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Introduction

Pacific Forum has for decades relied on a combination of experienced senior analysts and up-and-coming experts to provide analysis that is both seasoned and fresh. This volume is no exception, as our Senior Adjunct Fellow Paul Goldstein leads off by analyzing the impact of the major foreign policy conflagration of 2026 (so far)—the US-Israel-Iran conflict, which has already impacted the world economy and whose ripple effects may permanently alter the US-China rivalry. From there, economist Albertus Siagian discusses the effects of something many of Asia's major players can relate to—national division—and its impact on living standards in the largest island in the Pacific: New Guinea.

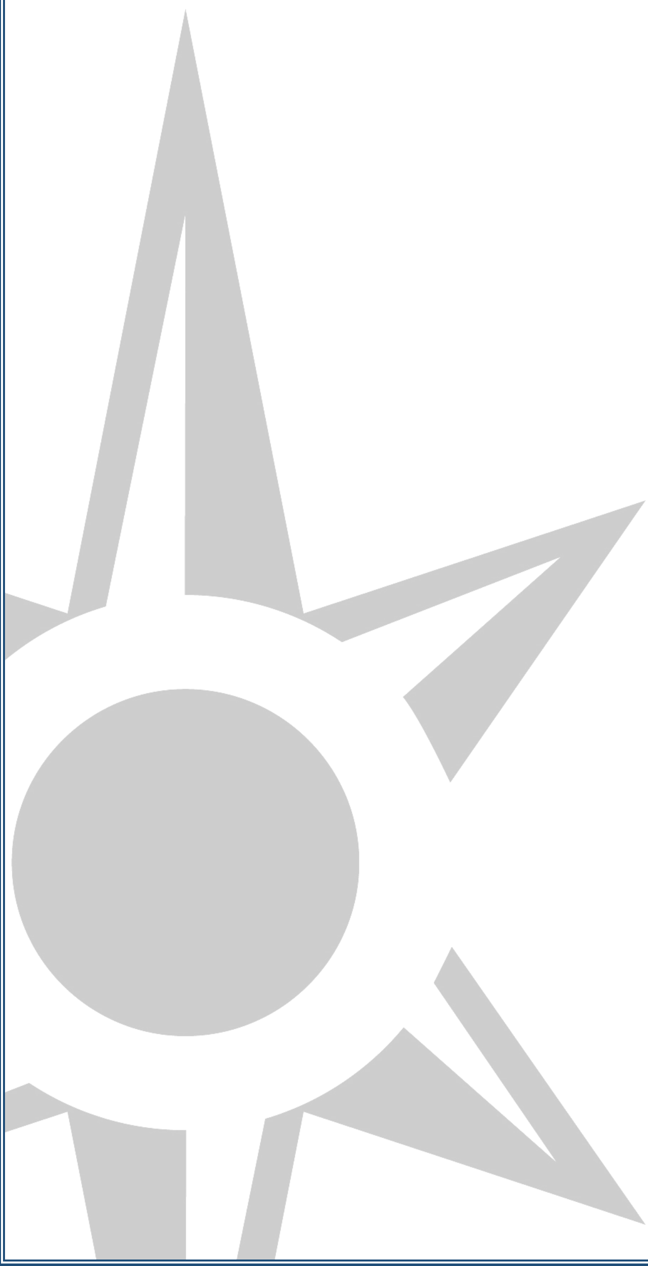
Nonresident James A. Kelly Fellows Jinwon Lee and Kinnidie White share their analysis on, respectively, the evolution of US-ROK alliance dynamics and the scope of North Korean information operations. Lastly, participants in Pacific Forum's internships program – Noémie Lepetit, Anaïs Matte, and Jimin Jeong—contribute emerging policy research on the topics of nuclear weapon-free treaties, NATO's evolving relationship with Indo-Pacific partners, and the impact of labor migration.

Together, they demonstrate our commitment to comprehensive security analysis for the Indo-Pacific, making use of both the senior and rising analysts in our expansive network.

Rob York
Director for Regional Affairs
Pacific Forum International

The Strait of Hormuz and the Global Power Rebalance

By
Paul Goldstein



Executive Summary

Paul Goldstein

The US–Israeli confrontation with Iran has entered a new phase, evolving into a multi-front regional crisis even as direct US and Israeli strikes inside Iran have ceased. The conflict's active fronts now center on Israel's intensified campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, persistent clashes along the northern border, and a potential widening set of engagements involving Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea corridor. These dynamics have produced sharply divergent assessments in Washington.

Some analysts warn that the United States risks being drawn into a prolonged and diffuse regional entanglement, with sustained naval deployments, air-defense operations, and militia attacks on US positions raising concerns about escalation, regional instability, humanitarian impact, and the diversion of US attention and resources from the critical Indo-Pacific priorities.

The administration continues to insist that the situation remains manageable and that US objectives are still within reach.

Diplomacy has become increasingly active across the region. Saudi Arabia has launched a high-level initiative aimed at preventing further spillover and exploring conditions for de-escalation. Qatar and Oman have continued their longstanding intermediary roles with Tehran, maintaining channels that Washington views as essential to preventing further escalation. Pakistan, which has been engaged in quiet regional diplomacy for some time, remains an important behind-the-scenes actor, leveraging its relationships with both Gulf partners and Iran to encourage restraint and preserve space for negotiation.

China, following its recent regional summit, has sought to reinforce stability rather than explicitly push for de-escalation, using its ties with Iran and key Gulf states to discourage actions that could threaten regional economic and security interests.

Inside Iran, the political landscape has hardened. A faction led by Interior Minister General Ahmad Vahidi has gained prominence, pressing for a more confrontational posture and arguing that negotiations under current conditions would signal weakness. This internal dynamic complicates regional diplomacy, as Tehran's willingness to engage remains constrained by domestic political pressures and the volatility of the situation in Lebanon.

Political tensions between Washington and Jerusalem add another layer of complexity. President Trump's contentious May 19 call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu underscored differences over the strategic direction of the conflict, particularly regarding expectations for Israel's campaign in Lebanon and the broader regional implications. The exchange, widely reported in the press, highlights a gap between Israeli ambitions and US assessments, reinforcing the strategic and political uncertainties shaping the conflict's trajectory.

I. Introduction

The maritime security crisis in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz is impacting both regional stability and global geopolitical developments, but it has also become the focal point in a wider confrontation. In short, the crisis has now become an integral part of the broader US-China strategic competition.[1]

This broader strategic issue arises at a time when both the US and Iran have conducted military operations that could break their fragile ceasefire. Even though the US Navy successfully sunk seven Iranian speedboats, President Trump has reiterated the ceasefire framework remains intact while he continues to pursue a diplomatic agreement.[2]

Certain developments have occurred that could end the conflict:

- Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that "Epic Fury" is over. This statement underscores the moves Trump has made that includes declaring "Project Freedom" has been suspended even as the blockade remains in place.[3]

- Pakistan's continued negotiating effort has produced a one-page memorandum of understanding, in which both countries end the blockade, the US removes sanctions, and Iran commits to a 15-year moratorium on uranium enrichment.

However, Iranian strikes, including against UAE port infrastructure and commercial shipping underscored that Tehran is still willing to escalate in real time and impose costs on its neighbors even as the broader confrontation intensifies.[4]

This represents a multilayered situation, more like overlapping planes than a single front, with pressure building in some areas and limited cooperation appearing in others. The US, Iran, Israel, and China are not moving along one straight line; they are operating on different layers that intersect at unpredictable angles. Some layers—such as covert strikes, maritime tensions, and competing regional agendas—pull toward confrontation, while others create narrow openings for coordination, such as shared interest in keeping the Strait of Hormuz open or avoiding a full regional collapse.[5]

These layers do not align neatly, and that misalignment is what makes the moment so volatile: escalation can come from one layer even as another shows signs of temporary alignment or quiet backchannel contact. The geometry of the crisis is uneven, stacked, and constantly shifting, which is why the situation remains unstable and interdependent at the same time.

Current clear objectives are:

- The US is focused on maintaining freedom of navigation and limiting Iranian coercion and a strategic agreement with Iran. A diplomatic agreement ending the conflict is part of the calculus.

- Iran is using maritime pressure to break sanctions, assert regional leverage, and target American aligned Gulf State countries—but potentially agreeing to cease the war.[6]

- Israel wants to further weaken Iran's military capacity and ultimately create conditions that lead to regime change while pursuing a Gaza-like strategy in southern Lebanon.[7]

- China protects its energy lifeline while capitalizing on US distraction to expand its influence. Still, China and the US might align

[1] Doshi, Rush, Heidi E. Crebo-Rediker, David M. Hart, McGuire Chris, and Sacks David. "At the Trump-Xi Summit, China Will Have the Upper Hand." May 10, 2026. https://www.cfr.org/articles/at-the-trump-xi-summit-china-will-have-the-upper-hand.

[2] Times of Israel. *In Tense Call, Vance Knocked PM for Overselling Likelihood of Iran Regime Change — Report*. March 27, 2026. https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-tense-call-vance-knocked-pm-for-overselling-iran-regime-change-likelihood-report/.

[3] "Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks to Press." *United States Department of State*, n.d. Accessed May 27, 2026. https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/03/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-remarks-to-press-8/.

[4] Luckenbaugh, Josh. *Iranian Drone Attacks Cause Major Damage Despite High Interception Rates*. March 24, 2026. https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2026/3/24/iranian-drone-attacks-cause-major-damage-despite-high-interception-rates.

[5] Fabian, Emanuel. *US Said to Strike Iran's Natanz Enrichment Site, IDF Hits Missile Production Sites*. March 21, 2026. https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-said-to-strike-irans-natanz-enrichment-site-idf-hits-missile-production-sites/.

[6] Audrey, Decker. "General Atomics 'Nears Deal' to Sell Anti-Missile Pod for Its Reaper Drones, Company Says." *Defense One*, Nov. 14, 2023. https://www.defenseone.com/business/2023/11/general-atomics-nears-deal-sell-anti-missile-pod-its-reaper-drones-company-says/392001/.

[7] Fabian, Emanuel, and Diana Bletter. *IDF Hammers Iranian Weapons Production Sites; Iran Fires Salvos of Missiles at South*. March 30, 2026. https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-hammers-iranian-weapons-production-sites-iran-files-salvos-of-missiles-at-south/.

on opening up the Strait of Hormuz.

- Though the situation remains unsettled and fluid, as the great-power rivalry between the US and China reaches a critical inflection point, there are hopeful signs that China could pressure Iran to open the Strait of Hormuz. With that being said, the Iranian Foreign Minister traveled to China for talks about ending the conflict as China prepares to receive Trump next week.

II. Continued Operations and Israel's Objectives

Against this backdrop, the US's recent ability to move two American naval vessels through the Strait of Hormuz without interference was a significant demonstration of operational control and intelligence dominance. It showed that while Iran can harass and target regional and commercial actors, it remains unwilling (or unable) to directly challenge US warships operating under the new pathway architecture. The contrast between Iran's opportunistic targeting of softer regional and commercial assets and its avoidance of direct confrontation with US naval forces highlights the asymmetry at the heart of the current standoff:[8]

- Tehran can impose friction, but it cannot dictate outcomes.

- Washington can maintain access, but it cannot restore normalcy.

Meanwhile, the Netanyahu government has been sending mixed signals on the extent of their knowledge of US actions and whether the US and Israel are coordinating the next moves.

Trump has been attempting to constrain Israeli actions, but the new foreign intelligence and internal security directors, Roman Gofman (Mossad) and David Zini (Shin Bet), could create a potential point of US-Israel tension as both men identify with a harder-line Religious Zionist outlook. Their worldview emphasizes maximal pressure on Iran, reduced tolerance for Hezbollah's entrenchment in Lebanon, and a belief that Israel must act decisively even when US preferences lean toward restraint.[9] Gofman is expected to push Mossad toward more aggressive covert activity against Iran's nuclear and military networks, while Zini's approach points to a tougher internal and northern-front security posture.[10] Both appointments signal a shift toward a more assertive, and willing to pursue actions with a higher chance of escalation or unintended consequences. The result is an Israel that remains strategically aligned with the US but is increasingly prepared to diverge tactically when it believes its core security interests are at stake.

III. Project Freedom: Operations in Hormuz

Project Freedom emerged from Pentagon and US Navy planners, who developed it as part of a broader set of maritime risk-mitigation options. It is part of the strategic sequencing of US policy, starting with Epic Fury and its economic warfare component, Economic Fury. Project Freedom was presented to the White House as a way to prevent a total collapse of maritime access while avoiding a direct confrontation. The guidance-and-pathway system is resource-intensive and inherently limited—it protects only those vessels that choose to operate within its structure—but it has succeeded in preventing a complete shutdown of the Strait. Still, Project Freedom has not restored normal traffic. Insurers continue to classify the Strait as a high-risk zone, and most commercial shipping companies have opted to reroute rather than rely on the US pathway. The collapse of normal traffic through Hormuz has forced global shipping into a patchwork of alternative routes, none of which fully compensate for the loss of the world's most important energy chokepoint:

- The Cape of Good Hope has become the primary fallback, adding weeks to transit times and significantly increasing costs.

- Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline and the UAE's Fujairah line provide partial relief, but together they can move only a fraction

[8] Billard, Robert. "North Korea's Rogue Strategic Pipeline Arming Iran's War Effort: Exclusive Interview." Military.Com, March 24, 2026. https://www.military.com/feature/2026/03/24/north-koreas-rogue-strategic-pipeline-arming-irans-war-effort.html.

[9] Lafavor, Lydia, Bradley Bowman, and Cameron McMillan. "Analysis: A Greatly Expanded Arsenal Means This Is Not the Hezbollah of 2006." *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 9, 2024. https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/07/analysis-a-greatly-expanded-arsenal-means-this-is-not-the-hezbollah-of-2006.php.

[10] Tov, Michael Hauser. "Ex-Mossad Head Says Israel Operates inside Iran, Saudi Crown Prince Open to Peace with Israel." Middle East News. *Haaretz*, November 27, 2025. https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2025-11-27/ty-article/.premium/ex-mossad-head-says-israel-operates-inside-iran-saudi-crown-prince-open-to-normalization/0000019a-c5a7-d824-ad9e-efff7b3f0000.

of the twenty million barrels per day that normally transit Hormuz.

- The Red Sea corridor, once a vital artery, has become unreliable due to persistent attacks near the Bab el-Mandeb, forcing shippers to choose between risk and delay.

The global system has adapted, but at a price: longer routes, higher costs, and a reshaping of trade flows that reflects the enduring instability of the Gulf. Iran has adapted as well.[11] The guidance-and-pathway system does not alter Tehran's strategic calculus. Iran retains the ability to threaten shipping through drones, mines, and fast-attack craft, and it can shift pressure to unescorted vessels, the Gulf of Oman, or other domains entirely. Iran's leadership is under acute internal strain: economic pressure, security breaches, and political fragmentation have created a volatile environment in which displays of resolve serve both strategic and internal purposes. Cyber operations, proxy activity, and targeted harassment continue at a low but persistent level, calibrated to impose costs without triggering a direct US response.

IV. Iran's Internal Dynamics

Iran's internal landscape is now one of the most consequential variables in the crisis. The regime is experiencing its most severe internal pressures since the 2019 protests, though the nature of the strain has shifted. Rather than mass demonstrations, the challenge now comes from elite fragmentation, institutional distrust, and a population exhausted by economic decline and political repression.[12] The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is divided between factions advocating calibrated escalation and those urging restraint. The Quds Force, still recovering from leadership disruptions and operational setbacks, argues that Iran must demonstrate strength to maintain deterrence and preserve its regional networks. Meanwhile, elements within the Basij and domestic security services warn that further escalation risks provoking unrest at home, where inflation, unemployment, and currency collapse have eroded public patience. The Supreme Leader's circle is increasingly preoccupied with succession politics. The new Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei's health remains a subject of speculation, with reports describing his condition as: "He reportedly suffered severe facial burns/disfigurement, significant leg injuries necessitating potential prosthetic limb replacement, and underwent multiple surgeries." As a result of the poor health of the new Ayatollah, senior IRGC commanders such as Ahmad Vahidi, Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, and Yahya Rahim Safavi are now the central power brokers in Tehran, accelerating the shift of authority away from the clerical establishment and toward the military. Their rise has intensified longstanding factional tensions: the current power vacuum has sharpened competition among political elites, and reports indicate growing friction between the IRGC and other senior leaders. The IRGC is pressing for a harder foreign-policy line and tighter internal control, moves that have already undermined any remaining prospects for even limited dialogue with the US side.

Inside Iran, the IRGC's dominance has stripped away much of the system's "republican" façade. The political structure is moving toward a military-led state rather than a clerical one. President Masoud Pezeshkian appears increasingly sidelined, with indications that he has been denied full access to the injured Supreme Leader. In the background, IRGC generals are using the crisis to consolidate authority, reducing the Supreme Leader to a symbolic figure while they take control of day-to-day decision-making. The shift is steady, deliberate, and unmistakable: Iran is being run by its security apparatus, not its elected officials or religious hierarchy.

The Trump administration is employing a form of economic warfare, known as "Economic Fury," and the result has increased the pressure on the governing elite. Sanctions have constricted revenue streams, and the maritime crisis has disrupted Iran's ability to export oil through covert channels. Smuggling networks have become more important, but also more vulnerable to interdiction. The government's attempts to stabilize the currency have failed, and public frustration is rising. While the regime retains coercive capacity, its legitimacy is eroding, and its margin for error is shrinking.

Iran's regional proxies—Hezbollah, the Houthis, and

[11] Levaton, Stav. *Mossad Chief Says Agency's Operations Penetrated 'Core' of Iran, Lebanon Secrets*. April 28, 2026. https://www.timesofisrael.com/mossad-chief-says-agencys-operations-penetrated-core-of-iran-lebanon-secrets/.

[12] Williams, Stuart. *Reza Pahlavi: Iran's Ex-Crown Prince Dreaming of Homecoming - AL-MONITOR: The Middle East's Leading Independent News Source since 2012*. Jan 12, 2026. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/01/reza-pahlavi-irans-ex-crown-prince-dreaming-homecoming.

various Iraqi militias—are also under strain. They face resource shortages, internal dissent, and pressure from local populations who resent being drawn into the war between the US and Iran. Tehran must balance the need to maintain these networks with the risk that overuse could provoke a regional backlash or invite direct US retaliation. In this environment, Iran's strategy is one of calibrated persistence. It seeks to impose costs on the US and its partners, maintain pressure on Israel, and preserve its regional influence—all while avoiding a war that could expose its vulnerabilities and destabilize the regime. This internal fragility is a central driver of Iran's behavior in the Strait of Hormuz and beyond.

V. China Gulf's Strategy

China's role in the crisis is subtle but increasingly significant. Beijing is not a direct participant in the confrontation, but it is a strategic beneficiary of prolonged US entanglement in the Middle East. China's Gulf strategy is built on three pillars:

- Energy security is the paramount pillar. China imports more than 40% of its crude oil from the Gulf, and the stability of the Strait of Hormuz is essential to its economy. Beijing has invested heavily in long-term supply contracts with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Iraq. It has also expanded its strategic petroleum reserves to buffer against disruptions. Yet China's dependence on the Strait makes it vulnerable, and Beijing is acutely aware that US-Iran tensions threaten its energy lifeline.[13]

- Economic integration is the second pillar. China has positioned itself as the Gulf's primary economic partner through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has invested in ports, industrial zones, telecommunications infrastructure, and renewable energy projects across the region. These investments give China leverage and influence without requiring a military footprint. Gulf states, seeking to diversify their economies and hedge against US unpredictability, have welcomed Chinese capital.

- Strategic hedging is the third pillar. China maintains cordial relations with all major actors in the region—Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and even Turkey. This allows Beijing to position itself as a neutral economic partner rather than a security guarantor. It avoids entanglement in regional conflicts while benefiting from US overextension. Beijing's mediation of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in 2023 was a symbolic demonstration of its growing diplomatic influence.

China has no interest in a full-scale war in the Gulf, which would threaten energy flows and destabilize global markets. But it does benefit from a US that is distracted and resource-burdened. Beijing's strategy is to deepen economic ties, expand its influence, and position itself as a longterm partner to Gulf states that are increasingly uncertain about US staying power. In private, regional officials express concern that Washington's focus on China could accelerate a gradual shift in the regional balance, with the US providing security and China providing capital—an arrangement that works in the short term but raises questions about leverage and alignment over time.

Importantly, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on May 6. The meeting produced a few meaningful but limited outcomes. China pushed Tehran to signal flexibility on reopening the Strait of Hormuz, and Araghchi publicly stated that resolving the issue "as soon as possible" was now achievable—language clearly shaped for next week's Trump-Xi summit. Beijing also reaffirmed its standard nuclear message, praising Iran's pledge not to pursue weapons while defending its right to peaceful nuclear energy, a stance that reassures Tehran of continued diplomatic cover.

The visit itself underscored that China initiated the meeting, a reminder of Iran's dependence on Chinese economic and political support. For Beijing, the meeting showcased engagement without committing to any concrete initiative; for Tehran, it preserved Chinese backing while offering a controlled signal of openness on the strait. The encounter did not shift the trajectory of the conflict, but it positioned China to claim relevance in whatever negotiations come next.

VI. US Maritime Posture

The US maritime posture in the Gulf has undergone a significant transformation. The shift from a

[13] *The Japan Times*. "Japan to Carefully Consider Minesweeping in Strait of Hormuz." March 26, 2026. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2026/03/26/japan/japan-sdf-hormuz-minesweeping-consider/.

traditional escort model to a guidance and pathway system reflects both operational necessity and strategic recalibration. The US seeks to maintain freedom of navigation without becoming trapped in an open-ended maritime war with Iran.

The guidance-and-pathway system is built on layered surveillance, intelligence fusion, and selective presence. US naval assets provide overwatch, but they do not accompany every vessel. Instead, they monitor designated corridors, respond to threats, and coordinate with regional partners. This approach reduces the burden on US forces while maintaining a credible deterrent.

ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) assets are central to this posture. Drones, maritime patrol aircraft, satellites, and signals intelligence platforms provide realtime situational awareness. This allows the USs to detect Iranian activity, track vessels, and respond quickly to emerging threats. The integration of ISR with regional partners enhances coverage and reduces blind spots.

The US relies on a network of bases in Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman to support its operations. These bases provide maintenance, resupply, and command-and-control capabilities. They also serve as hubs for Epic Fury, the rapid-response architecture designed to counter Iranian missile and drone activity. Hence, the targeting of the UAE is aimed at demonstrating Iran's ability to weaken the US tactical position.

The implementation of Project Freedom is an attempt to outflank Iranian tactical operations. Moreover, as implemented it provides a strategic framework for shifting the global support for the US effort to open the Strait of Hormuz. It also integrates maritime security, economic pressure, and diplomatic engagement into a cohesive approach. The goal is to contain Iran without escalating into a regional war. The guidance-and-pathway system is a key component, allowing the US to maintain a presence without overcommitting.

This posture reflects the broader strategic context of the US-China strategic challenge. The administration's view of China as the primary strategic competitor also means that the US and China can potentially cooperate in the Persian Gulf.
The US requirements for sustaining its defense industrial base means preserving resources, attention, and political capital for the Indo-Pacific. Every additional deployment to the Middle East is weighed against the perceived need to maintain flexibility for a potential crisis involving Taiwan, the South China Sea, or Chinese economic coercion.

VII. Conclusion

Across the region, the confrontation is defined by a paradox: it is stable enough to persist, yet volatile enough to shift rapidly. The guidance-and-pathway system prevents collapse but does not restore normalcy. Iran can impose costs but cannot break the blockade. Israel has reestablished deterrence but not achieved its political aims for regime change. China is watching, hedging, and positioning itself for long-term advantage. The US seeks to contain the conflict without losing focus on its primary strategic competitor.

The result is a layered stalemate. The Strait of Hormuz remains constrained, the Red Sea remains contested, and the regional balance remains fragile. Confrontation continues, neither resolved nor escalated, but suspended in a state of managed instability—shaped as much by Washington's rivalry with Beijing as by its confrontation with Tehran.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Forgotten New Guinea Partition: Revisited from the Welfare Perspective

By
Albertus Siagian

Executive Summary

Albertus Siagian

The same people on the same island, then partitioned, then governed by two different countries. This happens on the largest island in the Asia Pacific region, New Guinea. Yet, how they now differ (or do not differ) in terms of welfare, proxied by income, has been very little researched, surprisingly almost hidden (or forgotten) in plain sight.

The original inhabitants of New Guinea are indigenous Papuans. Today, they live under either Indonesian governance (in the western half) or Papua New Guinean governance (in the eastern half), separated by an almost straight border along the 141st meridian east line. Whether indigenous Papuans are better off living "as part of a country" (like those in Western New Guinea or WNG) or living "as a country" (like those in Papua New Guinea or PNG) has been a debate. However, this debate is very often seen from the (geo)political lens, and less from the economic lens.

For the first time, using income data triangulation, this paper reveals whether the partition has brought an income difference between indigenous Papuans on the west and east sides. This is a novelty, given that any previous research attempts could not granularize the income data based on ethnicity for WNG, and this matters because a significant number of non-indigenous people also live in WNG.

In 2010-2011, which is the latest data available for WNG, about 44% of the indigenous Papuans in WNG had higher income than the average indigenous Papuans in PNG, around three times higher. They usually live in coastal regions. Meanwhile, about 56% of them had a lower income than the average indigenous Papuans in PNG, about three times smaller. They usually live in the interior regions. Therefore, on average, it is quite inconclusive to say that the partition brought an income difference between the two sides.

However, the data triangulation for the WNG (plus the literature review for the PNG) also reveals that indigenous Papuans in the interior regions are usually poorer than those living in coastal regions, and this is true for both halves. This paper provides several policy recommendations for improving the welfare of the indigenous Papuans, especially those in the hinterland regions.

Economies of scale matter. Many modern economic activities cannot be maintained if the market participants are just too few. It does not give enough financial justification to make self-sustaining private production, private consumption, and public-servicing facilities. And this matters in the context of New Guinea's geographically challenging mountainous hinterlands, where the population density in some locations is too small. And this is the key reason why the hinterlanders are poor in the first place.

All settlements in the hinterland should be identified based on their population density. The first group is those settlements with enough population density to achieve the economies of scale required to do modern economic activities. And the second group is settlements that do not surpass that scale requirement. The two governments' economic development policies should then be differentiated according to which group they are handling.

For the first group, the governments may freely provide clean power plants (like solar, wind, and hydro) to the hinterlanders. Electricity can be used for promoting productive activities there, such as pumping groundwater for agricultural irrigation, cattle raising, woodcraft machining, and others. The extra electricity from this vast hinterland can also be sold to the coastal cities. Later, these economic gains can be used to cover the plants' maintenance costs. The governments should also improve transport and telecommunication connectivity between them and the cities. This is to facilitate rural dwellers to market their local products more easily at a higher price to wealthier urban customers.

As for the second group, the governments may offer a chance for rural-to-urban resettlement. Rural dwellers should be offered an opportunity to voluntarily exchange their village assets (like land) for public housing (to be owned for free permanently) in the towns. Later, the government may re-manage these village assets (preferably for reforestation and selling carbon credits) to earn money, which can be used for two things. First, to recover the cost of building the public housing in the first place. Second, to recover the cost of reskilling those rural dwellers so that they can integrate themselves into the modern economy in those urban places.

In conclusion, the partition does not seem to create a significant income difference between indigenous Papuans on the two sides. And in the long term, whether the indigenous Papuans in the whole of New Guinea can be reunited remains an unrelenting (geo)political debate. However, in the short term, the two governments can at least opt to be united in terms of their economic approaches in improving the welfare (or income) of the island's native people.

Introduction

The Korean people were partitioned by external forces along the Military Demarcation Line and have remained divided since 1953. Under a different regime, South Koreans now enjoy a higher income per capita than their northern counterparts. With its more liberal and market-oriented economy, the South is more open to foreign capital (such as equity, skilled professionals, and technology), and this situation helps the South to make faster economic development. This story has stood as a famous example of what partition can bring about.

There is another example of a land effectively split down the middle, and it is surprisingly hidden (or forgotten) in plain sight. The largest island in the Asia-Pacific region, New Guinea, was partitioned by the Europeans in 1824. The western half of the island was administered by the Dutch until 1963, after which Indonesia took effective control in 1969.

Meanwhile, the British and the Germans ruled the eastern half until 1905. Then, the British handed their part over to Australia, and Australia seized the Germans' part during World War I. Finally, in 1975, Australia granted independence to Papua New Guinea (PNG).[1] Since then, indigenous Papuans (who are the original inhabitants of New Guinea) live under either Indonesian governance or Papua New Guinean governance, separated by an almost straight border along the 141st meridian east line.

Not only partitioned, but indigenous Papuans across the island also need economic improvement. As part of Indonesia, Western New Guinea (WNG) is nationally known as the least developed of the five main islands in Indonesia. And the eastern half, or PNG, also has the status of a lower-middle-income country, according to the World Bank. Both sides require attention.

Moreover, as part of Indonesia, Western New Guinea (WNG) has received migrants from other parts of the country without restriction.[2] The migration was even promoted during Indonesia's 32-year military regime as part of the transmigration program that aimed to make the population density even across Indonesia. After absorbing WNG in the 1960s, the Indonesian land territory expanded by 28%. Transmigration to sparsely inhabited WNG was seen as an opportunity to 'distribute population and economy' that had been so concentrated in Indonesia's Java.[3] Java, indeed, was one of the islands with the highest population densities in the world at that time.

Not only is WNG vast, but it also has abundant gold reserves, accessible mainly from its southern coastal areas. WNG also has one of the last tropical glaciers in the world, in contrast to the rest of equatorial archipelagic Indonesia, where the presence of snow is impossible. The acquisition of WNG thus gave a lot of economic and touristic opportunities to Indonesia.

However, Malay people's migration to WNG also means a clash of civilizations. It is the story about Muslim people with rice culture and a more modern economy coming to the land dominated by Christian indigenous Papuans with sago culture and a more tribal economy. And the centralized governance from Jakarta during the 32-year military regime means that indigenous Papuans in WNG often did not have full direct control over economic arrangements in their own land.[4]

Meanwhile, as an independent country, Papua New Guinea (PNG) fully controls its border and has a better grip on the economic arrangement in the eastern half of the island. Unlike their western counterparts, who are more connected to Asia (notably ASEAN states), the eastern population seems to be more connected to the Pacific region (notably Australia and Oceania).[5] Under these different socioeconomic arrangements, the

[1] Patrick Matbob & Evangelia Papoutsaki "'New Guinea: A Divided Island:' Papua New Guinea's Relationship with West Papua," presentation, 8th International Small Islands Conference, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada, June 6-9, 2022, https://www.researchbank.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/63483dc6-7d3b-4041-a6e3-4b9507f34c8d/content; Lachlan McNamee, "Settler Colonialism in New Guinea: Or Why Australia, not Indonesia, Set Papuans Free," *Department of Pacific Affairs*, 2024, https://researchmgt.monash.edu/ws/portalfiles/portal/619738885/619738841-oa.pdf.

[2] Jim Elmslie, "Comprehending West Papua: Demographic Transition and the 2010 Indonesian Census," in *Comprehending West Papua*, edited by Peter King, Jim Elmslie, & Camellia Webb-Gannon (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney, 2011), 358-368.

[3] Riedno Graal Taliawo, "The Indonesianization of West Papua: Development of Indonesia's Attitudes and Policies towards West Papua and the Dynamics of the Papua Freedom Movement," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022): 71-83, https://al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jhsss/article/view/3318.

[4] Taliawo, "The Indonesianization of West Papua."

[5] Barbara Age, "Papua New Guinea's Diplomacy in Managing Neighbourly Cooperation: A Personal Reflection," *Department of Pacific Affairs*, April 4, 2025, https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/33886acc-b8cb-4d7d-bda1-0676d1a485e3/content; Claudia C. Reyoet et al., "Assessing Papua

indigenous Papuans on the two sides of the island may have different incomes. Surprisingly, how they differ has not been deeply researched so far.

Social studies on New Guinea mostly revolve around its past exploration history and tribal anthropology. Beyond that, academia gravitates toward the controversy of WNG's absorption into Indonesia, the Indonesian military's alleged human rights violations there, Indonesia's transmigration impact on WNG's demographic transition, and the natural resource exploitation on both sides of the island by the private sector.[6] There has been minimal research on how the welfare of the indigenous Papuans on both sides of the island may go differently under different governance, as primarily measured by income.

It is true that income is certainly not a universal metric for measuring someone's welfare. However, income is still a crucial enabler of higher welfare in someone's life. The traditional life of the indigenous Papuans really depends on what nature offers to them. But what nature offers to them is limited. And consequently, what these limited things can be traded for (via a barter system) will also be limited. The only liberation comes when they move to a more widely acceptable medium of exchange, which is modern money. By collecting and using money, they have more options in terms of whom they can trade with and what they can trade, in their effort to expand their economic freedom. Thus, having more money (or simply having more income) is a crucial, but not sole, indicator of welfare. Another reason is that income data is more available than other 'welfare' indicators.

One study from the Pacific Institute of Public Policy (PIPP) tried to research this income gap as it sought to understand how much indigenous Papuans in WNG have economically progressed under Indonesian governance.[7] In addition, that study tried to compare it with the development of the Papuans in PNG. The study hypothesized that there had been economic inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous people in WNG. This inequality was also mentioned briefly by another study.[8] The PIPP study did not, however, have the income figures that were specifically tied to the indigenous Papuans in WNG; thus, the comparison to PNG's income might be biased if its real intention was to compare the indigenous Papuans of both sides of the island.

Whether indigenous Papuans are better off living "as part of a country" (like those in the western half) or living "as a country" (like those in the eastern half) has been a debate mostly seen from the (geo)political lens and less from the economic lens. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate whether indigenous Papuans on the two sides of New Guinea have different welfare (proxied by income), given that they live under different national governance. This paper will also propose some policy recommendations based on the findings.

Outsmarting Papuan Income Data Scarcity as a Crucial Step

Comparing the income of indigenous Papuans on each side of New Guinea requires first knowing the income of indigenous Papuans on either side, and such data is hard to come by. The official data from the statistics bureaus of the two countries (PNG and Indonesia) never differentiates incomes based on ethnicity. From the PNG side, perhaps that feels unnecessary, as the population in the eastern half of the island is largely indigenous. Meanwhile, to maintain social harmony in the pluralistic Indonesian society, the Indonesian Statistics Bureau keeps a political tradition of not producing and publishing its income data by ethnicity, including in WNG.

For the indigenous income data in PNG, this paper assumes that the PNG income data is already specifically for indigenous Papuans, given that the population is largely indigenous. Admittedly, this

New Guinea's Bid for ASEAN Membership: A Constructivist View," *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 5, no. 2 (2025): 151-169, https://ejournal.uncen.ac.id/index.php/PJDIR/article/view/4923.

[6] Socratez Sofyan Yoman, "The Injustice and Historical Falsehood of Papuan Integration into Indonesia through the Act of Free Choice, 1969," in *Comprehending West Papua*, edited by Peter King, Jim Elmslie, & Camellia Webb-Gannon (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney, 2011), 116-128; Bobby Anderson, *Papua's Insecurity: State Failure in the Indonesian Periphery* (East-West Center, 2015), https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/065f1d96-f9b7-4718-8763-f94c42b2bcbd/content; McNamee, "Settler Colonialism in New Guinea."; Muhnizar Siagian, "Four Decades of Papuan Diaspora Campaigning for Papuan Independence in the Pacific Region," *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 5, no. 1 (2025): 65-85, https://ejournal.uncen.ac.id/index.php/PJDIR/article/view/4313; Budi Hernawan, "Torture in Papua: A Spectacle of Dialectics of the Abject and the Sovereign," in *Comprehending West Papua*, edited by Peter King, Jim Elmslie, & Camellia Webb-Gannon (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney, 2011), 339-357; Anderson, *Papua's Insecurity*; McNamee, "Settler Colonialism in New Guinea."; Siagian. "Four Decades of Papuan Diaspora Campaigning."; Elmslie, "Comprehending West Papua: Demographic Transition."; McNamee, "Settler Colonialism in New Guinea."; Matbob and Papoutsaki, "'New *Guinea: A Divided Island.*'"

[7] Jim Elmslie, "Economic and Social Indicators of West Papua," *Pacific Institute of Public Policy*, June 19, 2013, https://pacificpolicy.org/2013/06/economic-and-social-indicators-in-west-papua/.

