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Doomed to Fail? US Extended Deterrence for South Korea and the US Nonproliferation Goal

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Abstract: *The 2023 Washington Declaration strengthened the US-ROK alliance, thereby temporarily quelling public opinion favoring Seoul's nuclear-arming. However, it has failed to reduce South Koreans' doubts about the credibility of US security commitments over extended deterrence. The goal of this article is to examine whether US extended deterrence for South Korea is still effective in deterring North Korea's growing nuclear threats. The central thesis of this article is that the United States should abandon its policy of extended deterrence for Seoul against a nuclear-capable North Korea and boldly explore a new strategy to keep stability and peace in Northeast Asia and maintain global nonproliferation regimes for the foreseeable future. The controlled and limited proliferation to South Korea seems to be a prime alternative, as it would allow the United States to minimize damages to both its policy of extended deterrence around the world and its objective of global nonproliferation.*

Keywords: *North Korea, nuclear proliferation, South Korea, the Washington Declaration, US extended deterrence.*

Despite North Korea's accelerating nuclear threats, South Korea is currently relying primarily on US extended deterrence for its security. This has manifested in the Washington Declaration (The White House 2023) announced after the US-ROK (Republic of Korea) summit in 2023. Is this an optimal choice for Seoul as well as Washington, given North Korea's daily evolving nuclear capabilities and growing threats? To be sure, South Korea, along with Japan, has often been taken as an exemplary case in which US extended deterrence functions completely. Nonetheless, skeptics (see, for example, Kim 2023a; Kelly and Kim 2025) argue that the policy

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of extended deterrence for South Korea is unsustainable due to North Korea's nuclear missiles which are capable of striking the US mainland as well as South Koreans' growing suspicions about the credibility of US security commitments. The debate about the efficacy of extended deterrence is becoming more intense in South Korea since the return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025.

In this article I examine whether US extended deterrence is still effective in deterring North Korea's growing nuclear threats against South Korea. To this end, the article analyzes the main purpose of US extended deterrence, the linkage between the US policy of extended deterrence and its objective of global nonproliferation, and the changing strategic circumstances for US extended deterrence. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the study of Asian security in particular and deterrence and nuclear proliferation more broadly.

The central thesis of this article is the following. Given North Korea's significant improvements in its nuclear capabilities in recent years, the US extended deterrence policy for South Korea has become neither tenable nor cost-effective. Hence, the United States should abandon its policy of extended deterrence for Seoul and boldly explore a new strategy to keep stability and peace in Northeast Asia and maintain global nonproliferation regimes for the foreseeable future. The controlled and limited proliferation to South Korea seems to be a prime alternative as it would allow the United States to minimize damages to both its policy of extended deterrence around the world and its objective of global nonproliferation. Given the nearly zero percent of possibility of North Korea's decision to give up its nuclear capabilities completely, Washington should set a realistic goal, instead of the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) of North Korea, and think more seriously about strategic benefits that a nuclear-armed South Korea can bring to the United States and its allies in Asia and beyond.

The article is structured as follows. The next section addresses the definition, purpose,

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and failing conditions of extended deterrence, followed by the linkage between extended deterrence and nuclear nonproliferation. The third section discusses the changing strategic circumstances of extended deterrence. The fourth section explains why US extended deterrence for South Korea has lost its function as a deterrent against a nuclear-capable North Korea. The fifth section deals with a realistic and cost-effective alternative to deter North Korea's nuclear provocations. The concluding section sums up the research findings and illustrates the significance of the research as well as policy implications.

Extended Deterrence: Definition, Purpose, Failing Conditions, and Links with Nonproliferation

Extended deterrence refers to a state's foreign policy choice by way of threatening military retaliation against a potential aggressor when the state thinks it is necessary to come to the defense of its ally who has been threatened by another state's military force (Huth 1988b; Pifer et al. 2010). Extended nuclear deterrence, therefore, typically portrays a situation where a superior ally possessing nuclear weapons provides a nuclear umbrella to an inferior ally that has no nuclear weapons to ensure the safety of the latter. In other words, it refers to a nuclear-armed state's security guarantees to defend a non-nuclear ally from threats via the implied or explicit threat of nuclear retaliation on the ally's behalf.

Extended nuclear deterrence has a dual purpose: deterrence and nonproliferation (Huth 1988a; Bleek and Lorber 2014; CSIS Commission on the Korean Peninsula 2023). To a potential aggressor, extended nuclear deterrence works to deter its aggression on the non-nuclear ally of a nuclear-armed state by ensuring overwhelming retaliation (using nuclear as well as conventional weapons) against it. To a non-nuclear ally, however, extended nuclear deterrence serves as a major mechanism to prevent its independent nuclear-arming by assuring

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a nuclear-armed state's security guarantees to its defense.

