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Asia-Pacific Flashpoints

Comparing Australian, Japanese,
South Korean & UK perceptions

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The Asia-Pacific Strategic Risks project convenes government officials, experts, and practitioners from South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the UK to discuss how changing threat perceptions impact new and ongoing proliferation challenges and what policy solutions can address them, including steps to encourage strategic restraint, greater collaboration and carefully honed nuclear risk reduction diplomacy. This is a joint project between the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and the European Leadership Network. The opinions articulated in the report represent the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or the European Leadership Network, or any of their members.

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Executive summary

The risk of conflict in the Asia-Pacific is a growing concern for Australia, Japan, and South Korea and, to some extent, for countries with significant strategic interests in the region, such as the UK. Building on previous work, this report explores differing risk perceptions towards China and North Korea as potential obstacles to policy coordination between Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the UK.

This project examined the views of experts and civilian officials on escalation scenarios in the context of the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. In in-depth interviews with 27 experts and 17 officials from the four countries, those interviewed provided their assessment of the likelihood of each escalation risk, and the level of impact on their own countries. The project identified three types of risk perception:

- **Acute:** risks perceived as likely and as having a direct impact on national security if realised.
- **Serious:** risks not perceived as likely, but as having a direct impact on national security if realised.
- **Latent:** risks perceived as unlikely, and as having an indirect impact, at most, on national security if realised.

The project finds that there is some degree of consensus among participants from the four countries on the drivers of escalation risks in the Taiwan Strait. They all view this risk as either latent or serious, and unlikely to materialise in the short term. But participants are concerned about the risk of conflict around Taiwan increasing in the longer term.

Opinions diverge more notably between South Korean participants and the others regarding escalation risks on the Korean Peninsula. South Koreans consider this risk acute, whereas most others seem to consider the risk latent.

Participants from all countries underlined the critical role of the United States as a policy coordinator. Australia, Japan, and South Korea rely on the Americans as alliance managers, to set the security agenda and oversee extended deterrence priorities. Despite this reliance, some states question US resolve and hence seek to enhance their national military capabilities. The emphasis on deterrence – both nuclear and conventional – tends to diminish the importance of inclusive multilateral approaches to maintaining stability in favour of smaller, purpose-built security partnerships.

Given the limited experience these four countries have when it comes to managing security discussions among themselves, absent the United States, the report offers a few preliminary recommendations for how to address this deficiency.

Increasing alertness: continuously reassess strategic risks and remain aware of 'moving targets'

- Joint annual surveys that measure perceptions of escalation risks and record military developments could provide a useful basis for comparison and adjustment of policies.
- Continuously modelling the interplay between emerging technologies and their impact on escalation, strategic stability,

and policy coordination is a necessary part of this broader task.

- Multi-year projects that engage security partners in comparative risk assessment at the Track 2 and Track 1.5 levels can help develop better policies to address rapid strategic change in Northeast Asia and adequately deal with these ‘moving targets.’

Improving coordination: enhance capacity-building and networking among experts

- Analytical capacity-building is needed to address deterrence challenges, including via dialogue that aims to increase predictability among security partners, and discussion on the types of assurances that are needed to reduce tensions with China and North Korea.
- Experts should analyse how legal and normative frameworks, such as the nuclear non-proliferation regime, can be better used to reduce tensions around North Korea and Taiwan.
- Scenario-based exercises in Track 2 formats should be used to improve understanding between the three Asia-Pacific countries when it comes to their thinking on risks, and to develop instruments to reduce escalation risks in crisis situations. Exercises should address US retrenchment scenarios and test the participants’ responses to signals from Chinese and North Korean leaders. The UK, as an actor from outside the region, could host such games in neutral locations.

Updating the security agenda: bring North Korea back

- Policymakers must refocus their attention on North Korea’s nuclear activities. The tendency among experts and officials in Australia, Japan, the UK (and the US) to treat nuclear risks on the Korean Peninsula as secondary to those in the Taiwan Strait appears to have cultivated a sense of resignation in South Korea that it must ‘go it alone’.
- Bringing North Korea back on the security agenda could reduce proliferation pressures in South Korea and help bolster strategic stability in Northeast Asia.
- Towards this end, regional partners and the UK, should combine more explicit positive guarantees towards South Korea with incentives for North Korea to curtail nuclear activities and provocative policies.

The emphasis on deterrence – both nuclear and conventional – tends to diminish the importance of inclusive multilateral approaches to maintaining stability in favour of smaller, purpose-built security partnerships.

Background

APLN and ELN have run a two-year project that aims to understand and compare the threat perceptions among Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the UK. The first year took an inductive approach to strategic risk analysis, engaging with experts and officials in each country to compare their thinking on strategic risks.

It quickly became evident that thinking on strategic risks is mainly informed by threat perceptions relating to China and North Korea, as well as concerns over the level of continued US commitment to the Asia-Pacific. These perceptions are not uniform but produce similar pressures in all three Asia-Pacific countries to enhance their deterrence capabilities through the procurement of new and improved weapon systems. For the UK, this has led to opportunities in defence cooperation with its Asia-Pacific partners, most notably with Australia through the AUKUS security pact.¹

The second year of the project assessed the unintended consequences of overreliance on deterrence. One key finding of a workshop held in Tokyo in October 2023 was that more efforts are required to balance deterrence with assurances towards adversaries.² This finding became the starting point of discussion at a two-day conference in Seoul in January 2024, where participants from all four countries discussed assurance policies from several angles. Discussions included how to make assurances work in case of US retrenchment from the region, the UK's potential (expanding) role, how to negotiate or communicate assurances to adversaries, the challenges in drawing red lines, and the intersection of assurances and emerging technologies.

This report synthesises and elaborates on the outcomes of this project, supplementing participant perspectives with insights gained from interviews with experts and officials in Canberra, London, Seoul, and Tokyo, as well as current policy research on the topic.

Introduction

The risk of conflict in the Asia-Pacific is a growing concern for Australia, Japan, and South Korea and, to some extent, for countries with significant strategic interests in the region, such as the UK. These four countries share concerns about China's increasing assertiveness and its lack of transparency over its nuclear weapons build-up, North Korea's aggressive nuclear and military posturing, and a worsening strategic competition between the United States and China. Significantly, they also share concerns – some more than others – on a possible US retrenchment from the Asia-Pacific.

This report builds on previous work between the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) and the European Leadership Network (ELN) and aims to explore the path ahead for the security strategies of Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the UK in an Asia-Pacific environment where the US role in the region cannot be defined clearly or taken for granted. The report identifies obstacles to policy coordination between Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the UK. These countries consider each other important partners for peace and security in the Asia-Pacific and there are existing institutional security ties between them, but they are not formal allies. Japan and South Korea – and to a lesser extent, Australia – have doubts about the reliability of US commitments to uphold regional security. At the same time, the security ties between them are fragile, but they realise that they may have few alternatives but to further strengthen these ties, in the context of the possible of US retrenchment.

The UK has strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific but does not possess the deep security relationships or hard power projection capabilities of the United States. Its military presence in the region is limited to deployments in Brunei, Singapore, and a joint base with US forces at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Its partners in the Asia-Pacific view UK involvement from a positive point of view, but also with some skepticism in terms of what London would actually be able or willing to contribute in a crisis.

Previous work by APLN and ELN has explored the threat perceptions in these countries as they relate to China and North Korea and found that a fundamental difference between the four security partners is the relative degree of their threat perceptions from either adversary.³ The same is true for their perceptions of specific escalation risks in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula: they all see potential escalation risks in both contexts, but their individual perceptions of these risks differ. This report builds on this work.

