

ISSUE BRIEF

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The Alliance Runway: The Capability-Expectations Gap of Being a “Model Ally” in Trump 2.0

Peter K. Lee, Research Fellow
Esther Dunay, Research Associate
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
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Introduction

How does the second Trump administration judge the security value of a “model ally”? President Donald Trump has long criticized U.S. allies as “free-riders” who do not pay their fair share, going so far as to personally pay for a newspaper advertisement in 1987 criticizing Japan and Saudi Arabia.¹ Yet in 2025, President Trump praised the leaders of these countries while his senior officials called some countries “model allies,” including the Republic of Korea (ROK), Israel, Poland, Germany, and the Baltic states.² This *Asan Issue Brief* analyzes the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) to identify how the Trump administration judges whether allied governments are shouldering “their fair share of the burden of our collective defense.”³ It looks at the ROK, Japan, and Australia, which are the United States’ key Indo-Pacific treaty allies that are addressed in the two documents.⁴ The NSS and NDS together offer an insight into the tentative consensus among the different ideological camps within the second Trump administration, each of which evaluates alliances differently.⁵

The Issue Brief proceeds as follows. First, it compares the Biden administration’s definition of a “model ally” with the shifting expectations of the second Trump administration. Second, it analyzes the 2025 NSS and 2026 NDS to identify evaluation criteria for “model allies” which emphasize tangible contributions, including higher defense spending targets, increased arms sales and investments in the U.S. defense industrial base, and offering access along the First Island Chain (FIC) and leading efforts to deter or defend against other, lesser threats. The Issue Brief finds that the Lee Jae Myung administration’s announcements have been interpreted by the Trump administration as fulfilling all three criteria. Third, it discusses the implications of a capability-expectations gap as well as the possible risks of being a “model ally” as defined by the Trump administration. Finally, it offers several policy recommendations for the ROK and allies, including preparing for pressure to seek even higher defense spending targets than those currently under consideration, preparing for potential shifts in U.S. force

posture as well as nuclear strategy in forthcoming strategic documents, and increasing participation in regional multilateral security partnerships that are still consistent with U.S. strategic objectives.

Defining a “Model Ally” in Biden and Trump 2.0

Economically, President Trump has made clear that the criteria for a “model ally” are defined by factors such as having a trade deficit vis-à-vis the United States, pledging massive corporate and state-backed investments, building manufacturing factories in the United States, and offering to share niche assets and resources that the United States lacks, among other things. In some respects, this represents continuity with the previous Biden administration, which kept many of the first Trump administration’s tariffs, such as on steel and aluminum, enacted policies to attract foreign investment, and created new multilateral partnerships, such as on critical minerals. On security issues, however, the second Trump administration’s criteria for judging allies significantly differ from those of the Biden administration. The Biden administration’s 2022 NSS and NDS heavily emphasized the inherent value of U.S. alliances and strategic partnerships. The benchmark for a “model ally” was implied across several factors, including adherence to democratic values, cooperation against Russia and China, and increased contributions to regional public goods to compete against China’s rising influence.⁶ For the second Trump administration, this is not a “model security ally.” Instead, the NSS and NDS outline new benchmarks.

