Navigating the Twin Risks in Alliance Dilemma

South Korea's foreign policy during the US-DPRK nuclear crises

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Abstract

How do weaker states in an asymmetric alliance simultaneously manage the risks of entrapment and abandonment? Research on alliance management largely focuses on how stronger states manage entrapment while weaker states address abandonment. Such arguments reflect the military imbalance and the relative dependence between asymmetric allies. However, weaker allies can fear both entrapment and abandonment simultaneously when the former threatens their interests and security. To understand how they navigate the competing risks within the alliance, we argue that weaker allies would cautiously act as conflict managers by coordinating with allies while advancing peaceful alternatives, garnering support from the international community, and offering inducements to the adversary to incentivize negotiations. We demonstrate our argument by analyzing South Korea's behaviors throughout three crises involving the US and North Korea in the post-Cold War era. We conclude with broader theoretical and policy implications.

KEYWORDS US-ROK alliance; alliance security dilemma; entrapment; alliance restraint; North Korean nuclear crisis

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Introduction

Alliances play a central role in statecraft, helping states address security threats and political disputes (Leeds 2020). Alliances help states deter, balance, or bandwagon with threats (Waltz 1979; Walt 1987), and reduce conflicts by enabling states to restrain allies and manage crises between allied states and their adversaries (e.g., Bearce et al. 2006; Gelpi 1999; Pressman 2008; Fang et al. 2014). Yet, being in an alliance also brings risks, namely, the risks of abandonment and entrapment (Niou and Ziegler 2024). Managing these risks can be tricky. Supporting an ally to reduce the risk of abandonment can raise the state's risk of entrapment should the ally become encouraged to undertake more aggressive actions. Conversely, attempts at mitigating the risk of entrapment by restraining an ally heightens the risk of abandonment if the ally chooses to exit the alliance due to doubts in the alliance relationship. This balancing act is the core of the alliance security dilemma (Snyder 1997, 181).

Strategies to deal with this dilemma form a big part of the alliance management literature, which is broadly divided into two due to it applying differently to states within the alliance. Many of these alliances, particularly the US-led arrangements, are asymmetric in their distribution of material capabilities. As such, weaker (or smaller) states are usually more worried about the risk of abandonment since they are more dependent on allies to deter or fight adversaries (Cha 2000; Snyder 1984, 466, 471-2; Morrow 1993; Oma and Petersson 2019). In contrast, having less need for security assistance and lower stakes in an ally's specific security concern, stronger allies are generally more cautious about addressing the risk of entrapment than abandonment (Snyder 1997, 180-3; Kim 2011, 355). With these expectations as starting points, the literature becomes split between stronger allies and strategies for mitigating entrapment versus weaker allies and the means to address abandonment.

However, in situations when the stronger ally's actions endanger the weaker state's security, the weaker ally can experience an elevated risk of entrapment, driving the need to balance both risks concurrently. Weaker allies can fear being entrapped by stronger allies and be particularly motivated to manage the risk because they have 'little control over [their] ally and still [face] the consequences of the ally's actions' (Kim 2011, 364). During the late 1950s, Japan feared being embroiled in the US's conflict with the Soviet Union and China because it hosts American military bases, and the US-Japan security treaty did not offer Tokyo such means to express its concerns or influence the US's behavior (Kim 2011, 364-6). Thus, to manage the risk, smaller states adopted policies like remaining neutral or building up one's capabilities to distance themselves from the aggressive ally or the alliance. These actions do not challenge existing theories because factors like the distribution of capabilities and relative dependence can still render the junior ally more concerned with the risk of abandonment. But when certain situations require weaker states to deal with the twin risks simultaneously, it begs the question of how they do so when circumstances demand it.

In this paper, we examine how junior partners maneuver within the margin of space that may exist between the two types of risks. We argue that weaker states proactively act as conflict managers to address both abandonment and entrapment in crisis scenarios. Specifically, they seek to coordinate policy options with their partners; source the help of the international community to deal with the situation; and offer inducements to bring the adversary back to the negotiation table. These actions may appear contradictory and even signal the weaker ally's reduced commitment to the alliance. Yet, the apparent contradiction, or more precisely, the balancing act, reflects the opposing forces inherent to the two risks (Snyder 1984, 482). Furthermore, rather than being less committed to the alliance, they show that it is because

weaker allies care to maintain the alliance that they seek to manage both risks even when stronger allies are taking actions that may hurt their security (Hirschman 1970). Articulating these actions adds nuance to the literature and shows how weaker allies can, too, use alliances as 'instruments of management' (Schroeder 1975) to resolve conflicts.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: the next section discusses the alliance dilemma in asymmetric contexts and explains how weaker states navigate intra-alliance dynamics. The following section details mechanisms of alliance restraint. We then apply mechanism-based theorizing (Ylikoski 2019), analyzing how the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) used conflict management tools during the 1993-94, 2002-05, and 2017-18 US-DPRK nuclear crises—periods in which South Korea actively managed US-DPRK tensions through the mechanisms described. We conclude with three theoretical and policy implications.

Alliance Security Dilemma in Asymmetric Alliances

In its essence, alliances enable states to increase security by jointly countering threats (Leeds et al. 2002; Weitsman 2004; Snyder 1997), including in asymmetric relationships such as the US-led alliances in the post-Cold War era (Fukushima 2020). While allies benefit from the security, economic, political, and technological exchanges (Christianson et al. 2023; O'Neil 2017), the US enjoys a particular advantage, as alliances act 'as a silver bullet that reassure friends, deter foes, and leave the United States unexposed' (Edelstein and Shifrinson 2018, 19-20). However, a key problem is the alliance security dilemma, which requires states to balance risks of abandonment and entrapment.

