NEXT Alliance Conference: Washington DC, 2025

Updating Alliance Strategies to Sustain Nuclear Deterrence

Conference Summary: May 2025

James L. Schoff
Senior Director, NEXT Alliance Initiative
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Updating Alliance Strategies to Sustain Nuclear Deterrence

Winter 2025 NEXT Alliance Conference, summary by James L. Schoff, Sasakawa USA

Preface

Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, through its US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative (NEXT), organized a multi-day Winter 2025 NEXT Alliance Conference (NAC) late February 2025 in Washington, DC, bringing together US, Japanese and South Korean scholars, defense policy analysts, and current and former government officials to consider key drivers of change regarding nuclear threats and nuclear deterrence involving all three countries. Whether or not the changes underway constitute the advent of a "Third Nuclear Age," the US and its allies face an increasingly complex and dangerous nuclear environment characterized by multipolarity, connections to new cyber and outer space domains, and heightened geopolitical confrontation between democratic and authoritarian states.[1] *There is a pressing need for the US and Japan, together with the Republic of Korea (ROK), to expand their exchange of views about new sources of potential instability and align their strategies to sustain deterrence and explore risk reduction.*

The objective of this Track 1.5 not-for-attribution conference is to foster substantive bilateral and trilateral expert dialogue on evolving issues surrounding nuclear deterrence, enhance mutual understanding on these topics, and contribute ideas for strengthening deterrence or highlighting priority areas for more discussion. Our goal is to provide useful background information and ideas that can be useful to the ongoing official bilateral and trilateral discussions on these issues.

The NAC began with briefings from recent and current US and Japanese government officials to provide background information ahead of a day-long trilateral workshop, convened at Sasakawa USA's conference facilities. Following the workshop, a few of the NAC participants were invited by Sasakawa USA to speak on the record at a short event open to the public (attended by about 20 guests made up of students, researchers, journalists, and some government and embassy officials).

NB: Please note that this report is not a consensus document and is solely the author's own interpretation of the insights generated by the dialogues and meetings (and via subsequent research) regarding current nuclear deterrence dynamics and the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances. Quotes are used to illustrate points on a not-for-attribution basis, as per agreement with all the dialogue participants. The author is solely responsible for the content of this report.

Table of Contents:

1. Background and Introduction
2. Prioritizing Threats, Understanding Variable
3. Deterrence Failure Implications for Allied Response Options
4. Assessing Adversaries' Capabilities and Strategies
5. Trilateral Deterrence Integration Options
6. Updating Alliance Strategies to Sustain Nuclear Deterrence

[1] The Cold War era is generally described as the first nuclear age, with the second linked to an expansion of nuclear-armed states (e.g., Pakistan and North Korea) from the 1990s. Current trends seem qualitatively different.

1. Background and Introduction

Overall, our Winter NAC focused on how we (as allies and partners) understand the evolving nuclear deterrence landscape in two broad areas: 1) geopolitical and geostrategic change, and 2) technological change and investment trends; and what impact this has on our thinking about deterrence theory and strategy. It seems clear that nuclear threats in Northeast Asia are growing in multiple ways, and in response the US, Japan, and South Korea are considering various changes to their nuclear deterrence strategies. This is why NEXT chose to take up the nuclear deterrence topic.

The following is a quick outline of how nuclear threats and deterrence dynamics are changing:

- ***"Massive and rapid" expansion of Chinese nuclear forces to become a second "nuclear peer"*** to the United States (along with Russia). These are the conclusions of leading US think tanks and government-sponsored studies.[2] China is and developing a Launch Under Attack posture similar to that of the United States and Russia, making its "silo-based ICBM force survivable for the first time, just as its size is being massively increased."[3] The US Strategic Posture Commission determined that "at China's current pace, it will reach rough quantitative parity with the United States in deployed nuclear warheads [i.e., ~1,700] by the mid-2030s," and many US analysts now assess that China is changing its nuclear employment doctrine from no-first use/minimum deterrent to "an expanded theater nuclear war-fighting role" with an eye on potential conflict over Taiwan.[4]
- ***Continued modernization and expansion of Russian and North Korean nuclear forces***, with Russia maintaining the largest nuclear arsenal of any state (for at least the next decade), modernizing its delivery systems, and enjoying excess production capacity.[5] North Korea is expected to roughly double its current nuclear arsenal of about 80 warheads to 160 by 2030, and it is unlikely to stop there.[6] North Korea is also reportedly developing a nuclear-powered strategic guided missile submarine, possibly carrying Pukguksong-6 missiles and eventually giving it a wider range of attack options.[7]

[2] See Center for Global Security Research, *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for US Nuclear Deterrence Strategy* (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2023, 13; and Madelyn Creedon and John Kyl, Et. al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 2023, 7; and US Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," A Report to Congress, 2024.

[3] Center for Global Security Research, 13.

[4] Creedon and Kyl, 8.

[5] Ibid, 9.

[6] Josh Smith, "What to Know about North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Programme," *Reuters*, September 13, 2024.

[7] Vann Van Diepen, "North Korea's Nuclear-Powered Missile Submarine: A Mystery Wrapped Around a Riddle and an Enigma," *38 North*, March 21, 2025.

- ***Growing strategic alignment among China, Russia, and North Korea***, evident in North Korea's deployment of up to 11,000 troops to fight alongside Russian forces invading Ukraine in 2024, as well as the China-Russia "no limits" partnership first articulated ahead of Russia's invasion and reaffirmed in February 2025.[8] One South Korean workshop participant dubbed this a "revisionist bloc" and noted that North Korea welcomed this "New Cold War" that increases its strategic value to its neighbors, who are now more willing to provide it aid and protection.

- ***Questions about the role of cyber space and outer space-based components of US extended deterrence*** and potential vulnerabilities to enemy disruption. The US, Russia and China all rely on space systems to varying degrees for missile early warning, communications, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and navigation related to nuclear deterrence, and they can be vulnerable to attack or interference through different means. These include "counterspace capabilities—including direct-ascent and co-orbital anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons, directed-energy weapons, electronic interference and cyber operations."[9] Going forward, the role of artificial intelligence (AI) vis-à-vis cyber defense systems or through misinformation represents a poorly-understood danger to information security and decision making related to nuclear matters among the allies.

