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Strategic Stability and Nuclear Salience

Japan, South Korea, and Extended Deterrence in the Third Nuclear Age

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JOEL PETERSSON IVRE

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Front page:
Fighter aircraft from the US 8th Fighter Wing, Japan, and South Korea conduct a trilateral escort flight of a US B-52 Bomber on April 2, 2024 (US Air Force, Karla Parra).

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Acknowledgements

This report explores Japanese and South Korean views of strategic stability and nuclear weapons. It is the result of interviews and conversations conducted with experts and officials in Tokyo and Seoul between November 2024 and January 2025. The author is grateful to these anonymous individuals for sharing their frank and honest opinions which are cited in-text throughout this report. The author would also like to direct particular thanks to Nobumasa Akiyama and Jun Bong-geun who helped advise this report, to Frank O'Donnell for his editing and review, and to Manpreet Sethi for her helpful comments. The author is also grateful to Fei Su and Jingdong Yuan at Stockholm Peace Research Institute who provided an opportunity to present a draft of the report, and to Agust Börjesson and colleagues at the Institute for Security and Development policy who provided useful feedback.

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STRATEGIC STABILITY AND NUCLEAR SALIENCE: JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA, AND EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN THE THIRD NUCLEAR AGE

April 2025

Joel Petersson Ivre

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Executive Summary

STRATEGIC STABILITY AND NUCLEAR SALIENCE: JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA, AND EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN THE THIRD NUCLEAR AGE

Joel Petersson-Ivre

The world is entering the Third Nuclear Age, marked by multipolarity and a shift in power dynamics. Japan and South Korea perceive a diminishing American nuclear umbrella and a weakening non-proliferation regime, and they are reevaluating the role of nuclear weapons in their security strategies. This report explores how Japan and South Korea perceive strategic stability and how their understanding of the threats they face – and the strategies they employ to deal with those threats – impact the global nuclear order.

Strategic stability lacks a universally agreed-upon definition and has various interpretations. While some focus on preventing nuclear first strikes, others consider a broader range of factors, including non-nuclear capabilities like conventional weapons and emerging technologies. Traditionally, this concept was applied to the relationship between the United States and Soviet. In the Third Nuclear Age however, China is emerging as third nuclear superpower, and there is greater number of smaller nuclear powers as well. But there is also a "small-m" multipolar aspect to the Third Nuclear Age that has received comparatively less attention: the role that non-nuclear armed allies of nuclear-armed powers play in shaping the global nuclear order and strategic stability.

Japanese and South Korean views of strategic stability

While Japanese scholars are familiar with the concept of strategic stability, its application to the modern geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia remains debated. The stability-instability paradox, where stability at the strategic level could lead to instability on the regional level, is a major concern for Japan. Japanese officials are concerned about the United States' ability to simultaneously deter multiple adversaries, potentially impacting the credibility of extended deterrence. To compensate for perceived US overstretch, Japan aims to create a denial posture through increased conventional capabilities and partnerships with likeminded countries. While recognizing that it must reduce overdependence on the United States, Japan finds it hard to envision regional security without the crucial role of the United States, viewing it as a "linchpin" for meaningful cooperation with other partners.

South Korean views of strategic stability prioritise predictability, viewing it as crucial for economic prosperity. The concept of strategic stability is either used in a broad general way, or in a limited geographical sense, encompassing only the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's relationship with Russia is an emerging concern, as it could embolden North Korea to take actions perceived to undermine stability on the Korean Peninsula. South Korean experts are particularly concerned about the potential for a North Korean-Russian

nuclear alliance and the risk of adventurism being seen as profitable. While South Korea acknowledges the importance of the US-China strategic competition, there is a reluctance to fully support US deterrence efforts against China, particularly regarding the deployment of US Forces Korea (USFK) outside the Korean Peninsula. This reluctance stems from concerns about arms race stability, crisis stability, and the potential impact on South Korea's relationship with China. For this reason, it remains a subject of debate in South Korea whether it has a deterrence relationship or not with China.

Japan and South Korea face a similar threat environment, but their different views of strategic stability shape their views of their own strategic roles in the region. They both seek to hedge and tie the United States closer to the region, but they place different emphasis on these strategies: South Korea – especially under progressive administrations – is more prone to hedging and envisioning a region without a significant US presence; Japan – even when it is ostensibly hedging – consistently seeks to keep the United States involved in the region at all costs.

Extended deterrence and nuclear salience

These approaches to the United States are particularly pronounced in the ways that they negotiate the nuclear aspects of their respective alliance and extended deterrence relationships with the United States. Extended deterrence can be conceptualised as an ongoing, continuous negotiation between the nuclear patron and the non-nuclear ally over the development, deployment and employment of nuclear capabilities. Introduction of new and more advanced, visible or destructive capabilities are generally more controversial because they change the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance, and they thus generate more *nuclear salience*, defined here as the general level of intensity and attention that policy elites perceive that they need to dedicate to a given nuclear policy option.

Nuclear salience pursued by US allies		*Technical capabilities*	
		US deterrent perceived as credible	**US deterrent perceived as not credible**
Political intentions	**US assurance perceived as credible**	Negative or low salience	Low to moderate salience
	US assurance perceived as not credible	Moderate to high salience	High salience

Allies pursue **negative or low salience** when they are content with the patron's capability and willingness to protect them. In the case of Japan and South Korea, US capability is evidenced by a favourable military balance against adversaries, a reliable US second

strike capability, and relatively strong warfighting ability of US-ally joint forces. They assess US willingness to defend them based on positive political statements to that effect. They may take pro-disarmament positions – like Japan did and continues to do – or make special non-proliferation commitments – like South Korea did in the 1990s. While neither country made any effort to dispense of their nuclear umbrella altogether in the 1990s and early 2000s, the salience of extended deterrence in both alliance relationships diminished briefly.

Allies pursue **low to moderate salience** when they perceive a negative regional military balance, weakening credibility of extended deterrence commitments, but remain sure that the alliance patron is still politically committed to their defence. In this position, Japan and South Korea argue for strengthened US nuclear capabilities, chiefly to support escalation dominance. They may not necessarily push for higher salience, such as redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons or nuclear sharing because the US political willingness to defend them is still seen as sufficient without such assurances.

Japan and South Korea began to shift towards this position as China's military build-up and North Korea's nuclear tests heightened concerns about strategic stability, leading to increased engagement with the United States on extended deterrence. This engagement, manifesting in dialogues and exercises, aimed to strengthen the credibility of US deterrence and security guarantees. While allies welcome US capability enhancements, they also advocate for conventional-nuclear integration to bolster deterrence credibility. In either case, their approaches to the alliance made nuclear weapons more salient in the alliance than before.

Allies pursue **moderate to high salience** when they perceive the nuclear patron's deterrent as technically credible, but harbour doubts about the patron's intention to use that deterrent. In this negotiating position, moderate increases of salience include further integration and institutionalisation to "lock in" the US commitment, offers to share burden of defence to make the political commitment easier for the United States. In this position, they also argue for approaches with higher nuclear salience, such as redeployment of US capabilities, or nuclear sharing, and become more likely to discuss independent nuclear armament as long as it does not come at the expense of the alliance. They may also seek a "technical deterrent" as a hedge against sudden withdrawal of extended deterrence assurances. These negotiating positions characterised Japanese and South Korean approaches to extended deterrence from the first Trump administration until today, and have made nuclear weapons a salient policy issue in both countries.

Finally, allies pursue **high salience** when they perceive the nuclear patron's political commitment as uncredible, and no capability enhancement or integration can make it so within a relevant time-period. In this position, Japan and South Korea may abandon negotiation entirely and seek independent nuclear armament or some alternative form of security arrangement. Neither Japan nor South Korea have assumed this negotiating position, but some – especially in South Korea – argue that the US nuclear deterrent is

not sufficiently credible to deter North Korea, and do not trust US intentions either. In either case, such moves to permanently high salience of nuclear weapons would only materialise in case of an actual US withdrawal from the region.

Today, policies implemented between the United States and Japan and South Korea display moderate nuclear salience, with South Korea pushing more actively for higher nuclear salience.

Implications

This report notes three implications of Japanese and South Korean efforts to increase nuclear salience for crisis stability, arms race stability and arms control:

Nuclear salience affects deployment of conventional capabilities and undermines crisis stability: Nuclear salience leads to enhanced conventional postures to compensate for perceived shortfalls in nuclear deterrence. While this may in some cases strengthen strategic stability, it could negatively impact crisis stability due to the potential for misinterpretation and rapid response pressures, and difficulty to distinguish conventional from nuclear capabilities.

Nuclear salience begets nuclear salience, justifies proliferation and undermines arms race stability: Extended deterrence, while historically successful in containing proliferation, may become a driver of nuclear proliferation in the Third Nuclear Age because it reinforces the notion that nuclear weapons are the ultimate security guarantee, leading to a reliance on them and potential proliferation. These implications are noticeable both in East Asia and in Europe today.

Nuclear salience undermines arms control efforts and underscores the need for new non-proliferation tools for a multipolar world: In a multipolar world, traditional non-proliferation tools may not be sufficient to prevent nuclear proliferation. Economic interdependence and the collective reaction of states opposed to nuclear weapons could be powerful deterrents. The empowerment of the Global South in the Third Nuclear Age could be a necessary part of a new multipolar approach to non-proliferation.

As the world is entering the Third Nuclear Age, and nuclear weapons are regaining salience, there is an urgent need for policymakers to not just consider how old familiar concepts of previous nuclear eras can be applied to a new and unfamiliar world, but also how these concepts created this world in the first place. Measures taken to enhance strategic stability in the past, such as the practice of extended deterrence, pose new challenges to strategic stability in the present.

Introduction

STRATEGIC STABILITY AND NUCLEAR MULTIPOLARITY

The world is entering the Third Nuclear Age. Nuclear weapons are regaining salience in public debates and national security policies, and experts and governments are debating how old familiar concepts of previous nuclear eras can be applied to a new and unfamiliar world. This is a world that is more multipolar than at any point in time during the previous nuclear ages. Power is no longer shared between two major powers as it was during the First Nuclear Age; nor is it accumulated in a single major power, as it was during the Second Nuclear Age. Today, more than at any point in nuclear history can we speak of nuclear multipolarity – there are more nuclear-armed states now than at any point in history. At the same time, they possess fewer nuclear weapons than at the peak of the Cold War, much thanks to the arms control treaties of the nuclear ages past, as well as the development of more precise and accurate delivery systems, that have lessened the need for massive nuclear yields.

There is also a "small-m" aspect of nuclear multipolarity. Since the First Nuclear Age, non-nuclear states like Japan and South Korea have contemplated the role of nuclear weapons in their respective defence postures. At different points in time, they have even signalled or pursued nuclear weapons themselves. They have been kept from doing so by international norms and treaties, most prominently the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is undeniable, however, that the American nuclear umbrella – the promise of nuclear protection in exchange for nuclear forbearance – played a significant role in coaxing both countries into the NPT in the First Nuclear Age. It has continued to play that role until today.

But now, Japan and South Korea find themselves at the intersection of these multipolar trends: American ability and willingness to use its power is diminishing and the non-proliferation regime that it has underwritten is tethering at the edge of collapse. China is looking to become the third nuclear pole in the emerging nuclear order. Consequently, there is increasingly vocal support for various nuclear pathways in both countries, such as nuclear sharing arrangements with the United States, (re-)deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, and even independent nuclear acquisition. It remains true that Japan and South Korea are states who are "embracing non-nuclear technologies to meet nuclear security challenges."[1] Even without going down any of the nuclear pathways under debate, both countries have vastly greater capability to affect regional and strategic stability than they had during the First Nuclear Age, or the decades after its end (the Second Nuclear Age).