[8] Taliawo, "The Indonesianization of West Papua."

assumption is somewhat unfair, as some PNG citizens might be non-indigenous Papuans.
However, given the PNG demographic data limitations, this is the most standard assumption on which this paper could rely. Meanwhile, for the indigenous income data in WNG, this paper requires a certain methodology, as explained below.

The total income of the WNG (GDP_{WNG}) is generated by the population in WNG (P_{WNG}), where this population is the sum of the indigenous (I_{WNG}) and non-indigenous peoples (NI_{WNG}) in WNG. But how much income in WNG is generated by the indigenous people alone (GDP^{I}_{WNG})? The first possible approach is to find the proportion of indigenous people in the WNG population first (that is I_{WNG}/P_{WNG}) and multiply this ratio by GDP_{WNG}.

$$GDP^{I}_{WNG} = \frac{I_{WNG}}{P_{WNG}} \times GDP_{WNG}$$

Further, because the total income of WNG is also the summation of the incomes of WNG's cities or regencies ($GDP_{sub-WNG}$), then it can be formulated as below.

$$GDP^{I}_{WNG} = \frac{I_{WNG}}{P_{WNG}} \times \sum GDP_{sub-WNG}$$

How much income per capita do the indigenous people in WNG have? Simplifying the above forumula, one would find the following:

$$GDP\ per\ capita\ of\ indigenous\ WNG = \frac{GDP^{I}_{WNG}}{I_{WNG}} = \left(\frac{I_{WNG}}{P_{WNG}} \times \sum GDP_{sub-WNG}\right) \times \frac{1}{I_{WNG}}$$

$$GDP\ per\ capita\ of\ indigenous\ WNG = \frac{GDP^{I}_{WNG}}{I_{WNG}} = \frac{1}{P_{WNG}} \times \sum GDP_{sub-WNG}$$

$$GDP\ per\ capita\ of\ indigenous\ WNG = \frac{GDP^{I}_{WNG}}{I_{WNG}} = \frac{1}{P_{WNG}} \times GDP_{WNG}$$

$$GDP\ per\ capita\ of\ indigenous\ WNG = \frac{GDP^{I}_{WNG}}{I_{WNG}} = \frac{GDP_{WNG}}{P_{WNG}}$$

In other words, with the first approach, the attempt to find the income per capita that the indigenous people in WNG have would result in the income per capita that all people in WNG have. The first approach produces the (average) income per capita data that is silent on the difference that may exist between the income per capita of the indigenous and the income per capita of the non-indigenous.

The result becomes different, however, when the data of indigenous people ($I_{sub-WNG}$) and non-indigenous people ($NI_{sub-WNG}$) of every city and regency in WNG is factored in. This paper will construct the second possible approach as follows:

$$GDP^{I}_{WNG} = \sum GDP^{I}_{sub-WNG}$$

$$GDP^{I}_{WNG} = \sum \left(\frac{I_{sub-WNG}}{P_{sub-WNG}} \times GDP_{sub-WNG}\right)$$

In the first approach, prior to summation, every $GDP_{sub-WNG}$ is multiplied by I_{WNG}/P_{WNG} first. But in the second approach, prior to summation, every $GDP_{sub-WNG}$ is multiplied by $I_{sub-WNG}/P_{sub-WNG}$ instead. Because the $I_{sub-WNG}/P_{sub-WNG}$ of every city and regency in WNG is not necessarily the same as I_{WNG}/P_{WNG}, then the value of GDP^{I}_{WNG} resulting from the second approach may differ from the GDP^{I}_{WNG} resulting from the first approach.

$$GDP\ per\ capita\ of\ indigenous\ WNG = \frac{GDP^{I}_{WNG}}{I_{WNG}} = \left(\sum \left(\frac{I_{sub-WNG}}{P_{sub-WNG}} \times GDP_{sub-WNG}\right)\right) \times \frac{1}{I_{WNG}}$$

Continuing the second approach, one would use the above formula to estimate the income per capita of the indigenous people in WNG. Unlike the first approach, the second approach could not be simplified to GDP_{WNG}/P_{WNG} unless the $I_{sub-WNG}/P_{sub-WNG}$ of every city and regency in WNG was exactly the same as I_{WNG}/P_{WNG} – an unrealistic assumption.

Given that the second approach allows for a potential difference between the income per capita of the indigenous people and the non-indigenous people in WNG to appear, this paper opts for the second approach. The second, more granular approach fits the research scope better because it considers the variation of the "population indigeneity ratio" among regencies or cities in WNG. Hence, the summation should result in more granular data of GDP and GDP per capita of WNG, customized based on ethnicity.

To use the second approach, the data of city-level or regency-level incomes and the indigenous and non-indigenous populations of each subgroup are needed. Fortunately, during the 2010 Indonesian national census, the Indonesian Statistics Bureau released the official number of indigenous Papuans (and non-indigenous people) in the WNG, down to the regency- and city-level. For reasons that remain unknown, subsequent censuses in WNG have never again surveyed the number of indigenous Papuans in WNG. Consequently, to maintain comparability with the PNG data, the only relevant PNG data that this paper should use is the PNG 2011 census data, which was the closest census in PNG to the year 2010. No newer comparison can be made.

Papuan Incomes Vary, Depending on Where They Live

The calculation above reveals that, on average, indigenous Papuans in WNG had around 53% higher income per capita in 2010 than the indigenous Papuans in PNG did in 2011. Their income per capita was USD 2,715, while their PNG counterparts had USD 1,770 per capita.

However, it seems equally important to investigate whether the income per capita of the indigenous Papuans in WNG also varies by location. More granular data may tremendously help policymakers to be more location-specific when attempting to improve indigenous welfare.

To investigate this, this paper divides the WNG area into the western coast, northern coast, southern coast, and landlocked areas. The western coast means all regencies or cities in the 2010 West Papua province bordering the sea. The northern coast means all regencies or cities in the 2010 Papua province bordering the Pacific Ocean. The southern coast means all regencies or cities in the 2010 Papua province bordering the Arafura Sea. And landlocked are the remaining WNG regencies or cities.

Further calculation reveals that, on average, indigenous Papuans in the coastal areas of WNG had three times higher income per capita in 2010 than the indigenous Papuans in PNG did in 2011. Their income per capita was USD 5,466, while their PNG counterparts had USD 1,770 per capita. Coastal areas of WNG had received a high influx of migrants from outside the island. Around 45% of the population of coastal areas of WNG was non-indigenous, coming from other Indonesian islands.

As inevitably the first place where non-indigenous people landed and in WNG, it is logical many would eventually reside there. This was in contrast with the PNG, where less than 1% of the population was non-citizens.[9]

More granularly, indigenous Papuans in the southern coastal areas of WNG even had a much higher income. They had five times higher income per capita than the indigenous Papuans in PNG, as their income per capita was USD 10,243 in 2010.

Again, around 45% of the population of the southern coastal areas of the WNG was non-indigenous Papuans, coming from other Indonesian islands. Importantly, the southern coastal area of WNG also houses the largest gold mining company in Indonesia (and one of the largest in the world). Conversely, the income per capita of indigenous Papuans in the landlocked areas of WNG (at USD 573 in 2010) was only a third of the income per capita of the average indigenous Papuans in PNG.

Only around 5% of the population of landlocked areas of the WNG was non-indigenous, coming from other Indonesian islands. Very few non-indigenous people coming to WNG would reside in the mountainous hinterland areas without access to the sea. Sea is important for them, as they may sometimes revisit their homeland outside WNG. Also, many commodities come from Java, and the coastal areas receive them first, from a logistical cost perspective. Another reason is that the WNG separatists often operate in the hinterland.

[9] Data limitation prohibits this paper from knowing how many non-Papuans were in PNG population. The only available data is the citizenship classification of the population, and thus it is still the best proxy available to sense how much PNG population was not indigenous.

Areas	GDP/capita of Papuans USD 2010/2011	GDP/capita of Non-Papuans USD 2010	Papuan Headcount 2010/2011	Papuan % of Total 2010/2011
WNG (southern coast)	10,243	16,218	284,646	3%
WNG (western coast)	6,092	6,339	373,302	4%
WNG (northern coast)	1,910	2,393	447,894	5%
PNG (all areas)	1,770	n.a.	7,254,442	74%
WNG (landlocked)	573	1,643	1,420,668	14%
New Guinea (total)			**9,780,952**	**100%**

Another noteworthy finding is how indigenous Papuans in WNG usually did not fare better than the non-indigenous people in WNG. Across all WNG areas, on average, their income per capita was only 40% of the non-indigenous income per capita. But this is not a constant percentage. Reviewing the data by region provides valuable insight into how this percentage varies. In coastal areas (of western, northern, and southern), their income per capita was 74% of the non-indigenous income per capita. But, in landlocked areas, their income per capita was just 34% of the non-indigenous income per capita.

Why in WNG might the income vary by location and ethnicity? WNG was once the destination of Indonesia's New Order government's transmigration policy. There, the Indonesian government equipped new arrivals with resources necessary for them to gain a livelihood, including land, farming equipment, housing, schools, and clinics. Therefore, the non-indigenous transmigrants were given enablers for economic growth that the indigenous residents were not given. This is perhaps one of the drivers of the disparity between the income per capita of the non-indigenous and the indigenous Papuans in WNG.[10]

As time went on, once the business activities of non-indigenous transmigrants sufficiently invigorated the local economy, the trickle-down economic effect came into play. Indigenous Papuans started to learn about, to take part in and eventually to benefit from the modern economy led by these transmigrants. The findings seem to suggest that the higher the presence of non-indigenous people in an area, the higher the income per capita of indigenous Papuans. This may explain why indigenous Papuans in coastal WNG had higher incomes per capita than indigenous Papuans in interior WNG.

From this logic, it can be inferred that during the New Order era, the increase in the living standard of the indigenous Papuans in WNG was more of an afterthought or side effect of the Indonesian transmigration policy. It was not the main original intended outcome of that policy. This could be why, despite some Papuans in WNG being richer than their PNG counterparts, many of them remained poorer than the non-indigenous people in the same place. This may also explain the unequal geographic distribution of economic betterment felt by the indigenous Papuans in WNG.

Up to this point, the paper assumes that all indigenous Papuans in PNG had the same income per capita across areas within PNG. Admittedly, this assumption is rather unfair, as indigenous Papuans in some areas of PNG may have a higher income per capita than the rest—perhaps high enough to exceed that of the average indigenous Papuans across WNG. Regional PNG data, however, was unavailable, preventing such examination of income variation.

Despite the data limitations, it can be noted that some literature suggests that indigenous Papuans in PNG's hinterland also live in a worse situation than those on the coast. PNG's hinterlanders mostly work in traditional semi-subsistence agriculture, with very rare harvest excess to be sold and to gain money.[11] The hinterlanders in PNG made up around 40% of PNG's population, which is no wonder that around 40% of the PNG population is below the poverty line.[12] It can hence be safely said that the interior

[10] Taliawo, "The Indonesianization of West Papua."
[11] Reehana Raza, "Rural Futures in Focus: Papua New Guinea," *International Fund for Agricultural Development*, December 16, 2025, https://www.ifad.org/en/w/opinions/rural-futures-in-focus-papua-new-guinea.
[12] Oliver Cornock, *The Report: Papua New Guinea 2020* (Oxford Business Group, 2020); Raza, "Rural Futures in Focus."

region of New Guinea is the poverty pocket for indigenous Papuans on both sides of the island.

Interior Highlands as New Guinea's Poverty Pocket

Villages in the hinterland of New Guinea on both sides are poor for several basic reasons. First, the local people live in scattered places across this very vast region. In 2010-2011, there were only around 4.2 million indigenous Papuans (which was less than Singapore's 2010 population) in a region slightly larger than Nebraska. With low population density like this, the local demand for goods and services is also low, giving little justification for local production to thrive.

Second, even if they had enough local demand, they would not have enough skills, tools, and technology to satisfy that demand. Schools and healthcare centers are rare in this region, leaving residents unprepared to be formal producers of goods and services. Public infrastructures (like telecommunications, energy, water supply, waste treatment, and transportation) are also rare, making this region unsuitable for conducting (more modern) market activities. Even if they want to sell their products to the demand centers like cities, the connectivity is both far and poor.

On the western side of the island, these factors were exacerbated by Indonesia's past policy. As mentioned before, under Indonesia's New Order government's transmigration policy, the government equipped transmigrants from outside WNG with land, farming equipment, housing, schools, clinics, and more.[13] Nevertheless, because these transmigrants moved to coastal areas, the more densely populated and infrastructurally developed places are concentrated there, not in the interior. The additional unspoken reason is that the interior region is often terrorized by WNG's armed separatist group, which believes that WNG was unjustly annexed into Indonesia.

The third reason is that even if the locals were able to produce goods and services in higher quantities, the selling price might be low, still giving them low revenue. Because, as mentioned previously, there is low connectivity to areas outside the hinterland, the local population would be the customers, and they have very little purchasing power. The only selling price that works in the market is a low one.

The other reason why the hinterland deserves more attention is that around half (56%) of indigenous Papuans in WNG live there.[14] Also, around half (43%) of indigenous Papuans in PNG also live there.[15] So, not only is the interior part of the island the worst in terms of income, but it also contains the most indigenous Papuans on either side.

Current Approaches to the Problem

After Indonesia's military regime collapsed in 1998 (during the Asian financial crisis), the Indonesian government hastily allowed democracy. In this new era, the Indonesian government issued Law Number 21 Year 2001, as amended twice so far.[16] The law formalized the special autonomy of WNG with an official acknowledgement that there had been a great controversy on how WNG was integrated into Indonesia and that indigenous Papuans in WNG needed more economic attention.[17]

In Indonesian politics, the law mandates a recruitment prioritization for indigenous Papuans in becoming members of the political parties, judges, and prosecutors in WNG. Indigenous Papuans must also have some permanent seats in the WNG legislative assemblies, and WNG governors and vice governors must also be indigenous Papuans. Additionally, transmigration from outside WNG is now subject to approval from the WNG governors.

The Reconciliation Council was also established to solve human rights issues, and a WNG-wide Papuan assembly, as different from legislative assemblies, was established to protect indigenous Papuan cultures.

In terms of economics, the law promotes the inclusion of indigenous Papuans in strategizing development

[13] Taliawo, "The Indonesianization of West Papua."

[14] Jim Elmslie, "The Great Divide: West Papuan Demographics Revisited; Settlers Dominate Coastal Regions but the Highlands Still Overwhelmingly Papuans," *Asia Pacific Journal – Japan Focus* 15, issue 2, no. 1 (2017), https://apjjf.org/2017/02/elmslie.

[15] Cornock, *The Report: Papua New Guinea 2020*.

[16] Government of Indonesia, *Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 21 Year 2001 on Special Autonomy for the Papua Province*, November 21, 2001, https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2001/id/94779; Government of Indonesia, *Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 2 Year 2021 on Second Amendment to Law Number 21 Year 2001 on Special Autonomy for Papua Province*, July 19, 2021, https://humanrightsmonitor.org/law/papua-autonomy-2/.

[17] Mangadar Situmorang, "Conflict Transformation in Papua: Challenges and Opportunities for Top-Down Special Autonomy Policy," *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 5, no. 1 (2025): 16-32, https://ejournal.uncen.ac.id/index.php/PJDIR/article/view/4240.

in WNG, in the hope that development efforts may optimally benefit them. The law also mandates employment prioritization (in any business sectors in WNG) of indigenous Papuans, as well as a fiscal budget to fund fully or partially the cost of their education and healthcare. Furthermore, a Special Autonomy Fund is provided every year to increase the welfare of the indigenous Papuans in WNG, distributed down to the regency- or city-level based on the number of indigenous Papuans living in each. The law also acknowledges that indigenous Papuans in some areas in WNG may not have received "development" yet, and this must be resolved.

This Special Autonomy Law and its Fund have been a starting foundation for improving Papuans' lagging welfare—especially for those in the interior—but the implementation needs more refining. For instance, as the law focuses on indigenous Papuans, it is logical and imperative to have a much more routine census on indigenous Papuans in WNG. Without continuously knowing the number of indigenous Papuans in WNG, it is hard to understand the true scale needed for the Special Autonomy Fund.

Currently, the law has also reserved several vital governmental positions in the executive, legislative, and judicial offices to be filled by the indigenous. Other important public-service jobs in WNG (especially doctors, nurses, teachers, policemen, and soldiers) are non-governmental positions, though, and the law should prepare these posts to be filled by indigenous Papuans as well.

Sadly, despite having had this autonomy law and fund since 2001, the economic legacy of the previous 32-year-long New Order regime was still deeply imprinted in WNG society and hard to overturn. The findings of this paper show that the situation in 2010 (or nine years after the autonomy law was enacted) was still far from what the autonomy law envisions.

Meanwhile, in PNG, its official Development Strategic Plan 2010-2030 also acknowledges that rural development is sorely needed there. The current approach is to provide essential infrastructure there, such as healthcare centers, schools, houses, electricity, transport, telecommunications, water supply, and postal services. The government also strives to grow rural economies, especially through microfinancing, cooperatives, and training program centers.[18]

Arbitrage-Based Economy as the First Proposed Approach

Generally, the two countries' current approach to this challenge is to modernize the interior regions by building facilities there. There is nothing wrong with the current approach, except that it has improved the situation very slowly for a reason. The very low population density in the interior region does not give enough economies of scale to build public-servicing facilities there.

Geography exacerbates this. Even if the local parliament approves the public budget to be used to cover the construction of facilities (despite being cost-ineffective), New Guinea's interior highlands are notorious for having a very challenging landscape. The snow-capped Carstensz Pyramid, which is the tallest peak between the Himalaya and the Andes, sits in these highlands. The development costs would be significantly high.

This paper, thus, suggests that all settlements in the hinterland should first be identified based on their population density. They should then be divided into two groups: the first group being those settlements with enough population density to achieve the economies of scale required to do modern economic activities, and the second group being settlements that do not surpass that scale requirement. The two governments' economic development policies should then be differentiated according to which group they are handling.

For the first group, the governments may freely provide clean power plants (like solar, wind, and hydro) to the hinterlanders. The underlying idea is simple: most modern activities need electricity. That electricity can then be used for promoting productive activities, such as pumping groundwater for irrigation, for cattle's drinking water, and for freshwater aquaculture in inland ponds. The International Fund for Agricultural Development also advocated that rural farming investment is key.[19] Although the advice was given for the interior PNG case, the same suggestion seems to be applicable as well in interior WNG. Another example, woodcraft

[18] Department of National Planning and Monitoring of Papua New Guinea, *PNG Development Strategic Plan 2010-2030* (Port Moresby: 2010), https://www.treasury.gov.pg/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Development-Strategic-Plan.pdf.

[19] Raza, "Rural Futures in Focus."

machining. Overall, these could be their local products.

The governments should also improve transport and telecommunication connectivity between them and the coastal cities. This is to facilitate rural dwellers to market their local products more easily at a higher price to wealthier urban customers. Beyond local products, the extra clean electricity generated across this vast hinterland could also be sold to the coastal cities. Later, these economic gains earned by the rural villagers could be used to cover those clean power plants' maintenance costs and other production costs.

In other words, the difference in economic levels between wealthier coastal cities and poorer interior villages across the island should be taken advantage of so the products of small towns can be sold at a higher price—one still lower than the customers in the larger cities would get when buying the same products in their current markets. It is mutually beneficial. In other words, this could be an arbitrage-based economy.

WNG's Special Autonomy Fund should be used to cover the initial cost of constructing those clean power plants, transport access, and communication lines to facilitate this growth. Meanwhile, in PNG, the public budgets of national, provincial, and local governments should assume that role.

Voluntary Resettlement as the Second Proposed Approach

For the second group (or villages under the population threshold), the governments may offer a chance for a voluntary rural-to-urban resettlement. Rural dwellers should be offered an opportunity to voluntarily exchange their village assets for public housing (to be owned for free permanently) in the towns. As this is done voluntarily, rural dwellers who are not interested in this scheme may also choose to stay in the villages. This voluntary scheme liberates indigenous Papuans to have more life options. As the name 'options' suggests, they may or may not take this opportunity, either of which is their call.

For those who are interested in this scheme, the more assets they have in the villages (especially in terms of land size), which they can legally prove, the bigger the units they are entitled to in the public housing. And vice versa. However, any unit in this public housing (including the small ones) would always be made as decent as possible. Included in this decency aspect is the maximum occupant density in a unit. That means, although families with smaller land get a smaller unit size, even the smallest unit would still satisfy the reasonable living conditions.

Later, the governments may re-manage these village assets to earn money. For example, the land could be reforested, and the potential carbon sequestration could be monetized and traded to the large carbon-emitting countries or companies. Then, the sales proceeds can be used for two things: first, to recover the cost of building the public housing in the first place; second, to recover the cost of training the rural transplants so that they can integrate themselves into the modern economy in the towns. For constructing public housing and training rural newcomers at the beginning of this process, WNG's Special Autonomy Fund should be used. Meanwhile, in PNG, the public budgets of national, provincial, and local governments should assume that role.

Despite being seemingly unconventional, population resettlement in general has been done in many other social and developmental contexts. For example, people in many parts of the world have been relocated because of major infrastructure development or disasters affecting their homes. In its early days, Singapore also rehoused slum residents to public housing to anticipate the land scarcity in the future. Today, Singapore is known for its world-class spatial design, despite being a third-world city with squatter settlements in the 1960s.[20] Resettlement is, thus, not something new and quite mundane.

This paper argues that, for handling villages below the population threshold, the resettlement approach brings several benefits. First, reconcentrating rural people into a few urban areas might be more affordable and quicker than modernizing many tiny villages across a very wide, challenging territory. Second, a high concentration of rural people in towns or cities enables economies of scale in providing education, health services, and many other public amenities for them. Third, once reconcentrated, indigenous locals can find a higher demand for what they produce, giving them a better and quicker chance of participating in a modern market economy.

[20] Kwek Sian Choo, *Resettling Communities: Creating Space for Nation-Building* (Centre for Liveable Cities, 2019), https://knowledgehub.clc.gov.sg/publications-library/resettling-communities-creating-space-for-nation-building/.

Funding Sources for Both Approaches

A note should be given to WNG's Special Autonomy Fund, as this is the key for initiating both approaches above (for the WNG side). The Fund needs to be administered more transparently and effectively. There has been an allegation that the WNG separatists intentionally create terror so that the local governments can have a justification to ask for more "security" money from Jakarta (in the form of this Fund), which is then smuggled by those local governments (also led by indigenous Papuans by law) to the WNG separatists. [21] Assuming this allegation is true, then increasing the Fund may not necessarily translate to reducing violence, and the violence will deter investment.[22]

Another note should also be given about the quality of PNG's state budget management. It was estimated by the PNG's Anti-Corruption Taskforce that almost 40% of the national budget was lost annually due to corruption and mismanagement from 2007 until at least 2013.[23] Some even said that the corruption was so massive that PNG almost turned into a kleptocracy. [24] This really hampers any economic development initiative in PNG. Just like WNG's case, PNG's state budget management needs to be more transparent and accountable.

Another funding source for the previous approaches is companies' CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) disbursement. Instead of leaving these companies to decide where to put the money, the money can be gathered by the two governments on the respective sides to help fund the two approaches above. New Guinea, on both sides, has seen many international large mining companies taking profits from this island and doing many CSR activities. If not coordinated well from the macroeconomic standpoint, however, these scattered CSR activities would be too disaggregated to create any development impacts on an island-wide scale.

Education as an Important Enabler

Both of the approaches outlined above are meant to bring rural people into the modern economy, but surely, education will be the important enabler. Vocational centers, for example, should be proliferated and at the forefront of the training of rural indigenous peoples in occupational skills that will enable them to participate in the modern economy. Previously, they lived with a subsistence economy, by which they could simply hunt, gather, and plant to sustain their lives, often without money involved. Now, basic hard skills, such as reading, writing, and counting, are imperative.

Modern skills like those would empower them to have more occupational options, beyond what is available to them in their current traditional means of life. And with wider job options, they can collect more resources (in terms of money), which would enable them to step further in their life. How is that possible? Because money is simply today's most widely accepted medium of exchange, and this is a tool to access a larger economy and get more benefits from it.

As an illustration, it might be rewarding to know the story in the southern coastal area of the WNG. The US-based largest gold mining company in WNG, which is also one of the largest globally, has a good training and employment program for the indigenous Papuans. The children of the indigenous employees are given free access to schools and hospitals. Some of the teachers and doctors are also trained or skilled indigenous Papuans. Later, they also get preferential admission to a polytechnic or vocational senior high school.

All these facilities are company-managed, and they are even more modern than the average facilities in Indonesia. After graduation, they are placed in certain positions in the company. Having modern jobs, they get a high income. This is why quite many of the indigenous Papuans in the southern coast of WNG have a much higher income than the rest of WNG. They are the result of an intentional human development program. This inspirational story serves as proof that indigenous Papuans, with an intentional, comprehensive, and targeted upskilling program, may have a significant upward social mobility.

But today's world has moved slightly forward. Education should also aim to teach entrepreneurial skills. The teaching paradigm should not treat

[21] M. Alfi Rajabi Nasution and Poltak Partogi Nainggolan, "Special Autonomy as Indonesia's National Policy to Improve the Welfare of the People of Papua," *Jurnal Pertahanan (Defense Journal)* 9, no. 2 (2023): 213-225, https://jurnal.idu.ac.id/index.php/DefenseJournal/article/view/13009.
[22] Situmorang, "Conflict Transformation in Papua."
[23] Pius Bonjui, *PNG Loses Billions to Government Corruption*, *ABC News*, August 27, 2013, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-27/an-png-billions-lost/4916656.
[24] F, J. (2011). *Near Neighbours, Worlds Apart*. London: The Economist.

indigenous Papuans merely as job-takers (i.e., becoming employees in someone's business). It must start empowering indigenous Papuans as job creators themselves (i.e., making their own business), because today's employers may start relying more on adding technology, rather than on adding labor. Creating jobs in service sectors is especially strategic because service sectors (unlike natural extraction and manufacturing sectors) may not be as easily replaceable by the current growing trend of automation, digitization, and AI. Additionally, giving entrepreneurial training to indigenous Papuans may help them to have as many opportunities as anybody else to lead a business.

Cross-Border Cooperation as the Other Enabler

Along with education, the other enabler is political. Both sides of the island face the same economic issue, but both sides cannot cooperate to achieve the same goal, as their relationship is marred by geopolitical suspicion. There should be a cross-border understanding and commitment between the two sides. The provincial governors in WNG (who, by Indonesian law, must be indigenous Papuans) and the provincial governors in PNG (who should naturally be indigenous Papuans too) should start doing cultural exchanges and conduction policy knowledge-sharing visits more often.

Additionally, it might be worthwhile to consider joint development programs between the two countries. Indonesia has already done a similar example. In the island of Borneo, which is split between Indonesia and Malaysia, the two countries have agreed to reduce the territorial tension through explicit economic cooperation along the border, such as in Ambalat and Entikong. Furthermore, knowing that there are so many shared Malay cultures between the two countries, both governments also established a joint cultural council to acknowledge the similarities and to reduce misunderstanding (such as MABBIM to standardize the Malay language across the countries). Perhaps similar bilateral economic and cultural agreements between Indonesia and PNG should be strengthened. This might open many development opportunities for the entire island. There has been one example of this, which is the Sota border post. Managed by Indonesia, the post has been a market hub among indigenous Papuans from both sides of the border.[25]

The Indonesian government has a full awareness that Indonesia's success in uplifting the welfare of the indigenous Papuans in WNG is a key to stopping the international sensationalizing of the WNG issue, which Indonesia sees as its internal issue.[26] Furthermore, the issue of WNG independence has been an Achilles' heel in the relationship between Indonesia and PNG.[27] Healthier cooperation between both sides may weaken the WNG's separatism so that development initiatives in WNG can proceed uninterrupted. At the same time, it may benefit PNG because it could lead to better diplomatic relations with Indonesia, which, admittedly, is PNG's largest and only land neighbor.[28] Thus, it could be a win-win situation for both sides.

Conclusion

About half of the indigenous Papuans in WNG had higher income than the average indigenous Papuans in PNG—around three times higher. They usually live in coastal regions. Meanwhile, the other half, usually living in the interior regions, had a lower income than the average indigenous Papuans in PNG. Therefore, on average, it cannot be conclusively said that the historical partition has brought an income difference between the two sides.

More specifically, the data triangulation for the WNG also reveals that indigenous Papuans in the interior regions are usually poorer than those living in coastal regions, and this is true for both halves based on the literature review for the PNG. Hence, both governments should focus on improving the welfare of indigenous Papuans, especially those in the hinterland regions.

In the long term, whether the indigenous Papuans in the whole of New Guinea can be reunited remains an unrelenting (geo)political debate; however, in the short term, the two governments can at least opt to be

[25] Nicholas Metherall et al., "Assessing the Development Impact of the Sota Border Post Connecting Indonesia and Papua New Guinea," *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 2, no. 2 (2022): 95-122, https://ejournal.uncen.ac.id/index.php/PJDIR/article/view/2209.

[26] Vidhyandika Djati Perkasa, "The Internationalization of Internal Conflict and the Diplomatic Challenges: The Case of Papua," *Indonesia Quarterly* 42, no. 3-4 (2024): 255-269, https://journals.csis.or.id/index.php/iq/article/view/1919.

[27] Matbob and Papoutsaki, "'New *Guinea: A Divided Island*;'" Rienlas Wideslatu, "Diplomatic Strategy of the Indonesian Government in Maintaining Papua as Part of Sovereignty," *Diplomacy and Global Security Journal* 1, no. 1 (2024): 816-837, https://ejournal.fisip.unjani.ac.id/index.php/DGSJ/article/view/2957; Age, "Papua New Guinea's Diplomacy."

[28] Age, "Papua New Guinea's Diplomacy."

united in terms of their economic approaches in improving the welfare of the island's native people.

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PACIFIC FORUM INTERNATIONAL

Evolving Alliance Paths: The US-ROK Alliance and Negotiation of Allie's Military Commitments on the Peninsula

By
Jinwom Lee

Executive Summary

Jimwon Lee

The dynamics of military alliances are not static; they evolve over time. For the security provider, the specific texts and provisions included in an alliance treaty can increase the burden and future costs of commitments. As a result, patron states design alliance treaties carefully. Following the Korean War, the United States deliberately structured the U.S.–ROK alliance to limit the risk of unwanted entrapment. In the immediate aftermath of the war, South Korea was highly emboldened and continued to advocate reunification through military means. Washington was concerned that overly rigid commitments could entrap the United States in another conflict initiated by its ally.

Although the Mutual Defense Treaty includes an automatic commitment to respond if either the United States or South Korea is attacked by an external adversary, the treaty itself contains only one concrete peacetime military obligation: the basing arrangement. Signed in 1953, the treaty primarily granted the United States access to South Korean territory for the stationing of U.S. forces, while the United States committed to deploying troops on the peninsula. Over time, however, subsequent negotiations and cooperative agreements expanded the scope of military commitments beyond the formal treaty text. The establishment of the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), for example, was not explicitly stipulated in the original treaty. This demonstrates how alliances evolve through continuous institutional adaptation and practical cooperation, even in the absence of formal legal obligations

These additional military commitments emerged through ongoing bargaining between the allies. South Korea consistently sought stronger U.S. security guarantees in response to persistent North Korean provocations, while the United States aimed to reduce the significant costs associated with maintaining and deploying troops abroad. The resulting institutional modifications reflect a process of negotiation and coordination through which both sides attempted to maximize strategic benefits while minimizing the risks inherent in alliance politics.

The U.S. troop basing arrangement in South Korea and the establishment of the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) emerged through sustained intra-alliance negotiations and evolved into important instruments of strategic alliance management. These institutional arrangements were designed not only to deter North Korean aggression, but also to mitigate the risk of unilateral escalation by South Korea that could entrap the United States in an unwanted conflict.

The forward deployment of U.S. forces helped reassure South Korea by strengthening the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee, while simultaneously enabling Washington to closely monitor and influence South Korean military behavior. Likewise, the establishment of the CFC institutionalized integrated command structures and joint operational planning, thereby reducing the likelihood that South Korea could independently initiate military escalation without U.S. involvement or oversight. Notably, the creation of the CFC coincided with reductions in U.S. troop levels on the peninsula, demonstrating how institutionalized command mechanisms can compensate for a declining physical military presence. These developments illustrate how intra-alliance negotiations and their decisions enabled both allies to recalibrate their respective levels of commitment and develop supplementary forms of military cooperation that functioned as tools of strategic management.

Currently, North Korea is likely to become increasingly emboldened as a result of its deepening cooperation with Russia, while the United States continues to pursue greater burden-sharing and considers reducing its troop presence on the Korean Peninsula. Although transforming the alliance from a provider–recipient relationship into a more co-managed security partnership remains an important long-term objective, the sustainability of the U.S.– ROK alliance ultimately depends not simply on reciprocal demands, but on a shared recognition of mutual necessity in maintaining regional stability. Rather than framing burden- sharing primarily in terms of obligations and cost distribution, both allies must align their policies around a common strategic purpose.

Historical experience suggests that reductions in troop levels can weaken the visible credibility of U.S. commitments unless they are accompanied by alternative institutional mechanisms that reassure allies and maintain strategic coordination. If the United States seeks to reduce troop levels on the peninsula, the troop reductions are likely to require compensatory institutional mechanisms to reassure allies and maintain deterrence credibility. In this sense, alliance sustainability depends not only on the quantity of military deployments, but also on the credibility and adaptability of the institutional commitments that underpin the alliance.

Introduction

The South Korea-US alliance was formed in October 1953 with the signing of the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. The treaty was signed after the Korean War concluded with an armistice agreement in July 1953, effectively establishing a ceasefire rather than formally ending the war. The agreement was concluded by military commanders representing the UN Command, North Korea, and China, and was shaped largely by negotiations between the United States and China. Initially, the South Korean regime, let by Syngman Rhee, viewed the Korean Armistice Agreement as a tool to prevent military actions by South Korea against the North and refused to sign the agreement, advocating instead for a military solution to unify the Korean Peninsula.[1] To address this situation, the US dispatched the Assistant Secretary of State to persuade Rhee to accept the armistice and engage in a series of bargaining discussions.

Especially, In March 1952, President Truman sent a letter to President Lee and expressed serious concern over President Rhee's increasing and open opposition to the proposed armistice agreement, warning that such a stance was in direct conflict with the objectives of the United Nations and the United States and further cautioning that if South Korea failed to fully cooperate with UN forces, it could result in the most serious consequences.[2] In April 1952, President Rhee responded by requesting assurances of continued US and UN support. He emphasized that any armistice agreement would require the backing of the Korean people to be effective. To strengthen such support, he urged the United States and the Republic of Korea to negotiate a mutual security pact at an early date and to accelerate the expansion of the Korean armed forces.[3]

In other words, Rhee demanded a total and comprehensive military alliance in exchange for agreeing to a truce. Rhee's continued insistence on an alliance treaty became a concern for American policymakers, who were unwilling to make long-term commitments. They concluded that negotiating a mutual security pact at that time would not serve US national interests.[4] This was because the US decision makers assume that unification of Korea continued to serve as a goal for President Rhee. In a meeting with Secretary Dulles in August 1953, President Rhee stated, "South Korea cannot continue to live unless Korea is unified. If the United States does not wish to help the Republic of Korea fight for the unification of Korea, then it should say so."[5] He requested that the US either resume hostilities or provide South Korea with material support to achieve its goal of unifying Korea.

In this vein, the Eisenhower administration had initially contemplated coordinating with the UN member states that participated in the war on greater sanctions as opposed to pursuing a formal defense treaty. Instead, the United States decided to support building up the ROK Army, which included plans for significant expansion of divisions to strengthen defense capabilities.[6] Still, even after the US got on board and Rhee agreed to the Panmunjom Armistice, negotiations for a mutual defense treaty encountered several difficulties.

Rhee's Four Key Demands and the US Response

In May 1953, Rhee sent a letter to Eisenhower requesting the inclusion of four key points in the bilateral security pact: first, he requested that the US agree to immediate military intervention if an enemy nation or nations resumed aggressive action against South Korea. Rhee also sought explicit clauses committing the US to supporting the expansion and strengthening of South Korea's armed forces via military training, equipment, and other forms of assistance. Next, he requested assurances that the US would provide adequate military aid, including sufficient supplies of arms, ammunition, and general logistical materials, to enable South Korea to build

[1] Steven Lee, "The Korean Armistice and the End of Peace: The US-UN Coalition and the Dynamics of War-Making in Korea, 1953–76," *Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 187, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44080503; US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *192.* Memorandum of a Conversation, Seoul, Dec. 18, *1956*, accessed April 2, 2023, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v23p2/ch1?start=181.

