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The Case for Nuclearization in South Korea and Japan to Enable US Withdrawal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has long prided itself on its defensive alliances with both Japan and South Korea. As a staunch ally offering its nuclear umbrella to protect both countries, the United States has provided significant resources to their defense and protection for over 75 years. As challenges to these alliances mount, especially a worsening American debt crisis and regional security crises, the United States must begin a reevaluation of its East Asian security commitments. Both the Japanese and the South Koreans have long advocated for a reduced American presence in their domestic politics but have lagged behind in critical military technology that the United States possesses a monopoly on such as stealth aircraft, blue water naval vessels, and most importantly, nuclear weapons.

In an era of increased revisionism from adversaries such as Russia, North Korea, and China, and the potential for American abandonment in a conflict under President Donald Trump, Japan and South Korea will soon come to a twilight moment of whether to invest into nuclearization or risk being at the mercy of nuclear coercion at the hands of these regional threats. This is compounded by the United States bearing the financial cost of a combined \$34.3 billion spent between the stationing of troops in Japan and South Korea from 2016-2019. The inordinate cost of the nearly 80,000 American personnel there has prompted concern from notable politicians such as President Trump, who question the cost-benefit calculus of defending these two countries. As this relationship is reconsidered under a second Trump presidency, this paper will provide a framework for the current total cost of U.S. force deployments, the nuclearization costs for both Japan and South Korea, and dive

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into how nuclearization can affect the region.

In a leadup to potential nuclearization by Seoul or Tokyo, the United States has a plethora of options to enable these allies to develop nuclear weapons. By adopting a pragmatic approach to sanctions, extended nuclear deterrence, and shifting politics, the United States can effectively help these allied nations sprint towards a nuclear weapon as it sunsets defense obligations to them thereafter. By utilizing all elements of national power, a solution can be reached that provides regional stability to East Asia while simultaneously enabling American withdrawal.

The Current Security Landscape

Facing a combined threat from North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK), the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Russia, Japan and South Korea are surrounded by hostile powers that have actively engaged in conflicts with these nations multiple times in their histories. North Korea has had active engagements with its democratic counterpart in multiple instances, including armed incursions and recent engagements such as the sinking of the Cheonan corvette (2010) and the shelling of the Yeonpyeong Island (2010).¹ These have come at the cost of multiple South Korean servicemen killed, while the South has had little leverage or coercive power to wield against the North.

This has carried over into recent history, with North Korea and South Korea continuing to decrease their diplomatic ties, with the notable 2024 destruction of the Arch of Reunification in Pyongyang and Pyongyang's designation of Seoul as a principal foe. Furthermore, South Korea has resumed broadcasting loudspeaker messages over the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in an effort to make North Korean soldiers defect. Even if symbolic, these actions represent a realistic view of the deteriorating situation on the Korean Peninsula.²

Japan also faces provocations from the PRC's maritime militia and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels that routinely challenge Japan's administration of the Senkaku Islands off the coast of Taiwan. Japan finds itself challenged by the PLAN in increasingly hostile interactions that have upset

the relative detente between the two countries in the 20th century. These come as the PLAN has achieved a larger fleet size than the United States, enabling it to mass its forces in the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean in a way that the United States cannot given its overstretched security commitments around the world. Japan cannot hope to match this fleet tonnage with its current domestic shipbuilding capabilities and frankly may never be able to achieve the scope and scale that the PLAN has for producing ships. The PLAN is also aided by the relatively young nature of its vessels, requiring less immediate maintenance than both the Japanese and U.S. navies continue to face given the age of their fleets.³

The PRC has made numerous attempts to further its so-called 'gray zone' activities against Japan in an effort to blur the line of conventional warfare. As outlined in *Unrestricted Warfare*, a PLA-published book detailing methods for confronting superior foes through unconventional means, the PLA, and as an extension, the PLAN, are actively trying to undermine Japan through unconventional means.⁴ The PLAN has resorted to harassing Japanese fishermen, or by utilizing its maritime fishing fleet to poach fisheries right outside of Japan's economic exclusion zone (EEZ). These have long-term repercussions, going so far as to completely deplete vital fisheries that may never return.⁵

