

U.S. Alliance Transformation and the Indo-Pacific Regional Order: South Korea and Taiwan in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines how the United States' alliance transformation strategy, under intensified U.S.–China strategic competition, is reshaping the Indo-Pacific regional order, with a comparative focus on South Korea and Taiwan. It argues that the driving force behind alliance transformation lies in a structural dilemma of hegemonic stress: while the United States seeks to preserve decisive advantage over China and other challengers, it increasingly lacks the unilateral capacity to sustain regional dominance at acceptable cost. In response, Washington has pressed allies and partners to expand both cost sharing and burden sharing, and has further explored collective defense arrangements in the Indo-Pacific. Crucially, this shift reflects an emerging tendency toward the extraction of allied contributions to compensate for U.S. capability gaps.

The study employs two complementary analytical lenses widely used in alliance politics: the abandonment–entrapment dilemma and the autonomy–security trade-off. It demonstrates that alliance transformation generates distinct and asymmetric dilemmas for South Korea and Taiwan. South Korea, as an institutionalized treaty ally, has experienced a relative decline in abandonment fears amid rising national capabilities and post-Cold War détente. Yet under alliance modernization—particularly pressures related to strategic flexibility and expanded

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roles in deterring China—Seoul faces escalating risks of entrapment and a narrowing space for strategic autonomy. Moreover, under selective engagement and transactional tendencies associated with the second Trump administration, concerns over abandonment may partially reemerge, compounding South Korea’s dual dilemma.

Taiwan, by contrast, has remained embedded in a de-institutionalized quasi-alliance since 1979, in which U.S. commitments are framed through strategic ambiguity. Although signaling associated with strategic clarity has intensified under recent administrations, it has not been fully institutionalized, leaving Taiwan’s security heavily contingent on U.S. political signaling. Under renewed transactional logic, Washington has intensified demands for Taiwan’s self-help—including increased defense spending, the development of asymmetric “porcupine” capabilities, and expanded economic contributions—while preserving ambiguity as a source of leverage. As a result, Taiwan’s chronic abandonment fears persist, even as its exposure to great-power confrontation deepens.

The article concludes that U.S. alliance transformation, rather than stabilizing the Indo-Pacific order, risks amplifying alliance fatigue, intra-alliance frictions, and regional polarization, thereby exacerbating instability across the region.

Keywords

Alliance Transformation, U.S.–China Strategic Competition, Indo-Pacific Regional Order, Abandonment–Entrapment Dilemma, Security–Autonomy Trade-off, ROK–U.S. alliance, U.S.–Taiwan relations

미국의 동맹 변환 전략과 인도-태평양 지역질서: 한국과 대만을 중심으로

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요약

본 논문은 미-중 전략경쟁의 격화 속에서 전개되는 미국의 동맹변환 전략이 인도-태평양 지역 질서에 미치는 영향을 한국과 대만 사례를 통해 비교·분석한다. 동맹변환의 구조적 동인은 중국을 비롯한 도전세력에 대한 우위를 유지하려는 목표와 이를 단독으로 달성할 수 있는 역량 사이의 괴리에 있다는 것이 본 연구의 주장이다. 미국은 이러한 딜레마를 완화하기 위해 동맹국 및 파트너국에 대해 비용 분담과 부담 분담을 넘어서 역할기여 확대를 요구하고, 나아가 인도-태평양 집단방위 구상까지 제기함으로써 동맹국 자원에 대한 추출(extraction) 경향을 강화하고 있다.

본 연구는 비대칭 동맹에서의 방기-연루 딜레마와 안보-자율성 교환모형을 분석틀로 삼아, 미국의 동맹변환 전략이 한국과 대만에 상이한 안보 딜레마를 유발하는 양상을 분석한다. 한국은 제도화된 동맹국으로서 탈냉전 이후 방기의 공포 완화, 전략적 자율성의 부분적 확대를 경험했다. 그러나 미-중 경쟁 심화와 동맹 현대화 압력 속에서 중국 억제에 대한 역할 확대, 주한미군 전략적 유연성, 집단방위 논의 등으로 인해 연루의 위험이 급증하고 자율성은 다시 제약되는 상황이 직면했다. 또한 트럼프 2기 행정부의 선택적 개입 및 거래주의가 강화될 경우, 연루 위험에 더해 방기의 공포가 재등장할 가능성도 제기된다.

대만은 1979년 이후 제도화되지 않은 준(準)동맹(quasi-ally)이었고, 전략적 모호성 정책 하에서 방기의 공포가 상시화되어 왔다. 최근 전략적 명확성이 강화되었음에도 제도화된 확약으로 귀결되지 않으면서, 대만의 안보는 여전히 미국의 정책 신호에 크게 의존할 수밖에 없었다. 또 미국의 거래주의적 접근 속에서 대만의 자강(self-help)과 기여 확대 압박이 심화되는 반면, 모호성은 오히려 대만으로부터 최대한의 기여를 끌어내기 위한 레버리지로 재활용되는 양상도 나타났다. 결론적으로 미국의 동맹 변환 전략은 동맹의 응집을 강화하기보다 동맹 피로, 내부 갈등, 지역적 진영화를 심화시켜 인도-태평양 지역질서의 긴장과 불안정성을 증폭시킬 위험이 크다.

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주제어

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I . Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of the United States' alliance transformation strategy on the Indo-Pacific regional order, with a particular focus on South Korea and Taiwan. Following the inauguration of the second Trump administration, the United States openly embraced a unilateralist orientation and intensified its demands on allies for cost sharing and burden sharing. Washington called on key allies—including NATO members, Australia, Japan, and South Korea—to increase defense spending and host-nation support, while also demanding expanded substantive roles and contributions to regional stability. At the same time, the United States strongly criticized allies' security free-riding, clarified that its priorities lay in homeland defense and the containment of China, and emphasized that regional security should increasingly be borne by allies themselves.

This orientation was concretized through an alliance transformation strategy. At its core, alliance transformation reflected Washington's intention to compensate for insufficient capabilities by drawing more extensively on allied contributions in pursuit of its strategic objectives. Whereas traditional alliance policy during the Cold War—such as the anti-communist alliance system—sought to mobilize allied resources while sharing a longer-term vision of collective development, recent alliance transformation more closely resembles an effort to extract allied resources in service of narrower and more immediate U.S. interests rather than the broader interests of the alliance bloc as a whole.

The call for alliance modernization with respect to South Korea must be understood as an integral component of this broader alliance transformation. In August 2025, ahead of a ROK-U.S. summit, Commander of U.S. Forces Korea Xavier Brunson referred to an expanded role for U.S. Forces Korea vis-à-vis China—namely, the expansion of strategic flexibility—and characterized this shift as alliance modernization. Deputy Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby likewise stated, through his personal social media account, that South Korea should assume a leading role in defending against

North Korea, indirectly underscoring the strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces Korea. Beyond the flexible employment of U.S. forces, the United States has also repeatedly emphasized the need to expand allies' direct military roles.

Proposals for a collective defense framework in the Indo-Pacific have emerged precisely in this context. Deputy Secretary Colby emphasized that individual allies should enhance their security roles while also moving toward sharing the burden of collective defense. Ahead of the August ROK-U.S. summit, Secretary of State Marco Rubio similarly stressed ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation and, further, collective burden sharing among Indo-Pacific allies at the ROK-U.S. foreign ministers' meeting. Former Biden administration officials, including Ely Ratner and Kurt Campbell, have also emphasized the need to further expand allied contributions and referred to the necessity of a collective defense framework such as a "Pacific Defense Pact." (Ratner, 2025; Campbell and Doshi, 2025).

