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ROK-US Alliance Modernization:
Road to USFK's Incremental Mission Creep*

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Abstract

Since 2025, debate over ROK-US alliance modernization has often been reduced to possible USFK drawdown. This article argues that the more consequential change under Trump 2.0 is not an abrupt rupture but what this article calls "incremental mission creep": the cumulative effect of capability shifts, basing consolidation and rotational patterns, and evolving declaratory language that gradually widens what US Forces Korea can do—beyond a peninsula-only contingency. It proposes a three-dimensional framework to trace this creep across capabilities and force structure, force scale and basing, and declaratory policy. Applying the framework shows a lighter US ground posture and greater early-phase responsibility for the ROK, alongside air and ISR reconfiguration from A-10 divestment and F-16 "super squadron" consolidation to prospective F-35 basing and MQ-9 deployment. While alliance modernization entails challenges, the article concludes with policy recommendations to manage mission creep through strengthened consultation and coordination, ensuring modernization reinforces deterrence while preserving alliance cohesion.

Keywords: Alliance Modernization, ROK-US Alliance, US Forces Korea (USFK), Strategic Flexibility, Trump 2.0, Mission Creep.

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I. Introduction

Since 2025, alliance modernization on the Korean Peninsula has been discussed through the language of transformation—if not rupture—amid looming concerns over possible "sudden" downgrading of US commitment, dwindling deterrence, and the prospect of drawdown of US Forces Korea (USFK). These anxieties intensified over a wave of forecasts and press reporting, which suggested that a second Trump administration—operating under a sharpened "America First" logic—might seek to reallocate US forward presence away from the Korean Peninsula and toward broader Indo-Pacific priorities and/or back to the homeland. A particular inflection point came when *The Washington Post* reported that the Trump administration was considering relocating roughly 4,500 troops—widely understood as the rotational Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT)—to other Indo-Pacific locations such as Guam (The Washington Post, 2025).

However, as this article finds, a central limitation of existing debate is that the discussion is often depicted as a binary problem of "troop reduction versus status quo." This framing is intuitive—force levels are highly visible and symbolically powerful. Yet it is also analytically blunt. The extent of change may not necessarily correlate with troop numbers, where short-term continuity in troop levels neither guarantees long-term stability nor settles shifting alliance expectations. As this article seeks to illustrate, US's force posture debates should not be about whether USFK shrinks. They should be focused far more on what USFK is increasingly expected to do: which capabilities are being fielded; what contingencies are implicitly referenced, either/both in arming as well as in senior-level statements; and how ROK and US' roles are reallocated across domains and phases of conflict. In other words, alliance modernization can proceed—even under a stable troop headline—through incremental shifts that accumulate strategic level of transformation.

This article advances a two-fold argument. First, USFK transformation under Trump 2.0 is more plausibly understood as "incremental mission creep"[1] than as an abrupt, one-time withdrawal kind of event. Incremental mission creep here does not mean a dramatic declaration that USFK will pivot and expand its mission to China tomorrow, nor does it require an immediate reduction in personnel. Rather, it captures the cumulative effect of small but

[1] The term "mission creep" was first coined by Dr. GO Myong-Hyun, senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Strategy, during his role as discussant to author's paper on November 28, 2025, at the Korean Association of Area Studies' annual forum.

consequential adjustments—capability and enabling-unit changes, rotational patterns, basing consolidation, and evolving declaratory mission language—that gradually widen the USFK's operational boundaries beyond the traditional Korean contingency. Second, this article argues that the same modernization dynamics that generate anxiety can also be a manageable opportunity—not only for alliance adaptation, but also for South Korean capability build-up within the alliance. If modernization is treated as incremental mission creep, it becomes possible to identify and govern it. The relevant policy question is not simply how to prevent troop reductions, but how to structure and/or respond to modernization so that (i) deterrence against North Korea remains credible, (ii) South Korea's conventional capabilities and command arrangements are strengthened, and (iii) the alliance avoids inadvertent entrapment dynamics or ambiguous commitments in extra-peninsular contingencies. In this sense, alliance modernization is not inherently a zero-sum tradeoff for alliance reassurance. It is a bargaining space in which Seoul can seek clearer consultation mechanisms, more calibrated conditions on extra-peninsular roles, and a more deliberate division of labor that strengthens both national security and alliance's combined readiness.