Abandonment occurs when states exit an alliance or withhold support; entrapment happens when states get involved in an ally's conflict in which they share only partial or no interest (Beckley 2015; Snyder 1997, 180-6). Managing both risks creates a dilemma because actions

mitigating one increase the other. This balance challenges all alliance members, as even allies facing the same opponent may lack matching stakes or policy preferences (Snyder 1997, 186-91; Lanoszka 2022, 95-100).

In asymmetric alliances, the severity of concerns on both sides can be extremely skewed in both relative and absolute terms. In relative terms, while weaker allies may be worrying more about abandonment, stronger allies can be troubled only by entrapment. In the extreme case of alliances in a unipolar world, the US need not fear abandonment because it faces 'no great power rivals, less need for allied support, and thus a greater capacity to go it alone. To the extent that allies are needed... the unipole has a greater ability to pick and choose among different alliance partners' (Walt 2009, 94, 98). Entrapment risk similarly remains low given its diminished need to commit to allies. Conversely, weaker states fear abandonment acutely, as they lack 'realignment alternatives' that could challenge US military capacity (Snyder 1984, 471-2; Walt 2009, 97-8).

At absolute levels, both fears of entrapment and abandonment on the weaker side surpass those of the stronger side. As Tongfi Kim (2016, 68) explains, a reason why stronger allies may be more concerned with entrapment is because they have less worries about abandonment. That is, rather than entrapment being a big problem—and it is usually not, because stronger states have the means to both prevent and refuse entrapment—it is simply more of a concern compared with the low likelihood of abandonment. Weaker allies, however, balance both fears at high levels, as they lack the means to prevent or escape either outcome (Pedersen 2023, 443-445). They must therefore continuously navigate an inverse relationship between the two risks, wherein steps that lower entrapment risks can be read as diminishing commitment and thus sharpen abandonment fears, while moves that visibly demonstrate loyalty and bolster deterrence

can widen the odds of entrapment. Worse, when entrapped, they have less means than their stronger counterparts to take advantage of the entrapped situation (Marton and Eichler 2013).

Thus, weaker allies' concerns in an intra-alliance dynamic are more complex than they seem. They must manage both abandonment and entrapment at once, yet their stronger fear of abandonment constrains how far they can go in reducing entrapment risk (Snyder 1997, 325). For junior partners, the alliance security dilemma is therefore not a sequencing problem but a simultaneous twin-risk management problem in which each move carries dual and sometimes contradictory implications for both risks. Yet existing scholarship addresses these risks in isolation, focusing either on stronger allies' entrapment mitigation (Cha 2010; Sobelman 2012; Kim 2011; Priebe et al. 2021) or on weaker states' abandonment strategies (Oma and Petersson 2019; Kristensen and Larsen 2017), with limited attention to how junior allies navigate both at once.

Second, even studies that address weaker allies' responses tend to focus on strategies of distancing or external balancing, such as hiding, seeking shelter in alternative alliances, or amplifying voice through multilateral institutions (e.g., Kim 2025; Wivel and Thorhallsson 2018; Pedersen 2023; Press-Barnathan 2006, 283-4). These strategies, however, are largely derived from NATO and European contexts where multilateral exit options exist. Bilateral arrangements present different dynamics, and it remains undertheorized how junior allies manage twin risks from *within* the alliance when extra-alliance options are limited (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato 2019; Wilkins 2018).

It may be the case that states' actions are aimed purely at dealing with either abandonment or entrapment. However, allies' actions can also reflect a mixed strategy, resulting in them appearing contradictory. In some cases, states may be comfortable with creating distance with

allies because the alliance is so strong that efforts to reduce entrapment do not excessively increase the risk of abandonment. In other cases, such as those we analyze here, states must undertake actions to address both risks because security concerns derive from both allies and adversaries. Efforts to reduce entrapment, however, carry their own cost: any move that signals restraint or distance from the ally's position can be read as weakened commitment, sharpening the countervailing risk of abandonment. Managing both risks simultaneously is thus a practical necessity for junior allies in high-stakes crises. Recognizing this logic is essential to avoid misreading apparent wavering as diminished alliance commitment.

Weaker Allies as Conflict Managers

We argue that weaker states, when trying to manage both risks of entrapment and abandonment, can act as conflict managers rather than simply follow the stronger side's hardline foreign policy. Each move they make must constrain escalation dynamics that could entrap them in a conflict, while avoiding actions that would damage relations with the stronger ally or intensify abandonment concerns. Weaker allies playing the role of conflict managers and prioritizing conflict de-escalation is not the usual affair. The sharing of a common adversary and/or their relative dependence on the alliance propels them to support their stronger ally, which is in their favor, since it strengthens the alliance. Moreover, by supporting the stronger ally's hardline policy, they stand to benefit from sending a strong deterrence signal to adversaries. As such, even if they prefer a peaceful approach, they can still support the stronger ally's actions. The conflict manager role thus becomes visible mainly when entrapment risks become sufficiently severe that weaker allies must mitigate them without exacerbating abandonment fears.

