



## Vulnerable US Alliances in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Implications

Eric Heginbotham & Richard J. Samuels

To cite this article: Eric Heginbotham & Richard J. Samuels (2021) Vulnerable US Alliances in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Implications, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:1, 157-175, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2021.1894709](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1894709)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1894709>



Published online: 23 Mar 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Vulnerable US Alliances in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Implications

Despite rising threats and challenges in Northeast Asia, the US commitment to its allies there has become less certain. In part, this is by design. President Trump argued that less categorical signals would encourage US allies to do more, either in their own defense or to support (and finance) forward deployed US forces. Hearing this, Japanese and South Korean (ROK) leaders have been led to consider alternatives to the status quo. They increased defense budgets, a welcome development in Washington, but they also have taken measures that may complicate alliance dynamics, undermine crisis stability, and weaken the broader project of balancing Chinese power. Early in his term, President Biden pledged to improve alliance relations. But confronted with uncertainty, Japan and Korea continue to edge toward offensive systems, including missile forces, which may prove destabilizing in crises. They have also moved away from the roles- and missions-based specialization of military labor that has enhanced alliance efficiencies for decades.

The widening discussion of nuclear weapons in both countries is perhaps most striking. While nuclear breakout could strengthen Japanese and South Korean self-defense, it would not necessarily enhance balancing. Indeed, given the

---

Eric Heginbotham is a principal research scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for International Studies and can be reached at [eric\\_h@mit.edu](mailto:eric_h@mit.edu). Richard J. Samuels is Ford International Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for International Studies at MIT. His most recent book, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community*, was published in 2019 by Cornell University Press. He can be reached at [samuels@mit.edu](mailto:samuels@mit.edu) or followed on Twitter @dicksamuelsMIT. This research was supported in part by the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center. The authors wish to thank Christopher Twomey, Jim Walsh, Shane Smith, and Henry Sokolski for their helpful feedback and suggestions.

---

© 2021 The Elliott School of International Affairs  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 44:1 pp. 157–175  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1894709>

overall balance of power, it would be just as likely to lead to “turtling,” producing well-armed neutrals that accommodate Chinese power.

## Japan and South Korea are exploring alternatives to the status quo including nuclear breakout

In this essay, we develop these ideas and put forward proposals for adjustments to, rather than abandonment of, longstanding US support for its Northeast Asian allies. We begin by briefly reviewing how the relative balance of power has shifted in China’s favor during the past two decades. We then examine a parallel shift—the weakening of the longstanding US domestic consensus in support of deep engagement abroad. We

discuss how these two developments have stimulated Japan and South Korea to explore alternatives to the status quo, including nuclear breakout. Finally, we review the consequences of diminished alliances for the United States and outline measures Washington can take to avoid proliferation and sustain its alliances in the new strategic environment.

### The Security Context

---

Tokyo and Seoul are facing unprecedented uncertainty in their security environments. The balance of power is shifting rapidly against them, and their mutual security guarantor, the United States, is showing signs of unpredictability. These challenges have affected Japan and South Korea differently, and they have responded accordingly. While Japan has adopted an increasingly determined balancing posture over the last two decades, ROK policy has been more conciliatory toward China.

#### Shifting Balance of Power

Japan’s economy, once a juggernaut, has grown by an anemic average of 1.3 percent over the last decade. In 2005, Japan’s GDP (measured according to market exchange rates) was roughly twice that of China’s; by 2019, China’s GDP had grown to three times that of Japan’s.<sup>1</sup> Although South Korea grew by a healthier 2.2 percent rate over the same period, its economy is but one third that of Japan’s—it remains the proverbial “shrimp among whales.” Depending on specific metrics, China spends 4 to 5 times as much as Japan on defense, and its margin over the ROK is larger.<sup>2</sup>

China’s conventional strength has expanded beyond so-called anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) capabilities designed to frustrate US deployment into and operations from locations in Asia. Beijing has built substantial capabilities in

all domains. It deploys four times more modern combat aircraft than Japan and has a larger navy.<sup>3</sup> China is addressing remaining weaknesses, including anti-submarine warfare, sustainment, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Its composite capabilities are significantly greater than Japan's, and it now enjoys qualitative advantages in some areas, including electronic warfare, air-to-air missiles, space, and cyber.

The nature and magnitude of the military challenge posed by the DPRK is different. Pyongyang maintains a 1.1 million-man army, but its air and naval equipment is obsolete, and its training standards are poor.<sup>4</sup> The primary threats posed by North Korea are strike and weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear-armed missiles, though other offensive systems (aircraft and long-range artillery) and biological and chemical weapons cannot be discounted. Although both Japan and South Korea are vulnerable to North Korean nuclear weapons, the difference between Seoul's and Tokyo's vulnerability on the conventional side is enormous. Pyongyang has no means to inflict significant damage on an alert Japan using conventional weapons; on the other hand, Seoul and its suburbs are within range of North Korean artillery.

While both Japan and South Korea are becoming more vulnerable to these regional challenges, the ROK position is more precarious—and the most stubborn driver is geography. The ROK is closer to the loci of threats and has less strategic depth. Besides the vulnerability of Seoul's suburbs to North Korean conventional attack, South Korea's major air and naval bases are, on average, about half the distance from the nearest Chinese territory as Japanese bases. Korean bases are, therefore, within range of about five times more Chinese conventionally armed ballistic missiles than are bases on Honshu (and perhaps twice as many as those on Okinawa). Much of Japan is also at or beyond the unrefueled fighter range (about 1,000 km) of China-based aircraft.