- ***Questions about future US investments in its nuclear enterprise, missile defense architecture, and Washington's commitment to NATO and other allies.*** Amid pressure from the "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) for spending cuts and from President Trump for more resources to flow toward new national missile defense and other programs, the Pentagon is looking to cut and/or redirect some 10 percent of its budget annually.[10] Meanwhile, the current generational nuclear modernization program (program of record) includes both the creation of new weapons and life-extending current assets that entail redesigning or upgrading weapons manufacturing facilities and supply chains, delivery systems, launch platforms, and their corresponding command and control infrastructures. This amounts to (including life-extension programs) seven simultaneous nuclear warhead programs, two aircraft programs, two intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) programs, two submarine programs, one sea-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) program, and one sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program. It is significantly behind schedule and well over its estimated budget of $400 billion from 2017-2026 (and possibly up to $1.5 trillion or more over the 30-year schedule).[11] This is

[8] Stella Kim and Mithil Aggarwal, "North Korea sent 3,000 more troops to Russia this year, Seoul says," *NBC News*, March 27, 2025; and Antoni Slodkowski and Laurie Chen, "China's Xi affirms 'no limits' partnership with Putin in call on Ukraine war anniversary," *Reuters*, February 24, 2025. See also, Patricia Kim, Asli Aydintasbas, Angela Stent, and Tara Varma, "The China-Russia relationship and threats to vital US interests," *Brookings Institution*, December 16, 2024.

[9] Nivedita Raju and Dr Tytti Erästö, "The Role of Space Systems in Nuclear Deterrence," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), September 2023.

[10] Tom Bowman, "Pentagon proposes $50 billion in annual cuts and identifies priorities to expand," *NPR*, February 20, 2025. See also US Presidential Actions, "The Iron Dome for America," Executive Order, January 27. 2025.

[11] Congressional Budget Office, "Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017 to 2026," February 2017; and Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Modernization: Costs & Constraints," May 2023.

all to sustain a nuclear deterrent of roughly its present size and capability, which the Strategic Posture Commission determined was "no longer adequate to deter the increased challenges from Beijing, Moscow, and the possibility of engaging both simultaneously."[12] The Biden administration hinted at this reality as well in 2024, saying that US nuclear forces "may reach a point in the coming years where an increase from current deployed numbers is required."[13]

Recent US administrations have responded to these developments with a combination of new tactics (e.g., a "tailored" or "integrated" deterrence approaches that increase the role for US conventional forces and other means) and more sophisticated and regular consultation mechanisms with Asian allies (e.g., the US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) or the US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) that was raised to a minister level for the first time in 2024). As for "integrated deterrence," one former Biden administration official at the NAC described it simply as "the whole being greater than the sum of its parts." "Rather than meet the adversary one-for-one in each stove-pipe of capability, it makes more sense to leverage all national capabilities across the DIME [diplomatic, informational, military, and economic]." He added that "coalitions could be the defining factor" for the 21st century in terms of maximizing the potential effectiveness of integrated deterrence (the conflict in Ukraine being a prime example). Thus, integrated deterrence and enhanced consultation mechanisms go hand in hand as we adapt to evolving threats.

There are many challenges for integrated deterrence, of course, although most of them are self-imposed and therefore should be surmountable. Workshop participants pointed to such challenges as rising costs for defense capabilities, over classification of information and bureaucratic stove-piping that makes communication and cooperation difficult (within governments and with allies), and inconsistent political leadership. The group discussed integrated deterrence opportunities as well, noting among them opportunities in space stemming from the indiscriminate nature of space-oriented attacks that can affect many countries' assets and therefore expands the group of countries potentially interested in supporting deterrence. Other areas (that will be touched on later in the report) include cyber security, missile defense, long-range strike, electronic warfare, information warfare, and defense industrial collaboration (especially small-arms production at scale) and defense trade.

The NAC trilateral workshop explored these different dynamics and options for updating alliance strategies to sustain nuclear deterrence over the course of five separate sessions, which are summarized in the remainder of this report.

[12] Creedon and Kyl, 39.
[13] Arms Control Association, "Pentagon Releases Nuclear Employment Report," December 2024.

2. Prioritizing Threats, Understanding Variables

One purpose behind the newer US nuclear consultation mechanisms with Asian allies is to more efficiently develop joint threat assessments, bringing together intelligence and policy making functions to facilitate interagency coordination and bring more transparency to the planning process in preparation for different possible scenarios. A former US official highlighted this practical value of consultation that "leads to predictability and ultimately enhances mutual trust, which is inherently the most important aspect of the extended deterrence relationship." It also helps the two governments think through practical steps necessary to carry out consultations during crisis that support timely and effective decision making. An open question remains whether the consultations actually feed into strategy development for each of the partners, or are they more simply a means by which gaps in national strategies are bridged through subsequent planning? Some gaps in alliance strategy and planning seem inevitable, given the growing complexity of the nuclear deterrence landscape, but we should be able to minimize them through frequent dialogue and close coordination.

A Japanese government official at the workshop described Japan's assessment of the worsening regional security environment, and while highlighting his country's continued confidence in US extended deterrence, he described Japan's commitment to contribute more directly and substantively to allied deterrence capability. This is rooted in Japan's national security strategy and defense strategy from late 2022 and evidenced by the significant rise in Japan's defense budget including its introduction of counter-strike capabilities from late FY2025. Beyond these steps, the official emphasized the importance of certain alliance documents and meeting readouts that demonstrate closer alignment of the two countries' thinking about extended deterrence challenges.

Specifically, he referenced the 2+2 Joint Statement from July 2024 that mentions "strengthening cooperation on extended deterrence and escalation management primarily through the Extended Deterrence Dialogue," and the subsequent EDD ministerial that "reaffirmed their intent to ensure full bilateral coordination through the Alliance Coordination Mechanism throughout every phase of a developing situation."[14] His interpretation was that even though the EDD has not changed much in terms of structure over its 15-year lifespan, there is a higher level and stronger bilateral commitment to leverage their consultations for the sake of escalation management of nuclear threats up to and including phases of crisis and conflict (even nuclear crisis).

In addition, the groundwork that was done in preparation for all of this dialogue did result in a December 2024 allied announcement that the US and Japan had created "Guidelines for Extended Deterrence," although the Guidelines themselves have not been released publicly.[15] News reports

[14] US Department of Defense, "Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee ("2+2")," July 28, 2024; and US Department of Defense, "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Ministerial Meeting on Extended Deterrence," July 28, 2024.

[15] US Department of Defense, "Government of the United States of America-Government of Japan Guidelines for Extended Deterrence," December 26, 2024.

suggest that the Guidelines clarify methods of allied consultations, the coordination of strategic messaging, and steps that Japan can take to support extended deterrence. Another Japanese participant noted that because strategic messaging involves actions such as when, where and how to deploy bombers, submarines, aircraft carriers, missiles, and the like, it means that Japan-US extended deterrence coordination is evolving from mere "discussion" to coordination in the operation of forces, including US nuclear forces.