[2] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume XV, Part 1, Korea*, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Document 52, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p1/d52

[3] Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume XV, Part 1, Korea, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Document 110, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p1/d110

[4] Claudia J. Kim, "Military Alliances as a Stabilising Force: US Relations with South Korea and Taiwan, 1950s–1960s," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 7 (2021): 1041–1062.

[5] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (Young)* (Seoul, 1953), accessed March 11, 2024, 1486, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d739.

[6] "한미 상호방위 조약 [ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty]," National Archives of Korea, accessed 14 March, 2026, https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/listSubjectDescription.do?id=002702&sitePage=.

defense capabilities strong enough to deter and repel future aggression independently. Finally, Rhee insisted that US air and naval forces remain stationed in their current positions in and around Korea to serve as a continued deterrent against aggression.[7]

This study seeks to examine the gap between President Rhee's four major demands regarding the formation of the treaty and the actual provisions of the treaty, as well as the debates within the United States surrounding these issues. First, the United States first opposed the inclusion of an automatic intervention clause on the grounds that only its Congress holds the authority to declare war. The US argued that since treaties require ratification by the US Senate, including an automatic intervention clause in the treaty would make the ratification process difficult.[8]

Specifically, some members of the Senate would be very reluctant to authorize anything beyond providing assistance for Korea's economic rehabilitation and establishing an arrangement whereby the US would consult with South Korea in the event of renewed aggression against the country.[9] In the letter to Rhee regarding acceptance of the Panmunjom Armistice, Eisenhower stated that his government was prepared to negotiate a mutual defense treaty with the Republic of Korea, modeled on similar treaties the United States had concluded with other Asian nations. US sought to reassure South Korea by emphasizing that a treaty with the Republic of Korea would be no different from existing US security treaties with Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, and that it would demonstrate to the international community that Korea would not stand alone in the event of external aggression.[10] However, Eisenhower also noted that, under the US Constitution, ratification of such a treaty required the advice and consent of the Senate, thereby underscoring the essential role of congressional approval and the possibility of domestic opposition.[11]

Ultimately, the US–ROK Mutual Defense Treaty incorporated provisions in Articles II and III similar to those found in the Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty and the ANZUS Pact, including a clause recognizing that an armed attack against either party in territories under its administrative control would constitute a common danger and require both sides to act in accordance with their constitutional processes. In this sense, the treaty functioned primarily as a defensive alliance, committing the parties to respond only in cases of external aggression. However, unlike the ANZUS and Philippine treaties, the ratification process for the US–ROK treaty included an additional Senate understanding that significantly clarified and limited the scope of US obligations. The Senate specified that the United States would be required to militarily assist Korea only in the event of an external armed attack against territory recognized by the United States as being under the lawful administrative control of the Republic of Korea.[12]

This reflected Washington's awareness of South Korea's strong aspiration for reunification through a northward military advance under the Rhee administration. The additional clarification therefore served several purposes: limiting US obligations strictly to defensive scenarios, excluding automatic intervention in cases initiated by South Korea, and making clear that territories outside the internationally recognized jurisdiction of the Republic of Korea, namely North Korea, were not covered by the treaty. In effect, while the United States included intervention clauses similar to those in its other alliances, it simultaneously sought to restrain unilateral South Korean military actions by narrowly defining the treaty's scope during the ratification process.

[7] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs*.

[8] "한미 상호방위 조약 [ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty]."

[9] William S. Whitespecial, "Full U. S. Arms Pact Demanded by Rhee for Truce Support; He Insists on All-Out Attacks if Reds Still Oppose Unity 90 Days After Cease-Fire Rejection Held Certain Congressional Leaders, After Talk With Dulles, Balk at Automatic Commitment Full U. S. Arms Tie Demanded by Rhee," *New York Times*, July 1, 1953, https://www.nytimes.com/1953/07/01/archives/full-u-s-arms-pact-demanded-by-rhee-for-truce-support-he-insists-on.html.

[10] *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (Young), secret*, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume XV, Part 2, Document 734, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d734

[11] Eisenhower to President Syngman Rhee, June 7, 1953, The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-president-syngman-rhee-korea-concerning-acceptance-the-panmunjom-armistice.

[12] *"UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNITED STATES", Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea*, October 1, 1953, US Forces Korea, https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty_1953.pdf.

Unlike Rhee's first demand, the second and third demands, calling for explicit commitments to military training and aid, were not formally incorporated into the treaty provisions. However, this omission was not unique to the US–ROK agreement, as similar treaties did not explicitly codify such obligations either. Although not stated in the treaty text, discussions over military and economic assistance continued between the two governments, and substantial aid was in fact provided in practice. In particular, in a letter dated January 31, 1955, President Eisenhower emphasized that the extensive economic and military assistance provided by the United States represented a significant investment in the future of South Korea, reflecting Washington's confidence in the country's long-term stability and development.[13]

Additionally, although the treaty did not include specific clauses, the presence of US troops stationed in South Korea facilitated the training of the Republic of Korea armed forces and enabled regular joint military exercises. A 1959 National Security Council report affirmed US policy to continue developing the ROK as a military ally by strengthening the capabilities of its military leadership and fostering a strong sense of cooperation and friendship toward the United States among the ROK military leadership. The report also outlined US policy to develop the ROK as a military ally by strengthening its military capabilities, including ongoing military assistance to South Korea to maintain agreed force levels and support established military programs and objectives.[14]

Lastly, unlike many other mutual defense treaties, the US–ROK Mutual Defense Treaty exceptionally included a basing provision in Article IV. The United States had previously concluded a separate and detailed Military Bases Agreement with the Philippines in 1947 following Philippine independence. Similarly, the 1960 US–Japan Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty incorporated a comparable basing clause in Article VI. A notable difference, however, was the timing of implementation agreements. In the Japanese case, a detailed agreement governing the operation and use of US bases was signed simultaneously with the 1960 treaty. By contrast, in the Korean case, a comparable agreement, designed to facilitate the implementation of the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, was not concluded until 1966.

The United States appeared to intentionally delay the conclusion of such an agreement with South Korea, even reiterating its proposals while dropping requests for advance written commitments. Internally, South Korea's significant domestic political instability, including the overthrow of President Syngman Rhee in 1960 and the military coup led by Park Chung Hee in 1961, contributed to US reluctance to finalize a long-term legal agreement with what Washington viewed as a politically unstable government. From the Korean perspective, however, this delay suggested unequal treatment, as South Korean officials pointed out that the United States had already established comparable arrangements with its NATO allies, Japan, and the Philippines.[15] The effects of this basing clause are examined in greater detail in the following section.

The Features of the Mutual Defense Treaty

In the finalized treaty, carefully crafted through a series of internal and bilateral discussions, three notable features stand out. First, unlike other US alliance treaties with Asian countries, such as those with the Philippines and Japan, the treaty between the US and South Korea consists of only six articles, making it relatively short. This brevity suggests that the patron (the US) was reluctant to commit to substantial military obligations, especially given the protegee's (South Korea's) strategic goal of eventual unification of the Korean Peninsula using military force. Since treaties are ratified and legally binding, obligating each party to fulfill its commitments, US policymakers at the time appeared to prefer treaties with vague or minimal obligations. This approach reflects its hesitance to incur burdensome commitments that might limit its strategic flexibility.

Second, Article IV establishes the basis for maintaining US forces in South Korea by stipulating that South Korea grants permission for the United States to use its territory for land, air, and sea forces. This distinctive inclusion is significant because it reflects the more direct linkage between alliance

[13] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XXIII, Part 2, Japan; Korea*, Document 8, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v23p2/d8

[14] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume XVIII, Japan; Korea*, Document 279, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v18/d279

[15] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XXII, Northeast Asia*, Document 262, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v22/d262

commitments and US forward military presence on the Korean Peninsula. Whereas in other cases basing arrangements were either handled separately or left outside the formal treaty text, the incorporation of such a clause in the US–ROK agreement underscored the centrality of US forces in deterring renewed conflict in Korea.

Despite some skepticism in the Senate, these provisions were ultimately shaped by broader strategic imperatives, including the aftermath of the Korean War, the need for postwar recovery, and the containment of Soviet influence. Eisenhower recognized the significance of the role that the United States Armed Forces could play in South Korea. He pointed out that this represented a rare opportunity in history for an army deployed in a foreign land to contribute meaningfully to post-war recovery. In this framing, military presence was linked not only to deterrence but also to constructive nation-building, providing the armed forces with a mission focused on the preservation and enhancement of human life rather than its destruction. In turn, such engagement was expected to strengthen US–Korea relations and contribute to broader regional stability.[16]

At the same time, however, the operational meaning of this provision remained dependent on subsequent implementation agreements and political interpretation, particularly regarding the scope and conditions of base use. In this sense, the basing clause not only institutionalized the US military presence in Korea but also left room for continued negotiation over its practical application. For example, such base obligations in alliance treaties are typically not reciprocal; one member may have the right to station troops on the territory of another member or an allied state that grants such rights. In this US-ROK case, the use of South Korea's territory by US forces is conditional upon the US's decision to deploy its troops: the final decision to deploy US troops remains at the United States' own discretion. Although South Korea requires US forces to be stationed on its territory, the ultimate authority to maintain these forces rests with the US This base obligation is the only explicit commitment that both parties are required to fulfill during peacetime.

Lastly, to address the concern of the US Senate, the Mutual Defense Treaty features conditional language regarding potential US involvement in future disputes or conflicts. Article II includes a consultation mechanism, requiring the parties to consult together whenever the political independence or security of either is threatened by external armed attack and to implement the treaty through suitable measures agreed upon in those consultations. This wording emphasizes a process of discussion and coordination when threats arise, prioritizing deterrence and joint responses over automatic military intervention. Moreover, Article III recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific on either party would endanger its own peace and safety and declares that each party would act to meet the common danger, but the action should be in accordance with US constitutional processes. This language in the treaty suggests that the United States, as the patron, tried to signal a limited yet credible commitment. This approach maintains alliance credibility while reducing the risk of entrapment in unwanted conflicts. Overall, such commitments reflect Washington's broader strategy, demonstrating a willingness to support allies against regional adversaries while preserving strategic flexibility to avoid automatic or full-scale involvement in potential future wars.

I. Article IV: Military Base Commitments and Fulfillment

The US-ROK alliance treaty specifically includes the right to "dispose of United States land, air, and sea forces in and around the territory of the Republic of Korea." Negotiation revealed significant divergences between Seoul and Washington in this 'base' related clause. Even before the Korean war, Rhee attempted to persuade US officials to conduct naval demonstrations in Korean waters in order to boost South Korean morale and deter North Korea. He also advocated for the establishment of a US naval base in Korea, reflecting his broader desire to secure as many military advantages and security guarantees as possible for South Korea.[17]

[16] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Draft Memorandum by the President to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense (Wilson), and the Mutual Security Administrator (Stassen)* (Washington, 1953), https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d731.

[17] Central Intelligence Agency, "Rhee Requests US Naval Demonstration and Naval Base in Korea," CIA-RDP82-00457R002100690001-6, December 1948, CIA Reading Room.

After the Korean war, President Rhee advocated for an explicit guarantee permitting the United States to maintain military bases in Korea. In contrast, Secretary Dulles emphasized that while the United States could consult with the Republic of Korea, the treaty could not authorize Korea to impose such military obligations. Dulles further argued that the security arrangement should not preclude future negotiations regarding the withdrawal of foreign troops from the peninsula. He later acknowledged that he would have preferred to avoid negotiating such a treaty altogether, considering it a necessary concession to secure the armistice.[18]

Following the signing of the alliance treaty in 1953, the number of US troops stationed in South Korea peaked at over 500,000, but this gradually dwindled to around 28,500 troops by 2020. The specific number of troops and types of deployed armaments have changed over time; however, a complete withdrawal of US troops from South Korean territory has never occurred. Although massive numbers of troops had been deployed in Korean territory after the Korean war, in 1953, the U.S had a plan to withdraw and reduce its troops. American decision-makers believed that, once South Korea's 20 divisions reached sufficient combat readiness and military capability, the United States could begin withdrawing and redeploying some of its forces, including two US divisions stationed in South Korea.

Radford estimated that these ROK divisions would reach reasonable combat readiness in early 1954. Accordingly, Eisenhower proposed withdrawing the two American divisions from Korea between March and May 1954. On December 26, 1953, Eisenhower announced that US Army forces in Korea would be reduced as circumstances permitted. As an initial measure, he ordered the withdrawal of two divisions back to the United States. However, the US also considered it inadvisable to make substantial reductions in its air and naval forces. Radford also emphasized that the decision to withdraw depended on the US government's assessment of whether the Korean Peninsula had settled into a prolonged stalemate. Eisenhower also cautioned that any renewed aggression from the adversaries in Korea would prompt the United States to respond with even greater military force than previously employed.[19]

Following Eisenhower's announcement to withdraw two US Army divisions from South Korea, the South Korean government generally adopted a restrained stance of opposition, while public reactions were marked by confusion and disappointment, sentiments that were largely not openly expressed and remained subdued in official discourse.[20] Ultimately, on January 23, 1954, the US military withdrew two divisions—the 40th and 45th.

Later, the Nixon administration announced the "Guam policy," which emphasized that its role in Asia should be primarily supportive rather than directive, stressing that Asian countries themselves should assume responsibility for their own security and political development. While reaffirming its commitment to honor existing treaty obligations, the administration argued that the United States should avoid policies that foster excessive dependence, which could otherwise draw it into regional conflicts such as Vietnam.[21] It also showed the US's intention to remove a number of troops from the minor allies' territories and emphasizing burden sharing with alliance members.[22] To reduce South Korea's concerns on troop reduction, President Nixon sent a letter to President Park stating that, under the Nixon Doctrine, any reduction of US overseas forces would proceed only in line with the growing capabilities of host countries. He confirmed that there were no plans for additional troop withdrawals from South Korea at that time and assured that any future reductions would be undertaken only after full consultation with South Korea and a joint assessment of security conditions.[23] Despite such direct assurances in official communications, the number of deployed US troops in South Korea nonetheless declined from approximately 66,500 to 40,000 during the Nixon administration.

[18] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Memorandum of Conversation, by Elizabeth A. Brown of the Office of United Nations Political and Security Affairs* (Washington, 1953), accessed March 17, 2026, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d732.

[19] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Memorandum of Discussion at the 173rd Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, December 3, 1953*, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v15p2/d811.

[20] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *The Ambassador in Korea (Briggs) to the Department of State* (Seoul, 1954), https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v16/d25.

[21] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972*, Document 29, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d29

[22] Philipp C. Bleek and Eric B. Lorber, "Security Guarantees and Allied Nuclear Proliferation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 3 (2014): 429-454, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24545647.

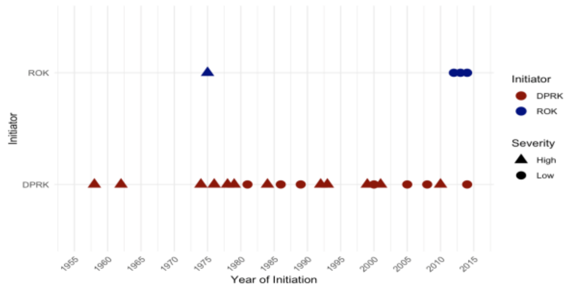
[23] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XIX, Part 1, Korea, 1969–1972*, Document 115, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d115.

As a more recent example, the first Trump administration shifted its view on alliances from a "communal sharing" approach to a "market pricing" approach.[24] Trump asserted that US forces would be withdrawn from Japan and South Korea if these allies failed to share the financial burden of managing the alliances. From long before he became president, dating back to a 1990 *Playboy* interview, and continuing until March 2019, he consistently argued that US allies were free riding on American military protection. During his presidential campaigns and tenure, he openly questioned the value of deploying US forces to East Asian allies, particularly South Korea.[25] Although Trump argued for a complete withdrawal of US troops, such actions did not materialize. During his first term, the number of US troops in South Korea remained relatively stable. In 2017, at the start of his presidency, approximately 23,634 US troops were stationed in South Korea. Instead of reducing the troop presence, the numbers slightly increased, reaching a total of 26,414 troops in 2020.

These decisions can once again be understood within the context of the United States' dual objectives within the network of Asian alliances: ensuring effective deterrence while avoiding entrapment. The first strategic goal of the United States in the region cannot be fully realized through a complete withdrawal of its troops. Persistent—and in some cases, intensified—external threats have rendered total disengagement from the Korean Peninsula increasingly untenable. Following the establishment of the Mutual Defense Treaty, South Korea's armed forces have steadily modernized and significantly enhanced their capabilities, but given the increasingly hostile environment, these improvements have still fallen short of fully substituting the presence of US military forces. During the Cold War era, very intense North Korea's provocations against South Korea occurred in the late 1960s to 1970s.[26] Even back then, North Korea's nuclear crisis and continuous conventional provocations threatened regional security and stability.

Another key objective achieved through the forward deployment of US troops has been to constrain South Korea's strategic autonomy. As the historical formation of the alliance illustrates, the US military presence has enabled close monitoring and control over Seoul's behavior—not only during the Syngman Rhee era, but throughout subsequent authoritarian regimes. With troops stationed on the peninsula, the United States has been able to monitor and restrain the Republic of Korea's independent military actions through integrated joint training, exercises, and operational coordination. By embedding US forces in South Korea, Washington also secures substantial leverage in alliance negotiations and bargaining processes. Seoul is incentivized to align its defense policies with American strategic priorities and to refrain from unilateral actions that might diverge from alliance objectives.

Figure 1. Militarized Interstate Disputes between Two Koreas



As depicted in Figure 1 above, North Korea's continuous provocations and severe disputes against South Korea have been evident since the aftermath of the Korean War. At first, North Korea held a relative advantage in conventional military capabilities compared to South Korea, particularly in the late 1950s and 1960s. Between the 1950s and 1970s, the North Korean Army (KPA) significantly developed its conventional military power and armaments, largely through equipment supplied by its major allies, China and the Soviet Union.[27] Kim Il-sung initiated a comprehensive program to modernize the KPA and accelerated efforts to enhance its offensive conventional warfare capabilities, particularly

[24] Mark S. Bell and Joshua D. Kertzer, "Trump, Psychology and the Future of US Alliances," in *Assessing the US Commitment to Allies in Asia and Beyond*, ed. Sharon Stirling (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2018), 6-13.

[25] Victor Cha and Andy Lim, "Database: Donald Trump's Skepticism of US Troops in Korea Since 1990," *Beyond Parallel*, February 25, 2019, https://beyondparallel.csis.org/database-donald-trumps-skepticism-u-s-troops-korea-since-1990/.

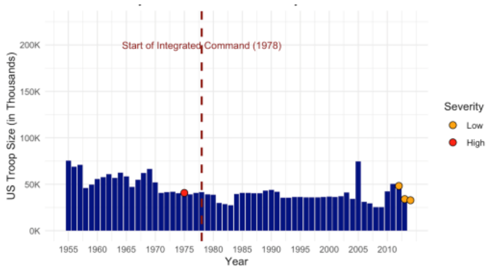
[26] US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *North Korean Provocative Actions, 1950-2007*, by Hannah Fischer, RL30004 (2007), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL30004.pdf.

[27] Kim Min-seok. "The State of the North Korean Military." In Korea Net Assessment 2020: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities, edited by Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto. Chicago: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020.

throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[28] During this period, given North Korea's comparative advantage in conventional military strength and its frequent incursions into South Korean territory, the issue of reducing troop levels or entirely withdrawing forces from the Korean Peninsula remained a contentious topic among US decision-makers.

In 1962, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric wrote to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that "the removal of a division not only would dilute our current deterrent to Communist aggression in Korea to an unacceptable level but could also lead to an undesirable change in the US/ROK command relationship. It might also cause the ROK to become reluctant to continue US operational control of ROK forces."[29] In this statement, he clearly identified two primary objectives: deterring Communist aggression and maintaining US control over South Korean forces.

Figure 2: US's Military Commitments and Military Disputes Initiated by South Korea



Related to the goal of restraining minor allies, as Figure 2 above shows, large numbers of military troops were deployed after the Korean War, while the militarized interstate data indicate that only four militarized disputes were initiated by South Korea. In other words, because South Korea was highly dependent on the United States militarily, the presence of US forces increased Washington's leverage over South Korean military policy. To avoid the risk of US entrapment in any unilateral ROK escalation, the United States was therefore able to exert greater pressure on Seoul to restrain provocative actions. As a result, the US-ROK mutual security arrangement functioned not only to deter North Korea but also to constrain potentially escalatory actions by the South Korea. The responses of the US and South Korea to provocations were measured to prevent the escalation of conflicts, despite numerous provocative and antagonizing actions by North Korea.

The continuous presence of US military forces stationed in South Korea has restrained it from carrying out massive military retaliation against North Korea's provocations. This restraint was due to concerns that such retaliation could trigger severe escalation, potentially involving North Korea's long-time allies, the Soviet Union and China.[30] One specific case illustrating the militarized dispute patterns between the two Koreas is the Korean DMZ conflicts between 1966 and 1969. Although no large-scale battles occurred, a series of low-level armed clashes between North Korean forces and those of South Korea and the United States were recorded. These clashes resulted in fatal militarized disputes, as both sides reported the deaths of their soldiers in the DMZ area. Most provocations along the 38th parallel were attributed to North Korea, including a failed attempt to assassinate former president Park Chung Hee by sending thirty-one commandos to Seoul in 1968. While the South responded with minor retaliatory actions, these were generally restrained. The United States neither agreed on nor permitted South Korea's plans for retaliatory action and Park Chung Hee's administration came to recognize that relying on US security guarantees constrained its ability to make autonomous strategic decisions.[31] The US aimed to avoid any excessively provocative actions, as it was concerned about escalating conflicts during the Cold War.[32]

Another example of compelled restraint is the axe murder incident that occurred in 1976. In this incident, two United States Army officers were killed by North Korean soldiers at the JSA in Panmunjom while they were trimming a tree. To address this incident, Park Chung -hee sent a message to General Stilwell, who served as Commander of United States

[28] Defense Intelligence Agency. North Korea Military Power: A Growing Regional and Global Threat. Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021.

[29] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *274. Letter from the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric) to Secretary of State Rusk* (Washington, 1962), https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v22/d274.

[30] Sung-Chool Lee, *The ROK-US Joint Political and Military Response to North Korean Armed Provocations* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), https://www.csis.org/analysis/rok-us-joint-political-and-military-response-north-korean-armed-provocations.

[31] Yoon, Tae-Young. "Managing the Korean Crisis: A Case Study of the Panmunjom Axe Murder Incident of 1976." Korea Observer 31, no. 4 (2000): 639–668.; Hong, Soon-ho. *1968 년 푸에블로 사건과 남한・북한・미국의 삼각 관계* [The Triangular Foreign Relations in Korea during the Pueblo Crisis of 1968]. The Journal of Korean History (2001): 179–208. [In Korean]; Cho, Dong-Jun. *데탕트 국면에서 박정희 행정부의 선택* [Park Chung Hee's Strategic Choices during the Détente Period]. EAI NSP Report no. 71. Seoul: East Asia Institute, 2014. [In Korean].

[32] Mitchell Lerner, "The Domestic Origins of the Second Korean War: New Evidence from Communist Bloc Archives," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 31, no. 1 (2018): 81.

Forces Korea (USFK) at the time. The president urged the US to take resolute retaliatory action against North Korea and suggested the participation of the ROK Special Forces in the operation.[33] On the other hand, Stilwell advocated a risk-averse position, and his policy recommendations were limited in scope, not extending beyond the JSA.[34] As a result, the US government responded by cutting down the tree with a show of naval and air force. However, the US dominated the crisis management procedures during the incident, which restrained further provocative actions by South Korea.[35]

In summary, the United States has fulfilled its military base commitments under the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty throughout the post-treaty period, even as the number of deployed troops has fluctuated over time. Although debates persist within the US government regarding the continued presence of military bases on South Korean territory, this arrangement provides the United States with opportunities to exert influence over its smaller allies in the region.

II. Extra Military Commitments Beyond the Treaty: Combined Forces Command

Some alliance treaties include an "Integrated Command" obligation, which represents the highest level of joint preparation. Alliances with this provision have unified armed forces, and these forces are controlled under an integrated military command, both in peacetime and wartime.[36] For example, the additional protocols to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) agreed upon in 1951 include provisions for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, responsible for commanding all NATO operations. These institutions aim to enhance the integration of NATO forces and establish clear lines of command in the event of a crisis or war.

In general, an integrated command should designate an allied armed forces chief command and establish a chief of staff committee and a joint staff. The Commander-in-Chief and the high command of the armed forces are responsible for facilitating coordination. This command should include, at a minimum, operational commands (land, air, and maritime), a joint intelligence system, and an integrated defense system to execute essential operational and peacetime missions. Therefore, establishing an integrated military command also requires high sunk costs and a strong institutional framework to promote cooperation among alliance member states. This is a costly endeavor for allies, since maintaining integrated command structures abroad requires ongoing funding, not just initial investments. For instance, NATO allocates around 3.8 billion euros ($4.1 billion) annually to support its integrated command structure, which includes air and naval bases, satellite communications, and fuel pipelines.[37]

In contrast to the NATO case, where integrated military structures were established shortly after the treaty's signing, the ROK–US Combined Forces Command (CFC) was not created following the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. Instead, the CFC was formally established in 1978 and was not envisaged in the original treaty text. The goal of the ROK–US Combined Forces Command is to deter external hostile acts against South Korea through the combined efforts of both nations and to decisively defeat any armed attack against it. The commander of the CFC exercises operational control over allied forces in accordance with strategic guidance and operational directives transmitted through the Military Committee of the ROK–US alliance. The structure is designed to enhance the efficiency of combined operations between ROK and US forces.[38]

The formalization of the CFC occurred amidst shifting power dynamics within the United Nations and the US' withdrawal plan during the 1970s. First, the entry of the People's Republic of China to the UN in 1971 and the increase of Third World nations' voice and influence heightened concerns about the future of the United Nations Command (UNC). During the 29th session of the UN General Assembly in 1974, communist-aligned delegations officially proposed to dissolve the UNC. Anticipating the potential implementation of such a dissolution, the United States promoted the development of a bilateral US-ROK combined force arrangement and established

[33] Yoon, "Managing the Korean Crisis."
[34] Gregory Winger, "Prospect Theory and Civil–Military Conflict: The Case of the 1976 Korean Axe Murder Incident," *Armed Forces & Society* 43, no. 4 (2017): 734-757, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609225.
[35] Yoon, "Managing the Korean Crisis."
[36] Ashley Leeds, Brett, and Sezi Anac. "Alliance institutionalization and alliance performance." *International Interactions* 31.3 (2005): 183-202.
[37] BBC News. "How Much Do NATO Members Spend on Defence?" February 18, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44717074.
[38] "한미연합군사령부 [ROK-US Combined Forces Command]," National Archives of Korea, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/listSubjectDescription.do?id=006382&sitePage=.

the Military Committee as alternative mechanisms to preserve military cooperation.[39]

The Nixon Doctrine led to the withdrawal of the US 7th Infantry Division from South Korea in 1971. Additionally, Carter's proposal included removing approximately 32,000 ground troops from South Korea over five years.[40] Not surprisingly, Carter's plans to withdraw US forces raised concerns in South Korea about the security commitment from the United States. South Korean President Park emphasized the urgent need for compensatory measures to maintain deterrence on the peninsula. To address these concerns, one of the steps taken was the establishment of the CFC.[41] The agreement on the establishment of the CFC was reached through the ROK–US Security Consultative Meeting and formalized in 1978.

Lastly, the CFC was established because the United States sought to retain operational control over South Korean forces due to concerns about the possibility of renewed war on the Korean Peninsula. In particular, operational control (OPCON) of the South Korean military was transferred to the Commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) during the Korean War. In 1978, with the establishment of the ROK–US Combined Forces Command, OPCON was transferred to the Commander of the CFC, a position that has been held by a four-star US general who concurrently serves as the commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) and United States Forces Korea (USFK), thereby ensuring continued American leadership over combined military operations on the Korean Peninsula. From 1978 to 1994, the CFC exercised both peacetime and wartime operational control authority.

Discussions regarding the transfer of peacetime operational control (Peacetime Operational Control, or OPCON) of the South Korean military began in 1988 during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Roh Tae-woo. On December 1, 1994, peacetime operational control was transferred to the South Korean military, and since then the Chairman of the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff has exercised peacetime OPCON. In other words, prior to 1994, the Commander of the Combined Forces Command retained operational control over all South Korean military forces, except for the II Corps, the Special Warfare Command, and the Capital Defense Command, during both peacetime and wartime. During wartime, the Commander also exercised operational control over all South Korean forces except the Capital Defense Command.[42] This arrangement was intended to restrain unilateral military action by the South Korean armed forces amid the ongoing reduction of US Forces Korea, while also ensuring that the Commander of the Combined Forces Command could firmly exercise command and control authority over both South Korean and US forces.

Considering that peacetime operational control (OPCON) was not transferred to South Korea until 1994, the United States remained reluctant to relinquish military authority on the Korean Peninsula throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a period marked by considerable political instability in South Korea. Washington sought to prevent the outbreak of another war on the peninsula while simultaneously expressing concern over what it perceived as Seoul's increasingly hardline and potentially provocative posture toward North Korea. In particular, following the 1968 Blue House raid attempt and North Korea's seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, the Park Chung-hee administration, dissatisfied with what it regarded as Washington's restrained response to North Korean provocations, sought to reclaim operational control (OPCON) authority. During the crisis management process, South Korea and the United States agreed that the Republic of Korea would exercise control over counter-infiltration and counterinsurgency operations. However, the South Korean request for the transfer of wartime operational control was ultimately not accepted by the United States.[43]

[39] "한미연합군사령부 [ROK-US Combined Forces Command]."

[40] Jeffrey B. Gayner, *Withdrawal of US Ground Forces from Korea* (The Heritage Foundation, 1977), acccessed March 19, 2026, https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/withdrawal-us-ground-forces-korea.

[41] *Memorandum of Conversation, President Park Chung Hee, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, et al., July 25, 1977 (Secret)*, National Security Archive, June 1, 2017, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22876-document-02-memorandum-conversation-president.

[42] Soyeon Lee and Jihwan Hwang, *국가안보전략과 전시작전통제권 전환 정책 변화: 노무현, 이명박, 박근혜 정부의 비교연구* [The National Security Strategy and Wartime Operational Control Policy: Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye Governments], *국가전략* [National Strategy], 27, no. 1 (2021): 129–155.

[43] Choi, Yong-hwan. *한반도 안보환경의 변화와 전시작전통제권 전환*[Korea's Security Situation Change and Wartime OPCON Transition Issues]. Seoul: Institute for National Security Strategy, 2022. https://www.inss.re.kr/upload/bbs/BBSA05/202202/F20220221164403538.pdf. Accessed May 10, 2026.

Especially, US Ambassador William Porter notably warned in a cable to Washington that "Park's desire to go north is not much less acute than his adversary's intention, someday, to move south," likening the South Korean leadership to a "tiger" that had become increasingly difficult to restrain.[44] This perception reflected a broader American concern about the potential for impulsive or unilateral actions by South Korea during the Park regime. As such, an integrated command structure can serve as institutional tools which were not only designed to enhance operational efficiency but also functioned as mechanisms for political and strategic control over its ally. This approach helps mitigate the risk of unintentional escalation into severe conflicts, and this strong control over protégés may lead to fewer hostile behaviors against their potential adversaries.

In other words, one of the key background factors behind the establishment of the CFC was the perceived necessity to create such a command structure before the completion of the first phase of US troop withdrawals. However, beyond this strategic rationale, the United States may have had another important objective.[45] The establishment of the joint military command is crucial not only for expressing the strong combined will of the ROK and the US but also for controlling South Korea. the United States also viewed the CFC as an additional institutional mechanism for restraining possible unilateral actions by South Korea and for maintaining effective control over combined military operations during 1970s-1980s.

Under the CFC structure, all key operational command positions—including the commander-in-chief and chief of staff—are held by US military personnel. In this context, South Korea could continue to expect deterrence against North Korea's surprise attacks through the alliance's strengthened institutional arrangements despite reductions in deployed US troops. At the same time, the establishment of the CFC as an additional US military commitment increased Washington's leverage over its smaller ally, enabling the United States to better control and restrain potentially provocative actions by Seoul. The second goal of the US has thus been achieved. As shown in Figure 2, since the establishment of the CFC in 1978, South Korea has not initiated any severe military disputes. This indicates that the integrated command serves as a tool for the patron to prevent undesirable and risky wars initiated by allies and to enhance credibility in security assurances. The US can effectively apply pressure on South Korea's decision-making process or persuade and motivate its protégé to refrain from unnecessary conflicts.

III. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The United States' two key military commitments, integrated command structures and troop basing arrangements, play a significant role in shaping South Korea's strategic autonomy and the credibility of US security assurances. These peacetime alliance commitments are more likely to deter promote restraint among assertive protégés, mitigating the risk of war. Such commitments function as strategic tools to prevent undesirable or risky conflicts, thereby maintaining regional stability within the alliance framework.

Fulfilling promises of alliance coordination can serve as an important signal of credibility and an effective instrument of alliance management. Although transforming the alliance from a provider–recipient relationship into a more co-managed security partnership remains an important long-term objective, the durability of the US–ROK alliance ultimately depends not merely on reciprocal demands, but on a shared recognition of mutual strategic necessity in preserving regional stability. In particular, the historical cases discussed above suggest that whenever the United States attempted to reduce its military commitments on the Korean Peninsula, whether through troop withdrawals or burden-sharing pressures, it often introduced alternative forms of institutional or strategic commitments to preserve two core objectives: maintaining influence and control over allied military decision-making, and sustaining credible deterrence against adversaries. The establishment of the ROK–US Combined Forces Command (CFC), for instance, simultaneously reflected efforts to manage alliance coordination and to compensate for perceived reductions in direct US military presence.

Accordingly, alliance adjustment is rarely cost-free. Any effort to restructure alliance commitments inevitably generates trade-offs between military

[44] US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *90. Letter from the Ambassador to Korea (Porter) to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy)* (Seoul, 1966), https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d90.

[45] *Memorandum of Conversation, President Park Chung Hee, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, et al.*

efficiency, political influence, deterrence credibility, and alliance autonomy. Policymakers should therefore evaluate alliance reforms not solely in terms of immediate financial burdens or troop levels, but in light of their broader strategic consequences. The central policy challenge is not whether costs can be eliminated, but rather which form of commitment structure is most strategically beneficial for sustaining long-term deterrence, alliance cohesion, and regional stability.

Additionally, the findings can also contribute to understanding the recent transformation of the North Korea–Russia alliance and its implications for the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. Since the summer of 2023, DPRK–Russia strategic ties have rapidly intensified, culminating in Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in June 2024. During this visit, Putin and Kim Jong-un signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which notably includes a mutual defense clause.[46] Analysts have observed that this agreement could pave the way for Russia to transfer advanced military technologies to North Korea.[47] In particular, Moscow reportedly provided Pyongyang with key technologies for the development of nuclear-powered submarines in the first half of 2025. This would represent a significant qualitative leap in North Korea's weapons systems and could fundamentally alter the strategic balance on the Korean Peninsula.[48] The Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) reported in 2025 that Russia had transferred a range of military systems to North Korea, including short-range air defense systems and advanced electronic warfare capabilities, along with related operational expertise and technical knowledge.[49]

By supporting Russia's war effort while simultaneously receiving advanced military assistance, North Korea has significantly enhanced its defense posture. Russian assistance may help Pyongyang offset the conventional military imbalance it faces against the US–ROK alliance. Not only would this further strengthen North Korea's military capabilities, but it may also elevate the threat it poses to the United States and its allies. Even prior to the revival of this alliance, North Korea had already demonstrated increasingly provocative behavior. Missile activity has surged under Kim Jong Un's leadership. During the Kim Jong Il's era (1994–2011), North Korea conducted only 16 missile launches. In contrast, under Kim Jong Un (2011–2024), the regime has launched over 200 missiles, indicating a clear shift in both frequency and strategic intent.[50] With increased military backing from Moscow, Kim Jong-un may feel emboldened to take even more assertive actions to enhance his leverage in regional or international negotiations.

The revival of the Russia–North Korea alignment and an emboldened North Korea is no longer a distant risk but an emerging strategic reality. As military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang deepens, the foundations of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula are being steadily eroded. Enhanced access to advanced technologies, combined with growing operational confidence, is likely to make North Korea both more capable and more willing to take risks. For Washington, this shift requires a reassessment of priorities. North Korea can no longer remain a secondary concern amid broader geopolitical challenges. Instead, the United States, together with South Korea, must adapt its deterrence posture to reflect a more complex threat environment. This entails moving beyond traditional alliance frameworks toward a more integrated and dynamic strategic approach—one that strengthens extended deterrence, reinforces missile defense capabilities beyond existing treaty-based commitments, and constrains the deepening military cooperation between Russia and North Korea.