Criteria 1. Variable Defense Spending Targets

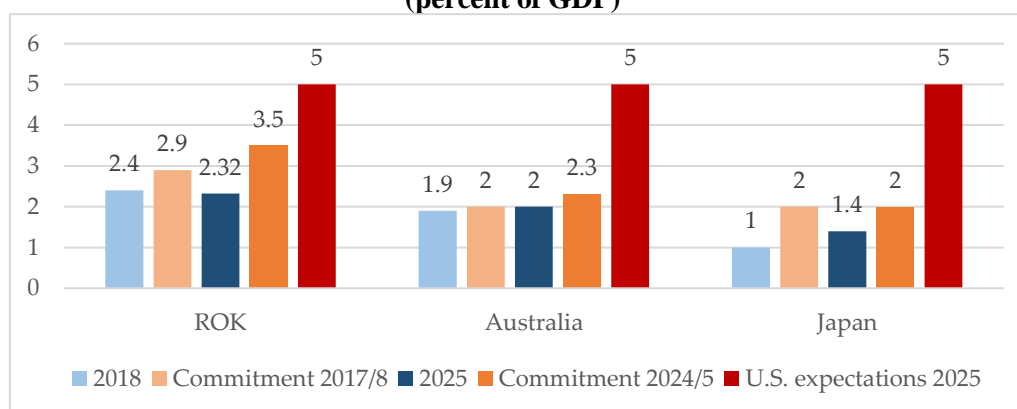
Defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) has been the starting point for defining a model security ally.⁷ President Trump has regularly threatened to abandon allies who do not spend sufficiently on their own defense, and even encouraged Russia to attack them.⁸ With his second term, President Trump has secured a commitment from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members to lift their core defense spending from the long-unfulfilled 2 percent of GDP to 5 percent, including 3.5 percent in core spending plus an additional 1.5 percent in security-related spending.⁹ The 2026 NDS states that the 5 percent benchmark is the “new global standard” for non-European allies as well,¹⁰ and says that it will prioritize allies “who are spending as they need to.”¹¹ More directly, the 2025 NSS urges Indo-Pacific allies, especially the ROK and Japan, “to increase defense spending.”¹²

However, in the Indo-Pacific, this standard has thus far not been consistently applied.¹³ For example, President Trump and Assistant Secretary of War for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs John Noh have argued that Taiwan should be increasing defense spending to 10 percent of GDP, not 3.5 percent.¹⁴ By contrast, in November 2025, the Lee Jae Myung administration agreed to increase defense spending to 3.5 percent of GDP, but did not mention an additional 1.5 percent in security-related spending per the Hague Summit pledge, and it also included a significant caveat that it would do so “as soon as possible in accordance with ROK legal requirements.”¹⁵ Japan and Australia have so far resisted attempts by the Trump administration to formally request that they increase defense spending to 5 percent. Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae recently said, “I have never directly heard the figure of 5% from the United States.”¹⁶ Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has similarly noted that, “There’s been a range of [spending targets] going forward” and that Australia will continue to work towards its declared 2.4 percent spending target by 2033–34.¹⁷

In some respects, this is déjà vu from President Trump’s first term. Figure 1 compares allied defense spending and pledges between President Trump’s first and second terms against their actual increases. It reveals that most allies struggled to keep fulfilling their own announcements, let alone meet the level that President Trump wanted. In short, none of the four countries came close to approaching annual defense spending levels at 3.5 percent, let alone 5 percent of GDP. To reach even a 3.5 percent target within the remainder of President Trump’s second term (2026–2028) would require anywhere from a

doubling of defense spending, in Japan's case, to an extra \$20 billion per year in the ROK's case, on top of its current \$44.8 billion defense budget.

Figure 1. Allied Defense Spending and Pledges under Trump 1.0 and 2.0 (percent of GDP)¹⁸



Sources: Data adapted and redesigned from multiple sources, see endnote for full list.¹⁹

Criteria 2. Arms Sales and Investments in the U.S. Defense Industrial Base

A second category of being a “model ally” according to the 2025 NSS and 2026 NDS is the size of arms purchases that allies make from the U.S. defense industrial base, something that the Gulf states have leveraged, for example. The strategic rationale for arms transfers in the Indo-Pacific is linked with the NSS and NDS emphasis on defending the FIC “with critical but limited U.S. support,”²⁰ and “greater military investment from ourselves and from allies and partners.”²¹ Yet, all three countries have consistently been among the top importers of U.S. major arms and have overwhelmingly sourced their arms from the United States in the period from 2020 to 2024: Japan (97%), South Korea (86%), and Australia (81%).²² How much more should these allies buy from the United States, especially at a time when the U.S. defense industrial base is experiencing significant delays in delivering capabilities, especially exquisite weapons systems in high demand?²³ The Lee administration announced in November 2025 that it would spend \$25 billion on U.S. military equipment purchases by 2030.²⁴ It is unclear if that figure would be split into smaller \$5 billion annual installments, similar to the \$200 billion investment package into the United States that has been divided into annual \$20 billion installments.²⁵ But if so, that would comprise at least \$15 billion in arms orders over the rest of President Trump’s term in office. For context, the ROK has placed \$445 million in Foreign Military Sales (FMS) orders since President Trump’s re-election, compared with Australia’s 2025 orderbook of \$4.4 billion and Japan’s \$4.9 billion.²⁶

