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Managing strategic autonomy amid the transition in U.S. grand strategy: South Korea and the composite equilibrium model

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Abstract

This study examines how the transition in U.S. grand strategy is reshaping the strategic environment surrounding South Korean foreign policy and proposes a Composite Equilibrium Model of Strategic Autonomy as an analytical framework for analyzing and managing these changes. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy reconceptualizes strategy as a process of strategic prioritization and institutional coordination rather than the pursuit of a fixed policy orientation. By emphasizing economic security and institutionalized burden-sharing, the NSS redefines alliances as frameworks of functional cooperation rather than automatic military guarantees. These developments generate structural pressures for South Korea that transcend the conventional binary between alliance deepening and hedging. In response, this study conceptualizes alliances and hedging as interdependent strategic variables that can be calibrated through institutionalized policy adjustment. Strategic autonomy is therefore understood not as a fixed condition but as a cumulative outcome emerging from the interaction between these variables over time. The Composite Equilibrium Model provides a framework for explaining how middle powers coordinate alliances and hedging to sustain strategic autonomy under structural constraints amid the transition in U.S. grand strategy.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary international order has entered a period of structural transition in which stability and predictability—long assumed as baseline conditions—can no longer be taken for granted. The consolidation of U.S.–China strategic rivalry, the normalization of prolonged conflict, and the securitization of economic and technological interdependence have converged to erode the foundational premises of the post–Cold War order. The prolonged war in Ukraine, the routinization of tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and recurring military crises involving the United States, Israel, and Iran collectively suggest the growing limitations of the security institutions and crisis-management mechanisms that once underpinned regional and global stability. At the same time, recurring supply-chain disruptions since the pandemic and the intensification of economic and technological security competition have fundamentally unsettled the liberal assumption that openness and interdependence constitute reliable foundations of order. What is at stake, therefore, is not merely a series of isolated crises but a broader structural transformation in which multiple strategic assumptions underpinning the postwar order are weakening simultaneously.

At the center of this transformation lies a reorientation of U.S. grand strategy. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has relied on a combination of forward deployment and alliance expansion to manage deterrence and sustain international order. Yet under conditions of mounting fiscal constraints, domestic political polarization, and growing pressure for strategic prioritization, U.S. strategy has increasingly shifted from comprehensive engagement toward selective commitment. In the context of Trump's second term, this trajectory has become more explicit at both the level of policy discourse and institutional design, emphasizing

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selective intervention and alliance burden-sharing. The core strategic perceptions and policy orientations underpinning this shift are most clearly articulated in the 2025 NSS, released by the White House in December 2025. The 2025 NSS offers an important window into the strategic direction and institutional self-understanding of the Trump administration, even though actual policy implementation may evolve under domestic and international constraints.

The 2025 NSS reconceptualizes strategy not as the selection of a single overarching line of action, but as a process of choice and prioritization under conditions of scarcity and constraint. It explicitly states that "a strategy must evaluate, sort, and prioritize," underscoring that the simultaneous management of all regions and issues—long a foundational assumption of U.S. postwar grand strategy—no longer constitutes a viable point of departure (The White House, 2025). Strategy is thus framed as a form of disciplined self-regulation, encompassing not only decisions about what to do, but also deliberate choices about what not to do.

Concurrently, the 2025 NSS expands the scope of national security beyond military deterrence to encompass industrial capacity, technological competitiveness, and supply-chain resilience. By declaring that "economic security is fundamental to national security," the document repositions trade policy, industrial policy, export controls, and standards competition from auxiliary instruments to core components of grand strategy (Ibid., 13). As a result, alliances are restructured from primarily military arrangements into multidomain strategic platforms that integrate technological, industrial, and standards alignment. This transformation raises the costs of alliance management well beyond defense burden-sharing, extending them into the coordination of economic security and supply-chain policies. For South Korea, this shift weakens the long-standing logic of functional differentiation between security and economic policy, which had previously enabled a limited form of hedging.

The 2025 NSS further signals a self-imposed recalibration of America's role in sustaining international order. Declaring that "the days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over," the strategy marks a departure from expectations of unlimited U.S. commitment toward a model centered on selective responsibility and efficiency (Ibid., 12). Under this framework, allies and partners are expected to assume primary responsibility within their respective regions, while the United States redefines its role as a "convener" and "supporter" of a burden-sharing network. The document further links enhanced security responsibilities and alignment with U.S. technology and export-control regimes to differentiated incentives, including preferential commercial treatment, technology sharing, and defense-industrial cooperation (Ibid., 12). In doing so, the 2025 NSS institutionalizes alliances not as norm-based solidaristic commitments, but as functionally contractual relationships structured around performance, alignment, and reciprocity.

This structural transformation constitutes not merely a change in South Korea's external environment, but a reconfiguration of the very architecture within which strategic choices are made. Situated at the intersection of U.S.–China strategic rivalry, South Korea has long sustained an asymmetric dual structure—relying on the United States for security while remaining deeply dependent on China economically. Yet the U.S.–ROK alliance is increasingly being reconstituted from a predominantly military arrangement into a multidomain strategic platform encompassing economic security, advanced technology, industrial policy, supply chains, and norms. At the same time, as China increasingly weaponizes economic interdependence for diplomatic and security leverage, the long-standing premise of a functional separation between security and economic management has become untenable. Controls on semiconductors and advanced technologies, participation in supply-chain restructuring, and competition over standards now function not as discrete economic policies but as core strategic variables simultaneously shaping alliance management and relations with China. At the same time, the routinization of tensions in the Taiwan Strait places South Korea in a position where it confronts a compounded set of strategic and economic costs combining demands for limited security contributions with the accompanying risks of economic retaliation, supply-chain disruption, and the spillover of escalation into the Korean Peninsula and its surrounding region.