[1] Andrew Futter et al., *The Global Third Nuclear Age: Clashing Visions for a New Era in International Politics* (Taylor & Francis, 2025), 3.

It is thus important to assess how both countries understand their role in the emerging nuclear order, and how they can affect it. That assessment is the purpose of this report, which is divided into two parts. The first part will explore how Japan and South Korea are shaped by the global nuclear order: How do Japan and South Korea think about strategic *stability* in general, and how does that influence what threats they seek to deter, and how they seek to deter them? The second part of the report will explore how Japan and South Korea seek to shape the global nuclear order as non-nuclear armed allies under the US nuclear umbrella, by advocating for more (or less) *nuclear salience*. The report argues that allied pro-nuclear policies emerge from specific perceptions of the United States' ability and willingness to uphold vital aspects of strategic stability. Finally, the third part of the report notes some implications for strategic stability and the global nuclear order that flow from Japan and South Korea's efforts to increase nuclear salience. It notes that nuclear salience affects the deployment of conventional capabilities, justifies further nuclear proliferation, and raises the urgent need to develop new non-proliferation tools for a multipolar world.

Chapter 1

DEFINING STRATEGIC STABILITY

Despite *strategic stability* being the organising concept of nuclear deterrence thinking in the United States since the early days of the Cold War, it does not have a single agreed-upon definition. In her comprehensive discussion on delineating the concept in the US-Russia context, Sarah Bidgood calls it "a floating signifier" which any meaning can be ascribed to, depending on the speaker.[2] Pavel Podvig (also cited by Bidgood) argues that the concept has "virtually no practical value."[3] James Acton cites the US Secretary of Defense's representative to the negotiations for the New Strategic Arms Treaty (New START), Edward Warner, who observed that the term "strategic stability" is used in three broad ways:

> most narrowly, strategic stability describes the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first (crisis stability) and the absence of incentives to build up a nuclear force (arms race stability); more broadly, it describes the absence of armed conflict between nuclear-armed states; and most broadly, it describes a regional or global security environment in which states enjoy peaceful and harmonious relations."[4]

Cold War-era scholars generally favoured the first interpretation of strategic stability as "a characteristic of deterrence based on mutual assured destruction … measured largely in terms of the potential vulnerability of strategic force components, notably land-based missiles."[5] Today, US experts such as Matthew Kroenig continue to adhere to this understanding: "strategic stability is a situation in which nuclear-armed states lack the incentive to conduct a nuclear first strike."[6] For the purposes of this report this definition might be thought of as the "traditional American" understanding of strategic stability, because it is rooted in American thinking during the Cold War – thinking that was not necessarily shared by the Soviet Union.[7]

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[2] Sarah Bidgood, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About US-Russia Strategic Stability', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 6, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 9, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2023.2221486.
[3] Pavel Podvig, cited in Bidgood, 9.
[4] James M. Acton, 'Reclaiming Strategic Stability', STRATEGIC STABILITY: (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2013), 117–18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12086.7.
[5] John D. Steinbruner, 'National Security and the Concept of Strategic Stability', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 22, no. 3 (1 September 1978): 411, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200277802200303.
[6] Matthew Kroenig, 'Strategic Stability in the Third Nuclear Age', *Atlantic Council* (blog), 7 October 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/strategic-stability-in-the-third-nuclear-age/.
[7] David S. Yost, *Strategic Stability in the Cold War: Lessons for Continuing Challenges*, Proliferation Papers / IFRI, Departement Des Etudes de Securite (Paris: IFRI, 2011).

As Warner's first definition of strategic stability indicates, the concept can be broken down into two conditions: *arms race stability* – "the condition wherein neither party to an arms competition will press military developments or deployments in quest of major advantage, because such advantage is judged to be unattainable, however desirable"[8]; and *crisis stability*, "a quality of strategic relations: during periods of acute crisis, instruments of war (mechanical, electronic, organizational) should not be the immediate cause of war."[9] James Acton has argued that the delineation between arms race stability and crisis stability muddles the concept, and that the two conditions are two sides of the same coin. In his view, the difference between arms race and crisis instability is that arms races play out between two nuclear-armed actors over long time-scales (months or years), while crises tend to play out over shorter time scales (weeks or days, hours or even minutes). From this understanding, Acton derives a different definition:

> A deterrence relationship is stable if neither party has or perceives an incentive to change its force posture out of concern that an adversary might use nuclear weapons first in a crisis.[10]

Although many definitions stress the importance of disincentivising first use, Elbridge Colby (now nominee for US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy) has omitted this aspect, arguing that strategic stability entails "a situation in which no party has an incentive to use nuclear weapons save for vindication of its vital interests in extreme circumstances."[11] In other words, strategic stability can still accommodate first strikes under certain extreme conditions.

Another feature of the traditional understanding of strategic stability is that it only relates to military nuclear dynamics. However, as Kroenig notes:

> decades ago, the term strategic forces was synonymous with nuclear weapons; now it refers to weapons with potential strategic effect such as missile defenses, advanced conventional strike including hypersonic missiles, cyber and space capabilities, artificial intelligence, and more.[12]

Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala call the emerging role of strategic non-nuclear weapons a "paradigm shift" which require a reconceptualisation of nuclear risks in the Third Nuclear Age.[13] This paradigm shift is prominently reflected in the first Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in 2018, which speaks about "non-

[8] Colin S. Gray, 'Strategic Stability Reconsidered', *Daedalus* 109, no. 4 (1980): 135.
[9] Gray, 135.
[10] Acton, 'Reclaiming Strategic Stability', 128.
[11] Elbridge Colby, 'Defining Strategic Stability: Reconciling Stability and Deterrence', Strategic Stability (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2013), 55, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12086.5.
[12] Kroenig, 'Strategic Stability in the Third Nuclear Age'.
[13] See: Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, 'Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons and the Onset of a Third Nuclear Age', *European Journal of International Security* 6, no. 3 (August 2021): 257–77, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.2.

nuclear strategic attack."[14] Further underlining the notion that this is an evolution from the traditional American definition, Heather Williams argues that "With this NPR, the United States has finally updated its approach to strategic stability to more closely resemble that of Russia and to include non-nuclear capabilities, such as conventional weapons and emerging technology, particularly cyber as factors in crisis stability and arms race stability."[15] In sum then, the modern understanding of strategic stability is no longer preoccupied solely with the issue of nuclear first strike.

Strategic stability as seen from Japan and South Korea

Nuclear multipolarity is another unique feature of the Third Nuclear Age. The nuclear order has technically been "multipolar" since the UK became the third state to acquire nuclear weapons in 1952. But the dominant roles that the United States and the Soviet Union, and their massive nuclear arsenals played in deterrence during the first and (to some extent) second nuclear ages meant that the nuclear order – and associated concepts such as strategic stability – was traditionally conceived as bipolar. With the growing influence of "regional nuclear powers"[16] (India, Pakistan, and North Korea), and with China's apparent build-up of its nuclear arsenal, relations between nuclear powers are becoming increasingly complex and multipolar.[17]

But there is also a "small-m" multipolar aspect to the third nuclear age that has received comparatively less attention. That is, the role that non-nuclear armed allies of nuclear-armed powers play in shaping the global nuclear order and strategic stability. Exploring these views is important, because these states can also possess various degrees of nuclear latency, and engage in nuclear hedging.[18] The objective of this section is to explore how two such states, Japan and South Korea understand strategic stability. Their respective understandings of strategic stability are undeniably affected by their status as "nuclear umbrella states", who are afforded protection by US extended nuclear deterrence. However, this status does not mean that they share the same understanding of nuclear deterrence in general, or strategic stability in particular. Tytti Erästö has argued that:

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[14] '2018 Nuclear Posture Review' (US Department of Defense, 2018), vii, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF. The term "non-nuclear strategic attack" does not appear in the 2010 NPR, see: '2010 Nuclear Posture Review' (US Department of Defense, 2010), https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/defensereviews/npr/2010_nuclear_posture_review_report.pdf.

[15] Heather Williams, 'Strategic Stability, Uncertainty, and the Future of Arms Control', *Survival*, 2018, 2, https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/98270537/SURVIVAL_NEW_STRATEGIC_STABILITY_AND_AC.pdf.

[16] Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era* (Princeton University Press, 2014), https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691159836/nuclear-strategy-in-the-modern-era.

[17] A previous APLN project has explored the "strategic chain" effect arising from the interplay between China, India and Pakistan in Southern Asia, see: Tanvi Kulkarni, 'Managing the China, India, and Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, Toda Peace Institute, 28 July 2022), https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Tanvi-Kulkarni_CIP-Report-Final.pdf.

[18] Nuclear latency refers to a state's capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons should it take the political decision to do so; nuclear hedging refers to specific behaviour by a state to use its latency status for deterrent, coercive, or compellent purposes.

"While there is a tendency for [nuclear umbrella states] to side with their nuclear-armed patron on matters related to nuclear weapons and nuclear disarmament norms, at times they have taken steps away from the allied mainstream position by advocating for *anti*-nuclear weapon policies [emphasis added]."[19] This report adds to this discussion, by seeking to show under what conditions Japan and South Korea advocate for various nuclear policies. Their advocacy often goes beyond the "allied mainstream position" in the sense that the allies argue for greater nuclear salience, which shifts the alliance in a *pro*-nuclear direction. For example, Japan and South Korea tend to oppose US adoption of policies intended to reduce nuclear salience, such as no first use and sole purpose, and advocate for policies that increase nuclear salience, such as US development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. These pro-nuclear policies emerge from specific perceptions of the United States' ability and willingness to uphold vital aspects of strategic stability. To make this argument, the following discussion will first seek to answer three questions for each country: How do they think about strategic stability? How does that thinking influence what they seek to deter? And how they seek to deter it?

Japanese views of strategic stability

In Japanese Defense White Papers, the term strategic stability does appear, but it refers almost exclusively to the way that Russia uses the term. In this way, the use of the term strategic stability in the Defense White Paper supports Russian thinking on the concept, but overall the Japanese understanding of strategic stability is solidly informed by American work on the subject.

Although the term does not see much official usage, Japanese scholars are generally well familiar with the concept of strategic stability. In one meta study on Japanese views of strategic stability, Takahashi Sugio details how seminal works on US nuclear deterrence theory were translated into Japanese in 1973, and Japanese authors published work on the topic throughout the Cold War and after. However, Sugio notes that there was little original Japanese work on the topic, and "the purpose of these publications was to introduce American thoughts on strategic stability to Japanese audiences."[20] At the same time, US air and naval superiority in the Pacific theater during the Cold War meant that there was no urgent reason for Japan to consider strategic stability between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The influence of American thinking on strategic stability appears to have led to a broad acceptance of the "traditional American" view of the concept, even as experts interviewed for this study disagree on whether the concept can be readily and usefully applied to the

[19] Tytti Erästö, 'The Role of Umbrella States in the Global Nuclear Order' (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 9 June 2023), 1, https://doi.org/10.55163/VYBU7480.
[20] Takahashi Sugio, 'Redefining Strategic Stability: A Japanese View', in *A Precarious Triangle U.S.-China Strategic Stability and Japan*, ed. James L. Schoff and Bin Li, 2017, 46, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/CP_321_Stability_WEB.pdf.

modern-day geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia.[21] One expert suggested that it solely describes the historical US-Soviet relationship, where near-parity existed between the nuclear arsenals of the two great powers. Another argued that it was not parity *per se* that contributed to US-Soviet strategic stability; strategic stability is not about a situation but a relationship between two stakeholders. "If one side says that strategic stability does not exist," they argued, "then strategic stability does not exist."