Key questions in the workshop's first session included: How closely intertwined are conventional and nuclear deterrence, and what does the future hold for concepts of "strategic stability" and the "stability/instability paradox?" [16] Can we identify new sources of deterrence instability? The underlying challenge is our drift toward the so-called three-body problem of a tripolar nuclear peer relationship, with an added twist of North Korea and its more sophisticated nuclear arsenal.[17] Physics teaches us that three bodies (be they atoms or planets impacted by gravity) behave more unpredictably and erratically than two, and US defense planners have for several years been trying to adapt Cold War-era binary deterrence theories to this modern multi-polar predicament.[18] The general goal is to preserve stability and avoid the real life equivalent of planets either colliding with each other or having one of them being ejected from a relatively stable orbit.

An American workshop participant saw some reason for optimism on this front because, unlike in physics, countries have agency and can course-correct to avoid collision or ejection, and they can do so independently or collectively with other nations as necessary. The challenge, of course, is how to effectively calibrate and coordinate these adjustments with allies, and how to communicate them to rivals. An important question to consider is what plays the role of "gravity" in the nuclear three-body problem. It is likely to be some combination of perceived national interest, international rules and norms, ideology, economic interdependence, and perhaps other factors. Political leadership matters, too, and one Korean participant highlighted political disruption as possibly the biggest threat to stability in the near term.

Expanding on the Korean perspective, this participant noted that South Korea has long thought of strategic stability in an integrated (conventional/nuclear) way, even though the nuclear component was not something it could control. Seoul looks to balance North Korea through its own conventional forces, the combination of US and ROK forces, and reliance on the US nuclear

[16] The term "strategic stability" in a nuclear weapon context is most simply understood as a situation in which nuclear-armed states lack the incentive to conduct a nuclear first strike (primarily due to a reliable second-strike capability). This evolved from just no incentive to attack to become a way to undergird an arms control process, and it has been supplemented by such concepts as arms race stability and crisis stability. How this applies in a multipolar dynamic is unclear, and it could potentially require a collection of bilateral arrangements for stability. One workshop participant defined it more broadly as "no actor that has the potential capacity to cause fundamental change in the international system has the actual capacity or willingness to do so."

[17] Some researchers refer to this challenge more generally as nuclear multi-polarity because there are in fact more than three nuclear powers (and this has been the case for a long time).

[18] Theresa Hitchens, "The nuclear 3 body problem: STRATCOM 'furiously' rewriting deterrence theory in tripolar world," *Breaking Defense*, August 11, 2022. See also, William J. Broad, "The Terror of Threes in the Heavens and on Earth," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2023.

umbrella. But North Korea's nuclear expansion, its apparently looser nuclear use doctrine, investment in drone capabilities, and its closer collaboration with Russia undermine allied efforts to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea is boosting conventional defense spending in response, and new US-ROK defense industrial cooperation agreements and the NCG are other alliance tools for strengthening integrated deterrence.[19] Some also see Washington's modernization of a higher yield B61 nuclear gravity bomb (the B61-13) and the SLCM-N program as a way to tailor some deterrence tools for North Korea.

Another factor to consider is how the three-body problem impacts "arms race stability" in comparison to "crisis stability," with a Japanese participant suggesting that it might be more complicated in the former case, but the latter dynamic is perhaps less influenced because Russia and China have relatively few overlapping vital national strategic interests. A US participant responded that the US and Soviet Union had to "learn" stability in Cold War and figure out how to read each other's signals and what each considered to be proportional responses to perceived escalation. This created precedent that helped make the nuclear relationship more stable over time. The current multi-polar dynamic is dangerous because new learning is required amid complexity that will likely challenge precedent setting.

A Japanese participant described the situation as a collection of different entanglements including among allies, between nuclear and conventional (strategic vs. sub-strategic), multi-domain entanglements, and inter-regional entanglements (e.g., Europe and Indo-Pacific). Multi-domain, for example, might allow for certain actions in the cyber or space domain that could substitute for the use of nuclear weapons for some missions, but how might that impact an adversary's thinking in terms of an appropriate response if the capabilities are asymmetric? What kind of political or psychological impact would these actions have on each other? In addition, although during the Cold War many US defense planners viewed strategic stability as contributing to sub-strategic stability, there is less confidence in East Asia on this front, especially when observing Chinese expansionist behavior in the South China Sea and East China Sea. A Korean participant, however, described the problem less as a "stability/instability paradox" (in which stability at the nuclear level can potentially incentivize conventional military adventurism) and more of a "double instability" problem, and too much US transparency about the troubles it is having with its nuclear modernization program might not be helping on this front in the short term.

Longer term, participants expressed concern about the trajectory of China's nuclear weapons programs and that it could eventually exceed US and Russian levels. China's second fast breeder reactor will come online in 2026, boosting its annual yield of plutonium to near 100 weapons worth.[20] A Japanese participant asked, "do we really think they will stop production in ten years? Does that kind of investment make sense?" There is also China's diversification of nuclear delivery

[19] Zita Ballinger Fletcher, "Top US, South Korean shipbuilders partner to bolster vessel production," *Defense News*, April 7, 2025.
[20] Prachi Patel, "China's New Breeder Reactors May Produce More Than Just Watts," *IEEE Spectrum*, Dec 28, 2022.

systems to consider, especially medium-range missiles. Will all the new warheads be mounted on ICBMs, or will some number go to MRBMs? If both, is that simply a reflection of Chinese desire to deter nuclear use by Russia and India, as well as the United States, or is it trying to facilitate regional hegemony and coercion?

Participants also discussed the potential role for missile defense, as the Trump administration looks to strengthen its continental defense system with an ambitious "Iron Dome for America" initiative to intercept enemy missiles in the boost phase from space.[21] Some wondered if proposed US defense spending cuts to fund national missile defense would be potentially reassuring or troubling to allies, and there were opinions on both sides. Those in favor saw the prospect of a less vulnerable US homeland as weakening Chinese confidence in the intimidation value of its nuclear arsenal, but others thought it could reflect a "fortress America" mentality that was less concerned with allies. Others noted that missile defense technology is rapidly proliferating, so the allies are likely to face some of the same challenges that we are trying to present to our rivals.

Inter-regional entanglements were also considered in the context of allies and deterrence, specifically regarding the Russia-Ukraine example and degree to which Russian nuclear coercion has had a restraining influence on NATO support for Ukraine. Some participants thought that Europe and Asia were sufficiently different (in terms strategic culture and political systems) such that direct comparisons were not very useful. A US participant also highlighted geographical differences, with greater security indivisibility in Europe (on a continent together) compared to the Indo-Pacific, where invasion pathways are more diverse and not as linked to, say, Taiwan, which could de-compress the escalation environment.

