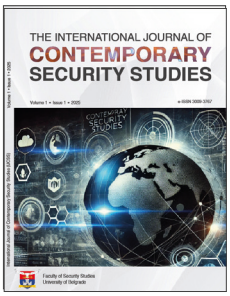
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Review article

United States–Republic of Korea Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines: Evaluating Alliance Coordination Against the North Korean Threat

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 United States-Republic of Korea Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines, as a subsidiary document to the Republic of Korea-United States General Security of Military Information Agreements and based on the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, contemplate strengthening the extended deterrence in the face of North Korea's progressing nuclear and missile threat. The guidelines institutionalize cooperation between the two allies in nuclear planning, intelligence sharing, and crisis management. This article examines their strategic implications for nuclear deterrence, extended deterrence, and alliance theory. The research is based on a qualitative systematic review of official policy documents, defence white papers, joint communiqués, and secondary academic literature. It adopts a theory-based analysis framework, drawing on classical and modern deterrence theory and alliance institutionalism, to examine shifts in coordination, credibility, and crisis stability. The guidelines bolster deterrence credibility through institutionalized consultative mechanisms, deeper integration of intelligence, and an enhanced joint military exercise program. Institutionalized nuclear consultation enhances interoperability and signals resolve, thereby reducing uncertainty in crises. However, closer integration also poses challenges for managing escalation and could exacerbate regional security dilemmas, especially in Northeast Asia's multipolar strategic environment. It can be concluded that the guidelines constitute a substantial development in alliance nuclear governance, as they operationalize extended deterrence commitments. They bolster both preparedness and alliance cohesion, but continued diplomatic engagement and tailored signaling are necessary to avoid inadvertent escalation. The study adds to discussions on managing nuclear alliances and can inform policy on crisis stability in Northeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

Nuclear deterrence; extended deterrence; alliance coordination; crisis management; security in Northeast Asia.

1. Introduction

The strategic environment in the Korean Peninsula has changed dramatically, with North Korea moving from a basic nuclear deterrent to a more diversified and operationally credible nuclear force. The emergence of intercontinental ballistic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, and multiple

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delivery systems (Kalanj, 2025; Popović Mančević, 2025; Porel, 2025) has transformed crisis stability and escalation dynamics in Northeast Asia (Panda, 2022; Sigal, 2020). These further complicate perennial questions about the credibility of extended deterrence in the United States–Republic of Korea alliance.

Extended deterrence denotes the nuclear-armed state's promise to defend its ally against nuclear or conventional attack (Huth, 1999; Kroenig, 2018). Classical deterrence theory posits that deterrence stability hinges on the supremacy of the threat of unacceptable retaliation (Schelling, 1966; Waltz, 1981). However, as capabilities develop in adversaries—especially those that can strike the defender's homeland—the credibility of such commitments comes to be doubted politically and strategically. Trends in public opinion in South Korea, such as rising support for indigenous nuclear capabilities, are symptomatic of this emergent credibility dilemma (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2023).

Reflecting the changing nature of threats, the United States and the Republic of Korea agreed to the 2023 Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines through coordination between the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense. The guidelines entrench structured nuclear consultations, intelligence sharing, joint planning processes, and crisis coordination procedures. The main research question this article investigates is whether proceduralized nuclear cooperation enhances deterrence credibility and alliance cohesion without exacerbating regional security dilemmas.

This study is important for both theory and policy. Theoretically, it advances debates in deterrence theory, extended deterrence research, and alliance institutionalism by considering the influence of institutional processes on credibility and escalation management. Whereas theories of nuclear deterrence focus on material capabilities, alliance theory highlights institutional mechanisms that address the challenges of abandonment and entrapment (Snyder, 1997; Cha, 2016). At the same time, security dilemma scholarship warns that defensive alignment may be misinterpreted by third parties as offensive aggregation, thereby causing instability (Jervis, 1978; Fravel, 2020). Understanding how the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines operate within these theoretical strains is crucial to the study of contemporary security.

The existing literature is informative but scattered. Deterrence scholarship focuses on strategic stability amid mutual vulnerability (Schelling, 1966; Waltz, 1981). Emphasis on credibility and reassurance in extended deterrence literature (Kroenig, 2018; Morgan et al., 2023). From a constructivist and normative perspective, deterrence is socially constructed through direct institutional interactions and shared narratives (Acharya, 2014; Tannenwald, 2018). However, few studies systematically link operational coordination mechanisms to alliance politics and the dynamics of regional perception. In particular, little attention has been paid to how institutionalized nuclear consultation affects such things as adversary signaling, allied reassurance, and third-party threat perceptions.