Under these conditions, the central challenge facing South Korean foreign policy transcends the traditional binary between alliance deepening and hedging. Rather than choosing between these alternatives, the key issue lies in how South Korea manages and recalibrates the growing alignment demands and associated costs that operate simultaneously across multiple policy domains. The alliance no longer functions solely as an institution centered on military deterrence; it has increasingly evolved into a broader framework that links economic security, technological competition, and normative alignment. As a result, the costs and consequences of strategic choices increasingly spill over across domains, reshaping South Korea's strategic choice space through cross-domain trade-offs and shifting temporal pressures. In this environment, analytical approaches that treat alliance, hedging, and strategic autonomy as independent or parallel policy options lose much of their explanatory power. Strategic autonomy should instead be understood as a conditional and process-based outcome that emerges gradually through the cumulative management and calibration of alliance commitments and hedging practices over time.

To address this challenge, this study proposes a "Composite Equilibrium Model of Strategic Autonomy" as an analytical framework for understanding how South Korea can restructure its strategic choices amid the transition in U.S. grand strategy. To develop this framework, the study conducts a textual analysis of the 2025 NSS and related strategic documents in order to identify the institutional self-understandings of the United

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States regarding alliances, economic security, and burden-sharing. These findings are then compared with existing theories of alliance politics, hedging, and strategic autonomy in order to evaluate the explanatory value of the proposed integrated framework. The composite equilibrium model developed in this study conceptualizes alliances and hedging not as mutually exclusive policy options but as interrelated strategic variables that can be politically calibrated and managed. Strategic autonomy, in turn, is understood as a process-based outcome that gradually emerges through the cumulative adjustment and combination of these strategies under structural constraints.

From this perspective, the study raises three core questions. First, through what mechanisms does the alliance restructuring articulated in the 2025 NSS compound and intensify the strategic choice costs facing South Korean foreign policy? Second, as multidomain alignment within the alliance deepens, how is the operational scope of South Korea's hedging strategy redefined, and what types of adjustment costs emerge in this process? Third, under what conditions does the accumulation of these adjustments expand or constrain strategic autonomy, and how are these outcomes differentiated across its constituent dimensions—namely strategic choice space, adjustment capacity, and policy latitude?

Taken together, this study develops an integrated analytical framework to explain how the choice costs and structural constraints of South Korean foreign policy are reconfigured as alliances evolve into multidomain strategic platforms under the transformation of U.S. grand strategy. In doing so, the study offers both a theoretical and policy-oriented point of reference for understanding South Korean foreign policy not as a binary choice between competing strategies but as a dynamic process through which strategic autonomy is gradually formed through the cumulative management and recalibration of multiple strategic instruments.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Composite Equilibrium Model of Strategic Autonomy and Its Operational Logic

Conventional analyses of alliance politics, grounded in the balancing–bandwagoning dichotomy and the logic of military deterrence, have largely reduced states' strategic choices to the adoption of a single strategic orientation. However, as the transition in U.S. grand strategy becomes increasingly pronounced, strategy is being redefined as the design and management of prioritization and adjustment under conditions of constrained resources and intensifying multidomain competition. As reflected in the 2025 NSS, alliances are likewise evolving from mechanisms of automatic military guarantees into functional coordination frameworks encompassing economic security, technology, supply chains, and normative alignment. Under these conditions, the central challenge for middle-power diplomacy is no longer a simple choice between alliance strengthening and hedging, but how these strategies can be adjusted and combined to generate strategic autonomy under structural constraints. Against this backdrop, this chapter proposes a Composite Equilibrium Model of Strategic Autonomy. The model conceptualizes alliances and hedging as interdependent strategic variables and strategic autonomy as a process-based outcome emerging from their cumulative adjustment.

2.1. Theoretical Debates on Alliance Politics and Constraint

Alliances operate as institutional arrangements that simultaneously provide protection against external threats while requiring varying degrees of policy alignment, thereby structuring the upper bound of the strategic choice space available to middle powers. As one of the oldest cooperative institutions in international politics, alliances have been interpreted through diverse theoretical lenses, each highlighting different mechanisms through which alliances both enable security and constrain autonomy.

Realist scholarship conceptualizes alliances as conditional instruments formed in response to external threats under an anarchic international system. In this view, alliance formation reflects strategic calculations between internal balancing and external alignment (Waltz, 1979). Subsequent refinements emphasize that alliance choices are shaped not simply by material power distributions but by perceived threats, which derive from a combination of geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions (Walt, 1987). Alliances are therefore best understood as contingent arrangements whose persistence depends on continued strategic relevance rather than institutional permanence.

Yet the dynamics of alliance maintenance generate their own structural tensions. As commitments deepen, states face the risk of entrapment in a partner's conflict, whereas weaker commitments increase the risk of abandonment. This entrapment–abandonment dilemma constitutes a central tension in alliance politics and is particularly pronounced in asymmetric alliances between major powers and smaller states, where security guarantees are often exchanged for varying degrees of strategic alignment (Snyder, 1984).

Liberal institutionalist approaches emphasize the role of repeated interaction and institutionalization in stabilizing cooperative security relationships. Alliances, from this perspective, function as institutional frameworks that facilitate information sharing, reduce uncertainty, and enable the provision of security as a collective good (Keohane, 1984). However, institutionalization does not eliminate underlying conflicts within alliances. Disputes over burden sharing, role allocation, and policy coordination persist, ensuring that alliances continue to impose political and strategic constraints on participating states.

Constructivist perspectives, by contrast, stress the social foundations of alliance relationships. Alliances are sustained not only through material incentives or institutional arrangements but also through shared

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identities, norms, and intersubjective understandings that shape how states interpret threats and obligations (Wendt, 1999).

Despite their theoretical differences, realism, liberalism, and constructivism converge on an important insight: alliances simultaneously provide security and impose constraints on the strategic autonomy of participating states. Yet these approaches were largely developed in a context where alliances were primarily understood as mechanisms of military deterrence. They therefore provide limited analytical leverage for explaining the ongoing transformation of alliances into multidomain coordination frameworks encompassing economic security, technological cooperation, industrial policy, supply-chain governance, and normative alignment.