Such circumstances are extreme, particularly in crises where smaller allies perceive high likelihood of military conflict or where nuclear capabilities threaten escalation near their

homeland, posing entrapment-abandonment dilemma 'in its severest form' (Snyder 1984, 492). Critically, in these moments, the two risks cannot be managed in sequence. Efforts to reduce entrapment must also avoid damaging relations with the stronger ally or intensifying abandonment concerns. Motivated by the need to reduce the risk of entrapment and de-escalate tensions, smaller states would actively attempt to restrain their more powerful partner and influence the adversary. To be sure, engagement with the adversary may also serve long-term purposes of threat reduction and regional stabilization. Yet such effects are analytically distinct from the crisis dynamics examined here, not least because they are often shaped by domestic political incentives as well as strategic considerations. We therefore focus on adversarial engagement only insofar as it functions as a crisis-time instrument of alliance restraint and argue that weaker allies pursue these objectives through three methods of alliance restraint: 1) intra-alliance consultation; 2) international coalition building; and 3) adversarial engagement.

These strategies closely mirror the methods of restraint proposed by Glenn Snyder (1997, 320-5). We build on and add to this work by demonstrating how these methods can be adopted and exercised by weaker allies. For instance, we exclude the threat of defection because it is seldom used by the restraining state and almost impossible for weaker allies if they are highly dependent on the stronger state. In asymmetric conditions, Snyder's description of the concession strategy, which suggests that the state urges its ally to make concessions to the adversary is also hardly applicable given weaker allies' limited bargaining power vis-à-vis the stronger state. Thus, we adapt the strategy so that it is the weaker, rather than the stronger, ally that is making the concession. The rest of this section further details the methods as they apply to weaker states in asymmetric alliances.

Intra-alliance consultation: The smaller ally may use alliance channels to shape the stronger ally's policy, cautiously voice disagreement, and signal the limits of its support while preserving its commitment to the alliance (Henry 2020, 57). Rather than 'cheap talk', such consultation functions as a signaling strategy embedded in institutionalized alliance channels. High-level diplomatic and military meetings allow junior partners to convey the domestic and regional costs they would incur from escalation, to set conditions for their own political and material support, and, if necessary, to indicate what courses of action they cannot publicly endorse. Smaller allies can use these opportunities to advocate less provocative measures, to warn that particular options would trigger unacceptable risks on their territory, or to adopt a policy line that does not further escalate the situation. At the same time, such consultation and insistence on using intra-alliance mechanisms allow them to continuously signal their loyalty to the alliance (Hirschman 1970, 76-82). These reassurances balance the restraining mechanisms (Snyder 1997, 330-2; Press-Barnathan 2006) and, thus, show that despite acting as restrainers through de-emphasizing the military option, these weaker states are remaining firmly committed to the alliance.

In practice, junior allies frequently combine intra-alliance consultation with calibrated participation to signal both restraint and continued commitment. During the First Gulf War, for instance, Japan's entrapment fears led the Kaifu government to restrict its contribution to financial support and reject combat deployment, deliberately limiting its alliance obligations (Midford 2011, 7679). Similarly, smaller NATO allies, such as Norway during Operation Unified Protector in Libya, have used ministerial consultations to scale back their participation

while remaining inside the coalition, pairing restraint with visible alliance commitment (Reuters 2011).[1]

International coalition building: The weaker ally may actively appeal to a third party to gain support for the de-escalation of the crisis (Henry 2020, 57). Rather than giving the junior partner direct bargaining leverage over the stronger ally, such moves work indirectly by raising the reputational and political costs of unilateral escalation and by embedding crisis management in institutionalized or multilateral settings in which the latter's credibility is at stake. The use of a third party can provide the smaller partner with another avenue to restrain their powerful ally while using international support for de-escalation to increase the costs of escalation for the adversary. Furthermore, the garnering of international support helps alleviate the tension between deterrence and restraint functions of an alliance and is a more viable strategy for smaller states in an asymmetric alliance (Snyder 1997, 329-37). As a crisis intensifies, countries whose security or economic interests are affected by it, especially neighboring states, may share the junior ally's intent to avoid further escalation. These countries may cooperate in de-escalating the crisis or pressuring the powerful state or its adversary not to aggravate the situation. Appeals could also be made to international organizations, such as the United Nations, to provide a platform for further diplomatic engagement (e.g., Rainio-Niemi 2020).

In order for their actions to not be interpreted as soft balancing or hedging, junior allies typically pair coalition-building with visible alliance maintenance efforts by framing appeals to the international community or regional powers as protecting, rather than undercutting, alliance credibility. In this way, international coalition building serves as a bridge across both dimensions

[1] Although outside the military-crisis scope of this paper, these cases illustrate a similar logic of pairing restraint with visible alliance commitment. This method primarily contributes to immediate escalation control by allowing junior allies to restrain the stronger ally's military options while preserving alliance coordination.

of conflict management: it raises the costs of escalation in the short term while shaping a broader diplomatic environment conducive to sustained engagement. For example, in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-55), Australia, Canada, New Zealand used sustained diplomatic engagement to press the United States to compel a Nationalist withdrawal from the disputed offshore islands, collectively managing their entrapment exposure from US over-commitment to the Republic of China (Henry 2020, 63-71).

