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INTRODUCTION

The rapid shift of the ROK (Republic of Korea) military from policy discussions to the active implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally reshaping the strategic landscape of the Korean Peninsula. This transformation is driven by a convergence of urgent factors: the scheduled transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the United States to the ROK, a shrinking demographic that necessitates replacing human sentries with autonomous systems, and the relentless advancement of the DPRK's nuclear and missile capabilities.

Currently, AI is no longer a distant prospect but a frontline reality. It is deployed in surveillance roles along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), integrated into the Army Tactical Command Information System (ATCIS), and forms the backbone of the upcoming Allied Korea Joint Command and Control System (AKJCCS). With the ROK government pledging over 3 trillion won by 2027 to develop ten key defense strategic techniques, the military is moving toward a manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) model that envisions 500,000 war drones and AI-piloted fighter jets.

This trajectory raises a set of questions that are strategically consequential precisely because AI's benefits and risks accrue at the same time. On one hand, AI promises major gains in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), target recognition, and decision support – capabilities that can strengthen deterrence and improve operational effectiveness against the DPRK's conventional and nuclear threats. On the other hand, I highlight several pathways through which AI integration can undermine stability: imperfect AI can increase uncertainty and misinterpretation; faster AI-enabled decision cycles can compress crisis decision time and narrow options for communication; and highly networked systems can be vulnerable to electronic warfare or attacks on critical hubs – raising escalation risks even when an adversary intends only limited effects.

As the ROK scales AI across governance and industry-led platforms, it is essential to ask and answer questions about what is being implemented, what is planned, and how it changes conflict dynamics.

IMPLEMENTATION OF AI IN THE ROK MILITARY TO DATE

AI is now shaping the ROK military planning and operational risk on the Korean Peninsula. The ROK military has moved from AI policy discussion to implementation phase.

In the surveillance domain, AI is currently deployed along the DMZ and coastal areas to replace or augment human sentries. According to the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), systems at front-line units, such as the 22nd Infantry Division, use AI to analyse surveillance footage.[1] The DAPA also completed an advancement

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[1] Minji Lee, "Military deploys AI-powered surveillance system at border unit," Yonhap News, 3 January, 2025, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250103003400315.

project for the Army Tactical Command Information System (ATCIS), framed as groundwork for AI-based for manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T).[2]

Ahead of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the US Forces Korea to the ROK (aiming for 2028), development of the ROK's first AI-based command and control system, has commenced in earnest.[3] This system is intended to enable more effective ROK-led combined operations and is built on the Allied AKJCCS, operational since 2015, which is the framework for commanding and controlling ROK-US combined operations across the Korean Peninsula. In response to the upcoming OPCON transfer and the need for technological advancement, the AKJCCS will incorporate AI-based situation analysis and automated decision support functions. By rapidly collecting and processing vast amounts of battlefield data, AI will reduce the workload for operators and support commanders in making accurate judgments. The ROK military aims to achieve operational capability for the AKJCCS by 2029.[4]

PLANNED AI CAPABILITIES OVER THE NEXT DECADE

The ROK's AI capabilities planned for the next decade can be analysed broadly across three levels: the national level, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) level, and the defense industry level.

National-level plan: National AI Strategy Committee Action Plan, proposed Defense AI Framework Act, and the establishment of Defense Data Security Zones

On December 15, 2025, the National AI Strategy Committee released an Action Plan to accomplish the goals of the ROK's National AI Strategy, which had been launched just 100 days earlier. The strategy to realize an AI-based defense powerhouse includes seven key tasks and 21 policy recommendations.[5] This plan incorporates establishing a Defense AI Data Center, enacting a Defense AI Framework Act, and expanding AI infrastructure into concrete action items. The core of this Action Plan is the commitment to transitioning defense AI from mere experimentation to a permanent operational system. Particularly noteworthy is the move to legislate a dedicated Defense AI Transformation (AX) organisation, led by the MND and involving relevant agencies like the DAPA. To this

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[2] Hyun-soo Kim, "Army deploys new command information system after upgrade," Yonhap News, 26 January, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260126003100315.