Under these conditions, the central issue for middle powers is no longer whether to align but how alignment should be designed and managed across multiple policy domains. Alliances increasingly operate as functional coordination structures in which varying degrees of alignment must be negotiated in exchange for access, protection, and institutional participation. At this juncture, alliance management inevitably intersects with the operation of hedging strategies. Understanding how alliances and hedging interact—and how their cumulative adjustment shapes the emergence of strategic autonomy—therefore becomes central to analyzing the strategic options available to middle powers.

2.2. Theoretical Characteristics of Hedging and Its Structure of Options and Costs

Hedging refers to a strategy through which states seek to preserve policy options under conditions of uncertainty, yet it inevitably entails costs associated with maintaining alliance credibility and policy consistency. In this study, hedging is defined as a conditional strategy adopted by middle powers in a structurally competitive international environment in which great-power rivalry is institutionalized. Rather than committing to a single alignment, states pursuing hedging seek to differentiate and recalibrate their external relations across multiple policy domains—including military, economic, technological, industrial, and supply-chain governance—in order to distribute risks and manage long-term strategic options. Such an option-management strategy, however, places strain on the coherence of policy signaling and on alliance partners' assessments of credibility. Repeated ambiguity in core security issues may therefore transform an expanded policy space into a source of accumulating credibility costs. Hedging should thus be understood not as passive avoidance of alignment but as an active strategy for managing uncertainty by calibrating the intensity and pace of alignment across multiple domains.

The concept of hedging originated in financial economics as a logic of risk diversification and was subsequently introduced into international relations as great-power competition re-emerged after the end of the Cold War. The foreign-policy behavior of Southeast Asian states amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry proved difficult to explain through the conventional balancing–bandwagoning dichotomy, prompting the introduction of hedging as an alternative analytical category (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2008, 2016; Roy, 2005). While early discussions often associated hedging with strategic ambiguity or cautious diplomacy (Evelyn Goh, 2006), subsequent scholarship reconceptualized it as an active adjustment strategy designed to manage the dual risks of entrapment and abandonment (Ciorciari, 2010).

More recent debates have further refined hedging as a distinct and purposive strategic category. Tan & Soong (2023) for example, conceptualize hedging as a form of "insurance strategy" through which middle and weaker states seek to preserve strategic autonomy under conditions of structural uncertainty. In their formulation, hedging is not simply an intermediate position between balancing and bandwagoning but a qualitatively distinct strategic choice. In this view, the primary purpose of hedging lies not in securing short-term stability but in accumulating option value in anticipation of long-term uncertainty.

At the same time, the study of hedging has expanded in two important directions. One strand of scholarship treats hedging not as a regionally bounded phenomenon confined to Southeast Asia but as a general strategic pattern employed by middle powers across the contemporary international order, particularly where geopolitical rivalry intersects with deep economic interdependence (Ikenberry, 2016; Jones & Jenne, 2022; Lee, 2024; Marston, 2024; Wilkins, 2023). A second strand conceptualizes hedging not as a single foreign-policy orientation but as a dynamic process in which strategic instruments are combined with varying intensity across different functional domains.

Building on the latter perspective, this study focuses on how hedging is adjusted and combined with alliance commitments under the structural constraints associated with the transition in U.S. grand strategy. In this framework, hedging is not equivalent to strategic autonomy itself but constitutes a key strategic input variable through which middle powers configure the policy space necessary for maintaining strategic autonomy. Hedging therefore does not seek to replace or negate alliances; rather, it operates within the institutional framework of alliances by calibrating the scope and intensity of alignment. Through such adjustment, hedging enables middle powers to mitigate the risks of excessive entrapment or dependence while preserving long-term strategic options.

2.3. The Concept of Strategic Autonomy and the Conditions of Middle-Power Diplomacy

Strategic autonomy is often interpreted as a departure from alliance commitments or the pursuit of an

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independent foreign-policy line. Such interpretations, however, unnecessarily narrow the conceptual scope of the term. In this study, strategic autonomy is defined not as the adoption of a particular diplomatic orientation but as the degree to which a state is able to preserve a meaningful range of strategic choices and policy adjustment capacity in major strategic matters under the structural constraints of an anarchic international system. Strategic autonomy thus represents a relative and process-based attribute rather than a declaratory stance: it reflects the extent to which policy adjustment remains sustainably possible over time.

From this perspective, strategic autonomy is not inherently opposed to alliance relationships. Alliances do not automatically entail the loss of autonomy for middle powers. By providing security guarantees, institutional access, and strategic stability, alliances can in some domains expand the policy space available to allied states. Yet as the scope and intensity of alliance alignment accumulate and become increasingly rigid, the room for policy adjustment may gradually narrow. The core issue of autonomy therefore lies not in the existence of alliances per se, but in whether the degree of alignment within the alliance remains open to adjustment.

The concept of strategic autonomy becomes particularly salient in the context of middle-power diplomacy. Middle powers occupy an intermediate position in the international hierarchy: they lack the capacity to shape international order in the manner of great powers, yet they also cannot rely entirely on external protection in the way smaller states often do. Under these conditions, strategies of full-scale balancing or unconditional bandwagoning tend to generate prohibitively high political and strategic costs. Middle powers therefore face strong incentives to manage their strategic choice space through functional differentiation and domain-specific adjustment in their external relationships. Strategic autonomy, in this sense, should not be understood as an objective achieved through the adoption of a particular strategy, but rather as an analytical category for assessing the sustainability of such adjustment over time.

It is also important to distinguish strategic autonomy from hedging. While hedging refers to a strategic practice through which states distribute risks and preserve options in response to uncertainty and great-power competition, strategic autonomy represents the outcome that emerges from how such practices are combined and managed within alliance relationships. Hedging may contribute to the preservation of autonomy, but it does not automatically generate it. Autonomy is therefore best understood as the cumulative result of how alliance commitments and hedging strategies are coordinated over time.