Adversarial Engagement: The weaker ally may seek to directly engage the adversary in the form of economic relief or formal and informal dialogues to try to reduce tensions on both ends. Signaling a security-seeking intention can alleviate the crisis, especially when it is provoked by the security dilemma. For the adversary, such a gesture from the weaker side can serve as an opportunity to exit the crisis while saving face. Because the adversary would appear to be responding to the other side's conciliatory efforts, the adversary is relatively free from the loss of domestic or international reputation even if it backs down from its previous position. Moreover, direct engagement may help the adversary deal with some of the immediate security and economic costs which it may be facing (Park and Peh 2020). Finland's Cold War management of Soviet pressure offers an adjacent illustration: through direct dialogue, economic engagement, and assurances of non-hostile intent, Finnish leaders sought to reduce Soviet security concerns while preserving limited autonomy and Western economic ties (Rainio-Niemi 2021). This case shows how a vulnerable state can use adversarial engagement to east security dilemma pressures and create diplomatic off-ramps from confrontation, even outside a formal alliance.

The methods of restraint outlined in this section, taken in some combination, are attempts by the weaker side to restrain the stronger ally from undertaking the military option and avoid being entrapped while carefully managing the countervailing risk of abandonment—the defining

characteristic of the twin-risk dilemma this paper addresses.[2] Each mechanism is therefore designed not merely to reduce entrapment but to do so in a way that simultaneously reassures the stronger ally of the junior partner's continued commitment to the alliance. Moreover, the three mechanisms outlined above operate jointly rather than as strict alternatives, with the emphasis on each varying by the phase and intensity of the crisis. Indeed, alliance entrapment is rare based on the historical records 'precisely because they [states] worry about it [and] take measure to avoid it' (Lanoszka 2022, 70-1).

Case Studies: US-ROK Alliance and the North Korean Nuclear Crises

We conduct a plausibility probe case study of the US-ROK alliance during three North Korean nuclear crises in the post-Cold War era: 1) the first nuclear crisis (1993-1994); 2) the second nuclear crisis (2000-2005); and 3) the 2017-2018 nuclear crisis. At each juncture, US consideration of military force raised entrapment risks for South Korea, particularly as North Korea's nuclear program developed progressively. These crises examine South Korean responses to the alliance dilemma, focusing on weaker ally agency rather than US entrapment fears (Cha 2010).

The US-ROK alliance also epitomizes a classic asymmetric relationship: a smaller ally threatened by a nuclear-armed adversary that depends on security assurances and extended deterrence while lacking wartime command autonomy (Park 2019, 451). Seoul thus faces persistent abandonment and entrapment fears, making this a crucial case for our theoretical argument (Gerring 2007, 115-22). Being bilateral, it complements research on junior partners' intra-alliance behaviors developed through multilateral cases. Additionally, spanning

[2] We recognize that restraint attempts may not always succeed. Our goal is to outline strategies weaker states can employ to avoid entrapment in asymmetric alliances; thus, we do not address definitions and conditions for success, which lie outside this paper's scope.

conservative (Kim Young-sam) and liberal (Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in) administrations, our analysis accounts for the role of domestic politics (Moller 2021).

Using primary and secondary sources—memoirs, interviews, and Korean-language documents—we outline escalation factors and how the crises high entrapment risks for Seoul. We analyze South Korea's mitigation strategies: consulting its powerful ally and oftentimes withholding diplomatic support, mobilizing international community support, and offering inducements to its adversary. Following mechanism-based theorizing, we build a 'mechanism scheme' (Ylikoski 2019, 16-17) of restraining methods that individually or jointly explain how weaker allies function as conflict managers. This exploratory plausibility probe contributes to the 'toolbox view of theoretical knowledge' (Ylikoski 2019, 17) by offering mechanisms for testing across cases to understand their varied manifestations.

Nuclear crisis of 1993-94

With the end of the Cold War, the strategic environment on the Korean peninsula was drastically altered. Without the support of its traditional superpower, the Soviet Union, Pyongyang felt threatened by a serious imbalance of power between the two Koreas. To alleviate North Korea's security concerns, the US withdrew its deployed strategic assets from the region (Koch 2012, 5-6). Likewise, inter-Korean relations improved with the signing of The Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North of 1992, in which the two sides pledged reconciliation, non-aggression, and expanded exchange and cooperation (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 203-6).

Despite these conciliatory efforts, the first nuclear crisis ignited after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found inconsistencies in North Korea's declaration of nuclear materials and Pyongyang, rejecting special inspections, announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in March 1993 (Wampler 2014). Moreover, North Korea

switched to a 'state of war readiness:' Pyongyang ordered its military to prepare for an imminent attack, mobilized civilians to dig trenches near their homes, tested air raid sirens, and shut its borders (Mack 1993, 340; Michishita 2003, 47-8).

In response, the Clinton administration considered military strikes against North Korea's nuclear facilities, though internal opposition to this option stemmed from war risks (Perry 2015, 105-6). Outside government, prominent figures—including former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft, Senator John McCain, and Governor Charles Robb—urged Clinton to take a tougher stance against North Korea by proposing 'preemptive air strikes' or tactical nuclear weapons to be redeployed in South Korea (Kim 2004, 83; Scowcroft and Kanter 1994). Tensions peaked when the US proposed UNSC sanctions in June 1994 (Wit et al. 2004, 212). As Pyongyang had warned that sanctions constituted an 'act of war' (McIntyre 1999), Washington planned to send military reinforcements to South Korea. However, while the intent was to deter a North Korean attack, it was also a move that could provoke an attack by triggering Pyongyang's security dilemma (Perry 2015, 108). As tension escalated, US officials coordinated military preparations and civilian evacuation plans with the Korean government (Wampler 2014; 'Interview of Chung Jong Wook' in Shin and Jo 2009, 220). This cascade of events raised acute war fears in Seoul, with South Koreans stockpiling food and gas burners (Lee and Moon 2003, 140) and US Secretary of Defense William Perry (2002, 12) recalled that '[d]uring my tenure… this was the only time that I believed that the U.S. was in serious danger of a major war'.