At present, the structural variable that most strongly shapes the dynamics of both the ROK-U.S. and U.S.-Taiwan relationships is the U.S.-China relationship. This encompasses the relative distribution of power between the two states, the character of their interaction (cooperation, competition, or conflict), and the intensity of that interaction. U.S. regional order-building strategies and alliance policy function as intervening variables that directly affect both the ROK-U.S. and U.S.-Taiwan relationships. While these policies originate in structural conditions, they are not reducible to them; rather, they exert a direct influence on the structure of alliances, their operational logic, and changes in strategic interaction among alliance partners. For this reason, any analysis of the contemporary ROK-U.S. and U.S.-Taiwan relationships must pay close attention to shifts in U.S. alliance policy.

Classic works on alliances in mainstream international relations theory (Walt, 1987; Schweller, 1994) are limited in their ability to explain alliance change. Studies that emphasize credibility (Schelling, 1980), institutionalization (Leeds, 2003, 2009), and shared values and identity (Risse, 1996) as conditions for alliance formation and maintenance suffer from similar limitations. Research on hierarchical order, frequently invoked in explanations of asymmetric alliances (Cooley, 2005; Lake, 2008), likewise

fails to provide a direct account of the U.S. alliance system in East Asia. Existing historical analyses of the character of the U.S. alliance system in the Indo-Pacific(Cha, 2016; Duffield, 2001; Hemmer and Katzenstein, 2002) no longer adequately correspond to contemporary realities.

This study conceptualizes U.S. alliance policy along five dimensions—alliance structure, the status of allies, the core domains of alliance cooperation, the operational principles of alliances, and shared norms—and analyzes changes in alliance policy on this basis. In particular, it examines how U.S. alliance policy has evolved under the strategy of alliance transformation and how these shifts have affected South Korea and Taiwan. A systematic analysis of the U.S. alliance transformation strategy, together with an examination of South Korea's and Taiwan's responses, constitutes a critical link for explaining and anticipating the trajectory of the Indo-Pacific regional order.

The key features of the alliance transformation strategy under the second Trump administration, to which this study draws particular attention, are as follows. First, alliance structure is shifting from the traditional hub-and-spokes bilateral system (Cha, 2016; Duffield, 2001) toward minilateral arrangements and a lattice-like network configuration. Second, the status of allies is evolving from that of unilateral security beneficiaries—or actors to be controlled(Cha, 2016; Weitsman, 2004)—to contributors possessing specialized capabilities across domains such as security and supply chains. Third, as technology has emerged as a core domain of alliance cooperation, strategic interaction among allies has become increasingly complex (Farrell and Newman, 2019, 2023; Aggarwal and Reddie, 2020; Blackwill and Harris, 2016). Fourth, amid a resurgence of U.S.-centered unilateralism, transactional approaches have intensified, while the credibility of U.S. security commitments and shared values has sharply eroded(Blankenship, 2020). Fifth, the shared values that once served to bind alliances together are increasingly fragmenting.

<Table 1> Core Elements of Alliance Transformation

| | Existing Regional Alliances | Alliance Transformation |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Alliance Structure | Bilateral(hub-and-spokes) alliances | Minilateral and lattice-like networked alliances |
| Status of Allies | Security beneficiaries | Domain-specific contributors |
| Core Domains | Military-security | Technology-economy-security nexus |
| Operating Principle | U.S. security commitments | Transactional logic and extraction |
| Normative Foundation | Shared values(anti-communism) | Erosion of shared values (America First) |

In evaluating the consequences of alliance transformation across the five dimensions outlined above, Snyder's(1984, 1997) abandonment-entrapment dilemma and the autonomy-security trade-off model proposed by Altfeld(1984) and Morrow(1991) provide useful analytical tools. Despite confronting structurally similar conditions, South Korea and Taiwan exhibit important differences in how the abandonment-entrapment dilemma and the autonomy-security trade-off operate.

During the Cold War, the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Republic of China alliance were both anti-communist and asymmetric alliances. What dominated South Korea and Taiwan during this period was the fear of abandonment, and their alliances with the United States represented archetypal asymmetric arrangements characterized by a security-autonomy trade-off(Hemmer and Katzenstein, 2002). The U.S.-Taiwan relationship faced a critical turning point with the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979. Taiwan effectively lost its state status, and accordingly the U.S.-Taiwan relationship was transformed into an unofficial quasi-alliance—an un-institutionalized assurance. Under conditions in which the very survival of the polity was threatened, Taiwan's strategic autonomy was also sharply curtailed(Leeds, 2003, 2009; Lawrence, 2024).¹⁾ Although the abandonment-entrapment dilemma and the autonomy-security

1) From the perspective of the alliance-dilemma framework, dissolution of a formal alliance with the United States would, in principle, increase Taiwan's autonomy. In Taiwan's case, however, because its freedom of action in the international arena is extremely limited, the termination

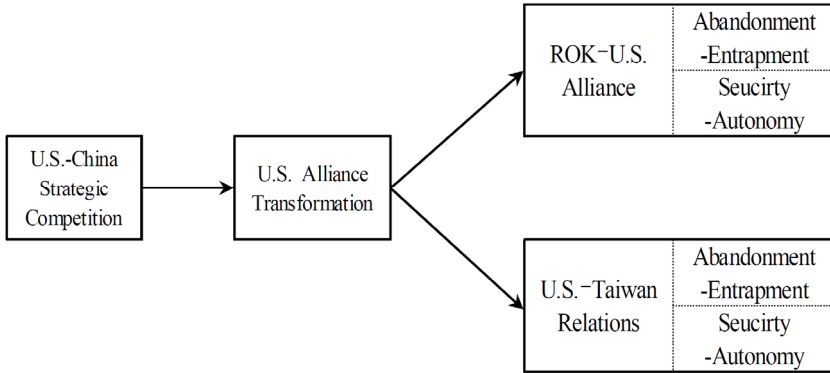
trade-off experienced by Taiwan have shifted in accordance with changes in cross-Strait relations, Taiwan's structural vulnerability has not been fundamentally resolved. By contrast, as geopolitical tensions eased in the post-Cold War period, South Korea was partially relieved from the fear of abandonment. Although limited, the space for strategic autonomy—previously sacrificed in exchange for security—expanded.

China's rise in the post-Cold War period generated divergent strategic dilemmas for the two cases. For Taiwan, China's growing power posed an existential threat, amplifying fears of abandonment. Amid intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, U.S. Taiwan policy—previously characterized by strategic ambiguity—has increasingly taken on features of strategic clarity. Yet this shift has also placed Taiwan directly on the front line of great-power rivalry. In the absence of institutionalized strategic clarity, Taiwan remains dependent on U.S. political will alone; consequently, abandonment fears have not been resolved, and the uncertainty and vulnerability confronting Taiwan have further intensified (Wu, 2021; Chang-Liao and Fang, 2021).

In South Korea's case, Seoul adopted the strategy commonly described as *anmiyeongjung*(安美經中)—security alignment with the United States combined with economic engagement with China—while resisting unilateral alignment with either side. However, as pressure to choose between the United States and China has mounted, South Korea has increasingly perceived the burden of unnecessary entrapment in U.S.-China conflict, and the strategic space that had expanded in the post-Cold War period has begun to narrow once again. Moreover, concerns have emerged that if U.S. demands for binary alignment persist and bloc polarization deepens, fears of abandonment may reappear.

of a formal alliance cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as an expansion of autonomy.