Stability-instability paradox

In the case of East Asia, strategic stability as understood by Japan is asymmetric, because China does not have enough capabilities to achieve mutual vulnerability with the United States yet. For that reason, China feels a large *disparity* at the strategic level. In the view of most Japanese experts, it is this strategic disparity which is driving the Chinese nuclear build-up. They fear that when China has accomplished sufficient parity with the United States to engage in arms control talks, the United States may accept mutual vulnerability with China, essentially ensuring stability at the strategic level, but creating instability at the regional level. This outcome – the stability-instability paradox – is a chief concern for the Japanese security community.[22] The first chapter of a recent publication from the National Institute of Defense Studies deals extensively with the question of "how strategic stability based on mutual vulnerability affects the situation at the sub-nuclear level of conflict," showing how the concept is acquiring renewed relevance in Japanese policy discussions.[23]

On the regional level, China may already have conventional capabilities that can deny the United States access to the region, which means that regional stability has to be achieved through a complex set of "understandings" between the two sides. To Japan, there is no clear answer how to achieve these kinds of understandings. Stability – broadly defined – has been debated between the United States and China, and while Washington has shown a keen interest in discussing issues of strategic stability with Beijing, a mutual understanding is yet to emerge. From the Chinese point of view stability is a more comprehensive concept, which is not just determined by conventional-nuclear dynamics but also political confidence and political will.[24] Notably, the Chinese understanding of

[21] A former Japanese diplomat argued that the traditional understanding of the concept is *too* American and Euro-centric; measuring stability in such concrete terms as parity – number of warheads, missiles, conventional capabilities – could be contrary to the strategic culture of East Asia, which places emphasis on ambiguity.
[22] In the early 2010s, the focus was more on the risk of "low-level conflict" with North Korea, see: Ken Jimbo, 'Extended Deterrence in the Japan-U.S. Alliance' (Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, 8 May 2012), https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/extended-deterrence-in-the-japan-u-s-alliance/.
[23] Mashahiro Kurita, 'Revisiting Strategic Stability: Focusing on Interactions between the Nuclear and Sub-Nuclear Levels of Conflict', in *New Horizons of the Nuclear Age*, ed. Sukeyuki Ichimasa, NIDS Perspectives 2, 2024, https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/perspectives/pdf/2024/3_eChapter01.pdf.
[24] Author's interview with Japanese security expert, 3 December 2024. For a discussion of the Chinese concept of strategic stability, see: David C. Logan, 'Chinese Views of Strategic Stability: Implications for

what constitutes acceptable strategic stability is premised upon its regional dominance. This understanding is diametrically opposed to the Japanese understanding, which is that stability is maintained by the United States remaining the preeminent power in the region, maintaining escalation dominance, and the power to dissuade adversaries from taking aggressive actions. A former Japanese diplomat put it straightforwardly: "strategic stability for Japan is when the United States is strong enough and determined enough to stop China, North Korea, or Russia from attacking Japan, whether by nuclear or conventional means."

The Japanese concern remains that any understanding on strategic stability between the United States and China that does not account for management of stability at the regional level (whether by deterrence or by arms control measures), will be detrimental to its core interests.[25] Narushige Michishita highlights the risk that China might use (or threaten to use) nuclear weapons on the operational or tactical level against Japan, to either prevent or punish Japanese assistance to Taiwan in a potential conflict. In this argument, Chinese use of nuclear weapons at the sub-strategic level would not necessarily affect stability on the strategic level, as long as the nuclear use was not aimed directly at US forces, but against Japanese, South Korean, or Taiwanese targets. As one Japanese expert noted "strategic" means the survival of the state. For the United States, stability at the theater level is not strategic, but it is so for Japan.

American overstretch and Japan's regional role

Japanese concerns are further compounded by the widespread perception that the United States is becoming overstretched. Officials have closely read the recently released "Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States", and in an interview, one senior official especially drew attention to the passage: "that the United States be able to deter Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict."[26] When asked whether the requirement to deter adversaries in multiple theaters at once created concern that the United States could be overstretched, and hence the credibility of extended deterrence be negatively affected, the official first responded directly: "No. We are confident." At this point however, the official made two points, that might suggest that they were not so confident after all: First, they admitted that US conventional means have been "wasted", specifically mentioning US Patriot and Tomahawk systems. The former was probably in reference to US provision of air-defense to Ukraine, while the latter probably concerned missiles used by the United States in strikes against the Houthi in Yemen. Then, the official directly invoked an argument by Elbridge Colby (since nominated as US Under Secretary for Defense Policy) that "the United States cannot do everything" which, the official admitted, "is not without an

U.S.-China Relations', *International Security* 49, no. 2 (1 October 2024): 56–96, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00495.

[25] Sugio, 'Redefining Strategic Stability: A Japanese View', 50–51.

[26] 'Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States' (US Department of Defense, 7 November 2024).

element of truth." The official seemed to approve of the argument Colby puts forward in the 2021 book *The Strategy of Denial*, that the United States focuses its limited capabilities on deterring China in the Indo-Pacific.[27]

One Japanese expert suggested that the three security documents that Japan published at the end of 2022 – the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program – reflected an ambition to create an "active denial posture", where Japan obtains enough capability to "deny China the prospect of operational success." Japan does not seek to match Chinese capabilities but ensure that China cannot succeed with any operation that it seeks to undertake. Geographically, this denial effort is focused on denying China operational success and disrupt the Chinese "operational sequence" in a potential invasion of Taiwan or aggression around the Senkaku Islands. It will do so through the combined capabilities of Japan and the United States (discussed in the next section), but also through its own independent capabilities.[28] For this reason, the Defense Buildup Program places particular focus on anti-ship missiles and torpedoes,[29] to create huge costs for China in the maritime battle space of the Indo-Pacific.

The recognition that the United States is overstretched appears to be one reason why Japan, to a much greater extent than South Korea (discussed below), views itself as regional actor, and seeks to bolster and compensate for the distraction of US capabilities elsewhere. A senior Japanese official invoked the words of former Prime Minister Nakasone, that Japan is an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" and acts as a "barrier" between China and the Pacific. This metaphor contrasts sharply with the popular description of South Korea's strategic predicament as a "shrimp between whales" or – in the words of one Korean expert – a "squeezed country." Where many South Koreans display reluctance or even unwillingness to intervene in a possible conflict in the Taiwan Strait, most Japanese defense planners assume that Japan will become involved from the start, and plan accordingly.[30]

Many in Japan recognise their overdependence on the United States, and some cast Japan's efforts to seek out "like-minded countries" in the region as an attempt to reduce that overdependence. To reduce reliance on the United States, Japan deepened its defense relationship with Australia in 2022, by providing a reciprocal access agreement to a country other than the United States for the first time. Soon thereafter, it struck a similar agreement with the UK, which followed the announcement of the Global Combat

[27] Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial* (Yale University Press, 2021).
[28] Nobumasa Akiyama, 'Strategic Risk Assessment in East Asia: A Japanese View' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network & European Leadership Network, April 2024), 11.
[29] 'Defense Buildup Program' (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 16 December 2022), 37–38, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf.
[30] See previous discussion by this author on different Japanese and South Korean perceptions of their role in Taiwan contingencies: Joel Petersson Ivre et al., 'Asia Pacific Flashpoints' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network & European Leadership Network, May 2024), 11–12, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Asia-Pacific-Flashpoints.pdf; see also discussion in *Like-Minded Allies? Indo-Pacific Partners' Views on Possible Changes in the U.S. Relationship with Taiwan* (RAND Corporation, 2023), https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA739-7.

Airpower Programme with the UK and Italy to produce next generation fighter jets. There was disagreement about the extent to which distant partners like the UK could be involved in the region. One senior official suggested that a stronger physical UK presence in the Indo-Pacific would be welcome, while one former diplomat argued that the UK could play a more important role in other theaters, such as ensuring that oil-shipment lanes, vital for Japan's energy security were kept open. However, others argued that seeking out likeminded partners is meant to solidify the US commitment to the Indo-Pacific, not hedge on US withdrawal.[31] Indeed, representatives of the Japanese defense industry, for example, have argued that overreliance on the United States has undermined the industry's competitiveness, even as key officials continue to push for more integration with the United States.[32] Similarly, a senior Japanese official suggested that Japan's renewed appreciation of Australia is motivated by its desire to join AUKUS Pillar II, Australia's joint partnership with the United States and the UK, which among other areas, entail work on coveted autonomous underwater capabilities. Such motivations underline the fact that without US involvement, Japan will not be able to achieve meaningful cooperation with other partners: "Would the Koreans and Japanese be eager to engage in military exercises without the United States?" asked one expert. "I doubt it. Washington is the linchpin."

South Korean views of strategic stability

As in Japan, South Korean policy practitioners who work closely with American counterparts on deterrence issues naturally tend to favour the traditional American understanding of strategic stability. However, Korean experts place more emphasis on *predictability* as an important aspect of strategic stability.[33] This understanding seems informed of the more comprehensive focus on stability that is found in South Korean official documents and policy, where the term strategic stability itself is not used at all. "Strategic" in the Korean lexicon is associated with policies that maximise South Korea's ability to take actions that support its economic prosperity.[34] Policy measures are considered "stabilizing" if they generate an environment that is conducive to this goal, and such measures can be, but are not necessarily, related to security and defense policy.

[31] Although not a Japanese perspective, Cheng-Chwee Kuik has made the case for the latter explanation, see: Kuik Cheng-Chwee, 'Navigating the Narratives of Indo-Pacific: "Rules," "Like-Mindedness", and "De-Risking" in the Eyes of Southeast Asia', 2023, 52–53, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1085043.
[32] Stew Magnuson, 'Japan Pushing Its Tech Companies to Partner with U.S. Defense Industry', *NTSA* (blog), 2 June 2023, https://www.ntsa.org/news-and-archives/2023/6/2/japan-pushing-its-tech-companies-to-partner-with-us-defense-industry.
[33] One Korean expert even argues that the "need to provide a predictability and transparency during an escalating period of tension or crises" constitutes a separate condition for strategic stability. See: Kuyoun Chung, 'Korean Peninsula and the Evolving Sino-US Strategic Stability in the Indo-Pacific', in *The Korean Peninsula and Indo-Pacific Power Politics*, ed. Jagannath Panda (Routledge, 2020), 113.
[34] See Sukhee Han, 'From Engagement to Hedging: South Korea's New China Policy', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 20, no. 4 (1 December 2008): 335–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270802507328.