Our working assumption of risk perception is closely related to threat perceptions.⁴ For this report, we have examined the views of experts and officials of escalation scenarios around the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. Through in-depth interviews with 24 experts and 19 officials from all four countries, we have asked about their view of the likelihood of each risk, and the extent of impact on their own countries. The resulting classification of risk perceptions is thus based on subjective assessments and can be divided into four types (see Table 1):

- **Acute:** the risk is seen as likely and will have a direct impact on national security if realised.
- **Serious:** the risk is not seen as likely, but will have a direct impact on national security if realised.

- **Manageable:** the risk is seen as likely, but at most it will have an indirect impact on national security if realised.
- **Latent:** the risk is not seen as likely, and at most, it will have indirect impact on national security if realised.

Table 1: Classification of risk perceptions

Risk perceptions		Serious risk likely within five years	
		More likely	Less likely
Impact on national security	Direct impact	Acute	Serious
	Indirect impact	Manageable	Latent

This categorisation describes perceptions of risks, not the risks themselves. We make no claims or judgements as to whether the risk perceptions are valid (with some exceptions raised in the discussion section). For example, one could argue that nuclear use or nuclear conflict resulting from the actions of North Korea should be considered an acute risk by Japan, but the results of this project indicate that this is not necessarily the view of Japanese experts and officials in the way that we defined “acute risk”. One could also argue that any risk of nuclear use – whether Chinese, North Korean, or American – could be considered acute or serious.⁵ Again, this is not what we find in this project.

We argue that the differences in how these countries perceive these escalation risks – and how they act based on these assessments – can influence the likelihood of risks materialising and their seriousness. Most prominently, as we have argued in a previous report, their respective responses to risks are centered on deterrence capability procurement, and not sufficiently on assurance policies that can balance deterrence.⁶ Overreliance on deterrence can exacerbate an adversary’s threat perception and lead to an arms race that increases risks. On the other hand, underestimating a risk may invite opportunistic aggression.

With different deterrence postures, and hence different approaches to manipulating risk, the ability to coordinate policies is reduced and the predictability of defence postures in the region is decreased. Chinese and North Korean risk perceptions could be adversely affected by such unpredictability, creating a dangerous action-reaction cycle. Encouraging all security partners to read from the same playbook vis-à-vis their specific roles in reducing the risks of escalation, is thus vital. Getting everyone on the same page goes far beyond deciding on the “division of labor”⁷ in terms of ‘who will fire which missile and when’ and includes the ability to coordinate diplomatic initiatives, as well as an ability to agree on assurances common principles for future dialogue with China

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and North Korea. All of these remain important but underexplored policy options for avoiding and containing dangerous escalation in the region. Such considerations need to be mainstreamed into procurement of military capabilities if they are to be effective. Foresight and policy coordination must not be afterthoughts if the goal is a safer Asia-Pacific.

Likelihood and impact of crisis

This section explores the results from a survey of 27 experts and 17 officials from Australia, Japan, South Korea, and UK, between September and November 2023. Interviewees were asked to respond to a series of questions on a four-point Likert scale. This section focuses on three questions; two relating to likelihood of risks, and one relating to the scale of the impact if a risk were to materialise:

- How likely is it that a serious crisis involving **China and Taiwan/ the Korean Peninsula** will take place within the next 5-15 years?⁸
- How likely is it that a serious crisis involving **China and Taiwan/ the Korean Peninsula** could escalate to nuclear use?
- To what extent would such a crisis involving **China and Taiwan/ the Korean Peninsula** affect the security of your country?

The results are indicative rather than statistically representative. Interviewees were given the opportunity to elaborate upon and expand on their responses.

Likelihood of escalation

This project found that participants from the three Asia-Pacific countries consider some form of conventional escalation to be more likely to take place in the Taiwan Strait than on the Korean Peninsula, but less likely to result in nuclear escalation. If a nuclear crisis were to occur, participants from all four countries view it as more likely to result from inadvertent escalation, which is defined by this project as “when a combatant’s intentional actions are unintentionally escalatory, usually because they cross a threshold of intensity or scope in the conflict or confrontation that matters to the adversary but appears insignificant or is invisible to the party taking the action”.⁹ There were some variations among these views; Australian participants mostly considered a crisis in the Taiwan Strait as more likely to take place and to escalate to nuclear use through some form of miscalculation. Korean views of the likelihood of a crisis were comparatively higher in the case of the Korean Peninsula, while Japanese and Australian interviewees saw a crisis there as unlikely. UK interviewees believed a crisis in either the Taiwan Strait or on the Korean Peninsula to be unlikely in the short term, but also recognised that China’s ongoing nuclear build-up would inevitably change the status quo, increasing Beijing’s appetite for risk-taking and weakening its No First Use (NFU) policy. Some also felt that the Chinese strategic shifts could influence North Korea to behave more recklessly.

Factors driving the likelihood of crisis in the Taiwan Strait

Factors considered likely to increase the risk of escalation in the Taiwan Strait included China’s leadership dynamics, the influence of the Ukraine War, and the possibility of unintended escalation. There was agreement that deterrence is currently effective, but opinions diverged regarding the potential for deterrence breakdown. In such a scenario, views varied on who might resort to nuclear weapons first (if at all), and what could constrain China or the United States from nuclear use.

China’s leadership dynamics: The extent to which an authoritarian state is ruled by collective or personalist leadership has been

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suggested to influence the likelihood of that state initiating conflict.¹⁰ Some Japanese and Korean observers agreed with this theory and were concerned that Xi Jinping's personal ambition to unify Taiwan with Mainland China is unconstrained by any significant political constituencies within China. This view reflects broader public distrust of Xi Jinping in both countries.¹¹ Some participants, however, suggested the opposite dynamic: Xi Jinping would not be able to avoid escalation over Taiwan even if he wanted to, due to pressure from political constituencies, waning public support in the wake of the pandemic, and slowdown of the Chinese economy. In this view, potential military aggression could be a calculated move to consolidate President Xi's power.¹² One Japanese official pushed back on this point, arguing that: "an invasion of Taiwan to distract from domestic economic problems does not make sense."

Influence of Ukraine War: Each country appears to think differently in terms of the influence of the war in Ukraine on China's decision-making calculus over Taiwan. A few UK experts argued that Russia's miscalculation over Ukraine is a cautionary tale to Beijing, strengthening their belief that no immediate crisis will occur in the Taiwan Strait. However, some also felt that if Western states were drawn deeper into the Ukraine conflict, it could create a strategic opportunity for Beijing to behave more aggressively towards Taiwan. Australian experts argued that the invasion of Ukraine has made China aware of its own weaknesses, and dismissed the suggestion that China would have been emboldened by the Russian experience, at least over the next five years.¹³ Japanese interviewees drew the opposite conclusion: China would draw key lessons from Russia on what not to do, and what it could do better in a future invasion of Taiwan. Korean interviewees argued that US distraction in Europe might weaken deterrence in the Taiwan Strait, to some extent mirroring perceptions of UK participants who feared the opposite (see below).

Unintended escalation: There was a consensus that if a conflict were to break out in the near term, it would be due to unintended escalation. Australian experts expressed concerns about unintended escalation in the Taiwan Strait over the next five to fifteen years, reflecting a broader sentiment identified by Brendan Taylor:

"Should a major power war erupt in Asia, the prevailing sentiment among Australian strategic observers is that it would most likely stem from inadvertent escalation or 'accidental conflict' rather than a deliberate act or policy choice."¹⁴

Reinforcing this view, an Australian official pointed out that Canberra's efforts to engage China on the implementation of crisis mitigation and confidence-building measures have been frustrating and possibly even counterproductive. One UK interviewee expressed a concern that China persistently dismisses US efforts to seek bilateral dialogue on crisis mitigation and confidence building measures, and views such outreach with suspicion.¹⁵

A Japanese expert lamented that China has drawn too many red lines, while the United States has drawn too few. The US practice of studied ambiguity has given China the strategic space to manipulate and test red lines, which could tempt Beijing into

“misadventure.” This view is supported by a joint study by the RAND Corporation and the Sasakawa Foundation, which found strong support in Japan for increasing US support for Taiwan across a range of diplomatic and military policy options, with some hesitation over increased troop presence and an explicit US statement to defend Taiwan.¹⁶ By comparison, South Korean respondent to the RAND-Sasakawa study expressed “mixed feelings” or opposition to many of the same policy options.¹⁷ These results align with differences between South Korean and Japanese interviewees to a follow-up question in our study regarding the extent to which they believed that their own policies could prevent a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Japanese respondents were more comfortable that they could do so; only half of South Korean respondents believed that South Korean policies could do so.

