

# One Peninsula Multiple Fronts

Korea in Great Power Rivalry

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# Abstract

This CSDS In-Depth Paper examines the strategic significance of the Korean Peninsula within the broader context of intensifying great power rivalry and growing interdependence between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions. It situates Korea within emerging adversarial alignments, marked by coordination among China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, and deepening collaboration between the United States and its European and Indo-Pacific allies. The analysis assesses how the prioritisation of the First Island Chain by the new US administration, coupled with doubts about US reliability, shapes allied threat perceptions, defence burdens and cross-regional cooperation. It also highlights constraints on South Korea's strategic posture arising from its economic and political ties with Beijing and Moscow. Through a scoping exercise and five thematic chapters, the In-Depth Paper evaluates how peacetime and wartime trade-offs influence deterrence dynamics and alliance management, and calls for further research on simultaneous crises across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres.

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# Introduction

Luis Simón and Ramón Pacheco Pardo

How much, and in what ways, does the Korean Peninsula matter in strategic competition? The return of great power competition or strategic competition has underscored the importance of the Indo-Pacific and – to a lesser extent – the Euro-Atlantic regions. Besides harbouring the greatest concentration of industrial, economic, technological and military resources outside of North America, the Indo-Pacific and Europe are home to China and Russia. These are the only two great powers with the capabilities – and intent – to pose a fundamental challenge to the United States’ (US) alliances and power and, in China’s case, to the US-led international order.

Importantly, over the past four years, Europe, the US and their Indo-Pacific partners have systematically alluded to the growing geostrategic interdependence between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres.<sup>1</sup> China’s “decisive enabling” of Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine, the presence of North Korean troops on the Ukrainian front and ongoing debates about the implications of a Taiwan contingency for global and European security all bear witness to such growing interdependence. We have, in effect, also seen the crystallisation of two sets of adversarial geopolitical alignments. On one side, a pan-Eurasian coalition of continental, authoritarian powers – Russia, China, Iran and North Korea – is coordinating its actions both regionally and systemically in a bid to revise the international order. On the other side, we see growing strategic cooperation among the US and its European and Indo-Pacific allies.

The arrival of the second Trump administration adds a new layer of uncertainty to these dynamics. Pentagon chief, Pete Hegseth, has emphasised the need for a clear hierarchy of strategic priorities, placing China – and, more specifically, the China threat in the Indo-Pacific – above all other challenges.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the First Island Chain – and Taiwan – are perceived as the centre of gravity of military competition with China. Such an approach not only entails a de-prioritisation of the Russian threat or the European region, but also of the North Korean threat and the Korean Peninsula, which are increasingly perceived in Washington as secondary fronts in the context of competition with China.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the North Atlantic Council meeting in Washington, DC, 10 July 2024:

[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_227678.htm?selectedLocale=en&gsid=429c0317-cef6-43e4-b9af-426d9d690b2f](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm?selectedLocale=en&gsid=429c0317-cef6-43e4-b9af-426d9d690b2f).

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Defense, “Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)”, Brussels, 12 February 2025:

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>.

President Trump himself appears sceptical of framing China, Russia, North Korea and Iran as a bloc, and may even seek selective engagement with some of them. Likewise, he is pressing allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defence, particularly Europeans and South Koreans. This is understandable. Leaving the nuclear dimension aside, Europeans and South Koreans should be in a position to deter or defeat, respectively, Russia and North Korea with minimal US support, given their industrial and conventional military potential. The fact that Europe and South Korea may be de-prioritised in relation to the First Island Chain, coupled with broader doubts about US reliability, could drive US allies to double down on their immediate regions.

That said, even if US allies may accept the premise of prioritising their respective backyards, they also want to keep a broader strategic perspective and preserve their cooperation. Cooperation among Indo-Pacific allies – like Japan and the ROK – but also between European and Indo-Pacific allies can create synergies in key areas like defence production or technological innovation. It also provides these countries with alternative partnerships in an era of uncertainty about US reliability. At the same time, the partnership between China, Russia, North Korea and Iran is showing remarkable resilience, and these revisionist powers are likely to coordinate their policies so as to create strategic dilemmas for the US and its allies.

From a South Korean perspective, however, there are also constraints to the deepening of cooperation across the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic. The current Lee Jae-myung administration, while prioritising the ROK-US alliance and ROK-Japan cooperation, is seeking to maintain workable ties with both Moscow and Beijing – driven by regional stability concerns and economic interdependence. This complicates Seoul's strategic engagement with Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic partners, even as it continues to value alignment with them.

A central challenge for strategy lies in ranking threats and regions – and understanding how the two intersect.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have long debated the relationship between the regional and global levels of analysis in international security. While regional dynamics often reflect local balances of threat, global powers tend to “see through” regional boundaries, shaping local outcomes through choices driven by external theatres. As threats travel across regions, what emerges is a complex web of simultaneity: the need to deter in one theatre while managing tension or crisis in another.

Against this backdrop, this CSDS In-Depth Paper examines how the Korean Peninsula fits into broader cross-regional (Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic) strategic debates. Previous studies have drawn on tabletop exercises (TTXs) to analyse the implications of simultaneous contingencies in Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula or peacetime deterrence dynamics in the First Island Chain.<sup>4</sup> Others have looked at

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<sup>3</sup> Simón, L., “Three Alternative Approaches to Deterrence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific”, *War on the Rocks*, 19 June 2025: <https://warontherocks.com/2025/06/three-alternative-approaches-to-deterrence-in-europe-and-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Garlauskas, G., Gilbert, L.D. and Imai, K. “A rising nuclear double-threat in East Asia: insights from our Guardian Tiger I and II tabletop exercises”, *Atlantic Council*, 12 May 2025: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-rising-nuclear-double-threat-in->

peacetime trade-offs between the European and Indo-Pacific deterrence architectures, and also drawn on TTXs to examine the implications of simultaneous contingencies in Eastern Europe and Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Yet, far less attention has been devoted to triangular interactions linking the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and Europe. Understanding how intra-regional and cross-regional trade-offs overlap is essential for assessing deterrence credibility and strategic prioritisation.

This In-Depth Paper, therefore, transcends the contingency frame to analyse how the Korean Peninsula features in strategic competition in both peacetime and wartime, through a scoping exercise that considers how the US, South Korea, Japan, Australia and Europe (both the EU and NATO, as well as key member states) weigh the Peninsula's importance against other priorities. Contributors in this In-Depth Paper explore how varying combinations of peacetime and wartime conditions shape deterrence and response dynamics, identifying key trade-offs, synergies and dilemmas that will inform future policy and analytical work.

This In-Depth Paper contains five distinct chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter looks at how to conceptualise cross-regional interdependence, and discusses five distinct peacetime and wartime combinations involving Europe, the First Island Chain and the Korean Peninsula. In this chapter, we also analyse the discussion about trade-offs and payoffs in deterrence, and we unpack three ideal types of security and alliance management: bifurcation, cooperation and integration. Chapter two, by Jihoon Yu, looks at South Korea's perceptions of strategic competition. Chapter three, by Jung H. Pak, analyses how the Korean Peninsula features in US strategic priorities. Chapter four, by Tongfi Kim and Eva Pejsova, focuses on the strategic relationship between Japan, Australia and the Korean Peninsula. Chapter five, by Alexander Mattelaer and Daniel Fiott, takes a strategic look at the Korean Peninsula from a European perspective. Finally, we end the In-Depth Paper with concluding remarks and a plea for further research on simultaneous crises and conflicts across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

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east-asia-insights-from-our-guardian-tiger-i-and-ii-tabletop-exercises/; Buchanan, R. et al, "Extended Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: A Regional Track 1.5 Report", Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

<sup>5</sup> Simón, L, Fiott, D. and Manea, O. "Two Fronts, One Goal: Euro-Atlantic Security in the Indo-Pacific Age", *The Marathon Initiative*, August 2023: <https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Two-Fronts-One-Goal-website-publication-v.2.pdf>.