Initially, South Korea's Kim Young Sam administration struggled to formulate a clear response. Divisions between hard- and soft-liners within the government, along with Kim's sensitivity to domestic public opinion, caused South Korea's approach to fluctuate (Michishita 2003, 71). Seoul first repatriated Lee In Mo, a long-imprisoned pro-North Korean figure, as a

goodwill gesture (Wit et al. 2004, 29-30). However, when this failed to elicit a positive response, Kim swiftly adopted a more hawkish stance, declaring 'no handshake with those holds [sic] nuclear weapons' ('Interview of Han Wan Sang' in Hong et al. 2017, 139) and withheld support for bilateral negotiations between the US and DPRK on the ground that Washington's 'comprehensive approach' to Pyongyang was too weak (Wit et al. 2004, 110).

However, as US-DPRK tensions escalated, the Kim administration's stance shifted. High-ranking ROK officials, including Foreign Minister Han Sung-joo and Intelligence Chief Kim Doek, recalled that many decision-makers, including President Kim, became hyper-sensitive to the possibility of a US 'overreaction' or all-out war with North Korea ('Interview of Kim Doek' in Hong et al. 2017, 169-70; Han 2017, 89). Accordingly, Seoul made various efforts with Washington to advocate a peaceful resolution of the crisis. For starters, South Korean officials persuaded their US counterparts 'to peacefully resolve the crisis with patience' ('Interview of Kim Sam Hoon' in Shin and Jo 2009, 33). When Patriot missile deployment discussions leaked in January 1994, Seoul publicly denied any decision and postponed further talks, concerned that it might provoke Pyongyang (Wit et al. 2004, 121-5). For similar reasons, Seoul later opposed the rapid US troop deployment or citizen evacuation ('Interview of Chung Jong Wook' in Shin and Jo 2009, 220; Wit et al. 2004, 205). Simultaneously, South Korea facilitated de-escalation: President Kim reversed his position on direct inter-Korean talks to enable US-DPRK negotiations (Kim 2001, 316; Chung 2019), and agreed to cover the lion's share of the costs associated with the 1994 Agreed Framework (Wit et al. 2004, 293).

In addition, the ROK cooperated with neighboring countries, especially China, based on their shared interest in maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea secured Beijing's consent to address North Korean nuclear issues at the UNSC in exchange for US negotiations

with Pyongyang (Kempster 1994; Han 2017, 90-1). Soon, Beijing pressured Pyongyang to return to negotiations by indicating that it would not veto UN sanctions against North Korea (Han 2017, 98-9). Additionally, with China's help, the Kim administration attempted a secret meeting with Pyongyang (Wit et al. 2004, 148-9). In discussions with Japan, Seoul prioritized the nuclear issue, resulting in a mutual understanding to share the financial burden if the US and North Korea concluded an agreement (Han 2017, 92-3). Seoul also secured Moscow's agreement to halt arms supplies to Pyongyang and to collaborate on North Korean nuclear issues (Kim 2001, 299).

Moreover, Kim collaborated with Clinton to offer rewards to Pyongyang that included 'economic and technical assistance and investments' (Gurtov 1996, 14). Kim's view was that rewards can be offered and later withdrawn if Pyongyang failed to act on its side of the bargain or continue with talks to resolve the ongoing crisis. Accordingly, a series of incentives were put on the table. Seoul agreed to cancel *Team Spirit* exercises, which Pyongyang considered to be a rehearsal of attacks on North Korea (Mack 1993, 340, 358). Furthermore, Seoul repeatedly assured Pyongyang that it does not seek unification through absorption ('Interview of Chung Jong Wook' in Shin and Jo 2009, 230). To further demonstrate its benign intentions, Seoul proposed the National Community Unification Formula, a gradual, three-stage process of national unification that includes inter-Korean confederation as a midterm stage.

Seoul's response in the first crisis clearly demonstrates conflict management mechanism, revealing its agency in slowing the momentum toward military escalation. As Washington considered sanctions, military reinforcement, and possible strikes, Seoul moved away from its initial hardlines stance to delay military steps and helped facilitate negotiations. In addition, it backed a peaceful resolution of the crisis, most notably by agreeing to bear a substantial share of

the costs associated with the Agreed Framework. Its influence should not be overstated: the Carter visit, Washington's recognition of the costs of war, and North Korean calculations also mattered (Wit et al. 2004, 251, 273). Yet Seoul's resistance to rapid escalation made military options harder to pursue, while its support for negotiated solutions made diplomacy more feasible.

Nuclear crisis of 2002-2005

President George W. Bush assumed presidency in 2000 with an 'All but Clinton' approach towards North Korea (Pritchard 2007, 1). By the start of 2001, the Bush administration suggested that any further US-DPRK dialogues would be contingent on the 'complete verification of the terms of a potential agreement' (Davenport 2002). The administration also framed North Korea as an 'axis of evil' or 'outposts of tyranny' (Hecker 2023, 37-8, 92). Consistent with such antagonistic rhetoric, the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review included North Korea as one potential target of the US's nuclear weapons (Bleek n.d.).