UK respondents largely considered it unlikely that a crisis would break out in the Taiwan Strait within the next five years. The belief expressed by some was that, if a military confrontation were to occur within this timeframe, the United States would prevail in any scenario, albeit at high cost. Hence UK experts generally concurred that Chinese aggression will be deferred until its military forces are at least on par with those of the United States. An exception to this belief is if Taiwan declares independence, which would result in forcing Beijing’s hand. Therefore, they suggested that more immediate threats arise from political instability rather than an imminent military confrontation. Conversely, and akin to the concern of US allies during the Cold War – would the United States be willing to trade the safety of Boston for the safety of Berlin? – it was suggested that a potential Trump administration would not be viewed by Beijing as a reliable security partner of the Asia-Pacific states and unlikely to enter a conflict that could escalate to a choice having to be made between Washington for Taipei. One UK respondent felt this ambiguity could tempt China to initiate hostile military aggression over Taiwan should a second Trump administration come into power.

Nuclear use – who goes first? Interviewees offered several views on how nuclear escalation might take place in the Taiwan Strait, and who would be first to use nuclear weapons. One UK participant believed that the nuclear relationship between the United States and China affects the risk of escalation in the Taiwan Strait. According to the interviewee, China’s nuclear build-up puts the onus on Washington to either accept a shift in the status quo or develop escalation dominance strategies to ensure China cannot prevail in any conflict, including over Taiwan. The participant felt that the United States has chosen to pursue the latter, which provides reassurances to the Asia-Pacific allies, at the cost of negatively impacting relations between China and the United States.

Although most Australian experts believed that the United States would not be the first to use nuclear weapons, one expert argued that the possibility of using limited nuclear strike is a significant element in current US decision-making. This expert downplayed the importance attributed to international norms and suggested that the risk of low-yield nuclear first use by the United States is “higher than most people realise” because “the use of nuclear weapons over water” is “controllable in shaping escalation dynamics.” Other Australian interviewees disagreed and articulated

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the more typical Australian view that nuclear weapons act strictly as tools of deterrence that operate in the background.¹⁸

One Japanese expert similarly argued that depending on the situation, both the United States and China could use nuclear weapons if they were decisively outnumbered, and that both sides would move to avoid the risk of escalation from limited nuclear use to all-out nuclear war. Another Japanese expert expressed concern over China's weakening NFU pledge. The expert did not elaborate on their reasons for doubting China's NFU but other analysts, including at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), have pointed to the omission of any mention of NFU in the outline of Beijing's Global Security Initiative.¹⁹

Deterrence is working, for now: Generally, experts and officials found more reasons for why escalation would not take place in the Taiwan Strait, as opposed to the Korean Peninsula. Most experts and officials believed that, for the moment, China is deterred and that the balance of military power favours the status quo. One expert noted that if China were to initiate an attack on Taiwan, it would likely do so under the belief that such an action would not trigger nuclear escalation. Although experts concurred that the possibility of unintended escalation exists due to miscalculations, they also emphasised that all parties involved would take every necessary measure to prevent such a scenario. One UK participant expressed the belief that with China's nuclear force expansion and the development of conventional options on all sides, conventional conflict may take place, but nuclear escalation would be constrained.

Australian experts view the Chinese leader as rational, arguing that he would have concluded that he needs to continue to address China's vulnerabilities, by continuing to expand and improve conventional and nuclear weapons capabilities, and by building military and economic partnerships that can bolster Beijing's relative power and influence in the region. It was notable, however, that Australian assessments of the risk of intentional conflict increased as the timeline was pushed out by 10 or 20 years, and if assumptions of continuing US alliance cohesion were called into question.

Korean interviewees also believed that the distribution of conventional military power is currently not in China's favour, and that nuclear deterrence is working between China and the United States. However, one argued that efforts to increase the distribution of conventional military power in favour of the United States and its allies could increase risks. They noted a range of actions that could drive this dynamic: deployment of medium range missiles or tactical nuclear weapons to the region; creating the impression of a NATO-like US-Japan-South Korea alliance; or political and military intervention in Taiwan.

Finally, interviewees offered broader normative considerations that could restrain Chinese nuclear use. One Korean interviewee argued that China has a strong commitment to being viewed as a legitimate actor internationally, which would be undermined by the use of nuclear weapons – although one former defence official argued that nuclear threats might not undermine legitimacy to the same extent. One Japanese interviewee suggested that nuclear use

Some interviewees in both South Korea and Japan argued that South Korea's preemptive strike doctrine 'kill chain' increases risks of escalation.

in Taiwan could potentially contaminate China with nuclear fallout, which may restrain its use of nuclear weapons.

Factors driving risk of escalation on the Korean Peninsula

Factors that are deemed to increase the risk of escalation on the Korean Peninsula include unintended escalation due to aggressive postures in both Koreas or intentional escalation (including nuclear) by North Korea. Some also believed that a crisis in the Taiwan Strait could spur North Korean opportunism.

Aggressive postures and escalation risks: Aggressive postures in both Koreas increase the risk of escalation. South Korean experts highlighted the risks inherent in North Korea's development of tactical nuclear weapons and its revised nuclear posture, which was announced in September 2022.²⁰ In the words of one Korean expert:

"Previously, the command and control (C2) structure for [tactical nuclear] weapons were unclear, but now North Korea has developed C2 capabilities and a predetermined operational plan for nuclear weapons use. Although without specifying detailed conditions, North Korea warned that a nuclear strike could be automatically and immediately executed according to this predetermined plan if the nuclear command and control system is threatened by an enemy attack."²¹

Some interviewees in both South Korea and Japan argued that South Korea's preemptive strike doctrine 'kill chain' increases risks of escalation.²² One Japanese expert has even argued that South Korea's kill chain' provided convenient justification for North Korea to adjust its own nuclear posture.²³ A Korean expert agreed that the combination of North Korea's more aggressive nuclear posture since September 2022 and South Korea's pre-emptive strike doctrine could create first-strike instability – the reciprocal fear of surprise attack – where both sides could be tempted to strike early during a moment of heightened tension. There is some nuance to the South Korean perception: the pre-emptive posture pursued by the current administration could suggest that key decisionmakers in Seoul may be less concerned about the imminence of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, believing that "peace through strength" – in the words of one current advisor to the National Security Council – can contain escalation.

South Koreans were concerned with North Korea using nuclear weapons intentionally and early in a conflict. Due to 'use or lose' pressures, they argued that North Korea might use nuclear weapons pre-emptively or at an early stage of conflict to compensate for its inferior and vulnerable conventional capabilities, weaker air and ballistic missile defences, and smaller nuclear arsenal. A Japanese government official agreed that North Korea has a low threshold for nuclear use due to the relative weakness of its conventional forces. A Japanese expert argued that North Korean intentional use would be measured to avoid a nuclear response from the United States. A detonation at sea or in a remote area could be attempted to coerce the United States and South Korea to back down during a conflict. A previous APLN report, published with experts at Nagasaki University, has argued that even limited use on the Korean Peninsula could lead to unpredictable spread of fallout with potential political ramifications that could create escalation pressures on leaders.²⁴

While this seemed reassuring to the Australian observer, a South Korean defence official worried that US over-reliance on conventional weapons for deterrence would induce North Korea to lower its nuclear threshold even more since it would be less concerned about US nuclear use.