In general, extended nuclear deterrence is likely to fail under the following conditions, among others. First, advances in an adversary's military technology such as new strategic weapons or anti-missile defense systems could undermine or neutralize the perceived strength and reliability of an extended deterrence provider's nuclear forces. Second, if an adversary perceives that an extended deterrence provider is unwilling or unable to act decisively, it might be emboldened to challenge the deterrence posture. Third, if a non-nuclear ally's confidence in a nuclear-armed ally's security assurances is questioned, the non-nuclear ally is forced to seek other means of survival rather than relying on extended nuclear deterrence. Of course, whether the security assurances of a nuclear-armed ally are sufficient enough is up to the non-nuclear ally's perception. Fourth, when an adversary perceives an existential threat to its regime or vital national interests, it may choose to act despite the risk of an extended deterrence provider's retaliation. Similarly, when the non-nuclear ally of a nuclear-armed state perceives an existential threat to its survival, it is likely to seek alternative security arrangements other than relying on extended nuclear deterrence.

Extended Deterrence and Nonproliferation

What is worth noting from the literature on nuclear proliferation is that conflict over nuclear objectives frequently occurs among allies and that in general, allies, rather than adversaries, have thus far played a more central role in hindering nuclear proliferation (Debs and Monteiro 2017, 338; Gavin 2015). This illustrates the significance of the US extended deterrence policy for nuclear nonproliferation. That is, it is the US policy of extended deterrence that has played a leading role in preventing its allies from going nuclear since World War II (see, for instance, Pifer et al. 2010; Gavin 2015).

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Emerging as a dominant power in the postwar period, the United States has sought to prevent the possibility of future nuclear war. To this end, it needed to limit the number of nuclear-armed states. Hence, it has implemented extended deterrence to the defense of allies in Europe and Asia, albeit with different structures—i.e., US nuclear forces forward-deployed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with a nuclear-sharing arrangement for Europe versus US nuclear forces forward-deployed to South Korea with full US control for Asia (Bradley 2024, 71). Given that US extended deterrence does not allow a non-nuclear ally to develop its own nuclear weapons and makes its survival dependent on the provision of the US nuclear umbrella, it is a central component in accomplishing the US objective of nuclear nonproliferation. As the State Department's International Security Advisory Board put it, "US assurances to include the nuclear umbrella have been, and continue to be, the single most important reason many allies have forsworn nuclear weapons" (US Department of State International Security Advisory Board 2024, 23). To prevent the global proliferation of nuclear weapons, the United States also established the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 (see UN Office of Disarmament).

By and large, the United States has been quite successful in achieving its nonproliferation goal (Gavin 2015). The number of nuclear-armed states remains a single digit (i.e., 9). Although Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea joined the club of nuclear-armed states, many countries including Germany, Iraq, South Korea, and Taiwan that were highly interested in going nuclear remain non-nuclear states. What is important to highlight here is that the success of nuclear nonproliferation was due in large part to the power of the United States.[1] The United States had used its dominant power to provide strong leadership in preventing nuclear proliferation since World War II, and its allies had come to trust its commitments to their security. As a result, the nonproliferation regimes—although there was a near consensus of existing nuclear-weapon states to sustain the NPT for the purpose of both

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reducing the likelihood of accidental nuclear war and increasing the likelihood of control over non-nuclear allies—remained quite strong and doubts about the effectiveness of extended deterrence were not prominently expressed for nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War.

Recent developments, however, have posed significant challenges to the US extended deterrence policy, thereby calling into question the sustainability of the goal of nuclear nonproliferation. The fundamental drivers of this change are three interrelated phenomena: the decline in US hegemonic power (i.e., the advent of partial unipolarity); the increasing threats posed by revisionist states—in particular, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran; and the appearance of a nuclear-capable North Korea.

Changing Strategic Circumstances of Extended Deterrence

Advent of Partial Unipolarity

Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth (2023) characterize the current international order as "partial unipolarity" (for disagreements, see Kupchan 2021; Tunsjo 2018; Lind 2024; Ashford and Cooper 2023). In terms of the most important elements of national power, the United States remains overwhelmingly superior to its rivals. With regard to the strength of military force and the size of the economy, for example, the United States remains the world's foremost power. It not only has the world's important allies but also numerous global leading edge technology firms (Brooks and Wohlforth 2023). Even China, the United States' most formidable challenger and pacing threat, estimates that it will take a considerable amount of time to catch up with the United States in all of these areas. Nonetheless, the United States is not as powerful as it was during the two decades or so after the Cold War, and it must rely on a great deal of help from its allies in maintaining global peace and stability. The formation of a

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trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States known as AUKUS and US efforts to invite Japan and South Korea to its pillar II (advanced capabilities) (Congressional Research Service 2024) to counter China in the Indo-Pacific region is a telling example. In that sense, the current international system is one of partial unipolarity.

What problems does partial unipolarity pose for American foreign policy? Most important is the strengthening of the America First policy line, as the rise of Trump demonstrates. Unlike the period of total unipolarity, partial unipolarity makes the United States favor an isolationist security policy rather than a value-based global policeman role-taking (see, for instance, Brands 2024). This is probably an inevitable choice for the United States, which struggles from financial constraints (see Congressional Budget Office 2023 for the problem of US financial constraints). In addition, to prolong US dominance, protectionist policies over the proliferation of free trade are also favored in economic policy (Barr 2023; Sanchez 2023). Partial unipolarity still values traditional alliances but emphasizes the expanded role of allies in maintaining global peace and regional stability (Colby 2021). Moreover, strong pressure is placed on allies to share defense costs or actively support US policies in combating common threats. These policy shifts in turn create tensions and discords in relations with allies, not to mention adversaries, which are the natural consequences of a weakened superpower acting to extend the life of its hegemony.

