

Growing Divergence: North Korea's Evolving Nuclear Strategy and the US–South Korea Alliance

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In response to North Korea's escalating nuclear and missile threats, the US and South Korea have taken measures to reinforce extended deterrence: the Washington Declaration, the Nuclear Consultative Group, and the enhanced visibility of US strategic assets around the Korean Peninsula. Despite these steps, South Korea's public confidence in US extended deterrence commitments has declined. This article argues that this decline is rooted in growing divergence between US and South Korean interpretations of North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy and the appropriate responses to it.

On April 26, 2023, US President Joe Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol held a summit and adopted the Washington Declaration.¹ The declaration was designed to reassure South Koreans that the US extended deterrence commitment to South Korea remains steadfast in the face of North Korea's growing nuclear and missile threats. Washington adopted the declaration in the hope of curbing South Korean support for nuclear armament and encouraging Seoul to faithfully comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The declaration outlines specific measures, including the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and the regular deployment of US strategic assets—such as nuclear-powered ballistic

missile submarines (SSBNs)—to the Korean Peninsula. As part of the implementation of the Washington Declaration, the USS *Kentucky* made a historic port call to South Korea in July 2023, marking the first visit to South Korea in forty-two years by a US SSBN.²

Despite these measures, public opinion polls conducted by three South Korean research institutions following the Washington Declaration revealed results that deviated from US expectations.³ In 2024, South Korean respondents' support in these polls for indigenous nuclear weapons stood at 72.8 percent,⁴ 66.0 percent,⁵ and 70.9 percent,⁶ marking decreases of 3.8 percent, 5.8 percent, and 4.2 percent, respectively, from 2023. On average, 69.9 percent of South Koreans favored acquiring nuclear weapons, a 2.1

1 White House, "Washington Declaration," April 26, 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>.

2 Shin Ji-hye and Ji Da-gyum, "Yoon Touts Solidarity on US Sub," *Korea Herald*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230719000755>.

3 Victor D. Cha, "Eyes Wide Open: Strategic Elite Views of South Korea's Nuclear Options," *Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2024): 23–40; Tongfi Kim and Do Young Lee, "Continuity and Changes: The Effects of Russia's War Against Ukraine on Japanese and South Korean Nuclear-Weapons Discourse," *The Nonproliferation Review* 30, nos. 4–6 (2023): 265–84.

4 "제2차 '북핵 위기와 안보상황 인식' 갤럽 여론조사 결과 공개" ["Release of Results from the Second Gallup Poll on 'Perceptions of North Korean Nuclear Crisis and Security Situation'"], Chey Institute for Advanced Studies, February 6, 2024, <https://www.chey.org/Kor/Notice/NoticeView.aspx?seq=236>.

5 Sang Sin Lee, Tae-eun Min, Juhwa, Park, Moo Chul Lee, Kwang-il Yoon, Bon-sang Koo, Antonio Fiori, and Marco Milani, *KINU 통일의식조사 2024: 북한의 적대적 2국가론과 한국의 핵보유 여론* [*The KINU Unification Survey 2024: North Korea's Two Hostile States Doctrine and South Korea's Public Opinion on Nuclear Armament*] (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2024), 246–47, https://www.kinu.or.kr/main/module/report/view.do?idx=128256&category=44&nav_code=mai1674786094.

6 "South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2024," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Public Opinion Surveys, May 16, 2024, https://asaninst.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=s1_6_1_eng&wr_id=23&page=1.

percent rise from the previous year. Although the Washington Declaration and the implementation of follow-up measures have been widely promoted, support for South Korean nuclear armament has continued to increase.⁷

Confidence in the US security guarantee appears to be related to these shifts in public opinion. One of the three polls showed that the percentage of South Koreans who believe Washington would use nuclear weapons to defend their country, even if North Korea could strike the US mainland, dropped from 51.3 percent in 2023 to 39.3 percent in 2024.⁸ In another time-series poll conducted since 2021, when respondents were asked to choose between hosting US troops and possessing their own nuclear weapons for national defense, more respondents selected the second option (possessing nuclear weapons) than the first option (hosting US troops) for the first time in 2024.⁹ This marked decline in public confidence occurred *after* the Washington Declaration was adopted.

What accounts for the recent decline in South Korean confidence in US extended deterrence? Addressing this question requires careful analysis of significant shifts in North Korea's nuclear strategy and doctrine over the past few years. The increasing distrust from South Korean respondents stems from a widening gap between US and South Korean views on North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy and appropriate countermeasures. Pyongyang appears to have recently made a significant shift in its nuclear strategy, aimed at countering the conventionally superior South Korean and US combined forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁰ Consequently, North Korea is currently assessed to have adopted a more aggressive nuclear posture on the Korean Peninsula, one that envisions preemptive nuclear use far more actively than in the past.¹¹ While Washington maintains that its existing extended deterrence commitment is sufficient, South

Koreans posit that the US has not adapted to these changes, raising doubts about America's resolve and capability to address the evolving North Korean threat.