An Australian official considered the likelihood of intentional North Korean nuclear use to be very low (and possibly even a deliberate exaggeration by Seoul, to extract stronger security commitments from the United States). Indeed, in Canberra, official concerns do not focus on the risk of intentional use by Pyongyang but on a combination of regional militarisation and arms racing, the absence of dialogue, and North Korea's military tests and posturing, which combine to make accidents and miscalculation more likely and more difficult to manage. One Japanese official agreed that intentional nuclear use by North Korea was "inconceivable."

UK experts believed that akin to the situation in the Taiwan Strait, the chance of a military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula is low. This assessment was based on the history of major crises in the past that were more severe than current events yet did not lead to open conflict. Another UK expert suggested that North Korea is unlikely to initiate an overt attack, knowing it cannot overpower South Korea, whether through conventional means or a nuclear strike, given the likelihood of United States support for South Korea. However, uncertainties surrounding the level of US support, particularly in the context of a second Trump administration, introduce some doubts. Despite these uncertainties, there remains a prevailing belief that the prospect of US intervention would sufficiently deter North Korea from initiating hostilities.

The UK view broadly aligns with Australian thinking on intentional nuclear escalation. They both saw Kim Jong Un as a rational actor who would be deterred by US extended deterrence, despite his posturing. While leaving the possibility for misjudgment open, they argued that Kim Jong Un plays "the long game" focusing on strengthening nuclear and missile capabilities and solidifying his nuclear power status. However, Australian officials argue that the prospects for miscalculation leading to unintentional use on the Korean Peninsula is a serious and growing risk given the difficulties of crisis communication with North Korea.²⁵

One Australian expert conceded that Pyongyang might be tempted to use tactical nuclear weapons as a tool for war termination if it believed its regime survival was at stake, but the expert argued that this development would not prompt the United States to back down, nor would it lead to a general nuclear exchange: the United States would probably respond with advanced conventional weapons, unless the US mainland itself was attacked. While this seemed reassuring to the Australian observer, a South Korean defence official worried that US over-reliance on conventional weapons for deterrence would induce North Korea to lower its nuclear threshold even more since it would be less concerned about US nuclear use.

As with Taiwan, faith was strong among Japanese respondents when it came to the US' ability to contain nuclear escalation on the Korean Peninsula through deterrence and their role as an alliance patron. A Japanese expert argued that the United States could also constrain South Korean responses to North Korean provocations, the way that it did during the Yeonpyeong-do shelling in 2011.

North Korean opportunism and cooperation with China and Russia: A crisis in the Taiwan Strait could increase the risk of North Korea opportunistically escalating a conflict intentionally.

A former Australian defence official saw the potential of bloc formation between China, Russia, and North Korea as problematic for US deterrence resolve: cooperation with Russia could increase Pyongyang's capabilities and cause Washington to reconsider its cost-benefit calculation of intervening on the Korean Peninsula.

Australian and UK experts and officials displayed skepticism around the potential for a 'dual crisis' scenario, and Korean expert Jina Kim, also argued that: "the scenarios in which North Korea could benefit from a Taiwan crisis are limited."²⁶ However, not all South Korea experts share this opinion, arguing that "the risk cannot be dismissed."²⁷ Some Japanese experts and officials agreed and saw this risk as a constraint on South Korea's involvement in a crisis in Taiwan.²⁸

Experts in all countries were concerned with the growing closeness and cooperation between Russia and North Korea. A former Australian defence official saw the potential of bloc formation between China, Russia, and North Korea as problematic for US deterrence resolve: cooperation with Russia could increase Pyongyang's capabilities and cause Washington to reconsider its cost-benefit calculation of intervening on the Korean Peninsula. One South Korean expert agreed, and pointed out that Russian assistance could enhance North Korea's ICBM program and its credible deterrent threat towards the US mainland, thereby weakening US extended deterrence to South Korea. However, they also refuted the creation of a 'bloc', by pointing out that China is trying to distance itself from the other two. The THAAD controversy in 2016 made South Korean experts and officials view China with suspicion, but the notion that China can play a constructive role on the Korean Peninsula reflects commonly (though not uniformly) held views among South Korean experts.²⁹ Officially, the current South Korean government is also making an effort to urge "China's constructive role in ensuring that the DPRK refrains from further provocations."³⁰

Impact of escalation risk

The survey also asked about the impact that a risk would have on the respondent's country if materialised. Compared to the views of factors that could drive outbreak and escalation of a crisis, responses varied greatly when interviewees considered the impact that a given risk might have on their country.

Impact of a Taiwan crisis

In case of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, all Asia-Pacific countries were concerned about becoming the target of Chinese counterforce strikes, due to the US bases that they house on their territory. There were also concerns about the effect on maritime lanes and traffic. South Koreans and Australians worried about becoming entrapped in a Taiwan conflict due to their alliance commitments to the United States; Japanese interviewees assumed that Japan would and should help and were more concerned about what would happen to the alliance if joint US-Japan efforts failed to stop China from seizing Taiwan.

Japanese and South Korean interviewees shared some concerns. South Koreans emphasised the close geographical distance to Taiwan and the likelihood that US bases on their territories would be targets of Chinese strikes. They were also concerned that US forces based in Korea might be diverted to Taiwan, leaving South Korea vulnerable. There was a sense that South Korea had limited interests in Taiwan or ability to affect a crisis there, other than out of obligation as a US alliance partner. There was, however, a recognition that the

A Japanese official believed that China may already have signalled its intention to strike Japan, by firing ballistic missiles into Japan's exclusive economic zone with "pinpoint accuracy", after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in 2022.

proximity of Taiwan and the economic disruption that would result of a conflict there, especially the disruption of sea lanes, would severely damage the South Korea's trade-dependent economy.³¹

If a crisis escalated in the Taiwan Strait, officials displayed certainty that Japan would be directly affected by strikes on US bases in Japan, and experience disinformation attacks meant to lower the morale of the Japanese population. A Japanese official believed that China may already have signalled its intention to strike Japan, by firing ballistic missiles into Japan's exclusive economic zone with "pinpoint accuracy", after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in 2022. Japanese officials did not directly entertain the notion of Chinese nuclear use against the Japanese mainland or cities, and one expert explicitly rejected that possibility. Whether China would use nuclear weapons or simply threaten to use them appears to be an unsettled question among Japanese experts. Nobumasa Akiyama has argued that China could seek to sway Japanese public opinion by declaring that Japan's coordination with the United States makes it a legitimate target of Chinese nuclear strikes.³² This observation reflects the outcome of a war game involving a Taiwan scenario, that was played at the Japanese Institute of International Affairs in the summer of 2022, where the players simulated both a Chinese nuclear threat against Japan, and a Chinese tactical nuclear strike against a US base on Okinawa.³³

Although Japanese interviewees did not seem to associate a conflict in the Taiwan Strait with complete nuclear destruction, they nonetheless spoke of a Chinese seizure of Taiwan in catastrophic terms.³⁴ The psychological impact of Taiwan coming under Chinese control would be massive, and one interviewee argued that even the threat of nuclear use against Taiwan would cause panic in Japan. Japanese officials argued that Japan would feel a sense of loss towards the United States, comparable to what Australia felt after the UK lost Singapore to Japan in the Second World War: it could cause the Japanese population to question the ability of the United States to protect Japan, and therefore the value of maintaining US bases in the country. After the loss of Taiwan, one expert argued, "Japan would be to China what Cuba is to the United States." Such a scenario would render the first island chain meaningless, and free navigation would no longer be possible around Taiwan, so Japan would be cut off from Southeast Asia. China's regional hegemony would be realised, and Japan's freedom and independence would be lost.