[3] Gyubin Hong, "Hanwha Systems wins KRW 93.7 billion contract for joint command and control system performance upgrade project" [한화시스템, 937억원 규모 연합지휘통제체계 성능개량 사업 수주], Yonhap News, 26 December 2025, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20251226031600003.

[4] Jeonghyeon Lee, "ROK-U.S. Combined Command and Control System Upgraded After 10 Years in Preparation for OPCON Transfer" [전작권 전환 대비 한미 연합지휘통제체계 10년 만에 업그레이드], Yonhap News, 4 August 2025, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20250731131400504.

[5] Yuri Ahn, "Defense AI Data Center to be established… Defense AI Framework Act also to be pursued in Q2" [국방 AI 데이터센터 만든다…2분기 국방 AI 기본법도 추진], Edaily, 16J December 2025, https://www.edaily.co.kr/News/Read?newsId=03686726642398848.

end, the National Assembly plans to propose the 'Defense AI Framework Act (tentative title)' in the first quarter of 2026 and push for its enactment by the second quarter.

The slow progress of Defense AX has repeatedly been attributed to insufficient personnel and organisational capacity.[6] The core issue was the lack of a dedicated control tower to oversee AI planning, coordination, and operations, as responsibilities were dispersed among the MND, DAPA, the armed services, and research institutions. Consequently, the National AI Strategy Committee will establish a new position, the 'Chief AI Officer for Defense (CAIO).'[7] The government plans to benchmark private companies that are establishing new C-level positions to oversee AI transformation initiatives.[8] This decision stems from the judgment that without such an organisation, neither budget, data, nor accountability efforts can be effectively mobilized.[9]

The government recently announced plans to establish 'Defense Data Safe Zones' at five major hubs nationwide to accelerate the adoption of AI technology in the defense sector.[10] This is a significant development that will bring major changes to the ROK's defense capabilities and defense industry. The Defense Data Safe Zone is a closed research environment designed to allow private companies and research institutions to safely analyse and utilize defense-related data to develop AI technology. Until now, defense data has been strictly controlled to prevent external leakage due to security concerns, making it difficult for the private sector to utilize. Now, data that has undergone de-identification measures can be used within these secure zones to accelerate Defense AX. The core goal is to drive innovation by integrating the private sector's creative ideas and technological capabilities into the defense field.

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[6] Hangkyung Kim, "[Defense Industry Issue Analysis (133)] For Practical Progress in Defense AI Implementation, the Ministry of National Defense Must First Restructure Its AI Governance Framework" [방산 이슈 진단 (133)] 국방 AI 적용 실질적 진전 이뤄지려면 국방부부터 AI 거버넌스 재정립 필요], news2day, 11 June 2025, https://www.news2day.co.kr/article/20250611500147.

[7] Yoonsoo Kim, "New defense CAIO established… 98 national AI projects launched" [국방 CAIO 신설한다…98 개 국가 AI 프로젝트 가동], Seoul Economic Daily, 16 December 2025, https://www.sedaily.com/article/14158505.

[8] Kang-han Kim, "National AI Strategy Committee Targets 2030 Physical AI Leadership," The Chosun Daily, December 15, 2025, https://www.chosun.com/english/industry-en/2025/12/15/4CGT7POEQ5EGZMGPTEIJM6JGYA/.

[9] Yoomi Chang, "South Korea's Defense AX: Next Year Will Be a Turning Point... Defense AI Framework Act, National Defense AI Center, and Data Center to Expand" [韓 국방 AX, 내년이 분수령…국방 AI 기본법·국파모·데이터센터에 판 커진다], ZDNET Korea, 15 December 2025, https://zdnet.co.kr/view/?no=20251215193849.

[10] Jongjin Park, "'Data Safe Zones' to Drive Defense AX Expansion to Be Established at Five Major Hubs" [국방 AX 확산 이끌 '데이터안심구역', 5 대 거점에 구축한다], Electronic Times, 13 January 2026, https://www.etnews.com/20260113000207.