[46] Artyom Lukin, "The Korean Peninsula's New Geopolitics: Why North Korea Is Shifting Toward an Alliance with Russia," *Asia Policy* 19, no. 3 (2024): 57-69.

[47] US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Russia-North Korea Relations*, by Andrew S. Bowen, Mark E. Manyin, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, IF12760 (2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12760.

[48] "Confirmed by South Korean Intelligence: Russia has Given North Korea the Technology to Create the Ultimate Weapon," *CE Noticias Financieras*, September 28, 2025, https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/confirmed-south-korean-intelligence-russia-has/docview/3255588590/se-2.

[49] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "Release of the First Report of the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT)." May 30, 2025. Accessed May 10, 2026. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_01321.html.

[50] "The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database," Nuclear Threat Initiative, Nov. 12, 2024, https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/.

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North Korean Information Operations: Impact and Implications for Regional Security

By
Kinnidie White

Executive Summary

Kinnidie White

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) information operations (IO) as a central pillar of its national security strategy. It argues that the DPRK's IO capabilities have evolved from traditional propaganda into a sophisticated, AI-enhanced hybrid warfare doctrine designed to achieve three core objectives: secure time for clandestine nuclear development through strategic deception, generate billions in illicit revenue via industrial-scale cyber theft to finance the state, and maintain absolute domestic control through a technological and coercive information monopoly. The paper examines the institutionalization of these operations, including the creation of specialized AI-hacking units and the use of remote IT workers. It analyzes their hybrid application in case studies targeting the US-ROK alliance. A central thesis examines the core strategic paradox facing the allied response: the challenge of relying on visible trilateral partnerships to build public credibility in an era where adversaries no longer prioritize secrecy, choosing instead to control the narrative around their inevitable exposure. The paper concludes by outlining immediate policy imperatives—such as attacking the regime's financial engine and reinforcing allied credibility—and provides a long-term strategic forecast to 2035, proposing an adaptive framework to counter the DPRK's future AI-autonomous threats.

Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) presents one of the most enduring and complex challenges to international security. While its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs justifiably garner significant global attention, they are supported and enabled by an equally critical, and perhaps less thoroughly comprehended, instrument of national power: its sophisticated information operations (IO) enterprise. Far from being constrained to mere propaganda, North Korea's IO strategy has evolved into a multi-domain, hybrid warfare capability inextricably linked to the grand strategy of regime preservation. As digital technologies and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) reshape the landscape of international relations, a deeper understanding of how the DPRK conducts these operations is critical to developing effective policy responses and maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula.

This paper examines the evolving nature of North Korean information operations and their broad implications for regional security. The central argument is that the DPRK's IO capabilities—a synthesis of deception, offensive cyber warfare, and psychological operations—function as a critical enabler for its core strategic objectives. These operations secure advantages for clandestine weapons development, generate illicit revenue to circumvent sanctions, and exert control over the domestic populace.

This paper is structured into six parts. First, it analyzes the evolution of North Korea's information operations into a strategic, AI-enhanced weapon. Second, it investigates the role these operations play in the DPRK's broader strategy by examining the three pillars of its IO doctrine: strategic deception, financial theft, and domestic information control. Third, it assesses the hybrid application of these tools through case studies. Fourth, it examines the core strategic paradox facing the US-ROK alliance: the challenge of coordinating a response in an era where the lines between visible and covert operations have become increasingly blurred. Fifth, it outlines immediate policy imperatives for the United States (US), the Republic of Korea (ROK), and their allies. Finally, it provides a strategic forecast of the threat landscape through 2035 and proposes a long-term framework for future-proofing the alliance.

Information Operations Defined

Understanding the threat landscape requires first explaining Information Operations is defined and operationalized. In U.S. military doctrine, IO has historically been framed as an integrating function. Joint Publication 3-13 defines IO as the synchronized employment of core capabilities, such as psychological operations, electronic warfare, military deception, and operations security, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial decision-making while protecting friendly assets.[1] More recently, frameworks such as the Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment (JCOIE) have expanded this definition to emphasize informational and physical power to shape the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of relevant actors.[2] In reality, however, the practical application of US IO is often compartmentalized, as actions in the information space are subject to strict legal and institutional restrictions that prioritize truthful public messaging.

Conversely, North Korea does not parse the same bureaucratic or legal distinctions. North Korean information operations fuse electronic warfare, cyber espionage, destructive malware, and psychological operations under a unified command structure, primarily directed by the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB).[3] While U.S. doctrine often treats IO as a supporting element for broader military objectives, North Korean doctrine views it as a primary, persistent offensive capability. These operations are a fully integrated component of its national strategy, serving as a direct force multiplier for the regime's economic and military objectives. The state conducts continuous grey zone information operations to achieve tangible outcomes.

I. The Evolution of the "All-Purpose Sword"

North Korea's investment in information warfare is not a recent phenomenon. Kim Jong Il reportedly declared in the 1990s that "war will be fought as information warfare," recognizing its potential as a

[1] Joint Publication 3-13, Information Operations, Nov. 20, 2014, pg ix.
[2] Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment (JCOIE), 25 July 2018, pg. vii.
[3] Heylyung Yun, "North Korea's Pursuit of Coercive Leverage in the Information Age: Expanding Cyber and Counterspace Capabilities," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 2025, 23(2): 331-356, Aug. 31, 2025.

powerful asymmetric tool.[4] [1] Information warfare provides North Korea with the means of accomplishing its strategic goals despite the relative overmatch posed by its adversaries. This perspective is grounded in the strategic logic of the "stability-instability paradox," which posits that when two states possess nuclear weapons, the resulting strategic stability deters large-scale war but paradoxically encourages lower-intensity conflicts.[5] For the DPRK, information operations, cyber-attacks, and "gray zone" provocations *are* a form of low-intensity conflict, conducted under the protection of its nuclear shield.

It is under Kim Jong Un that this vision has been institutionalized and operationalized, with cyber warfare being publicly elevated to the status of an "all-purpose sword," equivalent in strategic value to nuclear weapons and missiles.[6] This evolution since 2010 can be segmented into distinct, albeit overlapping, phases defined by motivation, capability, and technological integration.

Early North Korean cyber operations were primarily concerned with disruption, espionage, and psychological harassment, with South Korea as the most frequent victim.[7] The 2014 hack of Sony Pictures Entertainment, while demonstrating surprising reach, remained largely an act of retribution and intimidation.[8] A significant strategic shift occurred as international sanctions tightened in response to the DPRK's nuclear and missile tests. The regime's commitment to its *byungjin* line—the simultaneous development of the economy and nuclear weapons—required massive, sustainable income sources.[9] Accordingly, the regime's cyber apparatus was re-tasked to meet this demand, transforming North Korea's cyber units into one of the world's most formidable illicit financial enterprises.

Groups like North Korea's own LAZARUS (also known as APT 38) executed large-scale thefts, including the $81 million theft from Bangladesh Bank in 2016.[10] This focus has since become specialized in the cryptocurrency space, reaching an industrial scale of systematic revenue generation. Between January 2024 and September 2025, North Korean actors stole an estimated $2.8 billion in cryptocurrency.[11] This period includes the February 2025 Bybit exchange heist of $1.5 billion, which demonstrated an unprecedented scale and sophistication.[12] These stolen funds are a strategic state asset, with estimates suggesting that cyber-enabled theft funds as much as one-third of the DPRK's entire weapons budget.[13]

The Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB), the DPRK's premier foreign intelligence and clandestine operations service, serves as a central hub for specialized units, including Bureau 121 (its primary hacking component) and APT 43 (which supports the nuclear program).[14] These units, numbering between 3,000 and 6,000 personnel, are staffed by a corps of elite hackers trained from a young age at domestic universities.[15]

The regime publicly signaled this reprioritization in the 2022 military parade, which, for the first time, featured a dedicated electronic and cyber warfare unit, placing it on par with conventional and strategic forces. This public showcase demonstrates a deliberate, state-directed allocation of resources. APT 37, sponsored by the Ministry of State Security (MSS), focuses on traditional espionage. Meanwhile, the Lazarus sub-groups, BlueNoroff and Andariel, specialize in financial theft and attacks on South Korean targets, respectively.[16]

The most recent and alarming development is the DPRK's adoption of AI and deepening ties with other similarly aligned authoritarian states. Recent intelligence indicates the formation of "Research Center 227," a specialized unit of approximately 90 computer specialists focused on developing offensive technologies to enhance cyber warfare, including the use of AI for automated data collection and destabilizing foreign security

[4] Min-hyung Kim, "North Korea's Cyber Capabilities and Their Implications for International Security," *Sustainability* 14, no. 3 (2022): 1744.
[5] Kim, "North Korea's Cyber Capabilities."
[6] Ibid.
[7] US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *North Korean Cyber Capabilities: In Brief*, by Emma Chanlett-Avery, John W. Rollins, Liana W. Rosen, and Catherine A. Theohary, R44912 (2018).
[8] US Library of Congress, *Cyber Capabilities: In Brief*.
[9] Daniel A. Pinkston, "North Korea's Objectives and Activities in Cyberspace," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 2 (2020): 77.
[10] US Library of Congress, *Cyber Capabilities: In Brief*.
[11] Jomar Teves, "North Korea Accused of Stealing $2.84 Billion in Crypto since 2024 with China's Help," *International Business Times*, 23 October 2025.
[12] Joe Tidy, "North Korean Hackers Cash Out Hundreds of Millions from $1.5bn ByBit Hack," *BBC*, March 9, 2025.
[13] Jerry M. Couretas, *Cyber Operations: A Case Study Approach*, Ch 7.1.4, DPRK Cyber Operations Wrap-Up., Wiley, 2024.
[14] Couretas, *Cyber Operations*.
[15] US Library of Congress, *Cyber Capabilities: In Brief*.
[16] Pinkston, "North Korea's Objectives," 80.

networks.[17] This reflects a sophisticated dual-track AI strategy: exploiting publicly available models for immediate gains while building indigenous AI capabilities for long-term autonomous operations.[14] Microsoft's 2025 digital threats report identified over 200 instances of foreign adversaries, including North Korea, using AI to create deceptive content.[18] North Korean hackers, including the Kimsuky group, have been observed using Large Language Models (LLMs) to circumvent safety measures, refine phishing campaigns through fluent language generation, and create fabricated military identification documents and deepfakes for sophisticated social engineering attacks.[19] This allows them to overcome a long-standing weakness in their psychological operations, which were often characterized by awkward phrasing.[20]

II. IO as a Core Enabler of National Strategy

North Korea's information operations are not conducted in a vacuum. They are a fully integrated component of its national strategy, acting as a force multiplier for its economic and military objectives. The overarching goal is regime survival, which the Kim dynasty has defined by a credible nuclear deterrent and absolute domestic control. Information operations are the essential connective tissue that enables both.

Component 1: Deception to Enable Nuclear Development

The regime has proven itself to be a highly proficient practitioner of strategic deception, systematically using diplomatic engagement as a smokescreen to secure time and resources for its clandestine weapons programs. This strategy of deceptive agreements has been the cornerstone of its nuclear diplomacy for decades.

This pattern is undeniable. The 1994 "Agreed Framework" saw the DPRK freeze its plutonium program in exchange for fuel oil and light-water reactors.[21] The US and its allies, believing the program was halted, adhered to the agreement. During this time, North Korea was secretly pursuing a second path to the bomb via a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, a fact it admitted only in 2002 when confronted.[22]

The DPRK repeated this pattern during the Six-Party Talks (2003-2009). This forum, involving both Koreas, the US, China, Japan, and Russia, was a masterclass in North Korean deception. In 2005, the DPRK signed a joint statement pledging to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs. Just one year later, in 2006, it conducted its first secret nuclear test. It continued to engage in negotiations, extracting concessions and securing more time, before conducting a second test in 2009 and withdrawing from the talks.[23]

The 2018 summits between Kim Jong Un and President Donald Trump were a clear demonstration of this doctrine. The "great deception," as described by David Sanger and William Broad, involved the DPRK's public offer to dismantle the Sohae satellite launching site—a superficial concession—while simultaneously continuing production and improvements at over a dozen hidden, undeclared ballistic missile bases.[24] The regime committed to the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." To Western ears, this sounded like a pledge to dismantle its arsenal. To the DPRK, it was a long-standing propaganda line requiring the complete withdrawal of US forces from South Korea and the removal of the US nuclear umbrella, an entirely untenable proposition.[25]

Component 2: Cyber-Enabled Theft to Finance the State

The second critical function of IO is to finance the state. The US has employed sanctions designed to starve the DPRK of the resources needed to build and maintain its nuclear arsenal. Offensive cyber operations are the regime's solution. This has evolved into a two-pronged strategy: large-scale theft and large-scale fraud.

First, in terms of theft, the billions stolen from cryptocurrency exchanges and financial institutions are laundered through complex networks, often

[17] "North Korea Created an AI-Specialized Hacker Unit to Strengthen Cyber Warfare Capabilities," *CE Noticias Financieras English* ed.; Miami. March 26, 2025.

[18] Microsoft Corporation, *Microsoft Digital Defense Report 2025* (2025), 48-51, https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/msc/documents/presentations/CSR/Microsoft-Digital-Defense-Report-2025.pdf#page=1.

[19] James Coker, "AI-Forged Military IDs Used in North Korea Phishing Attack," *Infosecurity Magazine*, Sept. 15, 2025.

[20] Pinkston, "North Korea's Objectives," 81.

[21] Hwee-rhak Park, "North Korea's Nuclear Armament Strategy and Deception," *Defence Studies* 23, no. 1 (2023): 133–34.

[22] Park, "Nuclear Armament Strategy and Deception," 135.

[23] Ibid.

[24] David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "In North Korea, Missile Bases Suggest a Great Deception," *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2018.

[25] Park, "Nuclear Armament Strategy and Deception," 140.

using Chinese, Russian, and Cambodian intermediaries, and funneled directly into WMD programs.[26] This has recently evolved to include participation in the Ransomware as a Service (RaaS) market, demonstrating a shift from centralized state-led operations to decentralized criminal partnerships, which complicates attribution.[27]

Second, when it comes to state-sponsored fraud, North Korea has deployed thousands of highly skilled IT workers abroad. These operatives use fake identities, sophisticated social engineering, and even AI-powered deepfakes during video interviews to secure legitimate remote work jobs at technology and finance companies. US-based facilitators have enabled the employment of over 10,000 North Korean operatives at hundreds of companies.[28] These workers earn hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, which are then repatriated to the regime. This scheme not only generates a steady, reliable stream of foreign currency but also provides the regime with invaluable intelligence and potential network access, representing a critical supply chain threat.[29]

Component 3: Domestic Information Control

The regime's external operations are only possible because it maintains a near-total information monopoly within its borders. This is achieved through a multi-layered system of technological control and psychological indoctrination.

Technologically, North Korea is a digital panopticon. It maintains a "small internet presence," with access routed through China and Russia, and available only to a tiny, heavily monitored elite. The vast majority of the populace is confined to a national intranet called *Kwangmyong*, which is disconnected from the World Wide Web.[30] On the device level, the state enforces a strict whitelisting restrictions. Mobile phones are required to run a state-controlled operating system that includes pervasive surveillance software, exemplified by the Traceviewer application, which periodically captures screenshots of user activity without consent. This mechanism, along with technical media policies that reject any file not cryptographically watermarked by state authorities, makes it extraordinarily difficult for citizens to access unvetted foreign information.[31]

However, the most significant recent development in domestic control is not technological but coercive. For years, a digital underground has existed, with USB drives and SD cards containing South Korean dramas and foreign news smuggled across the border and sold in informal markets (*jangmadang*).[32] This created a cognitive dissonance as citizens saw the mismatch between state propaganda and external reality. The regime's response has been a strategic inversion, shifting from persuasion to pure coercion. Recent reports indicate the regime has implemented capital punishment for citizens caught consuming or distributing foreign media.[33] This suggests that, in addition to eliminating access to the actual external information, the regime may also attempt to eliminate any audience that may be receptive to an alterative narrative.

III. Case Studies in Hybrid Warfare

The DPRK's true operational sophistication lies in its ability to integrate facets of information warfare into a cohesive whole.

Case Study 1: Strategic Narratives and Alliance Disruption

North Korea conducts persistent, multi-layered disinformation campaigns designed to achieve two goals: legitimize its own nuclear status and delegitimize the US-ROK alliance. The regime consistently frames its nuclear program as a necessary and rational defensive deterrent against "hostile" US policy.[34] This narrative is legally institutionalized, with the DPRK enshrining its nuclear status in its constitution.

This is paired with an aggressive wedge strategy aimed at the US-ROK alliance. The DPRK systematically targets allied military exercises, such as Ulchi Freedom Shield and the trilateral Freedom Edge, characterizing them as "extremely dangerous

[26] Sunha Bae, "Hidden Enablers: Third Countries in North Korea's Cyber Playbook," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 25, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/hidden-enablers-third-countries-north-koreas-cyber-playbook.
[27] Arif Perdana, Muhamad Erza Aminanto, and Bayu Anggorojati, "Hack, Heist, and Havoc: The Lazarus Group's triple threat to global cybersecurity," *Journal of Information Technology Teaching Cases 2024*, Vol 0(0) 1-12.
[28] Microsoft, "Digital Defense Report 2025," 48-51.
[29] Microsoft, "Digital Defense Report 2025," 48-51.
[30] US Library of Congress, *Cyber Capabilities: In Brief.*
[31] Nat Kretchun, *The Need for a New US Information Strategy for North Korea*, (United States Institute of Peace, 2019), pg. 8.
[32] Jieun Baek, *North Korea's Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground Is Transforming a Closed Society* (Ch. 4, pg. 150,Yale University Press, 2016).
[33] Jean Mackenzie, "North Korea Executing More People for Sharing Foreign Films and TV, UN Finds," *BBC*, Sept. 11, 2025.
[34] Edward Howell, "When Bad Behavior Pays: North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order," DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2021.

provocations" and preparations for an invasion.[35] High-ranking officials such as Kim Yo Jong and Pak Jong Chon issue coordinated statements condemning these defensive drills, aiming to create political friction within South Korea and between Seoul and Washington.[36] This messaging is often amplified by Chinese state media, suggesting a broader coordinated information strategy.[37]

Case Study 2: Differentiated Targeting (ROK vs. US)

North Korea's IO campaigns reveal a sophisticated, differentiated approach based on the target. Operations against South Korea and the United States have fundamentally different objectives.

Campaigns targeting South Korea, which Kim Jong Un has constitutionally defined as the "primary enemy," focus on ideological subversion and regime delegitimization.[38] The regime deploys a massive contingent of its cyber warriors—estimated at 6,800 personnel—to build a "united front for unification revolution" within the South. This involves psychological warfare to exploit societal divisions and foster anti-government and anti-US sentiment.[39]

In stark contrast, operations targeting the United States prioritize financial exploitation and intelligence gathering. Rather than attempting ideological subversion, the DPRK treats the US as a primary source of revenue. The strategic objective is not to change American minds but to steal American money and technology, which is then funneled directly into the WMD programs that threaten the US mainland.

Case Study 3: The New Frontier - Space, AI, and Deepening Alliances

The DPRK is actively integrating next-generation capabilities into its hybrid warfare model, augmented by deepening collaboration with an authoritarian bloc. Its space program, while claiming to be for peaceful purposes, is inextricably linked to its ballistic missile development. The 2022 revision of its Space Development Law, which explicitly permits military use of space, confirms this dual-use strategy.[40] Reconnaissance satellites enhance their intelligence-gathering capabilities, while the launches themselves serve as cover for testing. ICBM technologies, including solid-fuel engines and potentially hypersonic glide vehicles.[41] This exploits a key legal loophole between the Outer Space Treaty (which permits peaceful launches) and UNSC resolutions (which forbid any DPRK launch using ballistic missile technology).

This technological push is augmented by deepening collaboration with Russia, China, and Iran. This integration of a pre-existing authoritarian threat network creates an increasingly complex problem set for Western-allied nations. For example, the same Lazarus Group operatives conducting cryptocurrency heists have also been caught targeting European defense companies involved in military drone design.[42] This allows the DPRK to simultaneously steal money to fund its weapons programs and steal technology to improve them. This collaboration is occurring as the transatlantic intelligence-sharing foundation has fractured and traditional monitoring mechanisms have failed (e.g., Russia's 2024 veto of the UN Panel of Experts monitoring sanctions). This creates a dangerous "race" where the DPRK is integrating its offensive capabilities faster than the democratic allies are integrating their defenses.

IV. Allied Coordination and Narrative Control

The DPRK's integrated threat model necessitates an equally integrated allied response. However, the US-ROK-Japan trilateral alliance faces a fundamental strategic paradox regarding the very nature of its coordination. The debate over whether covert IO coordination is more effective than visible, institutionalized frameworks is rapidly becoming obsolete. The evidence reveals an emerging

[35] "North Korea Slams 'Dangerous' Drills by US, Japan, South Korea," *Al Jazeera*, Sept. 14, 2025.

[36] Sanghee Hong et al., "Kim Yo-Jong's Strategic Rhetoric: A Semantic Network Analysis of North Korea's Diplomatic and Strategic Communication," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 37, no. 2 (2025): 295–329.

[37] Robert S. Hinck and Skye C. Cooley, "North Korean Media Penetration and Influence in Chinese and Russian Media: Strategic Narratives During the 2017-2018 Nuclear Confrontation," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020), 1331-1352.

[38] Hyung-Jin Kim, "North Korea Says Its Revised Constitution Defines South Korea as a 'Hostile State' for the First Time," *Associated Press*, Oct. 16, 2024.

[39] Arif Perdana, Muhamad Erza Aminanto, and Bayu Anggorojati, "Hack, Heist, and Havoc: The Lazarus Group's triple threat to global cybersecurity," *Journal of Information Technology Teaching Cases 2024*, Vol 0(0) 1-12.

[40] Martyn Williams, "North Korea Revised its Space Law to Permit Military Use," *38 North*, June 2, 2025.

[41] Sung Won Kim and Si Jin Oh, "Reconsidering the Overlooked Threat of North Korea's Outer Space Activities: Focusing on the Menace of Militarization and Weaponization of Outer Space," *Korea Observer* 55, no. 2 (2024): 222–24.

[42] Alessandro Mascellino, "Lazarus Group's Operation DreamJob Targets European Defense Firms," *Infosecurity Magazine*, Oct. 23, 2025.

paradigm shift: state actors, including the DPRK and its patrons, are prioritizing narrative control over inevitable exposure rather than outright secrecy.

The Measurement Paradox and Trilateral Complexity

A core challenge in assessing allied IO strategy is attaining timely, accurate, and meaningful measurements. Traditional intelligence frameworks for measuring effectiveness (such as Measures of Performance/Effectiveness or the Diamond Model for influence operations) require attribution to function. However, the core feature of covert operations—plausible deniability—is fundamentally incompatible with the attribution needed for measurement and evaluation. This creates a structural paradox: the more effective a covert operation is at remaining concealed, the less measurable its success becomes through standard intelligence frameworks.

This problem is then exponentially compounded by *trilateral* coordination. Attribution methodologies for cyber operations are still developing, and assessing IO coordination across three state actors with different operational tradecraft is vastly more complex than a bilateral assessment. Coordinated messaging patterns could be coincidental, timing correlations require higher confidence thresholds, and target overlap may reflect independent strategic interests rather than a unified command. It is possible that existing methodologies systematically underestimate the scale and effectiveness of three-party IO coordination.

The New Paradigm

The emergent insight is that state actors have inverted the traditional logic of espionage. Success is no longer defined by avoiding detection, but by maintaining operational continuity despite it, and, in some cases, weaponizing the exposure itself. When a deepfake is exposed, when a state-sponsored hack is attributed, or when a defense minister's private video goes viral, the resulting blowback becomes part of the information operation designed to sow chaos and erode trust.

In this new paradigm, visible, institutionalized frameworks (like the Camp David trilateral agreements or the ROK's participation in NATO's CCDCOE) are not an *alternative* to covert action. Instead, they function as the crucial credibility scaffolding. They provide the public-facing narrative of unity and legitimacy, which ironically creates the political and strategic space for covert operations to function. The strategic advantage lies not in avoiding detection but in controlling the narrative around exposure and maintaining operational continuity.

The Evidence Gap and the Credibility Crisis

While this new paradigm is emerging, there remains no definitive *public* evidence that covert trilateral IO is inherently more effective than visible frameworks. The fundamental problem is one of asymmetric data availability. Visible frameworks produce measurable institutional outputs (e.g., joint exercises, policy statements), while covert coordination leaves only indirect traces (e.g., timing correlations, message overlaps).[43]

This creates a "credibility crisis" for the visible alliance. Institutional reinforcement, such as NATO conducting its first Article 5 exercise with all 32 nations, can mask deep strategic fragmentation. This fragmentation is visible in doubts over transatlantic intelligence sharing (which is pushing European agencies closer together, independent of the US), a lack of assertive coordination as adversaries prepare for conflict, and the absence of an updated nuclear strategy despite new threats.[44]

This credibility gap—where visible deterrence signals are decoupled from actual strategic capability and unity—is the primary target of DPRK IO. Covert allied operations have a "resilience advantage" in that they are not dependent on political consensus. Still, they cannot function without the legitimate, public-facing "credibility scaffolding" that is under direct and constant assault.[45]

V. Immediate Policy Imperatives

Understanding the DPRK's integrated strategy and the new paradigm of "narrative control" illuminates several critical policy pathways. A conventional

[43] Dorota Sikora-Fernandez & Danuta Stawasz, "The Asymmetry of Access to Public Data," *The Journal of Public Governance* 65, no.3 (2023), https://doi.org/10.15678/PG.2023.65.3.03.

[44] ohn Psaropoulos, "Europe Lacks Coordination as Russia 'Prepares for War with NATO': Experts", *Al Jazeera*, Oct. 27, 2025.

[45] Karl-Heinz Kamp, "Why NATO Needs a New Nuclear Strategy," *DefenseNews*, Oct. 30, 2025.

response is insufficient; the allied response must be integrated, resilient, and strategically sophisticated.

First, the alliance must counter the DPRK's foundational strategy of deception by adopting a "distrust and verify" model. As recommended by Park (2023), all diplomatic engagements with the DPRK leadership should be treated as deception operations until proven otherwise. This requires abandoning "trust-based" diplomacy entirely. Future negotiations cannot accept "cosmetic compliance," such as the shuttering of a single, aging test site. Instead, they must demand a full, complete, and verifiable declaration of all nuclear, missile, and production facilities *before* any sanctions relief is offered. The "cunning phrase" of "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" must be publicly and repeatedly rejected, with the US-ROK alliance insisting on the unambiguous language of the dismantlement of the DPRK's own arsenal.

Second, the alliance must aggressively reinforce its "credibility scaffolding" through an integrated international defense. Given that the visible alliance framework is the primary target of DPRK IO, its reinforcement is a top priority. A central component of this reinforcement must be the establishment of a formal trilateral IO-cyber fusion center. This would move beyond the current high-level consultation group and establish a permanent body to coordinate real-time intelligence sharing on DPRK IO, cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns, and to develop joint attribution and response playbooks.

Furthermore, this defense must be global in scope. Material support from Russia and China make this an international, not merely regional, problem. The United States must facilitate deeper institutional links between its Indo-Pacific allies and NATO, specifically leveraging the Republic of Korea's participation in the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE). This is essential to repair the "fractured" transatlantic intelligence foundation and demonstrate that the visible democratic alliance is not just rhetoric but a unified operational front.[46]

This new defensive posture must also be codified to have maximum deterrent effect. The United States and the Republic of Korea should strongly consider initiating a formal process to update the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. This update should explicitly state that a large-scale cyber-attack against one nation's critical infrastructure could trigger a collective response, thereby modernizing the alliance's deterrent posture to match the twenty-first-century threat, much as NATO did with its 2014 cyber defense policy.[47]

Third, the alliance must attack the financial engine of the DPRK's WMD program, not just the weapons themselves. Given that illicit information operations directly fund the nuclear and missile programs, counter-IO *is* counter-proliferation. The international community must pivot to aggressively targeting the means by which the DPRK sources its funds. This includes a vigorous diplomatic campaign to push for mandatory "Know Your Customer" (KYC) regulations on all major global cryptocurrency exchanges, backed by severe secondary sanctions for any exchange that facilitates the laundering of funds linked to North Korea. This policy faces significant implementation challenges, as the DPRK's move into the RaaS market and its use of decentralized cryptocurrency mixers are specifically designed to make attribution and financial tracking extraordinarily difficult. This, in turn, requires the creation of a new joint task force focused not just on sanctions but on developing and deploying AI-powered blockchain analysis tools to track and interdict these illicit flows in real time.

Fourth, the alliance must seize narrative control by working to break the regime's internal information monopoly. The regime's greatest strength—its total control over its domestic population—is also its greatest vulnerability. However, a long-term strategy to undermine this control must reckon with the new risks involved. The regime's strategic inversion of information control through elimination means that traditional information-dropping campaigns (via USBs or radio) now carry a much higher ethical burden, as they could directly result in the recipient's execution.[48]

Therefore, a two-pronged approach is necessary. The US and ROK must robustly fund efforts by non-governmental organizations and broadcasters like Voice of America and Radio Free Asia to get outside information into North Korea. Still, they must prioritize technologies that are harder to trace, such as satellite data-casting, over physically planted

[46] Antoaneta Roussi, "Europe's Spies are Learning to Trust Each Other - Thanks to Trump," *Politico*, Oct. 22, 2025.

[47] Min-hyung Kim, "North Korea's Cyber Capabilities and Their Implications for International Security," *Sustainability* 14, no. 3: 1744.

[48] Mackenzie, "North Korea Executing More People."

media that can be more easily discovered.[49] In parallel, allied strategic communications must become more sophisticated, moving beyond simple condemnation. A potential counter-narrative could offer a tangible example of an alternative future. Allies should actively promote the "Vietnam model"—a state that maintained its political system and sovereignty while achieving massive economic prosperity *after* normalizing relations with the West and forgoing weapons of mass destruction. This narrative directly attacks the *byungjin* line by demonstrating that North Korea's economic stagnation is a *choice* made by the regime, not a necessity imposed by the world.[50]

VI. 2035 Strategic Forecast and Future-Proofing the Alliance

The immediate policy imperatives outlined above are essential for managing the current threat; however, the DPRK's IO capabilities are evolving rapidly. A responsive strategy is insufficient; the US-ROK alliance must adopt a *predictive* and *adaptive* long-term framework to future-proof its defenses against the 2035 threat.

The next decade will be defined by two phases of AI integration into DPRK operations. The first phase, lasting from approximately 2025 to 2030, can be defined as "AI Democratization." During this period, commoditized AI tools will allow even low-skill DPRK actors to conduct sophisticated attacks. This will include the widespread use of real-time deepfakes for infiltration and automated, cross-platform social media campaigns that are linguistically and culturally fluent, eliminating a key weakness of past operations. Following this, the "AGI Integration" phase from 2030 to 2035 will see a more profound shift. As autonomous and generative AI matures, the DPRK will likely develop capabilities for independent strategic planning, predictive vulnerability discovery (utilizing AI-powered zero-day identification), and a true convergence of cyber and physical attacks. By 2035, the threat will be one of fully automated "AI vs. AI warfare," operating at a speed that makes human-in-the-loop responses obsolete.[51]

To counter this 2035 threat, the alliance must move beyond traditional defense and embrace a multi-decade strategy of technological and institutional adaptation. The immediate actions taken between 2025 and 2027 must build the foundation. The priority is to enhance attribution and intelligence sharing. In addition to the trilateral fusion center, the US and ROK must establish a dedicated joint cyber intelligence center focused on real-time threat analysis and formalize information sharing with private-sector cryptocurrency exchanges and AI companies. The second immediate action is to harden defensive infrastructure. The alliance must accelerate the transition to quantum-resistant cryptography, accelerating the ROK's 2035 timeline, and implement comprehensive security vetting for all IT service providers to counter the remote worker supply chain threat.[52]

During the medium term, from 2027 to 2032, the alliance must develop adaptive defenses. This requires joint investment in next-generation defenses, including Cyber Neural Immunity systems that are self-defending and AI-powered, as well as predictive threat modeling to anticipate DPRK attack vectors before they are deployed. This must be paired with aggressive economic countermeasures. To counter the DPRK's own use of AI in sanctions evasion, the allies must co-develop AI-powered blockchain analysis and compliance monitoring systems.[53]

This strategy culminates in the long-term vision for 2032 to 2035, which aims to achieve deterrence dominance. This requires an evolution of deterrence doctrine. The alliance's military doctrine must be updated to fully integrate cyber operations into conventional deterrence, asserting "cyber sovereignty" and developing a posture of "active cyber deterrence"—that is, proactive capabilities for disrupting threats—to impose costs on the adversary. This doctrinal shift must be supported by institutional adaptation. Legal frameworks must be updated to address AI-enabled warfare, and the alliance must take a leadership role in establishing new international norms for cyber conflict.[54]

[49] Kretchun, *The Need for a New US Information Strategy*.
[50] "The World Bank in Viet Nam," World Bank Group, accessed May 2, 2026.
[51] David Stocks, "Cyber Security in 2035," *Germane Advisory*, 2024.
[52] In 2035, Korea Becoming the Global Hub for Quantum Economy! Government of Korea, Ministry of Science and ICT, Pubic Relations Division, June 27, 2025.
[53] Farhad E. Salamah, "The Digital World in 2035: Strategic Prediction and the Paradigm Shift in Cyber Security," *LinkedIn*, March 5, 2025,
[54] Salamah, "The Digital World in 2035."

This long-term vision faces two significant challenges. First is alliance coordination. As established in Part IV, visible frameworks are vulnerable to political shifts (such as potential changes in US administration policy) and strategic fragmentation. Therefore, cooperation must be embedded in permanent bureaucratic structures to ensure "institutional resilience." Simultaneously, the ROK must be encouraged to develop independent cyber defense capabilities and "multilateral hedging" (e.g., deeper ties with NATO) to reduce bilateral dependency. Second is technological adaptation. The alliance must commit to sustained R&D investment and create new pipelines to compete with the private sector for top AI talent, all while balancing defensive imperatives with democratic values and ethical constraints.[55]

Conclusion

North Korean information operations have evolved from rudimentary propaganda into a sophisticated, AI-enhanced, and financially self-sufficient strategic weapon. They are the "all-purpose sword" that Kim Jong Un proclaimed them to be.[56] The regime's "peaceful" space program, its "paternal" civil affairs, and its "conciliatory" diplomatic overtures are all facets of this integrated strategy.

This presents a formidable challenge to an international order already strained by great power competition and technological disruption. The convergence of North Korea's advancing capabilities with the strategic cooperation of Russia, China, and Iran signifies a new, coordinated threat to democratic institutions. The failure to address this threat is compounded by allied vulnerabilities—not just in technology but also in the strategic credibility of their own coordinating frameworks.

Any policy that seeks to address the North Korean nuclear threat in isolation is destined to fail. The alliance must adopt a strategy as integrated as its adversary's. It must confront the full spectrum of its information operations—its deception, finances, domestic control, and future evolution. This requires a dual-track approach: reinforcing the visible "credibility scaffolding" of the alliance through institutional commitment, while simultaneously developing resilient and adaptive covert and technological capabilities to win the long-term war of narrative control. It is only by achieving this strategic synthesis that the United States, South Korea, and their allies can hope to create the conditions for meaningful and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

[55] So Jeong Kim, "The US National Cybersecurity Strategy: Main Issues and Implications for South Korea," INSS Issue Brief Vol.99 No.13, 2023.

[56] Kim, "North Korea's Cyber Capabilities."

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The Bangkok Treaty in the Indo-Pacific: Credibility and Effectiveness in the Context of Nuclear Deterrence and Modernization

By
Noemie Lepetit

Executive Summary

Noemie Lepetit

This paper evaluates the credibility and future viability of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon- Free Zone (SEANWFZ) in an Indo-Pacific security environment increasingly shaped by nuclear competition, maritime tensions, and great-power rivalry. Established through the 1995 Bangkok Treaty, the SEANWFZ is a cornerstone of ASEAN's regional order and a key contribution to global non-proliferation under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Yet despite its strong normative foundations, the zone remains only partially effective, as none of the nuclear-weapon states has ratified its Protocol and strategic realities continue to challenge its implementation.