Moreover, strategic autonomy cannot be secured solely through diplomatic will or the diversification of external relationships. Without the material and institutional foundations necessary to sustain policy adjustment—including defense capabilities, economic resilience, technological capacity, and administrative coordination—formal diversification may simply mask or even deepen underlying patterns of dependence. Strategic autonomy also contains a temporal dimension. When short-term crisis management consistently takes precedence over the accumulation of long-term adjustment capacity, immediate stability may be preserved while the strategic choice space available in the future gradually contracts.

Taken together, strategic autonomy should be understood not as a fixed condition or an independent strategic objective, but as a process-based outcome shaped by the ways in which alliances and hedging are combined across policy domains and managed over time. In the context of middle-power diplomacy, strategic autonomy therefore emerges as the cumulative result of strategic adjustment between alliance commitments and hedging practices, providing a key analytical axis for evaluating the effective scope of a state's strategic choice space.

2.4. The Composite Equilibrium Model: Mechanisms Generating Strategic Autonomy in South Korean Foreign Policy

This section integrates the adjustment dynamics of alliances and the operational scope of hedging into a single analytical structure in order to explain the mechanisms through which strategic autonomy is generated. To this end, the study proposes a Composite Equilibrium Model of Strategic Autonomy, a theoretical framework designed to analyze how distinct diplomatic functions operate simultaneously and are coordinated under a shared environment of structural constraints in middle-power diplomacy. Within this model, alliances and hedging are conceptualized not as mutually exclusive strategic options but as strategic variables that operate in parallel with varying degrees of intensity across different policy domains. Strategic autonomy is therefore understood as a process-based outcome that emerges cumulatively over time through the interaction and adjustment of these variables (see Figure 1).

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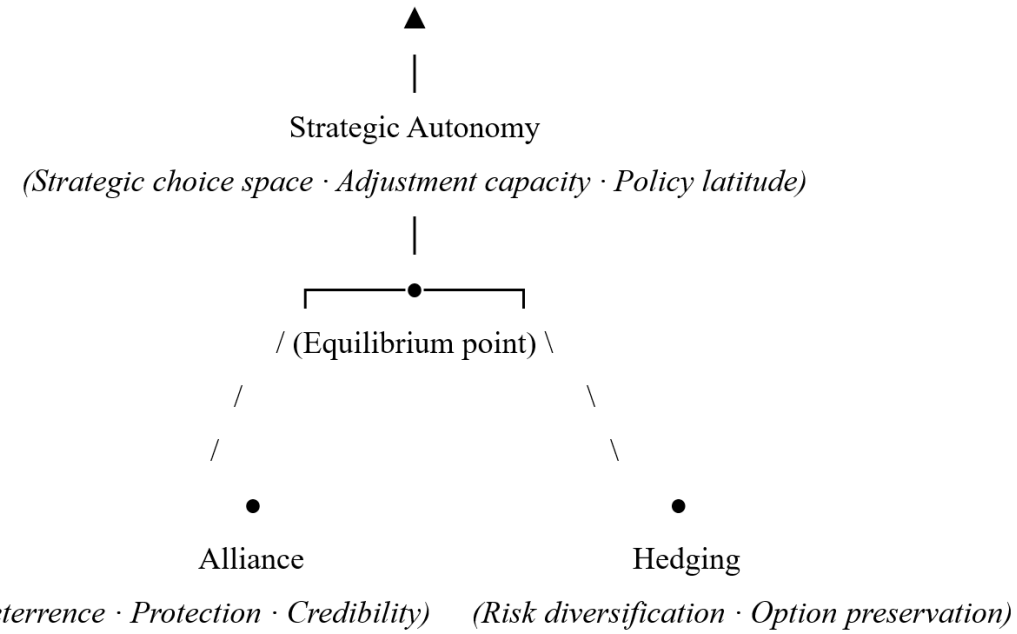


Figure 1. Composite equilibrium model of strategic autonomy: Alliance-hedging calibration and the generation of strategic autonomy.
Source: Author's formulation.

The core premise of the composite equilibrium model is that middle-power diplomacy does not proceed through linear movement along a single strategic axis. Rather, it unfolds as a multidimensional process in which multiple strategic functions operate simultaneously and are continuously adjusted within a shared environment of structural constraints. In this framework, alliances function as stabilizing mechanisms that provide deterrence and protection against external threats while simultaneously establishing an upper bound on strategic autonomy through the requirements of policy alignment. Hedging, by contrast, operates as a mechanism for risk diversification and option preservation in response to uncertainty and competitive volatility, yet its operation entails ongoing costs associated with maintaining alliance credibility and strategic signaling. Strategic autonomy thus emerges not as an alternative to alliances or hedging, but as the cumulative outcome of how alliance adjustment and the scope of hedging are combined across different policy domains.

From this perspective, strategic autonomy should be understood not as a fixed equilibrium but as a dynamic and shifting balance whose position evolves in response to changing structural conditions. Deepening alliance commitments may enhance short-term security stability and deterrence credibility, yet beyond a certain threshold they can generate rigidity in policy alignment and path dependence that constrains long-term autonomy. Conversely, expanding the scope of hedging may increase diplomatic flexibility and broaden the available strategic choice space, but excessive reliance on hedging can amplify alliance credibility costs and external pressure. Strategic autonomy therefore emerges within the zone where these countervailing effects intersect. When either component becomes excessively dominant, the overall stability of the composite equilibrium structure may instead weaken.

The composite equilibrium model accordingly interprets strategic adjustment not as a static optimal point but as a continuously reconfigured process unfolding over time. A key advantage of the model lies in its ability to disaggregate foreign-policy strategy across functional domains. In the military and security domain, the requirements of deterrence and credibility tend to sustain a relatively higher degree of alliance alignment. In contrast, within economic, technological, industrial, and supply-chain domains, the operational scope of hedging may expand more actively in order to manage risk diversification and preserve policy options. Through the cumulative interaction of these differentiated adjustments, the range of strategic autonomy available to middle powers is gradually formed and continuously redefined.

