

## **ROK-US Relations in the Moon-Trump Era: A South Korean Perspective**

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### **1. Donald Trump, the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States**

Donald Trump, an outsider in Washington politics, has been inaugurated as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Only a few people forecasted the era of President Trump. While the mainstream U.S. media, as well as most pundits, predicted a comfortable victory for Hillary Clinton, an opposite outcome unraveled. Moreover, since there is not much known about the foreign and security experts in the Trump team, the international community views the Trump administration with much anxiety and uncertainty. In his inaugural address, President Trump urged the U.S. public to unite by reiterating the slogan, 'Make America Great Again.' The voice toward the electorates takes the shape of 'unity,' and reads as 'America First,' clearly manifesting Trumpian nationalism.

The reason that hope precedes concern when prospecting the Trump era is because Trump is still engrossed in myopic perspective of the U.S. and the world. Although many people anticipated message of unity and harmony as the president of all Americans, it is assessed that President Trump has left the sources of confrontation and fragmentation, lingering on the rhetoric pronounced during the campaign. One opinion article in the *New York Times* expressed that, although the expectations were low from the onset, the inaugural address was beyond disappointment. In addition, the *Washington Post* assessed the address as the most worrisome one in the U.S. history. At the same time with the inauguration, anti-Trump rallies were witnessed across the U.S., not to mention Washington D.C., reflected by the lowest approval rating of all times (37%) prior to the inauguration. The 'Not My President!' chants of anti-Trump seem to foreshadow the Trump administration's difficult road ahead.

Trump highlighted two points during his inaugural address. One is 'America First,' and another is populism.

First, the most crucial point emphasized in the inaugural address is 'America First.' Trump stated, "for many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay." He added that this is the past and a vision will be declared from the moment, which is America First. He emphasized two simple principles of the notion, America First, 'buy American and hire American.' This signals the inclination to trade protectionism, where U.S. national interest is prioritized, and a harbinger of a trade

war. The colors of America First that will be exposed in trade, military, and diplomacy presage a sea change in the international order.

Second, as an outsider in Washington politics, he expressed strong distrust on the establishment politics, proclaiming populist politics of communicating directly with the public. In his speech, he mentioned that while politicians thrived, people struggled, jobs diminished, and factories closed. He further stated that politicians of “all talk and no action” will not be tolerated. This overtly demonstrated his disbelief in the establishment, not only in the Democratic side, but also in the Republican side. President Trump’s words, “today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington D.C. and giving it back to you the American people,” were hailed with a big applause from the crowd. As an outsider with no experience in the public office, Trump declared the Trumpian populism directly contacting with the public, while avoiding the conventional practices in Washington-centered politics.

As Trump’s inaugural address could also be interpreted as a separation from the Republican traditions, it could be viewed as the combination of Andrew Jackson-style nationalism and populism. His address has given a strong impression of U.S. native jingoism rather than conservative ideology and traditional Republican remarks. This is clearly not the U.S. we have known. The world may encounter an unfamiliar side of the U.S. that was unknown until now.

## **2. Concerns for ‘America First’ Foreign Policy**

Trump’s White House website revealed six top issues – America First Energy Plan; America First Foreign Policy; Bringing Back Jobs and Growth; Making Our Military Strong Again; Standing Up For Our Law Enforcement Community; and Trade Deals Working For All Americans – concurrently with Trump’s inauguration, articulating the general outline of his policy. In terms of foreign policy, he asserted the America First Foreign Policy, revealing his intention to pursue a foreign policy that concentrates on U.S. national interests and security. Under this tenet, the international community, as well as the Korean Peninsula, is faced with a new era of uncertainty.

The U.S. foreign policy orientation in the Trump era is prospected to take a selective engagement approach in international affairs, and this will probably appear as an isolationist stance pulling out from the global issues. In particular, several concerns emerge in U.S. foreign policy area.

First, if the U.S. retreats to neo-isolationism, this becomes a precursor of a significant decline in the liberal international order that the U.S. has built for the last 70 years. After the Second World War, the U.S. has carried out trade and diplomacy through various international norms and institutions, genuinely assuming a ‘system-maker, privilege-taker’ role. The U.S. retreat to neo-isolationism implies deteriorating foundations of the

liberal international order by itself and accelerating the rise of revisionist powers such as China and Russia. Also, the U.S. soft power – symbolized as American values, norms, and global standard – has waned and suffered the side-effect emerged in the form of xenophobia, misogyny and exclusiveness rather than of inclusiveness, and of selfishness rather than of tolerance.

Second, will the policy of strategic rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific be weakened? If the Trump administration goes back to retrenchment, this will inevitably weaken the rebalancing policy as well. In contrast to earlier predictions, President Donald Trump's policies towards Asia may not radically depart from those of the previous administration. Trump is more likely to adopt a hawkish – if unpredictable – enforcement of the policy's key defense objectives in the Asia-Pacific.