A final point of note in the PRC's gray zone activities is its blurred leveraging of economic nationalism. The PRC has orchestrated high-level boycotts of South Korean and Japanese goods in response to their perceived hostility towards Beijing. This was highlighted by South Korea's 2017 decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in response to North Korean provocations, which was followed by a sustained Chinese consumer boycott of South Korean products. This had an adverse effect on the South Korean economy given the heavy trade between the two nations, showcasing how the PRC can utilize soft power to bully its neighbors with relative impunity.⁶

The PRC applied similar methods against Japanese products in response to Japan releasing irradiated water from the Fukushima Nuclear Plant. Despite the fact that the water was released in accordance with internationally recognized standards, and surprisingly

lower than that of some Chinese nuclear releases into international waters, the PRC organized a boycott of Japanese fish and cosmetic products, citing ‘radiation concerns.’⁷ It highlights that the PRC often resorts to brash foreign policy actions below the threshold of war to ‘punish’ perceived aggressions, even if they do not directly affect China.

Countering Growing Autocratic Ties

Japan and South Korea also face the emergence of the Russo-North Korean defensive treaty alliance, which can bring with it advanced technology sharing between the two parties. Given Russian advances in hypersonic technology, advanced space capabilities, and a sophisticated nuclear submarine capability, this new alliance poses major threats for stability in the region given the propensity for seemingly irrational actions taken by the Kim dynasty over the last 75 years. However, the Kim Dynasty has been extremely calculated in its actions, and this could point to the DPRK taking actions that they see as crucial to their survival.⁸

The growing relations between the DPRK and Russia also pose a significant danger to East Asia through potential intellectual property sharing. Hypersonics represent one of the most sophisticated forms of non-nuclear missiles and they can render the distance between Japan and its neighbors a nonfactor, while significantly impeding or inhibiting the ability for the U.S. Navy to operate in the region without significant risk to capital ships such as aircraft carriers. Russia’s advancements in the field of hypersonics pose a significant obstacle to U.S. power projection and represent a growing threat to both Seoul and Tokyo.

Given this, it is tantamount that South Korea and Japan develop nuclear capacities that enable them to bring greater leverage to negotiations to protect their sovereignty while they themselves work more on future weapons technologies. Nuclear weapons might be one of the few options that can force any party to a negotiating table, regardless of superiority in conventional forces.

The Path to Nuclearization

To counter this increased threat from revisionist

powers, Japan and South Korea can devote their advanced nuclear energy capabilities and scientific proficiency to developing the most credible defense mechanism in human history: nuclear deterrence.

Japan

In this regard, Japan has a clear advantage over South Korea in having the technical capability and refining capabilities to produce a weapons grade nuclear weapon. Given its advanced nuclear energy program, Japan could theoretically, by conservative estimates, produce a nuclear weapon in as soon as two to five years with an estimated cost of \$2 billion.⁹ This could then be augmented by Japan’s advanced space program which could seek to provide the space vehicle that could deliver the payload to a theoretical target at a much longer distance than that of South Korea. It’s important to note that Japan would need to be able to strike targets as far away as Moscow in a theoretical contingency plan where Russia chose to react to Japanese actions against an adversary such as North Korea with the new security framework between the two.

South Korea

South Korea faces a more difficult path to nuclearization but one that is still manageable given the country’s deep nuclear energy history and scientific prowess. South Korea currently benefits from a robust defense industrial base that already produces advanced weaponry such as ballistic missile submarines that could theoretically be retrofitted to accommodate a submarine launched nuclear missile.¹⁰ This would give Seoul a leg up on Japan in terms of South Korea’s increasingly self-sufficient military-industrial complex.