MND-level plan: Organisational restructuring, budget increase, and 500,000 War Drones Initiatives

The MND announced that it passed a revision to the 'Enforcement Rules of the Organisation and Operation of the Ministry of National Defense and Its Affiliated Institutions' and implemented the new organisational structure starting January 2, 2026.[11] The core of this organisational restructuring is strengthening dedicated AI functions and reorganizing governance. The strategy is to integrate and reinforce AI-related functions previously scattered across the defense sector. This institutional foundation has been reorganized in two major aspects. First, a new 'Deputy Minister' position has been created to strengthen AI-based defense governance. The Deputy Minister will oversee core areas where AI adoption is deemed essential, such as combat power, logistics, and informatisation, serving as a control tower responsible for AI utilization and advanced technology transformation across the entire defense sector. This is expected to significantly enhance decision-making speed and execution capability. Second, the MND has launched the 'Defense Artificial Intelligence Planning Bureau' which will function as the core organisation that comprehensively oversees defense AI policy and data strategy.

A major shift in defense AI has commenced in terms of budget allocation as well. The ROK government recently announced its policy to invest over 3 trillion won by 2027 in ten key defense strategic technologies, including AI and advanced materials.[12] The total defense R&D budget allocated by the MND and the DAPA for 2026 is about 5.84 trillion won,[13] an increase of approximately 950 billion won compared to the previous year. The government repeatedly used the phrase "major shift toward defense AI" while explaining the budget increase. The MND and the DAPA have made AI-based command and control, intelligence analysis, target identification, and autonomous driving core pillars of the budget, increasing the related budget to 142.7 billion won – four times the previous year's amount.[14] The 2026 Future Defense Technology Project budget stands at 349.5 billion won,[15] representing a roughly 40% increase from the previous year. One of the core

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[11] Ministry of National Defense, "New Deputy Minister Position Dedicated to AI Implementation Established, Focusing on 'Defense AX'," [AI 도입 전담 차관보 신설 '국방 AX' 집중], 31 December, 2025, https://www.mnd.go.kr/cop/kookbang/kookbangIlboView.do?categoryCode=dema0003&boardSeq=47078&id=mnd_020101000000.

[12] Sang-soo Park, "S. Korea to invest 30 tln won in AI, chip sectors via Public Growth Fund in 2026," Yonhap News, 16 December 2025, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251216001900320.

[13] Yoon-jung Lee and Ji-hwan Kim, "Korea boosts defense R&D to lead advanced weapons market," Chosun Biz, January 9, 2026, https://biz.chosun.com/en/en-industry/2026/01/08/KIJ7XHQS4VGRPJ7UW4Y52ROI2E/.

[14] 2025 Ministry of National Defense Work Report. December 18, 2025. https://www.korea.kr/archive/expDocView.do?docId=41505.

[15] Jaehoon Yoo, "2026 Defense Budget Rises 7.5% to 65.8 Trillion Won... Includes Increased Duty Allowances," The Asia Business Daily, December 3, 2025, https://cm.asiae.co.kr/en/article/2025120311182918631.

pillars of this project is 'Physical AI.' This concept extends beyond software AI alone, integrating AI into physical platforms such as actual robots, drones, and combat vehicles.

According to the MND work report, it will establish the three pillars of governance, infrastructure, and environmental ecosystem foundations for AI utilization, and advance core projects in the three key domains of unmanned and autonomous systems, command, and support and administration. Additionally, it aims to develop an 'AI Staff Officer' model by 2028 and 500,000 war drones for future warfare capabilities, along with manned-unmanned teaming. Through the ROK-U.S. alliance, the MND will pursue expanded cooperation in advanced defense science and technology fields, including AI and MUM-T, as well as the defense industry sector via regular and ad hoc consultative bodies.[16]

Defense Industry-level plan: From detecting targets to advanced stealth capabilities

ROK defense firms are also focusing their efforts on AI. Major players like Hanwha, LIG Nex1, and KAI are already prominently featuring AI, drone, and robotics-based weapon systems (see Table 1).