In sum, the composite equilibrium model moves beyond reducing middle-power diplomacy to a binary choice between "alliance deepening" and "hedging." Instead, it provides an analytical framework for understanding strategic autonomy as a dynamic outcome generated through the design and cumulative management of strategic combinations across policy domains. From this perspective, the effectiveness of middle-power diplomacy is determined not by the adoption of a single strategic orientation, but by the capacity to continuously recalibrate and manage the relationship between alliances and hedging under evolving structural constraints.

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3. The Reconfiguration of South Korea's Strategic Choice Environment amid the Transition in U.S. Grand Strategy

This chapter examines how the transition in U.S. grand strategy is reshaping the functional character of the U.S.–ROK alliance and how these changes are redefining both the adjustment mechanisms of alliances and the operational scope of hedging under new structural conditions. It further analyzes how, through the cumulative interaction of these adjustments, strategic autonomy emerges only selectively across different policy domains while encountering structural constraints in others. The purpose of this chapter is not to evaluate the normative desirability of particular strategic choices, but rather to explain how alliances and hedging are simultaneously constrained and reconfigured under shared structural pressures, and how their cumulative interaction reshapes the strategic choice space of South Korean foreign policy.

The strategic environment surrounding South Korea cannot be understood as a linear policy space determined solely by general dynamics of international politics or by shifts in the preferences of a particular great power. Rather, it is a complex configuration shaped by the intersection of multiple structural factors: the geopolitical position of the Korean Peninsula, the persistence of the division system, the enduring structure of military tension, the industrial composition of the South Korean economy, the institutional evolution of the U.S.–ROK alliance, domestic political polarization and social fragmentation, and the broader global power structure defined by intensifying U.S.–China strategic rivalry. While this environment may appear to offer South Korea a wider range of strategic options than in the past, in practice these options increasingly come into conflict under overlapping pressures, producing a paradox in which the range of conceivable strategic choices expands even as the space for feasible policy maneuver narrows. South Korea thus finds itself in an era in which the range of conceivable diplomatic strategies appears broader than ever, yet the structural conditions under which those choices can realistically be exercised are becoming progressively more restrictive.

At the center of this structural transformation lies the ongoing reconfiguration of the functional logic of the U.S.–ROK alliance amid the transition in U.S. grand strategy. During the Cold War, the alliance functioned primarily as a conventional military alliance centered on deterrence and extended deterrence. Today, however, the alliance increasingly operates as an expanded framework of cooperation that extends beyond military deterrence into the domains of economic security, advanced technology, industrial policy, and supply-chain governance, including sectors such as semiconductors, batteries, critical minerals, and cybersecurity. This transformation effectively repositions South Korea within the broader architecture of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy—not merely as a regional security partner, but as a central participant in the restructuring of technological, industrial, and supply-chain orders. Institutionalized trilateral cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan, the expansion of global supply-chain coordination networks, and deepening collaboration in advanced technological sectors collectively illustrate South Korea's potential to function not only as a regional middle power but also as a significant technological and industrial node within the evolving strategic order.

Yet this functional expansion of the alliance simultaneously introduces new forms of structural burden. As the operational scope of alliance coordination expands beyond the military domain into multiple policy sectors, South Korea's policy choices increasingly extend beyond traditional foreign and security policy into questions that affect the broader national economy and industrial ecosystem. Export controls on semiconductor equipment, restrictions on advanced technology cooperation with Chinese firms, and the restructuring of global supply chains demonstrate how alliance-related pressures now manifest not merely as abstract strategic expectations but as concrete policy constraints. The United States' growing emphasis on economic security and selective engagement strategies has reinforced the logic of burden-sharing within alliances while simultaneously constraining the scope of South Korea's strategic autonomy in more complex and far-reaching ways.

These constraints are further compounded by the dual dependency embedded within South Korea's economic structure. South Korea's industrial ecosystem is deeply integrated into a U.S.-centered financial and technological order while remaining structurally intertwined with China as its largest trading partner, production base, and export market. Core sectors—including semiconductors, batteries, displays, petrochemicals, and the broader automobile and electric-vehicle industries—remain closely embedded within Chinese supply chains and production networks. Consequently, economic downturns in China, industrial overcapacity, or accelerating decoupling trends can generate immediate and substantial impacts across the South Korean economy. Conversely, closer cooperation with U.S.-led technology restrictions and supply-chain restructuring may expose South Korea to economic retaliation from China and to the costs of industrial realignment. South Korea thus occupies a structurally dual position at the intersection of two competing economic orders, where alignment with one side almost inevitably generates countervailing pressures from the other.

Under these conditions, strategic autonomy cannot realistically be understood as a question of independence or alliance disengagement. Unlike the European Union's discourse on sovereign autonomy, South Korea's strategic autonomy must be redefined in practical terms as the degree to which policy discretion can be preserved and the costs of unavoidable strategic choices can be absorbed and redistributed across different policy domains within the structural context of U.S.–China rivalry. Autonomy therefore does not

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signify the unlimited expansion of strategic choice but rather the capacity to manage and distribute the costs of decisions when choices become unavoidable. In this sense, strategic autonomy is less about eliminating structural pressures than about coordinating and moderating them.

The 2025 NSS further underscores the significance of this management challenge. Rather than assuming simultaneous engagement across all regions and strategic domains, the United States increasingly emphasizes strategic prioritization and more differentiated burden-sharing among allies. Parallel discussions within the U.S. Department of Defense and major policy research institutions likewise emphasize strengthening deterrence efficiency through alliance networks and rationalizing the distribution of strategic burdens across partners (Center for a New American Security, 2025; RAND Corporation, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). These shifts reflect a growing structural need to more precisely coordinate the operational scope and contribution expectations within alliance systems under changing strategic conditions.