Evolution in North Korea's Nuclear Strategy

Under Vipin Narang's famous classification of nuclear strategies (or nuclear postures), a catalytic strategy seeks to catalyze military or diplomatic intervention—typically from a third party—when the state's vital interests are threatened by an external adversary.¹² Applying this typology to North Korea, Narang explained that Pyongyang initially adopted a catalytic strategy.¹³ That is, North Korea aimed to employ its nuclear weapons to prompt intervention from its patron, China, or to induce Beijing to act as a crisis mediator during conflicts on the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, Narang predicted that if China were no longer perceived as a reliable patron, North Korea—facing the conventionally superior US–South Korea combined forces—would likely shift to an asymmetric escalation strategy.¹⁴ Indeed, over the past few years, North Korea's nuclear strategy appears to have evolved into asymmetric escalation, incorporating its core characteristics.¹⁵

Asymmetric escalation is designed to deter conventional attacks by enabling a state to quickly escalate to the first use of nuclear weapons against the adversary.¹⁶ An asymmetric escalation posture has three key features: (1) the threat of first use of nuclear weapons; (2) explicit intention to employ nuclear weapons tactically against an adversary's conventional forces and the delivery platforms to achieve this; and (3) pre-delegation of authority to military commanders for nuclear weapon use.¹⁷

North Korea's stance on a “no first use” (NFU) policy has shifted significantly. Previously, Pyongyang consistently portrayed its nuclear forces as defen-

7 It is worth noting, however, this support—while initially appearing strong—was in fact “soft.” One of the three surveys found that South Korean respondents' support for an indigenous nuclear armament dropped substantially—by 15.9 to 21 percentage points—when they were primed to consider various potential costs, such as the abrogation of the US–ROK alliance or international economic sanctions. Lee et al., *The KINU Unification Survey 2024*, 248–53.

8 “제2차 ‘북핵 위기’와 안보상황 인식’ 갤럽 여론조사 결과 공개.”

9 Lee et al., *The KINU Unification Survey 2024*.

10 Nicholas D. Anderson and Daryl G. Press, “Lost Seoul? Assessing Pyongyang's Other Deterrent,” *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 3 (2025): 9–27.

11 Wook-Sik Cheong, “The DPRK's Changed Nuclear Doctrine: Factors and Implications,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 6, no. 1 (2023): 136–47.

12 Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 15–17.

13 Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 305. For a summary of Narang's typology of nuclear strategies, see page 22. See also Vipin Narang, “Nuclear Strategies of Emerging Nuclear Powers: North Korea and Iran,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015): 73–91. For a different view of North Korea's initial nuclear strategy, see Dong Sun Lee and Iordanka Alexandrova, “North Korean Nuclear Strategy: Envisioning Assured Retaliation,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 21, no. 3 (2021): 371–400.

14 Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 305.

15 For an alternative perspective on North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy, see Hyun-Binn Cho and Ariel Petrovics, “North Korea's Strategically Ambiguous Nuclear Posture,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2022): 39–58.

16 Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 19.

17 Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 19–21.

sive. For example, the 2013 North Korea nuclear law describes its nuclear weapons as “just means for defense” to cope with the US’s increasingly hostile policy and nuclear threat.¹⁸ The nuclear law also states that the primary role of these weapons is to deter and repel enemy aggression and attacks on the state.¹⁹ Additionally, it clarifies that Pyongyang would neither use nor threaten to use nuclear weapons first against nonnuclear states like South Korea unless they participate with a hostile nuclear power like the US in acts of aggression and attack against North Korea.²⁰ In September 2022, however, North Korea enacted a new law that significantly pivoted away from its original NFU-oriented stance. Under the section titled “Conditions of Using Nuclear Weapons,” the new law stipulated five circumstances under which nuclear weapons could be used: “1) in case an attack by nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction was launched or drew near is judged, 2) in case a nuclear or non-nuclear attack by hostile forces on the state leadership and the command organization of the state’s nuclear forces was launched or drew near is judged, 3) in case a fatal military attack against important strategic objects of the state was launched or drew near is judged, 4) in case the need for operation for preventing the expansion and protraction of a war and taking the initiative in the war in contingency is inevitably raised, 5) in other case an inevitable situation in which it is compelled to correspond with catastrophic crisis to the existence of the state and safety of the people by only nuclear weapons is created.”²¹

Notably, the law allows North Korea to use nuclear weapons first if an external attack on the state “drew near is judged”—that is, is deemed imminent—or dur-

ing wartime to prevent further escalation and secure victory. The circumstances it describes are so broad that they could allow Pyongyang to resort to preemptive nuclear attacks at virtually any time, based on arbitrary judgments that will not be transparent to external observers and actors trying to deter North Korea.²²

Illustrating the second characteristic of an asymmetric escalation strategy, in 2021 Kim publicly acknowledged for the first time that North Korea was developing tactical nuclear weapons and declared that “producing smaller and lighter nuclear weapons for tactical uses” would be one of several key strategic goals in his country’s five-year military development plan (2021–25) for a nuclear weapons program.²³ The following year, North Korea began efforts to operationalize tactical nuclear weapons for actual war-fighting missions. In September 2022, Kim ordered the expansion of the operational roles of tactical nuclear weapons and the acceleration of their deployment.²⁴ In late December 2022, the North Korean leader directed that “[n]ow that the South Korean puppet forces who designated the DPRK as their ‘principal enemy’ and openly trumpet about ‘preparations for war’ have assumed our undoubted enemy, it highlights the importance and necessity of a mass-producing of tactical nuclear weapons and calls for an exponential increase of the country’s nuclear arsenal.”²⁵ In 2023, Pyongyang unveiled its tactical nuclear warhead and a range of tactical nuclear platforms designed to target South Korea.²⁶ Since 2022, North Korea has significantly increased the number of test-firings of short-range ballistic and cruise missiles that exclusively target South Korea.²⁷ North Korea has clearly signaled its intention and ability to carry out aggressive tactical

18 “Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted,” KCNA Watch, April 1, 2013, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451896124-739013370/law-on-consolidating-position-of-nuclear-weapons-state-adopted/>.

19 “Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted.”

20 “Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted.”

21 “Law on DPRK’s Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated,” KCNA Watch, September 9, 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1662687258-950776986/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated/>.