**While both are becoming more vulnerable, the ROK position is more precarious**

Moreover, sensors and missile systems deployed along the Japanese archipelago would present a barrier to Chinese exit to the Philippine Sea and Western Pacific—Japan's rear areas. Japanese and US ships and aircraft could operate behind and reinforce this barrier while still being able to influence events inside the East China Sea and, to a lesser extent, in the South China Sea. The ROK, located entirely within the first island chain, would not enjoy similar benefits. Even with US assistance, Korea's vulnerability to Chinese blockade or attack would be acute, and without it, Seoul's situation would be near hopeless. For both Japan and the ROK, the United States remains a backstop against Chinese and North Korean threats.

### **End of US Consensus on Deep Engagement**

Just as leaders in Seoul and Tokyo are confronting a more challenging security environment, they must also deal with an American ally questioning its postwar consensus on global deep engagement. Engagement has come under challenge from both academic and political figures, and the electoral success of the latter indicates that popular support for it is, at best, unsteady. South Korean and Japanese thought leaders were unnerved by President Trump's "America-first" view of alliances as constraints on US options and drains on its resources. They heard him label the NATO alliance "obsolete" and declare that the United States "cannot be the policeman of the world."<sup>5</sup> And they felt it closer to home when the president insisted that Seoul increase annual host nation support (HNS) by some 400 percent to US\$5 billion—12 percent of Korea's total defense budget—and suggested he would be willing to remove troops from Korea unless they conceded.<sup>6</sup>

Biden has set different priorities, but it remains to be seen how he will navigate among constituents at home and allies abroad. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he stated, "The best China strategy, I think, is one which gets every one of our—or at least what used to be our—allies on the same page."<sup>7</sup> He has also said that he does not think cuts to the defense budget are "inevitable" and that certain parts might actually increase.<sup>8</sup> However, some in the Democratic Party are already pushing for significant reductions to the defense budget.<sup>9</sup> In the summer before the 2020 election, members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus rallied around Bernie Sanders' proposal to cut defense spending by about 10 percent in a single year.<sup>10</sup> While it is almost certain that Biden will improve political relations with allies, new questions may thus arise about US willingness and, more importantly, capability to come to its allies' defense in the event of conflict.

Tokyo and Seoul, confronted with growing regional threats and a less certain ally, are evaluating options for greater autonomy. They are also aware that US domestic politics could evolve in ways that further undermine US support for overseas commitments more dramatically.

### **Japan: Defending the Regional Balance of Power but Looking for "Plan B"**

---

During the past 15 years, Japan has adopted diplomatic and military measures to balance against the rise of Chinese power in partnership with the United States. In 2016, Prime Minister Abe introduced a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy to leverage Japanese economic strength and compete for influence from Asia to Africa. Tokyo has cultivated strategic relations with Australia and India, and it conducts military exercises and 2 + 2 strategic dialogues with each. It

convened an ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting in 2014 and conducted its first 2 + 2 meeting with Jakarta in 2015. In September 2018, a fleet organized around the helicopter carrier *JS Kaga* conducted exercises in the South China Sea, southwest of Scarborough Shoal. Tokyo has also militarized part of its aid portfolio, providing security-related assistance to 16 countries from Mongolia to Papua New Guinea.<sup>11</sup> Soon after succeeding Abe in September 2020, Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on training and operations to further deepen defense ties.<sup>12</sup>

These policy moves accelerated during the Trump presidency and also became part of public discussions of Japanese “Plan Bs” designed to hedge against alliance degradation and China’s rise. While no Plan B proponent openly advocates ending the alliance with Washington—many view it as an essential means to buttress the alliance—proposals include some combination of four strategic elements:

- enhanced conventional defense
- deepened regional security partnerships
- cooperative security arrangements that might include accommodation with China
- nuclear weapons

The first proposal—one that virtually all advocates of other options endorse—emphasizes strengthening Japan’s own military capabilities. One National Defense Academy professor estimates it would cost roughly US\$15 billion a year (one-third of Japan’s current defense budget) to replace US capabilities associated with missile defense, sea-lane defense, and outer island defense—a figure that, we note, fails to offset the much larger cost of US forces that would flow from other parts of the world in a contingency.<sup>13</sup>

A second approach entails deepening strategic relations with other like-minded partners, a process we noted above that is well underway. One leading security affairs journalist asks, “How far can we delegate our security to the United States?” He answers that while alignment with Washington is the most realistic option, “it is necessary to have a discussion” about how to replace the San Francisco “hub and spoke” system, adding that “we have entered an era when it is not only necessary to maintain the US security umbrella, but it is also necessary to prepare for US decline.”<sup>14</sup>

A third option is to rebalance Japan’s position between China and the United States. A distinguished former diplomat has stated flatly that it is “time to review the US-Japan alliance,” suggesting that Trump’s America-first policy signaled US withdrawal from its leadership role at a time when Japan lives with a

“deteriorating security environment.” Evoking the 1970s Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), he urges Japan to lead a new “multi-layered” security architecture, which he describes as “a soft security cooperation system that would include potential enemy nations.”<sup>15</sup>

None of these first three options is a game changer, and they might be better imagined as “Plans A.2.0–4.0.”<sup>16</sup> The same shifting balance of power that stirs Japanese doubt of Washington’s security commitment also undercuts Tokyo’s prospects for autonomous defense. The gap in conventional capabilities is simply too large to fill, either by indigenous capabilities or alliance with lesser powers. Enter the nuclear option.