<Figure 1> The Dynamics of the ROK-U.S. Alliance and the U.S.-Taiwan Relationship



Because of the widening gap between the objective of maintaining overwhelming superiority over challengers centered on China and Russia and the capacity to achieve that objective, the United States has demanded expanded roles and contributions from its allies. The U.S. alliance transformation strategy and its effects on South Korea and Taiwan serve as a touchstone for understanding how the United States conceptualizes alliances in the Indo-Pacific, as well as a barometer for assessing broader changes in the Indo-Pacific regional order.

South Korea is a major U.S. ally in the Indo-Pacific, a central pillar of deterrence against North Korea, and a strategic hub capable of constraining China and Russia. At the same time, South Korea also holds significant strategic importance for China. Economically, the two countries are bound by deep and difficult-to-decouple interdependence, and South Korea is also a potential partner in managing North Korea. Moreover, from China’s perspective, South Korea functions both as a potential buffer between the United States and China and as a weak link within the U.S.-led alliance system(Snyder, 2018). As U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies and alliance transformation becomes more concrete, South Korea finds itself under mounting pressure to choose between the two great powers.

Although Taiwan is not a formal U.S. ally, the United States has effectively provided security by deterring China's attempts to alter the status quo. Taiwan is the focal point toward which the United States and its regional allies concentrate power projection and coordination, and it constitutes a central node in assessing U.S. strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific. Both the first Trump administration and the Biden administration emphasized support for Taiwan and moved away from traditional strategic ambiguity toward greater strategic clarity. As a result, the Taiwan Strait has emerged as the most dangerous flashpoint in U.S.–China relations. Unlike South Korea, Taiwan is not merely subject to pressure to choose between the two powers; rather, it stands at the center of direct great-power confrontation.

In this sense, South Korea and Taiwan represent structurally comparable cases situated at the forefront of U.S.–China strategic rivalry and directly affected by U.S. alliance transformation. Both countries are also core partners in U.S.–led efforts to restructure advanced industrial supply chains in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and other cutting-edge sectors. If bloc polarization intensifies under alliance transformation, the strategic linkage between crises in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula may become increasingly pronounced. For these reasons, analyzing U.S. alliance transformation and its effects on South Korea and Taiwan provides critical insight into U.S. demands on alliances, allied perceptions of U.S. alliance policy, and ultimately the regional order the United States seeks to construct.

Building on this problem consciousness, this article proceeds as follows. Chapter II examines changes in U.S. alliance policy amid intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition, focusing on the U.S. dilemma stemming from insufficient capabilities. Chapters III and IV analyze the cases of South Korea and Taiwan, demonstrating that under alliance transformation South Korea faces a narrowing of strategic space and heightened risks of entrapment, while Taiwan confronts increased exposure to great-power rivalry and intensified abandonment anxiety. Chapter V concludes by comparing the two cases and considering the future trajectory of the Indo-Pacific regional order.

II. U.S.–China Strategic Competition, the U.S. Dilemma, and Alliance Transformation

1. The First Trump Administration: The End of Engagement toward China

The first Trump administration inherited the Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia policy, which emphasized the Asia-Pacific region, but adopted a far more confrontational posture under the banners of “America First” and unilateralism. Whereas the Obama administration focused primarily on criticizing China’s behavior for violating the rules of the existing international order, the Trump administration went a step further by arguing that the institutions and rules themselves—designed in ways that benefited China—needed to be fundamentally rewritten. In major strategic documents, China was defined as a serious challenge and threat, and the necessity of a stronger response was repeatedly emphasized (U.S. DoD, 2018; 2019; White House, 2017).

To more effectively contain China’s expansion, the Trump administration expanded and redefined the “Asia-Pacific” as the “Indo-Pacific” and reorganized the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) into the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). As a result, the U.S. military posture in the South China Sea was strengthened, and arms sales to Taiwan were resumed. As the United States enhanced military cooperation with Taiwan and criticized China on sensitive issues such as territorial claims in the South China Sea, military tensions in the region escalated accordingly.

Washington increasingly invoked values and political systems to consolidate alliances, discourse surrounding a “New Cold War” also gained prominence. The 2020 report “United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China” (White House, 2020) defined U.S.–China relations not merely as a competitive relationship, but as a confrontation rooted in ideological and systemic conflict—democracy versus dictatorship. The report concluded that China, which was challenging the United States across virtually all domains, including values, political systems, military and security

affairs, and the economy, required a forceful and comprehensive response.

Despite its pronounced unilateralist tendencies, the Trump administration increasingly sought to leverage alliances in its effort to contain China. Even amid strong pressure on allies for cost sharing and burden sharing, existing military alliances in the Indo-Pacific were maintained and reinforced, and security cooperation among the United States, Australia, Japan, and India—the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—was revived. At the same time, Washington pursued the construction of U.S.-centered advanced technology and industrial networks and supply chains, including the Economic Prosperity Network (EPN), the Blue Dot Network, and the 5G Clean Network. As the United States began to leverage minilateral alliance arrangements to exclude China, a tendency toward the weaponization of interdependence also became increasingly evident (Farrell and Newman, 2019; 2023).

These developments toward the end of the first Trump administration made clear that U.S. strategy toward China was no longer premised on cooperation or coexistence. The Obama administration's Pivot to Asia had been a robust response to the intensification of U.S.-China tensions and strategic competition, but it was grounded in confidence in the resilience of a U.S.-centered liberal international order and presupposed the possibility of coexistence with China. As the Trump era intervened, this latter assumption rapidly eroded, and under the United States' increasingly unilateral foreign policy, U.S.-China relations were transformed into a fundamentally zero-sum relationship.

2. The Biden Administration: Alliance Lattices and the Consolidation of Bloc Politics

By the end of the first Trump administration, a bipartisan consensus in favor of a tougher China policy had begun to solidify.²⁾ The Biden administration largely

2) Even within the Democratic Party, criticism spread that China's threat had been underestimated and that traditional engagement policies had failed to socialize China and integrate it into a

reassessed Trump's hardline approach favorably and declared its intention to carry it forward. Responding to and deterring China's rise was defined as the core of U.S. national strategy, and more aggressive operational concepts premised on the possibility of military confrontation were developed (U.S. DoD, 2021; White House, 2022a). The 2022 National Security Strategy (White House, 2022b) emphasized that China is the only competitor possessing both the intent and the capability to challenge the United States, and that the coming decade would represent a decisive inflection point in U.S.-China competition. This assessment carried significant implications, insofar as it suggested that U.S.-China rivalry might no longer be a protracted strategic contest of the Long Game (Doshi, 2021), but rather an increasingly imminent and potentially catastrophic confrontation.

At the same time, a notable shift accompanied the Biden administration's inauguration. Declaring that "America is back," the administration abandoned Trump-style unilateralism and emphasized alliances, multilateralism, and values-based diplomacy. As a result, the bilateral confrontation between the United States and China was restructured into a "many-versus-one" configuration—U.S. allies versus China—and pressure on Beijing became more systematic. However, as the administration framed competition with China as a clash between democracy and authoritarianism and sought to legitimize an anti-China coalition through values such as human rights and democratic governance, U.S.-China rivalry increasingly took on the characteristics of bloc politics, further intensifying regional tensions.

The United States strengthened not only its existing bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific—such as those with Japan, Australia, and South Korea—but also cooperation within the QUAD and among the Five Eyes countries. In parallel, Washington sought to rebuild the Atlantic alliance by forging consensus among G7 and NATO members that China constitutes a structural challenger and by integrating this consensus into a broader anti-China coalition. The AUKUS trilateral security partnership with the United Kingdom and Australia likewise formed part of efforts to

U.S.-centered liberal international order (Campbell and Doshi, 2021).

extend this coalition beyond the Indo-Pacific. At the Summit for Democracy held in December 2021, 110 countries participated and collectively criticized China's revisionist behavior in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. To restructure global supply chains and the regional economic order, initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group were also launched.