22 Ildo Hwang, “DPRK’s Law on the Nuclear Forces Policy: Mission and Command & Control,” IFANS Focus, October 12, 2022, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/eng/pblct/PblctView.do?csrfPreventionSalt=null&pblctDtaSn=14058&menuCl=P11&clCode=P11&koreanEngSe=ENG>.

23 Bomi Kim, *North Korea’s New Weapon Systems: The Development of Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Its Implications* (Institute for National Security Strategy, 2022); Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, “North Korean Nuclear Weapons, 2024,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 15, 2024, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2024-07/north-korean-nuclear-weapons-2024/>.

24 Kim Tong-hyung, “N. Korea Says It Will Never Give Up Nukes to Counter US,” Associated Press, September 9, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/asia-united-states-south-korea-nuclear-weapons-north-acad3f4abf01c88a2dd8be02860d8c8e>.

25 “Report on 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th WPK Central Committee,” KCNA Watch, January 1, 2023, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1672543894-200963704/report-on-6th-enlarged-plenary-meeting-of-8th-wpk-central-committee/>.

26 Ji Da-gyum, “N. Korea Unveils First ‘Tactical Nuclear Attack Submarine,’” *Korea Herald*, September 8, 2023, <http://koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230908000504>; Nam Hyun-woo, “North Korea Unveils Tactical Nuclear Warheads,” *Korea Times*, March 28, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/08/103_347994.html.

27 Missile Defense Project, “Missiles of North Korea,” *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 14, 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/>; Wook Yang, “2023년 북한 핵개발 현황 및 평가: 국방력 강화 속에 지속될 2024년 도발 [2023 North Korea’s Nuclear Development Status and Assessment: Ongoing Provocations Expected in 2024 amid Bolstered Defense],” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Issue Brief, December 28, 2023, https://asaninst.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=s1_1&wr_id=429&sf=wr_subject%7C%7Cwr_content&stx=Nuclear&sop=and&page=1.

nuclear operations against South Korea, if necessary, using these short-range systems.²⁸

The recent evolution of North Korea's nuclear strategy also clearly reflects the third characteristic of an asymmetric escalation strategy. In recent years, Pyongyang transitioned from its original assertive nuclear command and control (NC2) system, wherein Kim held all centralized power, to a more delegative system. Specifically, North Korea's 2013 nuclear law specified that the state's nuclear weapons "can be used only by a final order of the Supreme Commander [Kim Jong Un]."²⁹ In contrast, Pyongyang's new delegative system seems to be intended to ensure nuclear retaliation against a surprise attack on the North Korean leadership. Notably, the 2022 law stipulates under the newly added section of "command and control of nuclear forces" that "the state nuclear forces command organization" shall assist the North Korean leader in "the whole course from decision concerning nuclear weapons to execution."³⁰ The section also stipulates that if Kim's NC2 is incapacitated due to an enemy attack, "a nuclear strike shall be launched automatically and immediately . . . according to the operation plan decided in advance."³¹ The core of this reform is to transfer pre-authorized control of the nuclear button to designated individuals.³²

Pinpointing the origins of this evolution is beyond this study's scope, but a few plausible explanations emerge. First, as Narang's theory suggests, a weak-

ening of North Korea's trust in China as its security patron may be a contributing factor. The strained relationship between the two communist allies in recent years lends plausibility to this explanation.³³ Second, South Korea's domestic politics may have played a role. The conservative Yoon administration, which took office in May 2022, adopted a more hard-line stance toward North Korea than its predecessor, the Moon Jae-in administration.³⁴ Notably, Pyongyang enacted its 2022 nuclear law just four months after Yoon's inauguration. Third, South Korea's military modernization has significantly weakened the effectiveness of North Korean conventional artillery attacks, shifting the conventional balance of power in favor of the South.³⁵ This shift may have prompted Pyongyang to adjust its nuclear strategy, utilizing its nuclear forces more actively for political and military purposes within the Korean theater. Fourth, lessons drawn from Russia's threat of nuclear first use in the Ukraine war might have driven North Korea's shift.³⁶

The Growing Cacophony

North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy has created a rift between Seoul and Washington in their threat perceptions and their approaches to the evolving North Korean threat. Table 1 examines differences in South Korean and US perceptions of five issues. The allies agree on only two issues.

Table 1. Summary of South Korean and US perspectives on North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy and appropriate responses.

	The likelihood of North Korean nuclear first use	The likelihood of North Korean localized provocations	The likelihood of a North Korean full-scale invasion	The need to significantly enhance the specificity of US commitments	The need for additional US military presence in South Korea
South Korea	Increased	Increased	Increased	Needed	Needed
The US	Increased	Increased	Not increased	Not needed	Not needed

Note: The values in this summary table represent an overall average perspective that includes both public and elite perceptions from the two states. The terms "increased" and "not increased" use 2021 as a reference point, when North Korea's nuclear strategy began to evolve in earnest.

28 Miachel Lee, "North's Kim Threatens to Destroy Seoul During Multiple Rocket Launch Drill," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, March 19, 2024, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-03-19/national/northKorea/Norths-Kim-threatens-to-destroy-Seoul-during-multiple-rocket-launch-drill/2005880>.

29 "Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted."

30 "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated," KCNA Watch, September 9, 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1662687258-950776986/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated/>.

31 "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated."

32 Megan DuBois, "North Korea's Nuclear Fail-Safe," *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/16/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-law-kim-jong-un/>.