Return of Revisionist States

Another factor that poses a fundamental challenge to the US extended deterrence policy and its nonproliferation goal is the return of revisionist states dissatisfied with the current international order. Its outstanding examples are Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its threats of using tactical nuclear weapons during

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the ongoing war in Ukraine (see, for instance, Paikin 2023; Stent 2020). They not only call into question the United States' ability to deter war and uphold the NPT regime but also illustrate how US global dominance is not as strong as it was in the early post-WWII and post-Cold War periods.

China's increasingly assertive behavior in the East China and South China Seas (for example, see Vukovic and Fechner 2023; Lind 2017) and Xi Jinping's reiterated calls for unification with Taiwan by force, if necessary (*Reuters* 2024a, 2024b; 2025) are also the examples of the return of revisionist powers in response to the weakening of US hegemony. In addition, as US Department of Defense's 2022 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (PRC) points out, China is rapidly increasing the stockpile of its nuclear arsenal from the current level of about 500 nuclear weapons to 1,000 by 2030 (and 1,500 nuclear weapons by 2035) and is working hard toward that goal (US Department of Defense 2022).

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's threats of the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in a contingency with the new first-use nuclear doctrine (Choe 2022) and the occupation of South Korea by force are also examples of the return of revisionist powers followed by the decline of the US hegemony. Russia and China, North Korea's traditional allies, have stood idly by as Pyongyang has upgraded its nuclear arsenal with multiple tests of various ballistic missiles. Moscow's arms deal with Pyongyang for Russia's war in Ukraine has even provided North Korea with technology it needs to upgrade its strategic weapons (Cha 2024a). Russian leader Vladimir Putin now sees North Korean leader Kim Jong-un as a useful strategic partner both in his wrestle with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Indo-Pacific region and in building his alignment with China's Xi Jinping (Ramani 2023).

Iran's persistent attempt to develop nuclear weapons despite international sanctions is another example of the return of revisionist states corresponding to the waning US

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preponderance of power. Indeed, according to a December 2024 report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran has "significantly expanded its production of uranium enriched to near weapons-grade levels in what appears to be a move to build leverage ahead of US President-elect Donald Trump taking office on January 20" (Davenport 2025). US military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025 only set back its nuclear program by several months or a year or so without completely destroying it (see, for example, CNN 2025).

Appearance of a Nuclear-Capable North Korea

As US hegemony weakens, one of the most prominent places where military tensions are rising and the potential for conflict between great powers is increasing is the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear capabilities are seriously challenging US extended deterrence in East Asia and the maintenance of the NPT, which have been essential to US national interests.

Since taking power in 2011, Kim Jong-un has accelerated North Korea's development of nuclear weapons as his survival strategy. Indeed, he has learned from the war in Ukraine, not to mention the fates of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in the Arab Spring and Saddam Hussein in the Iraq war, that nuclear weapons are essential for his regime's survival. Under his leadership, North Korea has conducted four (in February 2013, January 2016, September 2016, and September 2017) out of the country's six nuclear tests and declared in 2017 the completion of its nuclear capabilities with the successful test of Hwasong-15 inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) (North Korea Leadership Watch 2018). Since then, North Korea has been striving to lighten and miniaturize its nuclear weapons and perfect its delivery vehicles (e.g., ICBMs), demonstrating its nuclear capability to reach the entire region of the United States, particularly with the successful test of a road-mobile, solid-fuel Hawsong-18 ICBM in 2023

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(Lendon and Yeung 2023). The test of the Pukguksong-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) in 2019 was another illustration of advancements in North Korea's missile technology and its ability to diversify delivery system. In addition, North Korea has been testing hypersonic missiles and fielding them around the front lines alongside tactical nukes (AP News 2025). Moreover, it has successfully launched a spy satellite with Russian technical assistance (Shin 2023). Furthermore, Pyongyang has announced that it is building a nuclear-powered submarine that is highly mobile and stealthy, promising its completion within a few years (Van Diepen 2023). If North Korea successfully builds a nuclear-powered submarine in which it can put its nuclear forces, the survivability of those forces would be significantly improved.