China responded by strengthening solidarity with states opposed to U.S. dominance and the liberal international order. In July 2021, Beijing extended its Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation with Russia for twenty years and intensified cooperation across technology, infrastructure, and military domains. China also concluded a comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran, expanding oil imports and cooperation in communications, railways, roads, and ports. At the same time, it deepened ties with Pakistan and Central Asian states—key nodes in the Belt and Road Initiative—while managing relations with North Korea, a central axis of tension in Northeast Asia, and promoting the expansion of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO).³⁾

Russia's war in Ukraine served as a decisive catalyst for the consolidation of China-Russia-North Korea cooperation and the entrenchment of bloc politics. In February 2022, China and Russia issued a joint statement criticizing AUKUS and Western sanctions against Moscow. North Korea similarly aligned itself with bloc politics to circumvent sanctions and secure diplomatic space. Kim Jong-un explicitly framed the emerging global order as a New Cold War between North Korea-China-Russia and the United States-South Korea-Japan, using this narrative to justify the strengthening of nuclear forces. North Korea's attempt to exploit global geopolitical polarization ultimately culminated in the deployment of North Korean troops to Russia and the reinforcement of a North Korea-Russia alignment.

A notable feature of U.S. strategy during this period was its reliance not on

3) At the August 2023 summit, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, and Ethiopia joined BRICS as new members. Following Iran's accession to the SCO in 2021, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia have also strengthened cooperation as dialogue partners.

large-scale multilateral institutions, but on layered and selective alliance arrangements calibrated to specific strategic objectives. Under what has been described as a “mission-driven coalition” approach (Campbell and Doshi, 2021), multilateralism was readily sidelined when it conflicted with U.S. interests, and multiple unilateral frameworks differentiated by issue area, membership, and intensity were deployed instrumentally. This approach reflected Washington’s recognition that it lacked the capacity to achieve its strategic objectives independently and therefore sought to compensate for capability shortfalls by expanding allied roles. Efforts to combine these various unilateral arrangements into a lattice-like structure designed to pressure China were further reinforced following the launch of the second Trump administration.

3. The Second Trump Administration: Unilateralism and Alliance Transformation Combined

With the inauguration of the second Trump administration, strategic competition with China remained a central priority, while Trump-style unilateralism and realist logic became even more pronounced. Unlike earlier periods, U.S. unilateralism was directed not merely at specific states, but at the international order and institutions themselves. The most important background factor driving this shift was the United States’ strategic dilemma: the growing gap between its objectives and the capabilities required to achieve them. Although the United States remains the only country with the structural capacity to reshape or resist changes in the international order, it no longer possesses the ability to unilaterally overwhelm the challenges posed by China and Russia. Washington’s response to this constraint took the form of selective prioritization based on strategic importance, coupled with intensified demands for allied contributions.

This shift was made explicit in the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance⁴⁾

4) U.S. administrations typically release strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy around one year after presidential inauguration, sometimes issuing interim documents beforehand. This report was disclosed to members of Congress, and key

released in March 2025 and in a Heritage Foundation report widely regarded as its intellectual foundation (Velez-Green and Peters, 2024). In both documents, U.S. priorities were clearly defined as homeland defense and responding to the Chinese threat.⁵⁾ A key feature of this strategy was its emphasis on selective intervention—concentrating resources on China while scaling back engagement elsewhere—reflecting a realist logic of retrenchment and restraint combined with targeted, forceful action.⁶⁾

With respect to alliance transformation, the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance explicitly articulated the intent to compensate for U.S. capability shortfalls through allied contributions. Yet rather than strengthening alliance cohesion, this approach emphasized the unilateral extraction of allied resources. Unlike Cold War-era alliances, which mobilized allied contributions within a shared long-term vision of collective development, contemporary U.S. alliance policy increasingly resembles an effort to extract resources to serve narrowly defined and short-term U.S. interests.

U.S. alliance transformation can be understood along two dimensions: cost sharing and burden sharing. At the level of cost sharing, Washington has criticized allies for security free-riding and persistently demanded increases in defense spending and host-nation support. NATO members agreed to raise defense spending to 5 percent of GDP by 2035, while Japan and South Korea committed to increases of approximately 2 percent and 3.5 percent of GDP, respectively.

More consequential than cost-sharing demands, however, are U.S. demands for expanded military roles by allies. The United States has emphasized that U.S. forces stationed in the Indo-Pacific must prepare actively for potential contingencies involving

points were reported by *The Washington Post*.

- 5) The Heritage Foundation report assessed the Chinese threat far more severely than in the past, to the extent of treating a Chinese invasion of Taiwan as a near-certainty. The Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community released in March 2025 (U.S. DNI, 2025) likewise defined China as the most serious threat to U.S. security.
- 6) Whereas the Biden administration emphasized linking Indo-Pacific alliances with NATO, the second Trump administration stressed that European defense should be borne by European states themselves. See Colby(2021), Wertheim(2024), and Lind and Press(2025).

China in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, while allies are expected to assume primary responsibility for threats posed by Russia and North Korea, allowing the United States to focus on China (U.S. DoD, 2026). Moreover, Washington has consistently stressed that allied military capabilities—not only U.S. forces—must directly contribute to strengthening deterrence against China.⁷⁾

Proposals for collective defense in the Indo-Pacific represent an effort to push burden sharing toward burden shifting. Deputy Secretary of Defense Colby has argued that individual allies should enhance their own security roles while also sharing the burdens of collective defense. Similar views were expressed ahead of the August ROK-U.S. summit, when the United States emphasized strengthening ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation, enhancing Indo-Pacific deterrence, and advancing collective burden sharing. These proposals echo earlier arguments for an “Asian NATO” to counter China, analogous to NATO’s role in confronting the Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁸⁾

Despite substantial constraints and criticism, proposals for an Asian NATO continue to surface due to shifts in the balance of power resulting from China’s rise and the declining capacity of the United States to counter it unilaterally.⁹⁾ Not only Trump administration officials such as Colby and Rubio, but also former Biden administration figures including Ely Ratner and Kurt Campbell, have emphasized the need to expand allied contributions and have referred to the necessity of a collective defense framework

7) This logic had already been articulated in the Biden administration’s concept of “Integrated Deterrence”, which envisioned the integrated employment of allied capabilities within a U.S.-led alliance network.

8) Numerous criticisms can be raised regarding the feasibility of such a framework. Indo-Pacific allies lack a strong shared identity and are geographically dispersed across an excessively wide region, resulting in divergent security interests. Positions toward China—the presumed common threat—vary substantially across countries. Normative criticisms have also been raised that an Asian NATO would entrench a New Cold War-style bloc structure. Duffield (2001) previously offered a similar explanation for the historical weakness of multilateral security institutions in the Asia-Pacific.

9) Green (2023) argues that China constitutes the most critical variable in the realization of an Asian NATO. Despite numerous practical constraints, sustained Chinese coercion and mounting threats may compel the United States and its allies to move toward the construction of a collective defense framework.

such as a Pacific Defense Pact (Ratner, 2025; Campbell and Doshi, 2025). This convergence reflects a growing consensus within the United States that alliances must move beyond bilateral arrangements and that allied contributions must be institutionalized accordingly (Cass, 2025).

Meanwhile, the “National Security Strategy” (White House, 2025) released on December 5, 2025 by the second Trump administration invoked the Monroe Doctrine, a historical symbol of the isolationist lineage in U.S. foreign policy. Of the two tendencies embedded in the administration’s strategy of selective engagement—retrenchment and restraint on the one hand, and robust intervention on the other—the former appeared to gain greater emphasis, giving rise to expectations that external intervention in support of strategic competition with China would likewise diminish.