# Chapter One

## Conceptualising Cross-Regional Interdependence: The Korean Peninsula in Strategic Competition

Luis Simón and Ramón Pacheco Pardo

To think clearly about simultaneity across Europe, the First Island Chain and the Korean Peninsula, it helps to move beyond a narrow “wartime–wartime” focus in each region and consider different combinations of “peacetime” (P) and “wartime” (W) as they interact across regions. Here, we are specifically thinking about three conflict or crisis locations: Europe, the Korean Peninsula and the First Island Chain (including Taiwan). We provide here combinations, involving peacetime or wartime in Europe, the Korean Peninsula and the First Island Chain:

- **Peace-Peace-Peace (PPP):** tensions across Europe, Korea and the First Island Chain remain below crisis thresholds, but mutually condition deterrence;
- **Peace-War-Peace (PWP):** a crisis or conflict in one theatre draws resources and thus reshapes deterrence and resource allocation in others;
- **Peace-War-War (PWW):** simultaneous wars in two theatres test allied coordination and prioritisation;
- **War-War-War (WWP):** dual crises undermine deterrence in the third.
- **War-War-War (WWW):** the spectre of simultaneous wars in all three theatres would represent the most extreme stress test for allied coordination and prioritisation

To clarify, these permutations are not simply abstract combinations of letters but correspond to distinct strategic possibilities. For instance, a “PWW” scenario could involve peace in Europe and simultaneous wars in Korea and Taiwan – an ideal situation for Russia to escalate coercion in Europe. A “WWP” scenario, with peace in Taiwan and wars in Europe and Korea, could encourage China to step up pressure on Taiwan, calculating that the United States would be overstretched. Finally, a “WPW” permutation – war in Europe and Taiwan with peace in Korea – could tempt Pyongyang to exploit the distraction and raise coercive pressure on the South. Each permutation illustrates how regional crises can cascade, creating incentives for opportunistic aggression.

Mapping these triangular dynamics – Europe, Korea and the First Island Chain – across both peacetime and wartime contexts offers a 360-degree view of how the Korean Peninsula matters strategically.

In each of these configurations, nuclear deterrence forms an invisible connective tissue. The prospect or use of nuclear coercion in one theatre – whether by Russia in Europe or by North Korea or China in the Indo-Pacific – can reverberate across others, altering both risk perceptions and escalation thresholds. Managing simultaneity, therefore, also requires understanding how nuclear dynamics in one



region can undermine deterrence credibility elsewhere, especially when adversaries coordinate their nuclear signalling.<sup>6</sup>

### Tradeoffs, payoffs and the logic of deterrence

There has been an intense debate in the US regarding the opportunity costs of supporting vs. not supporting Ukraine, and how that affects America's overall strategic position *vis-à-vis* China. America's European and Indo-Pacific allies have followed that debate closely. Some experts have pointed to the importance of trade-offs, arguing that a dollar spent in Ukraine is a dollar not spent on deterring China in the First Island Chain.<sup>7</sup> Others have dismissed such reasoning and argued that supporting Ukraine can generate payoffs in a China and First Island Chain context. Payoff-related arguments come in different shapes and forms. Some argue that standing up for global norms whenever and wherever they are challenged sends a powerful deterrent signal to Beijing in relation to Taiwan.<sup>8</sup> Others speak of strategic sequencing and argue that downgrading Russian military power in Europe in the short term can set the foundations for prioritising the China threat in the Indo-Pacific over the medium and long term.<sup>9</sup>

The Korean Peninsula adds yet another logic of complexity to debates about cross-regional trade-offs and payoffs. Its main threat referent – North Korea – leads Seoul to view it as distinct from the US-China rivalry, yet its geography and alliances embed it firmly in the broader Indo-Pacific balance. China's ties to Pyongyang – and, increasingly, to Moscow –, US efforts to integrate the ROK into its regional strategy and Beijing's suspicion of such moves all underscore this interdependence. Peacetime prioritisation of Taiwan, for instance, could weaken deterrence *vis-à-vis* North Korea, while escalation on the Peninsula could reverberate across the Indo-Pacific and into Europe.

A major conflict in Korea would generate profound strategic and geopolitical effects. It would constrain US bandwidth to engage elsewhere, invite opportunistic aggression in other theatres and disrupt deterrence balances globally. Conversely, crises in Europe or around Taiwan could draw in the US and leave Korea exposed. Whether and when different crises unfold – the sequencing question – will shape US and allied strategy. Thus, for instance, while China may have an interest in having Russia or North Korea stir trouble in Eastern Europe or Korea so as to draw US resources and create opportunities in the First Island Chain, Moscow and Pyongyang are likely to make strategic decisions on their own timing.

A Korean contingency would almost certainly possess a nuclear dimension, given North Korea's maturing arsenal and its willingness to employ nuclear coercion early

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of cross-regional trade-offs from a nuclear perspective see Masuda, M. and Mattelaer, A. "The Long Shadow? China's Military Rise in the Indo-Pacific and its Global Implications", *CSDS Policy Brief* 18/2024: <https://csds.vub.be/publication/the-long-shadow-chinas-military-rise-in-the-indo-pacific-and-its-global-implications/>.

<sup>7</sup> Colby, E. and Skylar Mastro, O. "Ukraine is a Distraction from Taiwan", *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2022: <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/ukraine-is-a-distraction-from-taiwan-russia-china-nato-global-powers-military-invasion-jinping-biden-putin-europe-11644781247>.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Japanese Prime Minister, Message from Prime Minister Kishida Fumio on the G7 Hiroshima Summit, 31 March 2023: [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101\\_kishida/statement/202303/\\_00018.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00018.html).

<sup>9</sup> Wess Mitchell, A. "A Strategy for Avoiding A Two-Front War", *The National Interest*, 21 August 2021.

in a conflict. This would not only test US extended deterrence guarantees in Northeast Asia but could also compel Washington to reallocate strategic assets from Europe, thereby affecting NATO's own deterrence posture. Conversely, a nuclear escalation scenario in Europe would constrain US signalling in Asia, heightening the risk of miscalculation across theatres.



## The Korean Peninsula adds yet another logic of complexity to debates about cross-regional trade-offs and payoffs

At the heart of these “trade-offs vs. payoffs” dilemmas lie a series of questions around the nature and scale of the Chinese challenge to US power and international order: should the China threat be conceptualised as narrowly as possible (i.e. confined to the First Island Chain), regionally (encompassing the Korean Peninsula too) or even globally? How much effort should be devoted by the US and its different allies to countering China in the First Island Chain vs. the Korean Peninsula vs. Europe? How much energy should be devoted to countering a low-cost Chinese effort to create instability in Korea vs. Europe vs. Taiwan? And how deep does Sino-Russian-North Korean strategic cooperation run?

### Strategic shifts and regional dynamics

Lee Jae Myung's arrival to power in Seoul has also triggered a revision of South Korea's foreign and security policy. Lee is emphasising both dialogue and diplomacy with North Korea, along with deterrence and the alliance with the US. In this respect, the agreement by the US to support South Korea's building of nuclear-powered submarines is a sign of the importance that Lee affords to the ROK-US alliance.<sup>10</sup> He is also following a less openly confrontational approach towards both China and Russia, even as he continues to cooperate with key regional partners like Japan and Australia and prioritises trilateral ROK-Japan-US security cooperation. The nuclear-powered submarine agreement with the US could lead to closer strategic cooperation with Australia, as well as with Japan, if the latter chooses to pursue this option as well.

Relatedly, early signs point to an ongoing interest by Lee's administration to continue to engage in strategic cooperation with Europe. Yet, the potential for conflict in the Korean Peninsula continues unchanged. This is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future, as North Korea continues to work closely with Russia, boosts ties with China and focuses on building its own deterrent. In this regard, its nuclear

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<sup>10</sup> Yu, J. “Game Changer: Trump Approves South Korea's Nuclear Submarine Ambition”, *The Diplomat*, October 31, 2025: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/game-changer-trump-approves-south-koreas-nuclear-submarine-ambition/>.

and missile advances and deepening of cooperation with both Moscow and Beijing appear to leave North Korea in a stronger strategic position than it was during the first Trump administration. On the other hand, the prospect of a *détente* between North and South Korea could yield benefits to regional and global security.