Relevant forces are different as well, where except for Korea the use of "trip wire" ground forces is less prevalent for deterrence than through the movement of navy and air forces. In the Indo-Pacific case, deterrence can perhaps be more flexible, but also more fleeting. In addition, without "buffer areas" like Central Europe in the Cold War, conflict could erupt quickly in Asia without the physical room for de-escalation, which raises the stakes of early decision making. Still, one Japanese participant thought that Ukraine showed the relevance of conventional force sustainability to nuclear deterrence, and many in the workshop believed that Russia's nuclear threats had been effective at deterring more direct involvement by the US and NATO in helping Ukraine defend itself, providing a cautionary lesson vis-à-vis Taiwan and China. A US participant noted a key difference from the early Cold War era, when the deployment of nuclear artillery shells and nuclear "backpacks" in the field seemed designed to deter an enemy by essentially guaranteeing that any conflict would quickly go nuclear. Today it seems that the priority is avoiding nuclear escalation at all costs.

[21] White House Presidential Actions, "The Iron Dome for America," Executive Order, January 27, 2025.

3. Deterrence Failure Implications for Allied Response Options, Reassurance of Allies, and Consequence Management

The workshop explored issues of nuclear deterrence and escalation management in more detail from the perspective of possible deterrence failure (either due to misunderstanding, miscommunication, or ill-conceived signaling that leads to an adversary's use of nuclear weapons in a limited manner). How should the US and allies respond; how can they manage the physical and psychological consequences of nuclear use; and how can the US maintain deterrence and faith in its nuclear umbrella in the aftermath? Related to these questions, the group considered ways that preparing for nuclear use could effectively support nuclear deterrence and strategic stability. In addition, the group discussed possible adjustments to declaratory policy, alliance consultation mechanisms, and conventional or nuclear posture that could help protect stability.

Picking up on the previous theme of escalation management, a Japanese participant expressed some concern about what he detected is a modern Western bias against escalation and always looking for a "proportional response." "Not all escalation is bad," he suggested, although it does require exceptionally good insight regarding the relative balance of forces and capabilities (and other escalation tools available), as well as an adversary's decision-making process. One "flip side" of this is considering seriously the possibility that an adversary could view the threat of unleashing a limited nuclear attack as an effective way to escalate and change our plans or behavior. It is important for the US and its allies to convince nuclear adversaries that this will not work or be worth the response pain.

A US expert at the workshop highlighted several operational implications of limited nuclear attack for the group to discuss. She noted that while nuclear weapons are the most powerful in terms of damage per weapon and create effects across all five operating environments and all three physical dimensions of warfighting simultaneously, their physical impact is relatively limited across an entire battlefield, and the effects linger for a shorter duration than most understand.[22] More than conventional, limited nuclear attack will likely have a significant (though, perhaps unpredictable) impact on the will to continue the war fight, possibly strengthening it or weakening it.

It would be useful for the US and its allies to consider preparing for these kinds of effects in their extended deterrence consultations and eventually in some of their military exercises. Key issues would include understanding warning triggers and protection implementation strategies when triggered, evaluating different response options, and preparing appropriate methods for immediate damage assessments and consequence management measures while sustaining the ability to fight.

[22] Operating environments refer to land, maritime, air, space, and cyberspace, and "physical dimensions" refers to human (e.g., psychological effects), physical (e.g., combat power loss, terrain impacts, etc.), and information.

A Japanese participant worried that Japan could be vulnerable to Chinese nuclear coercion aimed at pressuring Tokyo not to provide basing or other support for US efforts to aid in Taiwan's defense, if it was not adequately prepared. He said that back in 2021, a Chinese Communist Party military channel posted a video discussing the possibility of treating Japan as an exception to its no-first-use nuclear policy "if Japan interferes militarily in our domestic affairs." He recommended proactive steps to reduce Japan's vulnerability through more missile defenses, civil defense preparations and better missile warning systems, and overall giving its citizens the fortitude to resist Chinese psychological pressure. This could be done unilaterally and in cooperation with the United States.

The US expert added that after some kind of limited nuclear attack, certain conventional military options that were not politically feasible before might become available, so preparing for this could be another area of alliance dialogue. Another American participant linked this to current US-Japan efforts to upgrade their command-and-control relationships with new command structures based in Japan. He said that one topic often discussed but viewed as too difficult or complicated currently is developing possible connectivity between US-ROK command nodes and the emerging US-Japan arrangements. If nuclear threats become more tangible in the region, preparing to link these commands and/or alliance coordination mechanisms might be more necessary and manageable politically.

A Korean participant described it as preparing for a "warfighting" nuclear deterrent, rather than seeing nuclear weapons as just a deterrent by itself. To some extent, the US and South Korea have already begun taking steps in this direction with NCG and advancement of integrated deterrence concepts. She emphasized the importance of continuity with the NCG process, moving from President Biden to Trump, so that momentum and substance can be built up around this kind of alliance preparedness and planning. She added that the bilateral consultations could include discussing in advance about what kinds of force replenishment measures would make sense after the outbreak of hostilities, so that the allies could try to quickly reassert deterrence from a position of strength.

A US participant who was part of a team that designed and moderated several war games involving a Chinese attack on Taiwan scenario described his observations of those outcomes over several iterations with different players. The scenario began as a conventional conflict involving China, Taiwan, the US and Japan, but it was designed to offer nuclear options to the players for China and the US, if they decided to use them.[23] Although the results varied with each iteration, nuclear weapons were used in about half of the games, all but one time initiated by China and almost always in response to a losing conventional fight. Set in the 2026-2027 time frame, China still

[23] It is worth noting that the game was designed to impose virtually no political restrictions on nuclear use, as the control team generally approved any of the "field commanders" (i.e., players') recommendations on this front, so the game was designed to model more the military dynamics (rather than political dynamics) surrounding potential nuclear conflict in East Asia.

generally lacked sufficient conventional capacity to protect its Taiwan invasion fleet in the face of large-scale and determined allied resistance, and so in some cases it resorted to a limited nuclear attack to turn the tide. Unfortunately, while the initial nuclear strike was localized and tactical in nature, there were some games that escalated to a strategic counter-value exchange between China and the United States, even though both sides sought to avoid that outcome.

