolitical changes are elevating the ROK's maritime security concerns into a new dimension, intertwining them with securitization issues and the manifestation of the State of Exception. This shift occurs as previously latent maritime security threats now demand concrete and immediate responses. For instance, China's recent indirect warning (Global Time, 2025/08/18) against the ROK regarding the potential provision of vessel technology to the U.S. illustrates that the ROK's economic and security actions could directly correlate with military threats from China. This suggests that maritime security issues, which involve threats to the ROK's SLOCs and maritime sovereignty, are no longer hypothetical scenarios. Furthermore, the recent U.S. move to grant strategic flexibility to the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) through alliance modernization aims to open up the possibility of its intervention in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Taiwan Strait, moving beyond the traditional framework of the alliance's role in defending the Korean Peninsula. This suggests that the ROK's maritime security policy and strategy can no longer be limited to the Korean Peninsula and may require emergency and exceptional responses within the broader context of Sino-U.S. hegemonic competition.

The intentions of neighboring nations are fundamentally altering the maritime security environment for the ROK. China's constraints and threats are materializing as genuine risks to ROK waters, while the modernization of the

U.S.-ROK alliance is placing the ROK in a State of Exception where it is difficult for the ROK to operate within the traditional security regime of practices. The ROK is at a pivotal moment, requiring a new level of strategic thinking and action to address these complex and varied threats. The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit marks a departure from the behavior typically associated with the ROK's existing security practices. This deployment highlights the need for new strategic insights and alternatives, given that the ROK could become the subject or object of the State of Exception within its maritime security environment.

This study applies the theory of the State of Exception to the case of the Cheonghae Unit deployment, suggesting that the ROK is entering an inevitable State of Exception that diverges from established practices. This shift carries the risk of creating a sovereign control void and may lead to situations reminiscent of Homo Sacer. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions: can the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit be viewed as a manifestation of the State of Exception? Is there potential for entities with a status similar to Homo Sacer to emerge as a result? Furthermore, does this deployment highlight limitations within the ROK's maritime security policy and strategy, necessitating a paradigm shift? Ultimately, the study aims to reassess the significance of the Cheonghae Unit deployment and ensure its sustainability.

To explore these critical question and lay a robust analytical foundation, this study employs a documentary analysis approach, utilizing secondary data to establish the legal, institutional, and political context of multinational force deployments by the ROK. The selection of secondary sources followed a systematic process based on two main criteria:

- Official Authority and Policy Reflection: Priority was given to sources that have official authority and can effectively reflect the government's stance, policy implementation, and the operational status of deployed forces.
- Independent Legal and Societal Analysis: Sources were selected to provide independent, non-governmental, and in-depth analyses of the deployment mechanisms and their societal implications.

II. Agamben's Theory of the State of Exception.

1. The State of Exception

A. Origin of the State of Exception and the Agambenian Turn

As globalization and military interventions by great powers emerge as critical issues in modern politics, the traditional framework of the modern nation-state proves inadequate for explaining these phenomena. In searching for political theories to analyze these realities, scholars have revisited Carl Schmitt's theory of the state.

In *Dictatorship* (1921), Schmitt argues that while dictatorship is a form of the State of Exception, it should not be understood as contrary to the legal state, but rather as an act necessary for the concrete application of the law. (Schmitt, 1989: 137) In *Political Theology* (1922), he asserts that the sovereign is the individual who decides on the exception, claiming that in the State of Exception—a situation of state survival—the sovereign can take essential measures for the common good, public safety, and order. (Schmitt, 2009: 13) Schmitt views the State of Exception as a temporary suspension of the law that fundamentally does not negate the legal order. (Pyo, 2011: 3-5)

In contrast, Agamben, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) and *State of Exception* (2005), defines sovereignty as the capacity to exist outside the legal order and suspend the law's validity. (Agamben, Translated by Park, 2008: 55) He argues that while the State of Exception signifies the suspension of law, it cannot be regarded merely as a factual state or an extralegal measure existing outside the law; rather, it serves as a temporary mechanism to protect and restore the entire legal order. (Agamben, Translated by Kim, 2009: 59-61) Furthermore, Agamben suggests that the State of Exception is not merely a legal concept but a political condition through which modern biopower operates, asserting that in contemporary politics, the State of Exception tends to become the norm. (Benjamin, 2007: 133; Pyo, 2011: 5-6)

According to Agamben, the State of Exception is not the abolition of law but rather a zone of 'anomie' where the force of law is suspended. (Agamben, 2005: 23) This unique space allows the law to exist without exercising legal constraints. In this zone of anomie, the sovereign, positioned outside the law, can wield the power of the law. This process gives rise to *Homo Sacer*—or 'bare life'—a being stripped of legal protection—emerges. (Agamben, 1998: 8) Although *Homo Sacer* cannot be subjected to a sacred offering, it is an entity that can be eliminated without the application of social norms or legal protection, signifying its exclusion from both divine and human law. Agamben interprets the life of *Homo Sacer*, which exists in an ambiguous relationship with the law, as the State of Exception—where the law is suspended in relation to human beings.

Sovereignty, which evolved into biopower in the modern era, continues to impose the conditions of the State of Exception—or bare life—on individuals in contemporary society. Agamben illustrates the pervasive nature of the State of Exception through modern events, notably the U.S. measures following the 9/11 attacks. (Agamben, 2005: 1-7) On October 26, 2001, the U.S. passed the Patriot Act, allowing for the detention of foreign nationals suspected of threatening security. Furthermore, on November 13 of the same year, the Military Commission order was announced, permitting the indefinite detention and referral of foreign nationals accused of involvement in terrorist activities to military commissions. These detainees are not granted the status of prisoners of war under

the Geneva Conventions, nor are they afforded any rights under US criminal law. Their legal rights are completely nullified, rendering them solely as the objects of power and governance, excluded from the legal system. (Myriam, 1999: 279) Agamben argues that this phenomenon arises from the biopower that reduces human life to bare existence, made possible by the State of Exception. (Pyo, 2011: 7)

The modern state is generally constituted and maintained through the State of Exception. This state of exception serves as a fundamental mechanism through which law interacts with life and suspends its own validity to encompass human existence. It represents a precondition for defining the relationship that simultaneously binds the living to the law and abandons them from it. (Lee, 2015: 20) Agamben views modern totalitarianism as a regime that established a lawful civil war through the State of Exception, facilitating the elimination of not only political opponents but also any citizens who could not be integrated into the political system for any reason. (Agamben, 2005: 1-2) From this perspective, he asserts that the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency has become an essential practice of the modern state. He ultimately diagnoses that the State of Exception is increasingly becoming the dominant paradigm of governance in contemporary politics, with provisional, exceptional measures evolving into standard techniques of governance, blurring the line between democracy and totalitarianism. (Agamben, Tranlated by Kim, 2009: 15-16)

B. The Emergence of the State of Exception in Contemporary Politics

Agamben argues that the State of Exception is not merely a temporary suspension for the sake of the legal order, as Schmitt suggested. Instead, in contemporary politics, it has become the rule and a core mechanism through which biopower operates to control citizens' lives. This phenomenon is evident in the re-emergence of bare life devoid of legal protection, representing a state where political life is stripped away, leaving only physical life. The normalization of the State of Exception leads to a realm of disorder, where traditional legal distinctions lose their significance and the executive branch attempts to wield power based on its own force, independent of legal norms. As a result, the 'force-of-law without law' (Agamben, 2005: 37) becomes the central operational mechanism of modern power. Agamben also seeks to explore the possibility of overcoming biopower within this disorder. By viewing the State of Exception as a space without law, he aims to illustrate the potential for dissolving the current regime. He considers disorder as a starting point for seeking a new alternative system, although he does not specify what that alternative might be.

Agamben's somewhat naive conclusion—that the law will eventually vanish or neutralize itself, suggesting that "one day humanity will play with the law as a child plays with a useless object"(Agamben, Tranlated by Kim, 2009: 124)—has

its limitations. The idea of a future “primordial state without law” fails to account for the real political conflicts surrounding the law. Political reality is a space where unpredictable and diverse forms of conflict arise. Only by understanding the State of Exception as such a conflictual domain can we gain a clear perspective to escape the actual situation, where the routinized State of Exception blurs the distinction between democracy and totalitarianism. (Han, 2016: 144-145)

When Agamben's argument is applied to the security context of the Korean Peninsula, it becomes evident that no other place is as deeply governed by the State of Exception or has so fully normalized it. On the Korean Peninsula, the State of Exception has emerged and become routine for the sake of security, under the pretext of security, and through the security apparatuses. The Korean War provided the grounds for extending this State of Exception into an everyday condition. Of course, the modern experience of the State of Exception can be traced back to the total mobilization and colonial rule during the Japanese colonial period, as many of the legal and institutional frameworks, discourses, and socio-technical systems developed after the division were already in place during that time. However, the Korean War served as another crucial inflection point, monopolizing the origin of all social truth constructions. The unparalleled experience of wartime emergencies has acted as an infinite resource, or repository, for the State of Exception. Agamben, in documenting the history of the State of Exception, identifies World War I as the catalyst for the emergence of permanent States of Exception in many belligerent nations. He argues that new legislative acts based on wartime decrees have now become accepted procedure by all political forces. In this light, the Korean War and the subsequent persistence of the Armistice in the ROK can be seen as forming the foundation of a Korean Peninsula-specific State of Exception. This historical experience enables the creation of a governing apparatus centered around security. (Hong, 2012: 78-79)

This Korean Peninsula-specific State of Exception is contextually aligned with the ROK's maritime security securitization issue. This means that when the ROK's existing regime of practices faces comprehensive and diverse security challenges, there is a tendency to respond solely within the framework of the Korean Peninsula-specific State of Exception, relying on wartime decrees and alliances. Furthermore, the military itself can be seen as a small apparatus that normalizes the State of Exception, performing this normalization both within and outside the military space. This is because security exists in an ambiguous border zone between the internal and the external. The military, functioning as a kind of laboratory, temporarily acclimates individuals to the Homo Sacer-like conditions of the State of Exception—specifically, to killing and death—according to command. (Hong, 2012: 84)

Agamben's concept of the State of Exception has become familiar in social discourse. However, this familiarity has led to hasty defense or criticism and a

superficial application of the idea, which prevents a deeper understanding. It is worth noting the puzzling trend of simplistically conflating the figure of Homo Sacer with the image of the socially vulnerable. We must question whether Homo Sacer truly marks a significant shift in critically analyzing and comprehending the existential conditions of these individuals. As Agamben clarifies, the paradigm of the State of Exception is already deeply embedded in historical reality. This concept prompts an epistemological shift, urging us to explore the hidden truths in the history of governance and leads us back to the core of political life, centered on the relationship between law and life.

Therefore, to understand the present through the lens of the State of Exception, one need to turn to history. This historical perspective should encompass a genealogy of governance that involves a complex interplay of multiple nations and regions, rather than focusing solely on a single state. Major historical events—such as the development of the sovereign state, wars, and civil conflicts—acquire a layered relationality under a global perspective through the paradigm of governance represented by the State of Exception. Consequently, the relationship between law and life, rather than individual citizens or states, becomes the fundamental basis for history and political thought. (Kim, Translator's Afterword in Agamben, 2009: 170-171) Acknowledging the academic limitations of merely applying the concept of Homo Sacer to the forms of the socially vulnerable, as noted by Hyang Kim (the translator of State of Exception), this research cautions against reducing Agamben's concept to a mere social critique. Instead, a thorough examination of the paradoxical structure in which Homo Sacer is included through exclusion within the political architecture will be more effective in understanding the underlying dynamics of modern political mechanisms.

2. The Deployment of the Cheonghae Unit and the State of Exception

The prior discussion, drawing on Agamben's thought, explored the notion of Homo Sacer as those excluded from legal protection by sovereign power within the State of Exception. Extending this concept to the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit forces us to confront fundamental questions that lie beneath the surface of this mission. This is because multiple distinct forms of bare life emerge in the exceptional space of Somali waters. The Somali maritime zone can be seen as a State of Exception where normal politics has collapsed due to the rise of piracy. Major global powers make sovereign decisions to deploy military forces in these waters to address the crisis. Paradoxically, however, this decision inadvertently pushes even their own citizens into a state of exception, giving rise to different forms of bare life intertwined within it.

Firstly, pirates represent a clear form of existence under conditions akin to Homo Sacer. Designated as enemies, they are stripped of all legal and political status. Neither classified as prisoners of war under international law nor criminals

entitled to rights within a specific state's judicial system, pirates become the embodiment of bare life. The sovereign power maintains order by excluding them. Secondly, kidnapped seafarers are citizens whom the state is obligated to protect. However, once they are abducted by pirates, they find themselves in a zone beyond the legal and physical reach of their state's sovereignty. Their status shifts from politically-recognized subjects to mere physical lives that must be rescued. Within this framework, the survival of kidnapped seafarers is entirely dependent on the sovereign's power, rather than on the state's legal protection system. Paradoxically, citizens who are protected by law find themselves in conditions of bare life, where their survival hinges on sovereign intervention in a zone of anomie where legal protections are suspended. Lastly, deployed military personnel are agents of sovereign power and subjects who execute the State of Exception. Yet, they, too, are at risk of becoming the objects of the exception. The state authorizes them to engage in combat, thereby placing them outside the boundaries of normal legal order, such as domestic criminal law. If they are killed in an international conflict zone, they face a double risk, making it challenging for them to receive full conventional legal protection, such as the status of prisoners of war under international law. This risk extends not only to actions taken during the rescue of ROK citizens or situations involving direct defense but also to unforeseen circumstances that may arise during operations. While the military can be seen as a means to achieve national goals, the unintended consequences of these actions can complicate the legal landscape further.

Bare life becomes particularly pronounced in the status of pirates and kidnapped seafarers. Pirates exclude themselves from the international legal community through their actions, which means they are not protected by international law and may be eliminated during anti-piracy operations. They exist outside the law, resulting lives that lack legal protection. In contrast, kidnapped seafarers are subjected to the exceptional risks created by pirates. They are removed from normal legal and political protection, facing a crisis where their lives can be extinguished at any moment. Under international law, pirates are classified as *hostis humani generis* (enemies of mankind), permitting all states to take action against them. Conversely, kidnapped seafarers are entitled to international legal and humanitarian protection, which include the right and qualification to be rescued. However, if the state fails to rescue them or if there is a lack of international support, leaving them abandoned, they can unintentionally be reduced to a state of bare life. In such cases, they may be considered right-less entities due to the absence of law and institutions. If the state is unable to rescue kidnapped seafarers or is institutionally unable to enforce their rights, they find themselves in an exceptional condition.

The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit is aimed specifically at rescuing these seafarers, thus reintegrating their lives into the normal legal and political

community. This action illustrates the sovereign state's duty to protect its citizens from being reduced to bare life. The deployment also signifies the state's efforts to uphold the legal and political framework in the international maritime domain, revealing an aspect of modern politics where bare life is either excluded or rescued in this context.