The main purpose of North Korea's priority of developing and advancing these strategic capabilities (e.g., nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities) was to deter the United States from intervening in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula because of Washington's concerns about Pyongyang's nuclear strikes on the American mainland. Through a number of ballistic missile tests and nuclear explosions, North Korea has sought to not only demonstrate its resolve and willingness to use its capabilities but also signal that it is prepared to escalate a conflict if necessary. In this sense, Pyongyang's adoption of a new law in September 2022 outlining conditions in which it would use nuclear weapons, including preemptive strikes if it perceives an imminent threat to its leadership or nuclear command structure, as well as Kim Jong-un's warning[2] at the April 2022 military parade of preemptive use of nuclear weapons is significant for the following reasons: first, by stressing North Korea's willingness to use nuclear weapons preemptively, the law and Kim's warning exert psychological pressure on South Korea, thereby increasing anxiety and uncertainly among South Koreans about the reliability of US protection; second, by making South Koreans question whether the United States would indeed come to its defense if it means facing a nuclear-armed North Korea, North the new law and Kim's warning aim to drive a wedge between the two allies.

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North Korea's rapidly improving nuclear capabilities pose a significant threat to the US goal of maintaining nonproliferation regimes such as the NPT and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and its extended deterrence policy for South Korea and Japan. Certainly, North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT in 2003 and its eventual success in developing nuclear weapons despite strong international sanctions has set the stage for a nuclear domino effect in East Asia (Candela 2023) and for proliferation risks in the Middle East, especially for countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the fact that North Korea's nuclear-armed ICBMs are capable of striking the entire region of the United States raises questions for South Koreans about the US extended deterrence policy: Can the United States really sacrifice Los Angeles for Seoul (Kim 2023a, 133)? Clearly, few Americans would support a nuclear war with North Korea if it is likely to lead to millions of American casualties. After all, North Korea's strategic behavior mentioned above is designed to challenge the credibility and effectiveness of US extended nuclear deterrence by raising the stakes, creating uncertainty, and attempting to fracture the US-ROK alliance.

The 2023 Washington Declaration (see US Department of Defense 2023), with its promise of more frequent deployment of US strategic assets near the Korean Peninsula and the creation of the Nuclear Consultative Group with South Korea, has certainly strengthened the US-ROK alliance, thereby temporarily quelling public opinion favoring Seoul's nuclear-arming. However, it has failed to reduce South Koreans' doubts about the credibility of US security commitments over extended deterrence, since it is basically not only a 'declaration' that is not binding, but also it does not address the core problem of how to deter North Korea's growing nuclear threats. For example, a survey conducted from December 15, 2023 to January 10, 2024 by the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies on 1,043 South Koreans shows that 60.8 percent of them remain skeptical of US extended deterrence commitments [i.e., they did not believe that the United States will fulfill its pledge even at the risk of potential nuclear strikes

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against American cities] (*Dong-A Ilbo* 2024). The same survey reveals that 72.8 percent of South Koreans agree with the need to arm themselves with nuclear weapons, compared to 76.6 percent of them right before the Washington Declaration. What this means is that South Koreans' public confidence in US nuclear assurances is in jeopardy and that South Koreans now think that they can no longer leave their security to the whims of Washington, since not only North Korea is unlikely to give up on its nuclear capabilities (91 percent of respondents in the poll believed so) but also Pyongyang's nuclear weapons are increasingly aiming for Seoul.

Trump's return to the White House in 2025 is further fueling South Koreans' anxiety about North Korean nuclear threats. South Koreans are particularly fearful of two possibilities in the second Trump administration. First, US forces on the Korean Peninsula might be withdrawn in accordance with Trump's America First policy. Second, the US nuclear policy toward North Korea may change to tolerate North Korea's existing nuclear weapons, and seek disarmament via nuclear freeze rather than denuclearization. These fears are being reinforced with the war in Ukraine, which has dramatically shown the reluctance of direct involvement of the United States and its allies to confront a nuclear-armed Russia (Kelly 2022) as well as the vulnerability of a non-nuclear South Korea against a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Obsoleteness of Extended Deterrence for Seoul

To be sure, US extended deterrence has played a pivotal role in maintaining stability and peace in Asia for the last 75 years, and remains a bedrock of regional stability. That said, the US extended deterrence policy for South Korea appears to be outdated. North Korea has spent the last few decades developing strategic weapons including ICBMs to neutralize US extended deterrence for South Korea. As a result, the entire region of the United States is now within the

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strike zone of North Korea's nuclear missiles (Kelly and Kim 2025, 115). Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that South Koreans have a great deal of suspicions about US security commitments, particularly given the possibility of a nuclear war between the United States and North Korea.[3] According to the May 2024 public opinion survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, South Koreans' level of confidence in US extended deterrence has virtually not changed for the last three years despite the Washington Declaration that has strengthened the US-ROK alliance. That is, only less than half (46.8 percent) of South Koreans agreed on the question of whether the United States would fulfill its pledge even at the risk of potential nuclear attacks against itself (Asan Poll 2024). This shows that South Koreans' perception of Pyongyang's capable nuclear deterrent has indeed weakened the credibility of US extended deterrence. In this regard, it is worth recalling Seoul's failed nuclear path in the past when the South Korean leader Park Chung Hee decided to acquire an indigenous nuclear weapons capability due to the uncertainty about US extended deterrence for South Korea (i.e., the fear of abandonment), which was caused by US president Richard Nixon's foreign policy initiative (the Guam Doctrine) of the start of détente at the global level (Jang 2016, 517).

