

ALLIANCE DILEMMAS UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: ABANDONMENT, ENTRAPMENT, AND SOUTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC CHOICES

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of alliance dynamics under the Trump administration, with particular attention to the South Korean case and its implications for U.S. alliances. Drawing on developments in U.S. foreign policy and allied responses, it argues that recent shifts have significantly altered perceptions of alliance reliability. The administration's approach—marked by unpredictability and unconventional communication—has intensified allied uncertainty, reshaping strategic expectations and behavior. In the case of South Korea, these dynamics have contributed to a reassessment of strategic dependence and a growing emphasis on self-reliant defense capabilities. The study conceptualizes alliance dilemmas through the twin risks of abandonment and entrapment, where allies must balance the danger of being left unprotected against the risk of being drawn into unwanted conflicts. Applying this framework to the South Korean case, the analysis shows how heightened uncertainty under the Trump administration reinforced both concerns: fears of abandonment encouraged greater consideration of autonomous defense strategies, while concerns over entrapment highlighted the potential costs of alliance commitments, particularly in crisis scenarios involving regional escalation. Building on these findings, the study argues that alliance dynamics under conditions of uncertainty have broader implications for U.S. hegemony and the stability of the alliance system. The erosion of trust in U.S. commitments has contributed to a shift toward strategic autonomy among allies, challenging the cohesion of the hub-and-spokes structure. At the same time, the emergence of coordinated allied responses suggests that alliance politics are increasingly shaped by perceptions of leadership credibility rather than material asymmetries alone. These trends underscore the centrality of predictability and trust in sustaining alliance stability and, by extension, the durability of U.S. hegemonic leadership.

Keywords

Alliance Dilemma, U.S. Alliances, Trump Administration, South Korea, Strategic Autonomy.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a evolução da dinâmica das alianças sob a administração Trump, com especial destaque para o caso da Coreia do Sul e as suas implicações para as alianças dos EUA. Com base na evolução da política externa dos EUA e nas reações dos aliados, defende que as recentes mudanças alteraram significativamente as perceções quanto à fiabilidade das alianças. A abordagem da administração — marcada pela imprevisibilidade e por uma comunicação não convencional — intensificou a incerteza dos aliados, remodelando as



expectativas e o comportamento estratégicos. No caso da Coreia do Sul, estas dinâmicas contribuíram para uma reavaliação da dependência estratégica e para uma ênfase crescente nas capacidades de defesa autossuficientes. O estudo conceptualiza os dilemas da aliança através dos riscos duplos de abandono e aprisionamento, em que os aliados devem equilibrar o perigo de ficarem desprotegidos com o risco de serem arrastados para conflitos indesejados. Aplicando este quadro ao caso da Coreia do Sul, a análise mostra como a incerteza acentuada sob a administração Trump reforçou ambas as preocupações: os receios de abandono encorajaram uma maior consideração de estratégias de defesa autónomas, enquanto as preocupações com o aprisionamento destacaram os custos potenciais dos compromissos da aliança, particularmente em cenários de crise que envolvem uma escalada regional. Com base nestas conclusões, o estudo argumenta que a dinâmica das alianças em condições de incerteza tem implicações mais amplas para a hegemonia dos EUA e a estabilidade do sistema de alianças. A erosão da confiança nos compromissos dos EUA contribuiu para uma mudança no sentido da autonomia estratégica entre os aliados, desafiando a coesão da estrutura «hub-and-spokes». Ao mesmo tempo, o surgimento de respostas aliadas coordenadas sugere que a política de alianças é cada vez mais moldada por perceções de credibilidade da liderança, em vez de apenas por assimetrias materiais. Estas tendências sublinham a centralidade da previsibilidade e da confiança na manutenção da estabilidade das alianças e, por extensão, da durabilidade da liderança hegemónica dos EUA.

Palavras-chave

Dilema das Alianças, Alianças dos EUA, Administração Trump, Coreia do Sul, Autonomia Estratégica.

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Introduction

U.S. Leadership and Alliance Challenges under Trump

From the Cold War through the post-Cold War period, and now in the context of a possible New Cold War, the United States has sought to sustain the international order it constructed. This effort has involved shifting its strategic focus across regions and, when necessary, recalibrating its commitments by redirecting resources inward. Despite these adjustments, one element has remained constant: the United States has continued to view itself as the leader of the international order. It has also retained a sense of duty associated with its role as a global security provider, regardless of fluctuations in its relative power. Over time, its long-standing allies and partners—although not always experiencing favorable conditions—have generally supported the direction of U.S. leadership, sometimes alongside it and at other times in a more supportive capacity.