The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit is not merely an ad hoc emergency response; it is a continuous operation justified by the need to address the non-traditional security threat posed by piracy. Ideally, a State of Exception ought to be a temporary measure that suspends the normal order of law during a constitutional crisis. However, the Cheonghae Unit's deployment has been extended annually, relying solely on temporary political act from the National Assembly while lacking a clear domestic legal foundation. This represents a phenomenon where an exceptional measure is elongated as part of normal governance practices. When actions taken outside the law is repeatedly executed, this enables the sovereign to operate within a realm unregulated by legal constraints. This reflects the routinization of the State of Exception that Agamben cautioned against.

The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit was the ROK's sovereign decision to combat piracy and protect national interests. Nevertheless, there remains an underlying exceptional condition, as sovereign power deploys military personnel to eliminate pirates and rescue kidnapped seafarers. This situation can be viewed as a manifestation of the State of Exception involving intertwined entities under varying conditions. To fully comprehend this dynamic, a global perspective is vital, along with a reflection on the relationship between law and life in the context of the Cheonghae Unit's deployment, as well as the exploration of alternatives.

This study aims to go beyond a critical analysis of the Cheonghae Unit's deployment case, seeking a rational mode of sovereign exercise within the inherent disorder and ambiguity of the State of Exception. Much like Agamben's quest for possibilities¹⁾ to overcome bare life, this research strives to identify an alternative governance paradigm whereby the state's sovereign decision—exemplified by the Cheonghae Unit's deployment—can achieve legitimacy without disconnecting from the relationship between law and life. This research ultimately aims to answer this fundamental question about the relationship between the state, law, and life—beyond the heroic narrative of the deployment.

1) The State of Exception is a space where the efficacy of law is suspended, even while the law remains theoretically in force. Within this space resides bare life, which is unprotected by law. However, the State of Exception also represents an interruption of law and a potential for new political practices, as bare life can give rise to a new subjectivity. Thus, the State of Exception is not merely a suspension of the law; it is a point where the relationship between law and life, sovereignty and the governed, can be reconfigured.(Agamben, Translated by Kim, 2009: 15-16)

III. Legal and Institutional Dilemmas of the Cheonghae Unit Deployment

1. Legal and Institutional Discussions

Since it was established in 2009 with the aim of combating Somali piracy, the Cheonghae Unit has played a crucial role in protecting international maritime order and South Korea's national interests. It has garnered significant domestic and international commendation for its successful protection of ROK vessels and crew members in Somali waters. However, despite its considerable military implications and inherent risks, the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit presents a fundamental legal paradox. Critics argue that the deployment lacks a clear and specific legal basis, relying solely on National Assembly consent under the Constitution. This reliance creates a "legal vacuum" (the force-of-law without law) —an operational framework that lacks explicit legal grounding. When National Assembly consent is granted repeatedly, this legal vacuum can become institutionalized, transforming what should be a temporary measure into a potentially permanent exception. Such a situation poses the risk of the State of Exception, where legal protections become ambiguous and kidnapped seafarers or deployed military personnel are inadvertently exposed to unexpected violence.

The relevant statutes classify military deployments into "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations" (UN PKO) and "Multinational Force (MNF) Peacekeeping Operations." (MND, 2024: 2) The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit falls under the MNF category. In contrast to UN PKO, which operates under *the Act on Participation of the Republic of Korea Armed Forces in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (or the UN PKO Act)* enacted in 2009, there is currently no legal framework governing MNF deployments. The ROK government has made various attempts to establish a foundational law for MNF deployments through National Assembly legislation.

Before the *UN PKO Act* was enacted, legislative attempts to create a deployment law began in the National Assembly, as military deployments were solely based on the Constitution. During the 18th National Assembly, a bill was proposed to establish a standing unit for UN PKO deployment (introduced by Rep. Song, Min-soon, 2008), and another bill aimed to address various types of deployments (introduced by Reps. Kim, Jang-soo and Song, Young-sun, 2009). However, both bills failed to pass due to the expiration of the assembly's term. Ultimately, the *UN PKO Act* was approved by the National Assembly on December 29, 2009. However, this Act does not apply to deployments other than UN PKO, including MNF deployments. A separate bill, *the Act on Special Cases concerning the Activities of ROK Armed Forces in the Somali Waters*, was also introduced in 2009 to legalize the operations of the Cheonghae Unit, but it also

lapsed with the expiration of the assembly's term.

Legislative attempts resumed during the 19th National Assembly. *The Act on the Participation of ROK Armed Forces in Overseas Deployment Activities* (proposed by Rep. Song, Young-geun, 2013) was introduced but failed to pass the Legislation and Judiciary Committee and was ultimately scrapped with the expiration of that assembly's term. In the 20th National Assembly, *the Act on the Overseas Deployment Activities of ROK Armed Forces* (proposed by Rep. Kim, Young-woo, 2016) was introduced but also lapsed. Attempts at institutionalization repeatedly failed to clear the legislative threshold. These attempts were thwarted by controversies arising from arguments that the deployment constituted aggressive warfare or risked alliance entanglement, as well as by decisions made within the National Assembly's legislative caucus. These repeated legislative efforts illustrate the challenges of institutionalizing MNF deployment, where aligning the requests of allies, national interests, and public understanding proves exceptionally difficult. The specific reasons for opposing the institutionalization of MNF deployment can be found in the arguments advanced by the following civil society organizations (CSOs):

“The Act on the Participation of ROK Armed Forces in Overseas Deployment Activities appears to be an attempt to legally justify various types of ROK military deployments restricted by the Constitution and international law by significantly expanding the scope of ROK military deployment to include not only 'Multinational Force Deployment' but also 'Deployment for Defense Exchange and Cooperation.' There is no reason to enact a separate law when the *UN PKO Act* is already in place and operational. The enactment of the bill would be an attempt to activate deployment as a routine activity, rather than an exceptional one guaranteed by the Constitution, thus effectively acting as a deployment promotion law. Rather than controlling unconstitutional or legally baseless deployments, it will lead to indiscriminate deployments. The ROK's deployment cases have been political decisions made at the request of the US, irrespective of the UN Charter or international law, or have sparked controversy over legitimacy due to the disparity between the stated external justification and the actual purpose of the deployment. Issues such as a lack of transparency in execution and arbitrary secrecy have been revealed. Above all, the logic of maintaining and strengthening the ROK-US Alliance has been the most significant factor in the main justification for deployment. The primary duty of the military is not to generate national interests but to uphold constitutional values. The concept of 'national interest' is so broad and intangible that the military could be misused according to the political interests of the regime. Deploying the ROK armed forces for an intangible

justification like 'national interest,' rather than for territorial defense and international peacekeeping, will only provide a pretext for further indiscriminate deployment attempts. In the case of the Cheonghae Unit, although the public was only informed of its activities to protect ROK vessels, it is not well known that the Unit is affiliated with the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and operates under US operational control. The US has long demanded cooperation from its allies to maintain maritime dominance over a wider area with its increasingly constrained naval power. While the Cheonghae Unit deployment can be considered a self-defensive deployment for the protection of civilian merchant vessels from pirates, its participation in the US-led combined naval forces cannot be automatically justified.” (NANDA, 2014b: 1-2)

CSOs argue that such deployment extends beyond the military's constitutional duty of national defense and should therefore be pursued cautiously. They assert that the ROK military has historically prioritized military involvement over diplomatic resolution for international disputes, which has led to an increase in deployments; the Cheonghae Unit, active since 2009, exemplifies this trend. CSOs claim that the National Assembly's consent process for these deployments has become merely a formality conducted annually, indicating that a system for democratic oversight of military deployments has not been properly established. Furthermore, they criticize the Moon Jae-in administration for expanding the Cheonghae Unit's operational area to the Strait of Hormuz—an area of intense political and military confrontation between the United States and Iran—without seeking a new authorization from the National Assembly. Consequently, they demand the withdrawal of what they consider an unconstitutional deployment to Somali waters and the rejection of any motion to extend it. (People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, 2020/03/30)

Another concern raised by CSOs is the issue of alliance entanglement. This concern arises because the Cheonghae Unit is deployed to CMF led by the US Fifth Fleet. The US-led CMF was established immediately after the 9/11 attacks to support the US-led War on Terror, undertaking counter-terrorism operations like Operation Iraqi Freedom alongside anti-piracy missions and what are designated as maritime security operations. The ROK is an integral participant in this force, operating under the US military's operational control. In contrast, countries such as China and India have stated that they cannot participate in multinational forces commanded by the US instead of the UN. CSOs argue that while the ROK's deployment to Somali waters can be justified as a self-defensive measure to protect civilian merchant vessels from piracy, participation in the US-led MNF cannot be automatically justified. They contend that deployment for involvement in a US hegemony-aligned multinational force may not encounter military

resistance other than from pirates off the coast of Somalia. However, they point out that resistance from related nations in regions, including the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, or the West Sea, complicates the view of the deployment as one contributing to “collective security” (NANDA, 2014a: 45-47). This interpretation by civil society of the legal and institutional shortcomings surrounding the Cheonghae Unit deployment has sparked political and social debate.

The controversy surrounding military deployment in ROK politics and society has intensified alongside the increase in such activities since the early 1990s, a period marked by significant political and social change in ROK. The election of Kim Dae-jung in 1998 marked a dramatic shift in ROK’s political history from conservative to progressive rule, providing progressive forces with an opportunity to test their foreign policy ideas. Domestic factors seem to have played a major role in shaping the formation process of ROK’s foreign policy during this time. The 2002 presidential election marked the peak of public debate concerning the future of the ROK-US Alliance. Central to this debate was whether the ROK-US relationship mirrored the public desire for greater autonomy in foreign policy, reflecting the ROK’s growing national capabilities. The discussions also related to the appropriate role of the ROK-US alliance, as the public sought greater autonomy in light of the country’s expanded national power. Furthermore, the democratization of ROK not only regulated the leadership of political leaders but also ensured that foreign policy was formulated in alignment with public will and implemented through democratic and transparent means. Policymakers in the democratic government at the time made efforts to gain public support in a transparent manner; otherwise, policy initiatives risked being frustrated or overturned. Therefore, the democratization of ROK, the growth of civil society, and the increase in national capability and autonomy function as key domestic determinants that significantly influence military deployment decisions. (Park, 2024: 73-74) At this point, the active discussions surrounding the Cheonghae Unit deployment—reflecting the domestic political and social landscape—transcends mere differences of opinions on a specific issue. They indicate that public perception and discourse surrounding the policy are diversifying and that the decision-making process for reconciling these views has evolved compared to the past.

2. Progress in Maritime Security Securitization

Park Ju-hyeon proposed two conditions for the securitization of the ROK’s maritime security, drawing on the securitization concepts of the Copenhagen School and the Paris School: “the performative success of the speech act” and “the alignment between the regime of practices and extraordinary politics.”²⁾ These two conditions are influenced by the exogenous structure characterized by the uneven

distribution of national power and the anarchic nature of the international system. Given that the sea is a global public good, stability and order can only be maintained through the presence of a hegemon that enforces laws and rules. The exogenous structure results in a disparity in influence among great powers in the maritime domain, which can either promote or hinder cooperation between states.

Power Transition Theory explains the causal relationship between the stability of the international order and the role of the hegemonic power. (Abramo, 1968: 288-295; Abramo and Jacek, 1980: 51) Specifically, the hegemon establishes the international order by creating rules, agreements, and institutions that serve its national interests and those of its allies. (Park, 2025: 136) According to this theory, the decline of the hegemon and the rise of a challenging power create fissures in the norms and institutions that uphold the existing order. If this occurs in the maritime domain, the continuity of the institutions and agreements that previously maintained maritime security becomes challenging. Therefore, to understand the need for a discourse on maritime security, attention must be paid to the hegemonic power's ability to enforce the maritime order. (Han, 2022: 155-156)

The performative success of the speech act and the alignment between the regime of practices and extraordinary politics represent internal state responses to changes arising from the gap in power between the hegemon and the challenger. (Buzan et al., 1998: 30) Security actors utilize their expertise to detect signs of threats in advance and assess the realities of those threat. Since their goal is to persuade the audience and gain consent before a threat materializes, they strive to construct discourse that enhances the performativity of the speech act. The regime of practices allows extraordinary politics to emerge without the need for constructed discourse, depending on the urgency of the threat or the severity of the triggering event. Therefore, the conditions for securitization must reflect both the need for the performative success of the speech act directed at the audience and the alignment between the regime of practices and extraordinary politics. (Park, 2025: 134)

The alignment between the regime of practices and extraordinary politics becomes possible when a situation arises that cannot be managed within the bounds of existing political grammar. In such cases, the ruling elite may initiate extraordinary measures or exceptionalism and subsequently seek the audience's

2) The Copenhagen School argues that the formation of discourse through “the performativity of the speech act” is central to the process of securitization. They contend that a securitizing actor highlights a specific threat and elevates it into a security discourse, which is then formally decided upon and enacted as policy with the acceptance of the audience. (Buzan et al., 1998: 27) In contrast, the Paris School emphasizes the routines and practices associated with governmental techniques (*gouvernementalité*) as the core of securitization. They claim that securitization represents a form of “extraordinary politics” that gains legitimacy, justification, and consent through a series of “regimes of practice” aligned with governmental authority. (Balzacq and Thierry, 2019: 337-340)

consent, or the audience may demand such actions themselves. This process bypasses the need for constructed discourse, securing legitimacy through legal interpretation or public judgment rather than solely through the performative success of the speech act. (Park, 2025: 137) If an exceptional measure related to the securitization of maritime security falls under extraordinary politics that cannot be handled by existing political frameworks, it cannot be achieved solely through *ex ante* successful speech acts. Unless an unprecedented event is experienced as an *ex post* phenomenon, obtaining the legitimacy, justification, and consent required for extraordinary politics within the regime of practices is difficult. (Buzan et al., 1998: 30) This challenge stems from the ROK's security framework, which is grounded in two core concepts: Korean Peninsula unification and the ROK-U.S. Alliance, both of which constrain ROK's maritime security.

The legal and institutional incompleteness concerning the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit—a situation caught between reality and norm—aligns with the geopolitical argument that the ROK's securitization of maritime security is slow. Maritime security is a broad, territorial concept that encompasses not only traditional threats such as counter-piracy and the protection of SLOCs but also diverse emerging security issues like climate change, environmental pollution, and mass illegal migration. Due to this inclusiveness and diversity, it is challenging to clearly define the specific scope of maritime security. Furthermore, the international environment, particularly the structure of great power, acts as a factor that undermines the performative success of the speech act necessary to elevate maritime security to a core national security agenda.

The ROK's security policy has primarily focused on a defense system aimed at military confrontation with North Korea. Consequently, resources for defense have mostly been directed toward deterring threats to the Korean Peninsula, while the protection of overseas SLOCs and the safeguarding of maritime sovereignty beyond the peninsula have been relatively neglected. The decision and implementation of the Cheonghae Unit deployment highlights a strategic vacuum—unrelated to the North Korean threat—that existed prior to the deployment. When new non-traditional security threats, specifically piracy near the Korean Peninsula, emerged, the ROK lacked an immediate and effective response system to safeguard its vessels and citizens. The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit was a hurried, temporary measure aimed at preventing immediate piracy damage, rather than the result of a long-term, comprehensive maritime security strategy. This indicates that the ROK's maritime security policies and strategies were primarily reactive to immediate threats, lacking a sustainable, long-term framework. Ultimately, the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit exposes the structural vulnerability in the ROK's maritime security policies and strategies, which struggled to address new maritime threats that were not directly associated with the North Korean threat. The slow progress in securitizing maritime security in the

ROK stems from a fundamental strategic imbalance: the discrepancy between a peninsula-centric mindset and the reality of existing maritime threats.