The paper shows that this gap is not merely legal or technical, but structural. While the SEANWFZ is formally aligned with international Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone standards and supported by cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, its operational relevance is weakened by unresolved maritime disputes—particularly in the South China Sea— and by deterrence practices such as nuclear transit ambiguity, submarine operations, and "Neither Confirm Nor Deny" policies. These dynamics generate a persistent disconnect between ASEAN's normative ambition and the strategic behavior of nuclear-armed states.

More broadly, the analysis highlights a regional environment shaped by accelerating nuclear modernization and widening deterrence dynamics. North Korea's expanding nuclear and missile capabilities have intensified threat perceptions in Northeast Asia, reinforcing reliance on extended deterrence. In South Korea, this fuels growing support for a "threshold state" debate, while in Japan nuclear-related discussions are becoming more explicit, reflecting a gradual normalization of nuclear options under regional pressure. These developments unfold alongside the modernization of U.S. and Chinese nuclear forces and the consolidation of more flexible deterrence postures, which together deepen strategic uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific. The emergence of frameworks such as AUKUS further reinforces this trend by embedding nuclear-related capabilities into regional security structures.

Against this backdrop, the paper argues that the SEANWFZ risks remaining a predominantly declaratory framework unless ASEAN adapts it to the strategic realities of the contemporary Indo-Pacific. To strengthen its credibility and operational relevance, the paper outlines several policy directions, including closer coordination with minilateral security arrangements, stronger regional nuclear risk-reduction and crisis-management mechanisms, the gradual development of a flexible ASEAN approach to nuclear governance, and the more systematic use of the SEANWFZ as a diplomatic instrument in ASEAN's engagement with nuclear- weapon states. It also highlights the importance of expanding strategic dialogue beyond the five recognized nuclear powers to include other nuclear-armed actors increasingly shaping Indo- Pacific security dynamics.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the future relevance of the SEANWFZ will depend on ASEAN's ability to translate its normative ambitions into strategic influence. In an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific, preserving the credibility of the zone is not only a legal or institutional issue, but also a broader geopolitical challenge tied to ASEAN's long-term role in regional security governance.

Introduction

The Crisis of Credibility in the Global Non-Proliferation Regime

As the international community prepares for the next Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the gap between legal commitments to disarmament and the evolving realities of nuclear strategy has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Despite repeated reaffirmations of the NPT's core objectives, nuclear-weapon states continue to modernize their arsenals and adapt deterrence doctrines to a more contested and multipolar security environment, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

More broadly, the global non-proliferation regime is facing a growing legitimacy and implementation deficit. While the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continues to warn of rising geopolitical tensions and declining trust [1], the structure of the regime remains marked by a persistent asymmetry: non-nuclear-weapon states are bound by strict legal obligations, whereas nuclear-weapon states retain their arsenals while continuing modernization programs despite disarmament commitments. [2] This imbalance reinforces perceptions of double standards and weakens the normative authority of the regime.[3]

In response to these limitations, alternative normative initiatives such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) have emerged, reflecting a form of "liberal counter-institutionalization" aimed at reinforcing disarmament norms beyond the constraints of the NPT.[4] However, none of the nuclear-weapon states has ratified the treaty, underscoring the persistent gap between normative disarmament ambitions and the strategic positions of nuclear powers.

The SEANWFZ in an Era of Indo-Pacific Nuclear Competition

Within this broader context, Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs) represent a key regional attempt to translate global disarmament objectives into legally binding frameworks. From Tlatelolco to Rarotonga, Pelindaba, Semipalatinsk, and Bangkok, these treaties reflect diverse regional responses to the nuclear order.

Among them, the SEANWFZ occupies a particularly complex position due to its strategic environment. Negotiated in the aftermath of the Cold War, in a period characterized by reduced nuclear tensions and strong multilateral momentum, the Bangkok Treaty initially benefited from favorable international conditions for arms control and disarmament.[5]

Today, however, the Indo-Pacific has become one of the central theatres of nuclear competition. The modernization of Chinese and US nuclear forces, the persistence of extended deterrence structures, and the increasing strategic role of maritime nuclear capabilities have fundamentally altered the environment in which the SEANWFZ operates.

Against this backdrop, the question is whether the Bangkok Treaty still functions as an effective non-proliferation instrument or whether its role has become primarily normative and declaratory. The analysis adopts a legal approach, confronting the treaty's formal obligations with contemporary strategic practices in the Indo-Pacific.

In Southeast Asia, the limits of regional nuclear governance are becoming increasingly apparent as strategic rivalry between major powers intensifies. The Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), established under the Bangkok Treaty of 1995, was designed to institutionalize nuclear restraint and reinforce ASEAN's ambition to preserve the region as a zone free from nuclear weapons. Yet, although the treaty continues to carry

[1] "L'AIEA alerte sur la fragilité du régime de non-prolifération nucléaire," *UN News*, Oct. 29, 2025, https://news.un.org/fr/story/2025/10/1157767.

[2] Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, "Statement on Nuclear Non-proliferation by Delegation of China at the Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference," press release, May 5, 2025, https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/disarmament_armscontrol/202505/t20250507_11616581.htm .
Shimon Stein, "President Trump's Position on Nuclear Non-Proliferation: The Inherent Contradiction and Its Implications," INSS Insight no. 1963, March 20, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/trump-nuclear/.

[3] Sergio Duarte, "The Erosion of the International Arms Control Regimes," *InDepthNews*, Aug. 9, 2023, https://indepthnews.net/the-erosion-of-the-international-arms-control-regimes/

[4] Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime as a 'Failed Promise': Contestation and Self-Undermining Dynamics in a Liberal Order." *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2024): 1-13, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae025.

[5] "Timeline of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)," Arms Control Association, last reviewed May 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/timeline-nuclear-nonproliferation-treaty-npt.

important normative value as a regional expression of non-proliferation and strategic autonomy, its practical effectiveness remains constrained by the absence of ratification by the nuclear-weapon states and by the growing predominance of deterrence-driven security dynamics. In this context, the relevance of the SEANWFZ depends less on the robustness of its legal framework than on ASEAN's capacity to maintain its political and strategic salience in an evolving geopolitical environment.

This therefore raises a central question: can a nuclear-weapon-free zone remain strategically credible when the nuclear powers it seeks to bind neither ratify its legal framework nor align their deterrence practices with its objectives?

I. Compliance and Credibility Confronting Strategic Practices

The credibility of a nuclear-weapon-free zone depends both on its legal definition and scope, and on the degree of compliance by nuclear-weapon states in practice. The SEANWFZ remains legally consistent and embedded within the broader non-proliferation framework, but its practical effectiveness is limited by external strategic dynamics.

From a legal perspective, UN General Assembly Resolution 3472 B defines two core requirements: a clearly delimited zone and an effective system of verification and control.[6] The SEANWFZ covers the territories of Southeast Asian states, as well as their continental shelves and exclusive economic zones (EEZs). However, the absence of precise delimitation of certain maritime areas, particularly in the South China Sea, generates uncertainty regarding the treaty's spatial scope. This ambiguity has direct implications for the interpretation of the Protocol's obligations. The treaty also establishes verification mechanisms in cooperation with the IAEA, reinforcing its formal compliance framework. It relies on a combination of binding international safeguards and domestic implementation measures to ensure compliance. Verification is primarily conducted through full-scope IAEA safeguards agreements, complemented by mandatory reporting, information exchange between states parties, and the possibility of clarification requests and on-site fact-finding missions in cases of ambiguity or suspected non-compliance.

Beyond these two basic requirements, the UN Disarmament Commission (1999) outlines corollary key principles for NWFZs, including regional ownership, voluntary establishment, and consultation with nuclear-weapon states to facilitate acceptance of negative security assurances. Importantly, such zones must also preserve peaceful nuclear cooperation.[7]

The SEANWFZ follows this regional initiative model. Since its adoption in 1995, ASEAN states have engaged in continuous dialogue with the five nuclear-weapon states recognized under the NPT (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to encourage accession to the Protocol[8], which would include commitments not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons within the zone.[9] The treaty does not explicitly prohibit transit, but its status remains unclear. This is because it does not specify whether the mere passage of nuclear-powered or nuclear-capable vessels is covered by its restrictions, as long as no weapons are stationed or deployed.[10]

The NPT further strengthens the legal basis of NWFZs by explicitly recognizing their legitimacy under Article VII. In this sense, SEANWFZ is formally consistent with the global non-proliferation architecture and contributes to the consolidation of nuclear restraint norms. From a strictly legal standpoint, therefore, the regime possesses significant credibility, despite ongoing uncertainties regarding maritime delimitation.

The Limits of Nuclear-Weapon State Engagement under the SEANWFZ

However, legal design alone is insufficient to ensure credibility. A second and decisive condition lies in the engagement of nuclear-weapon states. To date, none of them has ratified the SEANWFZ Protocol. Their reluctance is driven by three main concerns: the

[6] United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 3472 B, Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in All Its Aspects, A/RES//3472 B (Dec. 11, 1975), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Disarm%20ARES3472B.pdf.

[7] United Nations General Assembly, Supplement 42, Report of the United Nations Disarmament Commission, A/54/42 (April 30, 1999), https://docs.un.org/en/a/54/42(supp).

[8] "Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone," opened for signature Dec. 15, 1995, *United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs Treaties Database*, article 3, https://treaties.unoda.org/t/bangkok_protocol.

[9] "Protocol to the Treaty," articles 1–2.

[10] Bangkok treaty," Nuclear Threat Initiative

broader geographical scope of the treaty (including EEZs and continental shelves), restrictions on the use of nuclear weapons within and from the zone, and implications for freedom of navigation under UNCLOS, particularly regarding nuclear-powered vessels.[11]

The issue of maritime ambiguity is particularly salient in the South China Sea, where overlapping claims complicate the interpretation of EEZ and continental shelf boundaries. The United States has also raised concerns regarding the legal nature of negative security assurances, the absence of a clear transit clause, and the lack of procedural rights for Protocol parties within treaty governance structures.[12] The issue of transit has been raised by NWS in the interpretation of the SEANWFZ framework and constitutes one of the factors explaining the reluctance of NWS to ratify the Protocol, as certain aspects of their strategic practices could be seen as potentially inconsistent with its requirements.

Compounding Strategic Practices and the Limits of the Treaty's Spirit

These issues are compounded by broader strategic practices that may come into tension with, or directly contradict, the spirit and objectives of the treaty. For instance, the "Neither Confirm Nor Deny" (NCND) policy is a long-established feature of the strategic practices of nuclear-armed states [13] , notably implemented by the United States. It applies to the presence of aircraft at any given time or location, even though official statements indicate that the US no longer routinely deploys tactical nuclear weapons abroad.[14] As a result, when a nuclear-capable ship enters or passes through a zone, no government, public, or international observer can confirm whether it carries nuclear weapons.[15]

The 1980s dispute between the United States and New Zealand illustrates the strategic weight of this doctrine: Wellington's refusal to accept NCND ambiguity led to a suspension of aspects of bilateral defense cooperation.[16]

In the Indo-Pacific context, NCND and nuclear-capable naval operations enable the United States to sustain extended deterrence commitments to allies such as Japan and South Korea, while preserving operational flexibility. This adaptive posture is seen as particularly relevant in responding to evolving threats, including those posed by the DPRK.[17] While this ambiguity serves strategic and deterrence purposes, it complicates the assessment of compliance with commitments under the Bangkok Treaty, particularly due to uncertainties surrounding the transit of vessels that may be nuclear-armed, which can create tensions with the spirit of the regional legal regime.

A similar issue arises with nuclear ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) patrols SSBNs are strategic submarines equipped with long-range nuclear ballistic missiles, forming the sea-based component of the nuclear triad of a small number of nuclear-armed states—primarily the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, China.

These submarines form the sea-based leg of nuclear deterrence and are designed for stealth and continuous at-sea presence. Because their locations and payloads are classified, their operations cannot be externally verified. Designed for stealth, mobility, and continuous deterrence patrols, they make it virtually impossible to determine their exact location or whether they carry live nuclear warheads at any given time.[18]

In practice, SSBNs regularly operate across the Indo-Pacific region and may transit near or within parts of the SEANWFZ without detection or verification, as their movements are classified and not publicly disclosed for security reasons.[19] The presence of such mobile and essentially invisible platforms further illustrates the gap between the formal legal

[11] "Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone," opened for signature Dec. 15, 1995, *United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs Treaties Database*, article 3, https://treaties.unoda.org/t/bangkok_protocol.
[12] Bangkok treaty," Nuclear Threat Initiative
[13] UK Parliament, *Written Questions, Answers and Statements*, UIN 107671, "Military Bases: Nuclear Weapons," answered by the Ministry of Defence, Jan. 27, 2026
[14] Kristensen, *The Neither Confirm Nor Deny Policy*.
[15] Hans M. Kristensen, "In Warming US-NZ Relations, Outdated Nuclear Policy Remains Unnecessary Irritant," *Federation of American Scientists*, Sept. 23, 2012, https://fas.org/publication/newzealand/.
[16] David Lange, "New Zealand's Security Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 5 (1985): 1009-1019, June 1, 1985, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1985-06-01/new-zealands-security-policy.
[17] Kyung-joo Jeon, "Making a Case for Flexibility in the ROK-US Deterrence Posture," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* (2025), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25751654.2025.2522495.
[18] "Strategic Deterrence," US Naval History and Heritage Command, June 24, 2024, https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/cold-war/strategic-deterrence.html.
[19] Stephan Frühling, "Nuclear-Armed Submarines and Strategic Stability in the Indo-Pacific," *The Strategist*, July 14, 2025 Nuclear-armed submarines and strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific | The Strategist

expectations of transparency and control embedded in the SEANWFZ and the strategic realities of nuclear deterrence at sea.

Geostrategic Complexity as a Defining Feature of the SEANWFZ

As a result, a structural gap emerges between the normative ambition of the SEANWFZ and the strategic behavior of nuclear-weapon states. The SEANWFZ is not undermined by legal ambiguity, but its credibility is increasingly weakened as deterrence logic comes to prevail over regional disarmament norms. These same strategic and operational considerations also explain why nuclear-weapon states continue to refuse to ratify the Protocol, even though such ratification is needed for the zone to be fully credible and effective.

Comparatively, other NWFZ regimes illustrate a higher level of consolidation. In Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco), all nuclear-weapon states have ratified the Protocol, while in Africa (Pelindaba), Central Asia (Semipalatinsk), and the South Pacific (Rarotonga), at least formal engagement has been achieved. In these cases, negative security assurances are legally binding, strengthening the security guarantees offered to non-nuclear states. By contrast, the SEANWFZ Protocol remains unsigned by all nuclear-weapon states, limiting its normative effectiveness.

In general, the other nuclear-weapon-free zones do not face the same complex geographical constraints as the ASEAN zone. Their boundaries are largely defined by coherent continental or clearly delimited regional groupings, which facilitates legal clarity and regional adherence. For instance, Tlatelolco encompasses all Latin American and Caribbean states, while Semipalatinsk includes the five Central Asian republics without major contested maritime spaces, complicating interpretation. Pelindaba, although geographically extensive, relies on the African Union's definition of Africa, ensuring relative territorial consistency. [20]

Most Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones operate in relatively stable continental or regional environments and do not face the same degree of strategic maritime complexity as Southeast Asia. In contrast, the Bangkok Treaty operates in a highly strategic maritime environment. Southeast Asia is shaped by intensifying competition between the United States and China [21] and is surrounded by nuclear-armed states, including China and India, with additional pressure stemming from the DPRK.[22] Compared to other NWFZs, this creates a far more complex strategic setting, where maritime space, alliance politics, and nuclear deterrence intersect.

ASEAN States' Commitment Amid Structural Limits of the SEANWFZ

Despite these challenges, ASEAN states continue to reaffirm their commitment to maintaining Southeast Asia as a nuclear-weapon-free zone. While acknowledging the difficulties surrounding Protocol ratification, regional actors remain engaged in diplomatic efforts to advance its universalization. The Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohamad Hasan, declared during the 58th ASEAN foreign minister meeting, "With the existential threat to humanity that nuclear arms pose, I call upon all ASEAN member states to remain united in our pursuit of a nuclear-weapon-free Southeast Asia."[23]

Overall, the SEANWFZ remains legally coherent and aligned with the broader non-proliferation framework, yet its practical impact is constrained by external strategic dynamics. This disconnect highlights a wider tension between regional disarmament ambitions and the enduring logic of nuclear deterrence, which continues to shape state behavior beyond treaty commitments. In this context, understanding the limits of the SEANWFZ requires moving beyond its legal structure to examine how contemporary deterrence practices and arsenal modernization strategies reshape the effectiveness of NWFZ more broadly.

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[20] United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, *Submission on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 79/241 "Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in All Its Aspects"* (United Nations, 2025), https://unidir.org/publication/submission-on-united-nations-general-assembly-resolution-79-241comprehensive-study-of-the-question-of-nuclear-weapon-free-zones-in-all-its-aspects/.

[21] "Global View of US-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, Oct. 30, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/event/global-view-us-china-relations.

[22] "SIPRI Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), https://www.sipri.org/yearbook.

[23] "ASEAN Reaffirms Commitment to Keep Region Free of Nuclear Weapons," Xinhua, July 9, 2025, https://english.news.cn/20250709/d4a96800097b4331997e0f073bac5ba7/c.html.

II. Tensions between Deterrence, Arsenal Modernization Logic and Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones

The strategic context has profoundly evolved since the creation of the SEANWFZ. While the Bangkok Treaty was negotiated in an environment shaped by the immediate post-Cold War period and a relatively favorable dynamic toward disarmament, the Indo-Pacific is now characterized by renewed deterrence logics and an acceleration of conventional and nuclear armament programs.

The United States is currently pursuing the modernization of its entire nuclear triad as part of its extended deterrence strategy. This evolution is accompanied by a strengthening of its military posture in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in order to maintain the credibility of its security guarantees toward its allies and preserve its strategic presence in contested maritime areas across the region.[24]

At the same time, China has undertaken a rapid transformation of its strategic capabilities. Its nuclear arsenal is undergoing significant quantitative and qualitative expansion, with the development of more diversified and survivable capabilities, including strengthened second-strike capabilities. This evolution forms part of a broader modernization and expansion of its strategic and military forces in the Indo-Pacific.[25]

North Korea is also continuing the development of its nuclear and ballistic capabilities. In recent years, Pyongyang has significantly diversified its arsenal, notably through the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles and capabilities designed to improve the survivability of its nuclear forces.[26]

These developments have contributed to changing regional security perceptions. In Japan and South Korea, debates regarding the credibility of US extended deterrence have intensified under the combined effect of China's military rise, North Korea's nuclear advancements, and growing uncertainty surrounding the long-term reliability of US security commitments.[27]

In South Korea, this situation has increasingly fueled debates surrounding the concept of nuclear latency, namely the maintenance of technological and industrial capabilities that could, in theory, enable the rapid development of nuclear weapons without formally violating the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons[28]. Similar discussions are also emerging in Japan, where certain political and strategic statements reflect the growing visibility of questions related to strategic autonomy and nuclear posture in an increasingly unstable regional environment.[29]

The Structural Incompatibility Between Nuclear Deterrence and NWFZs

Taken together, these developments illustrate a broader action–reaction cycle between major powers, in a context where arms control mechanisms remain limited. The absence of effective constraints reinforces a dynamic of reciprocal modernization, increasing strategic uncertainty and contributing to the militarization of the Indo-Pacific. This environment, in turn, strengthens the centrality of nuclear deterrence in regional security calculations, which in turns constraining the normative effectiveness of instruments such as the SEANWFZ.

The contemporary logic of nuclear deterrence is fundamentally difficult to reconcile with the normative foundations of NWFZs. Contemporary

[24] Michael Bennett, *Projected Costs of US Nuclear Forces, 2023 to 2032* (Congressional Budget Office, 2023), https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2023-07/59054-nuclear-forces.pdf.
[24] US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Navy Columbia (SSBN-826) Class Ballistic Missile Submarine Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, R41129 (2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41129.
[24] Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), https://www.jstor.org/stable/40389236
[24] "US 2026 Defense Strategy."
[24] Manning, *The Future of US Extended Deterrence.*
[25] "How Is China Modernizing Its Nuclear Forces?" *ChinaPower*, last modified March 19, 2024, https://chinapower.csis.org/china-nuclear-weapons/.
[26] National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program*, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/north-koreas-nuclear-weapons-program.
[27] Jung Hoon Choi, "North Korea's Advanced Nuclear Weapons and US Extended Deterrence for Japan: An Assessment Based on Nuclear Deterrence Theory," *Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University, Asia Japan Journal* 2, no. 0 (2020): 109–134, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/asiajapan/2/0/2_109/_article.
[28] Foundation for Strategic Research, Emmanuelle Maitre, *"Towards a South Korean nuclear weapon? Political and strategic considerations"* (Korea Security and Diplomacy Program, 2025), https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/korea-security-and-diplomacy-program/towards-south-korean-nuclear-weapon-political-and-strategic-considerations-2025.
[29] François Diaz-Maurin, "The 2025 nuclear year in review: Back to the Future Atomic Age," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 25, 2025, https://thebulletin.org/2025/12/the-2025-nuclear-year-in-review-back-to-the-future-atomic-age/.

nuclear security is increasingly shaped by a renewed arms race characterized by competitive modernization and long-term strategic investment. In contrast, NWFZs rely upon a fundamentally different conception of security based on institutionalized mutual restraint rather than the threat of nuclear retaliation. By seeking to establish the total absence of nuclear weapons within specific regions, such zones implicitly challenge the legitimacy of nuclear possession itself, which remains the central premise of deterrence doctrines.[30]

This tension is particularly visible in the context of extended deterrence and nuclear umbrella policies maintained by the United States and its allies. NWFZ treaties generally require nuclear-weapon states to provide negative security assurances, formally committing not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against states parties. However, for nuclear powers relying on flexible deterrence strategies, such commitments may be perceived as restricting operational ambiguity and weakening alliance credibility. This explains the persistent reluctance of several nuclear-armed states to ratify certain NWFZ protocols or to accept legally constraining interpretations regarding nuclear transit and deployment.[31]

Moreover, the operational requirements of contemporary deterrence strategies frequently conflict with the geographic and legal constraints associated with NWFZs. Nuclear-armed states remain reluctant to accept restrictions that could delegitimize the transit of nuclear-capable submarines, aircraft, or other delivery systems through strategically sensitive maritime areas. In regions characterized by high geopolitical tension, such as Northeast Asia or the Middle East, nuclear weapons continue to be perceived as instruments of strategic prestige, coercive leverage, and ultimate security guarantees. Consequently, the persistence of deterrence-centred security doctrines constitutes a major structural obstacle to the consolidation and expansion of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in strategically contested regions.[32]

The Implications of China's Potential Signature of the SEANWFZ Protocol

While SEANNWFZ is already constrained by deterrence logics, the Chinese case shows how a nuclear power can exploit these gaps: by maintaining strategic ambiguity linked to its territorial claims, China can support the treaty while preserving its nuclear interests, making its practical implementation uncertain.

By signaling its willingness to sign the Protocol first, China could not only turn the SEANWFZ into a discursive and political tool to present itself as a responsible nuclear power, but also potentially influence the positions of other nuclear-weapon states. This approach allows China to claim a moral high ground in criticizing the nuclear policies of the United States and its allies, such as the deployment of their nuclear capabilities in regional waters.

The SEANWFZ—and China's interest in signing its protocol—has gained increased significance in Chinese regional diplomacy, particularly following the launch in 2021 of the Australia–UK–US (AUKUS) tripartite security partnership, aimed at providing Australia with nuclear-powered (but conventionally armed) attack submarines. The Chinese government regards AUKUS as "forming an underwater military encirclement against China,"[33] argues that it violates the nuclear non-proliferation regime, and invokes the SEANWFZ to criticize the agreement. In March 2023, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that AUKUS "undermines the efforts of ASEAN countries to establish the SEANWFZ and seriously undermines the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation architecture in East Asia."[34]

According to Chinese commentaries, China's willingness to sign the protocol demonstrates its "legitimate responsibility as a major power seeking peaceful development" and contrasts with the "irresponsible behaviors of the AUKUS countries." [35]

Strategic ambiguity lies primarily in the relationship between the willingness of China to sign the protocol and China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Beijing bases its claims on the nine-dash line and the concept of the "Four Sha," which encompass the Pratas, Paracel, and Spratly Islands as well as the Macclesfield Bank. This legal construction seeks to project extended jurisdiction around these maritime

[30] Mendenhall, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and Contemporary Arms Control."
[31] Mendenhall, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and Contemporary Arms Control."
[32] Mendenhall, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and Contemporary Arms Control."
[33] Hoang, "Why China Supports."
[34] Hoang, "Why China Supports."
[35] Hoang, "Why China Supports."

features—internal waters, territorial seas, EEZs, and continental shelves—as if they constituted a coherent unit capable of generating cumulative maritime rights.

Nonetheless, according to the prevailing interpretation of UNCLOS, a continental state cannot aggregate dispersed maritime features to produce a maritime zone covering the vast majority of a semi-enclosed sea. The requirement for a memorandum of understanding (MoU) accompanying the signing of the protocol reflects this logic.

By demanding that the treaty not prejudice its sovereignty claims, China preserves room for selective interpretation: it could invoke the SEANWFZ to challenge the presence or transit of foreign nuclear assets in areas it considers under its jurisdiction, while maintaining that its own deployments do not violate the treaty since they would occur within its "own" waters.

For Beijing, this area is essential to the credibility of its second-strike capability; its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines must operate in sufficiently deep waters to ensure their survivability. This logic stands in direct tension with ASEAN's objective of nuclear neutrality. In practice, the strategic nuclearization of the South China Sea renders the prospect of a fully nuclear-weapon-free zone not only politically contested but also technically and strategically difficult to achieve.[36]

For ASEAN, such a signature would certainly strengthen the legal validity of the SEANWFZ, but it entails significant risks: divergent interpretations regarding the geographical scope, heightened internal tensions, and uncertainty over effective arms control.[37] Moreover, the persistent refusal of other nuclear powers to sign the protocol—in order to preserve their freedom of navigation and transit—combined with the rapid modernization of Chinese nuclear submarines in the South China Sea, is gradually transforming this space into a deterrence hotbed.

Taken together, these dynamics reflect a self-reinforcing cycle of nuclear modernization and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, which increasingly limits the normative reach of the SEANWFZ and exposes its structural constraints. In this context, the key question becomes how ASEAN can preserve, adapt, or reinforce the treaty's relevance within an evolving strategic environment.

III. Credibility, Adaptation, and Future Prospects of the SEANWFZ

ASEAN plays a central role in preserving Southeast Asia as a nuclear-weapon-free zone through the implementation of the Bangkok Treaty and the institutional framework established under the SEANWFZ. Its approach goes beyond regional denuclearisation alone: ASEAN seeks to position the SEANWFZ as part of the broader international architecture of disarmament, non-proliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. This dual objective—regional security and contribution to global nuclear governance—structures ASEAN's action in the field.

This ambition is reflected first in the strengthening of ASEAN's internal normative and institutional framework. The 2023–2027 Plan of Action, adopted by the SEANWFZ Commission on Aug. 2, 2022, aims to reinforce both the legal and operational implementation of the Treaty. In this regard, ASEAN focuses on improving compliance with international nuclear safety and security standards, enhancing regional monitoring and regulatory capacities through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy, and supporting Member States developing peaceful nuclear energy programs. The Plan also promotes capacity-building and technical cooperation with international organisations, particularly the IAEA and the CTBTO, while maintaining consultations with Nuclear-Weapon States regarding unresolved issues related to the SEANWFZ Protocol.[38]

Beyond the implementation of the Treaty itself, ASEAN has progressively integrated nuclear governance into a broader regional security framework. In cooperation with the IAEA and other international partners, ASEAN has expanded its activities to include regulatory strengthening, nuclear safety training, and the development of peaceful nuclear applications, including civilian research programmes. At the same time, the organisation increasingly addresses nuclear-related transnational threats such as illicit trafficking of nuclear and radiological materials, terrorist financing,

[36] Akçiçek, "A Nuclear-Free Southeast Asia."
[37] Akçiçek, "A Nuclear-Free Southeast Asia."
[38] *Plan of Action to Strengthen the Implementation of the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, 2023–2027*, adopted by the SEANWFZ Commission, Aug. 2, 2022, ASEAN

and the misuse of dual-use technologies. This evolution demonstrates ASEAN's attempt to situate nuclear governance within a wider conception of regional security encompassing both traditional and non-traditional threats.[39]

Finally, ASEAN's action is also directed outward through its participation in global non-proliferation and disarmament efforts. The organisation regularly engages in multilateral fora, including the NPT Review Conferences, where it advocates for the universalisation and effective implementation of key international instruments such as the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the IAEA safeguards system. ASEAN additionally supports cooperation among nuclear-weapon-free zones and encourages their progressive expansion, thereby promoting the long-term objective of a global nuclear-weapon-free order.[40] Through this external dimension, ASEAN seeks not only to consolidate the credibility of the SEANWFZ but also to affirm its role as a normative actor within the international non-proliferation regime.

The ASEAN Way: Strengths and Limitations in Security Governance

The effectiveness of this normative framework is closely linked to ASEAN's institutional model, commonly referred to as the "ASEAN Way."[41] Based on the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and informality, this approach has enabled ASEAN to maintain internal cohesion and external neutrality, thereby reinforcing its centrality in regional security architecture.[42] It has also allowed ASEAN to function as a convening platform for major powers within inclusive frameworks such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum.[43]

Nevertheless, the ASEAN Way also constitutes a structural constraint on the organisation's capacity to respond effectively to contemporary security challenges. Consensus-based decision-making often slows collective action, while the principle of non-interference limits ASEAN's ability to address internal crises with regional security implications. These limitations have become particularly visible in contexts such as the political crisis in Myanmar, as well as earlier regional disputes, which have exposed the gap between normative commitments and operational effectiveness.

In addition, the growing strategic competition between major powers in the Indo-Pacific, combined with the emergence of alternative minilateral frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS, has further challenged ASEAN's ability to maintain its centrality in regional security governance.[44]

Reinforcing ASEAN Centrality Through Enhanced Effectiveness of the SEANWFZ Framework

In this context, ASEAN centrality, while remaining a cornerstone of the regional architecture, cannot be considered structurally guaranteed. ASEAN centrality is increasingly contingent upon ASEAN's capacity to adapt its institutional practices to a more complex and fragmented security environment. Strengthening ASEAN's relevance therefore requires a more effective articulation between normative commitments and operational mechanisms, particularly in relation to the SEANWFZ. This includes improving compliance with existing instruments, reinforcing engagement with nuclear-weapon states on the SEANWFZ Protocol, and ensuring that ASEAN-led frameworks remain the primary platforms for regional security dialogue.[45]

In light of these challenges, several policy recommendations can be advanced to strengthen the effectiveness, credibility, and operational relevance of the SEANWFZ within the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment.

Recommendations

- ASEAN could progressively **develop a flexible common framework on nuclear risk management and crisis prevention.** Rather than imposing binding commitments, this approach would encourage convergence around shared principles, including common assessments of regional nuclear

[39] The ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025* (Jakarta: Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2016), https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ASEAN-APSC-Blueprint-2025.pdf.

[40] The ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025* (Jakarta: Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2016), https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ASEAN-APSC-Blueprint-2025.pdf.

[41] Caballero-Anthony, "The ASEAN Way." https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00400-0

[42] Caballero-Anthony, "The ASEAN Way," 16.

[43] Barbora Valockova, "ASEAN Centrality and Its Narratives in an Evolving Regional Order," *E-International Relations*, March 26, 2025, https://www.e-ir.info/2025/03/26/asean-centrality-and-its-narratives-in-an-evolving-regional-order.

[44] Rüland, "The Nature of Southeast Asian Security Challenges," 16.

[45] Caballero-Anthony, "The ASEAN Way," 19.

risks, consultation procedures during crises, and basic de-escalation guidelines. Developed incrementally through diplomatic practice, such a framework would strengthen ASEAN's strategic coherence while remaining compatible with the ASEAN Way and national sovereignty concerns. In this regard, as highlighted in Maryna dei's analysis, capacity-building initiatives, maritime security cooperation, and broader support for regional public goods could reinforce ASEAN's role while addressing persistent operational gaps in regional security management.[46]

In addition, as underlined by Phar Kim Beng, the Indo-Pacific security environment is increasingly shaped by emerging technological threats with direct implications for nuclear security and strategic stability. Cyberattacks targeting nuclear infrastructure, vulnerabilities in advanced early-warning systems, and the diffusion of dual-use technologies all point to the need for strengthened regional resilience mechanisms. **ASEAN should therefore reinforce its collective capacities in nuclear monitoring, crisis simulation, and coordination** with international organizations such as the IAEA, in order to enhance preparedness and crisis-response effectiveness in a rapidly evolving strategic environment.[47]

- The credibility of the SEANWFZ, however, ultimately depends on overcoming the continued absence of Protocol ratification by nuclear-weapon states. ASEAN should therefore transform the treaty from a largely declaratory framework into **an active diplomatic instrument systematically integrated into its external relations with major powers,** particularly the United States and China. Through these **bilateral diplomatic channels, ASEAN could encourage nuclear powers to adopt differentiated but verifiable commitments**, including transparency measures, prior notification mechanisms for nuclear-related activities, and clearer clarification of regional nuclear doctrines. This would reinforce the operational relevance of the SEANWFZ while increasing its influence on external strategic behavior in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN should also broaden the external dimension of the SEANWFZ by **engaging additional nuclear-armed states—particularly India, Pakistan, and North Korea—through structured strategic dialogues.** While these discussions would not aim at formal accession to the Protocol, they could **help secure political assurances regarding non-deployment, non-use, and respect for the integrity of the zone.** ASEAN could further institutionalize these exchanges through a regular regional dialogue format bringing together ASEAN members and external nuclear actors on issues of strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction.

In this context, the rise of minilateral security frameworks, including initiatives such as AUKUS, should not be viewed as a challenge to ASEAN centrality, but rather as an opportunity to embed these initiatives within a broader and more interoperable regional security architecture. **ASEAN should therefore encourage stronger institutional linkages between minilateral groupings and ASEAN-led mechanisms,** ensuring that these frameworks operate as strategic complements rather than alternatives to ASEAN-centered regional governance.

- Finally, ASEAN should **establish a *Maritime Transparency Working Group* under the SEANWFZ framework to reduce strategic ambiguity and strengthen confidence-building measures in sensitive maritime areas**, particularly in the South China Sea. The initiative would provide a flexible platform for consultations on nuclear-related maritime risks, military exercises, nuclear-capable naval deployments, and incident prevention. It could also **promote voluntary transparency measures, including prior notification mechanisms and exchanges on maritime crisis management practices.** By institutionalizing dialogue on maritime nuclear risks, ASEAN would reinforce both the operational relevance of the SEANWFZ

[46] Dei, "The Indo-Pacific as a Strategic Arena."

[47] Phar Kim Beng, "Dangerously Unprepared"

and its broader role in Indo-Pacific strategic stability.

Conclusion

The SEANWFZ under the Bangkok Treaty remains one of ASEAN's most ambitious attempts to anchor nuclear restraint in Southeast Asia, at the intersection of legal norm-building and regional identity. Its existence demonstrates that Southeast Asia has successfully institutionalized a collective commitment to non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament, fully embedded within the broader architecture of the NPT regime. In formal terms, the treaty is coherent, well-structured, and consistent with international legal standards governing Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones.

However, the credibility and effectiveness of the SEANWFZ are increasingly challenged by the strategic transformation of the Indo-Pacific. The rise of nuclear modernization programs, the consolidation of extended deterrence structures, and the normalization of ambiguous maritime nuclear practices have created a security environment in which legal commitments and strategic behavior appear increasingly difficult to reconcile. The absence of ratification of the SEANWFZ Protocol by all nuclear-weapon states is not a marginal gap, but the central structural constraint that limits the operational relevance of the entire regime.

In this context, the SEANWFZ risks evolving into a predominantly declaratory instrument: normatively significant, but strategically constrained. Yet this outcome is not inevitable. The treaty retains potential as a diplomatic and normative lever, particularly if ASEAN repositions it as an active instrument of engagement rather than a static legal framework. Its future relevance lies less in formal legal perfection than in its capacity to shape expectations, structure dialogue, and frame regional nuclear restraint in an increasingly contested environment.

The core argument is therefore straightforward: the SEANWFZ does not suffer from normative weakness, but from strategic under-adaptation. Its survival as a credible regional instrument will depend on ASEAN's ability to translate its legal foundations into political influence, to engage nuclear-weapon states beyond symbolic consultations, and to embed the treaty within broader Indo-Pacific security dynamics.