33 Ji Da-gyum, "China, N. Korea Mark 75th Anniversary of Ties with Little Fanfare," *Korea Herald*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3488374>; Hyung-jin Kim, "North Korea and China Mark Their 75th Anniversary of Ties as Outsiders Question Their Relationship," *Associated Press*, October 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-china-xi-f2b1aebf0016cc32fb40600802540a21>.

34 Kang Seung-woo, "Does US Support Yoon's Hawkish Stance on North Korea?," May 14, 2022, *Korea Times*, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/03/103_329107.html.

35 Anderson and Press, "Lost Seoul?"

36 Kim and Lee, "Continuity and Changes."

South Korea

South Korean leaders and experts across the political spectrum have grown deeply concerned about Pyongyang's nuclear evolution toward a more offensive and aggressive posture. In particular, they are highly sensitive to North Korea lowering the threshold for nuclear use in various scenarios, believing that the likelihood of North Korea's nuclear use—ranging from peacetime to crisis and wartime—has significantly increased.³⁷ In January 2024, President Yoon criticized Pyongyang, stating, "The North Korean regime is an irrational group that has legalized the preemptive use of nuclear weapons as the only country in the world to do so."³⁸ In December 2022, Wi Sung-lac (now the first National Security Advisor under the new Lee Jae Myung administration) assessed that North Korea was extremely escalating its threat to South Korea through test-firings of various types of nuclear missiles.³⁹

South Koreans are concerned that as North Korea's nuclear strategy grows more aggressive, Pyongyang may be more inclined to undertake military actions on the Korean Peninsula, such as localized provocations or even large-scale invasions. In other words, with North Korea now possessing a more offensive nuclear doctrine and a range of supporting tactical nuclear weapons, Pyongyang could become more emboldened to use military options. Former South Korean Vice Minister of National Defense Baek Seung-joo warned that North Korea, having gained confidence from the legalization of nuclear weapons, might be preparing for localized provocations similar to the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010.⁴⁰ South Korean experts have also frequently examined a scenario in which North Korea rapidly occupies disputed islands in the Yellow Sea. These experts warn that North Korea could coerce South Korea into recognizing

these already lost islands as a *fait accompli*, either by threatening a limited nuclear attack or launching an actual "escalate to de-escalate" nuclear attack.⁴¹

Moreover, influential South Koreans warn that North Korea's new nuclear law could signal the prelude to full-scale war. In January 2024, Kim Jong Un ordered a constitutional revision to specify "the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming South Korea and annexing it as a part of the territory of our republic in case a war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula."⁴² In light of this development, a South Korean expert argued that the new nuclear law reflects a dangerous ambition of "forceful absorption and unification through nuclear means," adding that "North Korea has never abandoned its goal of unification."⁴³ President Yoon stated, "North Korea has enacted a new nuclear law for first nuclear use to reunify [the Korean Peninsula] under communism."⁴⁴ Then-opposition party leader Lee Jae Myung, stated a few days after North Korea's new nuclear law was released: "I think this is a shocking and serious situation, because it appears North Korea has revealed its intention to use nuclear weapons not just for defense, but even for a preemptive attack."⁴⁵

Seoul believes that to effectively counter North Korea's evolving threats, Washington must significantly enhance the specificity of its extended deterrence commitments to South Korea. For example, South Korea wants the US to more concretely outline in advance how it would respond to North Korean aggression under specific scenarios. The information requested by South Korea includes the specific types of nuclear assets to be deployed, the locations of these assets, and the operational processes to be employed.⁴⁶ The rationale is this: Seoul believes that if the US were to explicitly and concretely detail its

37 Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Adopts New Law Hardening Its Nuclear Doctrine," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/09/world/asia/north-korea-kim-weapons-law.html>; Hwang, "DPRK's Law on the Nuclear Forces Policy."

38 Lee Haye-ah, "Yoon Says 'Irrational' N. K. Likely to Carry Out Provocations Ahead of April Elections," *Yonhap News*, January 31, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240131006600315>.

39 "[JoongAng Ilbo—CSIS Forum 2022] The Alliance in Turbulent Times," December 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZnY8ThwC4Q>.

40 Eunhye Lee, "백승주 '北, 핵무기 사용 법제화 이후 자신감, 다른 국지도발 준비 가능성,' [Baek Seung-joo: North Korea's Increased Confidence After Nuclear Legalization May Signal New Local Provocations]," *Joseilbo*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.joseilbo.com/news/htmls/2022/11/20221104470289.html>.

41 Yonghwan Choi, "Issues and Response Tasks of North Korea's Nuclear Strategy," *Institute for National Security Strategy*, June 2024, <https://www.inss.re.kr/upload/bbs/BBSA05/202406/F20240612171857969.pdf>; Jieun Lee, "北 커지는 핵위협...어떤 '핵전술 시나리오' 있을까 [North Korea's Growing Nuclear Threat: What 'Nuclear Warfare Scenarios' Exist]," *Asia Business Daily*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.asiae.co.kr/article/2023032016494322326>.

42 Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Says It Is No Longer Interested in Reunifying with the South," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/16/world/asia/north-korea-reunification-policy.html>.

43 Moon-jung Cho, "전문가 김정은, '영토완정' 으로 적화통일 의지 표명 [Kim Jong Un Expresses Intent for Unification Under Communism Through 'Territorial Integrity,' Experts Say]," *New Daily*, January 22, 2024, <https://www.newdaily.co.kr/site/data/html/2024/01/22/2024012200319.html#>.

44 Hansol Woo, "윤 대통령 '북, 대남 적화통일 위해 핵 법제화...확고한 국가관·대적관 필요 [President Yoon, North Korea Enacts a Nuclear Law for Reunification Under Communism]," *KBS*, November 6, 2023, <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/pc/view/view.do?ncd=7810921>.