If the securitization of maritime security in the ROK is to include not only the deterrence of war on the Korean Peninsula and the defense of territorial waters, but also the ability to counter threats from surrounding powers and engage in international maritime security activities, then it must align with changes in both the regime of practices and extraordinary politics. In other words, countering surrounding powers and participating in international maritime security requires harmonizing with or overcoming the current regime of practices, which is based on the security concept of Korean Peninsula unification and the delineation of military roles within the ROK-US Alliance. Since this shift necessitates a transformation of the core principles and nature of existing security policy, it must rely not only on the successful articulation of policy goals but also on decisions made amidst the political realities facing policymakers. (Lee, 2014: 145) The frequent coverage of North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations, compared to that of international maritime security, limits the performativity of the speech act. Alignment with extraordinary politics becomes achievable when policymakers recognize that the relationship between the Korean Peninsula issue and maritime concerns cannot be adequately addressed through the existing regime of practices. In this light, the emerging domestic discourse on Alliance Modernization³⁾ can be understood as a cognitive shift that promotes the securitization of the ROK's maritime security. The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit exemplifies a practical realization of this higher-level discourse.

3. Sustainability of the Cheonghae Unit Deployment

Since 2006, as piracy surged in the waters near Somalia due to the civil war, *the United Nations adopted Security Council Resolution 1838*, calling on member states to deploy naval vessels and aircraft. The Gulf of Aden is a vital transit route for strategic materials, such as crude oil and liquefied natural gas, with approximately 300 ROK vessels passing through each year, making security in this region essential. After obtaining consent from the National Assembly, the ROK government first deployed the Cheonghae Unit to Somali waters in March 2009. As of 2025, the Cheonghae Unit consists of one destroyer, one helicopter, and a contingent of up to 320 personnel, all tasked with ensuring the safety of

3) Alliance Modernization refers to the evolution of the US-led alliance system, initiated during the Cold War, as it undergoes functional and political adjustments to respond to changing strategic environments. This concept has been notable in U.S. strategic discussions since the 2000s, particularly within the context of the Indo-Pacific, as 'alliance modernization' or 'building 21st-century-style alliances.' In the ROK, this discourse serves as a policy justification for the realignment of the ROK-U.S. alliance, defense burden sharing, and regional involvement. (Campbell et al., 2018: 60-70; Ratner et al., 2020: 21-33)

ROK vessels, protecting ROK citizens in emergencies, and participating in maritime security operations conducted by the CMF and the European Union.

The Cheonghae Unit successfully conducted “Operation Dawn in the Gulf of Aden” in January 2011 to rescue a ROK vessel and its crew from pirates. It also carried out the “Operation for Evacuation of ROK Citizens from Libya” in March 2011 and August 2014 to safely withdraw ROK citizens from Libya. In April 2015, the Unit established a shipboard embassy for the first time to facilitate the safe evacuation of South Korean citizens in Yemen and to protect those who remained. These efforts are credited with a decline in pirate activity in the deployment area after it peaked in 2011. Meanwhile, as tensions escalated in the Middle East, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz, starting in May 2019, the South Korean government temporarily expanded the Cheonghae Unit's deployment area from the Gulf of Aden to cover the entire Persian Gulf, including the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz, starting in January 2020. This decision aimed to ensure the free navigation of South Korean citizens and vessels. The Strait of Hormuz is a strategically vital area, accounting for over 70% of the ROK's crude oil imports and seeing approximately 900 annual transits by ROK vessels. The Cheonghae Unit conducts its mission independently in the expanded deployment area, cooperating with the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) when necessary for the protection of citizens and vessels. In addition, it has undertaken operations to protect ROK citizens in the Middle East and West African waters. Notably, in January 2021, the Unit was deployed to the Strait of Hormuz to assist in the release of the ROK vessel MT Hankuk Chemi, which had been detained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. In June 2021, when five ROK crew members were kidnapped by pirates in the Gulf of Guinea, West Africa, the Unit was dispatched to provide rescue support. (MND, 2022: 202)

Since its initial Deployment to the Gulf of Aden, Somalia, in March 2009, the Cheonghae Unit has been tasked with responding to the threat of piracy against ROK vessels and supporting the safe passage of merchant ships. The Cheonghae Unit has received positive recognition for its contributions to international maritime safety cooperation. In particular, the successful rescue of hostages, including Captain Seok Hae-gyun during the 2011 Samho Jewelry hijacking incident, vividly illustrated the inherent risks and realities of the Unit's operations. This successful mission garnered strong domestic public support, which solidified the legitimacy of the deployment. The repeated execution of this deployment, bolstered by public support, has led to a normalization of the legal vacuum surrounding it.⁴⁾

4) As all states possess universal jurisdiction over piracy, military forces may engage in anti-piracy operations under emergency circumstances. However, the arrest and legal processing of pirates logically fall under the responsibilities of institutions vested with criminal judicial authority. Although South Korea, along with other nations, currently dispatches military units to combat

The legal basis for the Cheonghae Unit's deployment rests on the National Assembly's consent, primarily derived from *Article 60 (2) and Article 5 (1) of the Constitution*. The practice of extending the deployment through annual National Assembly consent has become routine. Since its initial deployment in 2009, the Cheonghae Unit's deployment has never been rejected by the National Assembly. (National Assembly Information System, 2009-2024) The Constitutional Court also reinforced the legal rationale for multinational force deployment with its 2010 ruling regarding the Iraq deployment⁵⁾, stating that *the Constitution* itself can serve as the legal basis for such actions. However, this interpretation raises concerns that the principle of the rule of law—requiring a statutory basis—is being circumvented through a constitutional exception. Despite procedural legitimacy secured through the Constitution and National Assembly consent, the issue lies in the lack of specific legal grounds and principles for deployment, as well as in incomplete regulations governing cooperation, institutional maintenance, and legal status guarantees for the government. This state precisely aligns with the notion of an “anomie zone,” where the force of law is suspended, as pointed out by Agamben. The repetitive and continuous nature of the Cheonghae Unit's deployment suggests that this constitutional exception is evolving into a form of permanent governance rather than a temporary measure.

Currently, the legal basis for military deployment is governed by the National Assembly's consent regulation under *Article 60 (2) of the Constitution*. Additionally, *Article 5 (1)* states that “deployment of the Armed Forces for aggressive warfare is prohibited,” which can be interpreted as a negative prohibition, indicating that aggressive warfare is generally not considered as a legitimate reason for deployment. While *the Constitution* establishes the basic framework allowing the military to be sent overseas, the specific circumstances, methods, and reasoning for such deployments must be determined by laws enacted by the legislature, not by *the Constitution* itself. However, there is currently no law

Somali piracy at the request of the UN, a review is necessary to consider whether the military should continue in this role in the future. (Korean Institute of Criminology, 2012: 54-55) This situation highlights that the Cheonghae Unit's mission operates within a fundamentally ambiguous zone, blurring the lines between military action and civilian jurisdiction. Consequently, existing legal frameworks—such as international maritime law, international humanitarian law, and human rights law—primarily focus on regulating the normal discipline and responsibilities associated with military deployment activities. However, Agamben's theory of the State of Exception provides a more powerful explanatory framework for understanding the fundamental legal inadequacies inherent in the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit.

5) The Constitutional Court of Korea ruled to dismiss the case, asserting that the decision to deploy the Armed Forces abroad is a highly political determination (an act of state) related to national defense and foreign affairs. Therefore, the Court held that it must respect the judgments made by the President and the National Assembly, and that it would be inappropriate for the Constitutional Court to review such matters solely based on judicial standards. (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2003Heon-Ma71, 2004/04/29)

that provides the detailed rules necessary for deployments like those of the Cheonghae Unit. In short, while *the Constitution* sets the minimum standard, there remains a significant legal gap. Before debating the constitutionality of any existing law, it is essential to address this legal vacuum. Thus, it is the natural right and responsibility of the legislature to create procedural processes that enable the National Assembly to appropriately evaluate these matters. (NANDA, 2014b: 10)

The enactment of a legal basis for deployment signifies a commitment to ensuring that military activities are subject to legitimate democratic control by the citizens. This is understood as part of the legislative actions by the National Assembly, which serves as the representative body of the people, to oversee the activities of the executive branch. Historically, various forms of military deployment have occurred since the year 2000. While deployments before 2000 were often temporary and based on special circumstances, those after 2000 have evolved into a format that requires continuous operational management due to their diverse and long-term nature. This reality highlights the limitations of temporary control through annual extension consent and underscores the need for permanent legal measures to manage peacetime operations effectively.

Despite carrying out specialized missions overseas, deployed military personnel currently hold the same legal status as those stationed domestically. There is also an absence of legislative provisions to address the inadequacies of this legal status, which does not account for the unique circumstances of overseas deployment. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a statute that outlines minimum protective measures, ensuring a basic safeguard for the legal status of deployed soldiers. This approach aims to rectify the existing unreasonableness rather than to confer special privileges, as deployment serves a national purpose. It is important to emphasize that the establishment of a legal basis for deployment is not intended to enhance the executive branch's enforcement capabilities but rather to empower the National Assembly to hold the executive branch accountable on behalf of the citizens. In other words, the law should be enacted in response to the needs of the National Assembly rather than the demands of the government. The government has acknowledged this perspective and has repeatedly sought to establish related statutes through legislator-initiated bills.

In *the Motion for Extension of Deployment of ROK Armed Forces to the Somali Waters* in 2019, the ROK government expanded the operational area from the existing “Gulf of Aden, Somalia” to include the Gulf of Oman, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Persian Gulf starting in January 2020. This decision was justified by the condition “including directed waters for the protection of ROK citizens in emergencies” specified in the motion. At that time, there was controversy over whether additional consent from the National Assembly was required for the expansion of the deployment area. However, the government's stance was that “the legal basis for expanding the scope of operation in an emergency is included in the

motion for extension of deployment passed in 2011.” This situation has led to a phenomenon where a temporary exception solidifies into a permanent status, allowing the sovereign's power, which lies outside the legal order, to become entrenched. The government initially decided to expand the deployment area to respond to urgent and exceptional situations involving the “safe escort of vessels, support for safe navigation, and protection of citizens.” This action resembles the manifestation of the State of Exception, where a part of the rule of law is temporarily suspended as a necessary response to an emergency. However, as this temporary measure continues without termination years later, it risks becoming an entrenched, regular norm. The National Assembly also consented to the expansion of the operational area in emergencies through the motion for extension, thereby effectively delegating the decision to the government's discretion. The executive branch's normalization of emergency measures, coupled with the National Assembly's relaxed control, embodies the exceptional condition identified by Agamben.⁶⁾ Some public opinion argues that adding a mission of a different nature—responding to threats in the Strait of Hormuz—compared to the existing mission of countering piracy in Somalia constitutes a new type of deployment necessitating separate National Assembly consent. Although the government justifies the deployment based on the existing “in case of emergency” clause, this creates further legal and institutional controversy and leads to another legal vacuum where the boundaries of law become ambiguous.

The condition “including directed waters for the protection of ROK citizens in emergencies” was first added to *the Motion for Extension of Deployment of ROK Armed Forces to the Somali Waters* in 2011. At that time, the government explained that “as the missions and roles of overseas deployed units are expanding due to the rapidly changing Middle East situation, it was explicitly stipulated that the Cheonghae Unit's mission scope includes activities to protect citizens in case of emergency.” The government clarified that this was “reflected to resolve the controversy over whether the evacuation of ROK residents from Libya in March 2011, due to political instability, was included in the Cheonghae Unit's mission scope.” (NANDA, 2011b: 14-15) Conversely, while the National Assembly acknowledged the need for the Cheonghae Unit to engage in citizen protection activities outside the Gulf of Aden, Somalia, it reviewed the motion and determined that expanding the operational scope to include “directed waters” for

6) Agamben views the reduced role of the legislature due to the expanding functions of the executive branch as a defining feature of the State of Exception. He interprets the phenomenon of governmental role expansion not merely as an overextension of the executive, but as a blurring of the distinctions among the government, the legislature, and the judiciary. In extreme cases, within a chaotic State of Exception, governmental power may disregard legislation and exercise authority through its own decrees. A modern example of this can be seen in various governmental measures that restrict established laws under the guise of counter-terrorism. (Pyo, 2011: 8)

the mission of “protecting ROK citizens in emergencies” could blur the boundaries of the Cheonghae Unit's mission and operational area, compromising the intent to limit the mission through National Assembly consent. Therefore, it was assessed that when granting the mission of “protecting ROK citizens in emergencies” to the government (Ministry of National Defense), it was essential to clarify the mission and operational scope, maintain procedural requirements, and mandate reporting relevant details to the National Assembly immediately after mission execution. (NANDA, 2011a: 14) However, the Cheonghae Unit's mission continues without such specific measures or complements.

IV. Manifestation and Future Direction of the Cheonghae Unit Deployment's State of Exception

Agamben's concept of the State of Exception describes a condition where the law is suspended, allowing the sovereign to exercise power without legal constraints. This indicates that the operational environment of the Cheonghae Unit exists in a legal vacuum while also being a site of sovereign authority. The high seas, especially areas plagued by piracy where the Cheonghae Unit operates, are inherently extraterritorial spaces where the legal sovereignty of any single state is difficult to enforce. The government's decision to deploy military forces for operations in these waters, without a clear domestic legal basis, represents an exercise of sovereignty beyond domestic legal control. In this context, the legal status of relevant parties, including pirates, kidnapped seafarers, and deployed military personnel, is on a blurry line between international and domestic law, leading to a situation where legal protections are unclear. These individuals, thrust into such ambiguity and subjected to sovereign power, provide valuable insights for a modern interpretation of “bare life.”

Applying Agamben's thesis to the Cheonghae Unit's deployment reveals that the situation should not be viewed merely as a legal vacuum or legislative failure; it represents an act of sovereignty actively utilizing the State of Exception. This perspective suggests that decisions are made to suspend legal norms based on political judgment, rather than indicating institutional or legal shortcomings behind the deployment. It can even be read as a deliberate choice to maintain maximum policy flexibility, achieved not through the absence of law but by temporarily suspending its application.

The Cheonghae Unit was initially deployed in 2009 as a temporary measure to address the urgent threat of Somali piracy. However, the ongoing nature of this deployment is transforming it into a *de facto* rule. Relying solely on *the Constitution* and National Assembly's consent to sustain this deployment, without specific legislation, may be politically advantageous. If foundational laws

governing deployment were established, they would require clear rules on engagement, legal status, and operational scope, resulting in the state imposing legal constraints on its military operations. Conversely, relying on constitutional consent allows the government maximum discretion free from stringent legal limitations. Moreover, legal ambiguities can serve as a means for the state to evade the risks and responsibilities associated with the deployment. In addition, the National Assembly's consent itself may be perceived merely as a political process that legitimizes the State of Exception rather than fulfilling its role in restoring the rule of law.