President Trump, for his part, appears to value engagement with North Korea – which would create synergies with Lee’s push for diplomacy. It is worth noting that pursuing peace with both North Korea and Ukraine could be a way for the US to use diplomacy to engage in “strategic sequencing” (i.e. accommodate the lesser threat(s) of Russia and North Korea, so as to focus on the bigger one: China). That said, while Russia, China and North Korea’s broader geopolitical interests – weakening and dispersing US power – may align, their immediate interests clash: they all want to push America’s attention away from their respective backyards, and thus focus on someone else.

### **Strategic geography and capability synergies**

Strategic geography also shapes these interconnections. If we focus on Europe, the Korean Peninsula and the First Island Chain, the latter two are arguably the most deeply interconnected theatres, given their geographical proximity and overlap in terms of regional alliance dynamics. That said, Europe and the Korean Peninsula present important commonalities in terms of strategic geography, which pave the ground for synergies. Both Europe and the Korean Peninsula are “air-land” theatres, heavily reliant on logistics, armour and a strong US Army presence. This distinguishes them from the First Island Chain, which is a predominantly “air-sea” environment. Such a distinction highlights not only different operational logics but also potential *synergies* between Europe and Korea in deterrence, capability development and defence-industrial cooperation. Paradoxically, these similarities suggest that lessons, force concepts and technologies may be at times more transferable between Europe and Korea than between either and the maritime Indo-Pacific.

The character of these three theatres also affects nuclear dynamics. Unlike the maritime Indo-Pacific, where nuclear signalling often involves long-range bombers or submarines, Europe and (potentially) Korea rely more heavily on dual-capable aircraft, tactical delivery systems and forward-deployed assets. This operational resemblance creates opportunities for cross-theatre learning on nuclear sharing, escalation control and allied assurance.

### **Bifurcation, cooperation and integration**

To help us make sense of how South Korea, the First Island Chain and Europe may relate to each other strategically, it might be useful to think about the benefits and drawbacks of three distinct, ideal-type approaches to security and alliance-management: bifurcation, cooperation and integration.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Op.Cit., “Three Alternative Approaches”.

## *Bifurcation*

Bifurcation entails treating Europe, the First Island Chain and the Korean Peninsula as *separate theatres*, governed by distinct strategic logics and alliance structures. It emphasises clear prioritisation and resource discipline: the recognition that US and allied attention, industrial capacity and military forces are finite. Under bifurcation, allies are expected to focus on their immediate regions, strengthening local deterrence while limiting cross-regional commitments. This is, of course, easier to apply in a Europe vs. First Island Chain than in a Korean Peninsula vs. First Island Chain context. Because even if the Korean Peninsula has its own characteristics, the level of overlap with the broader Indo-Pacific is quite high.

A bifurcation approach highlights *trade-offs* – the idea that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, and even sub-theatres like Korea and Taiwan, compete for US bandwidth. It also underscores the importance of regional autonomy, encouraging Europeans and South Koreans to assume greater defence responsibility.

Bifurcation also allows us to establish a clear distinction between the China, Russia and North Korea threats and how to approach them. One consequence of this could be to focus on the bigger threat (e.g. China) and deprioritise or even accommodate the lesser threat(s) (Russia and North Korea). Yet bifurcation carries risks: it may encourage adversaries to exploit seams between theatres, and it assumes that crises will remain compartmentalised when they may, in fact, cascade.

In a bifurcated framework, nuclear deterrence remains theatre-specific – NATO's nuclear umbrella for Europe, and the US extended deterrent for Asia – yet these umbrellas draw from a common strategic pool. A major nuclear crisis in one theatre could thus constrain assurance in another, even if alliance planning remains formally separated.

## *Cooperation*

Cooperation represents a more flexible middle ground. It recognises that while most security dynamics are regionally rooted, Europe, the Korean Peninsula and the First Island Chain are increasingly intertwined, with the Yellow Sea as the main connective tissue between the Korean Peninsula and broader US-China dynamics. Under this model, allies maintain theatre-specific deterrence while fostering cross-theatre coordination in diplomacy, intelligence, defence industry and technology. Cooperation allows for *selective synergies*: linking efforts where they produce collective benefit – such as shipbuilding, munitions production or supply-chain resilience – without diluting a theatre-specific operational focus. Applied to Korea, this might mean expanding NATO-IP4 dialogue, improving interoperability in domains like cyber or missile defence or synchronising sanctions and export controls. Cooperation reflects the pragmatic understanding that deterrence in one region reinforces deterrence elsewhere, provided partners communicate and align strategically.

To be sure, cooperation also faces political and perceptual limits. From a Lee Jae Myung administration's vantage point, cooperation with NATO and the IP4 must be balanced against the need to manage stable working relations with China and Russia. This underlines that cooperation, while desirable, cannot be assumed to

evolve automatically – it requires careful calibration to accommodate regional sensitivities.

A cooperative model also invites dialogue on nuclear assurance practices – such as consultations, transparency mechanisms or crisis communication – between NATO and Indo-Pacific allies, without formal integration. This could strengthen credibility and reduce escalation risks in scenarios involving simultaneous nuclear threats.

### *Integration*

Integration goes further. It conceives Europe, the First Island Chain and the Korean Peninsula as a *single strategic space* – a connected frontline in a systemic competition with a bloc comprising China, Russia and North Korea. Integration calls for the harmonisation of planning and coordination across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific alliances, potentially linking command, control, intelligence and defence planning processes. While this does not imply mutual defence obligations between NATO and Indo-Pacific allies, it does suggest moving toward a unified strategic framework, shared situational awareness and complementary force postures. The logic of integration aligns with the emerging reality of cross-regional adversarial coordination, but it also demands unprecedented political and operational alignment among allies – something still far from realised.

Full integration would also require a shared conceptualisation of nuclear deterrence across regions – acknowledging that simultaneous nuclear coercion by Russia, China or North Korea could only be countered through coordinated signalling and contingency planning among all US allies.

Importantly, these models need not be applied uniformly across all dyads. Europe and the Indo-Pacific may, for now, be best managed through a bifurcated or cooperative approach; by contrast, the Korean Peninsula-First Island Chain axis within the Indo-Pacific may lend itself more naturally to cooperation or even integration, given their geographical proximity and overlapping threat environments. Thinking in these terms encourages policymakers to move beyond abstract “unity” or “fragmentation” debates and to consider differentiated forms of strategic linkage across the triangular geography.

To be sure, in practice, most actors are likely to gravitate toward cooperation rather than full integration. Integration may appear excessive, while pure bifurcation too constraining. Moreover, each actor has incentives to retain elements of bifurcation for its own flexibility while encouraging others to move toward cooperation or integration – a dynamic akin to a repeated Prisoner’s Dilemma game. When the game is short or finite, the equilibrium tends toward mutual defection, or bifurcation. When repeated over time with no clear endpoint, cooperation can emerge as the stable equilibrium. This analogy captures both the temptations and the potential of cross-regional coordination.

# Chapter Two

## South Korea's Strategy Amidst Interlocking Regional Crises

Jihoon Yu

South Korea perceives the Korean Peninsula as both a persistent flashpoint and a key node in the emerging global competition between democratic and authoritarian powers. What was once a narrowly regional confrontation with North Korea has become deeply embedded in the wider geopolitical contest linking the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic theatres. The growing coordination among China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, alongside intensified cooperation among the US, its European allies and Indo-Pacific partners, means that any contingency on the Peninsula today would have implications far beyond Northeast Asia. For Seoul, the Peninsula has become a litmus test of allied cohesion, extended deterrence and the sustainability of the rules-based international order. This broader geopolitical environment increases the complexity of Korean security planning, requiring Seoul to assess not only North Korean behaviour but the intentions and capabilities of a widening set of actors.