COMPANY NAME	TECHNOLOGY NAME	TECHNICAL CONTENT	DEVELOPMENT TARGET YEAR
Hanwha Aerospace, Hanwha System	Loitering Precision Guided Weapon (L-PGW)	Detecting targets and launching suicide drones for strikes using AI technology during flight	2029
LIG Nex1	AI C4I	AI analyses reconnaissance information in real time to respond and issue commands	2027
KAI	MUM-T	KF-21 6th Generation Advanced Stealth Capabilities with AI Pilot Functionality	After 2030

Table 1: AI Technologies of selected ROK defence firms
Source: Chosun Biz.[17] The author has restructured the content pertaining to AI.

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[16] 2025 Ministry of National Defense Work Report. December 18, 2025, https://www.korea.kr/archive/expDocView.do?docId=41505.

[17] Yoon-jung Lee and Ji-hwan Kim, "Korea boosts defense R&D to lead advanced weapons market," Chosun Biz, January 9, 2026, https://biz.chosun.com/en/en-industry/2026/01/08/KIJ7XHQS4VGRPJ7UW4Y52ROI2E/.

Hanwha Aerospace is actively incorporating AI and physical AI technologies into its AI-based precision-guided weapons, suicide drone systems, next-generation self-propelled howitzer K9A3, and Cheonmu multiple rocket launcher upgrades.[18] The K9A3 is under development to achieve manned-unmanned integrated operations using sensors and AI autonomous driving algorithms.

LIG Nex1 is integrating AI into its unmanned surface vehicles (USVs), reconnaissance and attack drones, and guided weapon systems, alongside its AI command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) systems.[19] Notably, its naval USVs serve as integrated platforms combining autonomous navigation, stealth, reconnaissance, and attack capabilities, positioning them as prime candidates to become flagship examples of the upcoming major AI transformation in defense.

KAI is fully deploying AI across its aviation capabilities, including the KF-21-based manned-unmanned teaming concept, the AI pilot 'K-AILOT', and multi-purpose unmanned aircraft.[20] K-AILOT is an AI pilot capable of autonomous mission execution across all domains – beyond a simple autopilot for navigation – including target detection, battlefield situation analysis, and proposing optimal response strategies.

This vision integrates fighter jets, UAVs, and AI piloting systems into a single framework, preparing a force structure on par with 6th generation fighters. By directly applying high-performance AI semiconductors to K-AILOT and the MUM-T, KAI aims to establish a foundation for existing mainstay aircraft like the KF-21, FA-50, and Surion to transform into advanced AI-based integrated combat assets.

THE EFFECTS OF AI-INTEGRATION ON STABILITY AND CONFLICT RISK ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

The rapid implementation of AI in the Korean military warrants an assessment on how it might affect the risks of conflict on the Peninsula – both in terms of stabilizing effects and potential escalatory pathways.

The potential impact of the ROK's AI integration on the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula can be assessed in terms of the offensive-defensive balance. First, AI contributes to enhancing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Integrating AI technology with existing ISR assets like drones and satellites improves identification and detection capabilities, thereby enhancing overall ISR performance. Adding AI-based Automatic Target Recognition (ATR) significantly boosts detection,

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[18] "Hanwha to Showcase Next-Generation AI and Unmanned Systems at ADEX 2025," Hanwha Aerospace, October 16, 2025, https://www.hanwhaaerospace.com/eng/media/newsroom/view.do?seq=575.

[19] "LIG Nex1 and BOS Semiconductors sign MOU on physical AI solutions for drones and robots," LIG Nex1, December 18, 2025, https://www.lignex1.com/eng/news/nex1newsNewView.do?bbs_no=7307.

[20] Ji-hwan Kim, "KAI integrates AI pilot K-AILOT into KF-21 manned-unmanned systems, Chosun Biz, March 24, 2025, https://biz.chosun.com/en/en-industry/2025/03/24/44NW2IBNGVFULH5OHLAIOPL34Y/.

tracking, and interception capabilities. Combining this capability with drone swarming further elevates ISR effectiveness.[21] Moreover, enhancing these ISR capabilities directly translates to strengthening precision strike capabilities.