A Japanese participant noted that an important factor for the US and its allies to consider is how each of them assess the balance of risks between action and inaction when nuclear threats are involved, and how those assessments can be aligned or reconciled. This becomes critical when deciding how aggressively to act in support of Taiwan's defense, compared to an attack on either Japan or the United States directly. He questioned whether US policy makers would see the threat of China's conquering Taiwan as critical of a national security threat as does Japan and what this might mean for the allied response to a crossing of "red lines" by China. An American participant added that this could be linked to declaratory policy as well, highlighting a recent change in US-Japan and even trilateral joint statements from high-level meetings that express opposition to "any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force *or coercion,*" and wondering if adding "or coercion" might lower the threshold for escalation.[24]

Related to the issue of balancing risks, the group also considered briefly how "much" of a limited nuclear attack (either in terms of scale and/or duration) can occur before it likely escalates into a strategic exchange between nuclear-armed adversaries, as it did at times in the previously cited war game series. This is an old debate from the 1960s and 1970s about the potential utility of limited nuclear war concepts for deterrence.[25] Many believed then that a nuclear war could never be won among equally armed rivals and the best deterrence was mutual assured destruction (MAD), backed by a high-profile campaign to emphasize the potential civilization-ending consequences of any nuclear use. However, others saw potential deterrence value in more discriminate nuclear weapons (so-called nuclear utility target selection or NUTS), resembling debates today about tactical nuclear weapons and limited nuclear attack options. Many participants agreed that it is worth exploring these issues again, because modern nuclear dynamics are sufficiently different and complex to allow for different interpretations among rivals that risk catastrophic misunderstanding.

Policy makers will always choose a non-nuclear option when it can achieve a desired (needed) effect, but how will leaders in different countries act if conventional weapon options are deemed insufficient? Will some turn to more tactical or discriminate nuclear attacks in the belief that they are the only way to accomplish a particular military or deterrent outcome, or perhaps believing that a reasonable gap exists between limited nuclear use and all-out nuclear war? Some

[24] See, for example, US State Department, "Joint Statement on the Trilateral – United States, Japan, Republic of Korea – Meeting in Brussels," April 3, 2025.
[25] See Manpreet Sethi, "Dissecting the Idea of 'Limited' Nuclear War," Centre for Air Power Studies, August 31, 2023.

participants suggested that perhaps this is an area worth exploring, first to align the allies' thinking and later trying to engage with potential nuclear adversaries on the topic.

An American participant advised the group to think carefully and objectively about what types of conventional and nuclear tools were needed for different types of missions. What advantage would a SLCM-N really provide the US, compared to the current air-launched cruise missiles that it is already modernizing, or the "dial-a-yield" nuclear options that it has currently on submarines. The only different benefit he could see for SLCM-N would be the ability to launch from closer to the Chinese mainland and strike interior Chinese targets more quickly, but is that nuclear strategy worth the cost? In addition, although we suspect China could be developing a nuclear anti-ship missile to deal with US aircraft carriers, it has not yet crossed that line. Given the asymmetry in target sets, therefore, it does not seem worth it for the US to field such weapons and invite arms racing on this front.

Related to this, a US participant asked the Korea delegation specifically about the thinking behind occasional Korean interest (mostly unofficial) in introducing US tactical nuclear weapons in the Asian theater or on the Peninsula as a way to bolster deterrence. Participants noted that nuclear "introduction" offers little operational benefit, although there could be psychological reassurance benefit in South Korea. A Korean participant thought that it could help drive the process of conventional-nuclear integration in a US-ROK context, with the ROK tailoring its conventional role to provide more effective support, and could also be a way to "lock in" the US nuclear umbrella. An American participant joined both of these last two points together by reminding the group that efforts to shore up extended deterrence and to reassure allies do not always overlap, even though we sometimes reference certain capabilities as if they do.

4. Assessing Adversaries' Capabilities & Strategies

The choices that the United States and its allies make about investments and posture to sustain deterrence will depend a lot on what we think we understand about potential adversaries' capabilities and strategy, said one US participant. He highlighted in particular questions about China's strategy, because although most Chinese government public statements about its nuclear deterrent reference US long-range strategic capabilities, China also has the ability to field a significant medium-range nuclear force for regional contingencies. To help address some of these questions, the workshop featured an expert in Chinese defense and foreign affairs to lead a session on these issues.

The expert focused on China's military and foreign policy strategy in the context of how it aligns desired ends with ways and means, with a particular emphasis on the nuclear dimension. She argued that China's military strategy is designed to serve the country's national strategy, which is pursuing its "Great Rejuvenation," the "China Dream," and China's modernization by the target year of 2049 leveraging the whole of society for this purpose. The "end goal," she suggested, "is to

revise the international order to support and benefit China's system of governance and Chinese national interests at home and abroad." The biggest obstacle to succeeding is the United States, and she described a growing consensus view in Beijing that the US is deploying a whole-of-government effort to contain and suppress China's rise. China's military in this case is an extension of the Chinese Communist Party and securing its political priorities through other means. It is focused on safeguarding China's sovereignty, security, and development interests, and it has a set of milestones to achieve related to preparedness and capabilities to handle a possible Taiwan crisis by 2027, to become a "modern military force" by 2035, and be a "world class military" by 2049.

Within this, she described China's nuclear strategy as "intended to be defensive in nature, but in practice it is highly sophisticated and intentionally ambiguous." It is designed to deter an enemy's first nuclear strike by maintaining sufficient survivability and counter strike capability, to be bolstered by current development of the ability to launch-on-warning. She argued that China generally views nuclear weapons as a means to deescalate and return to conventional conflict, but its no-first-use policy contains caveats in the case of threats to the Communist Party's political legitimacy, say from a pending conventional defeat in a crisis involving Taiwan. This ambiguity is exacerbated by China's practice of co-mingling conventional and nuclear missile forces during peacetime, creating a potentially volatile picture for both deterrence and escalation management. As discussed earlier, China's nuclear capabilities are growing both quantitatively and qualitatively, and she laid out her net assessment of China's nuclear triad (both hardware and software). The lack of information available about China's programs, unfortunately, tends to leave Western analysts assuming worst-case scenarios to inform their own defense investments and doctrine.

The expert concluded with some thoughts about how China views Japan and South Korea in the context of their alliances with the United States. She noted the "action-reaction cycle" that often occurs when allied defense cooperation information becomes public and prompts Beijing to respond, sometimes just rhetorically, but depending on the perceived severity of the allies' "offense" to China's sovereignty and interests, it can also lead to different types of Chinese military or economic coercion. The low level of mutual trust and poor state of current US-China (but also Japan-China and ROK-China) diplomatic and crisis communications adds to the danger of unintended conflict and escalation. The recent trend of stronger US-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation causes Beijing to see actions by one of the three as increasingly linked to, or coordinated with, the other two, even if that is not necessarily the case.