This transformation reflects a fundamental shift in the global security environment since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consolidation of the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang axis. The transfer of North Korean munitions to Russia, potential deployment of North Korean personnel to support Moscow's war effort and Beijing's diplomatic and economic shelter for its authoritarian partners blur the distinction between regional and global threats. From Seoul's perspective, a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would no longer be a contained crisis; it would reverberate across the entire US alliance network, affecting deterrence credibility in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Conversely, crises in Taiwan or Eastern Europe would inevitably shape Korea's own security environment. South Korean strategy must therefore be conceived not only in national and regional terms but also through the broader lens of bifurcation, cooperation and integration – recognising that developments in Europe, Taiwan and the First Island Chain can shape Korean security and *vice versa*.

### **A dual-track strategy under the Lee administration**

Under President Lee Jae-myung, Seoul pursues a dual-track strategy that blends robust deterrence with pragmatic diplomacy, seeking to manage an increasingly entangled security environment without provoking unnecessary escalation. The administration maintains the ROK-US alliance as the core pillar of national defence while placing greater emphasis on sustained dialogue and crisis management mechanisms with North Korea. This approach aims to stabilise the military balance, prevent miscalculation and preserve diplomatic space for tension reduction. At the same time, the Lee government seeks to prevent strategic over-extension by avoiding rigid binaries between deterrence and diplomacy, or between regional security and global strategic responsibilities. This calibrated posture reflects a broader effort to align national policy with the requirements of systemic

competition and to navigate between pressures for regional bifurcation and opportunities for selective cooperation with like-minded partners.

Despite this direction, debates within Seoul's strategic community remain active. Some advocate for a more compartmentalised policy, treating the North Korean threat as a primarily regional matter rather than embedding it within global geopolitical confrontation. They argue that compartmentalisation could help preserve diplomatic manoeuvrability with China and reduce the risk of Seoul becoming over-entangled in US-China rivalry. However, critics contend that such an approach is increasingly unrealistic given the deepening interconnections between theatres. North Korea's growing integration with China and Russia, US alliance modernisation and Europe's expanding Indo-Pacific interests all blur the lines between regional and global issues. The Lee administration's current trajectory reflects this latter view, recognising that South Korea's security is best served through strategic integration rather than deliberate isolation.

### **Managing grey-zone pressure and peacetime deterrence**

South Korea's day-to-day security management is dominated by the need to counter, deter and mitigate grey-zone pressures that fall below the threshold of armed conflict. North Korea employs a suite of hybrid tactics – cyber intrusions, GPS jamming, disinformation, maritime infiltration and illicit finance – to probe allied thresholds, erode public confidence and normalise instability. Seoul's response has been the construction of a comprehensive deterrence framework that integrates military readiness, technology-enabled monitoring, information resilience and societal robustness. South Korea's "three-axis system" – the Kill Chain, Korea Air and Missile Defence (KAMD) and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) plan – forms the operational backbone of deterrence. Yet peacetime deterrence also requires strengthening national cyber defences, securing communication networks and enhancing public awareness against cognitive manipulation.

Trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan has become indispensable to this architecture. Real-time missile-warning data sharing, joint maritime patrols, coordinated anti-submarine exercises and cyber threat-intelligence fusion are reshaping the operational environment in Northeast Asia. These mechanisms reflect a recognition – consistent with the cooperation logic set out in the introduction – that South Korea's security is inseparable from broader Indo-Pacific stability and that grey-zone challenges require synchronised responses across theatres. European engagement, while still limited in scale, reinforces these efforts symbolically and operationally by supporting sanctions enforcement and maritime domain awareness. As grey-zone tactics become increasingly sophisticated, Seoul's challenge lies in maintaining escalation control while denying Pyongyang the strategic benefits of gradual, persistent coercion.

### **Responding to limited and large-scale aggression**

If North Korea undertakes limited kinetic aggression – such as targeted artillery strikes, limited naval clashes or short-range missile provocations – South Korea's doctrine emphasises swift, precise and proportional retaliation designed to restore deterrence without triggering uncontrolled escalation. The goal is to impose clear

costs on Pyongyang, preserve allied credibility and maintain operational initiative. During such crises, Japan and Australia would likely provide intelligence, surveillance and logistical support, while European partners would bolster diplomatic messaging, impose sanctions and deliver humanitarian or non-lethal assistance. Strategic communications would play a central role, reinforcing allied resolve while signalling that pathways for de-escalation remain open.



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sustainability of the rules-  
based international order**

In the event of a full-scale conflict or nuclear escalation, the Korean Peninsula would rapidly become a global crisis – a scenario directly connected to the PPP-WWW simultaneity framework outlined in chapter one. South Korea's initial defence would rely heavily on the South Korea-US Combined Forces Command, national mobilisation and continuity-of-government measures. Recognising the possibility of constrained US reinforcement during simultaneous crises in Taiwan or Europe, Seoul is expanding capabilities that ensure early-phase self-reliance, including long-range precision strike, missile defence and deep magazine capacity. In this context, the pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) has emerged as a strategic priority.<sup>12</sup> SSNs offer unmatched stealth, endurance and survivable second-strike potential, enabling persistent Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), sea-denial operations and assured retaliation even under intense missile attack. For Seoul, SSNs are not merely force enhancers but critical assets that strengthen deterrence stability during the most dangerous window of a conflict – the early hours when command-and-control networks may be under severe pressure. Their acquisition would significantly reinforce South Korea's ability to maintain undersea dominance and ensure continuity of deterrence regardless of adversary first-mover actions.

**China, Russia and cross-regional linkages**

China remains the most complex external variable in South Korea's strategic environment. Beijing's core interests – preventing North Korean regime collapse, maintaining a strategic buffer against US forces and avoiding uncontrolled escalation – drive a cautious but increasingly assertive posture. While direct Chinese military intervention on Pyongyang's behalf is unlikely, Beijing could provide diplomatic cover, economic support and selective intelligence assistance that complicates allied response options. Seoul, therefore, maintains pragmatic

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<sup>12</sup> Op.Cit., “Game Changer: Trump Approves South Korea's Nuclear Submarine Ambition”.



communication channels with China to manage crisis risks and prevent misperceptions. At the same time, growing Sino-North Korean alignment further erodes Seoul's ability to separate regional dynamics from global systemic trends.

Russia's deepening cooperation with North Korea has added a new dimension to cross-regional linkages. Moscow's reliance on North Korean munitions for its war in Ukraine, potential ISR sharing and discussions of expanded military-technical cooperation reflect a strategic convergence driven by mutual isolation. These interactions link security developments in Europe directly to Northeast Asia, reinforcing the idea that crises can no longer be viewed through separate regional lenses. For Seoul, this emerging axis magnifies the need for integrated deterrence with the US and closer coordination with Europe, while also underscoring the risks of excessive bifurcation between regional theatres.

### **Building resilience and integrated deterrence**

Resilience has become as central to South Korea's security strategy as military modernisation. As North Korea expands its missile inventory and develops more advanced delivery systems, Seoul is investing heavily in layered missile defence, hardened infrastructure and secure communications networks. Early-warning enhancements, satellite reconnaissance and redundant Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems aim to ensure decision-making continuity under sustained missile pressure. Equally important is the strengthening of civilian preparedness through civil defence drills, crisis communication protocols and public resilience initiatives designed to prevent societal paralysis during conflict. These measures ensure that military readiness is matched by societal endurance.

Integrated deterrence – combining military, economic, technological and diplomatic tools – anchors Seoul's broader approach to systemic competition. The modernisation of the South Korea-US alliance, deepening cooperation with NATO and the EU and expansion of high-end national capabilities all contribute to a deterrence architecture with global reach. This reflects an aspiration toward selective integration with allies across both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, while still acknowledging the practical constraints that necessitate elements of bifurcation. Counter-disinformation efforts, supply-chain resilience and energy security planning complement traditional military initiatives. Ultimately, South Korea recognises that the North Korean threat is immediate, but the strategic determinants of peace and stability are global. By strengthening national resilience and deepening its networked alliances, Seoul seeks not only to safeguard its own survival but also to contribute meaningfully to international stability in an era of systemic competition.