The article is structured as follows. Chapter II reviews the literature and policy debates surrounding alliance modernization and USFK strategic flexibility, and then proposes an analytical framework centered on tracing the 'creeping' changes of the USFK. Away from quantitative approach—discussing the number of troops and capabilities—this article suggests systemic analysis of USFK's qualitative mission transformation, by looking into changes in the force structure (air/ground/sea proportion and weapon-type), basing, and declaratory policies. Chapter III applies the framework to recent developments in USFK—including ground-force optimization, airpower reconfiguration, and the growing salience of 'strategic flexibility.' Chapter IV assesses implications of the changes for alliance's readiness, deterrence credibility, and alliance cohesion. The chapter also discusses emerging friction points such as OPCON transition and new mission expansion areas (including nuclear-submarine related debates). Lastly, the article concludes with policy suggestions for managing this mission creep.

II. What Is Alliance Modernization?

1. From the Old to New Parameters of Debate

The ROK-US alliance was built around a relatively clear mission and division of labor: USFK's forward-deployed conventional forces under the Combined Forces Command (CFC) structure provided deterrence and readiness against North Korea's aggression—backed by US's nuclear umbrella—while the ROK military expanded its conventional capabilities. In peacetime, the combined command arrangements and routine exercises were designed to make US commitments visible and credible, thereby reducing incentives for North Korean opportunism. In wartime, CFC would integrate both US and ROK forces under combined command and control to fend-off and punish North Korean attacks, with expectations for US's provision of advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, airpower, logistics, and reinforcement. For most of the alliance's history, in short, the political narrative and operational planning anchored on the North Korean contingency.

Against the backdrop, previous debate over USFK's troop level and strategic flexibility also remained bounded around the parameter of the Korean Peninsula. While the USFK troop reduction was indeed a recurring theme, it was more about variations of a DPRK-focused posture rather than redefinition of the core mission. Accordingly, past transformations took form of periodic drawdowns within an otherwise peninsular-anchored framework. After the height of approximately 327,000 US servicemen in 1953, the Eisenhower administration pushed major reductions to roughly 55,000 troops by 1960. The next major shift came in 1971, when the Nixon administration withdrew the 7th Infantry Division, cutting USFK strength to just above 40,000. Another major posture reconfiguration occurred in the mid-2000s in the backdrop of the 9/11 and Bush administration's war against terrorism: USFK declined from about 37,500 in 2003 to 32,500 in 2004, then to the current level of 28,500 by 2007 (ROK Ministry of National Defense, 2008, p. 85; Niksch, 2019). The strategic flexibility debate, also emerged in the 2000s, which drew down to a political closure in January 2006, when then Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a joint statement that codified reciprocal understanding: Seoul "fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the US global military strategy and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the US forces in the ROK," while

Washington, in turn, in "implementation of strategic flexibility… respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people" (ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2006). The language was left politically ambiguous.

What makes the current alliance modernization debate different is that the scope of discussion is now less bounded by the Korean Peninsula contingency itself. The structural context has changed: North Korea's capabilities today—nuclear and increasingly sophisticated conventional forces—are far more consequential than at the time of earlier major reductions, and China has emerged as the pacing challenge shaping US global posture. As US' priorities sharpen under these structural stimuli, Washington has become more explicit about posture optimization, theater-wide flexibility, and the China factor. The logic is straightforward: if China is the pacing challenge, forward forces must be configured to generate combat power quickly, survive precision strikes, and remain fiscally sustainable (US Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2025). For the Korean Peninsula, this implies that USFK is increasingly evaluated not only for its deterrent value against North Korea, but also for its contribution to a broader theater architecture.