For example, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy,

> presents a roadmap for an integrated regional diplomacy that would enable the ROK to contribute more to regional and global peace and stability. To achieve this goal, the ROK is strategically prioritizing the reinforcement of the norms- and rule-based order, and enhancing cooperation and solidarity with like-minded countries.[35]

Implicitly, strategic stability is defined as the absence of conflict and the presence of rules to guide state behaviour to make it more predictable. Several former diplomats interviewed for this report emphasized *comprehensiveness* as an important characteristic of strategic decision-making. Speaking of the ongoing debate in South Korea whether to provide arms directly to Ukraine (following North Korea dispatching troops to support Russia's war effort), a former diplomat argued that the South Korean government would need to take a "comprehensive assessment of all related factors" before making a decision. They added that,

> How the current pattern of escalating intervention in the Ukraine conflict – geographically distant but *strategically* close – ends up, will have huge implications for South Korea [emphasis added]… That conflict is related to the shifting geopolitical tectonic plates. It takes place at the faultline of the Global West and the Global East.[36]

The former diplomat pointed to the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and the East and South China Seas as specific hotspots that contribute to such unpredictability.[37]

Strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula

The main object of South Korea's deterrence efforts is North Korea, which is evident in South Korean experts' discussions of "strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula."[38] Strategic stability, in this understanding, is a condition of arms race and crisis stability that exists either between the ROK-US alliance on one side, and North Korea on the other;

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[35] '2023 Progress Report of the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy' (The Government of the Republic of Korea, December 2023), 4–5.
[36] Interview with former Korean diplomat, 22 November 2024.
[37] The "faultline" metaphor, suggesting natural phenomena beyond the country's control, is often employed by South Korean intellectuals when discussing these geographical hotspots, and stability writ large. See Joon Hyung Kim, 'South Korea's Strategic Autonomy: Maintaining Regional Stability Amid US-China Competition' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, May 2024), https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Joon-Hyung-Kim_27-May.pdf.
[38] See: Jina Kim, 'Strategic Stability on the Korean Peninsula: Dual Crisis and Risk Reduction Measures' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network & European Leadership Network, February 2024), https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-pacific-strategic-risks/strategic-stability-on-the-korean-peninsula-dual-crisis-and-risk-reduction-measures; Chungin Moon, 'There's more to security than deterrence', *Hankyoreh*, 20 February 2024, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1129096; Hyeongpil Ham and Manseok Lee, 'South Korea's Conventional Forces Buildup: The Search for Strategic Stability', *War on the Rocks* (blog), 16 April 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/south-koreas-conventional-forces-buildup-the-search-for-strategic-stability/.

alternatively, strategic stability is sometimes used simply as way of characterise inter-Korean relations and deterrence dynamics. As one Korean expert interviewed for a previous APLN report argued, "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."[39]

The drivers of North Korea's pre-emptive strike doctrine are contested. During the first Trump administration, South Korean analysts argued that North Korea would adopt a pre-emptive strike doctrine if it perceived that the United States would not come to South Korea's defence, and if South Korea's conventional forces were not sufficiently overwhelming to inflict unacceptable punishment on North Korea.[40] Yet, North Korea appears to have pursued a pre-emptive strike doctrine even with a credible US deterrent in the picture, as it laid out in the 2022 "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces",[41] which one Korean analyst likened to a "DPRK nuclear posture review."[42] The law drastically lowers the threshold on nuclear use by specifying five use conditions "that encompass almost all thinkable nuclear, non-nuclear, and political crisis situations."[43] In addition to the Nuclear Forces Law, North Korea has officially abandoned the goal of peaceful Korean unification. Korean experts are debating whether this signals a revisionist attempt to alter the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, or something else, such as weakening South Korean cultural influence. Those who favour the first argument argue that by essentially revoking from South Koreans the status of "fellow countrymen" it is building the "moral and ideological grounds to feel at ease aiming nuclear weapons at once-compatriots."[44]

North Korea's relationship with Russia is becoming an item of concern among South Korean experts. Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one expert was quick to draw attention to South Korea's extended deterrence relationship with the US, which Ukraine

[39] Joel Petersson Ivre et al., 'Asia-Pacific Flashpoints: Comparing Australian, Japanese, South Korean & UK Perceptions' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network & European Leadership Network, 29 May 2024), 14, https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-pacific-strategic-risks/asia-pacific-flashpoints-comparing-australian-japanese-south-korean-uk-perceptions.
[40] Manseok Lee and Sangmin Lee, 'North Korea's Choice of a Nuclear Strategy: A Dynamic Approach', *Defense & Security Analysis* 36, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 377–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2020.1858536.
[41] 'Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated', *KCNA*, 9 September 2022, https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1662687258-950776986/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated/.
[42] Sangkyu Lee, 'The Nuclear Force Policy Law: Implications for DPRK Command and Control', *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network* (blog), 18 October 2022, https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/the-nuclear-force-policy-law-implications-for-dprk-command-and-control.
[43] Bong-geun Jun, 'Comparing North Korea's Nuclear Forces Policy Laws', *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network* (blog), accessed 26 February 2025, https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/comparing-north-koreas-law-on-nuclear-forces-policy-2022-with-the-law-on-consolidating-the-position-of-nuclear-weapons-state-2013.
[44] Hong Min, cited in Jeongmin Kim, 'Why North Korea Declared Unification "Impossible," Abandoning Decades-Old Goal', *NK News*, 1 January 2024, https://www.nknews.org/2024/01/why-north-korea-declared-unification-impossible-abandoning-decades-old-goal/.

lacked. This key difference, the expert contended, undermined emergent arguments that North Korea could learn from Russia's "nuclear shadow" threat, which successfully guarded against direct Western intervention in Ukraine..[45] There is no consensus on this point, however, and some experts interviewed for this report believe that nuclear deterrence has been so useful for Russia that it may have affected how North Koreans think about their own nuclear weapons.

Still, South Koreans note that there are signs of Pyongyang learning nuclear lessons from Moscow's experience. The North Korea-Russia relationship has drawn Ukraine "strategically close" (in the words of the former diplomat quoted above), and South Koreans recognise the risk that with a new, and more revisionist major power to back it up, North Korea might become emboldened. South Korean experts note that North Korea has begun to adopt terms similar to strategic stability to legitimise its status as a nuclear power, and that North Korea uses Russia's status as a recognised nuclear power to bolster its own claim to that recognition. North Korean media has quoted Russian officials' praise for the DPRK-Russia strategic partnership treaty, which "contribute[s] to maintaining the strategic stability not only in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia but also in the rest of the world."[46] As the treaty entered into force in December 2024, North Korean media used the term directly: "The mighty DPRK-Russia relations based on the treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership will be a powerful security device that … guarantees international strategic stability."[47] The recognition of North Korea's nuclear power status is a sensitive topic to South Koreans, as evidenced by the strong reactions from South Korean experts and politicians to initial comments from President Trump and his defence secretary nominee that appeared to open up the possibility of granting North Korea that status.[48]

Beyond the enhancement of North Korea's international status, the comprehensive strategic partnership between North Korea and Russia points to long-term military cooperation. In the short term, this might include transfer of sensitive military technology, such as a reliable second-strike capability, ICBM re-entry vehicles, nuclear submarines, or satellite technology that could enhance North Korea's ability to strike against the US mainland. South Korean experts have warned of the risk of North Korean-Russian "nuclear alliance", and how it might embolden North Korea's use of nuclear blackmail. Such a deal might allow for strategic stability through mutual vulnerability between North

[45] Jina Kim, 'The Russia-Ukraine War and the DPRK: ROK and Allied Responses' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, May 2022), 5, https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Policy-Brief-No.-81-Jina-Kim.pdf.
[46] 'DPRK Embassy in Moscow Hosts Reception', *Rodong Sinmun*, 15 December 2024, https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/.
[47] 'Russia-N. Korea Treaty of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Takes Effect - KCNA', accessed 6 March 2025, https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/108291/.
[48] Ankit Panda, 'South Korea Doesn't Want North Korea Labeled as a Nuclear Power. It's Causing Friction With the United States.', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (blog), 23 January 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/01/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-npt-us-denuclearization-policy?lang=en.

Korea and the United States but lead to instability on the Korean Peninsula.[49] Such instability could be further exacerbated by North Korea's battlefield experience. South Korea's ambassador to the UN argued that

> this unprecedented military support from Pyongyang to Moscow will change the dynamic of geopolitics on both East and West sides of the Eurasian Continent. It will also have serious military and security impacts on the Korean Peninsula. By sending its troops to the battlefield, North Korea will gain combat experience of modern warfare for the first time since the Korean War.[50]

In the long term, one expert speculated whether Russia would intervene on North Korea's behalf on the Korean Peninsula, deeming it "unlikely, but not impossible."[51] A former Korean diplomat emphasised that depending on how the Ukraine conflict comes to a pause, there may be a danger that North Korea and Russia will draw the wrong lessons: that adventurism is profitable.

The US-China competition and South Korea's strategic flexibility

Korean experts assessing the regional security outlook beyond the Korean Peninsula itself – much like their Japanese colleagues – divide the East Asian security structure into two tiers, where the strategic competition between the United States and China takes place on the first tier. Just as Japanese experts are concerned that regional stability is strategic to Japan, but not to the United States, South Korean experts are concerned that strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula is strategic to South Korea, but not to its US ally.

There is an important distinction to be made between South Korea and Japan in this regard, however. For Japan, the challenge is to continue persuading the United States that further integration of the US-Japan alliance is in its strategic – existential – interest. This effort

[49] The stability instability paradox holds that stability on the strategic level might embolden the conventionally superior side to initiate conflict. Because South Korea is conventionally superior to North Korea but does not have revisionist aims, one Korean expert rejected the "stability-instability paradox" as a concept to characterise this outcome. They argued that it applies better to major power relations, and not the complicated entanglement of nuclear and conventional powers of various sizes and postures in Northeast Asia.

[50] Joon-kook Hwang, 'Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations', Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations, 30 October 2024, https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/un-en/index.do. South Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* published an interview with the Ukraine intelligence chief, advocating the same message, see: Chul-hwan Jung and Su-yeon Park, 'Exclusive: N. Korea's Combat Gains May Reshape East Asia's Security, Ukraine Intel Chief Warns', The Chosun Daily, 17 February 2025, sec. North Korea, https://www.chosun.com/english/north-korea-en/2025/02/17/GQCB3UC4YFHQTNG3QYGBSSTX3A/.

[51] The author implies, but does not directly raise the prospect of Russia restoring its extended nuclear deterrent to North Korea, see: Du-Hyeogn Cha, 'North Korea's Troop Deployment to the Ukraine War and Fomenting Hostility Toward South Korea', Issue Brief (Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 28 October 2024), 4, http://en.asaninst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Issue-Brief-Executive-Summary-North-Korea%E2%80%99s-Troop-Deployment-to-the-Ukraine-War-and-Fomenting-Hostility-Toward-South-Korea.pdf.

is easier for Japan, because it shares the US view of China as the main strategic threat in the region. Japan is thus willingly supporting US efforts on the strategic level.

In South Korea, given the focus on North Korea, there is no consensus on this point. Some experts argue that South Korea should give the United States its full support on the strategic level; others are more cautious. One expert who consults for the Korean government on strategic issues said: "the United States wants to focus on the first tier and integrate its allies. But for South Korea, this is not preferable for its security. It wants to focus on the second, regional tier." In other words, the debate on how South Korea should support the United States in its strategic competition with China is not settled, and this is expressed as a seeming reluctance to acknowledge any deterrence relationship between South Korea and China. For example, despite the Chinese sanctions that followed the installation of the THAAD in 2016, the South Korean government officially continues to dismiss THAAD's impact on strategic stability and argue that it is strictly intended to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula.