Today, the world is experiencing the second term of President Donald Trump. The accumulated costs of sustaining a global security role have contributed to a relative decline in U.S. power, and in this context, President Trump's representative slogans such as "Make America Great Again" and "America First" reflect a broader strategic rationale. However, as these ideas have been translated into policy, the U.S. has increasingly moved away from the center of global governance and the existing international order. The Trump administration places less emphasis on international issues and collective problem-solving, leaving states more frequently to manage their own or international challenges. This tendency is particularly visible in the security domain, where reduced U.S. engagement has, in some cases, left allies exposed or effectively abandoned. At the same time, as the U.S. distances itself from long-standing partners, it has occasionally shown ambiguity in distinguishing between allies and adversaries.

In the meantime, the administration maintains a strongly U.S.-centered approach in its expectations toward allies. When cooperation is deemed necessary, it relies on pressure to enforce burden-sharing. The difficulty, however, is that such pressure often places allies in situations they neither prefer nor willingly accept, thereby creating conditions of



entrapment. The administration appears to assume that when it initiates competition or conflict with adversaries, the associated costs should be shared by its allies. In some cases, these situations emerge from highly contingent or individualized decision-making processes. Regardless of the legitimacy of such conflicts, and irrespective of whether allied consensus exists, the U.S. has at times framed its demands in terms of repayment for past security commitments.

Under these conditions, long-standing U.S. allies are increasingly uneasy with what they perceive as indiscriminate pressure and an asymmetrical alliance relationship. Additionally, as the U.S. appears to retreat from its traditional role in maintaining the international order—without presenting a clear alternative vision—other states are reassessing their strategic direction. A broader shift toward self-help is becoming more evident, accompanied by a stronger emphasis on national interest and growing skepticism regarding the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. As a result, efforts to strengthen autonomous defense capabilities are intensifying. Against this backdrop, this study examines, the risks of abandonment and entrapment under the Trump administration from the perspective of South Korea, through the framework of the alliance dilemma.

Research Frame: Alliance Dilemma

Although the scope of the term 'alliance' has recently expanded to encompass multiple domains—including military, economic, and energy cooperation—its underlying logic and ultimate purpose remain closely tied to state survival and the use of military power.

In an anarchic international system, states prioritize survival above all else. As Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues, security constitutes the primary objective of states, as only when survival is ensured can they pursue other goals such as economic gain or political influence. Building on this logic, Stephen Walt (1989) explains that alliances are formed primarily in response to external threats. States facing such threats seek to aggregate power through cooperation in order to deter or counter potential adversaries.

Walt further conceptualizes alliances as formal or informal arrangements for security cooperation among states, designed to enhance the power, security, and influence of their members. (Walt, 2009) In a similar vein, Glenn Snyder (1990) defines alliances as formal associations oriented toward the use or restraint of military force, intended to advance the security or broader interests of member states in relation to specific adversaries. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that alliances are fundamentally instruments for strengthening security, power, and military capability.

This study adopts the concept of the 'alliance dilemma' developed by Glenn Snyder, which builds upon and extends Waltz's 'Balance of power' and Walt's 'Balance of threat' frameworks. Snyder (1984) conceptualizes alliance politics in terms of the dual risks of abandonment and entrapment, which vary according to the level of commitment among allied states. When a state demonstrates a high level of commitment to an alliance, the risk of abandonment by its partner tends to decrease. However, this also increases the likelihood of entrapment in conflicts initiated by the ally. Conversely, when commitment



to an alliance is weak, the risk of entrapment declines, but the probability of abandonment increases (Snyder, 1984).

Alliance Abandonment risk under the Trump Administration

Burden-Sharing and Conditional Alliance Commitment

U.S. military forces are stationed across various regions of the world, and South Korea is no exception. Since the establishment of the alliance following the Korean War in 1953, U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) have remained a central component of the bilateral security arrangement. Over the course of this alliance, the possibility of troop withdrawal or reduction has repeatedly emerged as a policy option in last 70 years (Ko, 2004). Such discussions are therefore not new. However, under the Trump administration, this issue gained renewed salience. Reports suggest that President Trump at one point considered the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, although this proposal was ultimately constrained by internal opposition within the administration ((Lee et al., 2018, as cited in Longo, 2026).