For decades, Japanese strategists almost unanimously averred that as long as US extended deterrence remained credible, nuclear breakout would not be in Japan’s interest.<sup>17</sup> While this has been regularly reaffirmed, some mainstream strategists today interrogate the credibility of extended deterrence. In 2018, for example, former Defense Minister Ishiba Shigeru—a longtime advocate of Japan’s nuclear latency—suggested “the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence ... has to be scrutinized.”<sup>18</sup> He publicly advocated amending

**Some mainstream strategists in Japan today interrogate the credibility of US extended deterrence**

Japan’s longstanding prohibition on building, deploying, or allowing the introduction of nuclear weapons, known as Japan’s three non-nuclear principles.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, researchers at the Security Strategy Research Institute of Japan with connections to Japan’s defense establishment argued that “if the relative position of the United States produces doubts about extended deterrence, another option would be to leave the NPT and become a nuclear weapons state ... [W]e would probably

gain the understanding and support of most other countries.”<sup>20</sup> In that case, they insist, the best model would be Britain, which, unlike France, integrated its war planning with the United States, but unlike Germany, maintained full control over actual use.

The government understands that nuclear breakout would not be warmly received by the Japanese public, and it focuses on enhancing extended nuclear deterrence, the so-called US “nuclear umbrella.”<sup>21</sup> To prevent the weakening of extended deterrence, Japanese officials have lobbied against a US declaration of no first use, discouraged the United States from acknowledging mutual vulnerability with China, and pushed Washington to maintain robust tactical nuclear weapons capabilities.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, the Japanese public’s aversion to nuclear weapons has diminished, though these weapons are still unpopular. A 2017 survey indicated that 12 percent of Japanese citizens favored nuclear armament

in the event that North Korea does not surrender its own programs, up from 7 percent the preceding year.<sup>23</sup> In November 2017, a special collection of articles on Japan's nuclear future was published in *Chūō Kōron*, one of Japan's most prominent monthlies, and earlier that year, the former Japanese Ambassador to the United States, Katō Ryōzō, argued that a robust reexamination of Japan's three non-nuclear principles was necessary.<sup>24</sup> What once was taboo now has a conspicuous presence in Japan's security discourse.

### **South Korea: Limited Diplomatic Options, Expanding Autonomous Defense**

Compared to Japan, the ROK's predicament is more dire, its relationship to Washington is rockier, and—because South Korean progressives and conservatives have alternated in power—its discussion of security alternatives has been more thorough. As the threats facing Korea have increased, and as Seoul's diplomatic options have narrowed, the government has struggled to widen its diplomatic space while enhancing autonomous military capabilities. Discussion of nuclear weapons now engages security experts in both political camps.

Since democratization in the late 1980s, progressive leaders have prioritized pacification of the peninsula, with the short-term goal of reducing risk and the long-term goal of reunification. They have sought to leverage relations with neighbors, including China, to reduce constraints imposed by the US alliance and have pushed for the early transfer of wartime operational control of coalition forces from the United States to Korea. Across the aisle, Korean conservatives have pursued national security through defense and deterrence. Given Korea's limited power relative to its neighbors, conservatives place heavy emphasis on enhancing defense ties with the United States and improving security relations with Japan. Although they support peaceful reunification in principle, they downgrade the priority of inter-Korean relations and reject unconditional aid to the North.

The deteriorating threat environment has limited room for maneuver by both camps. Conservatives, long suspicious of Chinese motives, have nevertheless sought to avoid antagonizing Beijing unnecessarily. When the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled against China on its claims in the South China Sea in 2016, the United States, Japan, and Australia declared the ruling “final and legally binding” and called on China to “comply.” Despite US pressure, Park Geung-hye's conservative government equivocated, saying that it hoped the “dispute will be resolved through peaceful and creative diplomatic efforts.”<sup>25</sup>

Progressives, for their part, acknowledge that South Korea's alliance with the United States remains necessary and learned the hard way in 2017 that China is a

less-than-ideal partner. China imposed economic sanctions after the deployment of THAAD missiles to Korea, forcing President Moon Jae-in to accept Beijing's demand for "three no's": no additional THAAD deployment, no ROK participation in US missile defense, and no accession to a trilateral military alliance with Washington and Tokyo. Beijing's sanctions and diplomatic victory alienated the Korean public, and Moon, departing from the progressive playbook, cooled on an enhanced partnership with China.<sup>26</sup>

**Head-spinning US shifts on North Korea policy have dented ROK conservative confidence**

US policy toward North Korea, meanwhile, has undergone head-spinning shifts—from threats of preventive war and "fire and fury" in 2017 to President Trump's declaration that North Korea was "no longer a nuclear threat" after the June 2018 summit in Singapore.<sup>27</sup> Following subsequent North Korean short-range ballistic missile tests, Trump, signaling that his agreement with Kim Jong-un covered only long-range systems, tweeted "These missile tests are not a violation of our signed Singapore agreement."<sup>28</sup> By 2019,

Washington redirected its pressure away from Pyongyang and toward Seoul, demanding a massive increase in financial support for US troops in Korea amidst rumors that the president favored decreasing US troop presence if no agreement were reached.

Washington's zig-zags dented conservative confidence in the alliance, even as progressives celebrated the apparent vindication of their views about American motivations. Yet, with Seoul alienated from and facing periodic bouts of North Korean and Chinese belligerence, popular support for the alliance remains high. In response to a July 2019 survey asking respondents whether Korea should strengthen ties with the United States or China, 78 percent chose the United States (up from 60 percent in 2016), while only 14 percent chose China.<sup>29</sup> But Korean security elites were shaken by rapid US policy shifts. Appreciating the problem, President Biden moved to reassure Seoul even before he took office.<sup>30</sup>

Popular support and US reassurances notwithstanding, uncertainties have mounted, and greater self-reliance in security affairs has become prominent in discussion of Korea's security alternatives. The spirit of self-reliance has long been strong in Korea—and not just among conservatives. Moon's progressive government has pushed for a more "autonomous defense" as well as a more independent diplomacy. Annual defense budget increases under Moon's 2019–23 National Defense Plan are on track to average 7.5 percent, outpacing both of the last two conservative administrations.<sup>31</sup> But the most startling change is

the increased discussion of nuclear options among both conservatives and progressives.