To fill this gap, the article has three objectives: (1) to analyze how the Joint Nuclear Defense Principles formalize nuclear consultation and crisis management in the context of the alliance; (2) to analyze their impact on deterrence credibility and alliance unity; and (3) to explore their wider regional security consequences.

The study proposes two hypotheses:

- First, the institutionalized nuclear consultation that is an integral component of the United States extended deterrence commitment-making process serves to bolster the credibility of extended deterrence by institutionalizing commitment within structured decision-making procedures and identifiable joint contingency planning processes.
- Second, the internal cohesion of the alliance is strengthened by institutionalization but may exacerbate regional security dilemmas unless balanced by moderate diplomatic signaling and crisis management.

This study is expected to contribute to theoretical debates on nuclear alliance management in Northeast Asia and to situate the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines within broader debates on deterrence and alliance governance.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative method within an interpretivist–critical realist ontological position. Critical realism posits that material phenomena of security, such as missile tests, doctrinal shifts, and alliance military exercises, exist outside observation while their strategic meaning is socially constructed through policy discourse, institutional practice, and alliance signaling (Bhaskar, 2008; Sayer, 2010). Qualitative design is suitable, as the research aims to explore institutional logics, credibility-building, and governance mechanisms rather than to test statistical relationships.

The study is designed as an embedded single-case study of the 2023 Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines within the United States–Republic of Korea alliance. The case study method facilitates an examination of institutional processes and context within the current Northeast Asian security environment.

2.2. Collecting Data

Data were gathered through systematic document collection and archival research. Predecessors included publicly accessible reports and policies from the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of the National Defense, alliance joint communiqués, defense white papers, congressional records, and official briefings. Tertiary sources are peer-reviewed academic articles, scholarly books, policy think-tank reports [for example, RAND, CSIS], and United Nations documents concerning missile testing and sanctions monitoring. The data collection focused on the years 2010–2023 to examine how North Korea developed its nuclear and missile capabilities and how the alliance adapted in response. All resources were accessed from official government sites, scholarly databases (such as JSTOR and Scopus), and institutional repositories.

2.3. Sampling Strategy

This study analyzes publicly available policy documents, strategic communications, and analytical literature on the United States–Republic of Korea alliance and North Korean nuclear issues from 2010 to 2023. A purposive sampling strategy was employed. Documents were chosen according to the three criteria:

- About the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines or the extended deterrence policy;
- Favorable comments on allied coordination mechanisms, nuclear doctrine, and crisis response in general;
- It was ensured that the data met the criteria of public availability and verifiability, so that the research process is transparent and replicable.

It is systematic in nature and examines some 60 key documents, including core alliance agreements, defense white papers, and major analytical contributions. Sampling was biased towards documents with institutional standing or significant scholarly impact to produce a meaningful, manageable analysis.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

This study is based on open sources and secondary materials. There were no human subjects, classified materials, or confidential information involved. Therefore, institutional ethical approval was not required. The research meets international standards for academic integrity, truthful citation, and the accountable representation of sources. All the files were processed in accordance with open access policies and copyright laws.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and process tracing. First, the documents were thematically coded to identify emergent categories related to deterrence credibility, alliance consultation mechanisms, intelligence integration, crisis coordination, and regional signaling. Coding was done manually through iterative reading and tabbing, which enabled the authors to cross-check during interpretation. Second, process tracing was applied to understand how the North's nuclear capabilities and institutionalization within the alliance have developed. This allowed the tracing of causal mechanisms through threat evolution, alliance proceduralization, and credibility signaling. Interpretive bias was minimized by applying analytical triangulation through the synthesis of primary documents and secondary scholarly works. It is not intended to judge secret capabilities or predictive results; rather, it is designed to explore institutional design, governance mechanisms, and strategic signaling processes. The integration of systematic document selection, transparent coding procedures, and theory-informed analysis guarantees methodological rigor and enables replication of the study by other researchers using the same publicly accessible corpus.