This time, moreover, the debate comes with clearer official signposts. Unlike the politically ambiguous 2006 formula, the ROK-US joint fact sheet released in November 2025 states that "The United States and the ROK will enhance US conventional deterrence posture against all regional threats to the Alliance, including the DPRK," while also noting that "[t]he two sides affirm relevant understandings since 2006" (The White House, 2025a). Although the term "strategic flexibility" remains intentionally muted, this is the first official bilateral recognition of broadened scope of US forces beyond the context of the Korean Peninsula. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS) reinforce this logic by arguing that allies of the First Island Chain (FIC) "must step up and spend," take "primary responsibility," and "more importantly do—much more for collective defense," and "allow the US military greater access to their ports and other facilities" (The White House, 2025b; US Department of War, 2026). Read together, these documents suggest a more explicit expectation that flexibility in USFK's mission set—and Seoul's support through access, logistics, and enabling functions for rotational forces—will be integral to the alliance's modernization agenda.

2. New Framework: Incremental Mission Creep

To better capture the essential nature of current alliance modernization, this article argues that the debates over USFK's force posture should move beyond the binary frame of 'troop reduction versus the status quo.' That dichotomy is politically intuitive because end-strength is highly visible and symbolically powerful. Yet it is analytically insufficient for capturing how alliance modernization unfolds in practice. To address this gap, this article proposes a framework that assesses alliance modernization as a process of 'incremental mission creep,' emphasizing the gradual adjustments that alter what USFK can do, where it is positioned, and how its purpose is publicly framed.

To operationalize the framework, I propose here three interacting dimensions, with the following indicators. First dimension is capabilities and force structure. Alliance modernization can be observed through scrutinizing the changes in the capability and force structure: what are newly introduced, retired, and/or relocated? What is the new mission—both explicit and implicit—that is newly enabled/disabled by the change? What is the change in proportion of different services? Second dimension is force-scale and basing. Alliance modernization can also derive from changing balance between permanent vis-à-vis rotational deployments, consolidation across bases, and shifts in readiness posture. Last dimension is declaratory dimension: whether the modernization is expressed through declaratory mission language; what is the official statement of USFK's purpose? What contingencies are implicitly or explicitly referenced? How are alliance consultation mechanisms framed?

Table 1. Three-dimensional Framework for Assessing Incremental Mission Creep

Three Dimensions	Indicators
Capabilities & Force Structure	Changes in platforms (introduction/retirement) Changes in missions (new/old) Changes in proportion of services (ground/air/sea)
Force Scale & Basing Patterns	Permanent vis-à-vis rotational deployments Consolidation across bases Shifts in readiness posture
Declaratory Policy	Mission language (explicit/implicit) Alliance consultation language

By delving into these interlocking dimensions, we can better identify underlying shifts that troop numbers can obscure. Capability changes can transform what USFK is able and expected to do without large changes in troop numbers. Conversely, stable troop levels and/or apparent continuity in official rhetoric can mask mission expansion when specialized enablers, networks, and access arrangements increasingly connect the peninsula to wider theater operations. To put another way, I argue that the alliance modernization unfolds not merely through the overt addition and/or deduction of troop levels and/or tasks, but through the gradual normalization of new assumptions about what the alliance plans for, rehearses, and funds. Even when individual adjustments appear marginal or disconnected, their cumulative effect can be substantial—potentially stabilizing in the short term yet strategically destabilizing if it outpaces alliance consultation, domestic legitimacy, or coherent guidance on how USFK should balance peninsular and extra-peninsular demands.

III. Scrutinizing Key Features of Alliance Modernization

Applying the framework to recent developments reveals that USFK modernization is proceeding along multiple vectors. Some changes are consistent with longstanding efforts to improve combined readiness and survivability; others, however, are more plausibly interpreted as aligning USFK with a broader and extra-peninsular posture. The following subsections highlight the latest developments in ground forces, air and ISR posture, and declaratory policy.