45 Cho Sung-ho, "이재명 '北, 평화 위협 유감...모든 도발 중단해야' [Lee Jae-myung: 'Regret over North Korea's Threat to Peace... All Provocations Must Stop]," *YTN*, September 14, 2022, https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0101_202209141112329864.

46 Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, "Comparing Allied Public Confidence in US Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *Asian Institute for Policy Studies*, Issue Brief, March 27, 2024, https://asaninst.org/data/file/s3_4_2_eng/f15af67c43af11afd7a990dc4f32fd2b_3XRlFPZN_6b75e0dd44fbca8899de7b11c972d96787d5406.pdf.

nuclear commitments and publicly announce their establishment—while keeping implementation details confidential—Pyongyang would be more likely to trust that US retaliatory actions would be carried out as specified, and would thus be deterred from launching nuclear or conventional attacks against South Korea. Stated differently, Seoul perceives American ambiguity as weakening the credibility and effectiveness of extended deterrence. Some South Korean experts contend that the US should formally codify that if North Korea launches a nuclear strike against South Korea, Washington will automatically intervene and immediately retaliate with nuclear strikes.⁴⁷

The Yoon administration sought to address the lack of concreteness in US extended deterrence by enhancing the viability of US nuclear commitments and specifying implementation plans.⁴⁸ Seoul's efforts bore fruit with several tangible results, including the endorsement of the Washington Declaration, the establishment of the NCG, the convening of multiple subsequent NCG meetings, the advancement of the alliance's conventional-nuclear integration (CNI) initiative, and the adoption of the US-ROK Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations.⁴⁹ However, many South Korean elites and citizens remain dissatisfied and continue to demand groundbreaking measures, including the redeployment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons to South Korea, the introduction of a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement, and the addition of a “nuclear attack protection clause” to the US-ROK alliance treaty.⁵⁰

Finally, Seoul believes that North Korea now poses a fundamentally different type of threat, and stresses the need to maintain the current strength and role of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) to deter

it. Most South Koreans view the existing US military presence as the basic, minimum requirement for effective extended deterrence. Some argue that more American deterrent assets should be dedicated to South Korea's defense, including the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea and the permanent or semipermanent stationing of US strategic assets on South Korean soil.⁵¹

South Korean leaders also advocate limiting the USFK's role to defending South Korea from North Korean incursions, fearing that expanding it beyond the Peninsula could undermine US extended deterrence. For example, when asked if South Korea would assist a US defense of Taiwan during a Chinese attack, President Yoon stated that such a scenario would likely provoke North Korea's opportunism. He emphasized that the primary focus of the South Korea–US alliance should be maintaining a strong defense posture against North Korea.⁵² This stance reflects South Korea's long-standing view of North Korea as a more immediate threat than China. South Korea's position that USFK should concentrate exclusively on deterring North Korea also reflects its concern that it could be drawn into unwanted military conflicts beyond the Peninsula. Specifically, apprehension is growing among South Korean experts that if USFK engages in a military confrontation with China in the Taiwan Strait, then South Korea might also be pulled into the conflict.⁵³ Some might argue that the so-called division-of-labor approach—where South Korea takes the lead in deterring North Korea on the Peninsula while USFK reorients toward other regional contingencies—which the Trump administration is said to be pursuing, would shield South Korea from the risk of entrapment.⁵⁴ South Korean

47 Dohyung Han, “한국 전문가들 '북 핵공격시 미 자동개입 의무 명문화해야' [South Korean Experts, 'US Obligation for Automatic Intervention Should Be Codified in Case of North Korean Nuclear Attack'],” *Radio Free Asia*, September 16, 2022, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/nuclearnk-09162022084039.html.

48 Kang Seung-woo, “Interview: Extended Deterrence Is Best Option to Ensure Peace on Korean Peninsula,” *Korea Times*, February 2, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/12/113_344713.html.

49 The White House, “Washington Declaration,” April 26, 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2>; The White House, “Joint Statement by President Joseph R. Biden of the United States of America and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea on US-ROK Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations on the Korean Peninsula,” July 11, 2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/11/joint-statement-by-president-joseph-r-biden-of-the-united-states-of-america-and-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-on-u-s-rok-guidelines-for-nuclear-deterrence-and-nuclear-operations-o/>.

50 Lee and Kang, “Comparing Allied Public Confidence in US Extended Nuclear Deterrence”; Yi Wonju, “PPP Candidate Vows to Develop Nuclear-Powered Submarines to Cope with N. Korea's Nuke Threat,” *Yonhap News*, May 9, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250509005000315>.

51 “한국판 MAD와 전술핵 재배치의 필요성 [The Korean Version of MAD and the Need to Redeploy Tactical Nuclear Weapons],” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Issue Brief, August 4, 2023, https://www.asaninst.org/data/file/s1_1/f15af67c43af11afd7a990dc4f32fd2b_jfBbcEHO_ada1c013471aa37e8c7ad8c7ab9fcfd0778fab7f.pdf; Kim Hyun-wook, “신정부의 한미동맹 발전 방향 [The New Administration's Direction for Enhancing the ROK-US Alliance],” Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, May 10, 2022, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/hmpg/mob/pblct/PblctView.do?pblctDtaSn=13997&clCode=P07&menuCl=P07&pageIndex=1>.

52 Fareed Zakaria, “South Korean President: North Korea Remains an Imminent Threat,” *CNN*, September 25, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2022/09/25/exp-gps-0925-south-korean-president-yoon-north-korea-threat.cnn>.