All of this led the expert to two perhaps seemingly contradictory recommendations that are actually quite complementary. The first is to quietly step up bilateral (and perhaps some trilateral) scenario-based war gaming at an official level that addresses some of the more politically sensitive areas that involve Taiwan and nuclear weapons, while the second is to continue pursuing engagement with China on nuclear-related issues in whatever avenues are possible. Even though Beijing tends to view engagement and dialogue as a gift of sorts to the US (requiring some kind of deliverable from Washington), there are moments when connections and progress can be made in

discreet areas (such as with the "AI risks and safety talks" carried out during the Biden administration with the Chinese government).[26]

In the subsequent workshop discussion, participants drilled down further regarding China's nuclear capabilities and strategy. One Japanese participant said that although China is reportedly introducing multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capability for some of its ICBMs and probably developing a submarine-launched variant, the heavy weight of its warheads could make it difficult to succeed quickly.[27] Other participants weren't sure, but some veterans of the US Defense Department pointed to the so-called China Military Power Report as the best source on this front, as it has been a vehicle for declassifying some of the US intelligence in these areas and remains the best available window into Washington's understanding on these issues.[28] The first edition of that report under a second Trump administration is expected by the end of 2025, and it will be interesting to see if Trump officials reveal any major new information or signal changes in how they assess Chinese capabilities in that report.

Group discussion shifted toward the Taiwan perspective in all of this, both in terms of how much confidence it had in potential defense support from the United States and other nations in the region, and what this meant for its own defense strategy. Washington has been encouraging Taiwan to invest more in its own defense, emphasizing asymmetric capabilities and employing a so-called porcupine strategy that makes it too unattractive for China to absorb (what Taiwan refers to as its Overall Defense Concept). Part of the Taiwan's goal is to survive an initial attack long enough to allow for US assistance to arrive and help turn the tide, but the extent of America's defense commitment to Taiwan is ambiguous. If Washington were to clarify a strong and quick response in support of Taiwan, could that reduce the sense of urgency in Taipei to keep investing in its defense? Alternatively, could a weakened US commitment undermine Taiwan's will to resist in the face of overwhelming Chinese military firepower? In the latter case, another potential outcome could be a decision by Taiwan's government to pursue its own nuclear deterrent.

Related to this, participants debated the relative importance of some changes that the Trump administration made to how it describes China and its policies vis-à-vis Taiwan. Recent updates to State Department fact sheets on China no longer refer to the "People's Republic of China" and instead simply refer to "China," while also expanding criticism about Chinese trade and economic policies, among other changes.[29] A participant who served in the US government during Trump's first term said that this nuance change was reminiscent of that time and not unexpected, but that a potentially more significant shift related to Taiwan. Trump's State Department removed a

[26] Lauren Egan and Phelim Kine, "Biden's final meeting with Xi Jinping reaps agreement on AI and nukes," *Politico*, November 16, 2024.
[27] Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress 2024," December 18, 2024.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ken Moriyasu, "State Department stops calling China 'PRC' in country fact sheet," *Nikkei Asia*, February 20, 2025.

sentence from its Taiwan fact sheet stating "we do not support Taiwan independence," which elicited a rebuke from China's foreign ministry.[30] Although US officials downplayed the change by saying its stated opposition to unilateral changes to the Cross Strait status quo by either side is sufficiently descriptive of US policy, one workshop participant said that it could signal a US step back from restraining Taiwan independence advocates. This could increase Beijing's sensitivity to certain statements or steps by Taiwan that suggest movement toward independence and further compress the escalation ladder.

5. Trilateral Deterrence Integration Options

The workshop then turned its attention to trilateral dynamics related to sustaining nuclear deterrence in East Asia, looking for practical yet effective ways to balance growing regional risks. Participants considered how the three countries' interests overlapped or diverged, how their defense capabilities could complement one another, and how they could improve the timeliness of trilateral consultation and coordination. The group also discussed possible trilateral "costly signals" (i.e., actions that demonstrate commitment to a particular policy because they involve notable costs for signaling states) that could be directed toward China to help warn Beijing if it was going too far with some of its coercion measures and risking military escalation. Overall, participants expressed a mix of optimism and pessimism regarding how effectively the three countries could integrate their approaches to nuclear deterrence.

On the optimistic side, an American participant listed a variety of viable options for strengthening deterrence capabilities and sending costly signals. These included further trilateral integration of missile defense architecture possibly on up to a level resembling the US-Canada North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Creating a full-time defense coordination center that facilitates the collection and analysis of intelligence and reconnaissance information is another option, or having some Japanese participation in the UN Command on the Korean Peninsula (that already includes UN-flagged "rear area" bases located in Japan).

The current domestic political environments in Japan and South Korea are not conducive to taking such steps at the moment, but more aggressive behavior by North Korea or China could make them more feasible. Additionally, policy makers in all three countries can take proactive steps to be ready to implement such policies if tensions do rise, for example by raising awareness in Korea and Japan about the role of UN Rear bases in Japan that support South Korean security or about the potential mutual benefit of closer missile defense cooperation. Expanding trilateral defense industrial cooperation in ship or submarine building could be another option.

[30] Kelly Ng, "China anger as US amends wording on Taiwan independence," *BBC News*, February 17, 2025.

However, some other participants were less confident that these kinds of options were practical due to some diverging interests among the three. The simple gap in interests relates to how potential threats are prioritized, with South Korea primarily concerned with North Korea, and Japan focused mostly on China. Even though Washington is concerned with both North Korea and China, they are physically distant, and US officials are also focused on threats from Russia, in the Middle East, and even in places like Yemen. A Japanese participant noted also the particular near-term challenge that President Trump represents in terms of his "America First" mindset and lack of reliability. She thought that this would hamper relatively bold trilateral action even in the face of growing tensions, although she did see potential in pursuing less costly signals in areas of defense industrial cooperation for missiles, ammunition, drones (in addition to shipbuilding mentioned earlier) that can still make meaningful contributions to deterrence.

Another Japanese participant pressed the group to think about how this kind of defense industrial or supply chain collaboration could send important signals to China and North Korea about the allies' resiliency and stamina in case conflict erupts. The goal, he said, should be to convince China and North Korea that any conflict would likely be long and costly because the three countries together (perhaps with others) can sustain production capacity beyond what any one nation can do alone. Others, however, cautioned that even if the political will existed in Japan and Korea to move in this direction, various structural, market, and legal impediments in the defense sector would make it difficult to achieve. It might be easier to realize for critical minerals or other supply chain areas, even possibly preparing to handle contested logistics of supply during conflict, but it is likely to be a bridge too far in the near term to symbiotically engage in various defense or weapons system manufacturing initiatives.