It seems that US extended deterrence for South Korea has lost its function as a deterrent against a nuclear-armed North Korea. North Korea's substantial advancement in nuclear and missile capabilities in recent years has made US extended deterrence neither sufficient enough to deter Pyongyang from attacking Seoul nor convincing enough to assure South Koreans of US military commitments to their defense. As David Trachtenberg points out, what matters is not US views of how others 'should' perceive the credibility of US extended deterrence commitments but "how others actually perceive them" (Trachtenberg 2012, 63). Simply put, North Korea's rapidly advancing capability in its own nuclear deterrent makes US extended deterrence no longer tenable as well as inefficacious. In order to prove the ineffectiveness of US extended deterrence against Pyongyang's evolving nuclear threats, it is unnecessary to

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mention here the aspects of an operationally nuclear North Korea's 'limited coercive escalation' tactic (e.g., the employment of tactical nukes in a contingency which can escalate free from a regime-terminating reaction) on the Korean Peninsula, which would create a dilemma for the US-ROK alliance's responses (Garlauskas and Gilbert 2024). The 'comprehensive strategic partnership' treaty between Russia and North Korea signed after the Putin-Kim summit in Pyongyang in June 2024 which provides mutual military assistance in the event of an armed attack on either of them (Cha and Kim 2024) further puts into question America's commitment to extended deterrence.

The US extended deterrence policy for South Korea is not cost-effective either. The cost of deploying US strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula on a frequent basis to counter North Korea's escalating nuclear threats is prohibitive. For instance, the one-day cost for the positioning of one US air carrier strike group including destroyers, submarines, and logistics and supply ships is over 6.5 million dollars (Kim Y 2023). Given current financial challenges that the United States is facing, this policy is unsustainable. According to "The 2023 Long Term Budget Outlook" by the US Congressional Budget Office, the US deficit equaled 5.8 percent of growth domestic product (GDP) in 2023. That level has been exceeded only twice over the past century—i.e., during World War II and the coronavirus pandemic. Its annual deficit is expected to be 6.4 percent of GDP in ten years and 10 percent of GDP by 2053, even with no new war or economic crisis. US Federal debt equaled 98 percent of GDP by the end of 2023 and surpassed its historical high of 107 percent of GDP in 2029, climbing to 181 percent of GDP by 2053 (Congressional Budget Office 2023). Such high and rising debt would certainly pose significant risks to fiscal outlook and slow economic growth, ultimately constraining American foreign policy choices. If US budget deficits and federal debt problems worsen, therefore, they might lead to a repeat of the Nixon administration's detente policy, such as the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam and Thailand, and the reduction of US forces

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in South Korea and the Philippines. This possibility only heightens the concerns of South Koreans who face existential threats from North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

If the US extended deterrence policy for South Korea is now obsolete and untenable due to North Korea's substantially enhanced nuclear capabilities, which policy would best deter North Korea's nuclear provocations, contribute to peace and stability in Northeast Asia, and achieve the US goal of maintaining global nonproliferation regimes?

Controlled and Limited Proliferation

The most realistic and cost-effective way to deter North Korea's nuclear provocations and bring peace and stability to Northeast Asia and beyond is through a controlled and limited proliferation, which means allowing South Korea to arm itself with nuclear weapons. This would be a prime strategic option for not just the United States and South Korea but also nearby countries for the following reasons.

First, South Korea's own nuclear arsenal enables the nuclear balance or the balance of terror to be firmly set on the Korean Peninsula, thereby deterring the escalation of its conflict with North Korea into an all-out-war. History has thus far proven that so long as both states secure a second-strike capability,[4] a war between two nuclear-armed states is nearly impossible due to mutually assured destruction (or MAD). Given US full control over their use, redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea cannot completely resolve the problem of South Koreans' suspicions about US nuclear assurances, even if it may strike the nuclear balance on the Korean Peninsula to a certain extent. In addition, as the research by Fuhrmann and Sechser (2014, 920) shows, while formal defense pacts with nuclear-armed security sponsors have significant deterrence benefits (i.e., a protégé is less likely to be a target in militarized disputes), deploying nuclear weapons on a protégé's territory adds little to the

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deterrent effects of the alliances.[5] This is why South Koreans overwhelmingly favored the option of acquiring their indigenous nuclear weapons (67 percent) over the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons (9 percent) in a 2022 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Dalton, Friedhoff, and Kim 2022).[6] Moreover, it is not a smart option, given China's expected strong opposition against and fears about US nuclear bombs stationed on the Korean Peninsula bordering China's mainland. Beijing's 'hysterical' reactions (see Kim 2018) to the deployment of the US-led regional anti-ballistic missile defense system called the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) on the Korean Peninsula in 2016 in deterring North Korea's missile attacks are a perfect example. NATO-style nuclear-sharing arrangements with South Korea are not a good option either since they have similar problems with redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. China's counteractions against it are easily imaginable, given US nuclear bombs that will be deployed in South Korea. Also, it cannot eliminate the possibility of North Korea's nuclear retaliation against the US mainland in a contingency, let alone against South Korea.