As a result, the current maintenance of the Cheonghae Unit creates conditions that lead to an unintended manifestation of the State of Exception, placing kidnapped seafarers and deployed military personnel in a status similar to bare life under exceptional conditions. They face potential threats to their lives while operating in a legal vacuum that lacks clear legal protection. This situation partially corresponds to Agamben's notion of bare life, understood as a form of existence in which the power over life and death is suspended by the sovereign's command. Although not entirely deprived of legal protections, such beings are effectively placed in a state of exception that situates them beyond the ordinary reach of the law. This raises a fundamental question: What obligation does the state have to individuals reduced to bare life in an unintended state of exception? While the state attempts to protect kidnapped seafarers and military personnel, its placement of these individuals in a legal vacuum actually undermines their legal status. This represents contradiction; legal protection and deprivation occur simultaneously through a single sovereign act. Protection offered within a framework of legal incompleteness is uncertain and can be altered at the sovereign's discretion. Therefore, the state must confront how it can genuinely protect lives exposed to legal vulnerabilities and what responsibilities it holds towards those whose legal protections are diminished by its actions.

The routine implementation of a state of exception also presents another significant danger. Even if the deployment of the Cheonghae Unit is deemed successful, relying solely on the National Assembly's consent procedure may perpetuate a legal vacuum, leading the state into unforeseen and dangerous situations. In times of necessity, the state might bypass legislative procedures and exert power under the pretext of a constitutional exception. If the practice of suspending the law for policy flexibility becomes habitual, it undermines the principle of democratic checks and balances, ultimately normalizing the State of Exception as a political regime. Moreover, the current international geopolitical environment, which is unfavorable for South Korea, heightens this risk.

Recent instability in the international order stems from the conflict between challengers to the existing order and those who seek to maintain it. As Henry Kissinger noted, the stability of the international order depends on a consensus

regarding legitimacy between status quo powers and revisionist powers. (Shetler-Jones, 2024) Russia and China are challenging core principles of the existing international order, such as sovereignty and the inviolability of borders. These challenges are evident in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, transcending mere regional disputes and escalating into conflicts with global implications. The involvement of status quo powers, like the United States and Japan, in these situations has turned events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Taiwan issue into a testing ground for the principles of international order. This structural conflict complicates diplomatic compromise and maintains tension between status quo and revisionist powers, particularly in the maritime domain. The US Indo-Pacific maritime strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative illustrate an inevitable collision, resulting in security threats surrounding international SLOCs. Incidents involving threats to navigation, such as those in the Strait of Hormuz between the US and Iran, and the seizure of the ROK vessel MT Hankuk Chemi, highlight the direct connection between maritime security and ROK's national interests.

Furthermore, North Korea has recently shifted its foreign policy. In September 2023, it launched the 'Hero Kim, Kun Ok' submarine, which it claimed was the "first tactical nuclear attack submarine," as well as the first and second 'Choe, Hyon-class' destroyers in April and May 2025. While these destroyers may not be nuclear-armed, the enhancement of North Korea's conventional forces marks a departure from its previous focus solely on nuclear capabilities, given their considerable importance in conventional warfare. Although the immediate military impact of enhancing conventional forces may be limited, the foreign policy implications cannot be overlooked. The strengthening of North Korea's naval power can be seen as a declaration of its expanding role and ambitions beyond the Korean Peninsula. In April 2025, Kim Jong Un stated the goal of building an "ocean-going operation fleet," asserting that North Korea aims "to build the capacity to proactively check the aggression of hostile countries and launch preemptive or final retaliatory strikes in any waters of the world." This statement explicitly indicates that North Korea intends for its military power to be exerted not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in offshore regions. (Cha, 2025: 3-7)

Through its involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war, North Korea has effectively highlighted its role as a source of instability not only in the Korean Peninsula but also on a global scale. It has demonstrated its presence in the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly amid the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. North Korea's declaration of its willingness to extend the operational radius of its military forces beyond the Korean Peninsula suggests that the DPRK-Russia alliance is not confined to the Peninsula but could evolve into a more expansive alliance impacting global dynamics. China must also enhance its China-centric solidarity to counterbalance

the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Cooperation with entities capable of supporting its military or diverting U.S. forces to the Korean Peninsula in the event of conflicts in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait will be essential. This situation could culminate in North Korea being recognized for its strategic value in a way it has not experienced before, thereby emphasizing its role in the region beyond the Korean Peninsula. (Cha, 2025: 8) Considering the implications of North Korea's shift in foreign policy, the future direction of South Korea's foreign policy will become clearer, prompting it to actively explore an expanded role and missions for its alliances beyond the Korean Peninsula. Previously, the ROK was worried about becoming entangled in offshore conflicts due to the expansion of alliance roles and missions, but it must now also consider the risk of abandonment stemming from an overemphasis on the Korean Peninsula.

The increasingly challenging behavior of China and Russia towards the international order is fostering political collusion among revisionist powers. North Korea's rising influence in offshore regions, particularly following the deployment of its troops for Russia, encourages its alignment with these revisionist powers.⁷⁾ This moment calls for the ROK to transcend the limitations of its existing regime of practices—focusing on a security concept aimed at unifying the Korean Peninsula and the military role-sharing in the ROK-U.S. Alliance—to effectively address the securitization dilemma concerning maritime security. Therefore, the ROK must anticipate tensions and conflicts between the status quo and revisionist powers and begin addressing them by confronting the vulnerabilities that arise within the State of Exception during that such confrontations.

If the status quo and revisionist powers manifest a State of Exception in the international community by directly confronting each other, several consequences can be anticipated. First, the international legal order may destabilize. Although powers portray themselves as guardians of international law and norms, they risk blurring legal boundaries by declaring a State of Exception, prioritizing force over law.⁸⁾ Second, double standards could become normalized. Countries may suspend

7) Until now, it would have seemed unlikely for North Korea's involvement to advance the interests of any grouping of nations. However, President Putin sees diplomatic and symbolic value in Kim Jong-un's support for Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. Moreover, North Korea is being studied as a case in point for countries intrigued by shifts in the global order, the perceived decline of U.S. dominance, and the implications of aligning with leading revisionist states such as China and Russia. If Putin is genuinely committed to promoting this alternative order beyond the Ukraine conflict, he may find value in maintaining cooperation with North Korea and will likely not be easily persuaded to abandon Kim Jong-un to please Trump. (Sydney Seller, 2025/04/24)

8) Recently, China has notably emphasized "maritime rights" in its official discourse. The 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal favoring Philippines highlighted that China's threats are no longer manifest in the presence of warships but are evolving into a conceptual challenge to its sovereignty claims over Taiwan and the islands in the South China Sea. By asserting its maritime rights, China seeks to align its diplomatic rationale more closely

laws in particular situations while condemning their rivals for similar legal violations. This contradictory behavior reinforces claims that opponents are also undermining the law for their own purposes, which will be exploited in justification arguments. Finally, domestic political order may weaken. When a State of Exception occurs externally, the restriction of fundamental rights or the concentration of power in a country can be justified under the pretext of security threats.⁹⁾ The ROK is likely to face significant threats in the current exogenous structure, characterized by tension and conflict between the status quo and revisionist powers—particularly pronounced in the maritime domain. Consequently, the ROK may align itself more closely with status quo powers, which heightens the possibility of an unintended emergence of a State of Exception in this process.

Summarizing the discussion so far, <Table 1> illustrates the trajectory of the Cheonghae Unit’s deployment in three phases through the lense of the State of Exception theory. This diagram indicates that the deployment began with the emergence of the State of Exception, evolved into a routine everyday exception,

<Table 1> Trajectory of the Cheonghae Unit Deployment's State of Exception

Phase 1: Manifestation of the State of Exception	Phase 2: Routinization of the Exception	Phase 3: Unintended Manifestation of the State of Exception (Predicted)
<p>Emergency (Somali Piracy) → Sovereign Decision (Initial Deployment) → Legal Vacuum (Reliance on Constitutional Consent) → Anomie Zone (Bare Life Emergence)</p>	<p>Repetitive Extension (Annual Consent) → Normalization (Exceptional Measure as Routine) → Executive Discretion (Hormuz Expansion) → Weakened Democratic Control</p>	<p>Exogenous Structural Change (Status Quo/Revisionist Conflict) → Alliance Entanglement/Abandonment → External Shock (New/Unforeseen Threat) → Involuntary Subject / Object of Exception</p>

with the international order and law, portraying itself as the key player responsible for maintaining regional stability and safeguarding the international order. This suggests that while both the U.S. and China maintain that their actions comply with international law, each side’s conduct nevertheless create instability for the other. (Liu, 2025/05/21)

9) The individual cannot refuse the sovereign’s demands because he perceives the state, the political community, as the fundamental unit of human existence. Since the individual cannot abandon this political community, akin to fate, the political order must be restored, even if it requires mobilizing the State of Exception during a crisis. Consequently, the sovereign is entitled to suspend the law or take any necessary measures to ensure the security of the political community. (Pyo, 2011: 5)

and is projected to reach the stage where the unintended State of Exception is manifested.

The Cheonghae Unit's deployment is justified by humanitarian grounds, including protecting SLOCs, safeguarding ROK citizens, and upholding international responsibilities. However, as Agamben noted, humanitarian justifications can be manipulated to enhance sovereign power, necessitating caution regarding intentions behind the humanitarian discourse. If a sovereign bypasses legal procedures and democratic controls under the guise of benevolence or protection, it may lead to a dangerous configuration of the State of Exception. The pretexts of national interest and citizen protection can override legal debates and delay legislative processes, resulting in the sovereign's arbitrary actions. The sustained deployment of the Cheonghae Unit suggests that the ROK could become either the subject or the object of an unintended manifestation of the State of Exception amid changes in its exogenous environment. This raises a critical question: is the ROK, facing the challenge of maritime security securitization, prepared for another unintended manifestation of the State of Exception, especially given its current struggle to establish an independent maritime security policy and strategy?

Agamben sought a way to overcome "bare life" within the State of Exception, and this study proposes a two-pronged alternative governance paradigm aimed at overcoming the routinization of the Cheonghae Unit deployment and restoring rational sovereignty.

1. Resolution of the Legal Vacuum and Strengthening of Democratic Control

The National Assembly must promptly enact a Foundational Law for Multinational Force Deployment to limit the executive branch's discretion and prevent the routinization of the State of Exception. This law should not only allow for deployment but also focus on restoring democratic checks and balances by explicitly requiring National Assembly consent for any expansion of mission or operational areas. Additionally, it should specify the legal status and protective measures for deployed military personnel. Legislation is essential to ensure that citizens are clearly protected by law.

2. Expansion of the Security Concept and Securing Strategic Alignment

The ROK must break free from the constraints of its current practices and advance the securitization of maritime security. Beyond the broad rhetoric of protecting national interests, policies must explicitly link deployments to a global policy and strategy, aimed at securing strategic autonomy rather than fostering entanglement or abandonment. This approach offers a practical solution to prevent the ROK from being reduced to either the subject or object of an unintended State of Exception amid changes in its exogenous context.

V. Conclusion

Agamben warns that the routinization of the State of Exception can lead to an arbitrary exercise of sovereign power, effectively reducing vulnerable subjects to the status of “bare life” (Homo Sacer). The minimum institutional and practical requirement to address the legal vacuum is either to terminate the State of Exception or to firmly restore the rule of law. Considering the value and effectiveness of the Cheonghae Unit deployment, the substantive solution lies not in terminating the mission but in enacting a statute that clearly defines its legal basis. This is crucial for re-establishing the fundamental principle of the rule of law, thereby protecting citizens and military personnel from arbitrary power.

Key Findings and Implications

The Cheonghae Unit’s deployment serves as a case study illustrating how Agamben’s State of Exception can become a reality in modern governance. The core issue is that the legal State of Exception surrounding this mission has become normalized. The routinization of the exception perpetuates a zone of anomie, which places kidnapped seafarers and deployed military personnel in a legally vulnerable positions, akin to bare life. True protection for these individuals can only be achieved through the robust and unwavering application of the law, rather than its suspension. The discussion surrounding the Cheonghae Unit’s deployment indicates a critical turning point that calls for a reconsideration of the limits of sovereign power and the fundamental importance of upholding the rule of law.

1. The Emergence of Exceptional Condition in Contemporary Politics

Recent events underscore that modern society is deeply influenced by the logic of the State of Exception:

- Gaza Strip: The nearly two-decade-long blockade by Israel, initiated in 2007, exemplifies the routinization of the State of Exception. The residents of the Gaza Strip are treated as a controlled population rather than full citizens of a sovereign state. They face permanent restrictions on fundamental rights like movement and communication due to the exceptional measure of the blockade. This situation creates an environment where Israeli security logic supersedes international legal norms, turning their region into a lawless zone. Consequently, the residents are reduced to humanitarian objects rather than subjects with full legal and political status.

- Detention of ROK Citizens in the United States (on September 4, 2025.): The case of the detained ROK workers under US immigration law illustrates the classic form of the State of Exception: Although the law exists, its enforcement is suspended for these workers, who have lost their legal status to remain in the

country. Their situation reduced them to subjects only of deportation, lacking the rights associated with full citizenship or the protections offered to criminal subjects under penal procedures. This highlights the arbitrary exercise of sovereign power, which can suspend the normal functioning of the law for specific individuals, exposing them as objects of sovereign force.

These examples demonstrate that the manifestation of the State of Exception is not confined to conflict zones; it can also emerge as a significant issue in ordinary, seemingly peaceful settings, posing a potential threat to the normative structures of everyday life.

2. The Legal Insufficiency of the Cheonghae Unit Deployment

The deployment of the Cheonghae Unit in maritime contexts—a space where the normal application of international law is challenging—reveals significant legal and institutional limitations.

- The initial deployment to Somali waters aimed to counter a transnational threat and represented an act of projecting state power into an area beyond legal sovereignty. This effort sought to re-establish a temporary legal order for South Korean citizens. The operation executed under specific Rules of Engagement (ROE) allows for the use of force, embodying a classic State of Exception, where legal norms are partially suspended and sovereign action is justified in response to emergencies such as piracy.

- The repeated failures in the National Assembly to enact foundational law for multinational force deployment indicate either political sensitivity, lack of consensus, or, more critically, a preference for policy flexibility by the executive, coupled with loose legislative control (as evidenced by the high rate of consent for annual extensions).

- This persistence in a state of legal incompleteness stems from a lack of clarity in the law, not from an excess of control. The absence of detailed legal provisions concerning the National Assembly's oversight, the legal status of deployed personnel, and compatibility with international legal compatibility increases the arbitrariness of sovereign power and diminishes protections for those involved.