However, South Korea lags behind Japan in its capabilities to refine plutonium and develop a weapons grade nuclear weapon. By conservative estimates, South Korea could produce an atomic weapon in as soon as one year’s time, assuming the international community does not impede this progress with actions such as sanctions.¹¹ However, South Korea is not subject to U.S. treaty obligations which enable it to store enriched plutonium (like Japan currently possesses) or operate a reprocessing plant for spent nuclear fuel. This would mean Seoul would need

to develop a reprocessing plant and keep it a secret to avoid sanctions. If successful, it is estimated that Seoul could process up to one kiloton of fuel per year, with a potential turnaround of one year between the construction and refining of enough nuclear material to build a bomb if Seoul met no obstacles.¹²

The US Role in Nuclearization

The best way for the United States to aid this process would be to enable South Korea and Japan through proactive technology sharing policies and sanctions exemptions. The State Department currently has several nonproliferation sanctions which can automatically trigger in the event individuals, entities, or governments choose to pursue a nuclear program.¹³ The impact of these sanctions on Japan and South Korea's economies would cause immediate hinderance to any attempt for either Seoul or Tokyo to pursue nuclearization. While it is entirely possible that both countries could still pursue nuclearization under sanctions, as evident from North Korea's own nuclear program, the damage that could be done to the developed South Korean and Japanese economies would be disastrous.

In this regard, the United States could theoretically provide an opportunity to steer its allies and partners to provide exemptions for South Korea and Japan. Such a proposal has precedent with the remarkable shifting of U.S. relations with India and Pakistan following their nuclear tests. After initially imposing sanctions, the United States later accepted a perspective that it was inevitable that India and Pakistan would develop nuclear weapons, and therefore it was best to align with them rather than to isolate them.¹⁴

U.S. public diplomacy should highlight the precarious nature of East Asian security affairs, growing revisionism in the region, and the growing desire of the United States to begin scaling back its security commitments. Furthermore, enabling as opposed to resisting the push for nuclearization would enable advanced technology sharing on intellectual property for refining spent nuclear fuel, as well as blueprints on weapons or reactor designs. It would also override the need to hide the respective nuclear programs. This would come at the potential drawback of adversarial

intelligence locating these future sites, but it also means that again, the PRC, DPRK, or Russia would initiate a conflict if they chose to strike, thereby still drawing in the United States which at this point should still be offering security guarantees.

In this final suggestion, the United States would ultimately have to continue defending South Korea and Japan to provide an advanced deterrent against any regional threats before it can begin a drawdown after nuclearization has finished. Once South Korea and Japan possessed a robust and capable nuclear deterrent, coupled with robust conventional militaries geared at asymmetric and traditional capabilities, they could then stand on their own while the U.S. military sunsets its treaty obligations towards them.

In this timeline, these economies can continue to trade, exchange ideas and people, and provide defense attaché support, but are more independent in their foreign policies. This relationship sees a net benefit to all parties while simultaneously showing resolve in the face of growing threats in the region. This relationship could mirror how the United States saw the democracies of Europe during the leadup to World War I and World War II as ideologically aligned but not treaty bound towards any one particular nation. In a time of shifting alliance structures, the United States could selectively choose its alliances as opposed to being treaty bound to dozens of different countries.

The Cost of US Burden Sharing

As of 2021, the United States has approximately 80,000 troops stationed in both South Korea and Japan, with 55,000 in the latter, and approximately 28,500 in the former. This comes at a cost of approximately \$20.9 billion for the Department of Defense (DoD) obligation to Japan and \$13.4 billion for South Korea for a three-year period of 2016 to 2019, totaling \$34.3 billion. Averaged out, this equates to approximately \$7 billion USD per year for U.S. commitments to Japan, and \$4.46 billion for South Korea. In exchange for basing rights, the Japanese government contributed \$12.6 billion during the three-year period, equating to approximately \$4.2 billion per year during the period, and South Korea contributed \$5.8 billion, or approximately \$1.93 billion, during the time frame, respectively.¹⁵