Third, will there be upsurge of protectionist trade policy and global trade war? The central economic goal of Donald Trump's administration will be to boost U.S. economic growth. Secretary of Treasury Steven Mnuchin said that the administration's objective is to raise the rate of GDP growth to three to four percent, doubling the rate achieved over the last decade. This will be accomplished by establishing a globally competitive tax system and introducing better trade policies. As a part of such efforts, President Trump has repeatedly assured that his administration will correct any unfair trade practice that hampers American interests—including Trans-Pacific Partnership, NAFTA, and KORUS FTA. If such policies are indeed implemented, global free trade system will be significantly impacted negatively.

### **3. Implications for ROK-U.S. Relations**

In Seoul, across the Pacific, South Korea elected Moon Jae-in as the new president. Following the impeachment and arrest of former president Park Geun-hye, President Moon faces a lot of challenges in both domestic politics and external relations. Normally, he would have had a two-month transition period, but his impeached predecessor, Park Geun-hye, is in jail facing corruption charges. For obvious reasons, many people both in Seoul and Washington are concerned whether the Moon-Trump era will be smooth or rocky.

Concerning the ROK-U.S. relations, diverse policy changes are expected to take shape in areas of security and economy, and in solving the North Korean nuclear issue. Whereas South Korea and the U.S. are certainly robust and credible allies, the issues that the Trump administration raises are challenging. In general, although Mr. Moon has tried hard to reassure Washington that ROK-US alliance “is the most important foundation for our diplomacy and national security,” it is quite natural that many voices are heard whether Moon and Trump are “on the same page” regarding many issues that might be potentially important for this bilateral relations.

President Moon's conservative predecessors generally shared America's approach to

North Korea, which is basically to pressure the North through sanctions and other measures to abandon its nuclear program. President Moon is, in contrast, closer in outlook to his late friend and ideological ally Roh Moo-hyun, who as president from 2003 to 2008 pursued a “sunshine policy” of seeking to engage North Korea through dialogue, aid and joint projects. Though much has changed since then — including the rise of Kim Jong-un, the third ruler of the Kim dynasty, and the relentless development of nuclear weapons in the North — the liberals Mr. Moon leads believe sanctions alone have failed to deter North Korea, and are wary of being drawn into a struggle between the United States and China.

An immediate source of friction with Washington is, for example, a potent antimissile system the United States has deployed in South Korea, which the liberals opposed. The opposition has been intensified by China’s furious reaction, including a boycott of South Korean brands, and President Trump’s statement last month — promptly pulled back — that Seoul should pay \$1 billion for the battery. Mr. Moon has said he will review the deployment, though he insists he will fully consult with the United States before making any decision on this or any other North Korean matter.

In relation to security, South Korea is likely to face two difficulties – the demand for an increase in defense burden sharing and an early transfer of wartime operational control, commonly known as OPCON.

Regarding economic relations, Seoul should prepare for the surging claims to carry out a smooth and swift resolution to the implementation measures of the KORUS FTA, and be poised for the worst case scenario of having to renegotiate the agreement.

As for the policy on North Korea, the new U.S. administration is highly likely to seek a new policy, replacing the Obama administration’s ‘strategic patience.’ Fortunately, the experts on foreign and security affairs in Trump’s team do not hold a much different view from that of the existing Washington politics experts, except for the methodology. However, the huge task of specifically coordinating the denuclearization strategy toward North Korea still remains. Furthermore, in coping with North Korean provocations, Trump administration’s high ranking officials, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have mentioned that all options are on the table, including pre-emptive military action against North. Such remarks raised a question that has dogged American military planners for 20 years: How could this be made to work?

The United States has long threatened to use force. The sincerity of such threats has always been ambiguous, as they are often meant less to prepare for war than to act as a deterrent to North Korea and a reassurance of the commitment by the United States to South Korea. But there is a reason that, even as North Korea’s weapons programs have passed red line after red line, the United States has never followed through. Almost any plan would bring a high risk of unintended escalation to all-out war, analysts believe. It would place millions of South Korean and Japanese civilians in the cross hairs of North Korean weapons with few guaranteed benefits.

As the Trump era commences, the world runs into a large uncertainty. Adding to the visualizing surge of trade protectionism, the possibility of U.S.-China confrontation has risen. The struggle between the great powers will come as an inconvenience to the middle and small powers including South Korea, whither trade or security. It is unlikely that the ROK-U.S. alliance will be fundamentally shaken, but the advent of the Trump era will pose new challenges to various issues related to maintaining the alliance. In many ways, South Korea needs an astute and acute understanding of the circumstances and strategic responses.