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What Lies Ahead for NATO-Indo-Pacific Relations?

By
Anais Matte

Executive Summary

Anais Matte

This report examines the evolution of relations between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners—Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand (the IP4) - against the backdrop of an international environment characterized by the proliferation of crises and the growing interconnectedness of security challenges. It demonstrates how changes in the global strategic landscape have gradually led the Alliance to move beyond its traditionally Euro-Atlantic focus and develop closer cooperation with the leading democracies of the Indo-Pacific region.

This report first traces NATO's evolution since the end of the Cold War. Initially focused on the collective defense of the Euro-Atlantic area, the Alliance progressively developed an extensive network of external partnerships in response to increasingly transnational threats. Bilateral relationships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand became progressively institutionalized over time before acquiring a collective dimension through the emergence of the IP4 framework. This process accelerated as Allies became increasingly aware of the growing interdependence between European and Indo-Pacific security.

The report then highlights the factors that have driven this rapprochement. China's rise, the strengthening of the Sino-Russian partnership, the deepening ties between Moscow and Pyongyang, and the global repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all contributed to the emergence of shared strategic concerns between NATO and the IP4 countries. In this context, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept represents a major turning point. For the first time, the Alliance explicitly acknowledged the link between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, identified China as a systemic challenge, and made the strengthening of Indo-Pacific partnerships a strategic priority.

The report also examines the implications of Donald Trump's return to the presidency of the United States and the questions it raises regarding the future of this cooperation. Trade tensions with allies, disagreements over the management of the war in Ukraine, and uncertainties surrounding US commitments have fueled debate about the ability of NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners to sustain their growing cooperation amid increasing political volatility in Washington. Such uncertainties are especially consequential as the security architecture of both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions remains heavily reliant on American engagement and security guarantees.

It is within this context that the report explores the absence of three of the four IP4 leaders from the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague. While many observers interpreted these absences as evidence of weakening ties between the Alliance and its Indo-Pacific partners, the analysis presented in this study reaches a different conclusion. The absence of the Japanese, South Korean, and Australian leaders appears to have been driven more by domestic political considerations and the specific circumstances surrounding the summit than by any questioning of cooperation with NATO. Despite their absence, all four partners were represented at a high level, and cooperation mechanisms continued to expand through political consultations, ministerial meetings, Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes, and collaborative initiatives in areas such as resilience, emerging technologies, and maritime security.

The report therefore concludes that the participation of national leaders in NATO summits does not, in itself, constitute a reliable indicator of the depth of NATO–IP4 relations. More fundamentally, it argues that this partnership is now grounded in converging strategic interests that transcend short-term political fluctuations. In an international environment marked by the growing assertiveness of revisionist powers, intensifying geopolitical rivalries, and the increasing interdependence of the European and Indo-Pacific theatres, strengthening cooperation between NATO and the IP4 has become a lasting strategic necessity. The study therefore recommends further deepening these relationships, including in a scenario where US engagement becomes less pronounced, in order to consolidate a framework for dialogue and coordination capable of addressing the security challenges shared by both regions.

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO) was created in 1949 with the signing of the Washington Treaty in the emerging context of the Cold War. It aimed to ensure the collective security of the countries in the Euro-Atlantic area against the Soviet threat. Its central article, Article 5, establishes that any armed attack against one of its members is considered an attack against the entire Alliance, thus enshrining the principle of collective defense. Originally composed of twelve states, the organization now includes thirty-two.

Originally, NATO had no external partners and remained an organization focused on the internal security of the Euro-Atlantic area. At the end of the Cold War, however, it began a gradual opening, developing a vast network of partnerships that now includes 35 members. Among them are several Indo-Pacific partners: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

The notion of the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) as a formal grouping within NATO began to take shape around 2017, at the time when the Alliance started meeting these partners as a group. The notion of the IP4 as an informal grouping within NATO began to take shape around 2017, at the time when the Alliance started meeting these partners as a group. IP4 refers to the four Indo-Pacific powers that comprise it. Originally, this designation emerged in the context of these countries' cooperation with NATO, but the term gradually spread beyond the Alliance's institutional vocabulary. It is now used by the media, analysts, and research centers to collectively refer to Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand in the context of debates on Indo-Pacific security.

Exchanges between NATO and IP4, initially organized at the level of the North Atlantic Council and permanent representatives, were gradually extended to ministerial meetings and then to summits involving the leaders of NATO member states.

These partnerships remain distinct: on one hand, NATO maintains bilateral relations with each of the Indo-Pacific partners, through individual partnership programs; on the other hand, it has gradually developed a framework for collective cooperation with the IP4 as a group. They share concerns regarding China and Russia as well as a common vision of the link between European security and Indo-Pacific security.

The IP4 does not function as a military alliance, but rather as a platform for political dialogue and coordination, sometimes punctuated by joint exercises or joint statements. These two dynamics are complementary, and each holds particular importance.[1]

In 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO announced a strengthening of cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners as a group. Although these two regions seem geographically distant, the international situation has shown, year after year, that the security of the Euro-Atlantic space and that of the Indo-Pacific are now closely tied.

In this context, the strategic rapprochement between China and Russia constitutes a major factor of international tension. These two powers share converging interests, focused on challenging Western influence and increasing their global weight. This partnership, although presented as very close, remains asymmetrical: China supports Russia mainly on economic and diplomatic levels while modulating its engagement according to its own priorities and avoiding direct military involvement. This dynamic directly influences NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners by increasing a sense of vulnerability in the face of a China positioning itself as an indispensable global actor. At the same time, Russia remains a strategic pivot for Beijing, acting as a key geopolitical and economic partner that enables China to counterbalance Western influence despite an increasingly asymmetrical relationship. It highlights the challenges NATO and the IP4 face in a world order where security is increasingly uncertain and interdependent.

Although NATO is not formally beholden to the United States, its financial and material contributions give Washington a decisive influence, often allowing it to shape the Alliance's strategic priorities despite collective decision-making processes.

Under the multilateralist impetus of the Biden administration, transatlantic cooperation tightened,

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[1] Walter Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos | The Evolution of NATO's Indo-Pacific Partnerships," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Dec. 3, 2024, https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/12/in-conversation-nato-indo-pacific-evolution/.

reinforcing trust between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners. The IP4 thus established itself as a key strategic partner, supported by the network of American bilateral alliances in the region. However, the recent political change in Washington creates uncertainties; in public opinion, some now question the durability and nature of the engagement between NATO and the Indo-Pacific.

I. Towards a stronger strategic cooperation between NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners (IP4)

The regional security architecture in Asia differs strongly from that in Europe, where NATO embodies a strong multilateral alliance. In Asia, no regional alliance of this type exists. The United States has rather established a system based on bilateral alliances, aiming to control their Asian partners, initially perceived as potentially unpredictable or dangerous—these perceptions applied primarily to certain Asian allies themselves, whose political trajectories and regional behaviors were seen as unstable from a US strategic standpoint. This approach fits into a strategy of powerplay, allowing the United States to create asymmetrical relationships, where a weaker ally is constrained and supervised, thus ensuring American protection.

The Americans particularly feared being drawn into regional conflicts, especially between Taiwan and China, South Korea and North Korea, or in case of Japan's remilitarization. A multilateral alliance had been considered between 1950 and 1951, but Australia and New Zealand opposed it, fearing a Japanese initiative—particularly, they were concerned that Japan, still in the process of postwar reconstruction and potential rearmament, could play a central or even dominant role within such a multilateral framework and thus regain significant regional influence.

In the absence of that, several bilateral alliances were concluded: the United States–Japan Mutual Defense Treaty (1951), the United States–South Korea Defense Treaty (1953), the United States–Republic of China (Taiwan) Security Treaty (1954), as well as the tripartite Australia–New Zealand–United States Treaty (ANZUS, 1951). These agreements allowed the United States to impose a framework of control over their Asian allies while guaranteeing their protection.

According to Victor D. Cha, the United States applies four main mechanisms to control its allies in Asia. The first consists of controlling the military decisions of allies. This is the most direct means, which prevents an ally from deploying its armed forces without American agreement. For example, the 1954 defense treaty between the United States and the Republic of China included a secret clause stipulating that any use of force had to be decided jointly with Washington, thus preventing Taiwan from unilaterally attacking mainland China. This clause is considered secret because it was not included in the public treaty but instead contained in a separate, unpublished "secret minute" documenting US control over Taiwan's use of force, which accompanied the 1954 agreement without being officially incorporated or made visible to the public or all international actors.

The second mechanism is control through military and economic aid. The United States uses assistance as a political lever; aid can be conditioned on the ally's behavior and Washington can exert financial pressure, including through the threat of withdrawing support. Thus, by making South Korea and Taiwan politically and economically dependent, the United States could suspend arms deliveries or adjust economic aid to influence their actions. For instance, certain offensive equipment, such as tanks or fighter jets, was denied to South Korea to prevent it from launching an offensive against North Korea.

The third mechanism relies on the bilateral structure of alliances, or the so-called "hub-and-spokes" model. The United States, at the center, forms the hub, while each ally represents a spoke isolated from the others. This asymmetric architecture does not merely constrain allies; primarily, it limits their strategic autonomy and prevents them from dragging the United States into unwanted conflicts.

Finally, the fourth mechanism concerns the control of allies' strategic and political development. In some cases, Washington seeks to guide the political and military evolution of an ally. One example is Japan, where the United States supervised its rearmament and helped build a stable state aligned with American interests in the region.[2]

The end of the Cold War in 1991 disrupted the world order. NATO had to reinvent its role in the face of new global security challenges. The Asia-Pacific gradually became a major strategic and economic center, notably due to its importance for maritime security. Threats shifted toward Russia, China, and North Korea, linking European security to that of Asia.

A turning point can then be observed: the states of the region became aware of the necessity to cooperate directly with each other without relying exclusively on the United States or old agreements. This shift from a Washington-centered model to a more flexible model is accompanied by increased cooperation, information sharing, joint exercises, and enhanced coordination in the Indo-Pacific.

Before the structuring of the IP4 as a group and strategic partner of NATO, each of the Indo-Pacific states had developed bilateral relations with the Alliance (1990–2000), which were later institutionalized through individual partnership programs (2012–2014). These programs, formalized in framework documents, identified areas of common interest conducive to cooperation. In recent years, the links between NATO and each of these partners have gradually strengthened.

A. Laying the foundations of NATO–Indo-Pacific dialogue

The awareness that European security and Asian security are closely linked in the face of emerging tensions constitutes one of the first milestones that led to the opening of bilateral relations between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners.

Debates around the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty as early as the 1980s reflect an early awareness of the indirect repercussions of American Euro-Atlantic decisions on Asian security. For several decades, the INF Treaty constituted a pillar of Euro-Atlantic security by eliminating an entire category of nuclear weapons directly threatening Europe. In contrast, in Asia, these choices raised fears of a strategic risk shift, with the continent potentially becoming a space of compensation, or even a "dumping ground," for weapon systems rejected by Europe.

While in the 1980s, the Indo-Pacific partners still largely trusted Washington's political stability, they already understood that decisions made within NATO could have direct effects in the Indo-Pacific. This structural concern is today revived and exacerbated by the contemporary political instability of the United States. The Trump presidency did not create this context but reactivated it in an increased climate of distrust.

At that time, NATO's role evolved toward a more open multilateral organization in which European security no longer depended exclusively on its member states but also on its external partners. Pursuing the goal of strengthening global security and anticipating future crises, the Alliance's actions necessarily involve extending its sphere of influence beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. This evolution occurs in a context marked by the affirmation of a multipolar world, the persistence of nuclear proliferation risks (notably around the INF Treaty), and the rise of new military technologies and cyber capabilities.

In a logic of adaptation to the post-Cold War international order, NATO adopted a collective defense strategy and develops a vast network of partnerships, which now includes 35 members. Among them are Indo-Pacific partners: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.[3]

These relations took the form of informal and flexible bilateral dialogues. They began with Japan in 1990 before extending to New Zealand in 2001 and then to Australia and South Korea in 2005.

These partners present very different profiles; their partnerships, therefore, developed at distinct paces, specific to each of them. The first forms of cooperation were formalized between 2012 and 2014 through Individual Partnership Cooperation Programs (IPCP). This system offers partners a wide margin of choice by allowing them to identify the specific areas in which they wish to cooperate, from a catalog of nearly 1,400 training proposals.[4] This format facilitates collaboration with NATO, particularly in the fields of interoperability, capacity

[2] Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the US Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2009): 158-196, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40389236.

[3] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[4] "Comment l'OTAN Prépare son Entrée en Indopacifique," *Asie-21*, July 6, 2023.

building, and reform of the defense and security sectors. It remains relatively flexible—the choice of priorities mainly rests with the partners, without obligations imposed by the Alliance. Beyond simple exchanges or visits, the objective is to prepare these countries to contribute concretely to military operations, be they humanitarian missions, maritime security and other military exercises, crisis management, or armed interventions.

Before 2022, cooperation focused mainly on cyber defense, interoperability, science and technology, as well as maritime and energy security. With Australia, Japan, and South Korea, intense operational interactions developed, notably to support missions in Afghanistan. Japan participated in cyber defense exercises and maritime operations, South Korea supported Afghan missions and contributed to scientific projects, Australia supported humanitarian and counterterrorism operations, and New Zealand took part in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan as well as maritime security missions.[5]

After the withdrawal of the ISAF mission, NATO gradually strengthened its relations with partners, particularly Japan and Australia, fostering regular dialogue based on a shared commitment to sustaining exchanges and to defending the rules-based international order.[6]

B. Asian challenges turn strategic: Russia, China, and North Korea

The partnerships between NATO and the Indo-Pacific countries take place in a context of shared concerns regarding international security, notably related to tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the rise of China, and the strategic rapprochement between Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang.

1. *Sino-Russian Relations*

Faced with deep political and economic instability, the Soviet bloc collapsed and Russian Federation emerged, marking the end of the Cold War. At the same time, the United States and NATO asserted themselves as the main powers of the international order. The rise to power of Vladimir Putin in 1999 marked a turning point, however, with a stated desire to restore Russian influence on the world stage. This would be done notably through the development of strategic partnerships, foremost among them China, to constitute a counterweight to American hegemony.

China and Russia share converging ideological and geopolitical interests. Both perceive American influence and the promotion of the liberal democratic model as direct threats to their political systems and regional ambitions. This convergence was articulated in 2001 with the signing of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, strengthening their political, economic, and diplomatic coordination until its expiration in 2022.[7]

This cooperation has also extended to the military domain. Since 2005, Beijing and Moscow have regularly conducted increasingly sophisticated joint military exercises, accompanied by exchanges of equipment and know-how. These maneuvers have notably allowed China to gain significant operational experience alongside a seasoned Russian military.[8]

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a key moment, isolating Moscow on the international stage and accelerating its strategic pivot toward China. China adopted an ambiguous position: without recognizing the annexation or explicitly condemning Russian action, Beijing abstained in sensitive United Nations votes while calling for a political resolution of the conflict and continuing its bilateral cooperation with Moscow. Since then, the Sino-Russian partnership has gradually deepened.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022 represents another major turning point—one in the international order at large. This conflict goes far beyond the European framework and constitutes a global threat to international stability. It was accompanied by a joint Sino-Russian declaration stating that their relationship knows neither "limits" nor "forbidden zones." Behind the scenes, though, the relationship is tending to become increasingly asymmetrical. The 2022 declaration did not lead to the conclusion of a legally binding formal alliance.

[5] "Relations with Partners in the Indo-Pacific Region," NATO, last modified June 23, 2025.

[6] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[7] "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation," signed July 16, 2001, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367098.html.

[8] Alessia Caruso and Tim Rühlig, "The Dependence Gap in Russia-China Relations," *European Institute for Security Studies*, Oct. 2, 2025, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/analysis/dependence-gap-russia-china-relations.

Western sanctions and the war effort have weakened the Russian defense industry while China's economic power has reinforced Moscow's dependence on Beijing.[9]

Following European sanctions, China became Russia's main trading partner, partially replacing Western companies in the Russian domestic market. At the same time, the rise in Chinese technological capabilities has allowed Beijing to drastically reduce its imports of Russian armaments, now marginal. While joint military exercises continue, Russia is no longer a key supplier for a technologically largely autonomous China. The two countries nevertheless continue to cooperate within multilateral frameworks such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in an effort to challenge the Western international order.[10]

Along with this asymmetry, growing geopolitical divergences now characterize this relationship. China prioritizes regional stability and avoids direct confrontation with the West. Its diplomatic support for Russia in the context of Ukraine remains measured and pragmatic. Beijing seeks to benefit from its alignment with Moscow to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the United States and Europeans without compromising its own strategic interests.[11]

Thus, China does not officially support the Russian military effort and does not directly provide weapons, but it provides substantial indirect support. Its economic backing, notably through the continued purchase of Russian oil and gas and the provision of dual-use components, contributes to the functioning of the Russian economy and, indirectly, to the war effort. [12]

The Sino-Russian diplomatic alignment remains particularly visible in the UN Security Council, although it has weakened following Russian aggressions against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Beijing refuses to align systematically with Moscow when it harms its international interests. In multilateral forums, Beijing adopts a more cautious stance, seeking to present itself as a responsible actor, committed to global stability and respect for international law while at the same time never referring to the Ukrainian conflict as a war.[13]

China must constantly balance the strategic advantage of a partnership with a weakened Russia against the risk of diplomatic isolation, secondary sanctions, or a lasting rupture with Europe. Ultimately, the Sino-Russian partnership relies more on a circumstantial and pragmatic anti-Western convergence than on a durable, balanced, and institutionalized alliance. Each dimension of the relationship—economic, diplomatic, and security—is calibrated distinctly by China, which supports Russia when it finds a strategic benefit and distances itself when the diplomatic cost becomes too high.

2. *Russia–North Korea Relations*

Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc at the end of the Cold War, economic and military exchanges between Moscow and Pyongyang experienced a sharp slowdown. Bilateral relations gradually resumed from 2000 with the signing of a Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation, replacing a 1961 agreement. This treaty established a legal basis for economic, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges, now guided by national and economic interests rather than ideological solidarity.[14]

The strategic rapprochement between Russia and North Korea gradually intensified, including mutual military support and close diplomatic coordination. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Pyongyang has supported Moscow diplomatically, notably by recognizing separatist territories and becoming a key partner in armaments. Following several summits between Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un, a Global Strategic Partnership Treaty was signed in 2024, including a mutual military assistance clause. Russia could transfer advanced military technologies to North Korea, thereby increasing the threat to the United States and its allies and limiting the effectiveness of UN sanctions against Pyongyang. [15] North Korea also provides direct support on the ground in Ukraine, supplying ammunition, ballistic missiles, and troops. According to estimates, between 3,000 and 10,000 North Korean

[9] Caruso and Rühlig, "The Dependence Gap."

[10] Hubert Testard, "Chine-Russie : Où en est L'Amitié Sans Limites ?" *Asialyst*, Jan. 15, 2026.

[11] "Russia and China's "No Limits" Partnership Has Limits," *bne IntelliNews*, Dec. 10, 2025.

[12] Bénédicte Tassart, "Quels Sont les Liens entre Vladimir Poutine et Xi Jinping ?" *RTL*, Dec. 4, 2025.

[13] Caruso and Rühlig, "The Dependence Gap."

[14] "북러 조약(2024)(2000)(1961)," 김진호의 세계읽기, last modified Aug. 31, 2023.

[15] EveryCRSReport – Russia-North Korea Relations https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IF12760.html

soldiers have participated in the Russian counter-offensive in the east of the country, notably around Kursk. Their presence demonstrates that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is no longer purely regional and can mobilize actors from the Indo-Pacific, transforming the war into a global issue. For Russia, these North Korean troops and resources compensate for its military difficulties and consolidate its position in the Asia-Pacific despite Western isolation.[16]

In return, North Korea receives Russian financial, diplomatic, and military support, as well as access to oil, financial systems, food exports, and direct military experience through its engagement in Ukraine. These resources and skills can then be used to strengthen its military posture in the Indo-Pacific region, thereby increasing pressure on South Korea and its European and American allies.

This deepening Russia–North Korea partnership must also be understood in the context of the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula itself where the regimes remain radically opposed. North Korea, a closed and isolated communist regime, seeks to protect its independence and limit Western influence. South Korea, democratic and allied with the United States, has a highly developed economy. Despite attempts at peaceful cooperation, military incidents multiply, such as the shelling of Yeonpyeong (2010), the closure of Kaesong, and missile launches. Furthermore, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons profoundly alters the military balance on the peninsula and creates a constant risk. Pyongyang possesses a deterrence capability that could trigger a major conflict in the event of an incident or misunderstanding. Each North Korean nuclear test triggers sanctions and reinforces the distrust of Seoul and Washington.[17] Meanwhile, the regular military exercises conducted by Seoul and Washington are perceived as a threat by Pyongyang, heightening regional tension. In this highly militarized environment, closer ties with Russia provide North Korea with additional strategic leverage, further reinforcing its deterrence posture on the peninsula.

The deployment of North Korean forces in Europe illustrates the export potential of this military partnership. It could encourage the formation of similar coalitions, promoting the proliferation of weapons and extending Pyongyang's influence beyond the Indo-Pacific. This strategic partnership between Russia and North Korea is not limited to transforming the Ukrainian conflict into a global issue; it increases the risk for Europe and the Indo-Pacific region by consolidating an alliance capable of bypassing sanctions and projecting power across multiple continents. In this context, NATO and its regional partners must coordinate their security on a global scale, as a localized conflict can now have transcontinental repercussions.[18]

It is worth mentioning that while North Korea displays a posture of strategic autonomy and constant challenge to the international order, it remains largely dependent on China. In 2023, China accounted for 98.3% of North Korea's official foreign trade, making Beijing Pyongyang's main economic supporter. This increase in Sino-North Korean trade must, however, be tempered by the commercial and diplomatic relations maintained with Russia, in the absence of official data since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Pyongyang could therefore seek to reduce its excessive dependence on Beijing given China's growing assertiveness on the international stage.[19]

3. *The rise of China*

Alongside Sino-Russian relations, the rise of China has intensified geopolitical tensions and reinforced interdependence between the Indo-Pacific and Europe. In a few decades, China has gone from a secondary actor to a major pole of economic, diplomatic, and military power in the twenty-first century. Initially dependent on sea routes, ports, and infrastructure under American influence, Beijing has developed alternatives to reduce this dependence, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS).[20]

[16] "Corée du Nord/Russie—Reconnaissance par Pyongyang de Déploiement de Troupes Nord-Coréennes (2 mai 2025)," *France Diplomatie*, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/ukraine/evenements/article/coree-du-nord-russie-reconnaissance-par-pyongyang-de-deploiement-de-troupes.

[17] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[18] "Corées," *Le Monde Politique*, https://www.lemondepolitique.fr/cours/international/geopolitique/crises-et-conflits/corees.

[19] Anton Sokolin, "North Korea's Economic Dependence on China Reached New Heights in 2023: Report," *NK News*, July 22, 2024, https://www.nknews.org/2024/07/north-koreas-economic-dependence-on-china-reached-new-heights-in-2023-report/.

[20] Andrew J. Sinclair, "A China-led Global System Alongside that of the US is Xi Jinping's Ultimate Aim," *The Guardian*, Aug. 12, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/12/a-china-led-global-system-alongside-that-of-the-us-is-xi-jinping-ultimate-aim.

Between 2000 and 2024, Chinese GDP per capita rose from approximately $1,000 to $13,303, while foreign trade increased more than fortyfold, reaching $1 trillion. Today, 70% of countries trade more with China than with the United States. The Chinese diplomatic network extends to 274 missions abroad, surpassing that of the United States, and China has been Africa's main trading partner for fifteen years, consolidating its influence in the Global South. [21]

China's military expansion is equally pronounced. The defense budget rose from $42.5 billion in 2000 to $314 billion in 2024, placing it second in the world behind the United States. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is rapidly modernizing, with an estimated nuclear arsenal of 500–600 growing warheads and a fleet numerically superior to that of the United States, although the latter retains a technological advantage in certain segments. Xi Jinping aims to transform the PLA into a "world-class" force by 2050.[22]

The main areas of tension in the face of this growth include the East and South China Seas, Taiwan, and the Philippines. China's military expansion and presence in the Indian Ocean and these strategic zones, essential to global trade, represent a threat to maritime routes and freedom of navigation. These developments have led to the establishment of regional coalitions and alliances, such as the trilateral Japan-Philippines-United States coordination or joint exercises between Seoul, Canberra, and Manila. Japan and South Korea are also strengthening American protection against the Chinese nuclear and military threat. [23]

Beyond military and economic power, China seeks to reshape international systems by influencing supply chains, critical infrastructure, and advanced technologies. Beijing increasingly uses economic coercion to create strategic dependencies and asserts contested maritime claims. NATO and its partners are particularly concerned about the lack of transparency in China's rapid military capacity development, cyberattacks, surveillance, and disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum technologies. Coordination with Indo-Pacific countries aims to limit dependence on China and to share information and technological standards. [24]

The rise of China thus constitutes a global challenge. It raises concerns for NATO, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, who share apprehensions regarding maritime security, deterrence, and the international order. This situation requires a global response to maintain international stability and security.

C. NATO's New Strategic Concept (2022): Towards the strategic convergence of European and Indo-Pacific futures

The emergence of international instability has made a global response necessary. The first concrete signs of rapprochement between NATO and the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) as a collective group appeared as early as March–April 2022, with the indirect participation of these countries in Alliance discussions, regular consultations, and coordination of sanctions and military aid to Ukraine.

On June 29, 2022, at the Madrid Summit, to which IP4 leaders were invited for the first time, this cooperation was integrated into NATO's New Strategic Concept. For the first time, the link between Euro-Atlantic security and that of the Indo-Pacific was officially recognized, and the Alliance announced a strengthening of its cooperation with these partners.[25]

NATO's strategic concepts are fundamental documents published every 10–12 years, defining the Alliance's priorities and threats. The 2022 Strategic Concept, published in a context marked by the war in Ukraine and China's early support for Russia, introduced several major developments. For one, Russia was designated as "the most direct and significant threat" to Allied security, using coercion, aggression, annexations, hybrid means, and nuclear deterrence. Additionally, for the first time in its

[21] Anna Fleck, "The Countries Dominating Global Military Spending," *Statista*, April 28, 2025, https://www.statista.com/chart/24728/countries-largest-share-global-military-spending/?srsltid=AfmBOoqub1Dw03Ias-KtQP-3iQFo18Csecqq0rZwZzP7zxr__CMhNPaT.

[22] Saadet Gokce and Riyaz ul Khaliq, "1st Quarter of 21st Century: How China Rose to Reshape Global Power," *Anadolu Agency*, Dec. 31, 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/1st-quarter-of-21st-century-how-china-rose-to-reshape-global-power/3784719.

[23] Masayuki Masuda and Alexander Mattelaer, "Une Ombre Immense ? La Montée en Puissance Militaire de la Chine en Indo-Pacifique et ses Implications à L'Échelle Mondiale," *Le Rubicon*, Nov. 6, 2024, https://lerubicon.org/une-ombre-immense-la-montee-en-puissance-militaire-de-la-chine-en-indo-pacifique-et-ses-implications-a-lechelle-mondiale/.

[24] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[25] Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

history, NATO formulated an official and clear position regarding China, which is described as a "systemic challenge" to the Alliance's interests and security due to its ambitions and coercive policies. NATO consequently abandoned the idea of an "opportunity" with Beijing; it is not called a direct enemy but considered a problematic actor.[26]

Overall, the Alliance's strategy was outlined based on three pillars: engagement (maintaining dialogue without rupture), awareness (understanding China, its intentions, and capabilities), and resilience (internal strengthening of member states, reduction of economic and technological dependencies, protection of critical infrastructure, and securing supply chains)—reflecting a China-focused response.[27]

Later, at the Washington Summit on July 10, 2024, the North Atlantic Council described China as an influential actor in the Russian war in Ukraine through its support to Moscow (although without direct combat) and also placed the DPRK in this category of peripheral actors.[28]

Within the framework of the new Strategic Concept, new, more specific programs were negotiated with Indo-Pacific partners between 2022 and 2023: the *Individual Tailored Partnership Programs* (ITPP). This system is a continuation of the "One Partner, One Plan" concept adopted by NATO in March 2021 to replace the existing IPCP (*Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme*). Unlike the IPCP, in which partners benefited from broad autonomy while NATO mainly provided expertise, the ITPP established a joint commitment based on co-ownership. In NATO's own terms, each program coordinated all partnership instruments according to an integrated logic—"One Partner, One Plan." The ITPP relies on five key elements: common objectives, operational goals with milestones and expected outcomes, an implementation plan, as well as mid-term and end-of-cycle evaluations over a four-year period.[29]

Since 2022, following NATO's New Strategic Concept, Indo-Pacific partners have been invited annually to Alliance summits, where leaders define major political and strategic orientations for the coming years. This development marks a turning point for NATO, demonstrating that after being historically focused on the Euro-Atlantic area and largely inattentive to China, the Alliance now fully integrates the country into its strategic thinking.

II. Into a new era of global instability: Prospects for NATO–Indo-Pacific cooperation

The United States, as a major military and economic partner in the Indo-Pacific, played a central role under the Biden administration in strengthening cooperation between the democracies of the Indo-Pacific and those of the transatlantic space. This facilitated the establishment of a relationship of trust between the two regions, positioning the IP4 as a strategic partner of NATO and consolidating American support through its bilateral partnerships. The recent change of government, however seems to call these achievements into question, particularly NATO's and the IP4's ability to sustain them in the absence of American initiative.

D. Washington in the spotlight: How US political transitions shape the NATO—Indo-Pacific balance

American power has established a strategic link with both Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. While the Asian security architecture relies entirely on American protection, Europe also remains incapable of defending itself without US support. At the NATO Summit in The Hague in June 2025, the Allies committed to each raise defense spending to 5% of their respective GDPs by 2035; however, this level remains insufficient to guarantee Europe's strategic and security autonomy without the American nuclear umbrella, which today remains the guarantor of its freedom.[30]

The second Trump administration has already emphasized that its security priorities lay elsewhere and that Europeans should ensure their own defense. Nevertheless, allies remain implicitly dependent, which constrains them from acting against American interests. Moreover, the administration's instability

[26] Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, "NATO 2022."
[27] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."
[28] Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, "Washington Summit Declaration," (Washington, D.C., July 10, 2024), https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2024/07/10/washington-summit-declaration.
[29] "Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes," NATO, Oct. 21, 2024, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/individually-tailored-partnership-programmes.
[30] "NATO Chief Wishes 'Good Luck' to Those Who Think Europe Can Defend Itself Without US Help," *AP News*, Jan. 26, 2026, https://apnews.com/video/nato-chief-wishes-good-luck-to-those-who-think-europe-can-defend-itself-without-us-help-90b4511d9ad54e17975450447f413d6c.

and its decisions affecting partners have repercussions on relations between NATO and the Indo-Pacific region. This is particularly visible across several policy domains, including US involvement in Iran, the growing economic competition with China, Washington's independent approach toward Russia and Vladimir Putin, and a series of trade policy measures that affect both allies and partners.

The policy pursued by the new Trump government indeed increases uncertainty regarding the stability and reliability of their alliances and raises many debates about a possible retreat of Indo-Pacific engagement within NATO. If the central pillar linking these two areas weakens, what future could this relationship have?

1. *US Involvement in Iran*

After years of hostility between Iran and the United States, the rise of nuclear tensions made a diplomatic solution necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear bomb without triggering a war. The JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) was then signed in 2015 by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom—together with Germany and the European Union.

The agreement imposes several measures: a strict limitation on uranium enrichment, which can only reach a low level insufficient to produce a nuclear weapon; strengthened inspections, with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) able to regularly monitor Iranian nuclear sites; and the easing of economic sanctions, notably in the oil and financial sectors.

In 2018, Donald Trump judged the agreement "too favorable to Iran" and decided to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA. He then launched the so-called "maximum pressure" policy, imposing massive economic sanctions on Iran's oil, trade, and banking system. In response, Iran gradually resumed uranium enrichment, exceeding the limits set by the agreement, which increased military tensions and mutual threats.

Tensions continued to rise. The IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), a powerful branch of the military involved in supporting militias in the Middle East, was designated by the United States as a "foreign terrorist organization," triggering new sanctions and justifying potential strikes against its targets. The assassination of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force (IRGC), in January 2020, blocked nuclear negotiations and pushed Iran to align more closely with Russia, supporting its position vis-à-vis the West and Ukraine.[31]

By 2024, Iran appeared strategically weakened. Its asymmetric power projection model—reliant on militias and indirect strategies—lost effectiveness, and the Iranian resistance axis suffered serious setbacks. The nuclear program then became the central deterrence option. At the same time, the Israeli-Palestinian war expanded in the region, with Iran supporting Hamas and other groups, resulting in an indirect conflict with Israel and the first strikes targeting Iranian interests.[32]

Trump's return in early 2025 relaunched the "maximum pressure" policy: sanctions, military threats, and diplomatic isolation. Conversely, he also proposed a new nuclear agreement, favoring diplomacy over war. Negotiations resumed between the United States and Iran, but a central disagreement persisted: Washington demanded zero enrichment and the end of Iran's nuclear program, while Tehran claimed the sovereign right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes. This disagreement blocked any diplomatic progress.[33]

On June 22, 2025, faced with the failure of negotiations, tensions escalated to a military level: the United States struck three Iranian nuclear sites—Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan—to prevent Iran from reaching the military nuclear threshold. The Iran-US crisis extends far beyond the Middle Eastern framework and promotes the consolidation of an anti-Western strategic axis, marked by Tehran's rapprochement with Moscow and Beijing in direct opposition to the interests of NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners. Such dynamics simultaneously strengthen coordination between revisionist powers across multiple theaters. The failure of the JCPOA

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[31] Utku Cakirözer, "Iran's Threat to Regional and Euro-Atlantic Security," Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM), NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Sept. 26, 2025, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2025-10/025%20GSM%2025%20E%20rev.2%20fin%20-%20IRAN%20-%20CAKIROZER%20REPORT.pdf.

[32] PBS news—A historical timeline of US relations with Iran https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/a-timeline-of-u-s-iran-relations

[33] US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Background and US Policy*, by Clayton Thomas, R47321 (2025).

and US intervention in the Iranian nuclear issue create a worrying precedent: they show that diplomatic deadlock can quickly lead to coercive actions, increasing regional tensions and sending a strong signal about the limits of peaceful crisis resolution, with implications for global strategic stability.

2. *The Growing Economic War Between China and the US*

Tensions between Washington and Beijing did not first emerge in 2025, but have their origins in 2018, when Donald Trump launched the first major wave of tariffs on Chinese imports. This decision aimed to denounce Beijing's economic practices—such as forced technology transfers, massive subsidies to domestic industry, violations of intellectual property, the scale of the US trade deficit—as unfair. At that time, the United States' total trade deficit was approximately $566 billion, of which nearly $375 billion involved trade with China, illustrating a marked imbalance in favor of Beijing. Washington considered this situation the result of unfair competition and a plundering of American innovation.

The United States thus imposed tariffs on numerous Chinese products, to which China systematically responded with equivalent retaliatory measures on US goods, fueling a gradual escalation of tariffs. This trade war quickly extended to the technology sector. American authorities notably banned the use of certain sensitive equipment, such as that from the Huawei group, accused of representing a national security threat due to espionage suspicions. The conflict also shifted to the monetary field, with China allowing the yuan to depreciate to mitigate the impact of US tariff sanctions.[34]

Under the Biden administration (2021–2025), the trade war was not overturned. While tariffs inherited from the Trump era were maintained, greater emphasis was placed on technology restrictions aimed at limiting China's access to critical technologies. Washington also encouraged its allies to adopt similar controls in order to reduce possibilities for circumvention and to anchor these restrictions within a multilateral framework, based on a united front of industrial democracies.[35]

Donald Trump's return to power marks a new phase of conflict intensification. His "Make America Great Again" doctrine, centered on defending American economic interests, has reignited the trade war with increased vigor. Reciprocal tariffs then exceed 100%, making trade nearly impossible and posing heavy threats to global commerce and international economic stability.[36]

The rivalry between the United States and China is not limited to a simple tariff confrontation; it relates to deep structural issues linked to long-term economic, technological, and geopolitical dominance. American economic and technological superiority constitutes a central pillar of its international leadership, now challenged by China's rapid rise. This rivalry now extends beyond trade to industrial, technological, and strategic domains, reflecting Washington's fear of Beijing redefining global standards and power relations.