1. Ground Force Reconfiguration: Lighter & Delegation of Early Ground Combat

The most sensitive modernization debate concerns the US Army's role on the peninsula—the longstanding backbone of USFK. As of today's 28,500 troop-level, ground forces continue to account for roughly 20,000 personnel (8th Army), alongside approximately 8,000 US Air Force (7th Air Force) and some 500 administrative components from the Navy and Marine Corps.[2] The

[2] USFK website (date accessed: January 7, 2026), https://www.usfk.mil/About/USFK/. However, Colonel Michael Long, former Eighth Army G-5 Assistant Chief of Staff for Policy, Planning, and

traditional deterrence logic of heavy US ground forces in Korea has been two-fold. First, it functioned as tripwire, visibly tying US forces on the ground to the defense of South Korea. Second, given the centrality of ground combat in the opening phases of a hot conflict, 20,000 strong US Army forces under USFK were expected to play a pivotal role in the initial, high-intensity stages of wartime operations. The ground-oriented force structure of the USFK reinforced deterrence against North Korea by making US commitment both salient and politically costly to reverse.

Yet as China threat grows, the logic of maintaining large and permanent forward-deployed ground forces on the Korean Peninsula has become harder for Washington to sustain—both resource- and risk-wise, given the exposure of concentrated firepower within the reach of China's increasing precision-strike capabilities. The faster China's military capabilities develop, the more USFK posture debates gravitate toward flexibility, dispersion, and survivability, prioritizing basing and force-employment concepts that reduce the likelihood of US forces becoming stationary targets. This is precisely the strategic context in which the US Army's Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) has gained prominence. Designed for expeditionary and modular employment, MDTF can be operation-specific and deployed in smaller, temporary and/or rotational forms—rather than traditional forms of fixed basing.

While USFK's troop-level stayed at 28,500 soldiers, we can see how US Army component of USFK has already been moving away from the heavy and permanent footprint-type since the mid-2010s. One of the latest inflection points was the end of the last permanently stationed armored brigade in Korea. After the Second Infantry Division's First Armored Brigade Combat Team (1st ABCT, 'Iron Brigade') was deactivated in 2015, the Army sustained the armor presence through rotational deployment—bringing major platforms such as M-2 Bradley fighting vehicles and Paladin self-propelled howitzers as part of a continuing series of Brigaded Combat Team (BCT) rotations (Winkie, 2022; US Army, 2020). The next shift came with the Army's decision to transition the rotational force to a Stryker BCT beginning in Fall 2022. This change reconfigured USFK's ground forces with a lighter, infantry-centric rotational packages of roughly 4,500 soldiers, while keeping Armored BCT equipment stocks (e.g. M-1 Abrams and M-2 Bradleys) in "a ready state" (US Department of War, 2022; US Army, 2022). This Stryker Brigade has since deployed on nine-month rotation cycle (US Army, 2024). To clarify,

Strategy, noted that US Air Force in Korea account for "6 or 7,000" soldiers. See, China Land power Studies Center (2025).

Table 2 illustrates how the role and mission of armored vehicles have steadily changed. The trajectory is clearly away from heavy, armor-on-armor maneuver emphasis—centered on the M-1 Abrams and M-2 Bradleys—and toward a more mobile, rapidly employable force built around the Strykers. In operational terms, Abrams and Bradleys are optimized for close battle with substantial protection and firepower, whereas Stryker prioritizes operational mobility and rapid movement of infantry. This changing platform-mix signals a preference for lighter ground forces, while increasing reliance on non-ground enablers and allied capacity.