Recent developments associated with the Trump administration's evolving regional priorities and intensified coercive diplomacy further complicate this management challenge. As the United States reallocates strategic attention and military resources through a renewed emphasis on hemispheric priorities while simultaneously expanding coercive tools in selected regions, the pressures confronting allied states are unlikely to manifest as strategic "vacuum." Rather, they are more likely to take the form of rising expectations for functional contributions across multiple domains. Under such conditions, South Korea may face simultaneous pressures arising from increased alliance-related contributions and from the redefinition of U.S. engagement in East Asia. These developments function as potential shock variables capable of rapidly shifting the equilibrium point within the composite equilibrium model. Strategic autonomy for South Korea therefore cannot be interpreted as an automatic byproduct of U.S. strategic retrenchment; instead, it increasingly becomes a variable that must be actively managed within an environment characterized by intensified alliance expectations and strategic competition.

The need for such strategic management becomes particularly visible in discussions surrounding potential contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. Zbigniew Brzezinski's characterization of the Korean Peninsula as a strategic pivot linking the Eurasian geopolitical space reflects the enduring geopolitical reality that South Korea occupies a critical intersection within contemporary great-power rivalry (Brzezinski, 1997). Historically, the Korean Peninsula has repeatedly experienced the direct consequences of shifting regional power balances, and this geopolitical vulnerability continues to shape South Korea's strategic environment amid intensifying U.S.–China competition.

As tensions surrounding Taiwan increase, debates over the operational scope of the U.S.–ROK alliance and the potential role of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) require increasingly careful strategic consideration. Several studies have noted that the operational utilization of USFK assets in the event of a Taiwan contingency cannot be entirely excluded, suggesting that South Korea may inevitably become linked to broader regional deterrence dynamics (Goldfeld D. A. et al, 2024; Klingner, 2024; Park, 2022). This does not imply automatic entrapment in a particular conflict, but it does highlight the growing structural need to manage more clearly the conditions and scope under which alliance deterrence mechanisms may operate. In this sense, rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait elevate the strategic significance of alliance management and the role of USFK from peripheral policy considerations to central issues in South Korea's broader strategic adjustment.

Taken together, the structural environment confronting South Korean diplomacy is characterized less by the expansion of strategic choices than by the growing importance of managing the costs associated with unavoidable choices. The expansion of the U.S.–ROK alliance remains a critical source of security stability and deterrence, yet its widening functional scope simultaneously introduces institutional constraints on policy discretion. Similarly, economic interdependence with China has long served as a foundation of South Korea's economic growth but increasingly generates diplomatic vulnerability within the context of structural U.S.–China rivalry. The ongoing transition in U.S. grand strategy therefore intensifies the pressures facing South Korea while simultaneously creating an environment that requires not the adoption of a single strategic orientation but the careful coordination of multiple strategies. Ultimately, the central challenge of South Korean foreign policy lies not in choosing between alliance deepening and hedging, but in systematically designing and managing the combination of these strategies so that strategic autonomy can be sustained within evolving structural constraints.

4. The Transition in U.S. Grand Strategy and South Korea's Foreign Policy Strategy: An Integrated Design of Strategic Autonomy

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the transition in U.S. grand strategy is reshaping the structural conditions under which South Korea's traditional model of functionally differentiated hedging has operated. As alliances expand beyond the realm of military deterrence into multidomain strategic platforms, the conventional practice of separating security relations from economic engagement no longer provides sufficient room for strategic adjustment. Under these conditions, the central task of South Korean foreign policy is not simply to choose between alliance deepening and hedging, but to determine how these strategies can be systematically combined and managed. This chapter therefore examines the institutional arrangements and

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strategic adjustment mechanisms through which strategic autonomy may be realistically sustained in South Korea's foreign policy.

4.1. The Structure of Integrated Adjustment: Alliance Management, Structural Hedging, and the Conditional Accumulation of Strategic Autonomy

Amid the transition in U.S. grand strategy, the U.S.–ROK alliance continues to maintain its fundamental deterrence function while its operational logic increasingly shifts toward a more conditional and managed framework of strategic coordination. The advancement of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities reinforces reliance on extended deterrence, while intensifying U.S.–China military competition and persistent tensions in the Taiwan Strait expand the scope of alliance considerations beyond the defense of the Korean Peninsula to include broader regional contingencies. As a result, the alliance is evolving not only as a mechanism for security provision but also as a framework of strategic cooperation requiring more refined forms of coordination and management. The key issue in this transformation is not whether entrapment risks exist, but how clear conditions and rules governing such involvement can be institutionalized. If threats directly linked to the defense of the Korean Peninsula are analytically distinguished from external crises arising from broader U.S.–China rivalry, and if the scope and modalities of alliance contributions are structured through predictable institutional rules, alliance credibility and risk management can be pursued in a mutually reinforcing manner. In this sense, the institutionalization of conditional involvement represents a strategic adjustment aimed at sustaining the long-term stability and credibility of the alliance under evolving strategic conditions.

Within this context, alliance management, structural hedging, and the strategic autonomy that emerges from their interaction should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive strategic choices. Rather, they constitute interrelated components of an integrated adjustment framework operating within the same strategic environment. By maintaining alliance credibility while preserving limited room for policy adjustment, and by employing structural hedging to manage the costs associated with strategic choices, middle powers may gradually accumulate a limited but meaningful degree of strategic autonomy. Such an approach represents one of the most stable strategic pathways available to middle-power diplomacy in the context of the ongoing transition in U.S. grand strategy.