Australian interviewees provided an interesting contrast. Due to Australia's alliance commitments and strategic dependence on the United States, they believed that Australian leaders on both sides of the political divide would provide direct military support to the United States and to Taiwan, which include sending Australian military assets and personnel into the conflict zone. This view, it is worth pointing out, is based on a scenario that is at least a decade into the future and is stronger than what has been outlined in the Australian Defence Strategic Review (DSR). As per an analysis from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS):

The DSR does not discuss 'realistic scenarios' in which the Australian Defence Force would join in a conflict other than to state that it must focus on developing anti-access/area-denial capabilities for operations in its primary area of strategic

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military interest. This implies that even in the case of a Taiwan contingency or a conflict in Northeast Asia involving Japan or South Korea, the preferred option for Australia would be to focus on rearguard operations further afield from the main theatre of operations, albeit aiming to hold threats at greater range with the increased stand-off weapons capability advocated in the DSR.³⁵

Even with Australia providing only rear support, all Australian officials, and most of the experts believed that there was a risk that the Australian mainland would be targeted by China in a Taiwanese contingency scenario, given that China would be aware of joint US-Australia military activities and elsewhere.³⁶

UK interviewees generally believed that a crisis in Taiwan could trigger a severe medium-term shock to UK supply chains, revenue, and connectivity. One participant felt that China could selectively bar UK-affiliated or UK-bound vessels from the Taiwan Strait during a blockade, temporarily slashing semiconductor exports and other goods to the UK market. Whilst the UK government is taking steps to reroute semiconductor supply chains away from Taiwan, these measures are costly, technically complex, logistically difficult, and are in the early stages. China might also respond by freezing Sino-British relations, shutting the UK out of regional fora, and cutting off inbound tourist and student revenue.

Surprisingly, military developments in the Taiwan Strait were not judged by UK participants as directly affecting British security, but the risk of a Taiwan crisis diverting US attention to the Asia-Pacific could have serious indirect consequences for UK security interests in Europe. To some extent, this view differs from that expressed in a December 2022 report from the UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee that “[t]he renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine has also led the US Biden administration to re-emphasise commitment to European defence.”³⁷ Some UK participants felt that the UK and US's primary focus on the Ukraine conflict could limit their capacity to dedicate resources to a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

Experts all agreed that the UK places great importance on sustaining and boosting its commercial presence in the region. One UK participant noted that should the UK impose sanctions on China in the event of a Taiwan Crisis, doing so might cascade into unintended consequences in the form of reciprocal sanctions being placed on the UK. Thus, wide-ranging reciprocal sanctions were judged by the respondent as having the potential to damage the UK economy at a time when disruption in the Taiwan Strait might already be roiling global supply chains.³⁸ Such an economic fallout would be noteworthy, emphasising the importance of economic considerations in assessing the impact of distant regional crises.

Impact of a crisis on the Korean Peninsula

A majority of interviewees from Asia-Pacific region responded that a crisis on the Korean Peninsula would affect the security of their country “to a great extent”. However, it became clear from responses that this meant very different things to different groups of interviewees. Unsurprisingly, all South Korean experts and officials were very concerned with the impact of escalation on the Korean Peninsula. Several interviewees underlined that such a scenario is a “life-or-death problem” for South Korea, which should be addressed with the highest sense of urgency.

Australian interviewees considered the rising risks of nuclear escalation on the Korean Peninsula as problematic; [...] However, most Australian interviewees felt that this view overstates the pact's significance and downplays Australia's capacity for independent action.

By contrast, Australian and Japanese interviewees acknowledged that although crisis escalation on the Korean Peninsula could wreak havoc on South Korea and have a detrimental impact on the broader international security environment, the direct damage to their own territory would likely be limited (unless the escalation went nuclear, see below). Interestingly, interviewees largely did not bring up indirect impacts, such as US non-intervention in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, which could affect Australian and Japanese perceptions of US extended deterrence commitments; or US intervention that escalated to nuclear use, which could have major environmental consequences for all states in the region. Japanese and Australian interviewees also did not bring up the implications of North Korean nuclear use against a US city.

According to one Japanese expert, North Korea does not have the capacity to occupy the South, and even if a war broke out, damage from a Korean Peninsula crisis would be localised to the peninsula itself. The risk of that conflict spilling over onto Japanese – let alone Australian – territory was considered slim. However, Japanese interviewees did acknowledge the risk of being a target of North Korean nuclear strikes, but considered that a high-impact, low possibility event – though at least one Japanese expert argued that North Korea's threshold for using nuclear weapons against Japan would be lower than against South Korea.³⁹ A Japanese respondent claimed that if North Korea did try to use nuclear weapons, that use would be limited to open water or in a remote area. Such use may not trigger a nuclear response from the United States, but could force both South Korea and the United States to accept negotiations. One Japanese official commented that in contrast to a failure of the United States and Japan to intervene in a Taiwan crisis – which would have deep implications for the US-Japan alliance – the same would not necessarily be true for a failure to intervene on the Korean Peninsula.

Australian interviewees considered the rising risks of nuclear escalation on the Korean Peninsula as problematic; one expert stated that the AUKUS pact makes it more likely that Australia would be pulled into a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, though most Australian interviewees felt that this view overstates the pact's significance and downplays Australia's capacity for independent action. However, one Australian academic noted that there is a tendency to downgrade the Korean Peninsula and upgrade the Taiwan Strait in Australia's perceptions of risks and consequences. There has been a major shift in Canberra: whereas six or seven years ago most eyes were on North Korea, attention had now shifted to China.

Although Japanese participants in this project were not quite so direct, two experts nevertheless noted in an unpublished workshop paper how key strategic documents in Japan “highlight security challenges from North Korea and Russia, but identify China as Japan's most substantial strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific due to its expansionist policies, military activities, and economic coercion.”⁴⁰ The relative upgrade of China appears to imply that the shift that has taken place in Canberra with regards to North Korea has also taken place in Tokyo.

UK interviewees mostly felt that a crisis on the Korean Peninsula could carry diplomatic implications for the UK, though the extent

of these would depend significantly on the scale and outcome of the conflict and how South Korea and the United States would respond, as well as the level of assistance required from the UK. For example, one participant felt that assistance might include logistics and intelligence, counter-cyber operations against DPRK actors, training, and the supply of arms.

While participants felt there could be potential economic consequences, such as disruptions to global supply chains, a conflict on the Korean Peninsula was not viewed by UK interviewees as having a direct and immediate impact on the UK beyond diplomatic and political considerations. However, this near universal perspective offered by participants underscores a deeper problem expressed by one participant that, compared to China, the UK has “devoted fewer resources to understand the DPRK” and to understand how conflict dynamics on the Korean Peninsula could inadvertently impinge upon UK security interests, especially if China entered the conflict.⁴¹ The (currently closed) UK embassy in Pyongyang has had a small role to play in liaising between North Korea and countries with which it does not have official diplomatic relations, but as one former UK diplomat pointed out, the usefulness of the embassy for that purpose should not be overplayed.

Comparing risk perceptions

With the above description of Australian, Japanese, South Korean, and UK risk perceptions in mind, we suggest that these perceptions can be provisionally mapped in relation to each other, as in Table 2 (the Taiwan Strait) and Table 3 (the Korean Peninsula) on page 22.