A number of nonproliferation advocates argue that a nuclear South Korea will destabilize (rather than stabilize) the Korean Peninsula. They often cite Glenn H. Snyder's seminal work (1961) of 'the stability-instability paradox' that points out that nuclear weapons may deter large-scale wars but can lead to instability at lower levels of conflict by encouraging nuclear-armed states to engage in conventional military actions under the assumption that the nuclear deterrent will prevent escalation to full-scale nuclear wars. Hence, they contend that the nuclear parity between the two Koreas would destabilize the Korean Peninsula by increasing the number of low-intensity conflicts even though it may prevent large-scale wars between them. For instance, Sukin and Dalton (2014) argue that "a nuclear-armed South Korea could be emboldened to respond more aggressively to North Korean provocations with proactive deterrence or 'quid pro quo plus' military operations, the inherent escalation risks of

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which are intended to dissuade North Korean the first place."

While plausible, this argument is little convincing since it goes against historical records. There are numerus examples where two nuclear-armed states employed a cautious diplomatic approach and conflict avoidance measures, thereby reducing the incidence of low-intensity conflicts between them, even though their nuclear weapons have the potential to embolden them to engage in those conflicts. The examples include the relationships between China and the Soviet Union after the border conflict between them in 1969, between China and India since the mid-1970s, between the United States and China in the post-Cold War world, not to mention the United Kingdom and France since the mid-1960s. In addition, even if lower intensity conflicts may sometimes occur between the two nuclear-armed Koreas, such conflicts would likely be restricted and would not escalate into an all-out war because of the fear of MAD (Kim 2023a, 136). The occasional low-intensity conflicts without full-scale war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir since both states became de fact nuclear powers in 1998 are striking examples (Kim 2023a, 136). Therefore, the nuclear parity between the two Koreas is more likely to stabilize the Korean Peninsula.

Second, South Korea's nuclear arsenal can serve as a buffer against the rapidly expanding nuclear capabilities of China (Sanger 2024) and Russia (Nelson 2024) which have had quite vigorous nuclear modernization programs. In addition, with China, Russia, and North Korea, which have all been nuclear-armed, South Korea's nuclear arsenal, along with Japan's nuclear latency,[7] reduces asymmetries in nuclear capabilities between authoritarian revisionist states (i.e., China, Russia, and North Korea) and the democratic status-quo powers (i.e., the United States, Japan, and South Korea) in Northeast Asia. These strategic considerations matter, especially because the United States is currently seriously engaging both in hegemonic competition with an increasingly assertive China and in tackling the war in Ukraine with a resurgent and revisionist Russia. Hence, US deep-seated objections to South Korea's

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nuclearization needs to be reconsidered. Washington should instead pay more attention to secure ways to keep South Korea as its key ally in the Indo-Pacific region even after Seoul's nuclearization, particularly because Beijing has persistently sought to weaken the US-ROK alliance for recent decades (see, for instance, Pak 2020). American strategic interests can be best served by a nuclear-armed South Korea.

Third, by allowing South Korea to take responsibility for its own security, the United States can significantly reduce the financial burden which results from frequent deployment of strategic assets around the Korean Peninsula. This could help Washington to ease the US future budget deficit problem and delay the end of partial unipolarity for as long as possible, thereby prolonging American primacy. In particular, a nuclear-capable South Korea would free up US money and resources to achieve other primary goals of national security such as containing China.

Fourth, a nuclear-armed Seoul equipped with a reliable second-strike capability would allow 28,500 US troops currently stationed in South Korea to be gradually withdrawn if needed or be reduced to the minimum necessary. This would make the US homeland safer by reducing the risk of automatic US involvement in a war on the Korean Peninsula (i.e., dampening the US fear of 'entanglement'[8]), while also diminishing the potential for domestic criticism related to the likelihood of a nuclear war with North Korea.

Fifth, given the inflammatory issues associated with Japan's past history, a nuclear-armed Japan could raise concerns from its neighbors, especially China and South Korea. In contrast, proliferation which is controlled and limited to South Korea poses far less concerns. Furthermore, considering a high level of desire for independent nuclear-arming among South Koreans, who face an existential threat particularly from North Korea's operational deployment of tactical nuclear weapons around the front lines, a limited proliferation to South Korea is virtually inevitable since they do not want to be hostages to North Korea's nuclear

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arsenal for the rest of their lives. South Koreans' desire for nuclear weapons is not likely to subside until they acquire them (Kim 2023b), as 70.9 percent of public support for independent nuclear-arming in the latest Asan public opinion survey demonstrates (Asan Poll 2024).[9]