A Korean participant noted that both Korea and Japan have a strong shared interest in helping to keep the US nuclear umbrella robust and enduring, and this is within a context of shared trilateral concern about closer alignment and security cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia. An American participant wondered if we should think of the US nuclear umbrella in East Asia as "one umbrella," or is there one for Korea and one for Japan? If it is essentially one umbrella in conceptual and practical terms, then that is a clear shared interest. Another Korean participant added that most trilateral table-top exercises she has observed result in horizontal escalation to include China-Taiwan and North-South Korea conflict, underscoring the close connections between these two mini-theaters and the potential benefit of at least a division-of-labor approach to deterrence cooperation, if not trilateral integrated deterrence.

One participant asked a former US government official in the group if the Biden administration had considered suggesting a trilateral nuclear consultative mechanism of some kind, given this growing overlap of security interests. He responded that although US officials did explore the idea (internally and with major Asian allies), the primary threat concerns among Japan, South Korea, and Australia are still sufficiently different to warrant separate bilateral channels. However, lessons learned in one bilateral forum can be applied to others, such as developing extended deterrence

guidelines with Japan that resemble some aspects of the US-ROK NCG. It might someday be advantageous to establish a trilateral or quadrilateral NCG of sorts, but it does not seem necessary or efficient at the moment. Existing trilateral defense cooperation dialogues (like the Defense Trilateral Talks and for cybersecurity) are adequate, he argued.

A Japanese participant, however, questioned whether current policy-level consultation mechanisms were sufficient at this point. He recognized the political and diplomatic benefits of these different peacetime initiatives, and there is active and valuable information sharing taking place. Moreover, at the operational and policy planning level, dispatching liaison officers to US INDOPACOM and to the Pentagon helps smooth alliance policy coordination and exercise planning, but he wondered if there might be additional opportunities to integrate certain command and control nodes to some degree. Another option could be to expand staff-level education or liaison opportunities regarding nuclear deterrence issues hosted by US Strategic Command or other US defense planners to help expand the alliance pool of knowledgeable professionals in this area. The participants in these "bottom-up" engagements can then return home to repopulate relevant offices in their national security councils, staff offices, and defense policy establishments that will prepare the allies more effectively for higher-end regional contingencies.

Overall, participants believed that the three partners had come far in the past several years in terms of fostering trilateral connections and capability, but only recently has it taken on a higher public profile. This was thanks in part to the trilateral leaders' summit at Camp David in 2023 that, as a political signal, was most costly for ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol and to a lesser extent for Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. The imbalance of political costs explains why further dramatic shifts are not expected in the near term, but continuing trilateral defense cooperation from the bottom-up in a public way will help reinforce for voters the mutual benefit of these interactions. This can help the allies be better prepared for possible further deterioration of the regional security environment by being better poised operationally and politically to expand coordination.

6. Updating Alliance Strategies to Sustain Nuclear Deterrence

The final workshop session was essentially a group wrap-up exercise to help identify and organize useful takeaways from the previous two days, trying to prioritize them as both a set of possible policy recommendations and an alliance agenda for further dialogue and engagement. For the purposes of discussion, the moderator used a traditional (albeit simplistic) strategy development framework of aligning ends, ways, and means and asked participants to reflect on the dialogue with this framework in mind.[31] The ultimate desired "end," of course, is avoiding any kind of nuclear conflict while at the same time protecting vital national interests, but herein lies one potential area

[31] See, for example, Jeffrey W. Meiser, "Ends+Ways+Means=(Bad) Strategy," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3000.

of alliance divergence, as vital allied interests are rarely identical. Also related to ends, participants urged the allies to think creatively and avoid "mirror imaging" when it comes to anticipating steps that China, North Korea, or Russia might take in the future that could undermine regional security and stability. Other possible areas of friction include disagreement about the best ways forward in any given situation and how to allocate resources or implement policies to deliver the means necessary for success.

In addition, the group considered important factors or dynamics that could affect strategy development, because nothing is static in this current security environment. Examples of key factors include: the extent to which China and North Korea keep increasing their nuclear arsenals and sophistication of delivery systems; how much closer (or possibly estranged) do Russia-China-North Korea become; what kinds of technological advances are made in AI, autonomous systems, missile defenses, and other military systems; political stability and/or continuity in the relevant countries; among other factors. Nuclear entanglements and the dangers of entrapment (or undesired escalation) can be impacted by the way in which new domains of outer space and cyber space evolve with regard to the nuclear deterrent, as well as how policy makers and the nations' publics learn and think about norms related to nuclear use and the potential utility (or futility) of the use of force as a way to settle political disputes. It is important for the allies to share information and their perspectives about these various factors and adapt their strategies accordingly.

Workshop participants over two days considered multiple ways that the allies can try to achieve their desired ends, and most of them rest on a foundation of capability, cohesion, and will. Participants generally agreed that, at its core, sustaining nuclear deterrence without capitulation requires close cohesion among allies and partners that underscores a collective will to resist efforts by other nations to change the status quo by force or coercion. This must be supported by sufficient military and economic capability to make deterrence credible, and Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated that this should include strong resilience and an ability to sustain the lethality of one's forces. Still, the overall goal remains the maintenance of regional stability and avoidance of military conflict in the first place, so it is a delicate balance to build up adequate capabilities without feeding into a security dilemma that prompts spiraling military investments by all sides. Enlightened and predictable political leadership is a critical enabling factor on this front, although it is often in short supply.

In some cases, the participants endorsed a "division-of-labor" approach that could help bridge gaps where national interests do not completely overlap, as well as help the allies share the burden of high defense investment costs. An American participant noted the similarities to NATO's concept of "separable, but not separate" when a "European Security and Defence Identity" was being developed in the early 2000s.[32] Although the circumstances are different in that NATO was

[32] Peter Schmidt, "ESDI: 'Separable but not separate'?," *NATO Review*, July 1, 2000.

managing a significant expansion of new members with diverse priorities and capabilities, while the US, Japan, and Korea are three current partners dealing with a deteriorating regional security environment, the concept is ultimately about balancing national and collective interests effectively and efficiently toward a common goal. Workshop participants also discussed what a division-of-labor approach might mean in practice.

In broad terms, this approach would allow for continuity in these US bilateral alliances and maintain their unique characteristics, such as US Forces Korea's (USFK) Army-centric focus on partnering with the ROK to deter North Korea, and the US Forces Japan's (USFJ) Navy and Air Force-focus on regional security (increasingly concerned with Taiwan and the East China Sea) and the defense of Japan, with both featuring closer integration with Japan's joint forces. These include the alliance nuclear deterrence consultations of the NCG and the EDD. Yet, this approach would also build upon recent trilateral security cooperation initiatives in missile defense, intelligence sharing, cybersecurity, and new areas such as defense production, shipbuilding, outer space, and autonomous systems. Participants noted a lot of room to strengthen connectivity and collective capability for both conventional and nuclear deterrence, and progress in these areas would have the added benefit of demonstrating cohesion and will to potential adversaries.