Table 2. Specifications of USFK's Armored Vehicles (Source: The Congressional Research Service, 2016)

Features	M-1 Abrams	M-2 Bradleys	M-1126 Stryker
Primary Role	Main battle tank (Destroy enemy armored forces)	Infantry fighting vehicle (Provide fire support and destroy enemy fighting vehicles)	Infantry carrier vehicle (Provide rapid deployment and transport of light infantry in various combat scenarios)
Mobility	Good at rough terrain but slow	Good at off-road	Faster, quieter, and portable (8x8 wheeled)
Armor	Heavily armored to withstand direct tank fire	Medium to withstand 14.5mm machine guns and other munitions	Lighter (relies on speed and situational awareness for survival)
Arm	120mm M256 cannon	25mm M242 Bushmaster chain-gun & TOW	.50 caliber M2HB machine gun or MK19 40 mm grenade launcher

Furthermore, the latest signpost of continued transformation is the USFK's reconnaissance/attack aviation component of the ground forces. According to the Congressional Research Service, the 5-17 Air Cavalry Squadron at Camp Humphreys was deactivated on December 15, 2025 (Feickert, 2025). The 5-17 Air Cavalry Squadron is part of the 2nd Combat Aviation Brigade "Talon" of the 2nd Infantry Division of the Eighth Army, in Table 3. This is another salient change for Seoul given that the squadron is known to have hundreds of personnel, operating aviation and reconnaissance assets, including AH-64E Apache helicopters and RQ-7B Shadow drones, since May 2022 (The Korea Times, 2026). All these reconfigurations are about the Second Infantry Division, which served as the backbone of USFK Army's major firepower on

ground, while five other subordinate major commands (SMCs) took the role of ISR and missile defense. The cumulative implications are here two-folds. First, alliance modernization involves US's lightening of ground components of Army forces of the USFK that play role in the early phase of conflict. Second, as result, South Korean ground forces are expected to shoulder a larger share of immediate maneuvers on ground. Mission creep, in the case of ground forces, is more consequential for Seoul's own defense capabilities.

Table 3. USFK Army (8th Army): Six Subordinate Major Commands (SMCs)

Six SMCs		Capabilities & Force Structure
2nd Infantry Division *(~12,000 troops)*	Headquarters Battalion, 2ID/RUCD "Tribe"	-
	Stryker Brigade Combat Team	*Strykers (4,500 troops): 9-month Rotational Deployment since July 2022*
	2nd Combat Aviation Brigade "Talon"	*Apache Attack Helicopters: 24 Apaches – 5-17 Air Cavalry Squadron*
	2nd Infantry Division Artillery "DIVARTY"	Serves as command HQ for artillery division (training and readiness)
	2nd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade "Champion"	Supports special operations-CBRN, division sustainment etc.
	210th Field Artillery Brigade "Thunder"	M270 MLRS, ATACMS
19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command *(~5,600 troops)*	US Army Material Support Command Korea	Supports NEO, combined/joint Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration (RSO&I) *(~5,200 troops)*
	94th Military Police Battalion	Law enforcement and detention, protect civilians and assets of the 8th Army *(~400 troops)*
1st Signal Brigade	41st Signal Battalion	Provides strategic/tactical communications and information for USFK and other component HQs on the KORPEN
	304th Expeditionary Signal Battalion	
	US Army Communications Information Systems Activity, Pacific	
35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade	2nd Battalion, 1st ADAR	Patriot
	6th Battalion, 52nd ADAR	Patriot, Avenger
	Battery D, 2nd ADAR	THAAD

65th Medical Brigade	549th Hospital Center, 168th Multi-functional Medical Battalion, 106th MDVSS, 618th DCAS	Linkage units to CONUS medical bases; provides medical support
501st Military Intelligence Brigade	3rd Military Intelligence Battalion	RC-12 Guardrail, RC-7
	524th Military Intelligence Battalion	HUMINT
	532nd Military Intelligence Battalion	Integrated intel operations
	719th Military Intelligence Battalion	Provides strategic and tactical intelligence support
	368th Military Intelligence Battalion	Reserve Forces

2. Air Power Reconfiguration: Lighter and Longer-Range Enablers & Basing

The air domain presents a case of incremental mission creep within the USFK, driven by platform retirement, basing, and introduction of new platforms. The first notable shift is the A-10 drawdown. In November 2024, the US Air Force announced that the Twenty-fifth Fighter Squadron at Osan Air Base would begin a phased withdrawal of its twenty-four A-10 aircrafts starting in January 2025 (Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2024). The drawdown completed by September 30, 2025. Known as 'tank killer,' A-10 was designed specifically for close air support (CAS), flying at low-altitude to defeat and defend against enemy's armed forces on ground.