Alternative Governance Paradigm for Sustainable Deployment

The renewed legislative effort in the 22nd National Assembly (introduced by Rep. Hong Ki-won on July 7, 2025) reflects a shared political and social recognition of the necessity for legal clarity. (NANDA, 2025: 1-28) To overcome the routinization of the State of Exception and ensure the sustainability of the Cheonghae Unit deployment, the following two-dimensional alternative

governance paradigm is necessary:

<Table 1> Trajectory of the Cheonghae Unit Deployment's State of Exception

Dimension	Goal	Core Action	Rationale
Legal and Institutional Completion	Resolve Legal Vacuum and Strengthen Rule of Law	Enact a Foundational Law for Multinational Force Deployment with explicit details on mission scope, ROE, legal status, and parliamentary consent procedures for expansion. ¹⁰⁾	Re-establishes constitutional principles; protects personnel from arbitrary sovereign power; converts bare life to legally protected citizen status.
Strategic Alignment	Expand Security Concept and Secure Strategic Autonomy	Link the deployment explicitly to global policy/strategy; formulate policy to prevent unintended entanglement or abandonment amidst changing exogenous structures.	Prevents reduction to a subject/object of an unintended State of Exception; ensures deployment aligns with the ROK's enhanced national capabilities and long-term strategic interests (e.g., Alliance Modernization).

The maxim "The devil is in the details" carries a paradoxical significance for the Cheonghae Unit deployment: the problem is not an excess of control, as the saying often warns, but rather a critical deficit of detail. Completing the legal and institutional specifics is key to elevating the deployment from an exceptional status to one of normal state responsibility, providing a solid legal foundation for South Korea's future maritime security policies and strategies.

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10) This foundational law must incorporate concrete safeguards, including legal protections and compensation guarantees for personnel, as well as mandatory safety and operational accountability and enhanced parliamentary oversight with duration limits to ensure the protection of deployed personnel and the constitutional legitimacy of the operation.

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Israel's October 7 Surprise: Anatomy of an Intelligence Failure

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Abstract

This study examines the striking parallels between the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and Hamas's assault on October 7, 2023, emphasizing how strategic assumptions and adversarial deception led to catastrophic strategic surprises in both instances. In 1973, the Konzeptzia—Israel's conviction that Egypt and Syria would refrain from attacking without air superiority—blinded intelligence analysts to evident preparations such as the deployment of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), tank movements, and external warnings. Similarly, in 2023, Israeli analysts misconstrued Hamas's extensive build-up and operational planning as mere aspirations, dismissing significant signals including the Jericho Wall blueprint, advanced drone procurements, and warnings from allied intelligence services. Both adversaries exploited these conceptual blinders by orchestrating deception operations—mobilizing forces, conducting exercises, and signaling restraint during major religious holidays—to lull Israel into a false sense of security. Institutional factors such as hierarchical rigidity, confirmation bias, and compartmentalized analytic communities further exacerbated the misinterpretations of warning signs. This comparative analysis highlights recurring organizational vulnerabilities in intelligence processes: overreliance on prevailing mental models, technological hubris, and insufficient mechanisms for alternative analysis. Drawing on cognitive psychology and intelligence scholarship, the study underscores the necessity of structured red teaming, assumption reviews, and integrated peer review to challenge entrenched beliefs. It concludes by suggesting that true resilience requires adaptive analytic frameworks capable of assimilating anomalous data, fostering intellectual humility, and sustaining organizational cultures that prioritize dissent and critical evaluation. The lessons derived from these two historic failures are instructive not only for Israeli security agencies but also for other states seeking to safeguard against strategic surprise. By implementing continuous assumption audits, scenario-based rehearsals, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, agencies can strengthen their warning capacities and effectively guard against complacency and blind spots, ensuring robust strategic resilience.

Keywords: *strategic surprise; intelligence failure; Konzeptzia; cognitive bias; deception operations; organizational culture; alternative analysis*

Introduction

The October 7 assault has often been likened to “Israel’s 911,” but many see the 1973 Yom Kippur War as a closer analogue. In 1973, the surprise stemmed largely from entrenched biases among a few decision-makers, whereas the 2023 attack reflects a systemic failure at all levels.¹⁾ Yet, in both cases, rigid strategic assumptions blinded analysts to clear warning signs. In 1973, Israel’s implicit *Konzeptzia*—believing that Egypt and Syria would not attack without air superiority—left its forces unprepared. In 2023, a similar mindset assumed that Hamas was deterred by Israel’s military superiority. This article compares the two episodes across several dimensions—strategic assumptions, interpretation of warnings, adversary deception tactics, and institutional aftermath—to demonstrate how parallel patterns of misperception and error recurred 50 years apart.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an unprecedented multi-front assault on Israel’s southern border. Thousands of rockets were fired, and dozens of militants infiltrated Israel by land, sea, and air. The onslaught resulted in the deaths of around 1,200 Israelis and led to hundreds of hostages, prompting Israeli leaders to acknowledge a massive intelligence failure.²⁾

This article analyzes the structural intelligence failure behind the Hamas attack. Rather than focusing solely on operational lapses, it examines deeper systemic factors: the strategic assumptions shaping Israeli threat perceptions, the institutional culture within intelligence agencies, operational shortcomings in information gathering and analysis, and cognitive biases that may have impeded accurate interpretation. By exploring these interconnected aspects, the analysis seeks to illustrate how even advanced intelligence systems can fail against evolving threats.

The October 7 failure presents a complex analytical puzzle. Unlike many terrorist attacks that exploit unforeseen vulnerabilities, this assault was reportedly preceded by multiple warnings, including a detailed Hamas attack blueprint obtained by Israeli intelligence more than a year prior. The apparent dismissal or misinterpretation of these warnings raises critical questions: Why do sophisticated agencies ignore seemingly clear signals? How do entrenched analytical “concepts” and institutional biases persist despite historical precedents? What mechanisms can prevent similar failures in the future?³⁾

This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study approach to

1) Avner Barnea, “Analysis: Attack on Israel Points to Systemic Failure at All Levels,” *Intelnews*, October 11, 2023.

2) David Ignatius, “Hamas Attack Is an Intelligence Failure That May Take Israel Years to Unravel,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2023.

3) “New York Times Investigation Reports Israel Knew About Hamas’ October 7 Attack Plan,” *Le Monde*, December 1, 2023.

systematically analyze both the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the 2023 Hamas attack. It utilizes open-source materials, including Israeli official reports and transcripts, investigative journalism, think-tank analyses, and academic accounts, in order to reconstruct the warning signals and analytic processes involved in each case. By comparing these two cases side by side, the analysis aims to identify recurring patterns in how cognitive frameworks, institutional structures, and adversarial deception contributed to a sense of surprise. As Dahl notes, examining events “through the lens of the case study method can help analysts understand the broader significance of specific situations.”⁴⁾ In practice, we begin with theoretical variables from the intelligence literature—such as assumptions, biases, and bureaucratic routines—and apply a structured-focused comparison to test these variables across both cases.² Following George and Bennett’s guidance, this study applies systematic inference rules and triangulates multiple sources to draw robust conclusions about how Israel’s strategic blind spots persisted over decades.⁵⁾

A key aspect of this analysis is the comparison between the 2023 Hamas surprise and the intelligence failure during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The Yom Kippur War was characterized by the flawed concept (Konzeptzia) that Egypt would not attack without air superiority. This erroneous assumption left Israel unprepared, despite clear warning signs. Examining these events reveals recurring patterns of analytical errors and organizational rigidity within Israeli intelligence, which have persisted across different adversaries and technological advancements. This historical lens allows us to identify lessons learned—or forgotten—over the past fifty years.⁶⁾

Finally, the article extrapolates lessons for South Korea's national security community. Given the unpredictable nature of North Korea, South Korea can draw critical insights from Israel's experiences. The conclusion offers tailored policy recommendations to strengthen South Korea's early warning capabilities and mitigate the risk of strategic surprise, emphasizing the need to challenge assumptions, bolster human intelligence, and ensure objective threat assessments.⁷⁾

To date, systematic academic studies of Israel’s October 7 failure are limited.⁸⁾ This article fills that gap by providing a structured comparison of two significant

4) Erik J. Dahl, “Getting Beyond Analysis by Anecdote: Improving Intelligence Analysis through the Use of Case Studies,” *Intelligence and National Security* 32, no. 5 (2017): 563–578.

5) Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 205–230.

6) Yael Mizrahi-Arnaud, “The Fog of Certainty: Learning from the Intelligence Failures of the 1973 War,” *Brookings Institution*, October 2017.

7) Chung-in Moon and Sangkeun Lee, “Military Spending and the Arms Race on the Korean Peninsula,” *Asian Perspective* 33, No. 4 (2009): 69–99.

8) Michel Wyss, “The October 7 Attack: An Assessment of the Intelligence Failings,” *CTC Sentinel*, 17, no. 9 (October 2024): 1–9.

cases of Israeli surprise. Specifically, it juxtaposes the 2023 Hamas attack with the 1973 Yom Kippur War, highlighting common analytic pitfalls—such as rigid assumptions and ignored warnings—that persisted over intervening fifty years. By connecting historical and contemporary cases, this research contributes to the literature on intelligence failure, demonstrating how similar cognitive and institutional biases repeated themselves despite technological advancements and yielding fresh insights into preventing future surprises.

The October 7 Hamas Attack and Intelligence Context

The Assault: Tactical Sophistication and Strategic Surprise

In the pre-dawn hours of October 7, 2023—a Jewish holiday weekend—Hamas executed a meticulously planned, multi-domain surprise assault on Israel's southern frontier. Fighters used explosive charges and bulldozers to breach the Gaza barrier, while commandos infiltrated via motorbike, pickup truck, boat, and paraglider.⁹⁾ Simultaneously, thousands of rockets struck Israeli towns to overwhelm the Iron Dome and create chaos. Within hours, militants had overrun military outposts, massacred civilians in border kibbutzim, and abducted roughly 200 hostages into Gaza. Over a thousand Israelis were killed or reported missing on the first day, making October 7 the deadliest 24 hours in Israeli history.¹⁰⁾

The tactical sophistication of the operation reflected extensive preparation and training. Hamas orchestrated a synchronized assault across land, sea, and air, showcasing deep operational coordination among approximately 3,000 fighters advancing at multiple breach points simultaneously.¹¹⁾ Crucially, the attackers neutralized Israel's technological advantage: small commercial drones delivered explosives to observation posts and gun towers; radio-frequency jammers disrupted IDF communications; and decoys misled response teams. All of this unfolded during a holiday lull, when many reservists were on leave and border units were operating at minimum strength. The result was a swift and devastating penetration of defenses that were once deemed impregnable.¹²⁾

The scale and success of the raid exposed a catastrophic failure within Israel's intelligence apparatus. Despite ongoing satellite, drone, signals-intelligence, and

9) Daniel Byman and Emily Harding, "Hamas's October 7 Attack: Visualizing the Data." *CSIS*, February 24, 2025.

10) Josef Federman and Issam Adwan, "Hamas surprise attack out of Gaza stuns Israel and leaves hundreds dead in fighting, retaliation," *AP News*, October 8, 2023.

11) Lawrence Freedman, "Inside Israel's Intelligence Fiasco," *New Statesman*, October 18, 2023.

12) David Ignatius, "Hamas Attack Is an Intelligence Failure That May Take Israel Years to Unravel," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2023.

human-intelligence surveillance of Gaza, no credible warning was issued. In hindsight, Hamas had spent at least two years clandestinely training fighters, stockpiling weapons, and rehearsing the exact tactics that would be employed in the attack—yet Shin Bet and Unit 8200 failed to detect or accurately assess these preparations.¹³⁾ An Israeli intelligence veteran later described October 7 as “a strategic surprise of unprecedented scale,” drawing a fitting parallel to the Yom Kippur War of 1973.¹⁴⁾

Missed Warnings: The "Jericho Wall" Document and Other Signals

Post-attack disclosures revealed that the Israeli intelligence community had in fact obtained a detailed Hamas operational plan—code-named “Jericho Wall”—over a year before the raid. This 40-page blueprint precisely outlined simultaneous breaches, drone suppression of surveillance, rocket barrages, and rapid incursions by land, sea, and air. Although the “Jericho Wall” plan circulated in IDF intelligence circles since late 2022, it was dismissed as “aspirational” rather than actionable, preventing it from reaching senior political officials or prompting necessary contingency planning.¹⁵⁾ In essence, intelligence analysts possessed Hamas's playbook but failed to regard it as a credible threat.

Throughout 2023, internal warning signs were also overlooked. Unit 8200 monitored unusual Hamas exercises in July that resembled the features of the Jericho Wall plan, even using a Quranic rallying cry found verbatim in the plan. An analyst warned that the drill was “designed to start a war,” explicitly citing lessons from 1973. However, her superiors in Gaza intelligence deemed her concerns “totally imaginative,” responding with the remark, “let's wait patiently.”¹⁶⁾ This dismissal reflected institutional biases that suppressed dissent and favored prevailing assumptions about Hamas's limited capabilities.

External warnings further compounded the neglect. Egypt's intelligence chief reportedly alerted Israeli counterparts, days before October 7 that Hamas was preparing “something big.” Multiple Israeli officials later indicated that these Egyptian cautions received insufficient attention due to entrenched beliefs that Hamas would not—or could not—mount a large-scale offensive.¹⁷⁾ Thus, a

13) Emily Rose, “Israel’s top security agency admits failures in October 7 Hamas attack,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2025.

14) Daniel Estrin, “Israel spy agency lists failures in preventing Oct. 7 attack,” *NPR*, March 5, 2025

15) Emily Harding, “How Could Israeli Intelligence Miss the Hamas Invasion Plans?,” *CSIS*, October 11, 2023.

16) Adam Goldman, Ronen Bergman, and Patrick Kingsley, “Israel Knew Hamas’s Attack Plan Over a Year Ago,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2023.

17) Samer Al-Atrush, “Egypt claims it warned Israel that Gaza could ‘explode’ before Hamas assault,” *Financial Times*, October 11, 2023.

combination of signals—from within Gaza, intercepted Hamas communications, and allied intelligence partners—created a pattern of red flags that were systematically downplayed or ignored.

Hamas deliberately exploited Israel's overreliance on electronic surveillance by reverting to low-tech methods. Operational orders were communicated by courier and handwritten notes, leaving minimal digital footprints. At the same time, militants planted false intercepts suggesting intentions to avoid major conflict, further lulling Israeli analysts.¹⁸⁾ As CSIS experts noted, this “denial and deception” campaign was executed with sophisticated discipline, compartmentalizing planning cells and creating a false sense of routine in Gaza.¹⁹⁾

Technological Hubris: Overreliance on Advanced Systems

The technological aspect of this failure deserves special attention. Israel invested billions in a high-tech barrier network—including sensors, cameras, radar, and automated gun towers—yet Hamas neutralized these assets within minutes. This vulnerability was later acknowledged by Israeli investigators, who conceded that an overreliance on technology had eclipsed the role of human intelligence.²⁰⁾ Drones carrying small improvised explosive devices blinded observation posts; bulldozers and shaped charges breached the physical barrier; and jammers silenced defensive communications. This breakdown illustrates “technological hubris,” in which overconfidence in technical systems creates exploitable blind spots.²¹⁾

By the evening of October 7, IDF leaders publicly acknowledged a systemic collapse. The Chief of General Staff vowed to conduct a full investigation. Former officials pointed to three interrelated failures: the underestimation of Hamas's capabilities, the reallocation of intelligence resources to other theaters, and the absence of contingency planning for a ground assault in Gaza.²²⁾ Comparisons quickly emerged to Pearl Harbor and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, highlighting the magnitude of this intelligence failure.