The tables do not represent an objective assessment of risk, but a relative comparison of perceptions of risks. As described above, the three Asia-Pacific countries agreed a crisis on the Korean Peninsula would affect them “to a great extent” but differed on what that meant in practice. Additionally, no risk perceptions were uniform between the participants from any of the countries; some interviewees, particularly Japanese officials, indicated that they were intentionally reserved in their judgements and were cautious about providing time frames. In contrast, Australian interviewees were comparatively less reserved in their comments, and more willing to entertain a wider range of scenarios.

There was only one case where there was broad agreement that a risk is acute (likely to take place within the next 5 years, and with serious impact on national security): South Korean interviewees’ views of any crisis (nuclear or non-nuclear) on the Korean Peninsula.

There were four cases in which risks were seen as serious (unlikely to take place within the next five years, but with significant impact on national security): interviewees from Australia, Japan and South Korea broadly regarded both nuclear and non-nuclear crises in the Taiwan Strait as serious threats. Moreover, Japanese respondents specifically identified a nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula as “serious” as well.

Additionally, there were four cases where the risk was seen as latent (not likely to take place soon, and with an indirect impact on national security due to the region’s geography): UK views on nuclear and non-nuclear crisis in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula, UK and Australian views on any type of crisis on the Korean Peninsula, and Japanese views on a non-nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

In all cases, risks were seen as more likely to materialise over time, and in some cases to have more direct impact. The arrows in both tables indicate the approximated change of perceptions as interviewees extended the potential timeline up to fifteen years in the future. As with the rest of the table, we emphasise that the ‘direction’ of these perceptions are not objective predictions about increasing risks (or perceptions of these risks), and are subject to significant uncertainty that should be further investigated.

The following section explores some implications of these different risk perceptions.

Table 2: Perceptions of escalation risks in the Taiwan Strait among experts and officials

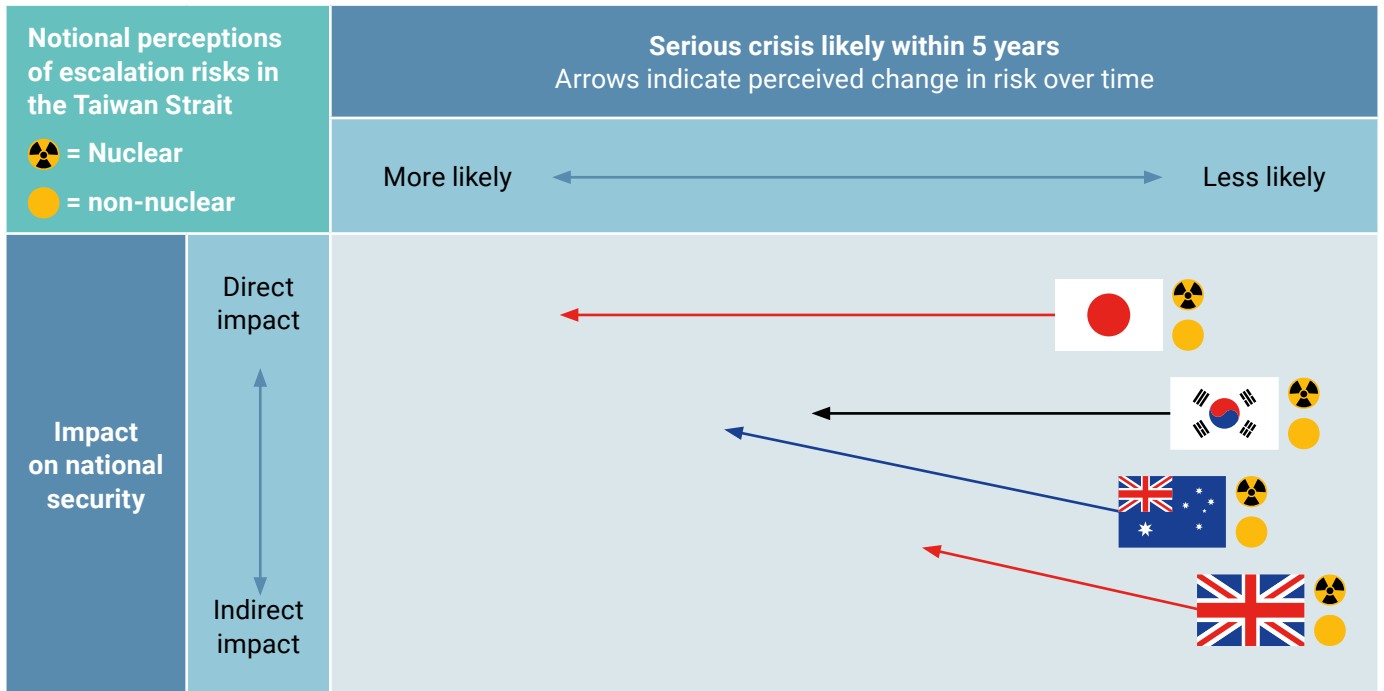
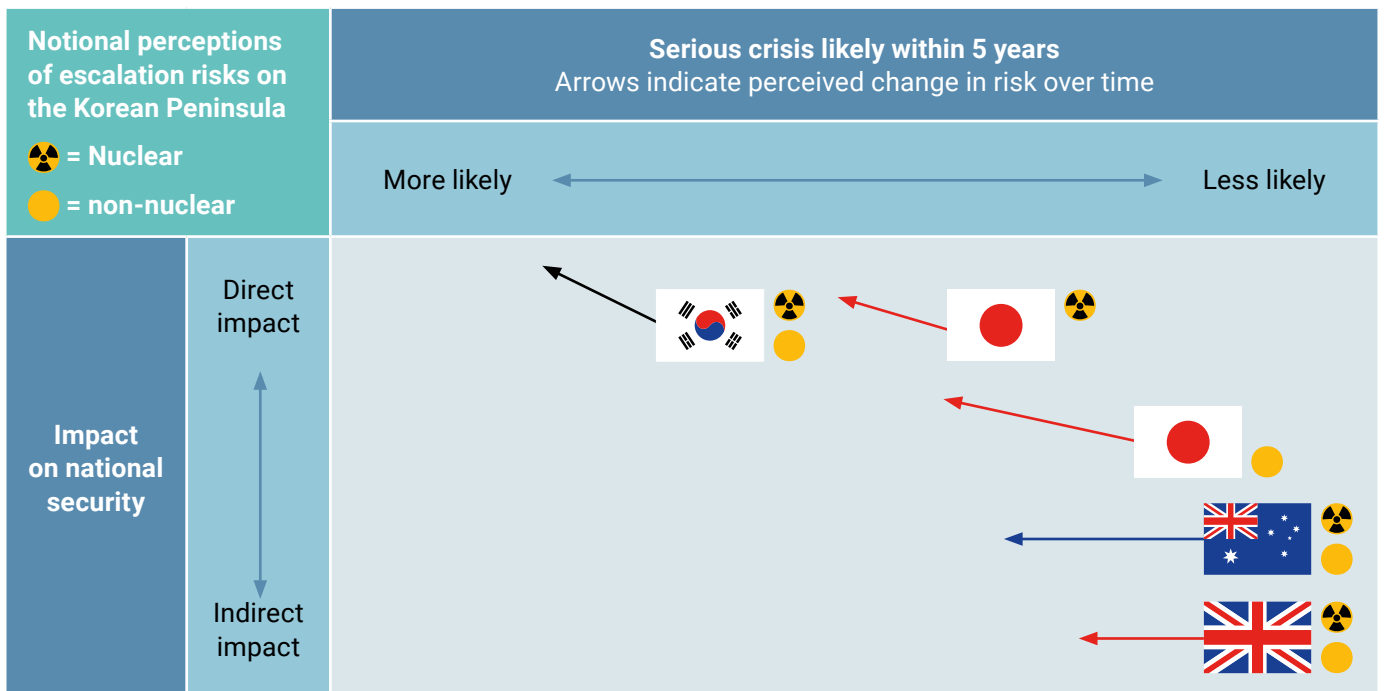


Table 3: Perceptions of escalation risks on the Korean Peninsula among experts and officials



Implications for policy coordination

Following the interviews, APLN and ELN organised two roundtable discussions in Tokyo and Seoul to deepen the discussion on perceptions of risk escalation, and how these risks could be reduced collaboratively between the four countries. The following section builds on those roundtable discussions.