There is a reluctance in South Korea to support deterrence efforts against China. This is especially reflected in the ongoing debate on "strategic flexibility", which concerns whether US Forces Korea (USFK) should be able to deploy outside of the Korean Peninsula. The issue was debated intensely under the Noh Mo-hyun administration (2003-2008), and in 2006, the United States and South Korea struck an agreement which stated that:

> The ROK, as an ally, fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces in the ROK. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, the U.S. respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.[52]

This arrangement left some (likely intentional) ambiguity exactly under what conditions USFK might be diverted to other theatres. The USFK's involvement in a Taiwan contingency featured prominently in contemporary analysis, which argued that it could have a negative effect on arms race stability through the concomitant build-up of US power projection capabilities, as well as a negative effect on crisis stability, because "the frequent in-and-out of the USFK could give the wrong signal, especially to North Korea and but also to China when there is a high tension in the region."[53]

Two decades later, these concerns continue to resonate in South Korea as the US-China competition intensifies, and US pressure on South Korea to concede the USFK greater strategic flexibility is becoming apparent. Ironically, this pressure is partly driven by

[52] 'United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership', US Department of State Archive (Department of State. The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs., 19 January 2006), https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm.
[53] Soonkun Oh, 'The U.S. Strategic Flexibility Policy Prospects for the U.S.-ROK Alliance' (Naval Postgraduate School, 2006), 72–73.

Seoul's own enhancement of its independent capabilities to hedge *against* a weakened US security commitment. General Paul LaCamera, a recent USFK commander, compared the status of the US-ROK alliance with that of the "global" US-Japan alliance, arguing in his 2021 Senate confirmation hearing that "Given the global role of the U.S. military and, increasingly, the international reach of the South Korean military, opportunities are emerging for Alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula."[54] This framing embodies the idea that not only would USFK deploy outside the Korean Peninsula, but South Korean troops might do so as well. Critical South Korean media was quick to note that "Gen. Paul LaCamera's remarks appear to speak for the US mainstream opinion that South Korea needs to play a bigger military role in maintaining American hegemony."[55]

Not everyone in South Korea is so opposed to strategic flexibility. The Yoon Seok-yeol administration took significant steps in support of it. The Washington Declaration, signed between Yoon and President Biden in 2023 upgraded the alliance to the "global comprehensive strategic alliance", and references to the Taiwan Strait became more frequent during the Yoon administration, although it avoided directly mentioning China. The trilateral partnership with the United States and Japan strengthened South Korea's integration with US strategic efforts further.

Many Korean experts welcomed such integration, lamenting South Korea's "obsession" with North Korea. Even the majority of Korean experts who argued that North Korea constitutes the main threat to South Korea, conceded that more attention should be paid to China as a security threat. China's development of precision weapons that can strike US bases in South Korea means that the US Air Force can no longer dominate the airspace around the Korean Peninsula, as it did in the past, and that might affect the US's willingness or ability to respond to North Korean provocations. Meanwhile, one expert argued that China's development of a blue water navy, which will soon be able to outmatch the US Navy around the Korean Peninsula, means that South Korea needs to develop asymmetric anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities to support the United States.

With the political turmoil that followed President Yoon's martial law declaration in December 2024 (with attendant accusations from his conservative supporters of Chinese political interference), South Korea's continued commitment to strategic flexibility is once again in question. South Korean politician Lee Jae-myung, a potential presidential candidate for the South Korean progressives, has clearly stated his view on the issue:

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[54] Paul LaCamera, 'Advance Policy Questions for General Paul LaCamera, USA Nominee to Be Commander, United Nations Command, Commander, Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command, and Commander, United States Forces Korea', accessed 12 February 2025, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/GEN%20LaCamera%20APQs%2014%20May%202021%20(FINAL).pdf.

[55] 'USFK commander nominee: S. Korea-US alliance can cooperate beyond Korean Peninsula', Hankyoreh, accessed 12 February 2025, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/996001.html.

"Why do we interfere in cross-strait relations? Why do we care what happens to the Taiwan Strait? Shouldn't we just take care of ourselves?"[56] Prominent progressive intellectual (and former presidential advisor) Moon Chung-in has argued in support of a "transcending diplomacy in which South Korea and like-minded middle powers together engage in a multilateral preventive diplomacy to avoid the coming conflict between China and the U.S."[57] Moon's position illustrates both how South Korean discussions of strategic stability are inseparable from the more comprehensive Korean understanding of stability, and how South Korea's strategic flexibility remains an open question.

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In sum, although Japan and South Korea face a similar threat environment their different views of strategic stability shape their views of their own strategic roles in the region. They both seek to hedge and tie the United States closer to the region, but they place different emphasis on these strategies: South Korea – especially under progressive administrations – is more prone to hedging and envisioning a region without a significant US presence; Japan – even when it is ostensibly hedging – consistently seeks to keep the United States involved in the region at all costs. These tendencies are particularly pronounced in the ways that they negotiate the nuclear aspects of their respective alliance and extended deterrence relationships with the United States, which is the subject of the next chapter of this report.

[56] 'DP Chief Lee's "Xie Xie" Comment Sparks Controversy', accessed 12 February 2025, http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=184519.
[57] 'Korean Peninsula without USFK: South Korea Must Reckon with Trump's Foreign Policy', The Korea Times, 11 February 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/02/120_391852.html.

Chapter 2

NEGOTIATING EXTENDED DETERRENCE: JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA'S PURSUIT OF NUCLEAR SALIENCE UNDER THE NUCLEAR UMBRELLA

Extended deterrence is an accumulation of policies that the United States has put in place since October 1953, when the nuclear-armed USS Oriskany entered Yokosuka, the same month that South Korea and the United States signed their mutual defence agreement, and just a few months after end of the Korean War. US decisionmakers had debated the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield in Korea but eventually decided against it. However, there was recognition that the *threat* of nuclear use could itself pose a strong deterrent against further conflict. The purpose of USS Oriskany's visit to Japan was to shore up the fragile armistice and deter actions from North Korea or China that might rekindle the war. This was the beginning of extended nuclear deterrence in East Asia.[58]

Throughout the Cold War, the US extended deterrence commitment has meant the transit of nuclear armed vessels in Japanese and South Korean territorial waters, shows of force, and the deployment of nuclear weapons on the territories of both Japan and South Korea. Unlike in Europe, nuclear extended deterrence in East Asia has never entailed any nuclear sharing arrangements, where Japanese or South Korean pilots would be authorised to deliver US nuclear weapons against pre-approved targets. South Korea, on two occasions, pursued an independent nuclear capability, but was eventually dissuaded by the United States. Japan has used the threat of "going nuclear" as means of "leveraging latency" and exert pressure on the United States to make particular concession, but there is no evidence that Japan ever pursued a nuclear program in the same way that South Korea did.[59]

Extended deterrence can be conceptualised as an ongoing, continuous negotiation between the nuclear patron and the non-nuclear ally over the development, deployment and employment of nuclear capabilities. Introduction of new and more advanced, visible or destructive capabilities are generally more controversial because they change the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance, and they thus generate more *nuclear salience*, defined here as the general level of intensity and attention that policy elites perceive that they need to dedicate to a given nuclear policy option.[60] By contrast, once an option has been introduced, salience may diminish over time as the policy option becomes a part of the status quo. Japan's reprocessing capabilities, online for decades, do not generate much

[58] Masakatsu Ota, 'Conceptual Twist of Japanese Nuclear Policy: Its Ambivalence and Coherence Under the US Umbrella', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 193–208, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1459286.
[59] Tristan A. Volpe, *Leveraging Latency: How the Weak Compel the Strong with Nuclear Technology*, Disruptive Technology and International Security (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).
[60] While the opinion of the general public is an important aspect of issue salience as well, this paper analyses only views of policy elites, experts and officials, see: Eleonora Mattiacci, 'How Nuclear Issue Salience Shapes Counterproliferation', *Global Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (20 September 2021): 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab026.

salience (at least not in relation to the role of nuclear weapons), while South Korea's debate on introducing the same kind of capabilities do.

Various policy options for nuclear capability introduction can be arranged along a one-dimensional scale from high to low (and negative) salience, as in Table 1.

DEGREE OF NUCLEAR SALIENCE	POLICY OPTIONS IN NORTHEAST ASIA
High nuclear salience *Policies that fundamentally **change** the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance.*	Ally's independent nuclear acquisition Nuclear sharing Redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons
Moderate nuclear salience *Policies that **substantively increase** the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance.*	Nuclear hedging Conventional-nuclear integration Advocating for nuclear patron's nuclear capability enhancement
Low nuclear salience *Policies that **incrementally increase** the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance.*	Regular meetings of working-level or cabinet-level officials
Negative nuclear salience *Policies that **decrease** the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance.*[61]	Sole Purpose No First Use Nuclear disarmament advocacy

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT DEGREES OF NUCLEAR SALIENCE

From the allies' point of view, the United States's negotiating position is determined by the strategic stability factors discussed in the previous section. These factors affect the US intent and capability to extend protection to its allies. The allies' independent bilateral negotiating position with the United States is determined by how effectively they perceive the US to be executing the simultaneous tasks of presenting a credible deterrent to their adversaries, and a credible assurance to the allies. The more positively the allies evaluate the United States ability to carry out these tasks, the lower salience they pursue, the more negative the evaluation, the higher the salience.

Allies pursue **negative or low salience** when they are perfectly content with the patron's capability and willingness to protect them. In the case of Japan and South Korea, US capability is evidenced by a favourable military balance against adversaries, a reliable US second strike capability, and relatively strong warfighting ability of US-ally joint forces. They assess US willingness to defend them based on positive political statements to that effect. Although allies may take drastic action and completely abandon extended deterrence (as New Zealand arguably did in the 1980s), they may take pro-disarmament positions – like Japan – or make special non-proliferation commitments – like South

[61] As these measures are not the focus of this paper, we leave this category somewhat underdeveloped.

Korea. Japan and South Korea held these positions during the first 15 years after the end of the Cold War.

Allies pursue **low to moderate salience** when they perceive a negative regional military balance, weakening credibility of extended deterrence commitments, but remain sure that the alliance patron is still politically committed to their defence. In this position, Japan and South Korea argue for strengthened US nuclear capabilities, chiefly to support escalation dominance. They may not necessarily push for higher salience, such as redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons or nuclear sharing because the US political willingness to defend them is still seen as sufficient without such assurances. The allies began to shift towards this position from the second Bush administration, through the Obama administration, and adopted it to some extent during the Biden administration.

Allies pursue **moderate to high salience** when they perceive the nuclear patron's deterrent as technically credible, but harbour doubts about the patron's intention to use that deterrent. In this negotiating position, moderate increases of salience include further integration and institutionalisation to "lock in" the US commitment, and defence burde-sharing offers to share burden of defence to make the political commitment easier for the United States. In this position, they also argue for approaches with higher nuclear salience, such as redeployment of US capabilities, or nuclear sharing, and become more likely to discuss independent nuclear armament as long as it does not come at the expense of the alliance. They may also seek a "technical deterrent" as a hedge against sudden withdrawal of extended deterrence assurances. This approach characterised their positions during the first Trump administration, and – given the likelihood of Trump's return – was also evident during the Biden administration.

Allies pursue **high salience** when they perceive the nuclear patron's political commitment as uncredible, and no capability enhancement or integration can make it so within a relevant time-period. In this position, Japan and South Korea may abandon negotiation entirely and seek independent nuclear armament or some alternative form of security arrangement. Neither Japan nor South Korea have assumed this negotiating position, but some – especially in South Korea – argue that the US nuclear deterrent is not sufficiently credible to deter North Korea, and do not trust US intentions either.