In addition, the Trump administration departed from previous approaches by demanding a substantial increase in defense cost-sharing. This was not merely a matter of financial burden. Rather, it reflected a broader tendency to treat the alliance as a transactional arrangement, thereby devaluing its strategic and normative foundations. Trump's rhetoric frequently relied on cost-benefit calculations, reducing alliance relations to quantifiable terms. Such an approach fails to capture the non-material dimensions of the alliance, including trust, shared commitment, and the historical depth of bilateral cooperation. Moreover, these statements were often presented without clear methodological grounding, which contributed to uncertainty among allied partners. The use of striking numerical claims, seemingly intended to strengthen bargaining leverage, was at times perceived as dismissive or even humiliating by the counterpart.

For example, Trump once remarked that "getting US\$1 billion from South Korea was easier than collecting rent from a Brooklyn apartment," a statement that appears to have been aimed at mobilizing domestic political support (Hwang, 2019). At the same time, it conveyed an implicit expectation that South Korea should accept a subordinate position in security negotiations while bearing a greater financial burden. This pattern persisted in subsequent political discourse. During later campaign periods, South Korea continued to be portrayed as underpaying, and was even described as a "money machine," alongside repeated references to sharply increased financial demands (Kim & Lee, 2024).

In practice, South Korea responded to these pressures by negotiating the initially proposed cost-sharing levels downward, while still agreeing to a significant increase (Statistics Korea, n.d.). This outcome can be interpreted as an effort to mitigate the risk of abandonment by maintaining the credibility of the alliance commitment.

Beyond direct financial demands, the administration also signaled a willingness to link economic cooperation to security considerations. The Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) was at times framed in terms that suggested the possibility of termination,



implying that economic relations could be leveraged to extract concessions in the security domain (Lester et al., 2019). While the U.S. had previously exerted pressure on South Korea's autonomy in times of crisis—such as during the 1997 Asian financial crisis—these instances were primarily driven by economic considerations (Ko, 2024). In contrast, under the Trump administration, security commitments themselves appeared to function as a form of leverage.

Taken together, these findings indicate a shift toward a transactional understanding of alliances, in which economic pressure is used to shape security outcomes. This approach reinforces the perception that alliance ties are conditional rather than stable. It suggests that if expected economic terms are not met, the alliance may become a point of vulnerability. In this sense, the credibility of U.S. security commitments is increasingly subject to negotiation, thereby heightening concerns over abandonment within the alliance.

Selective Engagement and Alliance Marginalization

South Korea experienced what was widely described as 'Korea passing,' a development that reflected a diminished recognition of its value as an ally. Beginning in 2018, President Moon Jae-in actively pursued engagement with North Korea. Through inter-Korean summits, South Korea played a key role in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table on denuclearization and in facilitating a summit between Kim Jong Un and President Trump. In structural terms, the configuration was relatively straightforward. Although three actors were involved, it was expected that South Korea and the U.S. would coordinate as allies in negotiating with a common adversary. Previous rounds of denuclearization diplomacy had also demonstrated that close coordination between Seoul and Washington was essential, even when their specific preferences diverged.

In this case, however, the two allies approached the issue from different starting points. South Korea prioritized the improvement of inter-Korean relations as a pathway toward denuclearization, whereas the Trump administration treated denuclearization itself as the primary objective. Despite these differences, sustained communication would have been necessary if the two countries were to act as a unified negotiating partner. In practice, however, the process unfolded differently. South Korea, despite being a central stakeholder and a key facilitator of the talks, was largely excluded from the core negotiations, which proceeded in a bilateral format between the U.S. and North Korea. The resulting outcome—often referred to as 'Korea passing'—can be attributed, in part, to the persistent gap in preferences between the parties.

The significance of this episode lies not only in the failure of the negotiations, but also in what it revealed about alliance coordination. Having experienced repeated difficulties in advancing North Korean denuclearization, South Korea and the U.S. faced a context in 2018–2019 that required careful and coordinated alliance management. Instead of close consultation, however, South Korea was, in effect, 'deliberately' sidelined. This suggests that when policy preferences diverge, the U.S. may choose to act independently rather than pursue alignment within the alliance framework (Song, 2024). For South Korea, it



implied that even as a directly affected party and formal ally, its position could be disregarded when it did not align with U.S. intentions.