# Chapter Three

## The Korean Peninsula in US Strategic Priorities

Jung H. Pak<sup>13</sup>

The US-South Korea alliance in the past several years has deepened and expanded to include issues beyond the Korean Peninsula, alongside traditional bilateral relations and defending against North Korea. The evolution of the alliance reflects the realities of an increasingly antagonistic People's Republic of China (PRC) and Washington's efforts to implement a more muscular, competitive approach, including by harnessing its broad network of allies and partnerships toward countering and deterring China. Surrounded by three autocratic countries with nuclear weapons and challenged for decades by North Korea's brinkmanship, South Korea, like it or not, is squarely in the new geopolitical landscape from which regional and global security threats emanate. This aligns with broader US thinking that peacetime competition and wartime contingencies on the Peninsula are now inseparable from wider Indo-Pacific and even Euro-Atlantic dynamics.

Since 2017, US foreign policy has focused on competition with China, and Washington has firmly called on allies and partners to bolster their own defence capabilities. The first Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) asserted, 'China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model and reorder the region in its favor'.<sup>14</sup> The Biden administration reaffirmed this orientation, declaring in its own NSS that the PRC is 'the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order, and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. Beijing has the ambition to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power'.<sup>15</sup> The Biden NSS affirmed that US alliances in the Indo-Pacific and a 'strong and unified NATO [...] not only deter aggressions; they provide a platform for mutually beneficial cooperation that strengthens the international order'.

Consistent with these strategies, both Republican and Democratic administrations have demanded – with varying degrees of rhetorical finesse – that allies and partners must increase their defence spending to meet new security challenges. Amid the backdrop of intensified friction between the US and China, Beijing's role as "a decisive enabler" of Moscow's war against Kyiv, and North Korea's military assistance to Russia – and what it is learning on the battlefield applicable to a Korean Peninsula conflict scenario – US expectations about South Korea's role in deterring and managing conflict on the Peninsula and beyond, including in Taiwan,

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<sup>13</sup> The opinions and characterisations in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the US government.

<sup>14</sup> The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> The White House, National Security Strategy, October 2022: <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>.

have grown. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, during his meeting with his South Korean counterpart in October 2025, said Seoul's intent to increase military spending would boost its ability to lead conventional deterrence against Pyongyang. While committing to defence against North Korea as the "core" of the alliance, Hegseth also acknowledged that 'There is no doubt flexibility for regional contingencies is something we would take a look at',<sup>16</sup> echoing previous US calls for expanding the scope of the alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula even before North Korea's provision of soldiers and armaments to support Russia war against Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

Seoul has risen to the challenge, increasing its defence budget by 8.2%,<sup>18</sup> joining with the US and like-minded partners to speak out – albeit cautiously – in support of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, closely coordinating with the US and Japan on North Korea issues and providing financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. South Korea has also become a "defence powerhouse" as well as a key security partner for NATO countries.

Meanwhile, intensified friction between the US and China has spurred policymakers and academics in the US to be seized with the potential for a US-China conflict in the Taiwan Strait and its global implications. Complicating matters is the possibility of a Taiwan conflict spilling over – whether intentionally or unintentionally – into other parts of the region, a potential scenario given the strategic alignment among Beijing, Moscow and Pyongyang and their overlapping interest in a weaker US and an eroded US alliance network.

Kim Jong Un might see an open China-US conflict as an opportunity for North Korea to advance its strategic objectives. Emboldened by his position in the new geopolitical environment: a strategic partnership with Moscow, Pyongyang's unprecedented military assistance to Moscow's war effort in Ukraine and Beijing and Moscow's shielding of Pyongyang from international sanctions, as well as advancements in developing new and more sophisticated weapons, Kim probably perceives he has more options to threaten and coerce South Korea and the international community. Depending on the scale, scope, duration and type of contingency in Taiwan and elsewhere, Kim has a variety of nuclear and non-nuclear tools (conventional weapons, special operations forces, cyber, chemical and biological weapons) he can use based on his risk calculus and his anticipated gains.

It is difficult to predict Washington's actions in any contingency scenario because decision-making would need to factor in the context of the situation in Taiwan, the nature of the North Korean offence and US priorities at the moment. Moreover, it is uncertain how the Trump administration would approach a Taiwan crisis, given

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<sup>16</sup> Kim, H. and Kim T., "Hegseth praises South Korea's plans to raise its military spending and boost defense capabilities", *Associated Press*, 4 November 2025: <https://apnews.com/article/us-south-korea-hegseth-military-1ab1d56e81073bde4661ea72959885f2>; Johnson, J. "Hegseth says 'flexibility' needed for U.S. forces in South Korea", *The Japan Times*, 4 November 2025: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/11/04/asia-pacific/politics/us-south-korea-china-military/>.

<sup>17</sup> "USFK commander nominee: S. Korea-US alliance can cooperate beyond Korean Peninsula", *Hankyoreh*, 20 May 2021: [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/996001.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/996001.html).

<sup>18</sup> Kwon, S., "President Lee Jae-myung boosts defense budget 8.2% to join global top four", *The Chosun Daily*, 5 November 2025: <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/11/05/Z32KK6M47JBQHESRN2XOPVEZLE/>.

President Trump's denial of a proposal to provide \$400 million arms package to Taiwan<sup>19</sup> and his apparent desire to reach a trade deal with Xi Jinping above all else.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Washington probably will continue to focus primarily on Taiwan, given the profound economic and security implications of a Taiwan contingency – the crippling of global supply chains of strategically important semiconductors necessary for almost all economic and national security activities,<sup>21</sup> as well as the deleterious effect on the US ability to defend allies, which would lead to the unravelling of US alliances.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Washington's goal for the Korean Peninsula during a simultaneous Taiwan-North Korea contingency scenario is likely to be deterrence and restoring stability as quickly as possible in the Korea Peninsula, in part to free up US and South Korea's resources for Taiwan, in concert with Seoul and with other partners, including Europe and Australia. Washington and Seoul would have to balance credible threats to deter further escalation, have a strong enough (and attendant messaging) to ensure Xi and Putin do not encourage Kim, but not enough to cause Kim to think he needs to escalate – including using nuclear weapons, perceiving a use-or-lose scenario. The US might seek to respond to North Korea with proportionality, as in the past, to prevent escalation (up to the level of nuclear weapons use), and a Taiwan contingency would reinforce the need to contain the situation on the Korean Peninsula to avoid diverting diplomatic and military resources from the first-island chain.

While in the past, Washington could have entertained some degree of cooperation from Beijing and Moscow to restrain Pyongyang, the current dynamic is such that there is a non-zero chance that Xi and Putin might support, tacitly or not, Kim's opportunism. In this sense, the US and South Korea could be facing three nuclear-armed countries, two of which – Russia and North Korea – have threatened to use tactical nuclear weapons in recent years, and one – North Korea – has simulated nuclear attacks on South Korean targets.<sup>23</sup> As the US intelligence community assessed in its National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on North Korea, Kim 'may be willing to take greater conventional military risks, believing that nuclear weapons will deter an unacceptably strong U.S. or South Korean response',<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the NIE noted, Kim would be more emboldened to pursue an attack if he were confident China and Russia would not oppose him.

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<sup>19</sup> "Trump nixed \$400 million in Taiwan military aid, pushing future arms sales", *Washington Post*, September 18, 2025: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/09/18/trump-taiwan-arms-sales-military-aid/>.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, A., "Trump lowers tariffs on China and announces end to 'rare earths roadblock after Xi meeting", *BBC*, 29 October 2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/cd7ry3x0nvet>.

<sup>21</sup> Sutter, K.M., "Taiwan's Role in Global Supply Chains", *Congressional Research Service*, 11 March 2025: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IG10073>.

<sup>22</sup> Rittenhouse Green, B. and Talmadge, C., "The Consequences of Conquest: Why Indo-Pacific Power Hinges on Taiwan", *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 4 (July/August 2022): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-16/consequences-conquest-taiwan-indo-pacific>.

<sup>23</sup> Klingner, B., "North Korea Signals More Provocations, Tensions", *Heritage Foundation*, 20 March 2023: <https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/north-korea-signals-more-provocations-tensions>.