Sixth, nonproliferation advocates emphasize the possibility of a "nuclear cascade" (Sagan 2011) or a proliferation cascade in East Asia, which refers to a scenario in which a country's development of nuclear weapons leads to other countries' pursuit of independent nuclear capabilities in the region, potentially leading to a regional nuclear arms race. Thus, South Korea's nuclearization could be a catalyst for a nuclear cascade for East Asia (in particular, Japan and Taiwan), leading to increased nuclear proliferation and regional arms race (see, for instance, Cha 2024b; Fitzpatrick 2016). While the risks of proliferation cascade cannot be completely ruled out, a range of political, economic, and strategic factors could mitigate them in East Asia, even if South Korea were to go nuclear. For example, Japan, despite its economic and technological capability, has a strong domestic non-nuclearization norms that are deeply rooted in its historical, cultural, and political landscape. As the only country to have suffered atomic bombings, Japan's anti-nuclear sentiment is robust among its population. There is strong public opposition to nuclear weapons in Japan (see, for instance, Matsumura and Grieco 2023), which is driven by not only historical experience but also cultural pacifism reflected in its Peace Constitution. Japan also maintains its 'Three Non-nuclear Principles'[10] established in 1967—i.e., no possessing, no producing, and no introducing nuclear weapons in Japanese territory. Hence, South Korea's decision to go nuclear would not necessarily lead to Japan's pursuit of nuclear weapons, as far as US security assurances to Japan remain credible. In the case of Taiwan, which has not been recognized as a sovereign state by many countries and has sought to maintain international legitimacy by abiding by international norms including nonproliferation, its decision to nuclearize could jeopardize this status and lead to severe diplomatic and economic repercussions. More importantly, given a high likelihood of Beijing's

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counter-proliferation strikes against Taiwan's autonomous nuclear weapons program, not to mention US robust oppositions to it, which results from Washington's desire to avoid an unnecessary nuclear war with Beijing, South Korea's nuclearization would not automatically lead to Taiwan pursing the same path.

In brief, a 'proliferation cascade' argument in East Asia is considerably exaggerated. The strategic conditions driving South Korea's present interest in nuclearization do not hold in either Japan or Taiwan, the two most likely regional candidates to join a proliferation cascade (Kelly and Kim 2005, 121). Therefore, a controlled and limited nuclear proliferation to South Korea may be an optimal option to minimize the damage of US extended deterrence at the global level as well as the best way to maintain global nonproliferation regimes, albeit with minimal damage.

As precautionary measures for nonproliferation in the case of South Korea's nuclearization, however, Washington should reassure Tokyo of its security commitments under the US-Japan Security Treaty while strengthening joint military exercises and increasing the presence of US conventional and strategic forces in the region to bolster defense capabilities. As for Taiwan, Washington should support Taipei in strengthening its conventional defense capabilities through arms sales, joint training, and military exchanges while reaffirming US security commitments (though these are not as formalized as Japan and South Korea) under the Taiwan Relations Act, thereby reducing any perceived need for Taipei to go nuclear. Although probably reacting with a high level of military and economic threats, China would ultimately have to live with a nuclear South Korea since it could not prevent North Korea (China's protégé) from being nuclear-armed. Nevertheless, Washington should initiate strategic dialogues with Beijing to prevent misunderstandings and let it know that South Korea's proliferation is only to deter North Korea's nuclear aggression.

Seventh, South Korea's nuclearization is also the best way to ensure that North Korea

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freezes its nuclear capabilities at its current level. This is because when South Korea's nuclear arsenal has a credible second-strike capability, North Korea may decide that it no longer makes sense to increase the number or capability of its nuclear weapons as long as it is safe. In this sense, South Korea's nuclearization may be an effective way to induce North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons in the long run, though highly unlikely at this moment. Indeed, it probably is the only way for North Korea's nuclear freeze or denuclearization, given nuclear weapons' current role of legitimizing the Kim Jong-un regime and Pyongyang's recent incorporation of a nuclear power status in its constitution (*Le Monde* 2023).

Conclusion

Given the changing strategic circumstances of extended deterrence as well as North Korea's rapidly evolving nuclear capabilities, this article has examined whether US extended deterrence for South Korea is still effective in deterring North Korea's growing nuclear threats. After addressing the definition of extended deterrence, the article analyzed its main purpose as well as its failing conditions. Then, it investigated how the US extended deterrence policy is linked with the US objective of nuclear nonproliferation around the world. This research question is critically important for the United States and South Korea, the two crucial allies confronting North Korea's ever-expanding nuclear program and its revisionist allies, China and Russia. Answers to this question are likely to shape the direction and content of not only American foreign policy but also Asian security for years to come.

The key research finding is that US extended deterrence for South Korea has become neither tenable nor cost-effective due to North Korea's substantial advancement in nuclear and missile capabilities in recent years. Hence, the article suggests that the United States abandon its outdated policy of extended deterrence for Seoul against a nuclear-capable North Korea and

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boldly explore a new strategy to keep stability and peace in Northeast Asia and maintain global nonproliferation regimes for the foreseeable future. The controlled and limited proliferation to South Korea seems to be an optimal alternative, as it would allow the United States to minimize damages to both its policy of extended deterrence around the world and its objective of global nonproliferation. With North Korea's nuclear disarmament being virtually unachievable, Washington should look for a realistic alternative to the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea. It must also take the strategic value of a nuclear-armed South Korea for both the United States and its allies in Asia and beyond into account.