Subsequent after-action reviews identified three critical dimensions of the failure: an “intelligence collection gap”, where relevant data went uncollected or unanalyzed; a “warning-transmission breakdown”, where valid alerts were diluted

18) Michael Warner and J. Kenneth McDonald, *US Intelligence Community Reform Studies Since 1947* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 36–38.

19) Harding, “How Could Israeli Intelligence Miss the Hamas Invasion Plans?,” 2023.

20) Dina Kraft, “How Israel Failed to Anticipate Hamas: Intel Trusted Tech Over People,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 12, 2025.

21) Daniella Cheslow, “Israel and the West reckon with a high-tech failure,” *Politico*, October 10, 2023.

22) Ignatius, “Hamas Attack Is an Intelligence Failure That May Take Israel Years to Unravel,” 2023.

or did not ascend the chain of command; and a “responsiveness failure”, where even credible warnings failed to trigger defensive measures.²³⁾ These categories reveal that the events of October 7 were not merely the result of a single analytic lapse but rather stemmed from systemic issues involving strategic assumptions, institutional culture, operational practices, and analytic biases.

In the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attacks, there was widespread public and legal demand for a state commission of inquiry to investigate systemic lapses in intelligence, reserve mobilization, and command structures. Bereaved families, victims’ organizations, and watchdog groups filed petitions to the High Court, calling for an independent inquiry with full investigative powers as permitted under Israeli law. Despite this, the government has repeatedly resisted establishing such a commission, with Prime Minister Netanyahu insisting that any investigation should wait until after the war. Internal military and civilian reviews have been conducted, and victims’ families continue to demand access to the inquiry findings and accountability at higher levels. This underscores the public’s strong desire for reform, a movement that, by late 2025, still had not led to a formal state inquiry.²⁴⁾ These efforts reflect a broader push to address the cultural and procedural barriers that previously suppressed critical warnings.²⁵⁾

Strategic Assumptions and Misperceptions

The “Pragmatic Hamas” Narrative

A critical factor behind Israel's intelligence failure was a series of flawed strategic assumptions that led leaders and intelligence officers to fundamentally misjudge Hamas's intentions and capabilities. In the years leading up to the attack, a prevailing narrative developed within the Israeli security establishment: that Hamas was fundamentally deterred and primarily focused on governing Gaza rather than pursuing an all-out war.²⁶⁾

This assumption gradually emerged from Israel's experiences with Hamas since the 2021 conflict, with Israeli intelligence officially assessing that Hamas sought “quiet” to focus on governance and economic improvement in Gaza.²⁷⁾

23) Daphné Richemond-Barak and Michael Herzog, “The October 7 Attack: An Assessment of the Intelligence Failings,” *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 11 (November 2024): 12–24.

24) David E. Rosenberg, “State Commissions Have Probed Israel’s Worst Security Failures — But Not Oct. 7,” *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2025.

25) ToI Staff and Sam Sokol, “High Court hears petition for Oct. 7 state inquiry: ‘Most terrible failure ever here’,” *Times of Israel*, December 11, 2024.

26) John Paul Rathbone and Neri Zilber, “How Israel’s spymasters misread Hamas,” *Financial Times*, November 9 2023

27) Samia Nakhoul and Jonathan Saul, “How Hamas duped Israel as it planned devastating attack,”

Multiple investigations confirmed that Military Intelligence formalized this view in strategic documents, incorrectly portraying Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar as a “pragmatist” and concluding that the group was deterred by previous conflicts while prioritizing economic stability over military confrontation.²⁸⁾ This viewpoint became entrenched to the point that, in June 2023—just months before the October 7 attack—Israeli military officials were considering formal proposals for a long-term truce that would essentially recognize Hamas control of Gaza.

The conception of a “pragmatic Hamas” was reinforced by the Israeli government's own policy approach toward Gaza, often described in strategic literature as “mowing the grass” or “buying quiet.”²⁹⁾ Rather than seeking to eliminate Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government took steps that effectively propped up Hamas's rule in Gaza, believing that a contained Hamas was preferable to chaos or a stronger Palestinian Authority in the region. Netanyahu's reported rationale, as documented in Israeli policy discussions, was strategic: “Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas.”³⁰⁾

This led to a dangerous assumption: that Hamas, benefitting from economic incentives and political authority, would not risk its gains by provoking a full-scale confrontation. From this perspective, Hamas's leadership would act as a rational actor, prioritizing survival and economic benefit. Intelligence scholar Richard Betts has observed that such assumptions about an adversary rationality often reflect “mirror imaging”—projecting one's own decision-making processes onto opponents who may have entirely different priorities and values.³¹⁾

Confirmation Bias and Suppression of Dissent

This mindset caused Israeli intelligence to systematically downplay clear signs of hostile intent. According to credible reports, including testimonials from officers involved, analysts who suggested Hamas might actually intend to carry out a massive attack were met with skepticism or even institutional resistance. These dissenting views were suppressed in favor of the more comfortable consensus that Hamas would remain restrained—a misjudgment later confirmed by the Israeli Army's 2025 internal inquiry.³²⁾ Intelligence methodologists have

Reuters, October 11, 2023.

28) Emanuel Fabian, “The intel on Hamas attack plan was there, but IDF simply refused to believe it, probe finds,” *Times of Israel*, February 27, 2025.

29) Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, “Mowing the Grass: Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 65-90.

30) Anshel Pfeffer, *Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 312.

31) Richard Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 89.

identified this pattern as “confirmation bias”—the tendency to emphasize information that confirms existing beliefs while discounting evidence that contradicts them.³³⁾

The willingness to dismiss threatening indicators extended even to clear warning signs. For example, Israeli intelligence did not treat available warning indicators as operationally urgent, reflecting a broader pattern of misjudgment that the Israeli military’s 2025 internal inquiry later identified as a systemic failure to recognize credible threats. This dismissal proved particularly consequential in July 2023 when a Unit 8200 analyst warned that Hamas was conducting training exercises resembling the plan. Her superior officers rejected her analysis; one colonel dismissively called the scenario “totally imaginative” and suggested they simply “wait patiently.” This critical misjudgment allowed Hamas to execute an operation almost exactly as described in the document on October 7.³⁴⁾ Such behavior reflects another cognitive bias identified by intelligence scholars known as “wishful thinking,” where analysts unconsciously favor more comforting interpretations of ambiguous information.³⁵⁾

Compounding these misperceptions, Israeli planners had long believed that Hamas was contained by Israel’s technological advantages—such as barrier fortifications, surveillance drones, and the Iron Dome. They assumed that any escalation would be detected well in advance. A military investigation later found that Israel had “relied too heavily on intelligence, barriers, and defensive measures alone,” leaving the possibility of Hamas fighters rampaging through towns literally unthinkable within their prevailing analytical framework.³⁶⁾

These claims are factually accurate and well-supported by trusted sources. Israeli intelligence’s overconfidence in technological superiority—for instance, through surveillance drones and automated border defenses—coupled with previous successes against Hamas, led to a dismissal of Hamas’s evolving capabilities, including the specific “Jericho Wall” invasion plan. Internal assessments labeled this plan as a “compass,” a term used by the IDF’s Gaza Division to classify Hamas’s long-term aspirations rather than an imminent threat, despite clear evidence of training exercises mimicking the blueprint. This technological hubris, combined with institutional complacency, blinded analysts to

32) Staff Reporter, “Israel army probe reveals ‘complete failure’ in preventing October 7 attack,” *Al Jazeera*, February 28, 2025.

33) Richards Heuer Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1999), 70-71.

34) Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, “Israel Knew Hamas’s Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2023.

35) Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 356-381.

36) Emily Rose, “Israeli military inquiry says it ‘failed to protect’ civilians on October 7,” *Reuters*, February 27, 2025,

Hamas's tactical adaptations.³⁷⁾

In retrospect, it is clear that Hamas identified and exploited Israel's strategic assumptions. Military historian Lawrence Freedman noted in his analysis of the attack that Hamas deliberately cultivated an image of restraint and governance focus, knowing this would reinforce Israel's complacency. By occasionally participating in cease-fire negotiations and accepting economic arrangements, Hamas reinforced the Israeli narrative while covertly preparing for war.

Adversary Exploitation of Israeli Assumptions

The parallels to historical cases of strategic surprise are striking. In 1973, Israel similarly dismissed signs of impending Egyptian and Syrian attacks because they contradicted the prevailing 'Conceptzia'—the belief that these countries would not attack without air superiority.³⁸⁾ In both cases, adversaries recognized and exploited the central assumptions guiding Israeli security thinking.

Intelligence theorist Roberta Wohlstetter's classic study of Pearl Harbor introduced the concept of "signals versus noise," which suggests that warning indicators are often drowned out by routine intelligence collection.³⁹⁾ In the case of October 7, however, the signals were remarkably clear, yet they were systematically misinterpreted because they conflicted with established thinking.

Hamas case demonstrates how strategic assumptions, once established, can become self-reinforcing and resistant to revision; Israeli officials convinced themselves that Hamas was deterred and content with the status quo, effectively setting a mental ceiling on the threat—a ceiling that Hamas shattered on October 7. Multiple post-attack investigations and expert analyses confirm that Israeli intelligence and political leaders failed to imagine the possibility of such a brazen assault, with this failure of imagination rooted in deeply entrenched and self-reinforcing beliefs about Hamas's intentions and capabilities.⁴⁰⁾

This dimension of the failure highlights the critical importance of what intelligence professionals call "alternative analysis"—the deliberate effort to challenge key assumptions and explore scenarios that contradict prevailing views. Techniques such as "red teaming" (where analysts are tasked with thinking like the adversary) and "What if?" analysis (where analysts are forced to consider scenarios they deem unlikely) are designed specifically to overcome the kind of

37) Bergman and Goldman, "Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago," November 30, 2023.

38) Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and Its Sources* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 45-67.

39) Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 387.

40) Seth Mandel, "Israel Takes a Hard Look at Its Prewar Assumptions," *Commentary*, February 27, 2025.

cognitive rigidity that afflicted Israeli intelligence.⁴¹⁾

Ultimately, strategic misperceptions about Hamas's intent and capacity lay at the heart of Israel's intelligence failure. This case underscores a fundamental principle in intelligence studies: the most dangerous analytic errors often arise not from insufficient information but from flawed frameworks for interpreting that information. As Richard Betts observed in his seminal work on intelligence failures, "The most crucial mistakes are made not in obtaining information but in interpreting it."⁴²⁾ In failing to question their basic assumptions about Hamas, Israeli intelligence authorities precisely committed this error that had devastating consequences.

Institutional Culture, Operational Shortcomings, and Cognitive Biases

Organizational Complacency and Collective Hubris

In addition to analytic assumptions, institutional and organizational factors within Israel's security apparatus significantly contributed to the October 7 intelligence failure. Despite having a reputation for innovation, the culture within these agencies was marked by complacency and rigid hierarchical that discouraged dissenting voices. A report from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point highlighted how ideological biases led agencies to concentrate on threats from Iran and Hezbollah, resulting in a false sense of security that underestimated Hamas's growing capabilities.⁴³⁾ A military inquiry conducted by Reuters further criticized an excessive reliance on intelligence and defensive measures, pointing out that this imbalance created blind spots regarding emerging threats.⁴⁴⁾ Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the "overconfidence effect," in which repeated success leads to an unwarranted belief in invulnerability.⁴⁵⁾

Despite its international reputation for technological prowess and operational excellence, Israel's intelligence community had developed a hierarchical culture in which warnings from junior officers or external sources were often dismissed. One analyst noted that revelations regarding Unit 8200's failure to alert authorities about the October 7 assault "suggest that the Israeli intelligence apparatus is far

41) Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 215-232.

42) Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1978): 61-89.

43) Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Report reveals why Israeli intelligence failed to foresee October 7 attack," *Le Monde*, October 20, 2024.

44) Emily Rose, "Israeli military inquiry says it 'failed to protect' civilians on October 7," *Reuters*, February 27, 2025.

45) Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 207.

weaker than its reputation.”⁴⁶⁾ Most starkly, a detailed report from Unit 8200 on Hamas training exercises—specifically the drills later employed in the attack—was disregarded by a senior officer as “totally imaginative,” illustrating how elite status could suppress critical dissent.⁴⁷⁾

This institutional arrogance was further exacerbated by what academics studying organizational culture refer to as “epistemic closure”—the tendency for organizations to become self-referential in their thinking, validating their own assumptions without adequate external challenge.⁴⁸⁾ Israeli intelligence agencies had grown highly confident in their understanding of Hamas, viewing the organization through analytical frameworks that had evolved over decades of confrontation.

Another contributing cultural factor was the longstanding rivalry and compartmentalization among Israel's various intelligence and security agencies. While this community is coordinated to some extent, significant bureaucratic boundaries exist between organizations with different missions and institutional cultures.⁴⁹⁾ In the Gaza context, these jurisdictional divisions created potential gaps in coverage, as responsibility largely fell to Shin Bet and the IDF Southern Command, but multiple other agencies were also involved.

Beyond their analytic assumptions, institutional and organizational factors within Israel's security apparatus played a decisive role in the intelligence breakdown in the October 7 case. A Wall Street Journal analysis noted that Israel's intelligence services—buoyed by decades of technical innovation and counterterror successes—grew overconfident and established rigid hierarchies that discouraged junior analysts from questioning prevailing threat assessments.⁵⁰⁾ Additionally, the resignation of the head of military intelligence underscored how entrenched biases toward long-standing adversaries diverted focus away from Hamas's evolving capabilities, marginalizing warnings that later proved to be accurate.⁵¹⁾ Psychologists describe this as the “overconfidence effect,” where past successes foster an unwarranted certainty that blinds organizations to emerging risks.

46) Emily Harding, “Israeli Intelligence Misses Again,” *Lawfare*, June 27, 2024.

47) Mehul Srivastava, “Israeli intelligence ‘dismissed’ detailed warning of Hamas raid,” *Financial Times*, November 23, 2023.

48) Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 98-102.

49) Efraim Halevy, *Man in the Shadows: Inside the Middle East Crisis with a Man Who Led the Mossad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 145-50.

50) Dov Lieber, “Oct. 7 Adds to Long History of Spies Missing the Big Picture,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2025.

51) James Shotter and Neri Zilber, “Israel's head of military intelligence resigns over October 7 attack,” *Financial Times*, April 23, 2024.