From this perspective, China's industrial overcapacity and the speed of its technological development, notably illustrated by the "Made in China 2025" strategy aiming to make China a global leader in key sectors, are perceived by the United States as direct threats to its technological supremacy.[37]

The United States' power on the international stage allows it to exert influence over its allies, whether within NATO, the G7, or the Indo-Pacific, to coordinate actions against China and increase its leverage vis-à-vis Beijing. That said, countries such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea remain economically dependent on China. Beijing threatens retaliatory measures if other states enter trade agreements with the United States to the detriment of its interests, in response to Washington's pressures to isolate China in international negotiations, highlighting a conditional and context-specific

[34] Julien Da Sois, "Tout Comprendre à la Guerre Commerciale entre les États-Unis et la Chine," *CNews*, Sept. 1, 2019, https://www.cnews.fr/monde/2019-08-07/tout-comprendre-la-guerre-commerciale-entre-les-etats-unis-et-la-chine-867518.

[35] Barath Harithas and Andreas Schumacher, "Where the Chips Fall: US Export Controls Under the Biden Administration from 2022 to 2024," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, Dec. 12, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/where-chips-fall-us-export-controls-under-biden-administration-2022-2024.

[36] Ethan Teekah, "US–China trade war." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 13, 2026. https://www.britannica.com/money/US-China-trade-war.

[37] Marianne Schneider-Petsinger and Jue Wang, *US-China Strategic Competition* (Chatham House, 2020), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/11/us-china-strategic-competition.

response to specific tensions linked to US pressure and economic coercion.[38]

A divergence is observed between NATO's approach, which favors maintaining diplomatic dialogue and economic exchanges with China to avoid turning it into an irreducible adversary while protecting European economic interests, and that of the United States, which adopts a more coercive and unilateral stance. The latter relies heavily on tariffs and technology restrictions to slow China's rise and pressures its allies to align with its policy to prevent circumvention by Beijing.[39]

In this context, allies find themselves in a delicate position. While the United States, as a key security guarantor in the Indo-Pacific and a highly influential actor within NATO, implicitly encourages alignment with its strategy, NATO itself maintains a more flexible approach, avoiding systematic adoption of US sanctions and seeking to limit strict alignment. As competition between Beijing and Washington intensifies, NATO increasingly evaluates how Chinese policies may affect Atlantic security, in contrast to the US emphasis on economic rivalry.[40]

This divergence highlights the need to consider NATO–Indo-Pacific cooperation independently from US-driven initiatives in order to safeguard Euro-Atlantic interests amid uncertainties surrounding American commitments.

3. *America's Independent Approach to Putin*

Europe has the financial capacity to support the Ukrainian war effort, but it does not have sufficient political weight to influence the decisions of Donald Trump, who favors direct negotiation between Washington and Moscow.

The first diplomatic steps initiated by Trump began on February 12, 2025, when he spoke by phone with Vladimir Putin. This was the first direct exchange between the two leaders in over three years, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the end of this call, they agreed to immediately launch negotiations and establish close cooperation between their respective teams.[41]

While Trump expressed his willingness to quickly end hostilities, the position of his administration became clearer during a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth presented the hardest line to date: a return to pre-war borders was deemed unrealistic, and Ukraine's NATO membership was excluded from consideration. The United States' priority objective was to end the conflict, even at the cost of territorial concessions. Washington nevertheless mentioned "robust" security guarantees, relying on a non-NATO peacekeeping force without deploying American troops. Meanwhile, Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine, officially continued to demand the full liberation of national territory, while Trump remained ambiguous regarding Kyiv's exact role in the peace process.[42]

Negotiations between Putin and Trump continued but produced few tangible results publicly, whether in the form of a global ceasefire or a peace agreement. Russia conditioned an expanded ceasefire on the end of Western military aid to Ukraine, a requirement aimed at sidelining Europe.[43]

In this context, the United States multiplied concessions to Moscow. Trump expressed willingness to accept Russia's retention of occupied Ukrainian territories, to permanently exclude Ukraine's NATO membership, and to ease economic sanctions. Washington also pressured Kyiv to accept an agreement favorable to the Kremlin. The US administration even considered officially recognizing the annexation of Crimea in 2014, ceasing public criticism of the Russian invasion, and distancing itself from international initiatives seeking to prosecute Moscow for war crimes. Despite these concessions, Vladimir Putin refused any compromise and maintained maximalist demands that would, in effect, entail the disappearance of the Ukrainian state. The United States then chose to continue its military support for Ukraine through its European allies.[44]

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[38] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on Sept. 15, 2025," press release, Sept. 15, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202509/t20250915_11708660.html.

[39] Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, "NATO 2022."

[40] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[41] Bose et al., "Trump Says Putin and Zelenskiy Want Peace; Phone Calls Kick Off Talks to End Ukraine War," *Reuters*, Feb. 13, 2025.

[42] "Trump Speaks with Putin About Ending War in Ukraine," *ABC News*, Feb. 13, 2025, https://abcnews.com/video/118773863/.

[43] Macarena Vidality and Javier G. Cuesta, "Trump and Putin Agree to a Ceasefire on Infrastructure and Energy Attacks in Ukraine War," *El País*, March 19, 2025, https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-03-19/trump-and-putin-agree-to-a-ceasefire-on-infrastructure-and-energy-attacks-in-ukraine-war.html.

[44] Peter Dickinson, "Trump Offered Putin Victory in Ukraine. Why Did Putin Refuse?" *Atlantic Council*, July 29, 2025,

The content of peace discussions between the United States and Russia notably concerned the fate of five Ukrainian territories under Russian control: Crimea, annexed in 2014, as well as the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, whose annexations were announced after 2022. The exchanges also addressed Ukraine's abandonment of its NATO candidacy and the strengthening of commercial relations between the United States and Russia.[45]

These negotiations ended the Western effort for an immediate ceasefire and opened the way to a prolonged continuation of fighting, pending long and uncertain negotiations. Trump refused to exert significant pressure on Moscow to achieve a rapid truce. While the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States had initially considered new coordinated sanctions against Russia, Trump then bypassed European initiatives and abandoned his own discourse in favor of a rapid ceasefire. This shift constituted a profound disappointment for Europeans.

In response, the European Union and the United Kingdom attempted to act without Washington by adopting new sanctions, notably against ships circumventing the oil embargo. Their requirement for unanimity slowed their implementation, however, and limited their impact, which fell far below that of a joint transatlantic action. A climate of distrust settled in Europe, fueled by the impression that Trump refused to increase pressure on Putin and by fears of a weakening of the US mediator role between Moscow and Kyiv.[46]

American fatigue with the absence of a ceasefire despite repeated attempts as well as the erosion of the complacent relationship between Trump and Putin ultimately led to a change of position in Washington. The United States announced aid enabling Ukraine to obtain Patriot missiles via NATO, marking an unprecedented rapprochement with Europe. Europeans purchased American weapons to be delivered to Ukraine, strengthening transatlantic alignment. Nevertheless, the persistent unpredictability of the Trump administration worried European allies: while it can sometimes produce results, it undermines agreements and fosters a climate of uncertainty.[47]

In negotiations, Europe remains indispensable. It contributes significantly to Ukraine's financial and military support and to the implementation of economic sanctions, but it does not control decisive levers—notably security guarantees. Meanwhile, the United States alternates between inclusion and bypassing: when massive sanctions or sustained economic pressure are necessary, Europe is treated as a key player; however, when it comes to sensitive negotiations, territorial concessions, or global geostrategic calculations, Trump favors the bilateral channel with Moscow and marginalizes Europeans. Russia actively exploits this unpredictability, favoring a one-on-one with Washington and European fragmentation, which only heightens distrust toward American commitments.

4. *Trade Policy Measures*

During his inaugural speech, Trump once again promised to "tax foreign countries to enrich our citizens," relaunching and amplifying his tariff strategy. This strategy consists of using tariffs as a political, economic, and diplomatic tool within the framework of his "America First" policy, aimed at protecting American industry, reducing trade deficits, and forcing partners to renegotiate.

From the beginning of his term, he launched an immediate offensive with massive tariffs targeting China, Mexico, and Canada. Gradually, he extended these measures to steel, aluminum, copper, lumber, agriculture, and automobiles, thereby broadening the scope of the same trade strategy across sectors and trading partners. In April 2025, he imposed "reciprocal tariffs" of at least 10% on almost all imports, with higher rates for certain countries: 20% for the EU, 24% for Japan, and 25% for South Korea. These measures triggered a chain reaction, counter-tariffs, and a climate of global uncertainty,

https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/trump-offered-putin-victory-in-ukraine-why-did-putin-refuse/.

[45] Zehra Nur Celik, "Trump's Special Mideast Envoy Claims Putin Wants 'Permanent Peace,'" *Anadolu Agency*, April 15, 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/trumps-special-mideast-envoy-claims-putin-wants-permanent-peace-/3539037.

[46] Anthony Faiola, "Trump Backs Off Ceasefire After Call with Putin, Letting Fighting Rage On," *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/05/20/trump-putin-call-ukraine-europe/.

[47] Laurent Berbon, "Trump-Poutine, le Début de la Fin ? : 'Si J'Étais Poutine, Je Commencerais Sérieusement à Préparer le Plan B,'" *L'Express*, July 17, 2025, https://www.lexpress.fr/idees-et-debats/trump-poutine-le-debut-de-la-fin-si-jetais-poutine-je-commencerais-serieusement-a-preparer-le-plan-b-TCMGE26ERNESNJRG3R3TAJ2WAE/?cmp_redirect=true.

significantly weakening Western and Indo-Pacific alliances.[48]

The unpredictability of Trump's decisions disrupted international trade and threatened security cooperation, particularly with Japan and South Korea, the countries most affected by these measures.

For Japan, the largest investor in the United States for five consecutive years and whose main trading partner remains Washington, US tariffs risk reducing the investment capacity of its companies and creating a trade deficit for the first time in three months.[49] Beyond the economic impact, these measures compromise the stability of security cooperation between the two countries, which is essential to the region. As a result, Japan emphasizes the need to strengthen mutual cooperation with the United States to maintain solid regional security, with the "Japan-US Alliance" remaining the cornerstone of its foreign and defense policy.[50]

South Korea, highly dependent on exports (88% of GDP in 2023), sees its sales to the United States, its main market, begin to decline (–2.07% in Q1 2025), with a risk of an annual decrease of 12.79% (~$13.2 billion) if the 25% tariffs are applied. In response, Seoul engages in bilateral negotiations, implements compensatory measures, and proposes solutions to reduce the trade surplus. As a result, these measures, driven by Washington's increasingly protectionist stance, contribute to reduced predictability in trade and investment.[51]

Finally, in January 2026, South Korea stated that the trade agreement with the United States remained in force despite these tariff threats and that it had not received any official notification of the implementation of the proposed new tariffs.[52] Despite tariff uncertainties, South Korean exports continued to grow strongly in early 2026, driven in particular by a boom in semiconductors, with a significant increase in exports to the United States and the European Union.[53]

In Europe, the 25% tariffs on steel and aluminum strongly affect companies integrated into global production chains. The United States remains the EU's main trading partner for goods and services exports. US tariffs risk raising prices, reducing European competitiveness, and disrupting integrated supply chains. The EU favors negotiation over a tariff war but does not rule out targeted retaliatory measures. According to European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, "Unjustified tariffs will not remain unanswered. The EU will protect its workers, businesses, and consumers."[54]

This is another example of how Washington's prioritization of its interests over those of its allies fosters a climate of uncertainty, weakening trust in its commitments and heightening concerns in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, both economically and strategically, thereby complicating cooperation on regional security issues.

In short, the policy changes adopted by Washington since Trump's return strongly influence its closest allies, whether within NATO or in its bilateral partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, in both military and economic terms. American support remains a key factor in diplomacy and security in these two regions, and this centrality raises questions about how these allies will respond to the implications of these choices.

When Indo-Pacific leaders miss NATO Summits (2025): A symptom of strategic vulnerability?

Following NATO's announcement in April 2022 of a strengthening of its relations with Indo-Pacific partners in a changing geopolitical context, the leaders of the IP4 countries—Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—have been invited each

[48] Wyatte Grantham-Philips, "Trump's Tariffs Have Launched Global Trade Wars. Here's a Timeline of How We Got Here," Associated Press, June 3, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/consumer-prices-inflation-trump-trade-6ea513a44876c2f4dc948a25c15b0eb0.

[49] MOFA Japan—call Ishiba-Trump, April 7, 2025; https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/pageite_000001_00886.html

[50] Doloresz Katanich, "Les Tarifs Douaniers Ralentissent les Exportations des Produits Japonais Vers les États-Unis," *Euronews*, May 21, 2025, https://fr.euronews.com/2025/05/21/les-tarifs-douaniers-ralentissent-les-exportations-des-produits-japonais-vers-les-etats-un.

[51] "Korean Economy Faces Headwinds as US Announces 26% Reciprocal Tariff for Seoul," *The Korea Times*, April 3, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20250403/south-korean-economy-faces-challenges-as-us-imposes-26-reciprocal-tariff-on-seoul.

[52] "AA—South Korea says trade deal stands despite Trump's tariff hike," Jan. 27, 2026, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/south-korea-says-trade-deal-stands-despite-trump-s-tariff-hike/3811888?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[53] Reuters – South Korea chip boom powers export growth to four-decade high, *April 1, 2026*, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-exports-rise-strongest-pace-nearly-four-decades-2026-04-01/?utm

[54] "EU-US Trade: How Tariffs Could Impact Europe," *European Parliament*, Feb. 13, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20250210STO26801/eu-us-trade-how-tariffs-could-impact-europe.

year to the NATO summit. This regular invitation reflects the growing recognition of the importance of global security issues and the need to develop partnerships beyond the Euro-Atlantic area.[55]

The NATO summit is a meeting of the heads of state and government of the Alliance's member countries. Partners, such as the IP4 countries, can be invited to exchange views on major strategic and security directions without participating in decision-making processes.

1. *An Absence That Shakes Public Opinion*

At the first two relevant summits—Madrid in 2022 and Vilnius in 2023—the Indo-Pacific countries were represented at the highest level. Participants included Fumio Kishida, prime minister of Japan; Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia; Yoon Suk Yeol, president of the Republic of Korea; as well as New Zealand Prime Ministers Jacinda Ardern in 2022 and Chris Hipkins in 2023.[56] [57]

The third summit took place in Washington in July 2024. On that occasion, Japan and South Korea were again represented by their respective leaders, Mr. Fumio Kishida and H.E. Mr. Yoon Suk Yeol, along with Christopher Luxon, newly elected Prime Minister of New Zealand. In contrast, Australia chose a lower-level representation: the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, Richard Marles. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declined the invitation to focus on domestic policy priorities, a decision that drew criticism.[58]

Despite Albanese's absence at the summit, Australia–NATO relations continued to strengthen. This dynamic was reflected in sustained participation in Alliance ministerial meetings, particularly at the level of foreign ministers, and, for the first time in October 2024, in a NATO Defence Ministers meeting alongside other Indo-Pacific partners (Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand).[59] The declaration adopted by the Allies at the end of the summit explicitly recognized the participation of the IP4 leaders.[60]

After three consecutive years of Indo-Pacific leaders' participation, this pattern was called into question at the NATO summit held in The Hague in June 2025. This summit, of particular importance in an international context marked by growing instability and uncertainties related to Donald Trump's return to the presidency of the United States, saw only one high-level representation among the IP4 countries.

Japan was represented by its Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, South Korea by its National Security Advisor Wi Sung-lak, and Australia by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Richard Marles. The only head of government present was the Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon.[61]

Regarding Japan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on June 20, 2025 that Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru would travel to The Hague from June 24 to 26 to attend the NATO summit, which would have marked a fourth consecutive participation since 2022.[62] However, on June 23, the Ministry announced the cancellation of this visit "due to various circumstances." It was specified that Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya would attend summit-related events and use the trip to hold bilateral consultations with G7 countries and other partners on major international issues.[63]

Concerning South Korea, spokesperson Kang Yoo-jung of the presidential office stated on June 22 that the president's participation had been seriously considered, despite significant domestic constraints. She clarified, however, that due to several internal issues and uncertainties related to the situation in the

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[55] "Innovation Initiatives, Further Support for Ukraine Key Takeaways from NATO's Foreign Ministers Meeting," *NATO Allied Command Transformation*, April 7, 2022, https://www.act.nato.int/article/innovation-initiatives-further-support-for-ukraine-key-takeaways-from-natos-foreign-ministers-meeting/.

[56] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "NATO Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) Leaders' Meeting," press release, June 29, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/ki/page1e_000413.html.

[57] Sarah Kim, "Yoon Pitches Tighter Security Cooperation between AP4 and NATO," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, July 12, 2023, https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/07/12/national/diplomacy/Korea-NATO-Summit-Yoon-Suk-Yeol/20230712174236341.html.

[58] Tess Ikonomou, "PM to Skip NATO Meeting, Sending Marles Instead," *The New Daily*, July 2, 2024, https://www.thenewdaily.com.au/news/politics/australian-politics/2024/07/02/anthony-albanese-nato-marles.

[59] "Relations with Australia," NATO, June 23, 2025, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-australia.

[60] Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, "Washington Summit Declaration."

[61] "Skipping NATO Summit, 3 Indo-Pacific Leaders Show Paltry Sense of Crisis," *JAPAN Forward*, July 10, 2025, https://japan-forward.com/skipping-nato-summit-3-indo-pacific-leaders-show-paltry-sense-of-crisis/.

[62] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Prime Minister Ishiba's Attendance at the NATO Summit," press release, June 20, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/pageite_000001_01067.html.

[63] English News—Japanese PM cancels trip for NATO summit, *June 23, 2025*, https://english.news.cn/20250623/5d6f3971ef334bea9caef559c58763f7/c.html

Middle East, the president ultimately decided not to attend the summit in person.[64]

For Australia, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated at a press conference on June 16, 2025 that although Australia is not a NATO member, it regularly participates in its work and would be represented at the summit by Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles.[65] A few days later, the media confirmed that Anthony Albanese would not travel to the Netherlands, leaving Richard Marles once again to represent Australia.[66]

In contrast, New Zealand confirmed the presence of its Prime Minister. A document entitled *Proposed Overseas Travel*, published by the Office of the Prime Minister of New Zealand in June 2025, details Christopher Luxon's official trip to Belgium and the Netherlands from June 17 to 27, 2025, explicitly including his participation in the NATO summit as New Zealand's representative to the Alliance and its Indo-Pacific partners.[67]

The absence of three out of four major leaders raised significant questions about the Indo-Pacific countries' commitment to NATO, particularly following Donald Trump's return to the presidency of the United States. Nate Fischer, Asia-Pacific analyst at the US geopolitical intelligence firm RANE, considers that "the outlook is poor for NATO." According to him, the absence of three IP4 leaders—especially after Mark Rutte's visit to Japan earlier in the year—suggests a significant loss of momentum in NATO's regional outreach strategy under Trump's second term, raising serious doubts about the coherence of the Alliance's previously promoted global vision by Washington.[68]

Although a joint NATO–IP4 declaration reaffirmed the importance of their partnership and the willingness to deepen it, the absence of the main Indo-Pacific leaders nevertheless sent a strong signal to the public, fueling questions about the nature, strength, and durability of NATO–IP4 engagement and cooperation.

2. *Key Factors Shaping Partner Representation at NATO Summits*

In international media, the absence of several Indo-Pacific leaders from the NATO summit in June 2025 was widely interpreted through the lens of evolving US foreign policy. Given the vague explanations provided by the governments concerned, the press sought to situate these absences within a broader geopolitical context, highlighting in particular the role and direction of the United States on the international stage.

Against this backdrop, it is useful to recall that since 2022, leaders have generally been aware in advance of the main topics to be discussed at NATO summits, such as sustained support for Ukraine, strengthening defense and deterrence, posture towards Russia, and increased cooperation with partners, notably in the Indo-Pacific region. Leading up to the 2025 Hague Summit, a few weeks before the meeting, Donald Trump publicly called on NATO allies to raise their defense spending to around 5% of their GDP, far above the 2% target set since 2014. The proposal was generally met with broad support among NATO allies, although some states expressed reluctance and highlighted challenges in meeting such a target, while NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, for his part, expressed his expectation that members would agree on a target close to 5% of GDP.[69] [70]

For the IP4 countries (NATO partners but non-members) these formal decisions did not directly concern them. They have no voting rights on the budget or defense policy.[71] Nevertheless, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth reiterated the American message at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May 2025, emphasizing the need for

[64] Hankyoreh—"Lee opts out of NATO summit due to uncertainty in Middle East, domestic priorities," *June 23, 2025*, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1204237.html

[65] Prime Minister of Australia, "Press conference—Kananaskis, Canada," transcript, June 16, 2025, https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-kananaskis-canada-16-june-2025.

[66] Courtney Gould, "Anthony Albanese to Skip NATO Summit as Search for Meeting with Trump Continues—As It Happened," *ABC News*, June 19, 2025, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-20/federal-politics-live-blog-june-20/105440154.

[67] Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, "Proposed Overseas Travel: Prime Minister, Hon Louise Upton, Hon Mark Mitchell and Hon Todd McClay—June 2025," July 18, 2025, https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/proactive-release-cab-25-sub-0194-proposed-overseas-travel-pm-upston-mitchell-mcclay-june-2025.

[68] Gabriel Dominguez and Jesse Johnson, "NATO's Indo-Pacific Ties Risk Losing Momentum as Leaders Skip Key Summit," *The Japan Times*, June 24, 2025, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/06/24/asia-pacific/politics/nato-indo-pacific-trump-analysis/.

[69] Gavin Blackburn, "Most NATO Members Endorse Trump's Demand to Up Defence Spending to 5% of GDP, Mark Rutte Says," *Euronews*, June 5, 2025, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/06/05/most-nato-members-endorse-trumps-demand-to-up-defence-spending-to-5-of-gdp-mark-rutte-says

[70] Lili Bayer, "NATO's Rutte Says He Assumes Alliance Will Agree on 5% Spending Target," *Reuters*, May 26, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/natos-rutte-says-he-assumes-alliance-will-agree-5-spending-target-2025-05-26/.

[71] NATO – Partnership

all allies and partners to "do their part" in defense. He criticized the level of defense spending by some Asian countries, urging them to increase their efforts in the face of growing regional threats.[72]

Aware that the central theme of the summit would be the vote on defense spending, the IP4 leaders chose to prioritize their national concerns. Despite the absence of heads of state or government, all IP4 countries were represented at a high level, ensuring that their interests were defended while allowing them to focus on domestic priorities.[73]

In the absence of clear and detailed official explanations regarding the decision of major IP4 leaders not to attend in person, international media largely relied on available information and broader geopolitical context to interpret these absences. While aware of the domestic constraints facing each country, the press nevertheless tended to frame the situation as a sign of a potential recalibration—or even a relative disengagement—of Indo-Pacific partners toward NATO, even though their continued high-level representation suggests sustained involvement rather than withdrawal.

In this context, domestic political considerations in June 2025 also played a significant role in shaping the leaders' decisions not to attend the summit in person. In Japan, Ishiba Shigeru, weakened by a series of scandals and in the midst of campaigning for the July Senate elections, preferred to concentrate his efforts domestically.[74] May 2025 polls indicated strong citizen dissatisfaction with his government, with very low support and harsh criticism of economic management.[75]

In South Korea, Lee Jae-myung, newly elected on June 3, 2025 after six months of crisis triggered by the brief imposition of martial law by former president Yoon Suk Yeol, had to manage a deeply divided country and a fragile domestic situation.[76]

In Australia, Anthony Albanese followed a similar logic, focusing on domestic priorities. Already absent from the previous summit due to an internal crisis, he noted that as a partner and not a NATO member, his presence was not indispensable, especially since his government had just been reelected in May 2025 and had to address economic challenges, the cost of living, housing policy, and energy transition.[77]

These absences do not reflect a withdrawal of commitment to NATO but rather a situational adjustment dictated by national priorities and domestic schedules. New Zealand was the only South Pacific leader to personally attend the summit because its domestic situation allowed it to do so without political cost while enhancing its image as an independent yet supportive partner of democracies.

The June 2025 context clearly illustrates the distinction between NATO members and its partners, with the latter not being bound by the Alliance's formal decisions, particularly regarding the increase in defense budgets. Albanese emphasized that "NATO is NATO—it is all the countries that are part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," while recognizing the importance of Australia being represented at a high level at the summit through the minister of defense, as has been the case for all IP4 members. He stressed that, although he had "never accepted the invitation," his country's participation was meant to reflect national priorities while ensuring effective representation.[78] On June 24, 2025, he clarified that the absence of three out of four leaders—himself, the South Korean president, and the Japanese prime minister—was part of a coordinated process, in an uncertain global and regionally unstable context, ensuring that the interests of the IP4 were nevertheless defended at the highest level at the NATO summit, thereby reflecting a continued and intact commitment to the Alliance.[79] It is important to remember that government changes are normal in all democracies, and NATO, as an

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[72] Paul McLeary, "Hegseth Warns Asia Allies that China Threat Is 'Imminent,'" *POLITICO*, May 30, 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/05/30/hegseth-warns-asia-allies-that-china-threat-is-imminent-00378700.

[73] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[74] Alastair Gale, "Polls Show Support for Ishiba Recovering Ahead of Election," *The Japan Times*, June 16, 2025, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/06/16/japan/japan-pm-ishiba-support-up/.

[75] "Rice Issues a Blow to Ishiba Administration Popularity," *Nippon*, June 4, 2025, https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h30012/.

[76] Reuters—South Koreans vote for president after months of turmoil triggered by martial law https://www.tradingview.com/news/reuters.com%2C2025%3Anewsml_L3N3S2046%3A0-south-koreans-vote-for-president-after-months-of-turmoil-triggered-by-martial-law/?utm

[77] "Building Australia's Future," Australian Labor Party, https://alp.org.au/policies-2025/; Patrick Commins, "The Return of Inflation May Poison Labor's Second-Term Agenda and Scare More Voters to the Fringes," *The Guardian*, Jan. 29, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/jan/29/inflation-rba-interest-rates-hikes-polarised-australia.

[78] Latika M. Bourke, "NATO: Anthony Albanese's Decision to Skip Summit Sends Wrong Signal on Ukraine," *The Nightly*, July 3, 2024, https://thenightly.com.au/politics/nato-eu-president-ursula-von-der-leyen-will-not-attend-summit-in-ukraine-joining-albanese-on-no-show-list-c-15224707.

[79] Joseph Olbrycht-Palmer, "Richard Marles Refuses to 'Speculate' on Possible Trump Meet," *news.com.au*, June 24, 2025, https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/richard-marles-refuses-to-speculate-on-possible-trump-meet/news-story/65a38d732b176344174f19cc7bc5d7e6.

alliance of democracies, is designed to maintain its commitments despite such political variations. The United States, in addition to being the Alliance's most influential member, wields considerable influence on the international stage, but this influence should not be conflated with that of NATO itself. US foreign policy can certainly impact bilateral relations between the United States and its partners, but it does not affect the Alliance's relations with its partners, as NATO acts and engages as a collective body. For Australia, for example, repercussions stemming from US policy were mainly felt within the AUKUS framework, while Japan and South Korea focused their exchanges on trade and security issues with Washington. By engaging with NATO, Indo-Pacific partners seek to diversify support and embed their cooperation within a more collective and multilateral approach.

Similarly, the absence of heads of state or government at the June 2025 summit should not be interpreted as disengagement; all Indo-Pacific partners were still represented at a relatively high level, ensuring that their interests were fully defended, which does not equate to total absence and does not call into question the solidity of strategic partnerships. On the contrary, these partnerships remain mutually beneficial and essential to international security and cooperation.

III. NATO and the IP4: Mutual attraction amid political instability and summit underrepresentation in 2025

NATO member states and Indo-Pacific partners are very different types of actors, whose cooperation is based on a convergence of interests, even though their motivations differ in nature and scope.

NATO–IP4: An Intact Partnership Driven by Shared Strategic Interests

For Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, the Alliance primarily represents a strategic lever in response to China's rise and the increasing hybrid and coercive threats in their region. It enables them to enhance resilience, access NATO's technological and operational expertise—particularly in cyber defense, interoperability, and military planning—and anchor their security policies within a network of democracies sharing common values.[80]

Conversely, NATO seeks to extend its strategic reach beyond the Euro-Atlantic theater to address the global nature of contemporary threats. By partnering with Indo-Pacific countries, it consolidates a common front against the authoritarian axis formed by China, Russia, and North Korea, while promoting shared security standards based on mutual trust and international stability. This partnership does not aim to establish a permanent NATO military presence in the region but to build an interconnected security architecture grounded in complementarity and strategic solidarity between the two zones.[81]

Since 2022, the leaders of the four Indo-Pacific partners (IP4) have recognized the interdependence of European and Indo-Pacific security and committed to closely coordinating their cooperation with NATO, leveraging their respective strengths to deepen dialogue and promote regional stability.[82]

This commitment has not only been maintained over the years but has strengthened. Following the NATO summit in The Hague in June 2025, NATO–IP4 relations remained robust and deepening. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte reaffirmed the importance of a joint analysis of security threats facing both regions, whose security is now interconnected.[83]

The joint declaration issued at the conclusion of the summit, far from signaling a retreat, marked a symbolic step in strengthening the partnership, reaffirming both parties' commitment to dialogue and cooperation based on shared strategic interests and common values. It specifically highlighted the Indo-Pacific partners' continued support for Ukraine, their willingness to increase defense spending transparently, and their intention to enhance industrial and technological cooperation, including in space, maritime, munitions, and emerging technologies, as well as force interoperability.[84]

[80] NATO—"Relations with Partners."

[81] Spyridon Kyriakis, "Allied Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Sub-Committee on Future Security and Defence Capabilities, Defense Security Committee, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, October 11, 2025, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2025-11/015%20DSCFC%2025%20E%20rev.%202%20fin%20-%20ALLIED%20COOPERATION%20IN%20THE%20INDO-PACIFIC%20-%20KYRIAKIS%20REPORT.pdf.

[82] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "NATO Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) Leaders' Meeting."

[83] Syeong Hyeon Choi, "Summit Snubs: What Key Nato Absences Reveal About Indo-Pacific Worries," *South China Morning Post*, June 28, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3316145/summit-snubs-what-key-nato-absences-reveal-about-indo-pacific-worries.

[84] "Statement Between NATO Secretary General and the Four Indo-Pacific Partners" (NATO, 2025), https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-

Mark Rutte noted that all Indo-Pacific partners have defense industrial bases that can be mobilized for joint acquisitions and innovations with NATO, as illustrated by developments observed during the war in Ukraine, particularly in drone and artificial intelligence technologies.[85]

This declaration represents only the first formal step toward deepening material relations.

In South Korea, the new government of Lee Jae-myung, elected on June 3, 2025, marked a strategic turning point by marked a strategic turning point by moving away from the former government's Indo-Pacific Strategy—a strategy aimed at expanding Seoul's strategic role and deepening cooperation with NATO and regional allies—signaling a shift toward a more pragmatic foreign policy approach rather than an explicit rebranding under a specific new regional label. Nevertheless, the depth of relations already established with NATO makes disengagement unlikely. Seoul has become a major strategic supplier for several NATO member states, notably in Eastern Europe.[86]

On the sidelines of the Hague summit, South Korea and NATO agreed to create an operational-level advisory body on defense industry cooperation. During this meeting, National Security Advisor Wi Sung-lac delivered a personal letter from President Lee explaining his absence and reaffirming his commitment to deepen the partnership.[87] On July 3, 2025, President Lee held his first phone conversations with Mark Rutte to explore concrete ways to strengthen cooperation.[88] Since then, strategic dialogues have continued, with the launch on Sept. 26, 2025 of the first direct South Korea–NATO dialogue on industrial and defense capabilities, aimed at consolidating mutually beneficial partnerships in production, development, and research—particularly in space, land, and munitions sectors.[89] In December 2025, a NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation spent a week in South Korea to deepen security and industrial cooperation, covering advanced defense, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and resilience to regional and global threats.[90]

In Japan, relations with NATO have remained solid and developing, characterized by institutional, strategic, and practical cooperation reinforced through regular contact. On Oct. 7, 2025, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba held a telephone conversation with Mark Rutte during which both leaders reaffirmed the importance of their cooperation in addressing global security challenges in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.[91] In November 2025, a NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation visited Japan for a week to strengthen the partnership, focusing on modernizing national security documents, easing defense export restrictions, increasing defense spending, and securing critical supply chains. This visit was a standalone bilateral mission by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly to Japan, separate from its subsequent visit to South Korea in December 2025, as Parliamentary Assembly delegations typically conduct distinct, country-specific visits rather than continuous multi-country tours. According to the NATO PA press release of November 25, 2025, Japanese legislators were expected to participate in NATO PA sessions throughout 2026 as part of efforts to deepen political dialogue following that visit to Japan.[92] In January 2026, the second Japan–NATO cybersecurity dialogue took place in Brussels, enabling in-depth exchanges on national strategies and future cooperation prospects in this domain.[93]

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and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/statement-between-nato-secretary-general-and-the-four-indo-pacific-partners.

[85] Choi, "Summit Snubs."

[86] Dongkeun Lee, "South Korea Moves Away from Former Indo-Pacific Strategy," *East Asia Forum*, July 21, 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/07/21/south-korea-moves-away-from-former-indo-pacific-strategy/.

[87] "Korea, NATO Agree to Establish Consultative Body on Defense Industry," *The Korea Times*, June 26, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20250626/south-korea-nato-agree-to-establish-consultative-body-on-defense-industry.

[88] "Lee Discusses Deepening of S. Korea-NATO Partnership in Phone Talks with Rutte," *The Korea Times*, July 3, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20250703/lee-discusses-deepening-of-s-korea-nato-partnership-in-phone-talks-with-rutte.

[89] NATO, "The First Dedicated Dialogue on Defence Industrial Cooperation and Capabilities Launched Between NATO and the Republic of Korea," press release, Sept. 26, 2025, https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/09/26/the-first-dedicated-dialogue-on-defence-industrial-cooperation-a.

[90] NATO Parliamentary Assembly, South Korea – Defense ambitions and advanced technologies at the heart of a delegation of NATO parliamentarians' visit https://www.nato-pa.int/news/koreas-defence-ambitions-and-cutting-edge-tech-take-centre-stage-nato-parliamentary-visit

[91] Prime Minister's Office of Japan, "Telephone meeting between Prime Minister Ishiba and NATO Secretary General Rutte (Summary)," press release, Oct. 7, 2025, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/103/diplomatic/202510/07nato.html.

[92] NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "NATO Parliamentarians Highlight Growing Interdependence between Euro Atlantic and Indo-Pacific," press release, Nov 25, 2025, https://www.nato-pa.int/news/nato-parliamentarians-highlight-growing-interdependence-between-euro-atlantic-and-indo-pacific.

[93] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "The 2nd Japan-NATO Cyber Dialogue," press release, Jan. 29, 2026, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_02033.html.

Australia has followed the same path, reinforcing its practical role alongside NATO partners, including significant contributions to support Ukraine. At the Hague summit in June 2025, Canberra signed an agreement with the NATO Support and Procurement Organisation (NSPO), facilitating closer cooperation in procurement, logistics, and defense capability acquisition and opening opportunities for Australian industry within NATO supply chains. As part of Operation Kudu, Australia deployed a Royal Australian Air Force E-7A Wedgetail aircraft and up to one hundred personnel in Europe to support NATO logistical and humanitarian operations related to the Ukrainian effort.[94] In December 2025, Canberra announced a military support program of approximately USD 95 million, including a $50 million contribution to the "Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List" (PURL), confirming its position as the largest non-NATO contributor to military assistance for Ukraine, totaling over USD 1.7 billion since the beginning of the invasion.[95]

New Zealand, for its part, continues operational and institutional contributions alongside NATO, consolidating its cooperation frameworks. In November 2025, it participated in the NATO–Industry Forum 2025 with other Indo-Pacific partners, addressing innovation, defense capabilities, and industrial cooperation in a multilateral context.[96] In December 2025, Wellington announced a USD 15 million contribution to the NATO–US initiative to provide weapons and equipment to Ukraine via the PURL, demonstrating concrete commitment alongside the Alliance.[97]

Despite some doubts expressed regarding Indo-Pacific partners' engagement since the Hague summit, the partnership with NATO remains solid and continues to develop—not to expand the Alliance into the Indo-Pacific, but rather to share common strategic interests and strengthen mutual security between the two regions.