<sup>24</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate: North Korea Scenarios for Leveraging Nuclear Weapons Through 2030, NIE 2023-00262-B, January 2023: <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-NIE-North-Korea-Scenarios-For-Leveraging-Nuclear-Weapons-June2023.pdf>.

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Seoul should not expect  
that it can transcend great  
power competition and that  
it can avoid getting  
embroiled in a Taiwan Strait  
contingency

There is a danger that the US and South Korean goals might not be aligned. If there are South Korean casualties, Seoul would be pressed to respond strongly, particularly if there is a perception that the US (and other partners) would be preoccupied with China and Taiwan (and Russia). A measured approach mirroring North Korea's action would almost certainly be seen by Pyongyang and some in Seoul as the US is not invested in defending its ally South Korea. Kim might be emboldened to further escalate, while the South Korean president likely would want to show resolve and take actions that would seek to take the initiative.

Alternatively, if Washington adopts a more belligerent posture and messages that it might take a preventive strike (as the Trump administration did in 2017), and South Korea follows suit, Kim is likely to lash out, including an attack on US bases in South Korea or use nuclear weapons, to show that he will not be intimidated, even if the US signals that a strike is not a prelude to regime change.<sup>25</sup> Fearing the collapse of the Kim regime and potential Korean unification under South Korea, Beijing could take military action in the Korean Peninsula, either signalling its willingness to assist the Kim regime, launch a military intervention and/or position forces in the Yellow Sea. Such a dynamic could open up a second front of conflict in the Indo-Pacific between the US and the PRC.

Meanwhile, the US would need to gauge Russia's possible role in this scenario. Moscow's spoiler role could range from offering rhetorical support to deploying technical and military support, which would further embolden Kim to continue to escalate, particularly in light of the mutual defence assistance they pledged to each other in June 2024. In fact, Putin might welcome a North Korean provocation, which would divert US attention from Europe. Putin's public threat from June 2024 that he would arm North Korea if Seoul provides arms to Ukraine was a stark reminder that, like it or not (for China and for the US), Russia is a player on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>26</sup> It also likely reflects Putin's perception that Europe is unlikely to come to the US and

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<sup>25</sup> Pak, J.H., Mi Terry, S. and Klingner, B., "Bloody nose policy on North Korea would backfire: Ex-CIA analysts", *USA Today*, 9 February 2018: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/02/09/korea-olympics-close-war-first-strike-disaster-jung-pak-sue-terry-bruce-klingner-column/319072002/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ng, K., "Putin warns South Korea against arming Ukraine," *BBC*, 21 June 2024: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1ee8x221lno>.

South Korea's aid in any robust way because he assesses European countries' primary threat referent is Europe, not the Indo-Pacific.

New geopolitical realities have shown how the security of the Indo-Pacific is tied to Europe, and *vice versa*, and the US must prepare itself and allies and partners for the metastasising of the cooperation among China, Russia and North Korea. As Simón and Pacheco Pardo note in the introduction, the partnership among revisionist powers is 'showing remarkable resilience, and these revisionist powers are likely to coordinate their policies [...] to create strategic dilemmas for the US and its allies'.<sup>27</sup> As this author cautioned during the first Trump administration, Washington should not fall into the trap of seeing its alliance with Seoul solely through the lens of strategic competition, as a zero-sum game,<sup>28</sup> or fail to recognise that deterrence in one region reinforces deterrence elsewhere. Nor should it assume that South Korea will continue to stretch itself and engage in productive cooperation on deterrence and diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific and in Europe. This is especially important given that US and South Korean choices increasingly straddle the line between bifurcation – treating theatres separately – and deeper cooperation across regions.

At the same time, Seoul should not expect that it can transcend great power competition and that it can avoid getting embroiled in a Taiwan Strait contingency, or that it can isolate the North Korea issue to a regional problem. As Pyongyang will take cues from Washington and Seoul's interactions and the health of the alliance to calibrate its coercive actions and implications for the Peninsula and beyond, Seoul must also have a broader strategic perspective. In this sense, both peacetime signalling and wartime planning require a shared understanding of how actions in one theatre may influence stability, deterrence and escalation dynamics in the other.

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<sup>27</sup> See the introduction in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> Pak, J.H., "Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China's Approach to South Korea", *The Brookings Institution*, July 2020: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP\\_20200606\\_china\\_south\\_korea\\_pak\\_v2.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf).

# Chapter Four

## Japan, Australia and the Korean Peninsula

Tongfi Kim and Eva Pejsova

This chapter focuses on the roles of Japan and Australia, two major US allies that are affected by the security developments in and around the Korean Peninsula in wartime, peacetime and situations in between. Due to its geographical position, Japan is part of the Northeast Asia security complex and will be directly exposed to military threats related to potential contingencies on the Korean Peninsula or in the Taiwan Strait. While Australia is geographically more distant, it has strong economic interests in Northeast Asia, relies on its critical shipping lanes and maintains a close security partnership with South Korea. Canberra has also historically joined all major wars that the US fought after the end of the Second World War (Korea, Vietnam, Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq) and will be expected to provide a substantial supporting role.

The most likely form of a military contingency in the Korean Peninsula considered here is a minor military skirmish, comparable to the 2010 Yeonpyeongdo bombing and the sinking of Cheonan in 2010. When combined with the use of or threat to use nuclear weapons by North Korea, however, even a minor military conflict can have major strategic implications for the allies. Should the situation escalate, possible overspills could feed into tensions in the Taiwan Strait, triggering the possibility of dual or multiple contingencies. After discussing the likely responses of Japan and Australia to possible forms of military contingencies, this chapter concludes with the peacetime strategic considerations.

Japan, like other US allies, is separated from South Korea by a large body of water. Even an all-out war in the Korean Peninsula will not threaten Japanese lives on a large scale as long as North Korea does not use nuclear weapons against Japan or US bases in Japan. At the same time, how South Korea and the US respond to North Korea's threat to use nuclear weapons has significant implications for Japan's national security strategy because that will affect the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella over Japan, not only against North Korea but also against other nuclear-armed adversaries such as China and Russia. With the 2022 North Korean law declaring the right of first nuclear use, some form of nuclear threat is highly likely in a military crisis with Pyongyang.<sup>29</sup>

As long as a conflict in the Korean Peninsula remains conventional, South Korea is more than capable of dealing with North Korea. More US military resources will focus on the Korean Peninsula, but that will not negatively affect US extended deterrence for Japan because of the geographic proximity between Korea and Japan. In fact, it would be important for Japan that the US actively supports South

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<sup>29</sup> On North Korea's new nuclear doctrine and its potential learning from Russia's experience in the Russia-Ukraine War, see Kim, T. and Lee, D.Y., "Continuity and changes: the effects of Russia's war against Ukraine on Japanese and South Korean nuclear-weapons discourse", *The Nonproliferation Review*, 30(4-6) (2024): 265-284.

Korea because the US' failure to do so will erode the credibility of US extended deterrence for Japan. This logic applies to Australia as well as Europe, although these geographically distant allies do not benefit from the US military resource shift to Northeast Asia.

Japan can and is likely to support South Korea through the trilateral information-sharing arrangements with the US and logistical support for US forces stationed in Japan. A direct involvement of the Japan Self-Defence Forces in combat operations is unlikely unless North Korea attacks Japanese territories or US bases in Japan, but Japanese ports and airports will become important for South Korean and US operations if the scale of the military conflict becomes large. In case Japan itself is attacked, Japan's emergent long-distance strike capabilities may become strategically important too.<sup>30</sup>

Australia's role in the case of a lower-intensity conflict on the Korean Peninsula is likely to be rather modest. While on the one hand, Canberra is most concerned by regional stability, bound to Washington under the ANZUS treaty obligations and committed to its security partnership with South Korea, it will need to carefully balance its domestic concerns and resource and force structure limitations. The risk of entanglement, exposure to retaliation and public scepticism will likely limit its involvement to a mostly symbolic contribution in the form of diplomatic messaging and operational support. Concretely, Australia could commit to providing operational support through logistics, ISR capabilities, so as to honour alliance credibility and partnership commitments with South Korea, but stay away from any form of direct military deployment. Canberra would mobilise diplomatic channels and increase economic pressure, eventually provide specialised technical assistance or help evacuate citizens from non-combat zones. Should the conflict intensify into a full-scale war, its air and naval assets could help sustain allied operations through surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and logistical support.

