

# THE REALIGNMENT OF STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR COMBINED REGIONAL DETERRENCE

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The US-ROK-Japan strategic partnership sends an important message across the globe as the bastion of the liberal democracy in the Northeast Asia. The strategic triangle shares moments of historical discordances and harmony in the past. The recent anxiety over the difference of national priorities centering the North Korean security dilemma and economic trade between the Republic of Korea and Japan exactly exemplifies a discordant instance. With the Republic of Korea as a mediator, the denuclearization negotiations between the United States and North Korea remain an entanglement that provides both the opportunity and adversity for the region. In response to this frequently changing regional security environment, the partners use various political and economic assets to maintain the regional balance of power and project their capabilities in hopes of demonstrating the resolve and engaging others to open up for negotiations. Recent international and domestic political developments in each state influenced the strategic decoupling of the triangle. A rupture within the triangle emerged when the national priorities clashed and could no longer stay aligned. The strategic decoupling also resulted in the misperceptions of others' strategic developments regarding military reform and advancements. While the concept of deterrence is openly discussed and commonly accepted, the

implementation of deterrence strategy can be perceived differently among the three states.

## **ROK's Defense Reform 2.0 and Self-Reliant Strategy**

The Ministry of National Defense's [2018 Defense White Paper](#) defined the ROK's national security goal as "a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula" and outlined its national defense objectives as "protecting the nation from external military threats and attack", "supporting a peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula", and "contributing to regional stability and world peace".

In achieving the national defense objectives, [a self-reliant national defense](#) was emphasized and led to an extensive military reform. The [Defense Reform 2.0](#) aims to "build an innovative, creative, 'elite and advanced strong force' by transforming the command structure that is "capable of executing integrated, offensive operations in an informatized, high-tech network-focused environment suitable for future warfare." This pertains to resizing and equipping the military with the strategic, operational and tactical assets including mechanized equipment, multiple rocket launcher systems and enhanced C4ISR (Command, Control, Communication, Computer, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) equipment.

The Republic of Korea's 4D (Detection, Disruption, Destruction and Defense) Operational Concept, a concept for comprehensive counter-missile operations, is an expansion of previously conceptualized Korea Air and Missile Defense, a multi-layered defense system for missile interception. As there is only a single battery of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense deployed in Seongju, Korea, ROK Air Force strives to develop the KAMD system for deployment as soon as possible. Through force development including command restructuring and technological advancements, the Ministry of National Defense prepares for the wartime operational control transition in order to have a self-reliant defense against omnidirectional security threats, including the North Korean nuclear threat.

## United States Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Defense Department's [Indo-Pacific Strategy Report](#) centers on a vision for preserving “a free and open Indo-Pacific”. The report describes the People’s Republic of China as a revisionist power due to its military modernization and coercive actions through “political warfare, disinformation, A2/AD networks, subversion and economic leverage,” while it continues to label the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as a rogue state. The revisionist actions of China inherently clash in interest with the “adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight” and “peace through strength by rebuilding the military”.

In enhancing the balances of power and advancing the international order, the defense strategy emphasizes a process of preparing, partnering and promoting a networked region. Besides advancing the defense capacity and capability in the region, the strategy calls for increased ISR capabilities and multi-domain operations. It also intends for the security partners “to shoulder a fair share of the burden of responsibility to protect against common threats.” The foreign military sales as the first instrument of resort in effort to maintain alliances have been effective in providing remedy for the allies in exchange for increased shared of burden. Taking an advantage of this, the Republic of Korea will continue to [purchase additional F-35 variants](#) to replace its outdated F-16s.

A shared security in the Indo-Pacific through the promotion of a networked region remains a challenge with different national priorities and uneasy interoperability and coordination among the regional allies. The expansion of the hub-and-spokes approach to a regional network of alliances through bilateral and multilateral arrangements has been fruitful. Still, the divergence of the national priorities, political agenda of each leadership and public opinion dimmed a shadow on the bilateral relations when alliance management matters. The [quasi-alliance](#) between the ROK and Japan requires an unwavering commitment from the United States.

## Strategic Realignment

ROK’s recent inaction to renew the General Sharing of Military Information in response to Japan’s export control added onto the strategic uncertainties that already exist. In spite of Seoul’s debate on GSOMIA as a non-necessity, the ROK’s Ministry of National Defense recently required further [intelligence on recent North Korea’s missile test](#). The political and economic tensions between the ROK and Japan may contribute to a number of uncertainties, but the strategic triangle is nevertheless necessary and remains a strong force of deterrence in the region. The strategic priorities of partners may be realigned for increased partnership and coordination among the security partners.

The strategic triangle concerns over North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests against the United Nations sanctions. It also has a growing concern for the impact of new technologies in the security environment in the region. The difference in perceptions of the strategic environment, however, had born strategic decoupling. Seoul troubles over détente and self-reliant policies. Tokyo focuses on the protection of its citizens from the North Korea’s security threats including [North Korea’s abductions of its citizens](#). Washington commits to maintaining the rule-based international order and preserving networked region to have an effective deterrence against any threat to the international order.

A dilemma on the combined deterrence due to strategic decoupling can be addressed without having to realign the national priorities and with the realignment of economic policies and political assurances. Though East Asian partners have become more export-driven economies and have successfully grown their economies in the past decades, the recent [economic growths](#) of ROK and Japan show the least promise with 2.7% and 0.8%, respectively, in 2018 due to the global recession. Likewise, the “America First” policy of the United States has yet to show its impact on its economy. The reluctance to promote regional trade and network the region with economic ties left the countries to seek economic growth through other means. This has also led to the ROK-Japan economic tension and its spillover to the [ROK’s inaction on GSOMIA](#).

The challenge lies in enclosing the economic gap among the triangle in a strategic environment where the US-China strategic competition has the greatest impact on the region. “[China’s growing global economic influence](#)” has considerable implications on the United States and its partners. The incomplete transformation into a free-market driven economy and lack of regulations bare challenges, such as the theft of high-valued intellectual properties, to the economic interests of the triangle. The externalities, such as trade restrictions and export control, in the trade can also be considered as an obstacle and move onto a freer trade among the partners. The use of economic instrument for the realignment of regional strategies can be useful in addressing current strategic decoupling.

### **Conclusion**

Securing the economic ties can ensure the partners to put their national sentiments and historical learning behind and prioritize their national strategies centered on network-based economic growth and, eventually, regional security. In a network-based region, enhanced alliance coordination can be an opportunity for stronger economic and security ties. In such strategic environment, the partners can engage in trilateral exchanges to discuss the deterrence at the policy level and nurture a common understanding on deterrence to eventually develop a combined regional deterrence. In this regard, the partners’ common assumption on the feasibility of “NATO-like” deterrence in the Northeast Asia can be explored. After all, [NATO’s deterrence mechanism](#) entails the forward deployment of missile defense systems and partners’ burden sharing.

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