53 Seong-geun Choi and Jun-sik Park, “중국에 한반도 타격 명분...대만 전쟁시 ‘연루의 함정’ 경고 나왔다 [A Pretext for China to Attack on the Korean Peninsula: Warning Issued about an 'Entrapment Trap' in a Taiwan Conflict],” *Money Today*, April 27, 2025, <https://news.mt.co.kr/mtview.php?no=2025042700581989589>.

54 Song Sang-ho, “US Looks to 'Calibrate' USFK Posture to Deter China: Senior Official,” *Yonhap News*, May 29, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250529011000315>.



experts reject this view, however, warning that US bases in South Korea would likely become targets of Chinese attacks, thereby drawing South Korea into an unwanted conflict.⁵⁵

The United States

The US interprets North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy and its implications quite differently from South Korea—as shown in table 1, the two allies' views align on only two out of five key aspects. Like Seoul, many in Washington have raised concerns that Pyongyang's evolving strategy increases the likelihood of a nuclear first use, citing the country's 2022 nuclear law.⁵⁶ Moreover, North Korea's continued advancement and diversification of its nuclear weapons are viewed as further exacerbating this risk. Narang, then-Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy, emphasized in a 2024 speech that North Korea's ongoing nuclear developments are pushing it to recklessly threaten South Korea and increasingly the US.⁵⁷

The US also acknowledges that North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy raises the potential for localized military provocations by Pyongyang. In other words, Washington agrees that Pyongyang's evolution has heightened the likelihood that North Korea will use nuclear coercion to achieve economic, political, and even military objectives. The 2023 analysis by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) on North Korea, produced in January 2023 and declassified in June of the same year, serves as a key resource for understanding the US perspective. The document analyzes the potential purposes for which North Korea might use its nuclear arsenal through 2030.⁵⁸ It assesses as "high" the likelihood that nuclear weapons could be used for coercive purposes and notes that Kim "may use limited military force to raise tensions as a means to press key foreign governments into adopting positions favorable to his objectives, confident that his growing nuclear capabilities will deter any unacceptable retaliation or consequences."⁵⁹ The 2025 ODNI annual report does not directly address how North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy affects its behavior, but it does note that "Pyongyang is expanding its capacity for coercive operations and using new tactics as it becomes more confident in its nuclear deterrent," highlighting the Kim regime's growing assertiveness fueled by its advancing nuclear capabilities.⁶⁰

The ODNI's annual report and some American experts point to an increasing likelihood that North Korea could launch low-level attacks against South Korea, including shelling disputed islands in the Yellow Sea and resuming provocations along the Northern Limit Line. The experts view these potential local provocations as attempts to maximize the effectiveness of coercive threats for political or economic gains.⁶¹ Many in Washington, however, assess that coercive nuclear threats are highly unlikely to lead to a full-scale invasion undertaken to reunify the Korean Peninsula

55 Beom-heum Baek, "대만유사는 한국유사 . . . 한반도 확산 방지해야 [A Taiwan Contingency Is a Korea Contingency . . . The Spillover to the Korean Peninsula Must be Prevented]," *Hankyoreh*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/because/1203534.html>.

56 For example, see Bruce Klingner, "Testimony Submitted to the Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs United States House of Representatives 'North Korea's Missile Threat to the Indo-Pacific Region,'" March 5, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/117978/witnesses/HHRG-119-II24-Wstate-KlingnerB-20250305.pdf>; United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Testimony on the Posture of United States Indo-Pacific Command and United States Forces Korea in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program," April 10, 2025, 4, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/4102025fulltranscript.pdf>.

57 Vipin Narang, "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies: Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS," August 1, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/>.

58 US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "North Korea: Scenarios for Leveraging Nuclear Weapons Through 2030," Doc. no. 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>.

59 US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "North Korea."

60 US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," March 2025, 27, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

61 US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," 27; Frances Mao, "Kim Jong Un: Is North Korea's Leader Actually Considering War?," BBC, January 23, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68052515>.

under communism.⁶² For example, the 2023 ODNI analysis mentioned above notes that North Korea's nuclear use "to seize territory and achieve political dominance over the Peninsula . . . will be much less likely than the strategy of coercion."⁶³

Washington's assessments of the situation have led to a position that differs from Seoul's regarding the need for a significantly more explicit commitment to extended deterrence. Washington does acknowledge some need for greater specificity, which has led to the establishment of the NCG and efforts to push for a CNI initiative.⁶⁴ While striving to enhance the specificity of its extended deterrence commitments, however, the US has also expressed opposition to additional measures sought by Seoul, such as the redeployment of nuclear weapons and the adoption of nuclear sharing arrangements.⁶⁵ Fundamentally, Washington wants to maintain a degree of ambiguity, out of concern that overly explicit commitments could increase the risk of being drawn into a nuclear war.⁶⁶ Such commitments could limit Washington's flexibility to employ alternative options, such as massive conventional retaliation or a decapitation strike aimed at eliminating Kim Jong Un.⁶⁷

Moreover, Washington believes that overly specific commitments would be counterproductive, emphasizing the value of calculated ambiguity.⁶⁸ This stance rests on the belief that ambiguity forces adversaries to constantly guess about US red lines and retaliation

methods, keeping nuclear response a possibility even in unlikely scenarios. This, in turn, promotes caution in adversarial decisions about whether to invade and thereby strengthens deterrence.⁶⁹ Additionally, Washington believes that excessively specific and detailed nuclear commitments for numerous scenarios could undermine the credibility of extended deterrence. If North Korea concludes that a US deterrent nuclear threat in a particular scenario is exaggerated or a bluff, it might doubt the credibility of all other US nuclear commitments.⁷⁰ Therefore, Washington prefers to avoid overly detailed or specific declaratory language in favor of ambiguous commitments.