Different priorities over the Korean Peninsula, aligned on Taiwan?

There was a significant contrast between South Korean views on the risk of escalation on the Korean Peninsula and those of other partners. South Koreans were the only participants to be concerned about the possibility of intentional escalation. They also viewed the impact of escalation as disastrous. Respondents from the other countries were less concerned about intentional escalation, and saw the impact of escalation as serious but to some extent manageable.

This difference is symptomatic of a reassurance problem that already exists within the US-ROK alliance: how can partners credibly signal to South Korea that they support stability and risk reduction on the Korean Peninsula? More specifically, how can they do so without formal commitments or alliance relationships, which would risk exacerbating North Korean threat perceptions? Efforts on part of all three countries are ongoing to enhance their respective security relationships with South Korea. However, the diverging risk perceptions raise questions about their efficacy in supplementing South Korean 'security demand'.

South Korea's relationship with Japan has improved under the current administrations of President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida, and resulted in mutual cooperation on sharing of missile defence data. This rapprochement is driven by Seoul's risk perception vis-à-vis North Korea, as well as Japan's concerns about nuclear escalation on the Korean Peninsula. In a strategic sense, both recognise the value in presenting a united front towards China, but there are still disagreements over specific China risks, including the Taiwan issue. Since relations began to improve in 2022, the two countries have not yet issued a joint statement that was not also co-signed by the United States.⁴² The extent to which a future bilateral statement between the two countries recognises their respective risk perceptions will be an indicator of the relationship's potential to deepen further.

Compared with the Korean Peninsula, the three Asia-Pacific countries' risk perceptions are more aligned with regards to a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Particularly, there appears to be some agreement on factors in China that drive risk around Taiwan. This agreement opens up some possibilities to align positions. For example, if South Korea and Japan both see the personalist nature of Xi Jinping's leadership as a source of unpredictability and even escalation, could they together formulate proposals for assurances from China that they would be prepared to accept? For example, could South Korea and Japan offer assurances that they would not use their capabilities (such as anti-submarine warfare capabilities) to hold at risk Chinese second-strike capabilities on the condition of China taking measures to maintaining the status quo in the

In a strategic sense, both [South Korea and Japan] recognise the value in presenting a united front towards China, but there are still disagreements over specific China risks, including the Taiwan issue. Since relations began to improve in 2022, the two countries have not yet issued a joint statement that was not also co-signed by the United States.

Taiwan Strait? The revival of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat between those two countries and China could offer an opportunity to do so informally.

Our findings bear out an observation by Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles during a recent visit to Tokyo: “Australia and Japan have never been more strategically aligned than we are now”. Australia is building credibility with Japan in a way that it is not doing with South Korea. A Japanese expert has even described the relationship as a “quasi alliance”.⁴³ Australia’s 2023 Defence Strategic Review, on the other hand, does not mention Korea at all.⁴⁴ Both Australian and South Korean experts have urged that the relationship needs to deepen.⁴⁵ That said, Australians, Japanese, and South Koreans all held similar perceptions of the consequences of a conflict over Taiwan, although it is important to stress that this is not a uniform view in either country. For example, some Australian participants questioned whether the perception of ‘China risk’ in Canberra has been inflated. In this regard, it might be useful for all four countries to jointly and collaboratively review exactly how they envision that a crisis in the Taiwan Strait would spill over on their territories.

Without the United States in the room

Injecting more specificity into conversations on strategic risks is urgent and important. It was striking that, even with encouragement to think about specific scenarios, many conversations on specific deterrence and risk reduction challenges between experts from all four countries tended to be abstract and general. One participant observed that the general nature of the conversation could be explained by the absence of American experts or officials in the project, who otherwise naturally tend to fall into a coordinating role. Indeed, even when conference participants were urged to think about collaborative measures that did not necessarily require US coordination – such as collaboration on emerging technologies – the discussions tended to eventually gravitate back to the conclusion that more coordination with the United States was necessary. The reluctance to engage with certain issues absent US support suggests a broader capability gap, and perhaps lack of trust and familiarity, between the three Asia-Pacific countries.

The UK’s experience in managing deterrence challenges and its capacity to bring parties together could be valuable for playing a supportive and complementary role. However, there were reservations about the UK’s credibility in this regard, especially among South Korean participants. A former diplomat recalled that when the UK proposed joint military exercises with South Korea amid the Brexit negotiations, the move failed to convey reliability or reassurance to South Korean counterparts. Similarly, another expert from South Korea argued that the UK’s focus on the Ukraine war complicated its ability to act as a key player in the Asia-Pacific region. Even though we observed some scepticism over the merits of closer UK defence engagement in the region, including from UK participants themselves, there was also some discussion over a constructive convening role the UK might play. To become a strategic actor, the same sceptical South Korean expert argued, it must influence the mindsets of key players, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, the United States, as well as China and North Korea.

They proposed that the UK could potentially leverage its strong ties with the United States to voice common concerns identified among Asia-Pacific security partners to the United States. And so, the discussion gravitated, yet again, back to the United States.

Faith in US extended deterrence but concerns about retrenchment

All discussions on risk perceptions were based on strong assumptions of continued US presence and deterrence in the region. A key question that the Asia-Pacific countries are currently trying to deal with is how to improve US extended deterrence commitments, or failing that, what alternative measures they can take in case of US retrenchment from the region.

Securing US commitment through a traditional NATO-style organisation is an increasingly common, though not uncontroversial, proposition.⁴⁶ Asia-Pacific countries recognise the lack of an overarching security architecture in the region, and the lack of a collective security guarantee comparable to NATO's Article 5. However, the vast geographical expanse and predominantly maritime nature of the Asia-Pacific pose challenges to establishing such a multilateral alliance.⁴⁷ The region faces a variety of security risks and divergent perceptions of these risks, unlike the European context where Russia is seen as the primary threat. This diversity makes it difficult to establish a unified front akin to an Asian NATO. Additionally, the creation of an Asian NATO-like structure comes with its own risks, particularly how it might enhance Chinese and North Korean threat perceptions.⁴⁸ Neither would an Asian NATO solve the fundamental reassurance problem associated with extended deterrence, given that it would still rely on the US nuclear umbrella.

Australian security analyst Sam Roggeveen argues that there has already been an implicit US retrenchment from the region.⁴⁹ The United States has maintained almost exactly the same level of forces in the region since the end of the 1990s, even as China has modernised and increased the size of its military and North Korea has become a nuclear-armed state. Although this argument may underestimate the extent to which US military capabilities are also qualitative in nature, when measured in quantitative terms, the relative balance of power has begun to tip out of the United States' favor, despite attempts to 'pivot to Asia'. Concurrent with this process, the United States has encouraged its allies to acquire more conventional capabilities, either by purchasing US products, or develop their own missile programs.