Allied contributions to strengthening the U.S. defense industrial base are also considered evidence of burden-sharing. For example, Australia and the ROK have committed to nuclear-powered submarines in partnership with the United States. Following a months-long review of the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) partnership by the Trump administration, Elbridge Colby, Under Secretary of War for Policy, said, “AUKUS is a model of the type of cooperation we need to meet the challenges of the 21st century.”²⁷ Part of this U.S. support no doubt stems from the Australian Department of Defence’s transfer of \$2 billion out of a promised \$3 billion to the U.S. Treasury in 2025 to support U.S. submarine industrial base improvements, something that the Trump administration would no doubt like other allies to follow suit.²⁸ Security-adjacent investments—such as the ROK’s \$150 billion investment for naval and commercial shipbuilding, Japan’s \$550 billion package including energy imports, critical minerals, and shipbuilding, and Australia’s \$3 billion joint critical minerals

initiative with the United States to support defense manufacturing—are all likely to be viewed positively.²⁹

Criteria 3. Access Along the First Island Chain and Taking Greater Responsibility for Regional Deterrence

An important priority of some Trump administration officials is to build credible deterrence by denial along the FIC to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony.³⁰ Since the first Trump administration, improving U.S. Access, Basing and Overflight (ABO) along the FIC has been a consistent priority. The 2025 NSS explicitly advocates for the United States to “[press] First Island Chain allies and partners to allow the U.S. military greater access to their ports and other facilities,”³¹ while the 2026 NDS states that the United States “will build, posture, and sustain a strong denial defense along the FIC.”³² The United States already maintains a significant forward presence in the region, with 28,500 personnel based in the ROK, 55,000 in Japan, and 2,500 on rotational presence in Australia. In 2025, however, there were no significant changes to the U.S. military posture along the FIC, and the much-awaited Global Posture Review (GPR) has still not been released.³³ It is therefore difficult to know which ally is willing to shoulder additional posture burdens, either by increasing or decreasing the level of U.S. forces they host, to be considered a “model ally.”

A related demand from the United States is that “allies and partners [...] take on a greater share of the burden of our collective defense, including by leading efforts to deter or defend against other, lesser threats.”³⁴ The Lee administration has clearly conveyed its desire to speed up the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to ROK forces to free up the United States, which has been highly welcomed by War Secretary Pete Hegseth, who called the move “great.”³⁵ However, whether OPCON transfer alone is sufficient to satisfy this criterion is questionable. This is because while OPCON transfer signals a willingness to assume greater responsibility and share the United States’ security burden, the ROK has never officially endorsed the principle of “strategic flexibility” of United States Forces Korea (USFK). This concept of “strategic flexibility” refers to expanding USFK’s role beyond a narrow focus on North Korea to include regional efforts at countering China. The second Trump administration appears to be pursuing this strategic change, as reflected in the NDS’s emphasis on shifting “primary responsibility for deterring North Korea” to the ROK, while “updating U.S. force posture on the Korean Peninsula.”³⁶ This implicitly suggests that USFK would need to be available for other regional contingencies, too. Although OPCON transfer enables the ROK to be well evaluated by the United States, reluctance to embrace greater regional mobility of USFK may offset these gains. By contrast, Japan and Australia have taken steps to enable more flexibility and access for U.S. forces, yet these do not appear to have credited in a similar way by the Trump administration.³⁷

Implications: A Capability-Expectations Gap?

A look at these three criteria suggests that the ROK is, in key respects, most closely aligned with the second Trump administration’s expectations of allies in the Indo-Pacific. It is the only ally that satisfies all three criteria and has consequently been designated as a “model ally.” Meanwhile, Australia and Japan have met the other criteria but continue to face pressure to increase their defense spending, and they have not been called “model allies.” In practice, the most significant difference between the ROK and the other allies is that the ROK explicitly committed to increasing defense spending according to U.S. demands. This also suggests that defense spending may be the most important criterion when evaluating allies.