In 2017, President Park's allies in the conservative Liberty Korea Party (LKP) visited Washington to explore returning tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula. Hong Joon-pyo, the LKP chairman, suggested that if Washington refused, South Korea and Japan should develop their own weapons to level the playing field.<sup>32</sup> Two years later, the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons was included in the LKP's platform. But with the United States accepting DPRK missile testing and pressuring Seoul for expanded financial support, other conservatives moved beyond simple calls for redeployment. LKP floor leader Na Kyung-won suggested consideration of a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement (see below), while Cho Kyoung-tae, another party leader, argued for a fully indigenous weapon.<sup>33</sup> A September 2019 editorial in the conservative *JoongAng Ilbo* argued that increased support for US troops "would be unnecessary if we had our own nuclear weapons," and in November 2020, Kim Chong-in, leader of the People Power Party (the successor to the LKP), discounted the prospect that Biden would make progress with Pyongyang and called for consideration of an independent ROK nuclear capability.<sup>34</sup>

Progressives' nuclear advocacy has been even more notable, given their historical opposition to nuclear weapons. In September 2017, President Moon's defense minister Song Young-moo told parliament that he had asked US Defense Secretary James Mattis to increase patrols by US strategic assets in the air and waters around Korea, adding "the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons is an alternative worth a full review"—a position rejected by Moon but that resonates with many progressive security elites.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in a November 2019 op-ed, former President Roh Moo-hyun's (2003–08) minister for foreign affairs and trade called for an end to the ROK's "dependent alliance," noting "a defensive nuclear capacity with a missile range limited to the Korean Peninsula is justified."<sup>36</sup> A senior foreign and national security policy staffer for former presidents Kim Young-sam (1993–98) and Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) acknowledged the domestic and international obstacles in the way of such a path, but wrote that "support for nuclear weapons is more and more in fashion." "South Korean policy elites understand," he said, "that the country is fundamentally responsible for ensuring its own security in an anarchic world."<sup>37</sup>

There is considerable public support for strengthening nuclear deterrence. Two national surveys were conducted in 2017. One indicated that 60 percent support a South Korean nuclear weapon, while 35 percent were opposed; the second poll found that some 68 percent support redeploying tactical nuclear

**R**OK progressives' nuclear advocacy has been even more notable

weapons to South Korea.<sup>38</sup> A separate survey conducted in December 2018, after North Korea temporarily halted nuclear testing and before the latest host-nation support negotiations began, found that support (54 percent) for an indigenous weapon had decreased but still exceeded opposition (43 percent).<sup>39</sup>

Under the rubric of “peaceful nuclear sovereignty,” South Korea (like Japan, but to a lesser extent) has assembled components of a nuclear weapons program.<sup>40</sup> The government of Lee Myung-bak pushed for the inclusion of pyroprocessing in the US-ROK Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, which was scheduled for renewal in 2014. (Pyroprocessing is a more proliferation-resistant form of reprocessing, which can produce fissile material for nuclear weapons.) Despite its concerns that pyroprocessing is nonetheless a proliferation threat, the Obama administration approved operation of an “advanced spent fuel conditioning process facility” but with limited capacity.<sup>41</sup>

Korea has also enhanced its missile capabilities. When Washington transferred ballistic missile-related technology to Seoul in 1979, the ROK agreed to limit the range of its systems to 180 km. Seoul negotiated an extension to 300 km in 2001 and to 800 km in 2012 in response to the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island by North Korea in 2010. The ROK maintains land attack cruise missiles with ranges twice that long and is reportedly developing an indigenous cruise missile with a 3,000 km range, which would place virtually every major Chinese city within reach—as well as all of Japan. Ballistic missiles, incorporated into South Korea’s “proactive deterrent” strategy, are armed with conventional warheads but could carry nuclear warheads (if successfully miniaturized) in the event of ROK nuclear breakout.

Perhaps the most dramatic development has been Seoul’s design and production of submarines equipped with vertical launch (VLS) cells designed for ballistic as well as cruise missiles. As of February 2021, two of these KSS-III boats have been launched with one more under construction.<sup>42</sup> Current plans call for nine boats in three variants, the last of which may be nuclear powered.<sup>43</sup> These submarines are, to the authors’ knowledge, the only submarines in the world with VLS cells for launching conventionally armed ballistic missiles, which are both more expensive and less accurate than cruise missiles. This indicates a potential future nuclear capability within which ballistic missiles would provide important advantages.

## Consequences of Diminished Alliances

---

As in all alliances, full congruence of US interests with those of its Asian allies is chimeric. US security interests overlap more broadly with Japan’s than with South Korea’s, and China policy provides the sharpest example.

Despite the erosion of US domestic support for global engagement, most US strategists see balancing against Chinese power as a principal goal of foreign policy. President Trump's National Security Strategy announced the return of great power competition—the same phrase employed by President Obama's Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, in 2016—and declared that the United States would ensure that “regions of the world are not dominated by one power.”<sup>44</sup> President Biden and his national security team have echoed this concern.<sup>45</sup> Japanese strategists similarly view China's rise as their central challenge, and Tokyo has adopted policies to balance against it. Korea, however, whether ruled by conservatives or by progressives, has shown little interest in balancing China. The ROK has cooperated with the United States in operations from Iraq to the Gulf of Aden, but its hesitancy with regard to Beijing makes Seoul less relevant to the US concern that no single power dominate the region.