At the same time, hedging in the domains of economic security, technology, industry, supply chains, and regulatory governance requires substantial conceptual reinterpretation. Whereas earlier forms of hedging relied on separating security and economic relations as a means of risk mitigation, contemporary hedging increasingly takes the form of structural design in which varying degrees of alignment are preconfigured across different policy domains. South Korea's economic structure—deeply embedded in a U.S.-centered technological and financial order while simultaneously intertwined with China as its largest trading partner and as a core production network hub—creates asymmetric risks in which rapid alignment with either side may generate immediate cost spillovers. Under such conditions, the core logic of South Korean hedging does not lie in maintaining symmetrical relations with both sides but in calibrating the scope and pace of alignment according to the characteristics of specific industries and technologies. In strategic technology sectors, selective alignment may become unavoidable in order to secure technological access, participate in standards competition, and sustain long-term industrial competitiveness. In more general industrial sectors, however, gradual diversification of production bases and supply chains may represent a more effective approach to strengthening economic resilience. Structural hedging in this sense does not oppose alliance commitments but rather functions as a complementary mechanism that prevents the expansion of alliance coordination from eroding strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy should therefore be understood as an outcome variable generated through the cumulative interaction between alliance management and structural hedging. Rather than signifying the freedom to avoid strategic choices altogether, strategic autonomy refers to the capacity to manage the costs and transmission pathways associated with unavoidable choices. It reflects not the degree of distance from alliance commitments but the ability to regulate the policy consequences and spillover effects that accompany alignment decisions under structural constraints.

In this context, middle-power networks and normative capacity constitute important resources for sustaining strategic autonomy. Cooperation with regional institutions and middle-power partners—including ASEAN, the European Union, India, Japan, Australia, and Canada—as well as with countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa should be understood not merely as rhetorical diversification but as a structural buffer that distributes the pressures of great-power competition across multiple relationships instead of concentrating them within a single bilateral framework. When institutionalized through multilateral platforms such as MIKTA, the G20, APEC, and ASEM, as well as regional economic frameworks such as RCEP, such cooperation expands opportunities for collective agenda-setting and norm formation. In areas including digital governance, technological standards, supply-chain transparency, climate governance, energy transition, and the protection of critical infrastructure—such as submarine communication cables, power grids, semiconductor production facilities, and key logistics hubs—participation in international institutional frameworks allows middle powers to transform strategic autonomy from a reactive capacity into a

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participatory role in shaping emerging global norms. By translating great-power pressures into collective agendas and institutional rules, these platforms help distribute strategic costs and expand diplomatic room for maneuver.

In summary, South Korea's strategic response to the transition in U.S. grand strategy cannot be reduced to a single alignment logic. Instead, it requires differentiated adjustment across multiple domains—including security, economic and technological policy, industrial and supply-chain governance, and diplomatic and normative engagement—each operating according to distinct principles and temporal rhythms of coordination. The structure of such domain-specific adjustments is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Domain-Specific adjustment structure of South Korean foreign policy.

Category	Security Domain	Economic, Technological, Industrial, and Supply-Chain Domain	Diplomatic–Normative Domain
Core Strategy	Alliance-centered stability management	Structural hedging	Normative capacity through middle-power networks
Operating Principle	Institutionalized management of conditional involvement	Domain-specific differentiated alignment	Norm coordination through multilateral institutions
Primary Objectives	Sustaining deterrence and crisis stability	Managing risk transmission and mitigating shocks	Institutional buffering of strategic choice space
Alignment Intensity	High (extended deterrence, operational cooperation)	Medium (strategic technologies and standards competition)	Low (multilateral norms and agenda-setting)
Adjustment Tempo	Rapid, crisis-driven	Selective and differentiated	Long-term
Key Risks	Expansion of extra-regional entrapment risks	Credibility costs and supply-chain disruptions	Delayed effectiveness

Note: "Alignment intensity" denotes the degree of structural alignment with U.S. strategic preferences. "Adjustment tempo" refers to the temporal pressure and policy flexibility associated with alignment changes.

4.2. The Operational Logic of the Composite Equilibrium Model: Integrated Adjustment and Institutionalization

As the preceding discussion indicates, the central challenge for South Korean foreign policy under the transition in U.S. grand strategy cannot be reduced to a simple choice between alliance deepening and hedging. Rather, alliances and hedging increasingly operate within the same structural constraints and interact with one another in ways that shape the conditions under which strategic autonomy can emerge. Under these circumstances, the effectiveness of South Korean foreign policy is not determined by the consistent adoption of a single strategic orientation but by the policy capacity to manage and recalibrate the interaction between alliances and hedging through institutional principles and rules. Strategic autonomy thus becomes a derivative outcome generated through the cumulative adjustment of these strategic variables.

The need for a composite equilibrium framework arises from the fact that the transition in U.S. grand strategy does not present allies with a stable end-state or fixed equilibrium. The 2025 NSS emphasizes strategic prioritization, the centrality of economic security, and the institutionalization of burden-sharing networks, redefining alliances not as automatic security guarantees but as frameworks of continuous negotiation over functional alignment and contributions. In this context, alliances remain indispensable mechanisms for providing security stability and strategic access. Yet when alignment commitments accumulate without adjustment, they can generate increasing entrapment risks and path dependence. Hedging similarly offers rational tools for risk diversification and the preservation of strategic options in uncertain strategic environments. However, when the scope of hedging exceeds the alliance's capacity to sustain institutional trust, it may also generate political and diplomatic costs that undermine stability. Strategic autonomy therefore emerges not as an alternative to either alliances or hedging but as a process-based outcome shaped by how the intensity of alliance alignment and the scope of hedging adjustment are jointly calibrated.

The central objective of the composite equilibrium model is therefore not to maximize either alliances or hedging individually. Rather, it seeks to design and manage conditions under which alliance-based stability does not translate into excessive entrapment pressures while the operational scope of hedging remains within the bounds of alliance credibility. Through this calibrated interaction, strategic autonomy can gradually accumulate over time. This perspective shifts foreign policy analysis away from the logic of selecting a single strategic line and toward the problem of policy design—namely how different forms of stability, access, policy flexibility, and strategic cost can be exchanged and combined across multiple domains.