Table 1. Evaluation of Allies

	ROK	Australia	Japan
Criteria 1: Defense spending pledges	Yes (3.5%/TBD)	No (2.4%)	No (2%)
Criteria 2: Large arms orders and defense industrial base investments	Yes (\$25b/5 years)/ \$150b shipbuilding	Yes (\$4.4b)/ AUKUS and critical minerals	Yes (\$4.9b)/ energy plus
Criteria 3: U.S. force posture support and leading against lesser threats	Mixed/Yes	Mixed/NA	Mixed/NA

An important policy implication arises from the above analysis. It should be noted that the current assessment is based primarily on pledges and political commitments made in the context of tariff talks and therefore, that allies were willing to make concessions. Moreover, allies have not started to implement concrete policies, so the current positive evaluation may change if allies do not put into practice what they committed to. This could create a potential capability-expectations gap between what the ROK, and other allies, promise and what they are financially capable of delivering in the timeframe that the Trump administration demands. This effectively adds another layer of risk in managing relations with the United States. For example, President Trump showed discontent and threatened to increase tariffs from the agreed 15 percent to 25 percent because the Korean National Assembly did not enact the trade deal reached in 2025.³⁸ If the Trump administration demands that a substantial portion of the financial commitments made by the Lee administration be materialized in the remaining three years of its term in office as it has pressured on the trade front, this would require an additional budget expenditure of over \$90 billion in the next three years to cover defense spending increases, arms purchases, and support for USFK.

The final key consideration is whether becoming a “model ally” is aligned with the ROK’s long-term strategic interests. The Lee administration’s efforts to prevent the Trump administration from further extorting or even abandoning the ROK in 2025 led it to commit to unprecedented increases in defense spending and arms orders as well as taking primary responsibility for dealing with North Korea. In doing so, its pledges have earned it praise as a “model ally.” But the potential capability-expectations gap could generate new risks for the ROK-U.S. alliance in the name of being a “model ally.” The ROK is currently making commitments that satisfy the short-term interests of the Trump administration, but the decisions it takes today may have enduring consequences for future ROK-U.S. relations. For example, if the ROK pursues OPCON transfer and takes primary responsibility against North Korea to alleviate the burdens of the United States, this could risk weakening the foundation and operations of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), eventually weakening its current deterrence effect. Moreover, once changes are made in the alliance’s security framework, reversing those changes will be politically and strategically costly.

Policy Recommendations

This Issue Brief offers four policy recommendations for managing the next phase of U.S. alliance policy. First, the Trump administration’s insatiable demands will continue, and there will be pressure to demonstrate that tangible progress and concrete investments are being made in line with announcements made in 2025. Just as Australia transferred \$2 billion for AUKUS, the ROK will this year need to sign arms sales contracts, allocate budget funds for USFK support, set a timeline for getting to 3.5 percent defense spending over the next decade, and implement shipbuilding funds. President Trump recently declared that he would use the money from tariffs to increase defense spending by an additional \$500 billion, taking U.S. defense spending toward the 5 percent global standard and far beyond the current 3.5 percent of GDP.³⁹ This additional funding would be used to fund initiatives like the Golden Dome and Golden Fleet. If the United States takes this direction, it will become increasingly difficult for allies to resist U.S. demands and to delay their own defense spending to 5 percent.

Second, allies need to prepare for the strategic gaps left by the NSS and NDS, given that two important strategic documents are still missing. Chief among them is the GPR, which is crucial to determining how the ROK and other allies should respond to the overall burden-sharing challenge. Originally expected to be released in late 2025, the GPR has been subject to reports that it would suggest possible reductions to USFK or shifts to rotational deployments.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the roadmap for whether the U.S. DOW intends to proceed with the U.S. Marine Corps relocation out of Guam will also factor in ROK planning. Any major decisions that undermine the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula or rush OPCON transfer would call into question the entire security package thus far negotiated.