Despite differences, a collapse of US-Northeast Asian alliances would harm the interests of all three countries. In the event of a rupture in the US-ROK alliance, Korea would find itself extraordinarily vulnerable, confronted by three nuclear armed neighbors (all Cold War adversaries) and unreconciled with Japan, its imperial overlord from 1910 to 1945. Given the growing consensus among Korean security elites regarding the need to buttress nuclear deterrence today, we expect that Seoul would consider securing nuclear weapons imperative. If an alliance rupture were fast and complete, the ROK might be unable to secure nuclear weapons without coming under intense pressure from China or, conceivably, being subject to a preventive nuclear attack or blackmail by North Korea. Under such circumstances, its options might be circumscribed, and it might attempt to move toward securing nuclear weapons surreptitiously.

Under the Biden administration, the danger of a dramatic rupture has lessened, and some short-term improvement in the relationship is likely. Nevertheless, North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities continue to advance. That threat, combined with the rise of China and a deteriorating regional balance of power, is likely to erode Korean confidence in the alliance. US domestic developments, such as a sharp decline in Washington's defense budget or the election of a future populist successor in the mold of Donald Trump, could deepen the problem.

Even in the event that there is no outright rupture in the alliance and the United States remains committed to it, Seoul might nevertheless hedge its bets by taking a more open and deliberate course toward nuclear armament, augmenting preparations already under way. Korea could face major hurdles. The ROK is heavily dependent on nuclear power (about one quarter of its total electric power generation), and it lacks easy access to nuclear fuel and other critical components, which are supplied largely by the United States and, to a lesser

extent, by other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.<sup>46</sup> Washington might, however, feel compelled to acquiesce to Korea's nuclear-weapons status, as it did with Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea. And even in the event of US opposition, Korea might attempt to navigate growing cracks in the international non-proliferation framework.

Major degradation of the US-Japan alliance, though less likely than a collapse of the US-ROK alliance, would raise similar questions in Tokyo. Japan's nuclear hedging already includes solid fueled rockets, 45 tons of plutonium, and planned development of both boost glide hypersonic missiles and hypervelocity cruise missiles.<sup>47</sup> And, as we have seen, there is a small but growing discussion among mainstream Japanese thinkers about options to strengthen nuclear deterrence.

**Nuclear breakout by either Korea or Japan would undoubtedly influence the other**

While a Japanese withdrawal from the NPT would surely meet with disapprobation at home and possible punitive measures from parts of the international community, Tokyo is less dependent on foreign sources of nuclear-related material and technology than is Seoul.

Nuclear breakout by either Korea or Japan would undoubtedly influence the other. Seoul has long been uncomfortable with

Japanese rearmament, and Tokyo is acutely aware of military developments in the ROK, particularly now that its defense budget has almost caught up to Japan's.<sup>48</sup> Nuclear breakout in either country might fulfill that state's most basic security requirements, but it would exacerbate insecurity in the other.

Significantly, nuclear weapons would not redress the regional imbalance of power or limit China's ability to act elsewhere in the region. Nuclear weapons would come at the cost of other assets (e.g., warships and aircraft) that might more easily be deployed across the region. Moreover, without top cover from the United States, Tokyo would be far less willing to put its own assets in harm's way in Southeast Asia. If one or both alliances fail, Japan and Korea's regional postures would likely converge in ways incompatible with US interests. Both would be heavily armed but less likely to weigh into a political fray with China beyond their own borders. Following such a "turtling" strategy, each would be intent on protecting its own independence, but more likely to accommodate China on other important issues.

In sum, notwithstanding Japanese and ROK military autonomy—even under conditions of nuclear breakout—the regional economic system and political order would likely come to reflect Chinese priorities.

## Implications

How might Washington act to avoid this outcome? We offer four prescriptions.<sup>49</sup> First, because maintaining a regional balance of power is in the US interest, America's Northeast Asian bilateral alliances should be sustained and supported. The much-maligned hub and spokes model of US alliances in East Asia has served the United States well to date and should be adjusted in order to continue doing so. Washington should hold the door open to multi-lateral defense arrangements, including a more evolved Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, India, and Australia. But while the Quad's day may come if the circumstances of the individual members change, it has not yet arrived.

Maintaining credible alliances in the face of major military challenges will require more than diplomacy with partners. It will also require maintaining US military capabilities. Domestic priorities, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, will almost inevitably require budgetary adjustments. Economies can surely be found in, for example, reductions to the Army's force structure. However, sharp across-the-board cutbacks in defense spending could have disproportionately large effects on readiness. Adjustment should, therefore, be planned over a number of years and carefully crafted. Policymakers should avoid disrupting operations and maintenance or gutting the development of capabilities necessary for Asian contingencies.

Second, the United States should adjust its approach to burden sharing. Negotiated targets for increased allied defense spending will be more enthusiastically received than demands to increase host nation support. Indeed, requests for greater defense spending will likely meet with strong support from the security communities in both the ROK and Japan, whereas demands for inflated transfer payments to the United States will engender resentment and be counterproductive. Proportional increases to defense spending would yield far larger gains to overall alliance resources than would any plausible increase in host nation support.