Finally, Washington views the current size and military capabilities of the USFK as substantial and sufficient to deter North Korea. The Trump administration is reportedly even considering withdrawing about 4,500 troops from the 28,500-strong USFK,⁷¹ signaling that it wants Seoul to take on a greater role in countering North Korea.⁷² In this context, the US appears to regard permanent stationing of strategic deterrent assets or the redeployment of nuclear weapons to South Korea as politically unwise and militarily redundant.⁷³ A former US official at the National Security Council, for example, argued that redeployment of these assets is unnecessary and would undermine extended deterrence. The official remarked that redeployment would be akin to announcing that "we will use nukes in Korea rather than engage our homeland.

62 For an exception among US analysts, see Robert L. Carlin and Siegfried S. Hecker, "Is Kim Jong Un Preparing for War?," *38 North*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/01/is-kim-jong-un-preparing-for-war/>.

63 US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "North Korea."

64 White House, "Washington Declaration"; US Department of Defense, "Joint Press Statement on the Fourth Nuclear Consultative Group Meeting," January 10, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4026575/joint-press-statement-on-the-fourth-nuclear-consultative-group-meeting/>.

65 Jung In-hwan, "US Ambassador to S. Korea Rebukes Ruling Party's Calls for Tactical Nukes," *Hankyoreh*, October 19, 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1063385.html.

66 Do Young Lee and Ian Bowers, "Bridging the Ambiguity-Explicitness Gap in the US-South Korean Alliance," *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/07/bridging-the-ambiguity-explicitness-gap-in-the-u-s-south-korean-alliance/>.

67 Michael Lee, "Conventional Capabilities, Nuclear Ambiguity Key to US Extended Deterrence, Say Experts," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 7, 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-12-07/national/northKorea/Conventional-capabilities-nuclear-ambiguity-key-to-US-extended-deterrence-say-experts-/1930468>.

68 Sangkyu Lee, Suon Choi, Adam Mount, and Toby Dalton, "Divergent South Korean and American Perceptions on Deterring North Korea," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 27, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/nuclear-for-nuclear-understanding-divergent-south-korean-and-american-perceptions-on-deterring-north-korea?lang=en>. For an exceptional view among US experts, see Ji Da-gyum, "US Needs 'Strategic Clarity' on North Korea Deterrence: Report," *Korea Herald*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3246194>.

69 Matthew Costlow, "Believe It or Not: US Nuclear Declaratory Policy and Calculated Ambiguity," *War on the Rocks*, August 9, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/believe-it-or-not-u-s-nuclear-declaratory-policy-and-calculated-ambiguity/>.

70 Lee et al., "Divergent South Korean and American Perceptions on Deterring North Korea."

71 Nancy A. Youssef, Alexander Ward, and Timothy W. Martin, "US Considers Withdrawing Thousands of Troops from South Korea," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/u-s-considers-withdrawing-thousands-of-troops-from-south-korea-725a6514>. The Pentagon has denied the report as untrue. See Song, "US Looks to 'Calibrate' USFK Posture to Deter China: Senior Official."

72 Song, "US Looks to 'Calibrate' USFK Posture to Deter China: Senior Official."

73 Eunjung Cho, "전문가들 '한국내 전술핵 재배치, 군사적 실익 적고 미한 동맹에 부담만 가중' [Tactical Nukes in S. Korea Offer Little Military Advantage, Strain US-ROK Alliance, Experts Say]," *VOA Korea*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.voakorea.com/a/6785739.html>; "US Hints at Opposition to Permanent Deployment of Strategic Assets in S. Korea," *KBS World*, October 19, 2022, https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=173154.

... We have to say our homeland is also threatened along with your homeland.”⁷⁴

The Trump administration has signaled that it is considering shifting USFK’s focus from strictly deterring North Korea to also incorporating broader missions beyond the Korean Peninsula.⁷⁵ In May 2024, Elbridge Colby, who was later appointed as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, told South Korean media that the USFK’s role should shift toward countering China.⁷⁶ Colby being named to the Pentagon’s number three post has raised concerns in Seoul that Washington will want a broader regional role for USFK than Seoul prefers—a divergence that could further weaken South Korea’s confidence in US extended deterrence.⁷⁷

Conclusion

North Korea’s nuclear strategy has evolved; as conditions have changed, the US and South Korea have diverged in their interpretations of this change. This growing divergence explains the recent sharp decline in South Koreans’ confidence in US extended deterrence: South Koreans believe that the US is downplaying the significance of North Korea’s evolving nuclear capabilities and posture, and failing to take appropriate measures to address the new threats this development poses.

Pyongyang also appears to be exacerbating intra-alliance discord by selectively threatening Seoul with nuclear first use while refraining from doing so toward the continental US. Pyongyang’s announcement that it is no longer seeking reconciliation with South Korea and the deployment of various short-range nuclear and conventional platforms targeting the South seem calibrated to instill maximum fear

in Seoul.⁷⁸ How the US effectively responds to North Korea’s divergent threats will be pivotal in ensuring credible extended deterrence for Seoul.

Since the start of the second Trump administration, American policymakers have increasingly viewed North Korea’s nuclear threat to South Korea and its threat to the US homeland as distinct challenges. Washington has signaled that it may prioritize the “defense of the US homeland” while gradually shifting deterrence responsibilities on the Korean Peninsula to Seoul.⁷⁹ This bifurcated approach would provide the US with greater strategic flexibility in the Indo-Pacific region, especially to counter China’s regional ambitions.