Along with A-10 drawdown, the US also decided to implement a major F-16 basing consolidation. While USFK's F-16s were dispersed across Osan and Kunsan Air Base, US decided to relocate all F-16s to Osan Air Base and consolidate them as two "Super Squadrons." Beginning with Phase I in October 2024, nine F-16s and 150 airmen relocated from Kunsan to Osan Air Base. Then US relocated thirty-one additional F-16s and about 1,000 airmen Kunsan to Osan Air Base, to be completed by October 2026 (US Air Force, 2025). Consolidation is known to improve sortie generation and sustainment efficiency.

While Osan Air Base's retirement of A-10 aircrafts are being back-filled by two 'super squadrons' of F-16s, the Kunsan Air Base began to undergo two major changes. First, US has been reviewing a plan to introduce F-35A

fighter squadrons at Kunsan Air Base. While implementation remains uncertain, the original plan was to base one squadron permanently, and another on a rotational basis (The Korea Herald, 2025). If realized, the capability reconfiguration would involve replacing F-16s with longer-range and stealth-purposed F-35s. While F-16 is also proven multirole platform with range of more than 800 kilometers (500 miles), F-35 fighter-jets can fly longer range of 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles) and also penetrate air defenses with the stealth capabilities (US Air Force, 2014). The shift implies a movement toward aircraft better suited for penetrating high-threat air defenses, enabling kill chains, and supporting operations that extend beyond a narrow CAS-centric mission set (Jo, 2025).

Lastly, USFK's air component is expanding its ISR and strike-enabling capabilities with the MQ-9 Reaper. In September 2025, USFK publicly confirmed deployment and operation of the MQ-9 at Kunsan Air Base (Seventh Air Force Public Affairs, 2025). As the Seventh Air Force stated, the MQ-9 is "a multi-mission, medium-altitude, long-endurance remotely piloted aircraft designed for dynamic execution targets and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions." The statement further confirms the scope of the capability, "to support the mission, deepen cooperation, and demonstrate our shared commitment to maintaining security and stability across the Indo-Pacific" (Seventh Air Force Public Affairs, 2025).

Overall, these changes point to two core features of incremental mission creep. First, each step of alliance modernization accumulates to steadily broadening what Korea-based airpower can do. The replacement pattern is not a like-for-like substitution but a qualitative reorientation toward longer-range and more networked platforms. F-35s and MQ-9s can extend operational envelope from the peninsula-focus to theater-relevant sensing and strike-enabling functions. Second, each step also accumulates to a posture away from a close, ground-centric combat. The A-10 retirement highlights this. In short, mission creep here is not a single doctrinal pivot but an accumulation of platform and basing decisions that gradually expand USFK's role from a Korea-focused air component to a more flexible node within a wider Indo-Pacific architecture—making strategic flexibility operationally meaningful even absent headline troop-number changes.

3. Mission Creep in Declaratory Policy

Equally consequential shift is US's official narrative. Incrementally, US officials and commanders have described USFK's role in terms that extend

beyond deterring North Korea. For example, Elbridge Colby—now Under Secretary of Defense for Policy—argued even before taking office that USFK should not be "held hostage" to the North Korea problem (KBS World, 2024; The Korea Times, 2025). More prominently in a press briefing on August 10, 2025, USFK Commander General Xavier Brunson described alliance modernization as a way for Korea to be "stronger against DPRK" while enabling the alliance "to go do other things" (US Forces Korea, 2025). This narrative was reinforced visually through Brunson's promotion of an 'East-up' map of East Asia, circulated within the command's strategic community, later publicized again via Brunson's public op-ed on the USFK website in November 2025 (Brunson, 2025). Brunson stated that a simple change in map orientation reveals how Korea-based forces are positioned "inside" the relevant theater perimeter.