A dual contingency scenario, involving a Chinese invasion of Taiwan along with a Korean contingency, would significantly alter the situation and the strategic calculus of both Japan and Australia. Given that South Korea has conventional military superiority against North Korea and China against Taiwan, it would make more sense for the US to focus its efforts on defending Taiwan. Dealing with a Taiwan contingency would also be more important to Japan, Australia and Europe because North Korea's occupation of South Korea is unlikely. Such a scenario would see both Japan and Australia likely more concentrated and involved in the Taiwan Strait, because of its direct impact on both countries' critical maritime routes and, in the case of Japan, even territorial security. Japan will be an essential hub for US operations to protect Taiwan, and it may join direct combat depending on the situation. On 7 November 2025, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi hinted at Japan's military involvement in a Taiwan contingency.<sup>31</sup> She argued that China's use of force or blockade against Taiwan could constitute a survival-threatening

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<sup>30</sup> Johnstone, C.B. and Hornung, J.W., "Separate U.S. Alliances in East Asia Are Obsolete", *Foreign Policy*, 11 September 2023: [HTTPS://FOREIGNPOLICY.COM/2023/09/11/JAPAN-SOUTH-KOREA-US-ALLIANCE-CHINA-SECURITY-EAST-ASIA-DEFENSE-GEOPOLITICS-BIDEN-KISHIDA-SUK-YEOL/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/japan-south-korea-us-alliance-china-security-east-asia-defense-geopolitics-biden-kishida-suk-yeol/).

<sup>31</sup> Geddie, J., Kelly, T. and Katsumura, M. "Explainer: Why did Japan PM's Taiwan remarks cause such a stir?", *Reuters*, 11 November 2025: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/why-did-japan-pms-taiwan-remarks-cause-such-stir-2025-11-11/>.



situation for Japan, which justifies collective defence with the US. An involvement in the Taiwan Strait contingency would then potentially reduce the capacity of the Japan Self-Defence Forces to assist the US on the Korean Peninsula.

Australia would prioritise focusing on the Taiwan Strait and the defence of the First Island Chain With Japan concentrating on the Taiwan Strait and South Korea on its own survival, Canberra's support to the allied forces will be critical. Such support could translate into Australian frigates and submarines patrolling secondary sea lanes in the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea and engaging in Anti-Submarine Warfare and minesweeping, enabling US forces to focus on the frontline. Due to its position on the confluence of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, Australia could play a major role in supporting the Allied forces' (including European) maritime activities, including counter-blockade measures against a Chinese blockade of Taiwan, in the Indian Ocean. To be sure, Australia's role as a logistical hub in such a scenario will be essential. It will ensure fuel and munitions supply and open its bases in the Northern Territory for allied aircraft rotation, maintenance and repair. Finally, given its established relationship with key regional actors and multilateral groupings (ASEAN, PIF, QUAD, IORA), Canberra could use its diplomatic leverage to contain possible spillovers, secure critical supply chains and increase pressure on the aggressors.

Against the extraordinary risks and strategic dilemmas posed by the above-discussed contingencies for Japan and Australia, strengthening cooperation with the US and the ROK in peacetime is critical to deter such scenarios from happening. When the European theatre is included in the strategic consideration, the need for coordinating allied cooperation and integration is even stronger. Allies have shared interests in preserving the credibility of US extended deterrence everywhere in the world, but they also have conflicting interests in the prioritisation of US military resources.<sup>32</sup> The competition for US military resources is arguably most prominent in their preference for US troop deployments, but it also extends to the type of defence industrial policy. For instance, Japan and Australia, both surrounded by oceans, have incentives to prioritise defence industrial policy to improve the maritime capabilities of the US and its allies. This broader dynamic reflects the tension between bifurcation – where allies prioritise their immediate regions – and cooperation or selective integration across theatres, particularly as Japan, Australia and South Korea seek to align policies without undermining their own regional requirements.

Even if the strategic interests of the allies coincide, commercial competition among US allies will present major obstacles to effective and efficient cooperation in the defence industry. As South Korea aspires to become a major defence exporter, Japan and Australia have significant opportunities and needs to coordinate their policies with South Korea.<sup>33</sup> In peacetime as well as in crisis scenarios, the ability of these three actors to cooperate – or at least avoid counterproductive bifurcation – will shape the resilience of the wider Indo-Pacific deterrence architecture.

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<sup>32</sup> Kim, T. and Luis Simón, L. "A Reputation versus Prioritization Trade-Off: Unpacking Allied Perceptions of US Extended Deterrence in Distant Regions", *Security Studies*, 30(5) (2021): 725-760.

<sup>33</sup> Lee, J. "South Korea to become 4th-largest global defence power, President Lee says", *Reuters*, 20 October 2025: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-seeks-become-4th-largest-global-defence-power-president-lee-says-2025-10-20/>.

# Chapter Five

## Korea in Strategic Competition: A European Perspective

Alexander Mattelaer and Daniel Fiott

At first sight, the fate of the Korean Peninsula may appear to be far removed from the centre of European security policy considerations. Yet neither Korean nor European security exists in a vacuum. After all, history offers precedents of the different ways in which security dynamics in one region implicate faraway partners. During the Korean War in the 1950s, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom all contributed either military forces to the UN Command or at least humanitarian and medical assistance. In any future Korean contingency, the European involvement will likely vary in function of the exact scenario, the kind of support that can be offered in the light of finite resources and the challenges that simultaneous conflict in other parts of the world may engender. Even in peacetime, the deterrence architecture in both regions displays significant cross-regional dynamics within the overall system of US-led alliances, reinforcing the broader theme of interconnected theatres highlighted in this volume.

### Why scenarios matter

A Korean contingency could take multiple forms. Much depends on factors such as how a conflict would begin, to what degree the United States would get involved, how long a conflict would last and whether the nuclear threshold would be crossed. A clear-cut case of North Korean territorial aggression and US leadership in rallying a global coalition – in other words, a scenario similar to Ukraine in 2022 – would offer the surest pathway to European states getting involved in support of South Korea's legitimate self-defence. Any conventional war that lasts longer than a few weeks would also trigger a debate about military assistance, if required and necessary. Yet, such a scenario assumes a somewhat limited conventional war between North and South Korea. Should the war suck in other regional powers such as China or Japan, and should North Korea and China coordinate war efforts with Russia in the European theatre, then support for South Korea would take on a different dynamic.

Precisely because the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula is real, its shadow can be felt during peacetime. Whilst the EU and South Korea have signed a bilateral Security and Defence Partnership, ultimately, both partners are expected to assume primary responsibility for sustaining the conventional defence of their own regions.<sup>34</sup> This means that even without active conflict, the need for sufficient capabilities underpinning the conventional deterrence equation puts a hard cap on the amount

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<sup>34</sup> Pacheco Pardo, R., "The EU-South Korea Security and Defence Partnership", *Korea Chair Explains*, 5 November 2024: <https://csds.vub.be/publication/the-eu-south-korea-security-and-defence-partnership/>.

of mutual assistance that can be promised – unless both sides commit to building up excess capacity far beyond what is needed for meeting their own requirements.

Whilst even a limited and conventional conflict would already have far-reaching implications, any crossing of the nuclear threshold by the North would immediately have grave global consequences. This is not only because of the breaking of the nuclear taboo itself, but also because of the likely nuclear retaliation by the US that can be expected. Such a response will draw warheads from the finite nuclear stockpile on which NATO's nuclear deterrence depends as well. The lessons that any Korean contingency might offer in relation to nuclear non-proliferation would also be watched carefully by different European capitals, most notably Berlin and Warsaw. If Seoul were to pursue a nuclear weapons programme with the tacit blessing of the US, this would constitute a decisive precedent for other states – if not a model to emulate. For the same reason, South Korean strategic self-reliance would warrant far less US security bandwidth.