However, it is difficult to explain shifts in the offense-defense balance based solely on the AI technology variable. This is because while AI can achieve overwhelmingly superior efficiency to human cognitive abilities in target identification, analysis, understanding of the operational environment, and calculating the optimal combination of weapon systems for target strikes, these capabilities can contribute to both offensive and defensive capabilities. Therefore, it is too early to conclude that the AI variable alone will usher in an era of offensive or defensive superiority.[22]

Then, what impact does AI have on strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula? The integration of AI into the ROK military may affect the risk of conflict on the Peninsula in three ways, both in terms of stabilizing effects and potential escalatory pathways. First, if AI performance is imperfect, uncertainty in predictions increases, potentially leading to unintended escalation and thereby undermining strategic stability. Second, AI enables rapid decision-making, but the swift judgments it facilitates can lead to faster initiation of hostilities, reducing the window for communication with adversaries and further increasing instability. Third, AI weapons systems are predominantly information and communications technology-based systems reliant on highly integrated semiconductors, communications, and networks for defense. This makes the systems highly vulnerable to advanced electronic warfare attacks. Furthermore, the more network-centric the AI weapons system architecture, the greater the risk that striking a specific hub could paralyze the entire command and control system. Therefore, even attacks by an adversary intended to have limited effects could be interpreted as part of a broader efforts to degrade core military capabilities, potentially triggering a stronger response from the ROK or its ally, the United States. AI-implementation can thus have a negative impact on strategic stability.

IMPACT ON NUCLEAR ESCALATION

The prospect of unintended escalation is particularly acute in the context of the DPRK's nuclear arsenal. Could the adoption and integration of AI systems in the ROK military influence the likelihood of nuclear escalation with the DPRK?

Indeed, the adoption and integration of AI systems does impact the nuclear calculus on the Korean Peninsula. Discussions surrounding the 'AI-nuclear nexus' have intensified

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[21] Yang Gyu Kim, "The AI-Nuclear Nexus and the Future of the Global Military Order" (AI and the New Civilization Standard: Military Challenges ①, EAI Special Report, September 6, 2024), [인공지능-핵무기 넥서스(AI-Nuclear Nexus)와 세계군사질서 전망," 『AI 와 신문명 표준: 군사도전 ①, EAI 스페셜리포트』.

[22] *Ibid.*

amid concerns about potential nuclear escalation with the DPRK.[23] Generally, a 'nexus' signifies the connection and interdependence between distinct elements. The 'AI-nuclear nexus' represents how to utilize the existing nuclear deterrence.[24] Also, the 'AI-nuclear nexus' refers to the phenomenon of AI becoming linked to nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3), early warning, target detection, and missile defense.[25]

The ROK military is enhancing its precision deterrence capabilities using AI to counter the DPRK's nuclear missile threats.[26] Looking at the development direction of the AI-based Korean three-axis system, regarding the Kill Chain, it includes AI-based target identification, tracking algorithms, multi-target response systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and robotic forces. The goal is to shorten strike decision time and minimize errors. Regarding the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), the goal is to enhance interception success rates and reduce response times through AI-based missile trajectory prediction models, automated engagement management and interceptor asset allocation systems, and AI-based sensor fusion and false alarm reduction algorithms. For Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) – the ROK's strategy to respond with a large-scale missile launch in the event of a DPRK missile attack – the goal is to ensure speed, visibility, and certainty of retaliation through AI-based command and control decision support systems, unmanned and robotic force-linked strike and support systems, and AI-based target set management and automated damage assessment. This represents a strategic choice to enhance accuracy, reliability, and deterrent power of deterrent through AI, rather than merely augmenting weapon systems.