The second nuclear crisis began in October 2002 when North Korean reportedly acknowledged to US special envoy James Kelly that it had a covert highly enriched uranium (HEU) program (Pritchard 2007, 40-4; Hecker 2010, 46). Subsequently, the US suspended its supply of heavy oil to North Korea, which was a part of the 1994 Agreed Framework (CNN 2002). The situation deepened with the *So-san* incident, when the US and Spain intercepted a North Korean shipment of Scud missiles to Yemen (Kerr n.d.). In retaliation, North Korea expelled IAEA inspectors, removed surveillance cameras, unsealed frozen facilities in the Yongbyon nuclear complex, reactivated a nuclear reactor, and in January 2003, declared its withdrawal from the NPT (Moon and Bae 2003, 12). The crisis peaked when US Defense Secretary remarked that 'we are capable of fighting two major regional conflicts' (Gittings and

Goldenberg 2002). Potential US strikes of North Korea were openly discussed in the news media (e.g., Kristof 2003).

South Korean policymakers viewed the growing US-DPRK tensions as perilous (Kim 2010, 213), with estimates of massive civilian casualties underscoring the stakes (Kleiner 2005, 217; Roh 2009, 215). Whereas Washington considered the military option to increase its bargaining power, Seoul acted quickly to deescalate the crisis (Lee 2008, 77).

Immediately after North Korea's acknowledgement of its HEU program, Seoul sent the Minister of Unification to Pyongyang to urge compliance with the 1994 Agreed Framework (Lim 2015, 524), while President Kim Dae-jung pressed Washington to pursue a peaceful resolution and secure Bush's confirmation of his lack of intention to strike Pyongyang (Kim 2010, 501-2). These diplomatic efforts – described by ROK representative to the Six-Party Talks Lee Soo-hyuk as 'tenacious persuasion' – continued after Roh Moo Hyun assumed office (Lee 2008, 78-9). As tensions intensified, Seoul signaled distance from US initiatives it viewed as potentially provocative, including only partially participating in the Proliferation Security Initiative, a multinational effort to prevent a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems in the wake of the *So-san* incident (Choi and Park 2008, 389-90). Through both private and public channels, South Korean officials stressed that the stability on the peninsula was preferable to coercive measures that risked possible collapse of the regime in North Korea (Kleiner 2005, 218). Roh further emphasized that US forces stationed in Korea 'should not be involved in disputes in Northeast Asia without our consent' (Cotton 2005, 277).

At the same time, South Korea maintained close ties with the US. Although Seoul's rhetoric at times diverged from Washington, its actions largely remained aligned with US policy, as Roh believed that preserving good relations with the Bush administration was essential to softening

its hardline stance and preventing war on the peninsula (Han 2017, 226-8; Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 388). In 2003, the two countries agreed to upgrade their relationship to a comprehensive and dynamic alliance. The following year, despite domestic backlash, Seoul sent troops to Iraq as part of the US-led coalition (Lee 2006, 260). This gesture gave Washington an incentive to moderate its position during the Six-Party Talks (SPT), a multilateral diplomatic effort involving the US, Russia, China, South Korea, Japan, and North Korea (Han 2017, 236; Moon 2008, 88). When the talks stalled in 2005 after the US blacklisted Banco Delta Asia due to North Korea's money laundering activities, Seoul appealed to Washington to lift the sanction, promising to exert strong pressure on Pyongyang if it did not respond positively to the relief (Moon 2008, 95).

Moreover, South Korea cooperated with third-party countries to resolve the nuclear crisis, particularly within the SPT framework. Initially, Seoul advocated direct negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang, believing that North Korea's fear of the US was driving its nuclear program (Moon 2008, 79). However, since Washington opposed direct talks, Seoul proposed a multilateral approach that included both parties (Chinoy 2008, 293). Sharing similar level of security concerns (Hur 2018, 54), policymakers in Seoul and Beijing in early 2003 actively consulted each other to bring Washington and Pyongyang to the negotiation table (Snyder 2003, 113-4). Japan and Russia also supported a multilateral solution to the nuclear issue. The framework allowed representatives from Washington and Pyongyang to engage in direct discussions by pairing participants for bilateral contact, circumventing the Bush administration's refusal to engage directly with North Korea (Pritchard 2007, 112). During rounds of negotiation, both North Korea and the US were pressured by other participants to compromise, leading to some degree of success, evidenced in the September 19 Joint Statement in 2005 and the Initial Actions Statement of February 2007 (Hur 2018, 85-7; Lee 2008, 113-7).

Finally, Seoul also made efforts to manage the situation by engaging with Pyongyang. Among other things, more South Korean firms were employing North Korean workers, tourism from South Korea increased, a military hotline was established, and negotiations proceeded on a variety of issues. Moreover, Seoul offered Pyongyang positive inducements to resume negotiations, such as providing fertilizer and electricity, after discussions stalled for over a year between the third and fourth rounds of the SPT (Chanlett-Avery et al. 2006, 8). In May 2005, Seoul proposed a gift of 200,000 tons of fertilizer to Pyongyang (Chanlett-Avery et al. 2006, 17) and a month later, offered to transmit 2 million kilowatts of electric power directly to North Korea if it agreed to nuclear dismantlement. This move, along with China's mediation, revived the SPT (Moon 2008, 90-1).