It is true that the NSS accorded overwhelming priority to the defense of the U.S. homeland and the Western Hemisphere. Yet the Indo-Pacific continued to be defined as a central arena of economic and geopolitical competition, and the importance of preventing military conflict and sustaining deterrence in order to safeguard U.S. economic interests in the region was reaffirmed.¹⁰⁾ Notably, even while stressing the need to reduce external intervention, the strategy underscored the achievement of strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific and the maintenance of advanced military superiority as the means to that end.

The critical question, therefore, concerns who will bear the associated costs and burdens. Although the NSS emphasized U.S. interests and objectives in the Indo-Pacific, its invocation of the Monroe Doctrine simultaneously signaled that their realization would be left, at least in part, to allies. For this reason, despite declarations of realist retrenchment and restraint, the underlying trajectory of alliance transformation

10) What distinguishes the recent NSS from earlier iterations is the heightened emphasis, in its discussion of the Indo-Pacific, on economic-security interests such as technology, critical resources, supply chains, and reindustrialization. References to China likewise reflect a notable shift: the language of systemic competition has largely disappeared, and China is no longer explicitly designated as a direct threat. Instead, the document places greater weight on China as a source of supply-chain vulnerability and as an economic competitor.

in the Indo-Pacific is more likely to persist—or even intensify—than to be reversed.

III. South Korea: U.S.–China Strategic Competition and the Risk of Entrapment

1. The Dynamics of the ROK–U.S. Alliance

Since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, relations with the United States have constituted the single most influential factor shaping South Korean foreign policy. The United States formed the ontological foundation that defined the birth and survival of the Republic of Korea, and the ROK–U.S. alliance has functioned as the most critical prerequisite for South Korea’s security and prosperity. Through the Mutual Defense Treaty, South Korea mitigated its fear of abandonment, while the United States managed its risk of entrapment. South Korea alleviated acute security anxieties and secured deterrence against North Korea and the communist bloc through the stationing of U.S. Forces Korea and the provision of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The United States, in turn, constrained South Korea’s potential unilateral use of force through mechanisms such as wartime operational control, the bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement,¹¹⁾ and missile guidelines, thereby limiting the risk of entrapment.¹²⁾ In this respect, the ROK–U.S. alliance also functioned as a dual containment mechanism vis-à-vis both

11) Agreement for Cooperation Between the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of the United States of America Concerning Civil Uses of Atomic Energy.

12) Although peacetime operational control was transferred in 1994, wartime operational control remains under U.S. authority. The Nuclear Energy Agreement, enacted in 1956, restricted enrichment and reprocessing of nuclear fuel; although these restrictions were partially relaxed through revisions, U.S. approval remains necessary for the utilization of nuclear materials. The Missile Guidelines restricted missile range and payload, effectively prohibiting South Korea’s ballistic missile development; the range limit was expanded to 800 km in 2011, and payload restrictions were later lifted.

South Korea and North Korea(Cha, 2016; Weitsman, 2004).

The ROK-U.S. alliance can also be understood through the autonomy-security trade-off model advanced by Altfeld(1984) and Morrow(1991). Within this asymmetric alliance, South Korea was guaranteed security but, driven by persistent fears of abandonment, adhered to a rigid strategy of bandwagoning with the United States. As a result, South Korea's diplomatic autonomy and independent foreign policy capacity remained extremely limited. This autonomy-security trade-off reflected both South Korea's relatively weak national power and the structural constraints imposed by the Cold War international environment. Although the degree of autonomy varied across administrations, no South Korean government sought to fundamentally depart from the alliance framework even after the end of the Cold War.

As Cold War tensions partially eased and South Korea's national power increased, however, the abandonment-entrapment structure of the ROK-U.S. alliance began to evolve, and the rigidity of the autonomy-security trade-off gradually loosened. Fear of abandonment—which had imposed substantial opportunity costs by constraining strategic autonomy—declined, while the space for limited strategic autonomy expanded. As geopolitical tensions in East Asia eased, the United States experienced a reduction in the risk of entrapment; at the same time, it increasingly required a rationale for engagement—namely, justification for entrapment. Consequently, the expansion of allied autonomy, division of labor, and role sharing within alliances emerged as salient issues.¹³⁾

As U.S.-China strategic competition intensified and the regional environment in East Asia shifted, however, both the abandonment-entrapment structure and the autonomy-security trade-off within the ROK-U.S. alliance underwent renewed transformation. East Asia emerged as the central theater of U.S. grand strategy, and as South Korea's national power expanded, its value as a strategic hub and core ally increased correspondingly. In this context, the United States sought to mobilize South Korea's

13) The Bush administration's alliance transformation initiatives in the early 2000s were pursued precisely within this context.

resources more actively in order to maintain strategic advantage vis-à-vis China and to draw Seoul more deeply into U.S.–China competition. South Korea, by contrast, sought to preserve the alliance while minimizing the risk of entrapment, given its dense economic interdependence with China and Beijing’s influence over the North Korean issue.

As pressures to choose between the two great powers intensified, the abandonment–entrapment structure of the ROK–U.S. alliance fundamentally shifted, resulting in a sharp increase in the risk of entrapment. Meanwhile, the strategic autonomy that had expanded during the post–Cold War period once again became constrained by the structural dynamics of U.S. China policy and escalating U.S.–China strategic rivalry.

2. U.S.–China Strategic Competition and the Evolution of the ROK–U.S. Alliance

In the post–Cold War era, the United States emphasized the need to adjust overseas troop deployments, enhance operational efficiency, and pursue military transformation in response to changing national interests and threat perceptions. Since the early 2000s, these priorities materialized in the form of overseas force realignment and alliance transformation initiatives, driven not only by the global war on terror following the September 11 attacks but also by the strategic imperative to respond to China’s rise. As part of this process, the United States reduced tens of thousands of troops stationed in Europe and Asia and redeployed forces in Germany and South Korea. Within this broader context, the issue of strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces Korea emerged as a central point of contention.¹⁴⁾

The 2006 “National Security Strategy”(White House, 2006)explicitly identified China’s military rise as a growing threat and underscored the need to counter it through

14) At the time, South Korea and the United States agreed to employ strategic flexibility “as necessary,” while reaching a conditional agreement that USFK would not be used in ways that ran counter to the will or intentions of the South Korean people.

strengthened alliances, particularly the U.S.–Japan alliance. It also emphasized strategic linkages among U.S. alliances in the Western Pacific, highlighting trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Australia, alongside efforts to enhance relations with Southeast Asian states (Jain and Bruni, 2006; Twining, 2007; Yahuda, 2011: 215, 256–259). Japan and Australia, perceiving China as a potential strategic threat, were relatively proactive in adapting to these changes by accepting greater task-sharing with the United States and enhancing interoperability.

South Korea, however, adopted a different strategic calculus. Given distinct threat perceptions and its complex relationship with China, Seoul remained more cautious toward U.S. alliance transformation initiatives. Deepening involvement in U.S.–led multilateral arrangements risked provoking China, while the North Korean threat remained the most immediate security concern. U.S. Forces Korea continued to constitute the core pillar of deterrence against North Korea, and concerns persisted that expanding strategic flexibility might increase South Korea’s risk of entrapment while simultaneously weakening deterrence on the Korean Peninsula.

As China’s challenge intensified and the United States shifted the center of its global strategy toward East Asia, alliance transformation accelerated further. Its core logic centered on flexible and mobile force employment—particularly naval and air power—capable of countering China’s anti-access/area-denial(A2/AD) strategy. This emphasis on maritime power, strategic flexibility, and dynamic force employment persisted across the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations (US DoD, 2018; 2019; 2021; Milley, 2021; Austin 2021; Hicks 2021; Hoehn, 2022).