This approach, however, could encourage North Korean nuclear provocations or military adventurism, which could backfire if a crisis then requires deeper US involvement in military contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. It could also backfire if such a development, in turn, were to create strategic openings for China to move more assertively in the Taiwan Strait or the East China Sea, with negative consequences for stability elsewhere in the region. American policymakers, therefore, should move away from the belief that retasking USFK to focus on the Chinese threat must involve redeploying them outside the Korean Peninsula. Instead, American leaders should recognize that credible extended deterrence can be achieved on the Korean Peninsula and across the region by maintaining current USFK force levels or with minimal withdrawals.

South Korea can also serve as a strategic outpost for countering China’s regional dominance. This scenario is particularly important for addressing China’s growing maritime assertiveness in the Yellow Sea, which has become increasingly apparent in recent

74 Eunjung Cho, “한반도 전술핵 재배치는 확장 억지력 약화시켜...러, 북에 첨단 기술 제공 우려 커져 [Redeploying Tactical Nukes to the Korean Peninsula Weakens Extended Deterrence ... Growing Concerns over Russia Providing Advanced Technology to North Korea],” VOA Korea, June 1, 2024, <https://www.voakorea.com/a/7638594.html>.

75 Eunjung Cho, “주한미군, 북한 억제에서 역내 전력으로...중국 ‘격퇴’ 까지 고려 [US Forces Korea to Transform from Deterring North Korea to a Regional Force ... Even Considering ‘Defeating’ China],” VOA Korea, March 15, 2025, <https://www.voakorea.com/a/8011497.html?withmediaplayer=1>.

76 Song Sang-ho, “Ex-Pentagon Official Stresses Need for War Plan Rethink, Swift OPLAN Transfer, USFK Overhaul,” *Yonhap News*, May 8, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240508000300315>.

77 Moon-whi Wi, “콜비 미국방차관 등장에 주한미군 역할 조정?...韓 핵무장은? [Colby’s Confirmation as US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy: Adjusting USFK’s Role? ... South Korea’s Nuclear Armament?],” *The JoongAng*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.joongAng.com/article/25327280>.

78 Heather Chen and Yoonjung Seo, “North Korea Says It Will No Longer Seek Reunification with South Korea, Will Launch New Spy Satellites in 2024,” CNN, January 1, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/31/asia/north-korea-reconciliation-south-korea-intl-hnk/index.html>; Kim Tong-Hyung, “North Korean Leader Kim Supervises Latest Test of New Multiple Rocket Launcher,” Associated Press, May 11, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-jong-un-multiple-rocket-launchers-russia-24072528bcc233072c1a56ce7bf370da>; Jiwon Song, “South Koreans Stay Calm as They See Showmanship in the North’s Escalating Threats,” Associated Press, February 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-mood-north-korea-weapons-e6022b5d5692acac1f658c3d8bc5d1bb>.

79 US Department of Defense, “Statement on the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy,” May 2, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4172735/statement-on-the-development-of-the-2025-national-defense-strategy/>; Kim Eun-joong, Roh Suk-jo, and Park Su-hyeon, “US Troop Cuts in Korea Back on the Table as Pentagon Weighs Indo-Pacific Shift,” *Chosun Daily*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/05/23/IT2ZBBDE4JDSVKHF5UZERQJBE4/>.

months.⁸⁰ Indeed, concerns are mounting among both South Korean and American experts that China is seeking to transform the Yellow Sea into a “second South China Sea.” Beijing has recently installed large floating steel structures—claimed to be aquaculture cages—in the Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ) established between South Korea and China. These actions echo China’s previous pattern of converting what were originally weather-monitoring stations in the South China Sea into military installations.⁸¹

Therefore, a more appropriate approach would be to maintain the overall size of the USFK while restructuring its current Army-centric composition—centered around the Eighth Army—and gradually increasing the proportion of naval and air forces equipped with enhanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. This strategy would allow Washington to simultaneously pursue three objectives: (1) maintaining robust extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula; (2) checking

China’s pursuit of regional hegemony; and (3) reassuring Seoul of Washington’s unwavering commitment. Furthermore, by enabling USFK to assume multiple missions that counter both North Korea and China simultaneously, this approach would also contribute to the Trump administration’s purported pursuit of greater strategic flexibility for USFK.⁸² ●

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Acknowledgments: *The author would like to thank Mark Bell, Matthew Fuhrmann, Jamie Kwong, Rohan Mukherjee, Lauren Sukin, the participants of the 2024 LSE Conference on “US Nuclear Strategy in a Changing Indo-Pacific,” the editors, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the article.*

80 Choe Sang-Hun, “China Calls Them Fish Farms. South Korea Fears They Have Another Use,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/24/world/asia/china-south-korea-sea-dispute.html>; Roh Sukjo, “[단독] 서해 구조물에 온누리호 접근하자 중 합정 등 5척이 둘러쌌다” [(Exclusive) When the Onnuri Vessel Approached the West Sea Structures, Five Chinese Vessels Surrounded It], *Chosun Ilbo*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/politics/diplomacy-defense/2025/06/27/17RHSNQCOFFS3EFNPXTMPVUIOA/>.

81 Jennifer Jun and Victor Cha, “Chinese Platforms in the Yellow Sea’s South Korea-China PMZ,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 23, 2025, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/chinese-platforms-in-the-yellow-seas-south-korea-china-pmz/>.

82 Song Sang-ho, “(News Focus) USFK’s Strategic Flexibility Issue Resurfaces as Pentagon Focuses on Deterring China,” *Yonhap News*, May 15, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250515000251315>.