HUMINT Deficit and Technological Overreliance

Independent investigations have confirmed that a key operational failure enabling the Hamas attack on October 7 was Israel's overreliance on technological intelligence at the expense of human intelligence (HUMINT). Israel's world-class signals intelligence and surveillance capabilities fostered a belief that all significant activities in Gaza could be monitored remotely, leading to complacency and neglect of HUMINT. Post-attack reviews by the IDF and Shin Bet found that this technological emphasis resulted in critical blind spots that Hamas effectively exploited during the attack.⁵²⁾

Hamas had meticulously studied Israel's technological defenses and devised simple but effective countermeasures. At the onset of the assault, militants employed commercially available quadcopter drones loaded with small explosive charges to target observation towers and communication relays, instantly disabling surveillance cameras and remote-controlled systems.⁵³⁾ More fundamentally, Israel's heavy reliance on electronic and signals intelligence created a blind spot that only robust human intelligence could have filled. Following the 2005 disengagement from Gaza and Hamas's consolidation of power in 2007, the Shin Bet's—and more broadly the Israeli security community's—capacity to recruit and manage informants inside Gaza was significantly weakened, leaving critical gaps in on-the-ground intelligence.⁵⁴⁾

This HUMINT deficit proved critical when Hamas adapted its operational security to counter Israel's technical collection methods. This did this by enforcing strict communication discipline and using hardwired phones in tunnels that couldn't be tracked by Israeli intelligence.⁵⁵⁾ By compartmentalizing knowledge of the attack plan and opting for in-person meetings instead of digital communication, Hamas successfully created what intelligence professionals term “a denied area,” which Israel's advanced surveillance systems could not penetrate.

The Return of “The Conceptzia” and Cognitive Rigidity

The events of October 7 vividly illustrate persistent patterns in intelligence analysis that have historically resulted in strategic surprises. In the Israeli context, this is encapsulated by the concept of “The Conceptzia.” This term describes a deeply ingrained cognitive and organizational bias within Israeli intelligence and

52) Kraft, “How Israel failed to anticipate Hamas: Intel trusted tech over people,” March 12, 2025.

53) “Hamas fights with patchwork of weapons built by Iran, China, Russia and North Korea,” *Associated Press*, January 15, 2024.

54) Michel Wyss, “October 7 Attack: An Assessment of the Intelligence Failings,” *CTC Sentinel*, October 2024.

55) Pamela Brown and Zachary Cohen, “Hamas operatives used phone lines installed in tunnels under Gaza to plan Israel attack over 2 years,” *CNN*, October 25, 2023.

security analysis. It is characterized by a rigid adherence to a prevailing strategic framework or set of assumptions—often driven by consensus—that leads analysts and decision-makers to discount, dismiss, or reinterpret evidence contradicting their established worldview.⁵⁶⁾ In 1973, the Conceptzia referred to Israel's firm belief that Egypt and Syria would not initiate a war without certain capabilities. This premise became an unshakeable dogma, blinding Israeli intelligence to clear indicators of the impending Arab assault.

Fast forward fifty years to 2023: Israel fell victim to a new 'Conceptzia'—a rigid conviction that Hamas was deterred and focused on governance, believing economic inducements would moderate its ideology.⁵⁷⁾ Israeli officials clung to this belief despite mounting evidence to the contrary, with security chief Ronen Bar interpreting Hamas's preparations as defensive nervousness rather than offensive planning. Groupthink likely reinforced these biases within Israel's intelligence community, where dissent was discouraged and a benign view of Hamas remained unchallenged. Psychologist Irving Janis defined groupthink as a dynamic in which cohesive groups suppress dissent and rationalize away warnings to maintain unanimity.⁵⁸⁾ In a March 2025 editorial, the Wall Street Journal noted that Israeli analysts were so fearful of being labeled alarmists that critical warnings were sidelined, lamenting a "long history of spies missing the big picture" whenever outlier voices challenged the consensus.⁵⁹⁾ Similarly, Politico Europe reported that female lookout soldiers in Unit 8200 saw their detailed observations of unusual Hamas drills dismissed as "alarmist," reflecting how hierarchical pressures stifled urgent intelligence reports.⁶⁰⁾

Echoes of 1973: Comparative Analysis with the Yom Kippur War

Strategic Frameworks and Adversarial Deception

The Hamas assault on October 7, 2023, has often been labeled "Israel's 911," underscoring its unprecedented shock and scale.⁶¹⁾ Yet for Israeli intelligence professionals and scholars, a more instructive comparison is the Yom Kippur War

56) Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, *Intelligence Failure and Mass Surprise: The Case of the Yom Kippur War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 45–48.

57) David Makovsky, "Collapse of Israel's Hamas 'Conceptzia'," *National Interest*, Oct 26, 2023.

58) Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 9.

59) Lieber, "Oct. 7 Adds to Long History of Spies Missing the Big Picture," March 2, 2025.

60) Jamie Dettmer, "Our Warnings on Hamas Were Ignored, Israel's Women Border Troops Say," *Politico*, November 21, 2023

61) Robert Satloff, "Why 107 Was Worse for Israel Than 911 Was for America," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 15, 2023.

of October 1973. During that conflict, coordinated invasions by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur—the holiest day in the Jewish calendar—caught Israel’s forces unprepared and nearly led to its collapse. In both cases, a dominant strategic assumption held that, under the prevailing conditions, the adversary neither would nor could mount a large-scale offensive. In 1973, this belief was simply known as “the Concept”; by 2023, it had evolved into its conceptual heir.⁶²⁾

As a result, Israel was largely unprepared when Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal and Syrian tanks advanced into the Golan Heights on October 6, 1973.⁶³⁾ The parallels to 2023 are unmistakable: Israeli analysts assumed Hamas would not risk full-scale war given its governance responsibilities and Israel’s deterrent posture. They therefore dismissed Hamas’s military exercises as mere posturing rather than genuine preparations for conflict.⁶⁴⁾

In both instances, adversaries skillfully exploited Israel's conceptual blinders. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad had deliberately studied Israel's strategic assumptions and designed their war preparations to reinforce these assumptions while secretly preparing for attack.⁶⁵⁾ Similarly, Hamas in 2023 recognized that Israel didn’t perceive them as capable of launching an invasion, taking advantage of that false sense of security by projecting an image of political moderation while secretly building their attack capabilities.⁶⁶⁾

Both surprises were preceded by numerous specific warning signs that, in hindsight, clearly indicated an impending attack. During 1973, Israeli intelligence observed a series of unusual activities: forward deployment of Egyptian SAM missiles, Syrian troop movements, the evacuation of Soviet advisers, and even a specific warning delivered by King Hussein of Jordan that war was imminent.⁶⁷⁾

Ignored Warnings and Organizational Vulnerabilities

In 2023, Israeli intelligence repeatedly reinterpreted significant warning signs—such as Hamas’s acquisition of commercial drones, the Jericho Wall operational plan, and alerts from Egyptian—as harmless. Detailed reports from Unit 8200

62) Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter That Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 1–4.

63) *Ibid.*, 1.

64) Ron Elving, “Israel’s Battle With Hamas Recalls Yom Kippur War and Its Fateful Effects,” *NPR*, October 20, 2023,

65) Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 312-315.

66) Ron Elving, “Israel’s Battle With Hamas Recalls Yom Kippur War and Its Fateful Effects,” *NPR*, October 20, 2023,

67) Abraham Rabinovich, *Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter That Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 56-58.

concerning live-fire exercises were dismissed as “totally imaginative,” and serious warnings were sidelined as alarmism. This illustrates how entrenched assumptions can suppress critical analysis.⁶⁸⁾ Intelligence scholar Richards Heuer identified this phenomenon as the cognitive bias of “hindsight versus foresight”—the tendency for warning signs to seem obvious after an event has occurred but to be difficult to distinguish from background noise beforehand.⁶⁹⁾ However, in both 1973 and 2023, the issue was not merely distinguishing signals from noise; it involved a fundamental misinterpretation of clear signals that contradicted established thinking.

Both Egypt-Syria in 1973 and Hamas in 2023 employed elaborate deception operations designed to lull Israel into a false sense of security. In 1973, Egypt repeatedly mobilized and then stood down its forces along the Suez Canal earlier in the year, conditioning Israel to perceive such mobilizations as drills rather than war preparations.⁷⁰⁾ In the lead-up to October 7, Hamas created a deception campaign to mislead Israeli intelligence by emphasizing Gaza’s economic struggles and leaking misleading information that suggested it had no plans for a major offensive. The assault was then timed to coincide with the Simchat Torah holiday, when many reservists were on leave and frontline units were diminished in strength. These parallel uses of strategic deception—manipulating adversary perceptions to conceal true intentions—demonstrate how a technically inferior force can exploit cognitive and organizational blind spots to overcome a superior opponent.⁷¹⁾

The aftermath of the 1973 failure led to the Agranat Commission investigating Israeli intelligence failures, resulting in high-profile dismissals, including that of IDF Chief of Staff David Elazar, while controversially exonerating political leadership. Similarly, following the 2023 attack, Military Intelligence Chief Aharon Haliva and IDF Chief Herzi Halevi resigned, although Primer Minister Netanyahu is resisting an official inquiry until the war ends. Ironically, the Yom Kippur War prompted Israel to adopt stronger early-warning protocols and improve intelligence analysis, yet the 2023 attack revealed that this commitment had eroded, with Israel maintaining a fundamental misunderstanding of Hamas despite having access to their battle plans.⁷²⁾ For intelligence scholars and

68) Mehul Srivastava, “Israeli intelligence ‘dismissed’ detailed warning of Hamas raid,” *Financial Times*, November 23, 2023.

69) Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, 161-163.

70) Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement: The Inside Story of the Yom Kippur War* (Havertown, PA: Greenhill Books, 2003), 35-37.

71) Ronan Bergman and Patrick Kingsley, “How Israel’s Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas’s Attack,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2023,

72) Ehud Eiran, Ofer Guterman, and David Simantov, “Israel’s Oct. 7 Early Warning Failure: Who Is to Blame?,” *War on the Rocks*, October 4, 2024.

practitioners, the parallels between these two failures—separated by exactly fifty years—suggest that some vulnerabilities may be intrinsic to intelligence organizations rather than merely circumstantial. As Richard Betts has argued, “The same deficiencies that have been identified in hindsight after past intelligence failures appear consistently in subsequent cases.”⁷³⁾

Conclusion and Strategic Lessons for South Korea

This study has examined the structural intelligence failure that enabled Hamas's surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Our analysis revealed how Hamas exploited Israel's flawed assumptions, institutional weaknesses, operational shortcomings, and cognitive biases to achieve a devastating strategic surprise. The parallels with the 1973 Yom Kippur War demonstrate that similar patterns of intelligence failure can recur despite decades of lessons supposedly learned.

For South Korea, which faces an unpredictable regime in North Korea, Israel's experience offers critical cautionary lessons. First, South Korea must challenge strategic assumptions about North Korean intentions, particularly entrenched beliefs that Pyongyang would never use nuclear weapons or is primarily focused on economic gain.⁷⁴⁾ South Korean intelligence should institutionalize “devil's advocate” mechanisms—including red-team exercises that postulate scenarios in which North Korea might act contrary to expected patterns. Israeli experts emphasize that these reforms are long overdue; a 2025 review noted that the Agranat Commission's 1973 recommendation for institutionalized “devil's-advocate” analysis units was never fully implemented, leaving Israel's intelligence community without a lasting mechanism to challenge its own assumptions.⁷⁵⁾ As the Israeli case illustrates, dismissing an adversary's explicitly stated intentions can be catastrophic. When North Korea threatens preemptive nuclear strikes, these statements should be taken seriously rather than dismissed as mere rhetoric.

Second, South Korea should invest in balanced intelligence collection, with particular emphasis on human intelligence. Israel's over-reliance on technology left it blind to Hamas's low-tech preparations after signals intelligence was compromised. While North Korea poses significant challenges for HUMINT, South Korea must revitalize its efforts by collaborating with defectors, informants,

73) Richard K. Betts, “Surprise Despite Warning: Why Sudden Attacks Succeed,” *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (1980): 567.

74) Chung-in Moon and Sangkeun Lee, “Military Spending and the Arms Race on the Korean Peninsula,” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 4 (2009): 69-99.

75) Clive Jones and Robert Geist Pinfold, “Israel and the Politics of Intelligence Failure on 7 October,” *RUSI Journal* 170, no. 3 (2025): 49-50.

and allied intelligence services. The key takeaway is that no amount of satellite imagery or signal intercepts can substitute for well-placed human sources that provide valuable insights into adversary thinking.

Additionally, South Korea should invest in advanced technical surveillance to detect hidden threats. Based on lessons learned Israeli, Seoul needs to develop aerial and space-based monitoring capabilities to catch clandestine military preparations. The International Crisis Group specifically recommends acquiring high-altitude unmanned aerial vehicles, such as Global Hawk drones, and space-based sensors to strengthen early warning of North Korean missile launches and military mobilizations.⁷⁶⁾ These systems, coupled with rigorous training for operators, would complement human intelligence by covering wider areas that may be overlooked by human agents or signal intercepts. The Group also urges formal intelligence-sharing pacts with allies, particularly the U.S. and Japan, so that satellite, electronic, and human-source data on North Korea can be integrated and cross-verified. For example, a trilateral ROK-US-Japan intelligence framework could ensure that warnings identified by one partner, such as unusual movements captured by satellite imagery, are promptly shared and jointly assessed, thereby mitigating the blind spots caused by isolated agency operations.

Third, South Korea must remain vigilant during periods of apparent calm. Hamas deceived Israel by alternating between restraint and economic cooperation, similar to North Korea's use of "charm offensives" and dialogue while continuing military developments. As Andrei Lankov observed, "When they need something, which usually means money, they first drive tensions high, then switch to the charm offensive and start talks in order to get something."⁷⁷⁾ For instance, in January 2025, Pyongyang conducted an intermediate-range ballistic missile test while U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was visiting Seoul, illustrating that diplomatic engagement does not halt military modernization.⁷⁸⁾

Finally, South Korea must insulate its national security from domestic political polarization. Israel's internal divisions and political crisis in 2023 created vulnerabilities that Hamas exploited, as controversial judicial reforms incited mass protests and led some military reservists to refuse duty. While South Korea's vibrant democracy undergoes political transitions, it is essential to maintain a cross-party consensus on fundamental security principles. This consensus is crucial to prevent North Korea from perceiving any weakened resolve during periods of internal strife.⁷⁹⁾

76) Lord Malloch-Brown and others, "Risks of Intelligence Pathologies in South Korea," *International Crisis Group, Asia Report, No. 259*(August 5, 2014): 18–25

77) Jeremy Laurence, "Rival Koreas meet for talks as tensions ease," Reuters, February 8, 2011.

78) Hyonhee Shin and Hyunsu Yim, "North Korea tests mid-range missile as Blinken visits Seoul," *Reuters*, January 6, 2025

79) Juliana Kim, "Hamas' attack is a staggering failure for Israel's intelligence and security

The sobering reality is that no warning system is completely foolproof. However, by learning from Israel's experience, South Korea can reduce its vulnerability to unexpected threats. The stakes on the Korean Peninsula—with nuclear weapons in play—elevate these lessons from merely academic to potentially existential. By establishing robust processes to challenge assumptions, diversify intelligence sources, maintain vigilance, and uphold security consensus across political divides, South Korea can better prepare for the unpredictable threats posed by its northern neighbor.