In this strategic environment, alliances assumed heightened importance. Cooperation from allied states was indispensable to enabling the strategic flexibility and integrated employment of U.S. overseas forces (US DoD, 2019; Joint Chief of Staff, 2019). Following the inauguration of the Biden administration, this logic was extended beyond U.S. forces to encompass key allies themselves. The concept of “Integrated Deterrence”, articulated in 2022, aimed not only to integrate U.S. capabilities across multiple domains but also to elevate and incorporate allied military capabilities into a unified deterrence posture.

South Korea broadly accepted and responded positively to U.S. efforts to restructure the regional order. Nevertheless, amid intensifying U.S.–China competition, Seoul pursued a posture of strategic ambiguity—maintaining the alliance with the United States while seeking economic coexistence with China, often described as *anmi gyeongjung*(安美經中)—security alignment with the United States combined with economic engagement with China. The United States remained South Korea’s core security ally, while China was both a neighboring great power exerting substantial influence on regional security and South Korea’s most important economic partner. Moreover, both the United States and China were indispensable actors in managing the North Korean issue. These structural conditions severely constrained South Korea’s ability to align fully with either side.

As the space for strategic ambiguity narrowed, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration opted to replace ambiguity with strategic clarity and to strengthen ROK–U.S.–Japan trilateral cooperation. Concluding that ambiguity had become increasingly untenable under intensified U.S.–China competition, the administration aligned more closely with the United States and Japan. Under the banner of elevating the ROK–U.S. alliance to a global comprehensive strategic alliance, the scope of the alliance expanded beyond the Korean Peninsula, and trilateral security cooperation was institutionalized(ROK Office of the President, 2022; ; ROK Government, 2022).¹⁵⁾

However, this abrupt shift was pursued without a long-term strategic vision or adequate mechanisms to mitigate the rising risk of entrapment. While the alliance appeared strengthened in formal terms, safeguards against involuntary involvement in U.S.–China conflict remained underdeveloped. At the same time, exclusive emphasis on relations with the United States and Japan contributed to the deterioration of ties with China and Russia, while South Korea’s diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Global South contracted. These vulnerabilities were further amplified as the second Trump administration intensified its alliance

15) The core of these changes consisted of (1) strengthening U.S. extended deterrence, (2) combining South Korea’s conventional forces with U.S. nuclear capabilities, and (3) reinforcing ROK–U.S.–Japan cooperation in preparation for potential conflicts with China.

transformation agenda.

3. Alliance Modernization and South Korea's Dilemma

As the United States intensified unilateral pressure regardless of alliance status while simultaneously demanding expanded allied contributions, South Korea's strategic dilemma deepened. U.S. demands toward South Korea can be analyzed along two dimensions: the material costs imposed on South Korea as an ally, and the heightened risk of entrapment generated by closer alignment with U.S. strategy.

With respect to alliance costs, Washington has repeatedly called for increases in host-nation support. President Trump referred to South Korea as a "money machine" and publicly cited figures far exceeding existing levels. Although recent Special Measures Agreements set more moderate contribution levels, renewed U.S. pressure for increased financial commitments has persisted. In parallel, the United States has linked alliance relations to broader economic negotiations, demanding expanded South Korean investment in the U.S. economy and emphasizing defense industrial cooperation, particularly in shipbuilding and advanced manufacturing. South Korea ultimately pledged substantial investment commitments in response.

More consequential than these material demands, however, is the rapid increase in the risk of entrapment arising from U.S. alliance restructuring centered on the containment of China. Washington's position is that South Korea should function as a forward base for deterring China and that the role of U.S. Forces Korea should not be confined to the Korean Peninsula. Strategic flexibility, in this sense, entails preparing for potential contingencies in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The broader U.S. defense strategy emphasizing mobility and rapid response is premised on this logic.

In the ROK-U.S. joint fact sheet released on November 14, 2025, alliance modernization was framed largely in terms of increased defense investment and procurement, while references to strategic flexibility remained ambiguous and limited. This divergence in framing reflects South Korea's effort to avoid explicit commitments

that could entangle it directly in U.S.–China conflict. Yet alliance transformation demands nevertheless present South Korea with an exceptionally difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they function as a litmus test of South Korea’s commitment to the alliance. On the other hand, they raise the prospect of direct entanglement in contingencies—particularly a Taiwan crisis—that may lie beyond South Korea’s capacity to manage.¹⁶⁾ In particular, if combined with U.S. proposals for a collective defense framework, South Korea risks being fully exposed to a New Cold War–style bloc structure in the Indo-Pacific.

As realist tendencies strengthened under the second Trump administration, U.S. alliance transformation in the Indo-Pacific risks reinforcing a vicious cycle of bloc polarization. South Korea now confronts a situation in which the risk of entrapment is intensifying, while fears of abandonment may also reemerge under transactional U.S. alliance management. This dual dilemma reflects the asymmetry inherent in the alliance, the unilateral and transactional features of Trump–style realism, and the structural pressures generated by U.S.–China strategic competition.¹⁷⁾

16) At the ROK–U.S. Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) meeting held on December 11, 2025, it was reaffirmed that South Korea would assume a leading role in conventional defense of the Korean Peninsula while the United States would provide extended deterrence. The U.S. State Department emphasized that the construction of nuclear-powered submarines agreed upon in the joint fact sheet constituted part of a collective capability against regional threats. The conventional–nuclear integration (CNI) concept, which integrates U.S. extended deterrence with South Korea’s conventional forces, likewise carries a high risk of directly entangling South Korea in great–power nuclear competition.

17) According to Snyder(1984, 1997), abandonment and entrapment exhibit an inverse relationship: as the risk of entrapment increases, fear of abandonment tends to decrease, and attempts to avoid entrapment may heighten fear of abandonment. At present, however, South Korea faces a situation in which the risk of entrapment is increasing while concerns about abandonment are simultaneously being raised. This dilemma arises from alliance asymmetry, Trump–style unilateralism and transactionalism, and the geopolitical tensions inherent in U.S.–China strategic competition. In principle, such dilemmas may be alleviated through internal balancing driven by South Korea’s growing national power or through adjustments to alliance relations.

IV. Taiwan: China's Threat and the Fear of Abandonment

1. The Dynamics of U.S.–Taiwan Relations: From a Formal Alliance to an Informal Partner

As in the case of South Korea, the presence of the United States was the decisive factor shaping Taiwan's security during the Cold War. The United States regarded Taiwan as a forward outpost for containing the communist bloc, and the alliance between the United States and Taiwan was institutionalized through the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty. Within this asymmetric alliance, Taiwan sacrificed strategic autonomy while mitigating its fear of abandonment and securing deterrence against China. The United States, in turn, managed the risk of entrapment by constraining the belligerence of the Chiang Kai-shek regime. In this respect, as with the ROK–U.S. alliance, the U.S.–Republic of China alliance also exhibited the characteristics of dual containment(Cha, 2016; Weitsman, 2004).¹⁸⁾

Détente and the normalization of U.S.–China relations fundamentally transformed the structure of U.S.–Taiwan relations. With the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Mutual Defense Treaty with the Republic of China was terminated and the formal alliance was dismantled. The United States nevertheless refrained from severing ties with Taiwan altogether. Instead, it maintained an unofficial quasi-alliance in a