3. Results

3.1. Institutionalizing Nuclear Consultation Mechanisms in Practice

The document review reveals a distinct transformation from declaratory reassurance to regular, institutionalized nuclear consultations in the United States–Republic of Korea alliance. United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense official documents show a rising level of procedural detail.

Main observed trends are:

- Establishment of institutionalized high-level consultative bodies on extended deterrence.
- Nuclear planning was formally incorporated into alliance defense discussions.
- Development of common means of crisis communication and decision support.
- Joint strategic table-top exercises increase in frequency.

These procedures and others have appeared consistently in alliance statements since 2016 and are elaborated in great detail in 2023.

3.1.1. Coordination of Intelligence and Information Sharing

The heightened rhetoric about intelligence interoperability and early-warning cooperation was noted in the analysis of policy documents from after 2017. In particular:

- Expanded real-time information-sharing commitments.
- Institutionalized missile launch notification and evaluation.
- Integration of missile defence coordination procedures.

Table 1 presents the identifiable trends in institutional coordination.

Table 1. The Development of Alliance Nuclear Coordination Mechanisms (2010–2023).

Period	Consultance Frequency	Nuclear Planning Integration	Intelligence Coordination	Criss Simulation Exercises
2010-2015	Ad hoc / periodic	Limited	Bilateral exchange	Occassional
2016-2020	Regularized forums	Structured discussions	Expanded Integration	Increased frequency
2021-2023	Institutionalized	Formal Procedural Framework	Real-time mechanisms	Formalized joint simulations

[1] Data derived from publicly available alliance communiqués and defense policy documents.

3.2. Indicators of Deterrence Credibility

The review of materials from 2022-2023 points to greater stress on conspicuous signals of alliance solidarity. Identified indicators include:

- Strategic asset deployments that are announced to the public.
- Joint exercises that mention nuclear response scenarios.
- High-level reconfirmations of extended deterrence promises.
- More public pronouncements that alliance cooperation was part of crisis preparedness.

Documented references to extended deterrence consultation mechanisms display an overall upward trajectory across the study period (2010–2023): they remain largely stable from 2010 to 2016, increase noticeably after 2017, and reach their highest level in 2023.

Process tracing reveals the growing formalization of crisis-response thresholds. Procedural portions witnessed include:

- Predetermined escalation triggers for consultation.
- Predetermined channels for decision-making coordination.
- Pre-planned simulation exercises for tactical nuclear scenarios.

Numbered elements of escalation control noted in the documents of 2023:

- Early-warning notification agreement
- Prompt bilateral strategic consultations
- Joint public messaging strategy
- Joint adjustment of military postures

Review of regional security reporting revealed:

- More frequent statements by regional actors that the alliance is now a form of "nuclear consolidation."
- Stronger diplomatic protests after big joint drills.
- Larger regional military exercises between neighboring powers, after the announcement of the alliance.

There is no forward-looking judgment; these are observations only, based on responses documented in publicly available materials.

During this same period of institutional consolidation, secondary sources show an increase in domestic controversy in the Republic of Korea over homegrown nuclear options.

Observed trends include:

- More poll references to an independent nuclear option.
- Parliamentary debates with reference to extended deterrence credibility.
- In policy discourse, alliance consultation is linked to domestic reassurance.

For the 2010–2023 period, the document analysis reveals three major patterns of empirical:

- The development of the institutionalisation of nuclear consultation mechanisms.
- Greater procedural codification of crisis coordination.
- Concomitant increases in visible signalling and in regional response formations.

These findings form the empirical basis for the next analytical section."

4. Discussion

This section discusses the results in the context of the broader literature on deterrence, alliance politics, and regional security. It considers the theoretical implications, policy relevance, and limi-

tations of the study. The analysis indicates that proceduralized coordination—based on joint planning, intelligence sharing, and scenario-based exercises—enhances the operational dimension of extended deterrence in the United States–Republic of Korea alliance. The 2015 Counter-provocation Plan and the 2023 Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines formalize structured consultation thresholds and crisis response mechanisms, thereby institutionalizing commitment.

This development aligns with scholarship on extended deterrence, which posits that credibility is not just about material capability but also about visible risk-sharing and consultative integration (Huth, 1999; Kroenig, 2018). The massive exercises Foal Eagle and Ulchi-Freedom Guardian, involving some 300,000 Republic of Korea personnel and 28,000 United States personnel, are a case in point of how alliance signaling bolsters deterrent posturing (Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2019).