The arc of this narrative culminated at the highest political and ministerial levels by the end of 2025. The ROK-US Joint Factsheet stated that the "United States and the ROK will enhance US conventional deterrence posture against all regional threats to the Alliance, including the DPRK" (The White House, 2025a). While the Fifty-seventh Security Consultative Meeting (SCM)'s joint communique reaffirmed that USFK will "maintain force and posture levels" (US Department of War, 2025), USFK's creeping role beyond the Korean Peninsula is becoming more outspoken. Half-alarming and half-assuring is also the US's FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which moved to conditional sustainment of troop-level: the FY2026 NDAA includes a funding restriction such that USFK's troop level cannot go "below 28,500" until the change is certified by the US Secretary of Defense, consulted with the Commander of USFK, INDOPACOM, Secretary of State, and the Director of National intelligence, to the appropriate committees of Congress that it is (i) "in the national security interest of the United States"; and (ii) is "being undertaken only after appropriate consultations with allies of the United States, including the Republic of Korea, Japan, and any country that has sent military contributions to the United Nations Command" (Congress.Gov, 2025). Paired with the reconfiguration of USFK's major forces, such narrative enforces incremental mission creep for USFK beyond the Korean Peninsula.

IV. What's at Stake for Seoul and the Alliance

Alliance modernization under Trump 2.0 is unfolding less as an abrupt break than as incremental mission creep across capabilities, basing patterns, and declaratory policy. Because these adjustments accumulate gradually, their effects on deterrence and alliance politics depend not only on what changes, but also on how different audiences interpret the changes and how the alliance governs the resulting tradeoffs. The central risk is therefore not a single dramatic pivot, but unmanaged drift in missions and expectations. For Seoul, the mission creep is a critical challenge—but it also creates opportunities. The risk of entrapment in contingencies beyond the Korean Peninsula will inevitably persist and likely grow; yet, if handled well, Seoul can sustain sufficient US presence for DPRK deterrence while also strengthening resilience against widening regional uncertainties, including China's expanding military influence in the West Sea. On this basis, below are some implications and recommendations drawn from the analysis.

1. Managing Deterrence Credibility under Incremental Mission Creep

Incremental mission creep inevitably complicates deterrence signaling because the same modernization step can communicate different messages to different observers. The delegation of early ground maneuver burdens to the ROK military can be framed in Washington as force optimization, but it can be read in Pyongyang as US willingness to prioritize China threat with reduced resolve to bear immediate costs in the opening phase of conflict with North Korea. Likewise, airpower reconfiguration that shifts away from platforms most closely associated with close, ground-centric combat can reduce the alliance's most intuitive tripwire imagery, even if overall lethality and survivability increase.

Thus, for Seoul, utmost importance is strategic management of the signaling. Mission creep should not signal weakened deterrence. ROK-US's combined rhetoric should emphasize that higher-end enablers and more survivable strike and ISR capabilities can strengthen deterrence by denial. To do so, the reconfigurations should be clearly tied to peninsula defense requirements, integrated into combined plans, and rehearsed in credible exercise narratives. The core issue is clarity across audiences.

2. Managing the Fear of Abandonment and Entrapment

Mission creep sharpens the abandonment-entrapment dilemma because Seoul and Washington often begin from different images of what alliance modernization is for. Washington emphasizes a repurposed and theater-flexible USFK aligned with US competition against China; Seoul prioritizes deterrence-first assurance against the DPRK and caution about involuntary involvement beyond the peninsula.

A practical way to manage this dilemma is to consult and coordinate. Mission creep is also about bargaining. If the ROK is expected to shoulder a larger share of immediate maneuver tasks, Seoul can reasonably seek clearer US commitments on enabling contributions that substitute for a lighter US ground footprint. Conversely, if Washington expects greater ROK participation in regional functions, Seoul can pursue a more explicit exchange over what assurances, capabilities, and industrial or technology cooperation will be provided in return.