The above must be caveated to say that it is difficult to speak of a consensus of any of these approaches to nuclear salience within each ally's government or strategic community. This is so for four reasons. First, opinions both within and between Japan and South Korea naturally differ. Second it is difficult to distinguish US capabilities from US intentions.[62] Third, there are differing views of what constitutes a credible political

[62] The second and third positions are easily conflated, because they often lead to similar deliverables, such as greater US investment in low-yield nuclear weapons, re-deployment of nuclear weapons to the region, or nuclear sharing. The logic that underpins them, however, is different: in the second position, the "credible" intentions of the US are exploited to obtain the deliverables; in the third position, obtaining the deliverables is seen as an expression of US credible intentions.

commitment or a sufficiently credible capability, both among policy practitioners in either state, but also between them and US policy practitioners. Fourth, the complex, time-consuming and path-dependent nature of policymaking means that, at any given time, either ally may seem to adopt all four of these negotiating positions at once.[63] Finally, as noted above, salience is relative to previously established policies, and can diminish over time.

Nuclear salience pursued by US allies		*Technical capabilities*	
		US deterrent perceived as credible	**US deterrent perceived as not credible**
Political intentions	**US assurance perceived as credible**	Negative or low salience	Low to moderate salience
	US assurance perceived as not credible	Moderate to high salience	High salience

TABLE 2: CREDIBILITY AND NUCLEAR SALIENCE

The relationship between perceptions of the credibility of US political intentions and technical capabilities affects the degree of nuclear salience that Japan and South Korea pursue.

When all is well: low or negative salience

When allies perceive the US capability to protect them is sufficient and feel assured that the United States intends to defend them with nuclear capabilities, if necessary, they do not push for increased salience of nuclear weapons.

After the end of the Cold War, the United States shifted its global security posture and removed its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991. One year later, South Korea signed the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with North Korea, clearly signalling that it wished to decrease the salience of nuclear weapons in the region. Meanwhile Japan undertook sweeping public diplomacy efforts in support of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation norms.[64] Neither country made any effort to dispense of their nuclear umbrella altogether, but the salience of extended deterrence in both alliance relationships diminished briefly, as global concerns centred on nuclear proliferation threats of non-state actors and nuclear terrorism.

[63] This analysis is primarily focused on the views of security establishments in the respective countries, and therefore exclude views from those, especially in Japan, who oppose extended deterrence and nuclear armament.

[64] See discussion in Mike M. Mochizuki, 'Japan Tests the Nuclear Taboo', *The Nonproliferation Review* 14, no. 2 (July 2007): 308–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700701379393.

When technical credibility is in question: low or moderate salience

Gradually, China's military build-up and regional influence, coupled with North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, re-kindled interest in extended deterrence issues in both Japan and South Korea. They perceived an increasingly negative regional military balance but saw no reason to doubt the United States' political commitment to their defence. The convergence of US political willingness to reassure its allies and the allies perceived need for greater credibility meant that their approach to extended deterrence "shifted from the mere stage of reliance to the stage of engaging with the United States."[65] In 2010, both countries established their separate extended deterrence dialogues with the United States, with the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* in 2009, and the shelling if Yeonpyeong-do in 2010 adding urgency to those efforts.[66]

Today, extended deterrence is maintained through regular "stocktaking events" (in the words of one Japanese official), intended for both sides to reaffirm a shared understanding of the threats that they face, and the policies that they each need to implement to address those threats. The establishment of these groups can be considered a moderate increase of nuclear salience (as they indisputably increase the role of nuclear weapons in the alliance). The everyday maintenance of of these groups – through meetings, and statements repeated from one occasion to another (such as the "ironclad" descriptor of the US-ROK alliance) – is believed to strengthen both the credibility of the US deterrent towards their respective adversaries, and the credibility of the security guarantee to the allies themselves. These policies incrementally increase the role of nuclear weapons.

The routine nature of managing the extended deterrence relationship means that disruptions can have destabilizing effects. During the December 2024 political crisis in South Korea, the bilateral talks of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) were suspended. Although Korean and US officials toned down the impact on extended deterrence, South Korean media noted that "the cancellation and postponement have fueled concerns that the turmoil in Seoul could undermine security coordination between the allies amid growing concerns over North Korea's evolving nuclear and missile programs and its deepening military partnership with Russia."[67] Finally, the regular meetings also have signaling purposes: Japan has recently begun to publicise images of tabletop exercises that take place in association with instalments of the Extended Deterrence Dialogue to show to adversaries who is participating, and to make the integration of the Japan-US alliance more transparent to domestic audiences.

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[65] Kimiaki Kawai, 'Mission Unaccounted: Japan's Shift of Role in US Extended Nuclear Deterrence', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5, no. 2 (3 July 2022): 445, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2110636.

[66] The decision to establish US-ROK extended deterrence dialogue predated both incidents.

[67] 'S. Korea, US Agree to Fully Resume Diplomatic, Security Events Postponed amid Martial Law Turmoil', The Korea Times, 24 December 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/02/120_389027.html.

Different views on nuclear use and posture are a persistent subject of disagreement and negotiation between the United States and its allies. Japan and South Korea have protested any US attempts to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons, as they believe nuclear weapons need to be salient to present a credible deterrent.[68] They thus protested Joe Biden's brief consideration of sole purpose and no first use.[69] Conversely, allies welcome and even advocate for US capability enhancements, such as the development of the sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) or the low-yield modifications to the W-76 warhead during the Trump administration. From the allies' point of view, these developments substantively increased the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance and had a positive effect on strategic stability because they strengthened the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent. Most importantly, they represented a tacit rebuttal of the doctrinal notion that "all nuclear use is strategic and will fundamentally alter the nature of conflict" a notion which allies believe have constrained the US ability to respond to provocations at the lower end of the escalation ladder.

For allies, this firewalling of strategic and sub-strategic (or conventional) nuclear deterrence is a manifestation of the stability-instability paradox. One Japanese expert provides a suggestion for how to remove this firewall:

> allies need to improve conventional-nuclear integration in the context of extended deterrence. Unlike during the Cold War, nuclear operations are no longer the responsibility of US regional combatant commands, but of Strategic Command (STRATCOM). Therefore, linking the agenda of the Extended Deterrence Dialogue with the joint operational planning process through the US–Japan Bilateral Planning Committee would seamlessly construct an escalation ladder from the grey zone to the conventional and nuclear domains, leading to more specific nuclear options for the defence of Japan.[70]

Experts in both South Korea and Japan who advocate for "more specific nuclear options" are of course well aware of the risks of low-yield nuclear weapons, they tend to emphasise

[68] The ally's assessment of credibility is not simply based on US willingness to use nuclear weapons, but also willingness *not to use* nuclear weapons, if doing so would go against the interests of the ally. During the 2017 North Korean nuclear crisis, some South Koreans believed that Trump's threat was *too* credible, and feared that the US might use nuclear weapons without consulting with its allies first, or that the US might trigger a preemptive attack from North Korea, see: Lauren Sukin, 'Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire: Explaining Domestic Support for Nuclear Weapons Acquisition in South Korea', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 6 (2019): 1011–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719888689.

[69] Song Sang-ho, 'Talk of Possible Shift in U.S. Nuke Policy Rekindles Questions over America's Security Assurances for Allies', *Yonhap News Agency*, 1 November 2021, sec. Politics, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211101009100325.

[70] Masashi Murano, 'The Impact of New Capabilities on the Regional Deterrence Architecture in North-East Asia', in *Alliances, Nuclear Weapons and Escalation: Managing Deterrence in the 21st Century*, ed. Stephan Frühling and Andrew O'Neil, 1st ed. (ANU Press, 2021), 150, https://doi.org/10.22459/ANWE.2021.13.

the benefits over the risks.[71] One Korean expert, presenting a "pro-argument for the new nukes [of the US arsenal, i.e. W76-2, B61-12, and the SLCM-N]," argues that the "enhanced feasibility" that these weapons bring, due to their smaller yield and greater precision "is critical to credibility and communication of resolve to the adversaries."[72]

It is important to emphasise that arguments for these "capability first" approaches to extended deterrence result from a lack of faith in the technical or doctrinal capability of the United States to respond to threats, not its lack of willingness to do so. It would make little sense for the non-nuclear armed ally to push the nuclear-armed patron to develop expensive tailored capabilities unless it strongly believes that the patron fundamentally wants to provide assurances.

When political credibility is in question: moderate to high salience

When doubts surface about the US willingness to protect its allies, the allies argue for enhanced nuclear capabilities through the opposite logic: specific, credible nuclear capabilities can reassure allies and strengthen their belief in US assurances. They pursue these assurances through four main strategies: they seek further integration and institutionalisation to "lock in" the US commitment.[73] These approaches are, to some extent, incremental changes to extended deterrence and therefore entail moderate nuclear salience. However, allies may also start discussing redeployment of US capabilities, or nuclear sharing arrangements – options with higher nuclear salience. In South Korea's case, there are increased calls for a "latent nuclear deterrent", as a hedge against sudden withdrawal of extended deterrence assurances.[74] In this position, they are more likely to also discuss independent nuclear armament, but as an *additive* capability to extended deterrence.

Concerns of US withdrawal from the region was raised during the first Trump administration, and both allies sought to "lock-in" the US political commitment under the more amenable Biden administration. It did so by institutionalising new forms of cooperation on nuclear issues. Most prominently, South Korean President Yoon Seok-yul's off-hand remarks about the country's domestic nuclear armament – and the increased volume of the debate over that option can be seen as a way of increasing nuclear salience to obtain further political assurances. In this view, the Washington Declaration, which a few months later established the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and led to the first visit of a US Ohio-class ballistic submarine to a South Korean port since the Cold

[71] For a contrasting view, see: Michiru Nishida, 'Are U.S. Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles Necessary? A Japanese Security Analysis' (Council of Strategic Risks, 2022).
[72] Bee Yun Jo, 'The Nukes We Need: Retrofitting American Extended Deterrent', *Journal of Peace and Unification* 12, no. 3 (August 2022): 36–37, https://doi.org/10.31780/JPU.2022.12.3.35.
[73] An important part of negotiations is of course the issue of alliance burden-sharing. Burden-sharing negotiations generally do not affect nuclear salience directly and have been omitted here for space considerations.
[74] Japan already possesses latent nuclear capability but does not actively use it for nuclear hedging purposes.

War, can be seen as signs of the tactic's success.[75] By January 2025, the NCG had established a number of workstreams that increase nuclear salience. Most notably, it carries out work on the operationalization of conventional-nuclear integration, which facilitates South Korea's conventional support for US nuclear capabilities, and thus locks in the US commitment to use nuclear weapons in defence of South Korea.