Meanwhile, the escalation environment has grown more complex. North Korea carried out over 120 missile tests from 2015 to 2022 (Arms Control Association, 2023), signifying a move toward operational readiness and a varied nuclear capability. In this asymmetrical environment, proceduralization seems to act as a stabilizer by defining escalation levels and compressing response times. The results support the assertion in alliance theory that institutions minimize uncertainty and fears of abandonment (Snyder, 1997; Cha, 2016). The institutionalization of nuclear consultation processes within the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense appears to enhance alliance solidarity by formalizing extended deterrence.

The findings also implicate the security dilemma theory, as it increases the alliance's internal cohesion. Defensive coordination could be viewed from the outside as strategic pooling (Jervis, 1978). China and Russia have repeatedly portrayed greater United States–Republic of Korea military integration as destabilizing, reflecting wider regional balancing dynamics (Fravel, 2020).

This dynamic shows that there is a tension in modern deterrence management: internal reassurance-oriented behavior can heighten perceptions of external threats. Hence, the results confound to some extent classical deterrence thinking that greater capability brings about stability (Waltz, 1981). Rather, stability is a consequence of the interpretation of signals within a multipolar regional system.

Diplomatic takeaways from the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) also demonstrate strategic learning within the alliance. The guidance, which incorporates the consultative thresholds and decision-making mechanisms, signals a convergence between deterrence and diplomatic signaling (Cha, 2019; Green, 2015). This combination method of deterrence implies that deterrence governance in the twenty-first century may require both military preparedness and diplomatic calculation.

This article makes several contributions to the literature on:

Deterrence theory finds that institutional design, not just material capability, is a crucial variable in deterrence credibility.

The Extended Deterrence Literature allows the formal consultation mechanism to serve as a credibility enhancer amid growing adversary capabilities.

Alliance Institutionalism: Proceduralization is shown to diminish internal uncertainty while, at the same time, creating possible external security dilemmas.

This article offers a more detailed analysis and understanding of nuclear alliance governance and links the operational, political, and normative levels. According to constructivist theories, institutionalized behaviors and signaling logics socially create deterrence credibility (Acharya, 2014; Tannenwald, 2018).

5. Conclusions

This research examined the United States–Republic of Korea Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines in 2023 to assess the impact of proceduralized nuclear coordination on deterrence credibility, alliance cohesion, and regional stability. The doctrinal and secondary literature qualitative analysis reveals that institutionalized consultation, joint exercises, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms increase op-

erational readiness, reduce uncertainty in crisis management, and lend greater credibility to the alliance. The codification of these procedures leads to more predictable decisions and actions in response to North Korean nuclear provocations. Nevertheless, the study also stresses that the regional perspective remains very important. China, Russia, and other players in the region may view greater procedural integration as a form of strategic consolidation, raising the possibility of security dilemmas that require diplomatic management. The guidelines enhance the cohesion of the internal alliance, and external signaling needs to be balanced to avoid escalation or perception problems.

In conclusion, the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines represent a strategic extended deterrence approach that blurred procedural detail with the doctrine of alliance cohesion and crisis response. In establishing institutionalized consultation, intelligence sharing, and scenario-based exercises, the guidelines strengthen deterrence credibility and underscore the ongoing significance of managing perceptions regionally and integrating diplomatic engagement into nuclear management.

5.1. Recommendations

The consultation, decision-making, and joint conduct of exercises among allies must be periodically reviewed in light of evolving threats and the operational environment. Crisis communication mechanisms, simulation exercises, and real-time intelligence-sharing mechanisms should be included in the guidelines to build capacity for swift responses. Japan, China, and Russia should be invited to strategic dialogues, where appropriate, to increase transparency and reduce the risk of misperceptions and inadvertent escalation. The Alliance should ensure that, as it strengthens deterrence, it maintains opportunities for diplomatic engagement and de-escalation to prevent crises from escalating.

5.2. Limitations

The investigation relies solely on open-source documents and secondary reporting. Accordingly, detailed operational information and the decision-making processes at the secret level were not available, and some numbers and procedures may vary across sources. The research makes no speculation about the details of secret capabilities; instead, it focuses on documented policies, exercises, and publicly expressed alliance mechanisms.

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