Since the end of the INF Treaty in particular, there has been an increased interest in long(er)-range strike capabilities among these allies. With technological improvements, these conventional capabilities can provide enough accuracy to reliably target adversary nuclear forces. In a sense, this is a de facto alternative security arrangement that US allies are pursuing in the region to mitigate against the risks of US retrenchment. APLN and ELN have noted the implications of this development in a previous policy brief.⁵⁰

Given that US presence and extended deterrence still constitutes a fundamental cornerstone of allied risk perception and management in the region, the greatest risk that US retrenchment poses is not

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just increased insecurity, but decreased predictability. Without a stable US presence, the policies of adversaries could become more aggressive, and the policies of partners could become more unpredictable. For example, where policymakers in Tokyo could previously trust Washington to rein in escalatory policy measures taken in Seoul, that expectation would not necessarily hold under a different US administration. Indeed, as concerns about US credibility are rising in South Korea, its policies are becoming riskier too. In October 2023, the South Korean defence minister said: “in case of North Korean provocation, I will take action *immediately, strongly and until the end* to shred the enemy’s will and capacity to make further threats [emphasis added].”⁵¹

Deterrence takes pre-eminence over multilateral arrangements

There is some scepticism towards the ability of the nuclear non-proliferation regime to manage risks, especially among non-governmental experts. Overwhelmingly, interviewees indicated that they saw both conventional and nuclear deterrence as more important to ensure stability in the Asia-Pacific than the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The potential for other types of multilateral security arrangements to emerge in the region is low. An often-proposed suggestion is to build a cooperative security architecture, similar to the Helsinki Process.⁵² However, the salience of nuclear weapons and threat of force makes development of a security community in a highly militarised Asia-Pacific challenging. One UK expert also considered the absence of nuclear weapons and development of a security community in the Asia-Pacific as problematic if states like China saw advantages in rearmament. As Schelling once observed: “lengthening the racecourse does not necessarily lessen the incentive to be first under the wire”.⁵³

For reasons similar to those that make an Asian NATO difficult – large geographical distances, the maritime nature of the Asia-Pacific region, and the different risk perceptions identified here – building any kind of security architecture is challenging in the Asia-Pacific. It is made more difficult by the huge cultural and political diversity of Asia, as China and North Korea would have to become a part of an Asian Helsinki-based security architecture too. As one participant in this project has pointed out, one of the most useful roles that the UK could play in either regard is to share its experience both with NATO, and with the Helsinki Process to support multilateral security frameworks in the Asia-Pacific. In the more immediate future, Brendan Taylor has proposed that Australia “should work in collaboration with other Asian middle powers” who have a similar interest in avoiding major power conflict given the unimaginable human and financial costs that such a conflict would likely entail.”⁵⁴

Participants generally endorsed the idea that deterrence should at least be balanced with assurances. An APLN-ELN policy brief discussed five challenges associated with issuing assurances of restraint (promises not to attack an adversary as long as certain conditions continued to be met). One such challenge was agreeing on red lines vis-à-vis China and North Korea. An actor’s drawing of

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red lines is clearly connected to that actor's risk perception: What behavior do I consider so risky that I will need to draw a line? Might drawing a line increase the risk I want to reduce? The implication of the varying risk perceptions between Japan and South Korea in particular, is that they likely disagree on where to draw their redlines with regards to North Korea. To some extent, this is clear from Japanese officials' comments that South Korea's offensive strike doctrine could "raise the stakes", Japan would likely prefer that South Korea chose a more measured approach to its conventional deterrence posture, to avoid nuclear escalation – which would also be in South Korea's interest. How can Japan communicate this concern to South Korea, and is there enough trust between the two countries that South Korea would even listen?

While the project has sought to analyse perceptions of escalation risks in a structured manner, it has not done the same for perceptions of the risk of US retrenchment. It is therefore difficult to conclude whether fear of US retrenchment correlate with – or causes – fear of Chinese or North Korean aggression. Discussions with experts and officials from all four countries indicate that this may be the case, even as they seek to play down the risk.

In summary, there is some degree of consensus among the four countries on the risk of escalation in the Taiwan Strait – although views diverged on the impact of the threat – while opinions diverge between South Korea and the others regarding escalation risks on the Korean Peninsula. The critical role of the United States as a policy coordinator is emphasised by all countries, who rely on American alliance managers to set the agenda and provide extended deterrence priorities. Despite this reliance, some states question US reliability and hence seek to enhance their conventional capabilities. The emphasis on deterrence – both nuclear and conventional – tends to diminish the appeal of inclusive multilateral approaches to maintaining stability in favor of smaller, purpose-built 'minilateral' configurations.⁵⁵ However, given the limited experience these four countries have with managing minilateral security discussions, especially absent the United States, the question arises: how should they go about it? We offer a few preliminary recommendations.

The path forward

There is a clear need for the three Asia-Pacific countries, and a clear interest on part of the UK, to enhance their policy coordination, and align and understand each other's risk perceptions, both in terms of the likelihood that a risk will materialise and the consequence that would follow should a risk materialise. To this end, we offer the following suggestions for how the four security partners can improve their policy coordination.

Increasing alertness: Continuously reassess strategic risks and remain aware of 'moving targets'

In the rapidly evolving strategic landscape in Northeast Asia, it is necessary to continuously reassess strategic risks. Multi-year projects at the Track 2 and Track 1.5 level that engage security partners in on-going re-assessments risks are necessary because rapid changes create 'moving targets'. Annual surveys that measure perceptions of escalation risks and record military developments, from policymakers and officials with continuous forward projection over five, ten, and fifteen-year (or longer) timespans would provide useful basis for comparison and adjustment of policies.

Regional countries are investing in a range of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) that will impact both deterrence and assurance dynamics in the coming years. While some work is being done to assess the consequences of EDTs on strategic stability, there is little understanding of how they might impact policy coordination and conflict de-escalation, particularly in a multi-actor environment. Modelling some of these interplays could help to improve policy coordination and could also be a confidence-building measure with Chinese experts.

Coordination: Enhance capacity-building and networking among experts

There is a need for analytical capacity-building on how to address deterrence challenges, especially dialogues that aim to increase predictability among security partners, and dialogues on the types of assurances that are needed to reduce tensions with China and North Korea. This recommendation was made in a previous APLN-ELN policy brief, published as a part of this project.⁵⁶ However, such capacity-building should not be solely focused on deterrence policies. Given the ascendance of deterrence as the preferred tool of risk reduction, it is increasingly important to enhance understanding of how legal and normative frameworks such as the nuclear non-proliferation regime can have a positive influence on strategic stability.

The three Asia-Pacific countries could all benefit from more specific understanding of each other's thinking about risks, and resulting decision-making in a crisis. Scenario-based table-top exercises could inform such understanding, though these should initially be conducted between experts in a Track-II format, to avoid giving the impression of belonging to the kind of tabletop wargaming exercises that the United States and South Korea regularly conduct on the Korean Peninsula. The UK, in its capacity as a convening power, could host such games in a relatively neutral location. Such exercises could play out scenarios under different

conditions of US retrenchment, and test the participants' responses to various signals from Chinese or North Korean leadership.⁵⁷ While scenario-based games are not predictive of actual events, they could help identify where the countries might disagree on diplomatic responses; their respective red lines for using force; and necessary lines of communication.

Updating the security agenda: Bring North Korea back

There is also a need to continue to seriously address the risks stemming from North Korea's nuclear activities, which (except in Seoul) tend to get eclipsed by the China challenge. North Korea's relative disappearance from the national security agendas in Australia, Japan, the UK, as well as the United States appears to have cultivated a sense of resignation in South Korea that it must 'go it alone'. While this project has not specifically investigated the domestic debate about South Korea's nuclear armament, increased attention from important security partners might serve to relax some of the proliferation pressures on Seoul. Bringing North Korea back on the security agenda could engender more understanding in Canberra, London, and Tokyo for Seoul's fear of Pyongyang's intentional escalation or nuclear use. At the same time, these three partners can also seek to temper risk factors that drive unintentional escalation, such as Seoul's pre-emptive strike posture. In short, bringing North Korea back on the agenda can yield more detailed analysis and common understandings of risky behaviours.

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