This dynamic became more visible with the U.S.–North Korea summit held in Singapore. During this period, President Trump made several statements that raised concerns about alliance management. In particular, he expressed a desire to withdraw U.S. forces stationed in South Korea and referred to joint U.S.–South Korea military exercises as ‘war games,’ subsequently announcing their suspension. These remarks were made without prior consultation with South Korea and did not follow established coordination procedures within the alliance (Borger, 2018). Such actions suggest that alliance commitments can be treated as instruments of negotiation and used as leverage depending on the counterpart. This dynamic is particularly notable given that the negotiation counterpart was North Korea—an actor defined as a common adversary alongside South Korea, and one that President Trump had previously provoked by referring to its leader as “rocket man.” This contrast highlights the impulsive and unpredictable nature of his approach.

Taken together, the overall developments indicate that the U.S. under the Trump administration, at times treated South Korea less as a partner in joint strategy and more as a subordinate actor within a hierarchical relationship. This pattern is consistent with theoretical expectations that a major power providing security guarantees may seek to constrain the autonomy of its ally. In this context, the unilateral and coercive aspects of U.S. policy signaled the possibility of abandonment, contributing to a situation in which South Korea faced pressure to accommodate U.S. preferences (Jo & Park, 2026).

South Korea's choice under the signals of abandonment

At the outset of President Trump's first term, U.S. allies and partners closely observed his campaign rhetoric, which often appeared to downplay the value of alliances and frame them in terms of economic gains and losses. Trump expressed a firm belief that U.S. allies were engaging in free-riding, and his direct, often improvised statements—frequently made without adherence to established procedures—generated uncertainty regarding the future direction of U.S. policy.

This concern was reinforced early in his presidency as the U.S. suddenly withdrew from several multilateral agreements, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), and the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership). These actions contributed to the perception that U.S. commitments could be reversed unpredictably. As a result, even alliance commitments—traditionally grounded in trust and shared security interests—appeared vulnerable to reassessment based on cost–benefit calculations. The proposal known as ‘Cost Plus 50,’ which called for a substantial increase in allied contributions, further amplified these concerns (Pettyjohn, 2019). Under such conditions, U.S. allies faced a situation in which failure to meet economic expectations could lead to severe consequences, including the risk of abandonment.



South Korea also was not an exception. The Korean Peninsula has remained in a state of armistice for more than seventy years, with North Korea continuing to advance its nuclear capabilities. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), South Korea has adhered to non-nuclear commitments while remaining fully aware of the costs associated with nuclear armament. Under conditions of persistent nuclear asymmetry, South Korea has no other option but to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella as a central component of its security. In this context, the Trump administration's perceived willingness to downplay South Korea's security concerns—along with the possibility that its survival might not be consistently prioritized, or could be treated as a bargaining instrument in negotiations with other states—generated both concern and heightened threat perception within South Korean society.

During his first term, the alliance appeared to loosen to a noticeable degree. The subsequent administration under President Joe Biden sought to restore alliance cohesion and reaffirm solidarity. The U.S. and South Korea reiterated their commitment to a robust bilateral alliance and also pursued expanded trilateral security cooperation with Japan. However, it is difficult to conclude that the decline in trust experienced during the previous period was fully reversed. With the return of a second Trump administration, South Korea again faces uncertainty regarding U.S. policy direction. This concern is shaped not only by prior experience during the first term, but also by the expectation that institutional or political constraints on presidential decision-making may be weaker, thereby allowing for more unilateral and less predictable actions. In this context, the intensity of Trump's rhetoric and pressure is expected to persist, if not increase.

With the return of a second Trump administration, South Korea was once again confronted with fears stemming from policy unpredictability. These concerns were not entirely new, but had already been internalized during the first term. At the same time, the second administration brought an additional dimension of uncertainty. Compared to the earlier period, there was a growing perception that fewer institutional or political constraints existed to moderate President Trump's unilateral rhetoric and decision-making, reinforcing expectations of more unrestrained and assertive behavior. Furthermore, the intensity of his rhetoric and pressure was not expected to ease; if anything, it was anticipated to escalate rather than moderate.