### **What European support is available**

In any scenario from peacetime to wartime, European states are most likely to offer immediate diplomatic and economic support to South Korea as a long-standing partner of the EU and NATO. Agreeing on diplomatic language for denouncing North Korean nuclear tests would constitute a case in point. Further steps in case of active conflict would likely come in the form of diplomatic support in international bodies, financial assistance for safeguarding the South Korean economy and the imposition of harsher sanctions on North Korea and its allies. NATO and the EU could also support South Korea with weapons and ammunition, especially given the industrial ramping up experienced in Europe since Russia invaded Ukraine. However, even this support would be contingent on the precise scenario. For example, in the case of a full-blown regional or global war, sanctions may be of limited use, given that the global economy would be in disarray.

Furthermore, in the case of a global war involving China, NATO and EU states would struggle to directly deliver weapons and ammunition to the Indo-Pacific theatre, meaning that any European military assistance would have to be channelled through US supply lines (i.e. one idea would be to create an “Atlantic Corridor” for such supplies, ushered by US and NATO naval forces). In case of a more contained conflict on the Korean Peninsula, Europeans would still struggle to deliver sizeable stocks alone, but they would be better placed to deliver stocks and support via regional partners, if necessary, without having to go through the US directly. Europe's ability to deliver weapons and support to the ROK would depend on Europe's ability to mass-produce such supplies, and the extent to which China or Russia would hamper European efforts, even with Moscow and/or Beijing not being directly involved in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Depending on the exact conditions, several European states may offer military capabilities, albeit most likely in modest numbers, given the need to maintain a significant number of forces on high readiness in the NATO Force Model. In certain niche capabilities – such as CBRN response units, for instance – this may nonetheless offer important strategic value. It should be recalled that European nations are now investing heavily in ammunition production, drone development,

aircraft and naval capabilities, all of which could be of use in a Korean Peninsula contingency. We should also recall that European nations can also avail themselves of cyberdefence, electronic warfare and space-defence capabilities – all of which would be militarily effective.

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**In case of a more contained conflict on the Korean Peninsula, Europeans would still struggle to deliver sizeable stocks alone**

More important is the fact that the ongoing European military build-up to address the Russian threat will, over time, enable the US to use its own resources as global swing capabilities to a far greater extent than before. Finally, defence industrial cooperation between European countries and South Korea will offer greater combined production capacity, redundancy and a degree of geographical shelter from attack. Whilst already key for sustaining deterrence during peacetime, this would become even more important in a protracted conflict.

### **The far-reaching implications of crisis simultaneity**

The most decisive factor in determining the nature and scope of any European involvement in Korean security concerns the potential simultaneity of other crises clamouring for a response. Already in peacetime, the finite reservoir of military capabilities for sustaining deterrence imposes a degree of caution in promising mutual support. In the case of a simultaneous war between the European allies and the Russian Federation, the available political, economic and military resources available to assist with a Korean contingency would shrink precipitously – for existential reasons. Only in the absence of simultaneous conflict with Russia could European support aim to support US war efforts by taking up the burden in Europe's neighbourhood. For example, the occurrence of simultaneous contingencies in the Middle East or Africa – that is to say, less existential scenarios – might precipitate a scenario in which European states can offer a reservoir of capacity to help backfill the gaps that may open due to US overstretch.

In case of parallel conflict in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula, one could imagine a European preference to stand by South Korea whilst the US and Japan concentrate on the war with China, for instance. Such an outcome would relate to the reality that both South Korea and the European allies have their own primary security threats to contend with, of which the existential nature is much easier to recognise. Yet even here, European support might be limited should Europe be simultaneously engaged with Russia. The most daunting scenario, therefore, is that of global war with multiple adversaries spanning across all theatres at once – the “world war three” scenario. Under such circumstances, the possibilities for offering mutual assistance through direct military support or the supply of weapons

and ammunition would most likely be very limited from a practical point of view. Yet at the same time, the case for strong political and economic support amongst all free nations and partners remains compelling, highlighting the importance of cooperation even under conditions of systemic fragmentation or bifurcation.

## **Conclusion**

The modalities of any European engagement in a Korean contingency are highly contingent on the exact conditions in which such a scenario may play out. Whilst the specifics may vary significantly from peacetime to wartime, there should be little doubt that European capitals and institutions will rapidly recognise the need to offer such support as can be made available without risking deterrence gaps in their own region. In the military domain, the available resources may be limited in numbers, yet still offer useful help. The details of a military support package would most likely be arbitrated in a NATO framework and involving individual European capitals. On broader political and economic responses, the EU is likely to play an important role alongside the different European capitals in planning for the required macro-economic response and sanction packages, underscoring the shared interest in maintaining integrated deterrence across regions despite inherent resource constraints.

# Conclusion

Luis Simón and Ramón Pacheco Pardo

This In-Depth Paper has explored how the Korean Peninsula features within a broader system of strategic competition linking the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. Across the chapters, a common theme emerges: Korea cannot be understood in isolation from broader strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic region. Rather, its strategic significance derives from how developments on the Peninsula intersect with wider regional balances, cross-theatre dynamics and the behaviour of a tightening China-Russia-North Korea axis. For the US and its allies, this creates a shared challenge of managing simultaneity – deterring coercion or conflict in one theatre while preventing opportunistic escalation in another.

The analytical framework introduced in this study – **bifurcation, cooperation and integration** – offers a useful lens for understanding these tensions. A bifurcated approach emphasises theatre-by-theatre prioritisation and highlights the constraints on US and allied resources. The chapters show that elements of bifurcation remain inevitable: Seoul, Washington, Tokyo, Canberra and European capitals must all ensure credible regional deterrence even when global attention is stretched. Yet pure bifurcation is increasingly untenable. As each contributor shows in different ways, crises in Korea, Taiwan or Europe would quickly reverberate across theatres, with nuclear dynamics amplifying these linkages.

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Korea cannot be  
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Euro-Atlantic region

Most actors, therefore, gravitate toward **cooperation**, the middle ground between rigid compartmentalisation and unrealistic integration. This cooperative logic is evident in US-ROK-Japan trilateral mechanisms; in South Korea's engagement with Europe and NATO; in allied expectations regarding Seoul's role in a Taiwan or wider Indo-Pacific contingency; and in emerging defence-industrial synergies across regions. The chapters on Japan and Australia underline that cooperation is both necessary and feasible in peacetime – even as competition for US resources or defence-industrial market share creates friction.

The prospects for **integration** – a unified cross-regional approach to deterrence and planning – remain limited. Political constraints, diverging national priorities and the sheer complexity of synchronising Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific deterrence make full integration a distant goal. Yet functional steps toward integration are emerging where pressures from adversarial coordination are strongest: in missile defence, ISR, cyber resilience and the sequencing of nuclear assurance. These developments suggest a future in which selective integration complements broad cooperation, while bifurcation remains a fallback when resources or politics demand it.

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Within this wider constellation of actors, **Australia’s evolving role** demonstrates how some Indo-Pacific allies can help tie together the strategic picture across regions. While not a central driver of Korean Peninsula dynamics, Australia’s capacity to serve as a stable logistical hub and rear-area support point in a Taiwan or Korea scenario illustrates the kind of connective function that strengthens allied resilience and Europe’s ability to engage the Indo-Pacific when necessary.

Finally, this In-Depth Paper is intentionally a **scoping exercise** – a first step toward understanding the triangular dynamics among Korea, Taiwan and Europe, and the cross-regional trade-offs that accompany them. Much more work remains to be done. Future research should focus on specific operational scenarios across the PPP–WWW spectrum; the practical implications of simultaneous crises; the limits and potential of integrated deterrence; and the defence-industrial requirements for sustained multi-theatre competition. Mapping these dilemmas in greater detail will be essential for policymakers seeking to strengthen deterrence, manage escalation and preserve strategic stability across the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.

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