Seoul's response in the second crisis reflects conflict management logic. It distanced itself from coercive measures, emphasized stability, and signaled limits to its support for military options. At the same time, it sustained inter-Korean exchanges and material inducements not simply as a broader engagement policy, but as part of an effort to create diplomatic space. Seoul also promoted the SPT that brought Washington and Pyongyang into direct negotiations. Unlike in the other two crises, the risk of imminent military action was lower, partly due to US commitment in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, Seoul's efforts helped institutionalize diplomacy through the SPT and made it harder for coercive strategies to proceed without a parallel negotiation track, thereby keeping a negotiated settlement politically viable.

Nuclear crisis of 2017-2018

The tense US-DPRK relations spiraled to a near boiling point during the first year of the Donald Trump administration. Pyongyang continuously developed nuclear and ballistic missile programs and, in the first half of 2017, launched a series of missile tests (Missile Defense Project 2017). In

response, Trump stated that the US would unleash 'fire and fury like the world has never seen' and that military solutions were 'in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely' (Merica et al. 2017). Reflecting Trump's incendiary rhetoric, US-ROK joint military exercises – *Max Thunder* and *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* – were conducted and the once-suspended THAAD launchers were deployed in South Korea (Panda 2017a). On 19 September, Trump aggravated the situation by declaring that the US 'will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea' should it continue with its course of action and ordering 'regular B1-B strategic bomber flights near North Korea' (Arms Control Association n.d.). These threats were not merely bravado; military options were discussed within the National Security Council (Sciutto 2020, 157), and Trump at one point even ordered his senior officials to devise a plan for evacuating US citizens from South Korea (Diamond and Liptak 2018).

Pyongyang did not back down under US pressure. North Korea conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear test (Arms Control Association n.d.; Fifield 2017), followed by the first launch of Hwasong-15, its largest intercontinental ballistic missile (Panda 2017b). During this period, Pyongyang officials pointed out that any aggressive US action towards North Korea would be considered an act of war and met with a corresponding response. Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho declared that 'the United States has effectively declared war on his country and therefore North Korea reserves the right to shoot down any U.S. aircraft that fly over or near its territory' (Arms Control Association n.d.).

Once again, the region was placed on high alert. US officials were concerned about the potential for a nuclear war triggered by a false alarm (Scuitto 2020, 158), and Seoul learnt of the discussions in Washington regarding potential military strikes targeting North Korea's nuclear force (Moon 2024, 146). The growing nuclear crisis presented a significant risk of entrapment

that the incoming South Korean president Moon Jae-in had to carefully navigate; aligning militarily with Washington to prepare for worst-case scenarios while simultaneously distancing itself from any unilateral resort to force (Choe 2017). Moon repeatedly emphasized that no military action would take place on the Korean Peninsula without Seoul's consent or, at minimum, prior consultation (Choe 2017; Moon 2017). Seoul also sought to reframe inter-Korean relations around the vision of the Peace-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula (Park 2019, 29).

This approach created friction with Washington – Trump derided it as 'appeasement with North Korea' that was bound to fail (Fifield 2017). However, Seoul coupled its restraining signal with careful alliance coordination. For instance, Moon visited Trump in the summer of 2017 and issued a joint statement reiterating the importance of the US-ROK alliance. The two sides agreed to regularize a meeting involving the foreign affairs and defense agencies, as well as an Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group to 'continue to coordinate closely to achieve our shared goal of complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner' (Office of the Federal Register 2017). During this period, South Korean officials at various levels maintained close contact with their US counterparts. According to one account, then–ROK Director of the National Security Office Chung Eui-yong spoke with U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton by phone on as many as 20 days in a month (Lee 2020, 334). The ROK government actively played the role of a conflict manager, actively consulting and coordinating with the US to deal with the growing nuclear threats from Pyongyang in a peaceful way.

In addition, South Korea sought to build international support for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis. Seoul made efforts to rekindle its relationship with Beijing, which had been strained

due to the THAAD deployment (Westcott and Suk 2017), and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Mongolia, some of whom later offered to host the US-DPRK summit (Moon 2024, 79-80). These efforts helped Seoul build a broader diplomatic environment in which renewed engagement with North Korea became more politically viable.

Lastly, as part of the government's role in restraining its stronger ally and escaping a potential situation of entrapment, Seoul offered its adversary a package of inducements to bring Pyongyang to the negotiating table. For instance, while attempting to reestablish contact with Pyongyang (Moon 2024, 41-2), Seoul suggested military exercises be halted in the lead up to the Winter Olympic Games (Reuters 2018). Additionally, to reduce the potential for future military conflict, Seoul and Pyongyang signed the September 19 Inter-Korean Military Agreement, which included a range of conventional-level arms control measures (KBS, 2018). Furthermore, when Trump cancelled the scheduled US-DPRK summit meeting in May 2018 following a series of hostile exchanges, Moon immediately convened an 'impromptu summit' with Kim to maintain the momentum for a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue (Moon 2024, 212-217).