Through these developments, South Korea came to recognize that alliance commitments are not unconditional and may be subject to abandonment. This realization underscored the risks of relying exclusively on the U.S. for security. Even as efforts were made to repair the existing strains within the alliance, the resolve to strengthen autonomous defense capabilities had already intensified.

As North Korea's nuclear program continued to advance, public support in South Korea for either indigenous nuclear development or the redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons had already been substantial, at times exceeding 50 percent (Sun, 2024). Although this result showed some fluctuations, survey outcomes indicate that the experience of the first Trump administration contributed to a significant increase in such preferences, largely driven by heightened concerns over abandonment (Lee et al., 2023; Chung, 2024). In sum, the signals of potential abandonment under the Trump administration



generated both a sense of insecurity and a growing conclusion within South Korea that a greater degree of strategic autonomy from its ally was necessary.

Alliance Entrapment risk under the Trump Administration

Escalatory Rhetoric toward North Korea and Risks South Korea faced

From the outset of his presidency, Trump appeared unwilling to tolerate regimes pursuing illicit nuclear proliferation. In retrospect, even in the early phase of the first term, the Trump administration considered the use of military force as a possible option to halt North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. The U.S. had previously refrained from using force against North Korea—despite its relative weakness in conventional terms—not only because of the anticipated costs of war or the potential involvement of regional powers such as China and Russia, but also due to concerns over the significant damage that would be inflicted on South Korea. Given the shared historical and political context on the Korean Peninsula, U.S. policy had traditionally taken into account South Korea's position.

However, the Trump administration introduced a different approach by placing greater emphasis on the military option in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, which had long been managed through non-military means such as sanctions, deterrence, and diplomatic engagement (Power, 2017). At the same time, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities coincidentally advanced rapidly, contributing to a qualitative escalation of the crisis.

In July 2017, North Korea successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), raising concerns that U.S. territories, including Alaska and Guam, had entered its range (Karako & Williams, 2017). In response, President Trump issued a strong warning to North Korea, including the well-known "fire and fury" statement, which implied the possibility of preemptive action. North Korea responded in kind, issuing statements that signaled its willingness to strike the U.S. mainland. Compared to previous administrations, which had tended to rely on calibrated and restrained language to avoid escalation, Trump's rhetoric was widely viewed by experts as unusually emotional and extreme. This raised concerns that such language could increase the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding at a critical level of tension (Hirschfeld, 2017).

Subsequently, North Korea continued its weapons development, launching ICBMs assessed to be capable of carrying nuclear warheads and conducting its sixth nuclear test. In response, President Trump further escalated his rhetoric, including references to a possible 'bloody nose' strike. As the situation intensified, the level of confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea continued to rise without clear limits. Under these conditions, South Korea and Japan—both located within close proximity to the potential conflict zone—faced the risk of being entrapped in a rapidly escalating crisis driven by U.S.–North Korea confrontation.

Concerns also emerged within the United States regarding the risks posed to allied states in East Asia, as well as opposition to the level of escalation associated with the Trump



administration's approach (Cha, 2018). In response, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, as a directly affected party, sought to reduce tensions between the U.S. and North Korea. In order to avoid entrapment in a potential conflict and to prevent further escalation toward war on the Korean Peninsula, he emphasized that military conflict was unacceptable. At the same time, he pursued engagement with North Korea while maintaining communication with the U.S., ultimately facilitating the conditions for trilateral summit, despite the abandonment that later emerged in the negotiation process.

Unilateral Escalation in Iran and Entrapment Pressures on Allies

During President Trump's tenure, there were numerous consequential developments in U.S. relations with other states. Among them, one of the most destabilizing events—generating widespread concern among multiple countries—was the U.S. strike against Iran in 2026. Although this occurred approximately one year into the second Trump administration, the conditions leading to such an outcome can be traced back to 2018, when the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). From that point onward, it became increasingly foreseeable that U.S. allies involved in the agreement could face risks of entrapment.

The JCPOA was originally a multilateral agreement involving six major powers—the U.S., China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—negotiated with Iran. Following its implementation, continuous monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did not produce conclusive evidence that Iran had violated the agreement (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2017). Nevertheless, the Trump administration assessed the terms of the JCPOA as insufficient and announced a unilateral withdrawal. At one level, this decision disregarded the positions of other participating states, including key U.S. allies such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. More broadly, it can be interpreted as a move of abandonment within the alliance context. Furthermore, the lack of clearly substantiated justification for this decision led to reluctance among allied states to support the reimposition of sanctions against Iran (Jakes & Sanger, 2020). This, in turn, contributed to concerns that major foreign policy decisions of the U.S. were being driven by individual leadership preferences, thereby undermining trust among states (De Witte & Gabel, 2018).