Third, another anticipated strategic document, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), will come as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) expires and President Trump signals a new nuclear arms race and nuclear testing regime. “Extended deterrence” or the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” are not mentioned in either the 2025 NSS or the 2026 NDS, which represents a significant change from strategic documents released under the Biden and Trump 1.0 administrations, especially for the ROK. Some ROK experts have surmised that the lack of such discussion is due to the fact that the Trump administration desires to preserve space for dialogue with North Korea, even while recognizing it as a threat,⁴¹ but this ambiguity raises questions for the ROK. How should it respond to these changes in terms of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence measures, including the availability and reliability of U.S. strategic assets, as well as possible redeployment of U.S. non-nuclear strategic assets in the Indo-Pacific? For example, the “critical but more limited support” that the United States would continue to provide has been widely inferred to mean nuclear capabilities, therefore not endorsing allied nuclear proliferation. But a future in which the United States has either reduced or reoriented its force posture on the Korean Peninsula to focus on China raises questions about whether it would still be willing to use nuclear weapons to defend the ROK in what has been categorized as a second-tier priority.

Finally, the ROK should propose and frame its contributions in terms of regional deterrence to convince the United States that its policies align with U.S. regional security efforts. References to building a “strong denial defense along the First Island Chain” or the repeated emphasis on “our collective defense”⁴² suggest that U.S. defense planning is organized around an integrated, collective regional theater. However, the ROK manages its relationship with the United States with a narrow, bilateral focus, and its participation in multilateral allied regional initiatives is low. The ROK should at least consider and openly discuss participation in informal multilateral security initiatives in the region with Japan and Australia. For example, the ROK should consider initiating discussions to take part in the Quad or the Squad, which are flexible and lighter security initiatives that do not come with formal obligations of a treaty alliance. This would not only help deterrence in the region but also signal to the United States its willingness to contribute to allied security efforts.

Conclusion

Trying to be a “model ally” of the United States in the deeply polarized and partisan politics of modern America is fraught with risks. On the diplomatic front, allies must try to earn a Democratic administration’s praise as a partner on climate change action and democracy promotion one day, and the next day they must reject many international organizations and development assistance programs as wasteful and unnecessary to please a Republican administration. But as the United States returns to a more basic understanding of alliances, the criteria for a “model ally” are actually becoming simpler. On the economic front, they are expected to support a revival of American manufacturing by transferring their wealth and knowledge. And on the security front, they are expected to be as close to self-sufficient for their own defense as possible. But, in the long term, this begs the question of whether a world in which U.S. allies are self-sufficient would still need to defer to American demands or even need to rely on alliances any longer. In that sense, not all allies may be prepared to walk the alliance runway indefinitely.

About the Authors

Dr. Peter K. Lee is a research fellow in the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. He is also a non-resident fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney and a member of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Philippines Maritime Security Advisory Network. Dr. Lee’s research explores security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, including U.S. alliances with a focus on South Korea and Australia. His recent publications include “MAASGA: Making American and Allied Shipbuilding Great Again” (August 2025), “Worth the Squeeze: A Conditions-based Analysis of South Korean Public Support for Nuclear Deterrence” (May 2025), “Allied Extended Deterrence: Towards a Collective Framework in the Indo-Pacific” (United States Studies Centre, May 2025), “A Sixties Comeback: Restoring U.S. Nuclear Presence in Northeast Asia” (May 2025), and *An Indo-Pacific Allied Shipbuilding Enterprise* (Asan Report, December 2024). Dr. Lee received his Ph.D. in strategic studies from the Australian National University, where he also taught courses on international relations and strategic studies.

Ms. Esther Dunay is a research associate in the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Her research covers U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic with a focus on defense and industrial policy, emerging technologies, and development cooperation. She also tracks Korean and European Indo-Pacific strategies, especially towards the Pacific Islands. Ms. Dunay previously worked on government relations and strategic communications at Kakao, South Korea’s largest internet conglomerate, as well as governance policy at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Seoul Policy Centre. She holds an MSc in Media and Communications (Media and Communication Governance) and a BSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has native-level proficiency in Korean, English, and French.

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- ¹² The White House, “National Security Strategy” (December 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>, p. 24.
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