18) This is clearly illustrated by the scope of application of the Mutual Defense Treaty. The United States explicitly limited the treaty's coverage to Taiwan proper and the Pescadores(澎湖諸島), Kinmen(金門島) and the Matsu Islands(馬祖列島)—where Chiang Kai-shek's forces were stationed and which were used as forward bases for a counteroffensive against the mainland—were excluded from the treaty's coverage. This exclusion was intended to block any localized conflict on these islands from becoming an “entrapment link” that would trigger automatic U.S. intervention. As in the Korean case, the United States also stipulated that the Taiwanese government could not conduct large-scale military operations or use force outside the Taiwan Strait without U.S. consent. U.S. arms support to Taiwan was likewise strictly limited to defensive weapons.

de-institutionalized form. Through the Taiwan Relations Act, Washington committed to providing Taiwan with defensive arms sufficient to maintain “a sufficient self-defense capability,” while deliberately stopping short of an explicit commitment to intervene militarily on Taiwan’s behalf. This approach—opposing the use of force against Taiwan and sustaining military support while withholding a formal security guarantee—constituted the policy of strategic ambiguity.¹⁹⁾

In the absence of an institutionalized alliance and under the framework of strategic ambiguity, Taiwan’s fear of abandonment intensified. Following U.S.–China normalization, Taiwan also effectively lost its status as a recognized state in the international system, resulting in a sharp contraction of strategic autonomy (Lawrence, 2024). In a context where survival depended on U.S. support and abandonment anxiety remained acute, Taiwan’s strategic options became extremely constrained, and asymmetric dependence on the United States deepened further. For Taiwan, the central dilemma was not the risk of entrapment within a strong alliance, but rather the problem of managing abandonment anxiety under a de-institutionalized patron–client relationship, even at the cost of forfeiting autonomy. This structural condition persisted throughout the post-Cold War period.

Unlike South Korea, which was able to expand diplomatic diversification and strategic autonomy as Cold War tensions eased and abandonment fears receded, Taiwan continued to sacrifice autonomy for survival and to suffer from chronic abandonment anxiety. While formally adhering to the One China policy, the United States articulated the so-called “Three No’s”—opposition to Taiwan independence, to “one China, one Taiwan,” and to Taiwan’s participation in international organizations as a sovereign state—and explicitly opposed initiatives such as referenda aimed at independence.²⁰⁾

19) The key institutional arrangements that define strategic ambiguity include the Taiwan Relations Act(1979), the three Communiqués(1972, 1979, 1982), and the Six Assurances(1982), and this framework remains officially in place to this day.

20) At the same time, the United States also sought to deter China’s intent to use force by emphasizing that differences across the Taiwan Strait should be resolved through peaceful means.

2. U.S.–China Strategic Competition: From Strategic Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity

Strategic ambiguity long served as the core principle sustaining stability in the Taiwan Strait by enabling dual deterrence—deterring China from using force while simultaneously restraining Taiwan from attempting unilateral changes to the status quo.²¹⁾ However, as U.S.–China strategic competition intensified and China’s military pressure on Taiwan increased, the stabilizing effects of ambiguity gradually weakened. In response, the United States began to pursue limited forms of strategic clarity at a limited level (Arabia et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Wu, 2021).²²⁾

The Trump administration’s “Indo–Pacific Strategy Report” (U.S. DoD, 2019) treated Taiwan as a de facto state and referred to it as a partner for cooperation and support. During Trump’s first term, the United States significantly expanded arms sales to Taiwan and enacted a series of legislative measures—including the Taiwan Travel Act (2018), the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (2018), the Taiwan Assurance Act (2019), and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act (TAIPEI Act, 2019)—designed to strengthen diplomatic, economic, and security ties. These measures included sensitive provisions related to Taiwan’s participation in international organizations, military cooperation, and the expansion of Taiwan’s diplomatic space. The 2019 NDAA also incorporated provisions to strengthen U.S.–Taiwan military cooperation, joint exercises, and arms sales.

The shift toward strategic clarity accelerated further under the Biden administration. Symbolic and substantive gestures—including the invitation of a Taiwanese representative to President Biden’s inauguration, high-level congressional visits to

21) For discussions of strategic ambiguity as a dual-deterrence framework, see Bush (2006) and Hsu (2010).

22) Rigger (2011, 2019) and Bush (2021) have criticized strategic clarity on the grounds that it may escalate tensions with China and place both Taiwan and the broader region at greater risk. Chang-Liao and Fang (2021) likewise warn that strategic clarity could inadvertently facilitate China’s gray-zone strategy and increase the likelihood of U.S.–China confrontation.

Taiwan, and repeated references to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait in joint summit statements—signaled heightened U.S. support. The removal of language from the State Department website explicitly affirming that Taiwan is part of China, continued arms sales, and repeated presidential remarks on Taiwan’s defense reinforced the perception that strategic clarity was strengthening.

A number of legislative initiatives supporting strategic clarity were also enacted. Prominent among them were the Taiwan Policy Act(2022) and the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act(2022), which included provisions to strengthen support for Taiwan across defense and economic domains, recognized the Taiwanese people’s right to self-determination, and referred to Taiwan as a major non-NATO ally alongside South Korea, Japan, and Israel. These laws also included provisions for strong responses should Taiwan suffer unfair and unjust disadvantages from China as a result of strengthening military relations with the United States(Hahn, 2023). In September 2024, the Taiwan Conflict Deterrence Act—which would freeze U.S.-based assets of senior Chinese officials in the event of an invasion or threat against Taiwan—passed the House of Representatives.²³⁾

Despite these signals of strategic clarity, the United States officially continued to maintain the framework of strategic ambiguity. Senior officials consistently reiterated opposition to Taiwan independence and emphasized that U.S. policy remained grounded in the Taiwan Relations Act, the Six Assurances, and the three Joint Communiqués. As a result, strategic clarity functioned primarily at the rhetorical and political level and did not translate into firm legal or institutional security guarantees. In the absence of institutionalized clarity, Taiwan’s security remained acutely dependent on U.S. signaling, while the expansion of rhetorical clarity without binding commitments

23) In step with the U.S. tendency to strengthen strategic clarity, Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen also delivered a strong message toward China. In an article submitted to Foreign Affairs, Tsai argued that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be a catastrophe for regional peace and democracy, and that the democratic camp should unite to defend Taiwan. She also emphasized confidence in U.S. security commitments and noted that U.S. forces are stationed in Taiwan(Tsai, 2021).

further amplified Taiwan's uncertainty (Glaser and Kan, 2002).

Whereas South Korea carried significance as a resource the United States sought to mobilize within the context of U.S.–China strategic competition, Taiwan constituted a critical chokepoint exposed to that rivalry and a central theater of confrontation. Under conditions in which enhancing strategic autonomy is exceptionally difficult, Taiwan has sought to mitigate abandonment anxiety by encouraging U.S. intervention, even as this strategy increases its exposure to great–power rivalry. China's rise and intensifying U.S.–China competition pose an existential threat to Taiwan, yet greater visibility of U.S. support has simultaneously heightened Taiwan's vulnerability as a focal point of confrontation.

3. U.S. Alliance Transformation and Taiwan's Dilemma

Following the inauguration of the second Trump administration, early signals suggested a possible strengthening of strategic clarity toward Taiwan, including revisions to official fact sheets and joint statements referencing Taiwan's participation in international organizations. However, these gestures were quickly offset by renewed ambiguity, as President Trump declined to comment on Taiwan's defense and senior officials reaffirmed long–standing adherence to strategic ambiguity (Lawrence, 2025).

As U.S. alliance transformation in the Indo–Pacific became more concrete, a significant shift emerged: realist and transactional logic increasingly came to be applied to Taiwan as well. The second Trump administration emphasized that Taiwan should bear greater responsibility for its own defense, repeatedly calling for substantial increases in defense spending and expanded Taiwanese contributions to the U.S. economy, particularly in advanced industries such as semiconductors.