Following the collapse of the agreement, tensions between the U.S. and Iran escalated. Iran responded through actions such as the seizure of oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, Saudi Arabia—one of the U.S. key partners in the Middle East—had already experienced attacks on its oil facilities, including the 2019 strike on Aramco. In response, the Trump administration implemented maximum-level sanctions and carried out military actions, including the targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani, widely regarded as a senior Iranian military figure. Although these developments did not escalate into full-scale war, they significantly heightened military tensions. In parallel, Iran accelerated its nuclear activities following the breakdown of the agreement and subsequent attacks, expanding uranium enrichment capabilities and operating advanced centrifuges.



Under the Biden administration, efforts were made to revive nuclear negotiations with Iran, but these attempts met repeated cycles of progress and suspension, ultimately failing to accomplish a renewed agreement. At the end of Biden's administration, renewed instability in the Middle East emerged following Hamas's attack on Israel. Shortly after returning to office in 2025, President Trump initiated a new round of nuclear negotiations with Iran. However, within a short period—reportedly as soon as the following month—the U.S. launched a surprise strike on Iranian nuclear facilities using bunker-buster munitions. Subsequently, the Trump administration justified further military action by claiming the detection of an "imminent threat," conducting joint strikes with Israel that targeted senior Iranian leadership, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In response, Iran warned that the U.S. had crossed a critical red line, and the possibility of direct U.S.–Iran war became a tangible reality observed by the international community.

At present, Iran has moved to exert control over the Strait of Hormuz, posing a severe military threat by restricting the passage of oil tankers belonging to the U.S. and its allies and partners. Contrary to earlier expectations by the Trump administration that the situation would be resolved quickly, this development introduced an unanticipated level of disruption. In the end, the U.S. called upon its allies—including European countries, South Korea, and Japan—to participate in the case more actively. However, when European states, particularly those within NATO, collectively declined to engage, the Trump administration defined his call as a "test" of alliance commitment and proceeded to explore ceasefire negotiations with Iran independently.

This sequence of events illustrates the extent to which the Trump administration approached alliances in instrumental and asymmetric terms. The decision to strike Iran was marked by a lack of transparent justification and proceeded without sufficient domestic support or prior consultation with allied states. Only after encountering strategic difficulties did the administration turn to its allies, not through cooperative coordination, but through pressure framed as requests for deployment, thereby attempting to draw them into the conflict. Given Iran's geopolitical significance in global energy security, allied states had strong incentives to approach such involvement extra cautiously not to be entrapped together.

In the case of South Korea, dependence on imported energy reaches approximately 90 percent, with around 70 percent of oil imports passing through the Strait of Hormuz. As tensions escalated, oil prices rose by approximately 20 percent within two weeks compared to pre-crisis levels. Although the South Korean government sought to respond, the prolonged nature of the conflict—contrary to initial U.S. expectations—led to rising costs in oil-related products, including rubber and plastics, as well as increased exchange rate volatility. These effects are directly hitting the public. While the Iranian ambassador to South Korea stated that South Korea is not a hostile state, he also implicitly suggested that non-cooperation with the U.S. would be conditional for this position (Seo, 2026).

In this context, the reluctance of allies to participate in military deployment was met by the Trump administration's characterization of the situation as a test of commitment. This framing, alongside attempts to reduce a matter involving national survival and human security to rhetorical positioning, can be interpreted as reflecting a diminished



regard for alliance relationships. As of March 28, 2026, President Trump issued statements indicating that the United States would “remember” those countries—including South Korea—that had not deployed naval forces to the Strait of Hormuz, signaling pressure on allies to share responsibility by becoming involved in the conflict.

In this context, considering the situation where the allied states are put in seriously difficult position to gladly support military deployment, President Trump framing the situation as a test of alliance commitment represents both the pressure and devaluation of alliance. Addressing an issue involving national survival and the lives of citizens in this manner can be interpreted as indicating a diminished regard for the alliance. As of March 28, 2026, the administration also signaled pressure toward countries—including South Korea—again that had not dispatched naval forces to the Strait of Hormuz, stating that he would “remember” their decisions, while attempting to draw them into the conflict and share the burden of responsibility.