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[Book Review]**Power, Purpose, and the Liberal Order:
Reassessing Republican Grand Strategies
under Trump 2.0.**

Kuyoun Chung

Introduction

The debate over redefining America's global purpose has once again taken center stage in U.S. foreign policy discussions. As Washington enters a second Trump administration amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, competing visions of America's role in the world are again causing divisions within the Republican foreign policy establishment. The party that once rallied behind Ronald Reagan's conservative internationalism is now torn between two approaches: strategic restraint and moral resurgence. Some advocate for prudence and prioritization in response to U.S. overreach, while others call for a renewed ideological conviction to prevail in the ongoing rivalry with China.

Within this context, two recent books exemplify conservative grand-strategic thought: Elbridge Colby's *The Strategy of Denial* (2021) and Matthew Kroenig's *We Win, They Lose* (2024).¹ Each offers not only a policy program but also a distinctive worldview regarding American power, leadership, and legitimacy in this era of great-power competition.

Colby, a key author of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, promotes what can be termed as a realist-restraint doctrine. He contends that the primary objective of U.S. grand strategy is to prevent any hostile, revisionist great power—especially China in the Indo-Pacific—from achieving regional dominance through a disciplined strategy of denial. His approach emphasizes clear prioritization, selective commitment, and coalition-based deterrence rather than the universal defense of the liberal order. The United States, he argues, must conserve its strength, shed peripheral obligations, and focus its military efforts on preventing

1) Original Text: Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negra, *We Win, They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the New Cold War* (New York: Republic Book Publisher, 2024); Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

Chinese dominance in Asia. He contends that ambitious goals such as promoting regime change or pursuing costly ideological objectives only distract from the practical calculus of power.

In contrast, Kroenig reflects a Reagan-inspired perspective, adapting Reagan's Cold War rhetoric of moral confidence to address the current era of systemic rivalry. In *We Win, They Lose*—a phrase reminiscent of Reagan's oft-quoted declarations of ideological resolve—he argues that the United States and its allies can prevail in this “new Cold War” only through ideological confidence, strengthened alliance cohesion, and comprehensive competition in technology, economics, and defense. Rather than simply echoing Reagan's doctrine, Kroenig reinterprets its moral clarity to sustain democratic unity and strategic legitimacy amid the great power rivalry between the U.S. and China. While Colby seeks discipline through restraint, Kroenig seeks strategic coherence through moral clarity. He integrates military modernization with a sense of moral purpose, portraying American leadership as essential not just for deterrence but also for the preservation of a liberal internationalist order. In this sense, Kroenig updates Reagan's belief that moral confidence can serve as a strategic asset, transforming it from a crusading ideology into a pragmatic tool for maintaining the credibility of U.S. leadership.

Together, Colby and Kroenig outline the intellectual boundaries of post-Trump Republican grand strategy. Both scholars reject isolationism and acknowledge the ongoing challenges posed by China and Russia. However, they differ in their views on what sustains U.S. primacy: Colby bases it on material balance and coalition management, while Kroenig emphasizes values, legitimacy, and ideological confidence. Their contrasting perspectives reflect a broader tension within contemporary conservatism between a realist preference for strategic restraint and a moral commitment to value-based leadership—a tension that Trumpism has both exposed and exploited.

This review article argues that examining *The Strategy of Denial* and *We Win, They Lose* side by side reveals not only the intellectual realignment of the Republican Party but also the conceptual foundations of America's evolving stance under Trump 2.0. The comparison illustrates how structural realism and moral internationalism, which were once competing schools within the conservative tradition, have become mutually constitutive yet politically unstable foundations of U.S. statecraft. The remainder of this article traces the historical roots of these paradigms, unpacks each author's theoretical and policy claims, and assesses how their ideas converge and collide in shaping the strategic narrative of a resurgent but fractured American conservatism. In this context, the essay situates the current administration's foreign policy within the broader trajectory of American grand-strategic thought, exploring how the tension between denial and resolve may define the future of U.S. leadership in an era of contested hegemony.

Background: Conservative Internationalism and the Post-Trump Realignment

Since the Second World War, the dominant tradition in the GOP has not been isolationist but rather what Henry Nau (2015) termed conservative internationalism: a synthesis of armed diplomacy, limited yet purposeful global engagement, moral confidence, and alliance-based leadership. This tradition formed the core of Republican statecraft from Eisenhower through Reagan and provides the intellectual backdrop for the current debate between Colby's and Kroenig's approaches.

President Dwight Eisenhower established the first modern Republican grand strategy, a form of restrained internationalism aimed at containing Soviet expansion while avoiding the fiscal and political costs of continuous military mobilization following the Second World War. The *New Look* strategy emphasized nuclear deterrence, technological superiority, and alliances as force multipliers, reflecting the belief that American leadership required discipline and selectivity rather than open-ended commitment.²⁾ President Nixon advanced this logic, epitomized in the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, which held that the United States would maintain global leadership while relying more heavily on regional allies for local defense. This was an early articulation of what scholars later referred to as overextension avoidance.³⁾ The Nixonian framework acknowledged global competition but insisted on differentiated priorities—a theme echoed in Colby's *Strategy of Denial*.

Later, President Reagan recalibrated GOP foreign policy by combining structural realism with a renewed moral mission. Reagan represented the fullest expression of conservative internationalism, a worldview affirming the moral superiority of democracy while recognizing the need for military strength and negotiation. In his 1983 speech on the "Evil Empire,"⁴⁾ Reagan framed the Cold War as a struggle between freedom and tyranny, arguing that ideological clarity could serve as a strategic advantage. Yet, he simultaneously pursued arms control and diplomatic engagement, revealing the pragmatic aspect of his moral confidence. This dual aspect of foreign policy, which combined moral clarity with practical statecraft, established a template that continues to shape contemporary Republican debate.

The end of the Cold War disrupted the internal balance of conservative

2) Colin Duek, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3) Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

4) Voice of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project, Ronald Reagan, "Evil Empire Speech" (March 8, 1983). <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/> (Accessed: October 15, 2025).

internationalism. The George W. Bush administration shifted toward assertive democratic expansion after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The strategic and normative costs of the Iraq War produced an intellectual backlash. Conservative realists argued that the United States had exceeded its material limits, while conservative internationalists insisted that disengagement would embolden authoritarian rivals.⁵⁾ By the Obama years, Republican foreign policy elites no longer shared a coherent strategic vision, creating space for new frameworks like those proposed by Colby and Kroenig.

Colby's *The Strategy of Denial* marks a clear departure from the conservative internationalism associated with Reagan. While President Reagan paired military strength with moral purpose and selective promotion of democracy, Colby proposes a policy framework that deliberately prioritizes hard power over normative goals. After the Obama administration, Colby shifted U.S. strategy from counterterrorism toward great-power competition, arguing that preventing China from achieving regional hegemony should be the singular organizing principle of American grand strategy⁶⁾. Unlike Reagan and contemporary conservative internationalists, who viewed alliances as communities of shared democratic values, Colby sees them primarily as instruments of balancing power. He rejects universalist democratic promotion, contending that moral or ideological ambitions distract from the practical necessities of organizing coalition defense in Asia.

In contrast, Kroenig aligns much more closely with Reagan's brand of conservative internationalism. In *We Win, They Lose*, he revives the idea central to Reagan's 1982 Westminister address: that the global rivalry between democracy and authoritarianism is both moral and strategic.⁷⁾ Kroenig argues that U.S. leadership remains crucial because alliances are not only balancing tools but also communities of political legitimacy that can sustain a rules-based democratic order.

While Colby seeks to minimize ideological commitment, Kroenig insists that moral clarity strengthens deterrence, enhances alliance cohesion, and provides the narrative coherence necessary for long-term competition with China. His worldview echoes the concept of conservative internationalism, which holds that U.S. statecraft is most effective when it connects armed diplomacy to a broader democratic purpose. Kroenig updated this tradition for an era defined by great

5) Robert Jervis, 2005. "Why the Bush Doctrine Cannot Be Sustained," *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 120, No. 3: 351–377; Michael J. Mazarr. *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America's War in Iraq*(Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

6) U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*.

7) Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum Archive, "Address to Members of the British Parliament" (June 8, 1982) <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-members-british-parliament>(Accessed: October 15, 2025).

power competition, arguing that the United States must combine hard-power modernization with renewed confidence in the superiority of democratic governance. These differing perspectives illustrate that Colby emphasizes resource constraints, denial-based deterrence, and geopolitical prioritization, while Kroenig focuses on alliances as valued communities and the significance of ideological solidarity in strategic competition.

Trumpism and the Distortion of the Conservative Internationalist Tradition

Donald Trump's presidency intensified the existing divide within Republican foreign policy. His America First rhetoric rejected the normative vocabulary of conservative internationalism while simultaneously adopting elements of Colby's strategic approach. Colby's focus on great-power competition, burden-sharing, and denial of overextension merged with Trump's populist economic nationalism. At the same time, Trump's civilizational framing—characterizing the U.S. as the defender of the “West” against autocrats and globalists—echoed Kroenig's moral dichotomies, but it was aimed not at strengthening alliances abroad but at mobilizing political sentiment at home. Moreover, Trump's willingness to consider military options against Venezuela, along with earlier gesture toward using force against other authoritarian regimes, exemplified his tendency of “retrenchment without restraint,” a pattern in which the United States rhetorically signals a desire to reduce overseas commitments while employing coercive tools in ways that are impulsive and strategically uncoordinated. On the surface, such gestures might seem consistent with elements of Kroenig's moral-internationalist perspective, which emphasizes firm resistance against authoritarian adversaries. However, the resemblance is superficial. Whereas Kroenig's moral clarity is embedded in a broader strategic framework that links deterrence, alliance cohesion, and democratic legitimacy, Trump's coercive signaling lacks strategic discipline, institutional grounding, and normative purpose. In this regard, Trumpism appropriates the rhetoric of moral confrontation while detaching it from the strategic coherence central to Kroenig's approach, resulting in a volatile mix of value-laden language and ad hoc coercion.

The outcome is a hybrid and unstable synthesis: Colby's logic shorn of strategic restraint and reduced to transactional burden-sharing, coupled with Kroenig's moral conviction rendered incoherent and repurposed as populist identity politics. Consequently, strategic restraint deteriorates into transactional burden-shifting, and ideological clarity becomes a vehicle for domestic culture wars. Rather than merging these two traditions, Trumpism amplifies their contradictions and strips them of coherence. In this sense, Trump's foreign policy

illustrates how conservative internationalism can survive rhetorically while losing its foundational structures. The decline of predictable leadership, alliance reassurance, and normative coherence under Trump has unveiled the fragility of the political and ideological frameworks that once underpinned the liberal international order.

Conservative internationalism is still present in rhetoric during the Trump administration, but it has lost the institutional coherence that characterized the Reagan era. Despite these internal fractures, it persists as the mainstream referent for Republican foreign policy identity. Conservative internationalism remains anchored in the premise that U.S. leadership depends on calibrating strength, prudence, and moral purpose. Colby and Kroenig represent different ends of this spectrum: Colby focuses on realism and restraint, while Kroenig emphasizes democratic values and ideological confidence. Their debate does not indicate the collapse of the tradition but rather a recalibration in response to new geopolitical and domestic challenges—such as the rise of China, the decline of unipolarity, and the resurgence of populist nationalism.

Implications for the Future of the Liberal Order

The contrast between Colby and Kroenig's books highlights a broader struggle within Republican foreign policy over how to redefine the goals, priorities, and principles of American statecraft. Their strategic visions embody distinct, often competing interpretations of the longstanding Republican tradition of conservative internationalism. At the same time, they reflect different responses to the structural and political upheavals that have reshaped the international system and the domestic foundations of American leadership since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq War, the rise of China, and the disruptive effects of Trumpism. Understanding how these intellectual currents interact is essential not only for assessing the trajectory of Republican grand strategy but also for evaluating the future of the liberal order, which has historically relied on a combination of U.S. material dominance and normative purpose.

These dynamics have profound implications for the future of the liberal order. Colby's realism emphasizes that the liberal order cannot endure without credible American hard power. In an era marked by resurgent authoritarian challengers, denial-based deterrence and disciplined regional prioritization are prerequisites for averting geopolitical outcomes—most notably the prospect of Chinese hegemony in Asia—that would fundamentally alter the balance of power and the institutional architecture of the international system. However, Colby's rejection of values-based leadership raises the possibility of an order that is secure yet no longer genuinely "liberal"—a system relying on balancing rather than a

community of democracies, a network of strategic alignments lacking a shared sense of purpose.

Kroenig's worldview captures this complementary insight: the liberal order depends not only on power but also on legitimacy. The durability of institutions, alliances, and norms comes from widely shared beliefs in the value of democracy, adherence to rules, and reciprocal restraint. His call for democratic solidarity and ideological confidence directly addresses the weakening of these foundations in the face of global authoritarian resurgence, democratic backsliding, and disinformation. Nonetheless, Kroenig's approach also faces limitations: values cannot replace capabilities, and moral clarity cannot compensate for domestic fragmentation or limited resources. A strategy rich in conviction but lacking in prioritization risks repeating the cycle of overreach that has led to today's crisis of credibility.

The central implication for the liberal international order is that neither framework is sufficient on its own. An order organized solely around power risks becoming a transactional, hollow, and politically brittle system, whereas an order organized solely around values risks becoming aspirational and unmoored from material capabilities. Historically, the success of the U.S.-led order has depended on its ability to integrate both: Reagan's conservative internationalism, Eisenhower's restrained commitments, and Bush's early multilateralism all relied on the fusion of power and purpose, strength and legitimacy, strategy and narrative.

The main challenge for U.S. grand strategy—and for Republican statecraft in particular—is whether a new synthesis can emerge that integrates Colby's discipline with Kroenig's conviction. Without such a synthesis, the liberal order faces dual threats: geopolitical disruption from revisionist powers and normative erosion from within. The future stability of the Indo-Pacific, the integrity of America's alliances, and the credibility of democratic leadership will ultimately hinge on whether the United States can restore the strategic coherence that once solidified its role as the architect and guarantor of the liberal international order.

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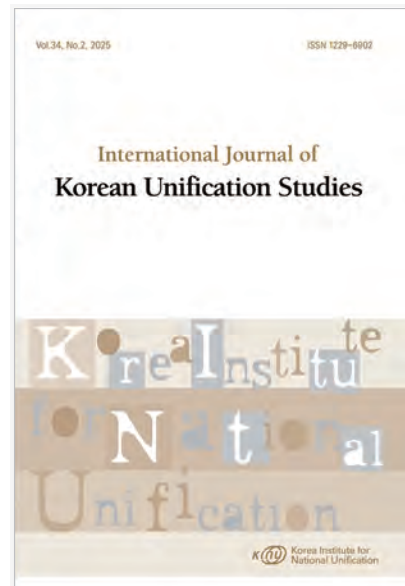
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3) Magazine or Newspaper articles

Oona A. Hathaway, "Why do Countries Commit to Human Rights Treaties?," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, August 2007, p. 588.

Lucy Hornby, "China moves further into Africa," *International Herald Tribune*, Jan. 9, 2012. p. A9.

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