While both Japan and South Korea do shoulder some amount of burden, it is clear that the United States remains the primary economic guarantor of both nations to host American troops. This comes at a time of strenuous costs for the United States, with a worsening financial deficit of \$1.8 trillion USD per year.¹⁶ While the United States continues to shoulder this burden, both Japan and South Korea devote less of their GDP towards military spending. While initially helpful to both Asian countries in establishing their robust and diversified market economies, the United States must now look to withdraw its military and economic commitments in a controlled manner given that both of these Asian economies can easily support large scale militaries. This can be done through nuclearization, which as mentioned previously, runs at a cost of approximately \$2 billion, significantly cheaper than the current agreements by the United States, Japan, and South Korea to base troops or subsidize American troop deployments. Investing in a proven deterrent would increase the ability of South Korea and Japan to defend themselves while knowing the United States remains their guarantor during the nuclearization process.

This withdrawal would enable the United States to shift the focus of its force deployments towards more pressing regional threats, taking into account the future demographic shifts that developed nations will be experiencing in the coming decades. By slowly shifting assets out of South Korea and Japan, the U.S. military enjoys the dual advantage of guaranteeing both countries' defense while also putting them on a path to nuclearization and greater sovereignty in their actions. This would be of keen interest to South Korea which generally has supported the withdrawal of American forces for a number of years but has lacked thorough domestic support for nuclearization.

With the election of President Trump to a second term, the domestic appetite of Koreans to see their country invest in a nuclear deterrent may substantially increase. President Trump's first term was marked by repeated calls for increased South Korean burden sharing and caused a notable shift in South Korean political rhetoric on the future of their country. This continued into 2024, when Trump repeatedly called to raise South Korean payments to the United States to upwards of \$10 billion per year.¹⁷ The potential for withdrawal might also create incentives for Japanese

and South Korean defense industrial sectors to partner with American companies as a means of increasing their domestic arms manufacturing capabilities while at the same time enabling American companies to increase sales, support democratic allies, and ensure the proliferation of cutting edge technologies that can aid a nuclear deterrent.

This shift in focus for the United States might also prompt Asian democracies to take their own organic steps towards multilateral defense agreements without the need for America to facilitate them. A current example is how the current Prime Minister of Japan, Shigeru Ishiba, has floated the idea of an 'Asian NATO' in the face of PRC and North Korean aggression. In Ishiba's eyes, this would see Japan go from a protectorate of the United States with no real military of its own, to a relationship more akin to the United Kingdom and the United States where both parties are capable of an independent defense of their own interests. Such an arrangement would entail allies that support one another, but ultimately are capable of providing for their own defense and military actions if necessary, as demonstrated by the independent British intervention during the Falklands War.¹⁸ It would set a necessary example to other Asian nations such as the Philippines to work on the development of a military that can act without the support of the United States or again, look to work more with local nations.

Historical Precedent

The United States has yet to go to war with a nuclear power, notwithstanding that it has enjoyed the most robust and dominant military force in the history of mankind. This theory of nuclear deterrence has helped explain why the United States has yet to fight a nuclear or conventional conflict with its principal adversaries over the years, such as the PRC, DPRK, the Soviet Union, and now Russia.

This model, that nuclear armed states generally do not go to war with each other, has more or less held. While there are exceptions, such as India and Pakistan's brief conflict while both possessed nuclear weapons, it has generally held true in all other parts of the world. Under international relations theorists, most notably Kenneth Waltz, nuclear weapons generally promote stability under the theory that rational actors would

not go to war with one another at the risk of nuclear annihilation.¹⁹ Falling back on one of the most lethal and terrifying weapons of war if diplomacy failed would greatly aid the ability of Seoul and Tokyo to be able to stand their ground. This scenario would be bleak, but one that is unlikely to play out owing to the leverage of nuclear weapons in diplomatic negotiations.