Standards should be consistent. Korea already spends more as a percentage of GDP (2.5 percent) than any NATO state, with the exception of the United States, and should not be pressured for further increases. For its part, Japanese defense spending, hovering close to just one percent of GDP, is inadequate for a country that spends generously on national health insurance and ambitious infrastructure projects at home and abroad. In May 2018, Japan's ruling party's Security Research Committee proposed establishing a target of 2 percent of GDP, a reasonable but still insufficient goal.<sup>50</sup> Establishing clear targets for Japanese defense spending and tracking performance against those objectives is a sensible approach.

Third, the United States and its allies should reinvigorate discussions of conventional roles and missions and the division of labor within each of America's Northeast Asian alliances. Evolving Chinese capabilities make it imperative that the United States and its allies deploy limited resources efficiently. Given different relative advantages of the states within each alliance, as well as the different peacetime location of forces and time to theater, it stands to reason that partner force structures should not be identical to those of the United States. Unfortunately, the trend toward mirroring—driven partly by a desire to hedge against uncertain US commitment—is evident in the force structures of both Japan and South Korea.<sup>51</sup>

**The United States  
will have to address  
its allies' nuclear  
insecurities**

Finally, the United States will have to address its allies' nuclear insecurities while discouraging movement toward breakout. The growth, reach, and improved survivability of Chinese and North Korean nuclear inventories naturally have raised South Korean

and Japanese concerns about the credibility of extended deterrence. Since these concerns are unlikely to subside, and since US interests are better served without proliferation, Washington should consider additional measures to prevent allies from viewing independent nuclear breakout as their best choice.

A range of options has been proposed, and there are inevitable tradeoffs among them. Returning US nuclear weapons to Korea, as some have proposed, would offer a powerful deterrent signal but comes with the steepest costs and risks.<sup>52</sup> Weapons there would be vulnerable, would require protection, and would invite public backlash. Since small yield weapons could be launched by aircraft or ships located elsewhere, basing weapons on-site is also unnecessary from an operational perspective.<sup>53</sup> Others have argued for a multilateral nuclear planning group in Asia modeled on the NATO example. While this is a positive proposal, it would require a higher level of security collaboration and fuller coordination of domestic politics in multiple states than anything achieved to date in Asia. This would have to be achieved without the benefit of a parallel to NATO's North Atlantic Council and would not likely be possible in time to be an effective deterrent.<sup>54</sup>

There are, however, other measures Washington might adopt.<sup>55</sup> These could include establishing separate nuclear planning groups with Seoul and Tokyo and exploring Korean and Japanese receptivity toward the wartime sharing of nuclear weapons (under US control and within NPT limits). Such preparations could include modifying hardware (e.g., certifying allied F-35s for nuclear delivery), acquiring new systems, and training air or naval crews in tactical nuclear strikes and command and control. Sharing might be accomplished off of allied

territory, avoiding the problems associated with physical presence. Training could take place in the continental United States, for example, and allied nuclear operations might be launched from Guam or, in the more distant future, by cruise missiles fired from ships or submarines offshore.

These proposals draw on Cold War precedents but would be tailored to current needs. We assume that the United States would keep custody of all nuclear weapons during peacetime and retain control over their release and use, as it has done with allies in Europe. These measures would, therefore, differ from the ill-fated NATO Multilateral Force (MLF) of the 1960s, for which collective decision-making on use was proposed by some of America's European NATO allies.<sup>56</sup> While this proposal may appear radical to some, it would reduce the likelihood of less salutary outcomes and is less destabilizing than indigenous alternatives under discussion in Japan and South Korea.<sup>57</sup>

National security strategies always require fine-tuning as circumstances change. It is time again for adjustment to the Northeast Asian alliance framework. Our analysis indicates that Japanese and Korean strategists recognize that a US alliance is their best—and maybe only—viable security option. We also observe, however, that they are coping with new uncertainties about America's commitment and the rise of China by hedging in understandable ways. Their equivocation is unlikely to advance US interests and may risk their own. Restoring trust will take effort and may entail measures that were once anathema. A US policy that recognizes its role as a pillar of strength around which regional states can rally, while also acknowledging new regional realities, will best serve American interests.

## Notes

1. IMF World Economic Outlook Database, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2020/October>.
2. IMF DataMapper, Real GDP Growth, 2010–19, accessed February 2021, [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/ADVEC](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/ADVEC).
3. These figures reflect fourth and fifth generation fighters. Aircraft figures and types from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, ed., *The Military Balance, 2020* (London: Routledge, February 2020).
4. Anthony Cordesman, *The Korean Military Balance: Comparative Korean Forces and the Forces of Key Neighboring States* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2011), [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/110712\\_Cordesman\\_KoreaMilBalance\\_WEB.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110712_Cordesman_KoreaMilBalance_WEB.pdf).
5. Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns over Russia," *New York Times*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