The potential failure of US extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea examined here is not an isolated case but part of a broader pattern where the credibility and effectiveness of US security assurances have been questioned or have failed. This is substantiated by historical precedents such as France's decision to develop nuclear weapons in the 1950s under President Charles de Gaulle and Israel's pursuit of nuclear capabilities during the same period, among others. As illustrated in general conditions where US extended nuclear deterrence is likely to fail, the issues facing South Korea are not unique (albeit serious in degree) but reflective of a larger context of the limits and challenges of US security guarantees globally.

Notes

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in *Foreign Affairs*, *Journal of Strategic Studies, Journal of European Public Policy, International Political Science Review, Journal of European Integration, International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, The Washington Quarterly, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Asia Europe Journal, Journal of Asian and African Studies, Asian Survey, Asian Perspective, Pacific Focus, Korean Journal of Defense Analysis, Sustainability,* and *International Trade, Politics and Development.* He was a Jean Monnet Fellow (2009–2010) in the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy and a POSCO Visiting Fellow (2016) at the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. He, along with James A. Caporaso, edited a book, *Power Relations and Comparative Regionalism: Europe, East Asia, and Latin America* (Routledge 2022).

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[1] There is no question that a combination of US pressures and several other factors ranging from economic considerations to international reputations and international treaties like the NPT affected the decision of countries such as Germany, South Korea, Taiwan, and Iraq to abandon their nuclear ambitions. Nonetheless, a number of scholars generally agree that the US role backed by its power was critical in preventing these countries' proliferation. See, for example, Gavin (2015), Debs and Monteiro (2017), and Fuhrmann and Sechser (2014).

[2] See Kim Jong-un's warning at the April 2022 military parade: "The fundamental mission of our nuclear forces is to deter a war, but our nukes can never be confined to the single mission of war deterrent…. If any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish its unexpected second mission" (*The Guardian* 2022).

[3] South Koreans' suspicions about US military commitments to themselves are understandable, given the historical records of the fulfillment of alliance commitments: the research by Siverson and King (1980) shows that allies renege on their defense commitments about 75 percent of the time whereas according to the research by Leeds, Long, and Mitchell (2000) as well as Leeds (2003), the rate of reneging on alliance commitments is about 25 percent.

[4] A second-strike capability refers to a country's ability to retaliate with surviving nuclear bombs after absorbing a nuclear attack from its adversary. See Lawrence Freedman (2003, 128).

[5] That said, deploying nuclear weapons on a protégé's territory may have other political benefits such as strengthening alliance cohesion and preventing protégé's proliferation. See Fuhrmann and Sechser (2014, 933).

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[6] As a matter of fact, South Koreans' preference for independent nuclear capabilities is quite enduring, given that South Koreans' public support for their own nuclear weapons has been consistently high—roughly between 55 percent and 75 percent—for the last decade or so. See, for instance, Kim (2023b, 416). Provided that South Korea is a democracy and that the democratic states are more susceptible to nuclear proliferation since they are "subject to pressure from domestic constituencies that favor nuclear development" (Kroenig 2009, 172), the proliferation to South Korea may be inevitable in the long run as North Korea's nuclear threats intensify.

[7] Japan is a latent nuclear power since it has the ability to build nuclear weapons in a very short period of time, if it wants. "As of 2016, Japan was known to have acquired 47.8 tonnes of plutonium and 1.5 tonnes of enriched uranium. It also has the capability to produce various delivery vehicles. Once committed, Japan could readily emerge as a full-fledged nuclear-weapons state in a relatively short time." See Moon and Jeong (2021).

[8] Entanglement takes place "when a state is dragged into a military conflict by one, or more, of its alliances" in which "a state is driven by moral, legal, or reputational concerns to uphold an alliance commitment without regard to, and often at the expense of its national interests." See Beckley (2015, 12). Also see Kim (2011).

[9] What is worth stressing here is that South Korea's option of building its own nuclear weapons, which was discussed only on the country's political fringe, has gone into the mainstream. A number of polls conducted by South Korean think thanks since 2010 show a very high and consistent public support (over 50 percent) for Seoul's nuclearization. Moreover, as Kelly and Kim (2025, 114) point out, while political elites remain divided, they "are more sympathetic to the idea than at any point in South Korean history." The *Joongang Daily* (2023) reports that although the majority (i.e., 62.3 percent) of South Korean security experts still oppose Seoul's indigenous nuclear capability, their number supporting it (i.e., 31.5 percent) has substantially increased in recent years. According to another report in the *Joongang Daily* (2025), over 40 percent of security experts predicted that Seoul will go nuclear within a decade.

[10] It should be pointed out, however, that the Japanese attitude on their 'Three Non-Nuclear Principles' is slowly but remarkably changing. In Japan today, there is a growing willingness (especially among young generations to whom the tragedy of the past is more distant) to loosen or rethink them due mainly to the loss of faith in US security guarantees under the Trump administration. For instance, a poll conducted in March 2025 shows that 41 percent of

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respondents were in favor of revising Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles, which is nearly doubled from a similar poll conducted three years previous (see Reuters 2025).

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