As mentioned earlier, even when presented with significant advances over the Soviet Union in nuclear technology, the United States still did not commit to a first strike against the Soviet Union. Nuclear weapons and the fear of retaliation ultimately forced the two superpowers to accept that an advantage did not necessarily equate to the need to try and achieve victory. Along similar lines, the South Koreans and Japanese can rely on themselves for nuclear deterrence rather than fall back on a less committed United States. This can increase their own resolve to develop robust defense capabilities, shift responsibility for the Indo-Pacific to countries that have significantly more at stake in the region, and promote a network of states that can operate on their own if necessary.

Finally, in the event that Japan or South Korea were subject to traditional aggression by the PRC or rogue actions of the DPRK, both democracies would have the leverage of being the defender. This would garner them international support to apply economic leverage against these aggressor countries, and if necessary, justify their actions from then on. It also shifts the blame towards the PRC which has for decades pushed for American withdrawal from the region and adherence to international law. If the PRC were to then make a rush at regional hegemony, it would lose out on partnerships in the region, more than likely pushing for a defensive organization akin to NATO forming out of Indo-Pacific countries that would fear PRC expansion. In this way, the United States may inadvertently facilitate a defensive alliance that can counter China by its own withdrawal from the region, leaving a vacuum that would create a new coalition. It might also push countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, who partner with both China and the United States, to take a more hardline stance against an expansionist prone China. By doing so, it could organically promote the Asian NATO talked about earlier.

The Future of East Asian Security

The current security situation in East Asia is precarious for the United States. America's bilateral defense agreements with countries in these areas risk embroiling it in a nuclear war. As it tries to reevaluate its role in this increasingly complex and multipolar world, the United States must balance how it can withdraw from this looming tinderbox. Japan and South Korea both possess capable economies that can support, fund, and cultivate militaries capable of taking on the regional threats present. Furthermore, since neither Japan or South Korea will be seeking an offensive or preemptive war, they can invest in cost effective methods of defense such as asymmetric weapons that can wreak havoc on any invading force, regardless of size.

As seen from the ongoing Russo-Ukraine War, a defending party can still fight a war of attrition, utilizing cheap and effective asymmetric means of warfare to battle a superior attacker to a standstill. This would be further aided by the John Mearsheimer's 'stopping power of water' theory (large bodies of water inhibit power projection by would-be hegemons), giving providence to Japan's strategic location and need to invest in naval and air assets as opposed to land assets, with South Korea centering its defense around the DMZ.²⁰ This would therefore aid the concept of acquiring nuclear weapons as a proven deterrent that can be an ultimate trump card when combined with effective military procurements.

In addition to hindering an offensive action, a nuclear deterrent can also force an enemy to prioritize specific targets, in essence giving South Korea or Japan a second mover advantage to retaliate. In a war of potential attrition or attempts to rally an international coalition to come to their aid, being able to combine a proven asymmetric strategy with a nuclear capability could force an enemy to adopt an unorthodox strategy that would cause it to split its forces to avoid presenting a tangible nuclear target, thereby weakening a potential invasion strategy. It also raises the stakes for any invading country, as it would lose international legitimacy at a time when global trade has reached record levels, thereby stifling its economy and potential growth opportunities. While it is entirely possible that a revisionist country such as North

Korea has no desire to factor in the ramifications of an invasion in its international standing, its main benefactors of Russia and China have significantly more to lose if they wish to maintain their export-based economies.

Even factoring in that North Korea's Kim dynasty has demonstrated an odd preponderance for calculated unpredictability, risking an invasion of the South would be a suicidal endeavor. Unless the PRC or Russia were willing to enable this, it would isolate North Korea to a degree unprecedented in its history. Nuclear weapons would enable the South Koreans to mitigate the risk of North Korea's advantage in military manpower while also forcing the North to risk a strategy that may not work (such as Russia's belief that a decapitation of Kiev would end the war early), concentrating on one central thrust south that could be easily countered. Notwithstanding an invasion, unmitigated aggression would almost certainly galvanize the democracies of East Asia and the Pacific to form some sort of defensive alliance, akin to NATO, balancing against the aggressor. This would have an opposite effect, thereby pushing countries to adopt immediate containment on aggression and force any invading party to consider a fight against multiple militaries as opposed to just one.