6. Sarah Kim, "Seoul Stresses Sticking to Framework of Current SMA," *JoongAng Daily*, December 19, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3071724>.
7. Thomas L. Friedman, "Biden Made Sure 'Trump Is Not Going to Be President for Four More Years,'" *New York Times*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/02/opinion/biden-interview-mcconnell-china-iran.html?>
8. Steve Beynon, "Biden Says US Must Maintain Small Force in Middle East, Has No Plans for Major Defense Cuts," *Stars and Stripes*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/biden-says-us-must-maintain-small-force-in-middle-east-has-no-plans-for-major-defense-cuts-1.644631>.
9. Joe Gould, "Democrats Face Internal 'Fight' on Defense Spending, Says Smith," *Defense News*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/10/07/democrats-face-internal-fight-on-defense-spending-says-smith/>.
10. Alex Emmons, "Progressives Plan to Push Big Cuts to Defense Spending, Citing Coronavirus Crisis," *The Intercept*, June 24, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/24/defense-spending-coronavirus-bernie-sanders/>.
11. *Japan's Defense Capacity Building Assistance* (Tokyo: Japan Ministry of Defense, 2016), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000146830.pdf>.
12. Kiyoshi Takenaka and Ju-min Park, "Japan, Australia Reach Security Pact amid Fears over Disputed South China Sea," *Reuters*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-australia/japan-australia-reach-security-pact-amid-fears-over-disputed-south-china-sea-idUSKBN27X131>.
13. Takeda Yosuihiro, *Nichibei Dōmei no Kosuto: Jishubōei to Jiritsu no Tsuikyū* [The Costs of the Japan-U.S. Alliance: Pursuing Autonomous Defense and Independence] (Tokyo: Akishobō, 2019).
14. Hiroyuki Akita, "Time for Asia to Rethink its Deep Dependence on US for Security," *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 3, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Time-for-Asia-to-rethink-its-deep-dependence-on-US-for-security>.
15. See Tanaka Hitoshi, "Ampo Jōyaku 60 Nen" [The Japan-U.S. Security Treaty at 60], *Mainichi Shimbun Premia*, January 3, 2020, <https://mainichi.jp/premier/politics/articles/20200123/pol/00m/010/004000c>.
16. Daniel Sneider, private correspondence, December 2, 2020.
17. Richard J. Samuels and James L. Schoff, "Japan's Nuclear Hedge: Beyond 'Allergy' and Breakout," *Political Science Quarterly*, September 2015, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/japans-nuclear-hedge-beyond-allergy-and-breakout/>.
18. Fumihiko Yoshida, "Japan Should Scrutinize the Credibility of the US Nuclear Umbrella," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 2 (2018), 464–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1507414>.
19. Ishiba Shigeru, "'Mochikomi' kara Kyōdo Hōzai made arayuru Giron ga Hitsuyō Da" [We Need Discussion of Everything from 'Introduction' to Joint Possession], *Chūō Kōron*, November 2017, <https://chuokoron.jp/chuokoron/backnumber/115838.html>
20. Ogawa Kiyoshi et al., *Nihonjin no tame no Kaku Daijiten* [Comprehensive Nuclear Dictionary for the Japanese People] (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 2018), 213.
21. Author interviews, Tokyo, January 2020.
22. Masa Takubo, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons: Japan, the U.S., and 'Sole Purpose,'" *Arms Control Today*, September 22, 2009, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009-11/role-nuclear-weapons-japan-us-%E2%80%9Csole-purpose%E2%80%9D>.

23. “Kita Chōsen Mondai no Kaiketsu wo Nichibei no Ryōkokumin wa Dō Kangaete Iru no Ka” [What Do the Japanese and American People Think about Solving the North Korea Problem?], *Genron*, December 28, 2017, <http://www.genron-npo.net/world/archives/6858.html>.
24. “North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons, Japan’s ‘Nuclear Weapons,’” special issue, *Chūō Kōron*, November 2017, <https://chuokoron.jp/chuokoron/backnumber/115838.html>; for a summary of Ambassador Katō’s argument in *Gaikō*, see Foreign Press Center Japan, “「非核三原則」に見直しを迫る議論” [Discussions Urging a Review of the ‘Three Non-Nuclear Principles’], November 24, 2017, [https://fpcj.jp/j\\_views/magazine\\_articles/p=59800/](https://fpcj.jp/j_views/magazine_articles/p=59800/).
25. Lee Je-hun, “Response on South China Sea Ruling Shows S. Korea’s Fragile Position,” *Hankyoreh*, July 14, 2016, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/752372.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/752372.html).
26. Unfavorable views of China in the ROK rose from 37 percent in 2015 to 63 percent in 2019. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “People around the Globe are Divided in Their Opinions of China,” *Pew Research Center*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/05/people-around-the-globe-are-divided-in-their-opinions-of-china/>.
27. “Trump Said North Korea was ‘No Longer a Nuclear Threat.’ His Spies Disagree,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/07/02/trump-said-north-korea-was-no-longer-a-nuclear-threat-his-spies-disagree/>.
28. Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “Kim Jon Un and North Korea tested 3 short range missiles over the last number of days. These missile tests are not a violation of our signed Singapore agreement,” Twitter, August 2, 2019, 11:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1157306442422136834?lang=en>.
29. Karl Friedhoff et al., “Cooperation and Hedging,” Asan Institute, October 2019, 4, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/cooperation-and-hedging-comparing-us-and-south-korean-views-of-china/>.
30. Yosuke Onchi, “Biden Reassures South Korea on U.S. Troop Presence,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 31, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-reassures-South-Korea-on-US-troop-presence>.
31. “S. Korean Defense Budget to Be Increased 7.5% per Year until 2023,” *Hankyoreh*, January 13, 2019, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/878210.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/878210.html).
32. Eunjung Lim, “South Korea’s Nuclear Dilemmas,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, no. 1 (2019), 300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2019.1585585>.
33. “Redeploying Nuclear Weapons in S. Korea Would Ignite Arms Race across NE Asia,” *Hankyoreh*, August 9, 2019, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/english\\_editorials/905214.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/905214.html).
34. Nam Jeong-ho, “Korea’s Nuclear Option,” *JoongAng Daily*, September 18, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2019/09/17/columns/Koreas-nuclear-option/3067999.html>; Thomas Maresca, “Opposition Leader: South Korea May Have to Arm with Nukes to Counter North,” *UPI*, November 24, 2020, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2020/11/24/Opposition-leader-South-Korea-may-have-to-arm-with-nukes-to-counter-North/4471606210789/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2020/11/24/Opposition-leader-South-Korea-may-have-to-arm-with-nukes-to-counter-North/4471606210789/).
35. Anna Fifield, “South Korea’s Defense Minister Suggests Bringing Back Tactical U.S. Nuclear Weapons,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