South Korea's choice under the signals of abandonment

The first Trump administration marked the period in which strategic competition between the U.S. and China became more pronounced. In effect, the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry placed many allied states in a difficult position, as they were implicitly pressured to align with one side. For many allies, this created an untenable dilemma: either distance themselves from China—one of the world's largest economic powers—and align with the U.S., thereby risking entrapment in great-power competition, or face the possibility of being labeled disloyal and subjected to abandonment by the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, this study does not treat U.S.–China competition as a central case of entrapment. At least, it can be understood as part of a broader and largely unavoidable structural shift in the international order. Despite the confrontational nature of its implementation, such competition was widely regarded as a rational and, to some extent, legitimate course of action for the U.S., whether as a hegemonic power or as a principal architect of the existing international order. Although the Trump administration did not consistently frame this rivalry in terms of defending the liberal international order, the overall direction—maintaining a U.S.-led order and responding to a perceived primary threat—remained aligned with long-standing strategic objectives. For this reason, it was, at least in part, a development that could be understood in rational terms.

By contrast, other cases reflected decisions whose justification was less clearly established, leading other states into heightened tension alongside the U.S. In some instances, these actions appeared less defensive in nature and more offensive, while also lacking transparency and facing domestic opposition within the U.S. itself. Despite these concerns, the Trump administration continued to exert pressure on allies to participate in addressing such crises. First, the U.S. in practice pressured—or indirectly compelled— allies to become involved in complex and high-risk situations. Second, even in cases where direct participation was avoided, U.S. actions contributed to the creation of security environments that posed both direct and indirect threats to allied states.



Following the Iran crisis, for example, U.S. military assets stationed in South Korea—including systems such as THAAD, which had been deployed at significant economic cost due to Chinese retaliation—were reportedly redeployed to the Middle East. During this period, North Korea continued its missile tests and military demonstrations. Amid growing concerns over a potential security vacuum, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung emphasized once again the necessity of strengthening autonomous defense capabilities. This included caution against excessive reliance on the U.S. and calls for the timely transfer of wartime operational control (Lee, 2026).

More broadly, Trump administration's decision makings and overall remarks suggest that the survival of allied states was definitely not consistently treated as a primary consideration. In some cases, U.S. actions brought outcomes that were favorable to actors previously regarded as threats—not only to the liberal international order but also to U.S. allies themselves. Such consequences were controversial for other allied states to accept on rational or strategic grounds. Moreover, there appeared to be insufficient consideration of whose security and survival were being placed at risk. These patterns can be understood less as outcomes of a coherent and institutionalized U.S. foreign policy, and more as consequences of President Trump's individualized and often unpredictable rhetoric and decision-making.

Now, the world is raising a fundamental question: when a geographically distant power such as the U.S. generates conditions that heighten security risks for its regional allies, to what extent are those allies willing to bear such risks? Furthermore, even in the event of direct military involvement by the U.S., there remained a credible concern that the U.S. will only prioritize its own interests over those of its allies. In this context, heightened tensions with North Korea or also gave rise to concerns about the potential for alliance decoupling, reflecting a logically grounded apprehension among regional partners (Panda, 2017).

Implication: The Alliance Dilemma and the Erosion of U.S. Hegemonic Leadership

First, the U.S.'s long-standing allies appear to be experiencing a decline in trust toward the U.S. However, such a conclusion should not be drawn hastily. The dynamics in U.S.–alliance relations since 2012 must be understood in light of individual leadership factors, particularly the personal characteristics and decision-making style of President Trump. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that within the U.S., there have also been political forces—such as the Biden administration—that have sought to prioritize alliances and strengthen solidarity.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, U.S. allies have directly encountered a fundamental reality of international politics: that alliances are not permanent, even among long-standing partners. The decades of effort, trust-building, and institutionalization of a liberal international order and regional security architecture since World War II have been relatively undervalued, while the possibility of abandonment has become more visible and explicit. As a result, allies have increasingly sought strategies for survival



independent of the U.S., leading to efforts to reduce dependence and strengthen domestic capabilities.