With President Trump's hostility towards the BRICS currency alliance, it would also further isolate any country that tries to challenge the dominance of the U.S. dollar, notably Russia and China. If North Korea, the PRC, or Russia were to hedge their bets on avoiding international sanctions by using a new currency, it would prove unlikely with the Trump Administration's open hostility and desire to end the currency alliance. This would adversely affect the market access of these countries, thereby stopping the core enabler of a state to wage war: money.²¹

Shifting American Priorities

As recapped earlier, the United States allocates nearly \$11 billion USD towards the defense of both South Korea and Japan every year. While there is a cost-sharing agreement with both of these countries, Washington still shoulders an extraordinary cost to deploy American forces across the world, close to countries that would like to see nothing less than a full

American withdrawal from the region. As Americans increasingly question whether military deployments are worth their tax dollars in the face of increasing socioeconomic strain in the home front, so too must America's defense establishment as it looks inwards.

The United States faces a myriad of issues that hamper its ability to grow and maintain its way of life. With an opioid crisis that claims the lives of thousands every year, major reforms needed to guarantee the existence of social programs like Social Security, worsening natural disasters such as wildfires, floods, and hurricanes, and a looming debt crisis that threatens to send the United States into a depression, the time to start cutting costs must come sooner rather than later. It is an imperative for the United States to start questioning how it can make financial cuts amid a rapidly changing world. The repercussions of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 are more present by the day as the Middle East rapidly deteriorates and the financial costs become more apparent in yearly debt repayments, which themselves are commanding a sizable percentage of the overall yearly budget.

In layman's terms, if the house is flooding, the logical answer is to get rid of the water as opposed to building more floors to avoid the rising water. If America wishes to make a meaningful change and reverse its economic and social decline, a whole-of-nation approach needs to be adopted, and with it, the reeling in of military deployments around the world. Of the three main conduits of American power, diplomacy, defense, and development, U.S. efforts have overwhelmingly focused on defense. However, now America must start to negotiate and utilize its diplomatic history to forge a new path. Washington can work towards playing a long game, enabling autocracies to waste their populations and ambitions over fruitless ventures, thereby steering themselves towards collapse as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany did. In a realist world, it is frivolous to waste national power when America could let its opponents find their own black holes to throw money into.

Furthermore, nuclear deterrence has proven to be one of the most successful means of avoiding war. Mutually assured destruction (MAD) has forced countries to hesitate with the use of conventional warfare, and even in the instances where it has occurred (such as the Kargil War between India and

Pakistan, border clashes between India and the PRC, and the Sino-Soviet border clashes), nuclear weapons were not deployed. All countries with nuclear weapons have distinct thresholds for their use, and even Russia has failed to meet a threshold to deploy its nuclear arsenal despite repeatedly telling the world it will use them in the ongoing Ukraine conflict. If policymakers apply this model, one in which the international community would be quick to apply sanctions or economic hindrances or coordinated military effort to punish a nuclear aggressor, this itself would be a consistent deterrent to stop an aggressor from targeting Japan or South Korea. In addition, scholars such as Mearsheimer have posited that Russia chose to start a war with Ukraine in large part due to Ukraine not possessing nuclear weapons.²² One can surmise that if Ukraine had nuclear weapons, this would have caused a change of course from Russia and instead Moscow could have sought a diplomatic solution, or simply not harbored revisionist claims to begin with. In the event Japan or South Korea could leverage a nuclear arsenal, this might aid their ability to force a potential invader to reconsider.