Several Japanese experts interviewed in this project look to the NCG with a certain measure of jealousy. They see the NCG as a sign that the ROKUS alliance is more integrated than their own alliance with the United States. They argue that a similar group should be the end-goal of the alliance reforms that Japan and the United States agreed to in 2022. Unlike South Korea, there is a limit to the extent to which Japan can increase nuclear salience beyond such integration. One former senior government official argued that US tactical nuclear weapons can provide "maximum assurance" to Japan, but strong anti-nuclear feelings in Japan have meant that debate has been limited. Locking-in US nuclear commitments in a manner similar to the South Korean approach is difficult for Japanese decisionmakers, as it would violate its three non-nuclear principles – no production, no possession, no introduction. For example, while Japanese experts were quick to note that only the first two principles are coded into law, measures such as the port visit of the US ballistic missile submarine to South Korea would not have been politically possible in Japan.[76]

Trilateral cooperation between the United States, South Korea and Japan also serves a political lock-in function that increases nuclear salience. One Korean expert noted with satisfaction that the US National Defense Authorization Act has anchored trilateral cooperation in the US Congress, by requiring the Secretary of Defense to provide annual reports on the subject.[77] The trilateral cooperation has contributed to raising nuclear salience by facilitating the first trilateral exercise air-exercises between the three countries, which involved a nuclear-capable B-52 bomber.[78]

At an even higher degree of nuclear salience, the United States can signal its political commitment to defend its allies by undertaking the significant expense associated with the permanent stationing of nuclear weapons into the theatre.[79] The United States does

[75] For a contrasting view, see: Ankit Panda and Tristan A. Volpe, 'Limited Leverage: Nuclear Latency in South Korea's Alliance Bargaining', *The Washington Quarterly*, 2 January 2024, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2326727.
[76] Several Japanese experts were critical of the port visit because they viewed it as a purely political signal from the United States to South Korea, and which may have undermined its technical deterrent capability, as the proximity of the submarine might allow China, North Korea, or Russia to seize the opportunity to collect sensitive data on the submarine once its location was disclosed.
[77] 118th US Congress, 'Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025', Public Law 118-159 (23 December 2024), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-119HPRT58246/pdf/CPRT-119HPRT58246.pdf.
[78] Hyung-Jin Kim, 'US, South Korea and Japan Hold First-Ever Trilateral Aerial Exercise', *Defense News*, 23 October 2023, https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-military/2023/10/23/us-south-korea-and-japan-hold-first-ever-trilateral-aerial-exercise/.
[79] For a discussion of this expense as it pertains to the Korean Peninsula, see: David Philips, 'Nuclear Redeployment A Roadmap for Returning Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons to the Korean Peninsula', in *On*

not currently have any nuclear weapons in the region, besides those that may be deployed on platforms such as the B-52 or ballistic submarines transiting the area or visiting for exercise or signalling purposes. The debate about this policy option usually centres on two related perspectives. In South Korea, it has focused on re-deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, and in Japan, on nuclear sharing and allowing port-visits of US nuclear-armed vessels.

In 2012, conservative South Korean politician and businessman Chung Mong-joon brought the question of re-deployment of tactical nuclear weapons into the public debate. Today, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, an influential think tank founded by Chung, is a leading advocate of this option.[80] In February 2025, Chung created an endowed chair at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC, and – certainly mindful of his audience – advocated for the creation of an "Indo-Pacific NATO" in which US tactical nuclear weapons would play an important role.[81]

In Japan, the debate is more contentious. The current Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba advocated for an "Asian NATO" before entering office in 2024 but has since not broached the subject. His predecessor, the late former prime minister Shinzo Abe advocated for nuclear sharing with the United States, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the debate appears to have largely subsided. Among the experts interviewed for this study, none supported nuclear sharing if it meant the permanent basing of nuclear weapons in Japan. However, they expressed support for nuclear sharing between the United States and South Korea. One former government official argued that nuclear sharing is only suitable for "continental warfare" and a future conflict with China would be maritime. The same expert was however positive to port calls by US vessels in the future, armed with the SLCM-N. Several experts noted that revising the third nuclear principle (no introduction) is likely to become a salient issue in the Japanese security debates as the SLCM-N nears completion and deployment in the next decade. A senior, currently serving official, said "it is likely that we permit US forces if needed."

There is some limited discussion in South Korea of independent nuclear armament as a means of alliance assurance. Generally, most experts agree that independent nuclear armament would not happen as long as US forces remain deployed in the region (and

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the Horizon: A Collection of Papers from the Next Generation, ed. Doreen Horschig (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2024), 12–38.

[80] Peter K Lee and Kang Chungku, 'Comparing Allied Public Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence', n.d.; Seong-whun Cheon, 'Redeploying American Tactical Nuclear Weapons to Counter North Korea's Nuclear Monopoly', *Asan Institute for Policy Studies* (blog), 17 December 2018, http://en.asaninst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Blog-Redeploying-American-Tactical-Nuclear-Weapons-to-Counter-North-Korea%E2%80%99s-Nuclear-Monopoly_181217_Cheon-Seong-Whun2.pdf; Kang Choi, 'As North Korea's Nuclear Threat Increases, We Must Realize the Re-deployment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons', *Asan Institute for Policy Studies* (blog), 13 February 2024, http://en.asaninst.org/contents/the-chosun-ilbo-op-ed-as-north-koreas-nuclear-threat-increases-we-must-realize-the-re-deployment-of-tactical-nuclear-weapons-february-13/.

[81] Notably, Chung, who has previously also advocated for South Korea's independent nuclear armament, appears to have prioritized the less salient re-deployment issue in recent years.

hence maintaining some measure of deterrence credibility). US security experts Daryl Press and Jennifer Lind, however, have put forward the idea that "maintaining the alliance while South Korea acquires an independent nuclear capability."[82] Some have pointed to such support in the United States – including Donald Trump's 2016 comments in favour of South Korean nuclear armament – to suggest that the United States would not oppose South Korean nuclear armament, and doing so would not endanger the alliance. However, South Korean security experts are generally sceptical of this argument.[83] At most suggestions by influential US individuals like Elbridge Colby that South Korean nuclear weapons can provide added deterrent power to the alliance are seen as disingenuous, and simply a way for the United States to withdraw its security commitment.

In South Korea today, the national debate is slowly converging on a middle ground option of moderate salience: to enhance nuclear latency. These proponents of nuclear latency believe that, given the security environment, South Korea should emulate Japan – which does have reprocessing capability – as a model of nuclear latency that can reduce breakout time. In 2024, South Korean conservative politicians established the Mugunghwa Forum, a pro-nuclear latency caucus with the explicit promotion of that goal in mind. The strategy calls for a negotiation with the United States that would allow South Korea to acquire industrial scale enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) facilities, which are currently proscribed by the 123 Agreement. There is a different view, which agrees that South Korea should acquire ENR capabilities, but for industrial purposes, such as nuclear waste management and reducing reliance on imported uranium. They therefore argue that South Korea must reduce its nuclear salience, because as long as the debate on nuclear weapons remains salient in Seoul, South Korea cannot credibly argue that ENR capabilities will be used only for peaceful purposes.[84] Their concerns appear to have been somewhat warranted. In March 2025, it was announced that the US Department of Energy plans to list South Korea as a "sensitive country."[85] While US and South Korean officials have claimed that the designation is related to a corporate espionage case, and does not have anything to do with the nuclear debate, but it remains difficult to imagine how the United States would look kindly on what would be a far more controversial attempt by South Korea to push for enhanced nuclear latency.

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[82] Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press, 'Five Futures for a Troubled Alliance', *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 33, no. 3 (September 2021): 357–80; the authors have continued to argue for this option, see: Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, 'South Korea's Nuclear Options', *Foreign Affairs*, 19 April 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/south-koreas-nuclear-options-north-korea-deterrence.

[83] See for example: 'National Security and Strategy (국가안보와 전략)' (Institute for National Security Studies, 2023), 19, http://riia.re.kr/upload/bbs/BBSA05/202307/F20230714102614656.pdf.

[84] Lami Kim, 'South Korea's Nuclear Latency Dilemma', *War on the Rocks* (blog), 19 September 2024, https://warontherocks.com/2024/09/south-koreas-nuclear-latency-dilemma/.

[85] "South Korea says it Agreed with US to Swiftly Resolve 'Sensitive Country Status", *Reuters*, 21 March 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-says-it-agreed-with-us-swiftly-resolve-sensitive-country-status-2025-03-21/.

When no credibility remains: high nuclear salience seen as the only option

Most experts agree that independent nuclear armament, the most salient nuclear option, would only take place if the United States withdrew its forces from the region altogether, with the concomitant loss of confidence in its political commitment that would follow.

As of March 2025, Japan and South Korea are nervously watching the US administration for signs of how it intends to approach extended deterrence in the years ahead. Three years ago, the war in Ukraine raised the spectre of nuclear aggression in their own neighbourhood, and they found the US response impotent. In Japan in particular, the US lack of commitment to decisively deter the Russian invasion and its piecemeal support of Ukraine afterwards, have had a dire effect on experts' outlook on Taiwan. While some contend that the US withdrawing from Europe might mean it is addressing the overstretch problem by focusing entirely on the Indo-Pacific, President Trump's comments that the US-Japan treaty is "one-sided" may betray such contention as wishful thinking. Pentagon-nominee Colby's argument in his official hearing that "Japan should be spending at least 3 percent of gross domestic product on defence as soon as possible," is sure to worry the senior Japanese official interviewed for this project, who expressed confidence that the Trump administration would be satisfied with Japan's commitment to increase defence spending to two percent by 2027.[86]

Japan's national experiences with nuclear bombing and fallout have created a strong nuclear taboo, and the politically influential anti-nuclear weapons movement is well-organised to oppose additional increases in nuclear salience – especially nuclear armament. Within the relatively nuclear-friendly Japanese security establishment, experts concede that a complete withdrawal of US forces would indeed cause Japan to go nuclear (either directly, or through a domino effect with South Korea going first), but they seem to consider this possibility much more remote than their Korean colleagues, even as they clearly recognize the limits of the US commitment (as discussed in the previous section). The reason for this appears to be the shared threat perception between Japan and the United States; as long as they both consider China a threat that must be deterred, Japan believes it will be indispensable to the United States, and a withdrawal unlikely. In South Korea, because its threat perceptions of China and North Korea are less aligned with the United States, the need to go nuclear, or hedge on that possibility are felt much more acutely.

For several reasons, independent nuclear armament is a vastly more salient policy option in South Korea than it is in Japan. Chiefly, there is also no "floor" in the South Korean nuclear debate; in sharp contrast to Japan, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have

[86] 'Advance Policy Questions for Elbridge Colby Nominee for Appointment to Be Under Secretary of Defense for Policy' (Washington, D.C), accessed 11 March 2025, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/colby_apq_responses1.pdf.

been seen as symbols of Korea's national liberation from Japanese colonialism.[87] Consequently, there is no significant political movement to protest a South Korean decision to go nuclear, or argue for reduced nuclear salience.[88] South Koreans who oppose nuclear armament base their opposition on a cost-benefit analysis: they point to the overwhelming cost of sanctions, international reputation, or opportunity costs as reasons not to go nuclear. In other words, and in contrast to Japan, their opposition to nuclear weapons is purely "materialist"[89] and they see the technical and political credibility of US extended deterrence as the most important material conditions preventing proliferation. Absent one condition, they may seek to sway the United States to strengthen its commitment or capabilities, but absent both, even the strongest non-proliferation supporters in Seoul are likely to support nuclear armament. A recent survey of security elites by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) bears out this prediction.[90] The US new approach to Europe has also caused concern in Seoul. After the Trump administration's policy shift on Ukraine, editorials from newspapers across the South Korean political spectrum noted similar concerns. The progressive *Hankyoreh* warned that the Trump administration would "soon make unilateral demands of South Korea regarding security issues such as extended deterrence",[91] and the country's largest newspaper, the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* said: "It's becoming clear that the world can no longer rely on the U.S., as it once did."[92]

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The Japanese and South Korean nuclear debates have moved from low to high salience in the past decades. While actual US nuclear policies remain somewhere in the moderate part of the spectrum; there arguably been some substantive changes to US nuclear policies, at least partly as a result of allies advocating for higher nuclear salience. While none of the policies where nuclear weapons are highly salient (redeployment, nuclear sharing, independent armament) have so far been implemented, the discussions around these options continue.