AI can thus serve as a powerful tool for countering the DPRK's nuclear missile threat. However, AI introduces several mechanisms that could trigger nuclear escalation with the DPRK. If the DPRK believes that the ROK's AI-based Korean three-axis system could detect and destroy its nuclear arsenal before or after launch, then combined with compression of decision time, the DPRK may decide to initiate nuclear escalation

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[23] Sangbae Kim, "Accelerating the pace of OPCON transfer discussions... Must enhance 'cyber-AI-nuclear nexus' capabilities" [전작권 전환 논의 속도…'사이버-AI-핵 넥서스' 역량 키워야], Joonangilbo, 30 January 2026, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25401387; Hanbyeol Sohn, "The Korea-U.S. 'AI-Nuclear Nexus' Could Also Deter North Korean Nuclear Provocations" [한·미의 'AI-핵 넥서스', 북한 핵무기 도발도 막을 수 있다], Hankookilbo, 29 January 2026, https://www.hankookilbo.com/news/article/A2026012810160005795?did=NA.

[24] Choong-Koo Lee, "Cyber-AI-Nuclear Security Nexus: The Convergence of the AI-Nuclear Nexus and Cybersecurity, (2026 KACS Special Report: Cyber Complex Nexus: Understanding the Latest Trends and Exploring Response Strategies, January 16, 2026), [사이버-AI-핵 안보 넥서스: AI-핵 넥서스와 사이버안보의 결합," 『사이버 복합 넥서스: 최신 동향 파악과 대응 전략 모색, 2026 KACS 스페셜리포트].

[25] Sangbae Kim, "Accelerating the pace of OPCON transfer discussions... Must enhance 'cyber-AI-nuclear nexus' capabilities" [전작권 전환 논의 속도…'사이버-AI-핵 넥서스' 역량 키워야], Joongangilbo, 30 January 2026, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25401387.

[26] Chaemoo Lim, "Strengthening North Korea Threat Response Capabilities with an 'Intelligent 3-Axis System'" ['지능형 3 축 체계'로 북 위협 대응력 강화], Kookbangilbo, 27 September, 2022, https://kookbang.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb/20220928/6/BBSMSTR_000000010021/view.do.

prematurely. Therefore, the adoption and integration of AI systems can be a double-edged sword for both the ROK and DPRK regarding the likelihood of nuclear escalation.

Based on the strategic dynamics of the Korean Peninsula, policy recommendations must bridge the gap between the ROK military's drive for AI implementation and the critical need to prevent inadvertent nuclear escalation with the DPRK. First, to prevent AI from dictating the pace of conflict, bilateral ROK-U.S. AI safeguards should be discussed with the United States. As the alliance integrates AI into Combined Forces Command (CFC) operations, shared protocols are essential to avoid escalation. Furthermore, crisis communications between Seoul, Washington, and Pyongyang (to whatever extent possible) should be pursued.

Second, AI systems must be designed to de-escalate tensions rather than accelerate them. The primary driver for military AI is the ability to process information and act faster than an adversary. Up to now, opportunities for integrating AI into military operations have been mainly associated with enhancing operational tempo, which could – as discussed above – increase risk of conflict. Yet, AI-enabled DMZ monitoring may provide highly accurate and objective data and reduces the risk of false alerts that could also trigger a retaliatory strike. In this case, AI can ensure both sides are adhering to agreements without requiring invasive human inspections that often trigger political friction.

Lastly, the ROK should leverage its position as a global AI leader to set international standards that indirectly pressure the DPRK to comply with basic safety norms. Building on the Responsible AI in the Military Domain (REAIM) summits hosted in Seoul, the ROK may hold normative leadership in designing AI safety rules with the international community including the DPRK. The ROK government should also make this an agenda item for future inter-Korean talks.

About the Author

Suon Choi is a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) and Indo-Pacific Research Fellow at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. She served as ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) Defense Innovation Special Advisory Committee Research Fellow and MND Policy Advisor Committee Defense Innovation Subcommittee Advisor. Her research expertise includes South Korea's defense strategy, U.S.-ROK alliance, and Pol-Mil game strategy. Currently, she is researching U.S. extended deterrence, its credibility, and ROK's nuclear armament debate.

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