An important feature of the composite equilibrium model concerns temporal asymmetry. Structural variables such as U.S. fiscal constraints and long-term shifts in grand strategy operate over extended time horizons, whereas specific policy orientations of individual administrations or regional crisis episodes tend to

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function as short- or medium-term variables. Managing these dynamics on the same temporal scale risks allowing short-term security stabilization to erode long-term strategic choice space. The model therefore incorporates temporal differentiation as a key adjustment principle, emphasizing the need to balance immediate stability with the gradual accumulation of long-term strategic autonomy.

Domain-specific differentiated adjustment constitutes another core component of the model. In the security domain, the deterrent function of alliances necessarily operates as the primary stabilizing mechanism. However, this does not automatically require identical levels of alignment across economic, technological, industrial, supply-chain, or diplomatic domains. In economic and technological sectors, structural hedging may take the form of differentiated alignment according to the strategic characteristics of industries and technologies.

In diplomatic and normative domains, participation in middle-power networks and multilateral institutions can diffuse pressures for alignment by distributing policy demands across broader cooperative frameworks. While such differentiated adjustment may appear externally inconsistent, it represents a necessary condition for managing strategic autonomy within a complex competitive order.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the composite equilibrium model depends on whether these adjustment principles can be institutionalized.

If the boundaries of alliance entrapment, the criteria for economic-security alignment, and the operational roles within middle-power networks remain ad hoc or informal, adjustment processes will remain vulnerable to repeated disruption during crises. Conversely, when these principles become embedded within strategic documents, standing consultative mechanisms, and recurring policy practices, South Korean foreign policy can operate according to consistent rules rather than reactive responses to external pressures.

In this respect, mechanisms such as extended deterrence consultations, supply-chain coordination frameworks, and middle-power multilateral networks function not merely as instruments of cooperation but as institutional foundations for stabilizing the interaction between alliances and hedging.

In conclusion, the rational objective of South Korean foreign policy under the transition in U.S. grand strategy is not the discovery of a stable equilibrium point but the development of the institutional capacity to continuously recalibrate the composite equilibrium structure under evolving structural constraints. Strategic autonomy emerges as a gradual outcome of this ongoing adjustment process.

Accordingly, the effectiveness of South Korean diplomacy should be evaluated not by whether it linearly chooses between alliances and hedging, but by the precision with which these strategies are coordinated and the degree to which such coordination can be institutionally sustained over time.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how the transition in U.S. grand strategy is reshaping the strategic choice environment of South Korean foreign policy and has proposed a Composite Equilibrium Model of Strategic Autonomy as an analytical framework for understanding and managing these changes.

The 2025 NSS highlights strategic prioritization, the centrality of economic security, and the institutionalization of burden-sharing networks, thereby redefining the operational logic of alliances. In this emerging framework, alliances function less as automatic guarantees of military protection and increasingly as structures of continuous coordination organized around functional alignment and differentiated contributions. As a result, South Korea's strategic challenge can no longer be addressed through the linear selection of a single foreign-policy orientation. Instead, it requires the design and management of strategic combinations capable of managing competing demands and costs across multiple policy domains.

Building on this premise, this study has reconceptualized alliances and hedging not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as interdependent strategic variables operating under shared structural constraints. Strategic autonomy, in this framework, is not treated as a predetermined objective but as a conditional outcome that emerges through the cumulative interaction between alliance commitments and hedging practices.

The central task for South Korean foreign policy therefore lies not in choosing between alliance deepening and hedging, but in designing principles and institutional mechanisms capable of managing their interaction across security, economic, technological, industrial, supply-chain, and diplomatic domains.

The analyses presented in Chapters III and IV have generated a set of policy-relevant implications from this analytical framework. As alliances expand beyond the military domain into broader structures of economic security, technological cooperation, industrial policy, and supply-chain governance, traditional forms of hedging based on the separation of security and economic relations are becoming increasingly constrained. Under these conditions, the study has proposed a differentiated adjustment strategy in which alliance stability is maintained through the institutionalization of conditional involvement in the security domain, structural hedging operates through differentiated alignment across economic and technological sectors, and diplomatic flexibility is reinforced through middle-power networks and multilateral institutional engagement. Rather than establishing a fixed optimal equilibrium, this approach emphasizes a process of domain-specific and temporally differentiated adjustment that balances short-term stability with the gradual accumulation of strategic autonomy.

The policy implications derived from this analysis are that the sustainability of South Korean foreign

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policy depends less on declaratory alignment than on the institutional capacity to manage the scope and conditions of alignment and contribution. In an environment shaped by intensifying economic-security competition, hedging can no longer be understood as a passive expression of neutrality. Instead, it becomes a form of strategic design through which the intensity and pace of alignment are calibrated across domains in order to manage the transmission of strategic risks. Strategic autonomy should therefore be understood not as a condition achieved through distancing from alliances but as an outcome that emerges through the careful coordination of alliance management and structural hedging.

This study nonetheless has several limitations. The analysis focuses primarily on the strategic direction outlined in the 2025 NSS, while the actual implementation of U.S. grand strategy will inevitably evolve through the interaction of domestic political dynamics, economic interests, and allied responses. Moreover, the composite equilibrium model presented here aims to clarify the logic of strategic adjustment rather than to produce a deterministic rule for prioritizing specific policy choices. Future research should therefore further examine domain-specific costs and benefits, crisis scenarios, and potential pathways of strategic and economic shock transmission in order to refine the operational conditions of the model.

Despite these limitations, the composite equilibrium model developed in this study provides an analytical framework for understanding how middle powers may manage strategic adjustment and sustain policy autonomy amid the ongoing transition in U.S. grand strategy. South Korea operates within a strategic environment increasingly shaped by the transition in U.S. grand strategy and by intensifying rivalry among major powers, yet it retains the capacity to manage its strategic choice space through the institutional design and coordination of strategic combinations. By conceptualizing strategic autonomy as an outcome that emerges from the interaction between alliance commitments and hedging practices, this study offers a framework for interpreting the dilemmas facing South Korean foreign policy and for designing strategies capable of sustaining policy flexibility amid the ongoing transition in U.S. grand strategy.

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