The 2017-2018 crisis illustrates junior partner conflict management under more acute conditions, as verbal and military confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang pushed the peninsula into a period of intense tension. Seoul narrowed the space for unilateral military action by insisting that any use of force required its consent or prior consultation, while maintaining close coordination with Washington. At the same time, it used Olympic diplomacy to renew inter-Korean contact, worked with regional actors to keep diplomatic channels open, and pursued military confidence-building measures, including the September 19 military agreement to reduce the risk of renewed escalation. These efforts did not determine the outcome alone, but they helped recast the crisis as one in which negotiation became increasingly difficult to sideline.

Domestic Politics as Alternative Explanation

Domestic politics offers an alternative explanation for South Korea's foreign policy. Conventional wisdom holds that conservatives in Seoul privilege deterrence and alliance cohesion, whereas progressives emphasize engagement and autonomy (Moller 2021, 120). The three crises initially appear to reflect this divide: Kim Young-sam's early hardline stance in 1993-94, Roh Moo-hyun's rhetorical distance from Washington, and Moon Jae-in's 2017-18 peace-regime initiative all align with partisan orientations.

However, the first crisis complicates a purely domestic-political account. Despite his conservative administration and hawkish opening, Kim Young-sam shifted toward restraint as US-DPRK confrontation intensified and the risk of entrapment rose (Han 2017, 89). His government pressed Washington for peaceful resolution and mobilized Beijing and Moscow to manage escalation—behaviors consistent with the crisis manager role argued in this paper. This first case is especially revealing: entrapment logic overrode partisan predispositions, compelling even a conservative government to diverge from a hardline policy when entrapment costs appeared intolerable (Moller 2021, 127).

Roh and Moon's cases reinforce this pattern but prove less surprising, as progressive administrations were already predisposed to engagement and caution (Moon 2008, 77; Moller 2021, 130). Collectively, the evidence indicates that domestic politics shaped each administration's tone and the initial preferences but failed to explain the consistent mechanisms—ally consultation, appeals to the international community, and inducements to Pyongyang—that emerged under conditions of heightened entrapment risk. Domestic politics conditioned form but not substance, whereas conflict manager logic provides a more robust cross-administration explanation.

Conclusion

Alliances remain central to international security, yet states must navigate the alliance security dilemma—managing twin risks of abandonment and entrapment. While entrapment is rare, this may reflect states' active prevention efforts. For weaker allies, dealing with it requires understanding how they manage the twin risks because efforts to address entrapment risk hardly exist independently of the other.

Entrapment threatens not only strong states but junior partners as well, though weaker states often face higher costs. Consequently, junior allies have incentives to try to restrain their allies and manage crises when faced with high risks of entrapment. However, because they depend on allies for security, their mitigation strategies must simultaneously reassure their partners. Our examination of US-ROK dynamics during three high-entrapment-risk periods—nuclear crises in 1993-94, early-to-mid 2000s, and 2017-18—reveals that South Korea employed active conflict management: coordinating policy options with the US, appealing to the international community, and offering inducements to North Korea. These methods, employed across different Korean leaders and political orientations, demonstrate that weaker states can function as active crisis managers while maintaining alliance commitment.

We propose two avenues for future research to further examine the thesis presented in this research. First, due to the feasibility constraints, this study focuses solely on the actions taken by junior partners in an alliance. Future research could examine the conditions under which these actions are effective, ideally by analyzing the variations in success and crisis outcomes, which exceeds the scope of this paper due to its mechanistic focus. Second, future studies should extend the analysis beyond South Korea to include cases, such as Japan during the early Cold War period, to assess the generalizability of our findings, alternative methods, and how these methods can be combined to produce different outcomes.

We offer three broad theoretical and policy implications. First, alliance management is much more nuanced and involves a spectrum of policy options for all states, including the weaker partners, beyond the binary of entrapment or restraint (Jesse et al. 2012; Weitsman 2004). Beyond the US-DPRK crises, for example, South Korea has carefully managed US-China relations in part due to the fear of entrapment (Swaine 2025). Should war happen between the US and China, South Korea could not only be drawn into the conflict but also be jeopardized if forces were diverted from the Peninsula or if North Korea attempted an opportunistic aggression. Hence, Seoul has remained cautious about siding with the US (Lee and Wiegand 2025). More recently, while recognizing that it 'cannot act or make decisions that go against America's basic policy stance', Seoul has strategically promoted the idea of peace in the Peninsula to Trump (Cha 2025), which evidences the varied policies weaker states can pursue even within a small space of maneuverability. Second, and relatedly, recent literature has highlighted the perceived weakening of US-based alliance in the Indo-Pacific amid renewed great power competition (Kang 2009). Observers cite allied hedging and balancing, as well as junior allies' de-alignment from the US, as evidence of declining alliance cohesion or stability. Our study shows that the foreign policies of US allies cannot simply be interpreted as balancing or waning alliance commitment, as junior partners can remain closely aligned while actively mitigating entrapment risks.

Finally, while scholars have attributed the scarce occurrence of entrapment to stronger states in alliances, the role of weaker allies in performing the role of active crisis managers has mostly been overlooked. Yet, as Galia Press-Barnathan (2006, 281) states, 'the overwhelming power disparities within the alliance are likely to create a permanent concern for political entrapment… [and] will constantly be at the background of any strategic planning by the smaller allies'. As

such, studying entrapment from the vantage of weaker states is crucial; it can help us better inform theoretical and policy work on states' foreign policies and alliance outcomes (e.g., intra-alliance bargaining dynamics and alliance credibility) more broadly (James 2022; Kih 2022; Tamamizu 2023).

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