An excellent example of a functioning nuclear deterrent was when the United States forced the PRC to stand down in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-55. Unable to find a diplomatic solution, President Dwight Eisenhower threatened the use of nuclear weapons on Chairman Mao Zedong and thereby forced China to stand down, stopping the PRC from attempting to cross the strait to take over Taiwan. It demonstrated that nuclear coercion was a potent threat, notwithstanding that the PLA had significant combat experience and manpower advantages from the Chinese Civil War and Korean War at the time, potentially giving it the edge over the Kuomintang forces had they managed to land forces. It also led to a serious rethinking of the PRC's strategic doctrine, pushing it to develop nuclear weapons to prevent a situation like the First Taiwan Strait Crisis from ever happening again. In applying this model, it is vital that South Korea and Japan develop nuclear weapons sooner rather than later to avoid facing nuclear blackmail without themselves possessing a nuclear counter.

Conclusion

The United States is at a watershed moment in its history. Afforded enormous military and economic success after World War II, it has cemented itself as a beacon of hope, democracy, and success. However, after myriad interventions, costly wars, and financial mismanagement, it risks losing everything unless immediate actions are taken to reel itself in. Americans have spent the last 75 years building an international system that has held up and helped prevent the world from falling into complete anarchy. It now comes to a point where the United States must trust the system it has built to withstand the pressures of revisionism. To do this, it must begin a concerted effort to derisk its military assets outside of conflict prone areas and most especially in regard to its peer competitor, the People's Republic of China. East Asia poses a substantial risk for nuclear escalation given the difficulties for the United States to project power nearly halfway across the world. With advancements in military technology for the PLA, America's historic naval advantages continue to erode as it becomes increasingly more difficult to deploy forces to potential conflict zones such as the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago.

If the United States wishes to retain its advantages, it must make the difficult choice of finding areas where it can withdraw, reorient spending towards the homeland, and let South Korea and Japan choose their own destiny. The United States can no longer bear the difficult position of being the world's police, and this has been shown no clearer than the present, where it faces monumental challenges in its home front. With issues like an expanding opioid and drug epidemic, failure to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control, and a rapidly spiraling debt crisis, it is evident that the power of the United States is in decline. It can no longer afford to merely push these issues aside in the name of national security. In the context of international relations, policymakers often think in terms of short sprints to beat their adversaries, but not with the foresight that they are often in a marathon that will take decades to play out. Policymakers can afford to address issues back home and at a future time, can better prepare America to utilize all instruments of our national power in a potential conflict.

South Korea and Japan are well equipped to take on nuclearization. If aided by the United States with trade and economic protections, these nations could

effectively develop nuclear technology within only a few years. This could achieve the twin purpose of enabling a U.S. drawdown in the region while still affording these countries the protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. For these countries it would see a sunset of U.S. treaty obligations and instead see a relationship built on a core respect of fellow democracies, prominent trade deals, and independent military defense.

Given the potential for geopolitical swings, there is no definitive way for the United States to know whether countries will want for the United States to simply leave one day. For example, Niger's military junta effectively kicked the United States out with little to no deliberation in 2024. The United States was caught off guard and forced to hastily withdraw its forces. While it is difficult to necessarily draw a comparison between two developed democracies in South Korea and Japan, the South Korean imposition of martial law in 2024 was a crack that could eventually give way to something much worse.²³

In conclusion, the United States has the potential to protect South Korea and Japan during a time where both can leverage their tools of national power to sprint towards a nuclear weapon. This can afford the two countries the opportunity to develop a proven deterrent that can force any adversary to drastically reconsider their actions. As shown even by the United States hesitance to go to war with nuclear armed powers, this would afford a protection to Seoul and Tokyo that they could entirely control without hesitation. In effect, both countries would have the chance to defend their sovereignty while also allowing the United States to sunset its obligation to their defense. It would be a poetic ending to a relationship that still has much fruit to bear in terms of trade but can finally see an end to the military obligations that the United States bears in this region. The opportunity to look inwards can afford all three nations the chance to utilize their strengths, forge their own destiny, and create strategies that better suit their individual needs as opposed to a misconstrued defensive alliance.

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