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[87] Akira Kawasaki and Keiko Nakamura, 'No Domino: How Japan's Experience Can Dissuade South Korea from Going Nuclear', *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network* (blog), 9 December 2024, https://www.apln.network/projects/nuclear-order-in-east-asia/no-domino-how-japans-experience-can-dissuade-south-korea-from-going-nuclear.

[88] Joel Petersson Ivre, 'The South Korean Anti-Nuclear Weapons Movement Must Find Its Voice', *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network* (blog), 22 August 2024, https://www.apln.network/projects/nuclear-order-in-east-asia/the-south-korean-anti-nuclear-weapons-movement-must-find-its-voice.

[89] Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 87 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51–52.

[90] Victor Cha, 'Breaking Bad: South Korea's Nuclear Option' (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 29 April 2024), https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option.

[91] '[Editorial] Trump's strong-arming of Ukraine', *Hankyoreh*, 5 March 2025, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1185478.html.

[92] 'Editorial: Trump's Shift on Ukraine and How It Could Impact on S.Korea's Security', *The Chosun Daily*, 23 February 2025, sec. Opinion, https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2025/02/24/EAMNVCXFRFH4LAU4KZ5T4HUVK4/.

Chapter 3

THE EFFECTS OF NUCLEAR SALIENCE ON STRATEGIC STABILITY AND THE GLOBAL NUCLEAR ORDER

What effects will Japan and South Korea's efforts to increase nuclear salience have on strategic stability, and on the global nuclear order? A few implications for crisis stability, arms race stability, and arms control are discussed below.

Nuclear salience affects deployment of conventional capabilities and undermines crisis stability. Failed efforts to raise nuclear salience within the alliance leads to greater efforts to enhance conventional capabilities. Japan's effort to acquire counterstrike capabilities, and South Korea's conventional counterforce strategy are both examples of how they seek develop stronger conventional postures to either compensate for perceived shortfalls in the alliance's nuclear salience or provide conventional support to the US nuclear deterrent. Enhanced conventional capabilities also facilitate nuclear hedging, a strategy which by definition is meant to raise the salience of the state's nuclear potential.

South Korea is the only non-nuclear armed state in the world to have developed submarine-launched ballistic missile technology for conventional warheads; the implication that it could quickly refit those missiles with nuclear warheads is surely not lost on either allied or adversary observers.[93] Although this development suggests that South Korea might be able to acquire a secure second strike capability in short time – thus strengthening strategic stability – one could also make the argument that crisis stability will be negatively impacted. Japan is developing a large number of sea-launched capabilities and purchasing Tomahawk missiles (TLAM) from the United States; along with the future introduction of the US SLCM-N, the intermingling of sea-based conventional and nuclear assets could create dangerous at-launch ambiguities. Tanya Ogilvie-White and the late Rear Admiral John Gower have made this argument with regards to the potential deployment of TLAM on Australia's AUKUS submarines:

> The sale of TLAM to Australia risks adding further to the miscalculation and misinterpretation risks which dual capable cruise missiles bring in crisis and early conflict. In essence, since neither China nor DPRK could be certain whether a launched SLCM was from an American or Australian submarine and further whether it was nuclear armed (until it detonated), it might assume the worst case

[93] A former Korean military official noted that a sea-based deterrent was the only option that made strategic sense for South Korea. Some have also interpreted South Korea's pursuit of a nuclear-powered submarine as hedging: Lami Kim, 'South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?', *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 115–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1445910.

and respond accordingly, which might include a counter launch before TLAM detonation.[94]

Ogilvie-White and Gower further note that the long flight-time of Australian TLAM would leave a "lot of time for such misinterpretation." In Northeast Asia, however, the problem is rather the opposite: cruise missiles launched in the seas around the Korean Peninsula or along the first island-chain at targets in China or North Korea would travel much shorter distances to their targets and increase pressures on North Korean and Chinese commanders to respond quickly, and perhaps disastrously. Overall, the very capabilities that both Japan and South Korea have touted as stabilising in the name of escalation dominance, could have the opposite effect.

Nuclear salience begets nuclear salience, justifies proliferation and undermines arms race stability: Nuclear salience in South Korea appears to raise nuclear salience in Japan and vice versa. When Japanese experts look to the Nuclear Consultative Group, or when South Koreans look to Japanese reprocessing capabilities, they see models to emulate. Furthermore, the nuclear debate in South Korea has raised the spectre of a regional "nuclear domino" effect in Japan.[95] Many Japanese experts interviewed for this study noted the risk of Japan going nuclear if South Korea did.

Extended deterrence has a long and largely successful history of containing nuclear proliferation, but in Third Nuclear Age, its days as a non-proliferation tool may be numbered. Under anything but the most benign geopolitical circumstances, extended deterrence causes those who rely on it to pursue further nuclear salience. In this sense extended deterrence may be the cause of its own undoing. By making US nuclear weapons the backbone of its allies' security, extended deterrence has reinforced the notion that "only nuclear can deter nuclear" and justified further reliance on nuclear weapons as the chief source of security.[96] The sudden retraction of the US umbrella would leave policymakers scrambling for new means of protection, and because they have always seen nuclear weapons as the ultimate security guarantee, independent nuclear capabilities will be their priority. Arguably, this is how Europe is reacting to the US administration's dismissive approach to NATO. The French President's public support for a French (or Anglo-French) nuclear umbrella might alleviate European concerns in the short term, yet the very same issue of political and technical credibility will reproduce the same concerns among Europe's non-nuclear armed states in the long term, especially due to technical

[94] Tanya Ogilvie-White and John Gower, 'A Deeper Dive into AUKUS: Risks and Benefits for the Asia-Pacific' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 5 October 2021), 34.
[95] Chung-in Moon, 'Is Nuclear Domino in Northeast Asia Real and Inevitable?' (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 1 October 2021), https://www.apln.network/projects/wmd-project/is-nuclear-domino-in-northeast-asia-real-and-inevitable.
[96] Lauren Sukin and Toby Dalton, 'Reducing Nuclear Salience: How to Reassure Northeast Asian Allies', *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (3 April 2021): 143–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1934257.

credibility concerns.[97] On the positive side, the much smaller size of the French and UK arsenals – and their limited ability to increase them in any reasonable timeframe– may spur necessary discussions around nuclear sufficiency and prompt Europe to find a model of extended deterrence that does not require the "diversity of options" that Japanese and Koreans see as necessary for their protection.

Nuclear salience undermines arms control efforts and underscores the need for new non-proliferation tools for a multipolar world: In a world of nuclear multipolarity, policymakers must contend with a greater number of factors affecting the nuclear order in new ways. The nuclear debates in Japan and South Korea are not new, but the external factors affecting them are, and tried and true measures for preventing nuclear proliferation or managing nuclear risk reduction may no longer be sufficient. If just one state decides to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, it would likely spell the death knell for the global non-proliferation regime and pose the most serious threat to strategic stability in generations. A global scramble for nuclear capabilities would create new arms races across the planet, and for each additional state acquiring its own nuclear weapons, the risks that misperceptions or accidents set off a catastrophic conflict will compound. The arms control treaties that facilitated strategic stability between the major powers in the First and Second Nuclear Age might perhaps be reproduced one day but extending them to emerging nuclear powers will be a diplomatic challenge unlike any seen before.

In moving on from excessive reliance on extended deterrence as a non-proliferation tool, associated frameworks such as that of "allied proliferation" must be dispensed with. What kind of tools can be used instead? The multipolar world – more interconnected than at any point in history – may hold the key to the answer. South Korea and Japan are some of the most trade-dependent nations in the world, a fact which is integral to their understandings of stability writ large. China represents a quarter of their exports, and a fourth of their imports; a fifth of their exports go to the United States, and between 10 to 15 per cent of their imports come from their nuclear patron. That China will react negatively to Japanese or South Korean proliferation is almost a certainty, although Chinese views of these prospects are not well-known.[98] How the United States will react is a more open question, but despite some evidence to the contrary, the US reaction is also likely to be negative. To those analysing costs and benefits in Tokyo and Seoul, the leverage that these dependences pose are major considerations. While Japan and South Korea are less dependent on the other nuclear powers, their ability to leverage specific

[97] Olamide Samuel, 'Europe Going Nuclear Would Be a Catastrophic Mistake', *Al-Jazeera*, 11 March 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/3/11/europe-going-nuclear-would-be-a-catastrophic-mistake.

[98] For some discussion on Chinese view of South Korea, see: Tong Zhao and Jungmin Kang, 'China's Role in Shaping South Korea's Nuclear Choice', *Global Asia* 18, no. 1 (March 2023), https://www.globalasia.org/v18no1/cover/chinas-role-in-shaping-south-koreas-nuclear-choice_tong-zhaojungmin-kang; Alexander M. Hynd, 'Dirty, Dangerous… and Difficult? Regional Perspectives on a Nuclear South Korea', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 6 December 2024, 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970241298756.

dependencies, such as South Korea's reliance on imported Russian and French uranium, can pose a deterrent to proliferation. The collective reaction of states normatively opposed to nuclear weapons should not be disregarded either.[99] There is probably limited leverage that important trade partners like Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines can exercise over the Northeast Asian nuclear threshold states, but it is worth noting that the accumulated Japanese and South Korean trade with all signatories to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons roughly equals their trade with China. The empowerment of the Global South in the Third Nuclear Age could be a necessary, if not sufficient part of a new multipolar approach to non-proliferation.

[99] See Joel Petersson Ivre, ed., *Regional Views of South Korean Nuclear Debates: Perspectives from Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, and Mongolia*, 2024.

Conclusion

THE ENDURING SALIENCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Japan and South Korea think about strategic stability in nuclear terms, and because they do so, it influences the threats they identify and the capabilities they see as necessary to deter those threats. Their view of strategic stability is informed by their status as non-nuclear allies of a nuclear patron, but also their own geopolitical predicaments that are sometimes quite distinct from that of their nuclear patron. That difference creates a subtle but important perception gap between them and the United States on what constitutes technical and political credibility that must be continuously negotiated. Raising nuclear salience becomes a means of conducting this negotiation, and raising salience affects strategic stability in ways intended and unintended. While conventional weapons and emerging technologies do play an increasingly significant role for strategic stability, there is not – in the minds of policymakers around the world – any weapon that can match nuclear weapons in terms of deterrent effect or destructive capability.

As the world is entering the Third Nuclear Age in which nuclear weapons are regaining their salience, there is a greater need for experts to specify what is meant by nuclear salience. Despite general agreement that nuclear salience is increasing, the concept has a distinct "you know it when you see it" quality to it, which prevents closer scrutiny of how it is generated as well as its policy implications. This report is a modest attempt at addressing this analytical shortfall.

Finally, there is an urgent need for policymakers to not just consider how old familiar concepts of previous nuclear eras can be applied to a new and unfamiliar world, but also how these concepts created that world in the first place. Measures taken to enhance strategic stability in the past, such as the practice of extended deterrence, pose new challenges to strategic stability in the present.

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