For more detailed "means," participants thought that this should go beyond the mere allocation of resources. For example, one former US official highlighted efforts made during the Biden administration on declassification (or in some cases re-classification) to expand information and intelligence sharing with key allies. This went beyond addressing individual cases as they arose and reconsidered antiquated rules that could open a wider range of mutual information and technology sharing. Outer space and satellites were good examples of this, where Cold War-era rules automatically classify satellite images or satellite communications at the highest levels, even though today there is a wide range of space capabilities that produce images no different than if they were taken by an aircraft.

There should be more flexibility for policy makers to determine which particular cases require classification, rather than walling-off allies (and even some agencies within the US government) from entire catalogs of information simply due to the collection method. In another example, a former US official described an effort to clarify the criteria for trust when an ally is looking to purchase or co-produce a long-range ISR platform or strike weapon, which otherwise would face a blanket "presumption of denial" under the Missile Technology Control Regime. These are systematic updates to outdated government regulations on secrecy that can safely expand information sharing and defense sales with allies for decades to come.

Sustaining nuclear deterrence capability and will requires constant attention and the investment of time and resources. Without being alarmist, participants saw room to introduce higher level bilateral and trilateral table-top exercises involving policy makers so that they are better prepared and can more confidently handle a more unstable nuclear balance in Northeast Asia. Civil defense

considerations should be included in these exercises, possibly involving a wider range of national and local government agencies that would be called upon to contribute to any large-scale consequence management situation. Japan's triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis) in 2011 and the subsequent US-Japan Operation TOMODACHI to provide relief and mitigate further damage is a valuable case study of civil-military collaboration to protect local and national security.[33] Done properly, these kinds of preparations can deliver practical and psychological benefits for all involved. They also demonstrate resolve to potential adversaries.

These recommendations suggest some potential rethinking about the alliance "software" for non-nuclear operations that are relevant to nuclear scenarios and nuclear deterrence. The extended deterrence dialogues have an important purpose of educating allies about US nuclear policies and strategies, as well as being a forum to keep in touch with the allies' concerns and taking steps to bolster reassurance. But, as we move toward more integrated deterrence, it will be better for those discussions to connect at least occasionally with other alliance initiatives on roles, missions, and capabilities, or concerning space, cyber, and other dialogues. This could also help tie together national and alliance acquisition strategies to extended deterrence goals and capabilities. Participants from all three countries also recommended some engagement with Taiwan officials on these topics to keep all sides better informed about their perceptions and priorities.

The group did not come to any firm conclusions about the preferred US nuclear posture for the near future, although some Japanese and Korean participants did encourage the US to consider enhancing its theater nuclear capability (e.g., SLCM-N or others), especially in a counter-ship context similar to China's possible nuclear-armed DF-21D or DF-26 anti-ship ballistic missiles, or at least to field a US hypersonic anti-ship cruise missile like China's YJ-21. Several American participants, however, were skeptical about the tactical benefits of such weapons when weighed against cost and deployment implications. Regardless, a lot depends on how the new Trump administration approaches its first defense budget and nuclear posture review, and participants encouraged US policy makers to give due consideration to nuclear deterrence requirements without overcommitting resources in a haphazard way.

Finally, amidst all the workshop discussion about ways to strengthen nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis regional challengers, participants emphasized the parallel need to keep exploring dialogue opportunities with China and North Korea on these issues to help mitigate arms racing and avoid miscalculations. Any form of dialogue is better than none, but ideally it would lead to clarifying misconceptions about each other initiating some form of mutual deterrence "learning" similar to

[33] See Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Koichi Isobe, *On the Frontlines of Operation TOMODACHI: Japan-US Coordination during Crisis*, (translation edited by James L. Schoff), published by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA in 2024 and available at https://spfusa.org/publications/on-the-frontlines-of-operation-tomodachi-japan-us-coordination-during-crisis/

the Cold War reference earlier. If conflict does erupt, it might also help all sides manage "war termination" in ways that avoid the use of nuclear weapons.

After an active period of bilateral and trilateral consultations about nuclear issues during the early 2000s amid North Korea's multiple nuclear tests, nuclear deterrence dialogues involving the US, Japan and South Korea became somewhat siloed among a small group of experts. The new nuclear landscape, however, compels the three partners to reinvigorate their deterrence strategy development with a wider range of participants and paying more attention to the practical implications of integrated deterrence. This workshop was designed to contribute to this goal.

About the Author

Jim Schoff became senior director of the "US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative" at Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA in 2021, following nine years as senior fellow and director of the Japan Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research and writings focus on the nexus of traditional and economic security for the US-Japan alliance amid dynamic technological and geopolitical change. Prior to Carnegie, Schoff served as senior adviser for East Asia policy at the US Office of the Secretary of Defense, contributing to strategic planning and policy development for relations with Japan and the Republic of Korea. He also worked in Japan as Business Manager for a large construction and project management firm, Schal Bovis, and he was the Director of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis for seven years. Overall, Schoff's career spans more than thirty-five years working in the fields of business, education, government, and the non-profit sector, all related to Japan, East Asia, and the US-Japan alliance. Some of his publications include: "US-Japan 'C3' Modernization: Past, Present and Future" (co-author, Sasakawa USA, 2025), "Allied on AI Assurance: Technology to Enhance AI Security and Safety" (Sasakawa USA, 2024), "Modernizing US-Japan Command & Control Relationships for New Challenges" (Sasakawa USA, May 2023), "US-Japan Technology Policy Coordination: Balancing Technonationalism with a Globalized World" (Carnegie, 2020), "A Precarious Triangle: U.S.-China Strategic Stability and Japan" (co-author, Carnegie, 2017), and *Uncommon Alliance for the Common Good: The United States and Japan after the Cold War* (Carnegie, 2017).

---

*The **US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative** is a forum for bilateral dialogue, networking, and the development of joint recommendations involving a wide range of policy and technical specialists (in and out of government) to stimulate new alliance connections across foreign, security, and technology policy areas. Established by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA with support from the Nippon Foundation, the goal is to help improve the alliance and how it serves shared interests, preparing it for emerging challenges within an increasingly complex and dynamic geostrategic environment. Launched in 2021, the Initiative includes two overlapping lines of effort: 1) Foreign & Security Policy, and 2) Technology & Innovation Connections. The Initiative is led by Sr. Director Jim Schoff.*