This mission creep problem is most acute when costs are imposed without an explicit bargain. Small changes that cumulatively expand exposure, such as deeper integration into theater command-and-control networks or expanded ISR roles, may not trigger formal negotiations even though they reshape Korea's strategic environment. Over time, such asymmetry can fuel domestic backlash and incentivize hedging, including intensified debates over autonomous deterrence options. The alliance therefore needs a deliberate and reciprocal division of labor that makes tradeoffs politically defensible.

3. Strengthening Combined Defense through Mission Creep

All in all, the most fundamental task is to strengthen ROK-US's combined defense through mission creep. The task is not to resist modernization, but to coordinate and manage it so that the alliance does not drift apart. Four steps are particularly relevant.

First, codify a minimum combined-defense baseline for the peninsula that is expressed not only in end-strength but also in concrete capabilities and readiness metrics. The baseline should cover early-phase ground combat requirements, air and missile defense coverage, ISR tasking priorities, munitions and logistics stockpiles, and reinforcement timelines. This baseline should be reviewed annually in ministerial channels and reflected in exercise objectives so that modernization does not inadvertently create early-phase gaps.

Second, institutionalize consultation thresholds for theater retasking of Korea-based assets. A standing posture-and-missions annex within existing high-level channels should specify triggers for notification, decision authority, escalation management, and post-action accountability when USFK-related enabling assets are employed for contingencies beyond the peninsula.

Third, narrow the gap between flexibility and assurance by pairing any repurposing logic with visible DPRK-focused reassurance. Practically, this means sustaining extended deterrence mechanisms and conventional-nuclear integration workstreams, and linking any regional flexibility to explicit statements and planning that deterring DPRK aggression remains the alliance's non-negotiable baseline. For Washington, this also implies caution about publicly framing USFK as 'China-focused' when the political purpose is to strengthen deterrence and alliance cohesion in the region.

Fourth, invest in a shared narrative and a calibrated division of labor that reduce misperception. Modernization should be framed as improving survivability, readiness, and combined deterrence, while the alliance socializes limited and politically sustainable forms of ROK contribution to wider regional security that do not hollow out the peninsula baseline. If modernization is framed and managed as a pathway to a more resilient and technologically advanced alliance, it can become a stabilizing opportunity rather than a source of alliance fatigue. The alternative is unmanaged drift that weakens deterrence signaling and invites wedge strategies.

V. Conclusion

Alliance modernization in the Trump 2.0 era is best understood as a process rather than an event. This article argued that the most consequential changes to USFK are occurring through layered adjustments in ground-force posture, airpower basing and enabling assets, and declaratory mission language. Conceptualized as incremental mission creep, these changes can widen the alliance's implied mission set even when headline troop numbers remain stable.

The article offered a three-dimensional framework for tracking this creep through capabilities and force structure, force scale and basing patterns, and declaratory policy. Applying the framework revealed three pathways: delegation of early ground-combat responsibilities to the ROK military, qualitative reorientation toward higher-altitude and longer-range strike and ISR enablers, and an increasingly explicit narrative of strategic flexibility that normalizes

broader regional functions for Korea-based forces. However, I argued that these shifts do not necessarily erode deterrence; in some respects they can strengthen deterrence by denial through more resilient and multi-mission enablers. But they also complicate signaling, increase entanglement risks, and intensify bargaining over who pays which costs for what strategic outcomes.

For Seoul, the core task is to ensure that modernization strengthens national defense capabilities. For Washington, the core task is to generate theater flexibility without eroding the credibility of peninsula defense. For both sides, the key is consultation and coordination: clarify a peninsula-defense baseline; codify consultation thresholds for theater flexibility; and pair capability shifts with reassurance through combined exercises and extended deterrence mechanisms. If these steps are taken, incremental mission creep can be bounded and converted into leverage for alliance adaptation, moving the partnership toward the more resilient alliance that both sides ultimately need. If not, modernization risks becoming a source of political friction that weakens deterrence and alliance cohesion at precisely the moment the alliance needs it most.

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