At the same time, under conditions of unpredictability associated with Trump administration, allies have also faced heightened risks of entrapment. This reflects a paradoxical dynamic in which allies that perceive the U.S. as less committed—and therefore potentially susceptible to abandonment—are simultaneously subjected to demands for higher levels of commitment and participation, thereby increasing their exposure to entrapment risks. For weaker allies embedded in asymmetric alliance structures, such pressures can be particularly severe. As of March 28, this dynamic appears to have contributed to growing solidarity among U.S. allies—especially in Europe—against what they perceive as excessive or destabilizing actions by the U.S., thereby making divisions between the U.S. and its allies more visible.

Second, this context carries an important implication for the U.S. itself: it, too, must learn a critical lesson. In alliance politics, abandonment typically is more desperate when a stronger partner distances itself from a weaker ally, highlighting the importance of credible commitments. Historically, the U.S. has often been perceived as the primary actor capable of abandoning its allies. However, circumstances surrounding the Iran crisis suggest that a reverse dynamic is also possible—namely, that allied states can collectively form solidarity and, under certain conditions, effectively distance themselves from a hegemonic power.

Even though the U.S. may be experiencing relative decline, it still retains the status of a hegemon. Yet, this case demonstrates that hegemonic status alone does not guarantee continued support from allies. When a hegemon fails to provide consistent justification for its actions or engages in persistent, unpredictable, or impulsive security policies, it risks losing the trust of its allies. Under such conditions, allies and partners may choose to realign or withdraw support.

The U.S.-centered security architecture has traditionally been described as a 'hub-and-spokes', in which the hegemon (the hub) determines the overall direction and the allies (the spokes) follow accordingly. However, recent flow suggests that the spokes are no longer unconditionally bound to follow the hub. The U.S. must recognize that allies are increasingly capable of pursuing independent strategies.

Third, as is typical in most presidential systems, a government's policy direction is often attributed to the sitting president. The U.S. is no exception, and policies and decisions made during the Trump administration are commonly associated with President Trump himself. However, the distinctive feature of the Trump administration lies in its mode of communication: rather than relying on established bureaucratic processes and institutional channels, policy announcements were often made directly through the president's personal statements or social media.

This approach frequently resulted in inconsistencies, including instances where statements were later retracted or corrected. As a consequence, global perceptions of U.S. policy became increasingly volatile, often shifting in response to a single statement. This pattern has also raised doubts about the consistency and reliability of U.S. foreign policy. Rather than reacting immediately to Trump's statements, other states increasingly



adopt a wait-and-see stance, anticipating potential reversals. As a result, confidence in U.S. foreign policy has weakened. At a time when the U.S. is already facing relative decline as a global hegemon, such consequences further contribute to a perception that the U.S. has lost a reliable and trusted leadership role, regardless of its actual material capabilities.

Fourth, it is necessary to reconsider whether the increasing emphasis on self-reliance among U.S. allies ultimately contributes to the maintenance of U.S. influence. From the perspective of the international community, the Trump administration's demands—particularly regarding NATO burden-sharing and financial contributions—are not entirely unreasonable, especially in the context of a perceived decline in U.S. power. However, U.S. dominance is historically reinforced by the asymmetrical dependence of allies, particularly in terms of nuclear deterrence and military capabilities.

If allies were to move toward greater autonomy, or even develop independent nuclear capabilities, as implied by concerns over abandonment, it raises the question of whether the U.S. could continue to effectively manage or be influential on its allies. Increased autonomy may lead not only to independent foreign policies but also to greater risks of regional conflicts. In such a scenario, it is worth questioning whether the U.S. could remain insulated from these developments. Ultimately, maintaining a pattern of frequent abandonment and entrapment dilemmas within alliances may undermine U.S. interests rather than strengthen them.

Concluding this paper, Robert Gilpin (1981) defines a hegemon as a state that possesses not only economic strength but also political and military power. This conceptualization highlights the comprehensive nature of hegemonic power that underpins the U.S. status and its role maintaining international relations, including the ROK–U.S. alliance. The role of a hegemon within an alliance can further be understood through Charles Kindleberger's framework of Hegemonic Stability Theory. According to Kindleberger (1973), a hegemon plays a central role by possessing both the capacity and the willingness to provide public goods within the international system, thereby exercising leadership. Moreover, the stability of the international system depends not only on the material capabilities of the hegemon but also, crucially, on its willingness to lead. This emphasis on willingness is also reflected in the work of Keohane and Nye (1973), who argue that a hegemonic system is sustained "when one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so."

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