- com/world/south-koreas-defense-minister-raises-the-idea-of-bringing-back-tactical-us-nuclear-weapons/2017/09/04/7a468314-9155-11e7-b9bc-b2f7903bab0d\_story.html.
36. Song Min-soon, quoted in Jesse Johnson, "South Korea Developing Its Own Nukes One Solution to U.S. Cost-Sharing Demands, Ex-Top Diplomat Says," *Japan Times*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/12/asia-pacific/nuclear-weapons-cost-sharing-south-korea/>.
  37. Byong-chul Lee, "Don't Be Surprised When South Korea Wants Nuclear Weapons," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 13, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/10/dont-be-surprised-when-south-korea-wants-nuclear-weapons/>.
  38. "More than Ever, South Koreans Want Their Own Nuclear Weapons," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/13/most-south-koreans-dont-think-the-north-will-start-a-war-but-they-still-want-their-own-nuclear-weapons/>.
  39. Dina Smeltz, Karl Friedhoff, and Lily Wojtowicz, *South Koreans See Improved Security, Confident in US Security Guarantee* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, January 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21292>.
  40. Peter Hayes and Chung-in Moon, "Park Chung Hee, the CIA, and the Bomb," *Global Asia* 6, no. 3 (September 23, 2011), [https://www.globalasia.org/v6no3/feature/park-chung-hee-the-cia-&-the-bomb\\_peter-hayes](https://www.globalasia.org/v6no3/feature/park-chung-hee-the-cia-&-the-bomb_peter-hayes).
  41. Toby Dalton and Alexandra Francis, "South Korea's Search for Nuclear Sovereignty," *Asia Policy* 19, January 21, 2015, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/south-koreas-search-for-nuclear-sovereignty/>; Jeffrey Lewis, "Pyroprocessing is Reprocessing," *Arms Control Wonk* (blog), March 30, 2011, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/203835/pyroprocessing-is-reprocessing/>.
  42. "South Korea Launches Navy's 2nd KSS III Submarine," *Defenseworld.net*, November 10, 2020, [https://www.defenseworld.net/news/28285/South\\_Korea\\_Launches\\_Navy\\_\\_\\_s\\_2nd\\_KSS\\_III\\_Submarine#.YCW6lmhKiUk](https://www.defenseworld.net/news/28285/South_Korea_Launches_Navy___s_2nd_KSS_III_Submarine#.YCW6lmhKiUk); Sebastien Roblin, "Are South Korean Submarines About to Go Nuclear?" *National Interest*, March 9, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/are-south-korean-submarines-about-go-nuclear-46582>.
  43. Lami Kim, "Has South Korea Renounced 'Nuclear Hedging'?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 27, 2017, <https://thebulletin.org/2017/06/has-south-korea-renounced-nuclear-hedging/>.
  44. Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
  45. Yang Kuang-shun, "Team Biden's Policies on China and Taiwan," July 16, 2020, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/team-bidens-policies-on-china-and-taiwan/>.
  46. Lim, "South Korea's Nuclear Dilemmas."
  47. Samuels and Schoff, "Japan's Nuclear Hedge."
  48. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.
  49. For a partially overlapping set of recommendations, see Van Jackson, *Restoring Strategic Competence* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, July 2020), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/restoring-strategic-competence>.
  50. "防衛費「GDP比 2%」目安 自民が提言案" [LDP Draft Proposal for a Defense Spending Standard of 2% of GDP], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO30937210U8A520C1PP8000/>.

51. James L. Schoff and Sayuri Romei, *The New National Defense Program Guidelines: Aligning US and Japanese Defense Strategies for the Third Post-Cold War Era* (Washington, DC: Sasaki USA, 2019).
52. Ryan W. Kort et al., "Twenty-First Century Nuclear Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (3rd Quarter 2019), [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-94/jfq-94\\_80-85\\_Kort-et-al.pdf?ver=2019-07-25-162025-083](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-94/jfq-94_80-85_Kort-et-al.pdf?ver=2019-07-25-162025-083).
53. Bruce Klingner, "The Case against Nukes in South Korea," *The Diplomat*, October 17, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-case-against-nukes-in-south-korea/>; Toby Dalton and Jon Wolfsthal, "Seven Reasons Why Putting U.S. Nukes Back in South Korea Is a Terrible Idea," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2017; Lawless, "Nuclear North Korea and Japan."
54. Chuck Hagel, Malcolm Rifkind, Kevin Rudd, and Ivo Daalder, "When Allies Go Nuclear: How to Prevent the Next Proliferation Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-02-12/when-allies-go-nuclear>.
55. David Santoro, "Deterring North Korea: The Next Nuclear-Tailoring Agenda," *War on the Rocks*, August 8, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/deterring-north-korea-the-next-nuclear-tailoring-agenda/>; Shane Smith, "Renewing U.S. Extended Deterrence Commitments against North Korea," *38 North*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/05/ssmith051320/>.
56. Beatrice Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France, and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949-2000* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 132–40.
57. Kort et al., "Twenty-First Century Nuclear Deterrence"; Richard Lawless, "Commentary: Nuclear North Korea and Japan: The INF Option," *Wedge Infinity*, December 14, 2020, <https://wedge.ismedia.jp/articles/-/21428>.