Europe as a NATO Priority: Security Connected to the Indo-Pacific, Not Full Inclusion

Since the return of war to Europe, NATO has remained fully focused on its core mission: the protection of the Euro-Atlantic area, a historical priority enshrined in the 1949 Washington Treaty. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted the Alliance to concentrate the bulk of its political and military resources on the Eastern flank and on strengthening deterrence against Russia. This focus is reflected in increased defense budgets, the definition of new capability objectives centered on Europe, official statements emphasizing European responsibility, and the prioritization of support for Ukraine.

Still, this clearly stated priority does not conflict with NATO's development of partnerships, notably with the Indo-Pacific region. These two dimensions are complementary rather than competing. NATO is and will remain a regional organization; there has never been any intention to extend the Alliance's military protection to the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, the security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific spaces is closely interconnected.[98]

The Alliance and the Indo-Pacific countries share common values based on peace and respect for the international order. Russia's aggression against Ukraine represents a serious violation of this order, undermining the fundamental principles that underpin it. The unilateral alteration of the status quo by force constitutes a direct threat to international security on a global scale.[99] In this context, contemporary challenges are global in nature and know no borders. Protecting European territories and allies therefore requires a global approach and strong interconnection. NATO can serve as a transatlantic platform for dialogue, fostering a shared understanding of the challenges facing the international community. This convergence of assessments of international risks and security threats is essential for both Allies and partners, particularly in the Indo-Pacific when it comes to, for example, addressing the challenges posed by China.

The partnerships developed by NATO, particularly those established with Indo-Pacific countries, rest on

[94] Minister for Foreign Affairs, "Australia Deepens Collaboration with NATO and Takes Further Action to Hold Russia to Account," joint media release, June 25, 2025, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australia-deepens-collaboration-nato-and-takes-further-action-hold-russia-account.

[95] Minister for Foreign Affairs, "Australia Stands with NATO Partners in Support of Ukraine," joint media release, Dec. 4, 2025, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australia-stands-nato-partners-support-ukraine.

[96] "NATO-Industry Forum 2025: Innovate, Accelerate, Sustain," *Allied Command Transformation*, Nov. 8, 2025, https://www.act.nato.int/article/nato-industry-forum-2025/.

[97] Mirage News—NZ Commits $15M Aid to Ukraine Defense Efforts https://www.miragenews.com/nz-commits-15m-aid-to-ukraine-defense-efforts-1582874/?utm

[98] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[99] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "NATO Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) Leaders' Meeting."

solid foundations. The goal is to deepen interactions at all levels in areas where there are shared interests and security challenges. The focus is primarily on promoting dialogue, exchange, and joint assessment of these challenges so that the means to address them can be collectively defined. As Gwendolyn Vamos, Head of Global Partnerships in NATO's Political Affairs and Security Policy Division in Brussels, emphasizes, this does not involve redeploying Alliance military assets to the Indo-Pacific, nor does it involve turning NATO into a security provider in the Pacific. [100]

The relevance of this argument lies in the fact that each actor—NATO and the IP4 countries—remains focused on its priority region. This focus is the very foundation of the partnership: first, it allows each party to contribute to the security of its own region; second, it increases the importance of the partnership in a context of weakening US support, which is indispensable for both Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Despite concerns arising from the evolving political landscape in the United States, the resulting climate of uncertainty, and the notable absence of Indo-Pacific leaders at the Hague summit, NATO's cooperation with the IP4 countries remains unchanged. Although less visible in the media, this partnership remains solid and continues to strengthen, driven by a growing recognition of the strategic interdependencies between the European and Indo-Pacific regions.

Recommendations

While European military capabilities and the security architecture in Asia remain largely dependent on the United States, this dependence does not provide an absolute guarantee regarding the stability of American political commitment. In this context, the establishment and strengthening of relations between NATO and the Indo-Pacific region can be seen as a complementary safety net—not an alternative to the American alliance, but an additional mechanism aimed at mitigating the potential effects of political instability in Washington. This concern is illustrated by Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba, who stated in a television interview in July 2025, "If it is assumed that Japan must follow American decisions due to its strong dependence, then we must work toward greater autonomy in security, energy, and food, in order to reduce our reliance on the United States."[101] In the face of this instability, the most effective response lies in strengthening strategic autonomy based on two main axes.

First, NATO and the IP4 countries should align with the American goal of a defense budget equivalent to 5% of GDP. Although this effort remains, at this stage, insufficient to eliminate all dependence on Washington, it would constitute a significant step toward the eventual capacity to ensure their own security and strengthen their defense frameworks.

Second, NATO should continue to deepen its partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries by developing closer ties and enhanced cooperation. This approach would prepare for potential gaps left by an American disengagement, particularly in Europe. It would involve intensifying joint exercises, strengthening military dialogues, and sharing analyses, strategic planning, and capability requirements. Such cooperation, conducted independently of the level of American engagement, would provide partners with the means to jointly address stability challenges arising both from political uncertainties in Washington and broader international issues.

[100] Landgraf, "In Conversation with Gwendoline Vamos."

[101] "Japan PM Ishiba Urges Less US Dependence as Tokyo Faces New Tariffs," *Reuters*, July 10, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/japan-pm-ishiba-urges-less-us-dependence-tokyo-faces-new-tariffs-2025-07-10/

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PACIFIC FORUM INTERNATIONAL

Rethinking Labor Migration Governance: Evidence from Korea's Employment Permit System

By
Jimin Jeong

Executive Summary

Jimin Jeong

Labor migration has been a driving force behind globalization, shaping economies, societies, and cultures across borders. The flow of migration brings not only labor but also ideas and culture that enrich host societies while providing significant economic benefits to labor-sending countries. In recent decades, Asia has played a prominent role in global labor migration, both as a major source of workers and as a destination. In 2020, Asia accounted for around 115 million migrants, or over 40 percent of the world's international migrants. Among these, 66 million participated in intra-Asia migration, which has steadily increased annually since 1990. In addressing domestic demographic concerns and labor shortages, newly industrialized economies such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore have actively pursued labor migration policies to attract foreign workers. Among these initiatives, Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) is one of the most distinctive state-managed labor migration programs in Asia, designed specifically to regulate and support the employment of low-skilled workers.

The migration of low-skilled workers is often overlooked in academic discourse due to an increasing focus on recruiting highly educated, high-skilled workers for technology-intensive industries. Nevertheless, in countries like Korea, which faces demographic challenges such as a low fertility rate and a rapidly aging population, low-skilled labor remains just as important as its highly skilled counterparts in sustaining the domestic industrial system. Since its establishment in 2004, the EPS has allowed low-skilled foreign workers to take positions in designated sectors, such as manufacturing and agriculture, for a limited period. In 2024, the number of foreign employees under the E-9 non-professional employment visa reached 302,000, a 12.6 percent increase from the previous year.

The experience of the EPS points to broader implications for how labor migration is governed. This article aims to analyze bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) through the case study of Korea's EPS and suggests that the institutionalization of labor migration is crucial for promoting sustainable labor mobility and protecting low-skilled workers. By examining how the EPS operationalizes co-development, control, and co-existence, this article contends that labor migration should be understood as a realm of governance beyond being a sole product of the labor market.

Introduction

Labor migration has been a driving force behind globalization, shaping economies, societies, and cultures across borders. The flow of migration brings not only labor but also ideas and culture that enrich host societies while providing significant economic benefits to labor-sending countries.[1] In recent decades, Asia has played a prominent role in global labor migration, both as a major source of workers and as a destination. In 2020, Asia accounted for around 115 million migrants, or over 40% of the world's international migrants. Among these, 66 million participated in intra-Asia migration, which has steadily increased annually since 1990.[2] In addressing domestic demographic concerns and labor shortages, newly industrialized economies such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore have actively pursued labor migration policies to attract foreign workers.[3] Among these initiatives, Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) is one of the most distinctive state-managed labor migration programs in Asia, designed specifically to regulate and support the employment of low-skilled workers.

The migration of low-skilled workers is often overlooked in academic discourse due to an increasing focus on recruiting highly educated, high-skilled workers for technology-intensive industries. Nevertheless, in countries like Korea, which faces demographic challenges such as a low fertility rate and a rapidly aging population, low-skilled labor remains just as important as its highly skilled counterparts in sustaining the domestic industrial system.[4] Since its establishment in 2004, the EPS has allowed low-skilled foreign workers to take positions in designated sectors, such as manufacturing and agriculture, for a limited period. In 2024, the number of foreign employees under the E-9 non-professional employment visa reached 302,000, a 12.6% increase from the previous year.[5]

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Institutionalization of Labor Mobility

Labor migration is often analyzed primarily as an individual rational choice, framed as a calculation of costs and benefits aimed at maximizing utility. The neoclassical theory of migration suggests that migration movements tend to converge toward a spatial-economic equilibrium, with people moving from lower to higher income areas and from densely to sparsely populated areas.[6] Under the neoclassical framework, migration is largely reduced to a function of geographic differences in labor supply and demand, where individuals, as rational actors, respond to wage differentials and employment opportunities; however, this approach to migration overlooks the institutional complexity that moderates and mediates migration processes. Migration is neither frictionless nor universally accessible. Individuals face unequal access to information, legal constraints, and administrative barriers. Furthermore, rather than a one-time decision, migration is a continuous process—from information acquisition to settlement—deeply mediated by institutional arrangements. Consequently, labor migration cannot be understood as purely market-driven but must be analyzed as embedded within regulatory and institutional frameworks that condition both opportunities and outcomes.

The migration of low-skilled workers is especially dependent on institutional availability. Compared to their higher-skilled counterparts, low-skilled workers have a more limited capacity to search for

[1] Hein de Haas et al., *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), ProQuest.
[2] International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2024*, ed. Marie McAuliffe and Linda Adhiambo Oucho (2024), https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024.
[3] Manolo Abella and Sabrina Kouba, "Structures for the Governance of Labor Immigration in Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore," in *Labor Migration in Asia: Building Effective Institutions* (OECD Publishing, 2016), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2016/02/labor-migration-in-asia_g1g63c3c/9789264251076-en.pdf.
[4] Kyeonghee Cho and Seungkeun Shin, "A Comparison of the Step-by-Step Technical Worker Training Policies between South Korea and Japan," *Quarterly Journal of Labor Policy* 24, no. 3 (2024): 93–116. https://doi.org/10.22914/jlp.2024.24.3.004.
[5] Statistics Korea, "2024 Survey on Immigrants' Living Conditions and Labour Force," press release, December 17, 2024, https://mods.go.kr/boardDownload.es?bid=11733&list_no=436178&seq=2.
[6] de Haas et al., *The Age of Migration*; Kyung Deuk Kwon et al., "A Closer Look at Labor Migration and Diversity in South Korea." *Korean Comparative Government Review* 26, no. 3 (2022): 27–48, https://doi.org/10.18397/kcgr.2022.26.3.27.

opportunities and exercise leverage in the labor market. Schmutz et al. compare the migration costs (monetary, psychic, and social costs associated with migration and settlement) and spatial friction (ability to search and apply for remote job opportunities) of blue-and white-collar workers across thirty French cities.[7] The researchers demonstrate that blue-collar workers face mobility costs that are three times higher relative to their average income, and they are at least twice as poorly connected to other cities as white-collar workers. Given that their analysis is based on city-level migration, the disparity in migration costs and spatial friction between blue-and white-collar workers is likely to be even greater in the context of international migration. Because low-skilled workers are less able to independently navigate cross-border labor markets, their mobility is often mediated through formalized systems—such as state-managed recruitment programs and employer-tied visa programs—that reduce uncertainty while simultaneously constraining choice.

Within the broader landscape of labor migration governance, BLAs represent a distinct institutional arrangement. Chilton and Posner summarize BLAs with five key characteristics: (1) the establishment of health, criminal records, and other eligibility criteria for potential workers; (2) obligatory screening of candidates by labor-sending countries; (3) legal protection of workers in the host country; (4) the limitation or regulation of recruiters and/or employers; and (5) institutional mechanisms for administration.[8] Compared to other forms of labor migration policies that are built upon no or only limited agreements between labor-sending and receiving countries, BLAs place greater emphasis on shared responsibility and accountability among the parties involved, especially when accompanied by mandatory Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), as seen in Korea's EPS.[9] Mutual recognition and enforcement help ensure relatively balanced leverage between labor-sending and receiving countries and incentivize both actors to monitor and regulate labor inflows and outflows.

BLAs can be an effective tool for both labor-sending and labor-receiving countries when tailored to the specific contexts and demands of each. This analysis adopts three key migration objectives commonly observed in host countries, as suggested by Cho et al.: Co-Development, Co-Existence, and Control.[10] Co-development seeks to promote mutually beneficial economic gains from migration for all stakeholders, including labor-sending and receiving countries, workers, and employers. Co-existence emphasizes the integration of migrant workers into host countries, ensuring their access to resources and benefits that enable them to become productive members of the host community. Control focuses on protecting human rights and security by managing migration flows and reducing the incidence of illegal activities such as human trafficking and unauthorized permanent settlement. The following sections present a case study of the EPS to examine the benefits of BLAs with MOUs in securing and promoting labor migration.

Korea's Employment Permit System

Korea has been experiencing a shortage of less-skilled domestic workers as many younger people avoid jobs in labor-intensive industries and in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME). The EPS aims to address this situation by helping SMEs supplement their workforce with foreign workers while not harming employment opportunities for domestic workers (National Assembly Library 2023).[11] Each year, the Korean government considers diverse factors such as labor needs, the sector's strategic importance to national exports, and firm-level employment size to determine quotas for eligible industries and firms.[12] For instance, "root industries," such as metalworking and chemical manufacturing, are allocated higher quotas. Firms in rural areas that face greater difficulty in securing labor supply also receive higher quotas. Sectors aided by the EPS include manufacturing, construction, agriculture, mining, and the livestock industry.

[7] Benoit Schmutz et al., "Why Are Low-Skilled Workers Less Mobile? The Role of Mobility Costs and Spatial Frictions," *Annals of Economics and Statistics*, no. 142 (2021): 283–304, https://doi.org/10.15609/annaeconstat2009.142.0283.

[8] Adam Chilton and Eric A. Posner, "Why Countries Sign Bilateral Agreements," Coase-Sandor Institute for Law and Economics Research Paper No. 807 (University of Chicago, 2017), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2926994.

[9] Piyasiri Wickramasekara, *Bilateral Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding on Migration of Low Skilled Workers: A Review* (International Labour Organization, 2015), https://www.ilo.org/publications/bilateral-agreements-and-memoranda-understanding-migration-low-skilled.

[10] Yoonyoung Cho et al., *Bilateral Arrangement of Temporary Labor Migration: Lessons from Korea's Employment Permit System* (The World Bank, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1596/30471.

[11] See comment

[12] "일반 고용허가제도" [Employer Permit System], Ministry of Employment and Labor, Korea Employment Information Service, July 9, 2025, https://m.work24.go.kr/cm/c/f/1100/selecSystInfo.do?currentPageNo=1&recordCountPerPage=10&upprSystClId=&systClId=SC00000335&systId=SI00000332&systCnntId=CI00002060.

Under the EPS, low-skilled workers are initially granted a three-year temporary labor permit, or E-9 visas, which can be extended once for an additional one year and ten months if they are re-employed by the same employer, allowing for a total of four years and ten months. Upon completion of this period, the Korean government operates a re-entry scheme for workers who have maintained lawful status and demonstrated stable employment; such "sincere workers" may be permitted to re-enter for an additional period of up to four years and ten months, extending their total stay to nine years and eight months. Furthermore, the E-7-4 visa provides a selective pathway to longer-term residence for workers who meet specific criteria, such as employer recommendations and Korean language proficiency, enabling continued employment beyond the standard low-skilled labor track.

The EPS was first adopted in 2004 under the Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers. In 2004, the Korean government signed MOUs with six countries in Asia–Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Mongolia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka–and issued E-9 visas to 3,167 foreign workers.[13] The partnership expanded in 2007 to include China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, and Nepal, then in 2008 and 2009 to include Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste. With the addition of Laos in 2016, the total number of partnering countries reached 16 across Southeast, South, East, and Central Asia. As of 2024, about 302,000 individuals are residing in Korea with an E-9 visa.[14]

A distinctive feature of the EPS is its highly structured, state-managed process that excludes private agencies from the recruitment, placement, and management processes (see Table 1). Policy decisions are determined by the Foreign Workforce Policy Committee. Based on these decisions, the Korean government signs bilateral MOUs with labor-sending countries which form the basis for a government-to-government recruitment system that excludes private intermediaries.

Eligible applicants in partner countries, typically between the ages of 18 and 38, must pass a Korean language proficiency test and other screening criteria.[15] Sending-country governments then compile candidate rosters, which are then certified by the Human Resources Development Service of Korea (HRD Korea). Local offices of the Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) recommend qualified candidates to eligible employers and issue employment permits.

Following selection, employers and workers sign standardized labor contracts, and employers obtain visa issuance approval from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). Workers then enter Korea on E-9 visas after completing pre-departure training and, upon arrival, undergo health checks and additional employment training. Throughout their stay, MOEL oversees employment conditions while MOJ manages residency status. Upon completion of their contracts, workers may receive return support or, under certain conditions, re-enter or transition to alternative visa pathways.[16]

Table 1. Korea Employment Permit System Process

Stage	Actors	Description
Policy Determination	Foreign Workforce Policy Committee	Major policies regarding foreign labor are deliberated and decided, including industries, quotas, and selection of sending countries
MOU Signing	Korean Government ↔ Sending Country Governments	MOUs are signed with labor authorities of sending countries. Implementation is evaluated to determine renewal.
Candidate Roster Creation	Sending Country Government ↔ Korean Government	A candidate roster is created for applicants who pass medical exams and the Korean language test. The sending country drafts the list, which is then certified by the HRD Korea.
Worker Selection & Permit Issuance	Employers ↔ Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL)	Local MOEL offices recommend qualified candidates to employers who meet requirements. Employment permits are then issued.
Employment Contract	Employers ↔ Foreign Workers	Employers sign standardized labor contracts with selected workers. HRD Korea assists with contract processing and worker entry arrangements.
Visa Issuance Approval	Employers ↔ Ministry of Justice (MOJ)	Employers apply for a Certificate for Confirmation of Visa Issuance.
Entry & Placement	Employers ↔ Foreign Workers	Workers obtain an E-9 visa, complete pre-departure training, and enter Korea. Upon arrival, they undergo health checks and at least 16 hours of employment training.
Employment & Residency Management	MOEL / MOJ	MOEL manages employment (monitoring, workplace inspections, re-employment permits). MOJ manages residency (registration, visa extensions, workplace changes).
Return Support	MOEL	Programs support workers upon completion of employment, including career certification and job placement assistance after returning home.

Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor (Korea Employment Information Service). 2025. "Employer Permit System."

[13] "외국인고용지원사업 통계자료('22.12 월 기준)" [Statistics on the Foreign Employment Support Program (As of December 2022)], Human Resources Development Service of Korea, December 11, 2023, https://www.hrdkorea.or.kr/7/5/5/8/3?k=53454&pageNo=&searchType=&searchText=.

[14] Statistics Korea, "2024 Survey on Immigrants' Living Conditions."

[15] Abella and Kouba, "Structures for the Governance of Labor Immigration."

[16] "일반 고용허가제도" [Employer Permit System].

Co-Development through Control: Transparency and Cost Efficiency in the EPS

Low-skilled migrants make up a significant portion of the overall migrant workforce in intra-Asia migration, although the skill and education levels of Asian migrant workers have gradually risen. Often, many of these low-skilled workers have limited educational attainment. For example, in Indonesia, one of the major labor sources of Korea's EPS, only about 3% of migrant workers leaving the country held a high school diploma or higher, while roughly 53% had only basic education in 2023.[17]

Low-skilled workers with limited educational attainments often face greater difficulties both before departure and during employment, with brokers and smugglers exploiting their precarious situation, leading to human trafficking and human rights violations. The number of people looking for overseas jobs far exceeds the available positions, leaving workers vulnerable to abuses during recruitment. In the absence of a fully functioning international protection system that guarantees safe recruitment, the responsibility of safeguarding migrants falls largely on labor-sending and receiving countries. While labor-sending countries pursue migration policies to protect their workers' rights, in practice, private brokers and agencies frequently undermine these efforts by charging excessive fees or steering workers into exploitative environments. In fact, migration policies in both labor-sending and receiving countries typically do not exclude—and often rely heavily on—private agencies for worker recruitment and placement.[18] Moreover, there are notable disparities in migration legislation across Asia; countries such as the Philippines and India have relatively well-developed legislation to regulate overseas employment, while others, including Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal, are newer to labor migration and lack organized frameworks.[19]

In the specific context of labor migration within Asia, ensuring co-development is often closely intertwined with ensuring control: transparency on the receiving country's side effectively complements the initiative of labor-sending countries, enabling co-development based on strict control. One of the key advantages of Korea's EPS is that labor migration operates on a government-to-government basis, making it strictly state-managed and excluding the influence of private brokerage agencies. For instance, in the MOUs signed between Vietnam and South Korea in 2006 as part of the EPS's initial implementation, both parties designated the Overseas Working Center of Vietnam as the sending agency and HRD Korea as the receiving agency, explicitly stating that "the sending agency is the only organization authorized to assist in visa applications, and no other organizations can intervene in the process."[20] The MOU further required the receiving agency to provide the labor contract issued by the employer to the sending agency, which would then carefully explain its contents to each worker so they could fully understand the terms before deciding whether to sign. According to a 2023 survey by Statistics Korea, 89.8% of E-9 visa migrants reported that they were informed of their contract terms prior to employment.[21] This structure enhances transparency in recruitment, facilitating safe departure and smoother adjustment into working life in Korea.

This restrictive, quota-based system also helps deter both workers and employers from breaching contract terms. For instance, the Korean government regulates job mobility among foreign workers, allowing workplace changes only under limited and legally defined conditions.[22] This enables closer oversight and helps address concerns about permanent settlement of temporary migrants. Moreover, under bilateral agreements such as that between Vietnam and Korea, if the proportion of workers who are absent from their workplace or who overstay illegally exceeds a specific threshold, the government may reduce the number of allocated permits or

[17] Asian Development Bank Institute, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and International Labor Organization, *Labor Migration in Asia: Trends, Skills Certification, and Seasonal Work* (2024), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/05/labor-migration-in-asia_519732dd/9b45c5c4-en.pdf.

[18] Anna Lim, "The Migratory Process from the Philippines to South Korea: Focusing on the Case of EPS Workers," *Contemporary Society and Multiculture* 13, no. 4 (2023): 39–66. https://doi.org/10.35281/cms.2023.11.13.4.39.

[19] Nilim Baruah, "Labor Migration Infrastructure and Services in Countries of Origin in Asia," in *Labor Migration in Asia: Building Effective Institutions* (OECD Publishing, 2016), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2016/02/labor-migration-in-asia_g1g63c3c/9789264251076-en.pdf.

[20] Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs of Vietnam under the Ministry of Labor of the Republic of Korea on the Sending of Workers to the Republic of Korea Under the Employment Permit System, Korea-Vietnam, July 24, 2006.

[21] Statistics Korea, "2023 Survey on Immigrants' Living Conditions and Labour Force," press release, December 18, 2023, https://mods.go.kr/board.es?mid=a20105010000&bid=11733&tag=&act=view&list_no=429301&ref_bid=.

[22] Ministry of Employment and Labor, *Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers*, Act No. 18041, April 13, 2021, https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=231477&chrClsCd=010203&urlMode=engLsInfoR&viewCls=engLsInfoR#0000.

temporarily suspend worker deployment, thus ensuring tighter management of the process.[23] In addition, strict penalties are imposed on employers who violate contract obligations related to minimum wages, workplace safety, or employee benefits. Under Article 94 of Korea's Immigrant Act and Article 20 of its Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers, such employers are subject to criminal penalties of up to three years of imprisonment or fines of up to 30 million KRW ($22,000).[24] They may also face administrative sanctions, including a ban on hiring foreign workers for three years from the date of the violation.[25] In this way, the EPS seeks to balance the inherent inequality between employers and employees, providing migrant workers with safer and more regulated working conditions. While there certainly remains room for improvement, one strength of the EPS lies in the clarity of accountability; since it is a fully state-managed system, responsibility for addressing malpractice is clearly assigned to government authorities.

Another aspect of control under the EPS relates to protecting the human and labor rights of the workers. The MOUs require the Korean government to protect these rights "in accordance with the related labor laws of Korea."[26] While the National Human Rights Commission and other human rights channels are accessible to the EPS workers, HRD Korea specifically maintains Foreign Workforce Support Centers across Korea that provide counseling for worker complaints as well as free labor consultation and Korean language and cultural programs.[27]

Workers and employers under the EPS are additionally required to participate in a program-specific insurance scheme. Employers must enroll in the Departure Guarantee Insurance, contributing monthly deposits equivalent to 8.3% of workers' wages, which can be claimed by workers upon departure from Korea or when changing workplaces.[28] Employers are also required to subscribe to the Wage Guarantee Insurance, which protects against unpaid wages of up to two million KRW (approximately $2,000). In addition, EPS workers are covered by Korea's national social insurance system, including health insurance, occupational accident insurance, employment insurance, and the national pension, at the same level with Korean nationals. These measures serve to mitigate employer abuse and institutionalize protections for migrant workers in precarious positions.

Overall, the EPS effectively regulates labor mobility while ensuring a baseline level of worker protection, balancing state control over migration with mechanisms for migrant welfare. This institutional design facilitates co-development among all participants by reducing both administrative and economic costs. As the EPS is managed through coordinated oversight across multiple government agencies, the EPS streamlines recruitment and management processes, lowering overall administrative expenses compared to systems that rely on private intermediaries. For migrant workers, this centralized and transparent recruitment process reduces migration costs by eliminating the excessive fees typically charged by private brokers in sending countries. Estimates suggest that average recruitment costs declined from approximately $3,509 per worker prior to the EPS to $927 in 2011 after its implementation.[29] Reducing migration costs is particularly important for low-skilled workers who, as previously mentioned, face disproportionately higher mobility costs and spatial frictions than their white-collar counterparts. In this sense, state-managed institutional design not only lowers administrative burdens for governments but also reduces economic barriers for migrants, thereby facilitating greater mobility.

The primary benefit workers gain from labor migration is economic. Beyond individual earnings, migration also benefits workers' families in their home countries and contributes to national economies through remittances. For countries of origin, remittances are considered a particularly stable source of foreign exchange as they are more predictable than other means of foreign investment. For this reason, remittances have historically received significant attention as a form of development

[23] "일반 고용허가제도" [Employer Permit System].
[24] Ministry of Justice, *Immigration Act*, Act No. 12782, October 15, 2014, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=33079&lang=ENG; Ministry of Employment and Labor, *Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers*.
[25] Abella and Kouba, "Structures for the Governance of Labor Immigration."
[26] Min Ji Kim, *The Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS): Background and Rapid Assessment*, International Migration Papers No. 119 (International Labour Organization, 2015), https://www.ilo.org/publications/republic-korea's-employment-permit-system-eps-background-and-rapid.
[27] Kim, *The Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS).*
[28] "Employment of Foreign Workers," Easy to Find, Practical Law, January 5, 2026, https://easylaw.go.kr/CSM/SubCnpclsCmd.laf?csmSeq=2325&ccfNo=1&cciNo=1&cnpClsNo=1.
[29] Kim, *The Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS).*

finance and as an effective tool for poverty reduction. For instance, Nepal–home to the largest number of E-9 workers in Korea as of 2023 (47,038 workers)–recorded personal remittances accounting for 26% of its GDP in 2023.[30] Other major sending countries, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, also display higher-than-average reliance on remittances compared to the global norm. Given that Korea is a primary destination for workers from these countries, the operation of the EPS plays a crucial role as a source of remittance income; yet, there remain concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of overdependence on remittances. If remittances become the only pillar supporting the livelihoods of families left behind, labor-sending countries risk structural dependency, thus undermining endurable co-development. This raises the need for proactive policy measures by labor-sending countries, while receiving countries like Korea can play a role. For instance, by providing financial literacy training that equips the workers with the skills to save money with a long-term return plan, receiving countries can contribute to a more sustainable roadmap for both workers and their home countries.

According to a 2023 survey by Statistics Korea, about 66% of E-9 workers in Korea (179,000 individuals) earned between 2 million and 3 million KRW per month ($1500-2100), while about 31% (85,000 individuals) earned above 3 million KRW.[31] In comparison, the average real monthly income in Korea in the same year was 3.6 million KRW, and based on the 2023 minimum wage of 9,620 KRW ($6.97), a standard 209-hour work month leads to roughly 2 million KRW.[32] These figures suggest an income gap between foreign and domestic workers, with the average earnings of E-9 workers falling between the legal minimum wage and the national average monthly income. While it is difficult to determine whether the gap stems from their status as foreigners or reflects the wage differences associated with lower-skilled jobs, it nonetheless highlights room for improvement in policy implementation. Given that employers may have little incentive to raise wages for workers who are primarily on circular, temporary contracts, promoting systems of sustainable employment could be one way to develop a more equitable and stable relationship between employers and employees.

The 2012 adoption of the "Sincere Workers" re-entry system and the 2021 reform partially addressed these concerns on sustainability and equity by introducing the structuralized re-entry system and improvements to working conditions. The 2012 reform reduced the waiting period for re-entry from six months to three months and exempted eligible workers from the Korean language test and mandatory training. Since its introduction, the number of sincere workers has steadily increased (see Table 2). Moreover, the 2021 reform largely increased protections by improving housing facilities, granting immediate access to health insurance upon entry. In subsequent years, the government also expanded re-entry eligibility and raised the limits of admitted workers and industries. As a result, both of these quotas and the number of incoming workers increased steadily from 2021 (see Table 3). While the EPS remains primarily a temporary migration program, maximizing its contribution to co-development requires continuous and sustainable employment opportunities within the permitted period of stay. After all, promoting sustainability benefits not only the workers but also employers, as it increases employee productivity and competitiveness.

Table 2. Admitted Sincere Worker, per year

Year	"Sincere Workers" (Number)	"Sincere Workers" (% of Incoming Workers)
2012	1,853	3%
2013	5,169	9%
2014	1,813	4%
2015	3,256	6%
2016	7,069	12%
2017	9,565	19%
2018	9,534	18%
2019	10,743	21%
2020	2,804	42%
2021	3,611	34%
2022	16,805	19%

Source: Original Data from HRD Korea. 2023. "Statistics on the Foreign Employment Support Program."

Table 3. Annual Quotas and Incoming Workers

Year	Quota	Incoming workers	Year	Quota	Incoming workers
2004	25,000	3,000	2014	53,000	52,000
2005	14,000	32,000	2015	55,000	51,000
2006	34,000	35,000	2016	58,000	60,000
2007	49,000	50,000	2017	56,000	51,000
2008	72,000	77,000	2018	56,000	54,000
2009	17,000	63,000	2019	56,000	51,000
2010	34,000	38,000	2020	56,000	7,000
2011	48,000	49,000	2021	52,000	11,000
2012	57,000	54,000	2022	69,000	88,000
2013	62,000	59,000	2023	120,000	100,000

Source: Original data from National Assembly Library. 2023. "The Employment Permit System in Data." Data & Law 12.

Co-Existence Beyond Numbers: Professional Training and Preparation for Reintegration

[30] "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)," World Bank Group, 2024, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS.

[31] Statistics Korea, "2023 Survey on Immigrants' Living Conditions."

[32] "최저임금 현황" [Minimum Wage Trends], Minimum Wage Commission, 2023, https://www.minimumwage.go.kr/minWage/policy/decisionMain.do; "월평균 임금" [Average Monthly Income], Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2024, https://www.index.go.kr/unify/idx-info.do?pop=1&idxCd=5032.

The EPS advances co-existence by helping migrant workers lead independent and sustainable lives through social, cultural, and economic participation.[33] A unique dimension of the EPS as a temporary circular migration scheme is its comprehensive training framework, which supports not only employment and integration in the host society but also post-employment return and reintegration into workers' home countries. Through these programs, the EPS supports workers, benefits employers, and assists labor-sending countries. These training programs can be broadly categorized into three areas: vocational training, integration programs, and reintegration support programs.

Vocational training focuses on skill development to ease workplace adaptation and enhance employment stability. All EPS participants are required to complete pre-departure training administered by institutions in sending countries certified by the MOEL. The curriculum includes technical skills, such as heavy equipment operation and automobile maintenance, as well as Korean language and conversation instruction.[34] Upon arrival and prior to beginning employment, workers receive additional sector-specific training delivered by employer associations.[35] For instance, the National Agricultural Cooperatives Federations provides training for the workers selected for agricultural jobs; the Construction Association of Korea does likewise to provide pre-job training and post-placement support for those in the construction sector.

During their stay in Korea, integration programs administered by the MOJ promote sustainable and safe settlement, such as the Initial Adjustment Support Program and the Korea Immigration & Integration Program.[36] The Initial Adjustment Support Program introduces newly arrived migrants to basic laws, institutions, and immigration-related procedures.[37] The Korea Immigration & Integration Program offers Korean language and cultural education for those seeking long-term residence or citizenship.[38]

Reintegration support programs are intended to foster voluntary return and ensure successful reintegration into home societies. Targeting workers with extended periods of residence or those eligible for re-entry schemes, these programs provide vocational training, Korean language certification, and job placement assistance.[39] Training areas include automotive maintenance, baking, welding, and computer-aided design. In addition, HRD Korea operates placement programs that connect returning workers with Korean firms operating in their home countries. By institutionalizing reintegration, the EPS treats return migration not as a terminal point but as a structured phase within a broader cycle of labor mobility.

Despite these efforts, critiques persist regarding the underlying objectives of reintegration programs. Existing literature argues that such programs are often oriented toward reducing irregular migration and encouraging timely departure, rather than ensuring meaningful reintegration outcomes.[40] As a result, while the EPS effectively manages circular migration, it may fall short of fully realizing sustainable co-existence. Strengthening cooperation with sending-country governments and expanding reintegration support could help build more durable pathway for cross-national development.

Conclusion

The success of temporary labor migration programs can be evaluated from multiple perspectives, such as their ability to prevent undocumented overstay, distribute labor efficiently, and promote development across sending and receiving countries.[41] This paper has applied the framework of co-development, co-existence, and control to assess whether the EPS, using BLA as an institutional

[33] Stephen Castles et al., *Integration: Mapping the Field*, Home Office Online Report 29/03 (University of Oxford Centre for Migration and Policy Research, 2002), https://forcedmigrationguide.pbworks.com/w/page/7447907/Integration%3A%20Mapping%20the%20Field.

[34] Hyunah Lee, "A Study on the Expansion of Qualification System for the Successful Return of Foreign Workers." *The Journal of Humanities and Social science* 12, no. 1 (2021): 3233–3246.

[35] Kim, *The Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS)*.

[36] Lee, "A Study on the Expansion of Qualification System."

[37] "Initial Adjustment Support Programs for Immigrants," Korea Immigration Service, Ministry of Justice, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.immigration.go.kr/immigration_eng/1868/subview.do.

[38] "Korea Immigration & Integration Program (KIIP)," Korea Immigration Service, Ministry of Justice, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.immigration.go.kr/immigration_eng/1869/subview.do.

[39] Yooncheol Choi, "A Critical Study on the Employment Permit System," *Public Law Journal* 19, no. 1 (2018): 253–275, https://doi.org/10.31779/plj.19.1.201802.008.

[40] Choi, "A Critical Study."

[41] Yeonghyun Kim and Hyunjoo Jung, "Promoting and Controlling Labor Migration: South Korean State's Intervention for Control in the Temporary Migrant Worker Program and Its (Un)intended Outcomes." *Journal of the Korean Geographical Society* 53, no. 2 (2018): 229–246, https://www.kgeography.or.kr/media/11/fixture/data/bbs/publishing/journal/53/02/07.pdf.

framework, offers an effective model for circular migration among low-skilled workers.

The findings suggest that the EPS demonstrates how structured, state-managed control can simultaneously regulate migration flows and protect migrant workers, contributing to co-development across stakeholders including labor-sending countries, receiving countries, employers, and workers. At the same time, through vocational training and integration and reintegration programs, the EPS promotes co-existence by supporting migrant workers' participation in both host and home societies while reinforcing the circular nature of migration.

The EPS demonstrates an important shift in understanding labor migration as a process shaped and mediated by institutional actors in international relations. By embedding migration within a system of governance, the BLA framework demonstrates that labor mobility can be actively managed through international cooperation and oversight. Most importantly, this reframing transforms labor migration from the realm of individual decision-making to that of governance, where it can be structured and directed toward broader policy objectives. While limitations remain, particularly in ensuring sustainable reintegration and equitable outcomes, the EPS offers valuable insights into how migration systems can be designed to balance control, integration, and development as part of a broader governance framework.

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