Within this framework, strategic ambiguity was redeployed not as a stabilizing device, but as a means of extracting greater contributions from Taiwan by amplifying

security anxiety without offering explicit guarantees. The core U.S. idea was to maximize national interests by expanding Taiwan's contributions through heightened security anxiety. Pressuring Taiwan to strengthen self-defense capabilities, import U.S. weapons, and increase defense spending—rather than offering explicit security guarantees—can be understood in this context. Strategic ambiguity thus came to underpin transactional diplomacy and alliance transformation.

During the post-Cold War period, strategic ambiguity had facilitated U.S.–China engagement while sustaining unofficial ties with Taiwan. As strategic clarity expanded under intensifying competition, ambiguity was not abandoned but rather reconfigured. Under the second Trump administration, strategic ambiguity was deepened and instrumentalized to deter China while maximizing U.S. leverage over Taiwan. As in the South Korean case, Taiwan responded by pledging increased defense spending, expanded purchases of U.S. weapons, and greater investment in the United States. Just as South Korea pledged massive investments through projects such as MASGA, President Lai Ching-te likewise had little choice but to pledge increased purchases of U.S. weapons and expanded investment in the United States while proclaiming himself a guardian of MAGA.²⁴⁾

Rather than providing firm security guarantees, U.S. alliance transformation emphasized strengthening Taiwan's self-help capabilities. Washington urged Taiwan to adopt asymmetric defense strategies, including anti-ship missiles, mines, and mobile, denial-oriented forces, consistent with the logic of the porcupine strategy(Campbell, 2025).²⁵⁾ Debates over Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept and defense reform emerged within this context(Gregson, 2023; Thompson, 2021; Lee

24) Premier Lai Ching-te pledged to raise Taiwan's defense spending to more than 3 percent of GDP, and in December 2025 Taiwan purchased U.S. weapons worth \$11 billion. TSMC also agreed to expand its investment in the United States.

25) This tendency was also reflected in Taiwan's purchases of U.S.–made weapons. In December 2025, Taiwan made its largest-ever purchase of U.S. weapons—\$11.1 billion—which reportedly included a wide range of systems and related elements aimed at strengthening advanced asymmetric defense capabilities and building tactical networks, such as HIMARS and ATACMS, as well as loitering munitions (Washington Post, Dec. 9, 2025).

and Lee, 2020). While these measures may enhance deterrence, they also impose significant strategic and economic burdens on Taiwan and carry the risk of provoking further Chinese coercion.

U.S. alliance transformation thus confronts Taiwan with a dual dilemma. Strengthening self-defense capabilities may contribute to deterrence, but it may also escalate tensions and reinforce Taiwan's role as a flashpoint. Continued reliance on the United States may provide short-term reassurance, yet in the absence of institutional guarantees it deepens Taiwan's vulnerability and perpetuates abandonment anxiety.²⁶⁾ Within the broader reordering of the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan remains a critical forward position for containing China, but U.S. selective intervention strategies increase uncertainty regarding long-term commitment, reinforcing a structure in which burdens expand without corresponding guarantees.

V. Conclusion

This article examined the impact of the United States' alliance transformation strategy on the Indo-Pacific regional order through a comparative analysis of South Korea and Taiwan amid intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition. It demonstrated how alliance modernization demands, driven by the gap between U.S. strategic objectives and capabilities, are reshaping alliance dilemmas for key regional actors.

Three core findings emerge. First, since the first Trump administration, successive U.S. administrations—including the Biden administration and the second Trump administration—have confronted a persistent capability dilemma: the inability of the United States to unilaterally overwhelm China. In response, Washington pursued alliance transformation that extended beyond cost sharing and burden sharing, increasingly emphasizing the extraction of allied resources to serve short-term U.S. interests rather than the mobilization of alliances for long-term collective gains.

26) Unlike formal allies, Taiwan has limited institutional channels through which it can influence U.S. strategic decision-making.

Second, South Korea—a formal and institutionalized U.S. ally—expanded strategic autonomy and mitigated abandonment fears as its national power increased. Yet under intensifying U.S.–China competition and alliance transformation, South Korea now faces heightened risks of entrapment. Alliance modernization has generated growing demands for expanded roles in deterring not only North Korea but also China, while selective intervention strategies under the second Trump administration have revived concerns about abandonment.

Third, Taiwan—bound to the United States through a de-institutionalized quasi-alliance—has remained structurally exposed to abandonment anxiety since 1979. Although rhetorical strategic clarity has increased Taiwan’s visibility within U.S. strategy, the absence of institutional security guarantees has persisted. Under alliance transformation driven by transactional logic, Taiwan’s strategic burdens have expanded, while abandonment anxiety has been reinforced rather than resolved.

Comparing South Korea and Taiwan highlights both shared structural pressures and critical differences. Both are asymmetric partners within the U.S. alliance network, yet South Korea operates within a formal alliance framework, while Taiwan does not. South Korea faces acute choice pressures between the United States and China, whereas Taiwan constitutes a direct focal point of great-power confrontation. As an institutionalized ally, South Korea has been able to partially mitigate abandonment anxiety, but it now confronts the risk of institutionalized entrapment. Taiwan, lacking formal guarantees and facing an existential Chinese threat, has been compelled to accept profound constraints on autonomy in exchange for survival.

Whereas South Korea may seek to limit entanglement in U.S.–China conflict, Taiwan structurally favors deeper U.S. military involvement around the island. Yet such alignment risks provoking China and entrenching Taiwan as a permanent flashpoint in East Asia. More broadly, alliance transformation under hegemonic dilemma and unilateralism threatens to shift U.S.–led alliances from mechanisms of cohesion toward instruments of unilateral extraction. Excessive burden shifting risks amplifying allied dissatisfaction and deepening fractures within the alliance system, thereby undermining the stability of the Indo-Pacific regional order as a whole.

In the realm of technological and economic security, South Korea is characterized by a relatively more substitutable semiconductor capability compared to Taiwan and by deep economic interdependence with China. As a result, it finds itself embedded in the intensifying competition over supply-chain restructuring between the United States and China(Sohn, 2016). By contrast, Taiwan occupies a distinctive position as an irreplaceable supplier of advanced semiconductors. This status may function as a “silicon shield,” yet under conditions of escalating U.S.–China strategic competition, it could conversely transform into a source of heightened security risk(Addison, 2001). Given that both countries remain bound to China through high levels of economic interdependence, these structural conditions are likely to exert significant influence on their responses to U.S. alliance transformation and on the broader trajectory of regional order reconfiguration.

<Table 2> Comparative Implications of U.S. Alliance Transformation:
South Korea and Taiwan

| | South Korea | Taiwan |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Relationship with the United States | Institutionalized formal alliance | Informal quasi-alliance; survival-oriented relationship |
| Position within the Alliance | Strategic asset and cooperative partner | Flash point; object of alliance power projection |
| Outcome of Alliance Transformation | Expanded burdens; increased entrapment risk; erosion of strategic autonomy | Absence of security guarantees; intensified abandonment anxiety; severely constrained autonomy |
| Trump Second-Term NSS Orientation | Entrapment risk compounded by renewed abandonment concerns | Unresolved abandonment fears; expanding self-help burden |

Under these challenging conditions, U.S. allies—including South Korea and Taiwan—must search for survival strategies amid pressures for contribution and the realities of self-help. Other regional states are likewise exposed to heightened instability and tension. While the erosion of multilateral institutions and intensified U.S.–China

competition make short-term alternatives difficult to identify, this study hopes to contribute to understanding the internal logic of U.S. alliance transformation and to informing efforts to improve the regional order.

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