

# Prospects for U.S.-ROK Relations In the Trump-Moon Era:

## A U.S. Perspective

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Following eight years of remarkable progress toward institutional strengthening and deepening of U.S.-ROK alliance coordination based on a clear recognition of a wide range of mutual interests, the U.S.-ROK alliance stands at a crossroads, is under new management, and South Korea faces growing security challenges both from North Korea and the region. As a result of U.S. and South Korean leadership transitions, the U.S.-ROK alliance may face renewed frictions, growing challenges, and new questions about its effectiveness and durability. It is a paradoxical moment: on the one hand, the U.S.-ROK alliance has strengthened its institutional base, built momentum and expanded cooperation to an unprecedented degree and with wider scope than ever before; on the other hand, the U.S.-ROK alliance may face growing internal frictions and simultaneous anxieties about both abandonment and entrapment, threats to its cohesion, and rising questions about mutual commitment despite a clear convergence of interest and despite being bound by the need to manage growing threats.

At the end of the Bush and Roh administrations, there was a growing recognition of a need to affirm a joint vision for the U.S.-ROK alliance and to strengthen and broaden the institutional foundations for alliance cooperation. North Korea-focused security cooperation to preserve the security of South Korea and deter renewed aggression from North Korea had long been the *raison d'être* for the alliance, but South Korea's growing capabilities and common democratic values provided the basis for a broader partnership that extended to other areas beyond security and beyond North Korea. The 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement between Presidents Obama and Lee Myung-bak affirmed and further institutionalized deepening U.S.-ROK security coordination in response to the North Korea threat, but it also envisioned an expanded scope of cooperation at the regional and global levels that extended to many functional dimensions of non-traditional security and global governance. The 2011 Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) provided the basis for expanded bilateral cooperation, and the new U.S.-ROK nuclear cooperation agreement joined security cooperation as additional foundations for cooperation that further broadened and institutionalized alliance-based security cooperation. This meant that the narrow security relationship that had historically been the "long pole in the tent" had been supplemented by a more stable three-legged stool represented by institutionalized and codified commitments to close U.S.-ROK security, economic, and nuclear cooperation.

### *The Trump Administration and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*

While the Trump administration is a beneficiary of a considerably strengthened and institutionalized U.S.-ROK alliance relationship, President Trump himself made statements as a candidate that have called into question his appreciation for alliances. These statements have generated anxiety and questions about American leadership among U.S. alliance partners around the world. In addition, President Trump brings unorthodox characteristics from his business experience to diplomacy in which relationships are personalized, tactical flexibility and transactionalism are emphasized, and uncertainty is maximized. This style runs up against traditional axioms of diplomacy and potentially increases stress in alliance relationships, which rely on a prior institutional framework of assurances to assure differential treatment of friends from enemies. Another downside of framing interactions within alliances to which Trump reacts negatively is that they can encourage free-riding among alliance partners at the expense of more equitable burden sharing. Alliance commitments, by their nature, assume a broader view of the world than “America first.”

As a result of Trump’s seemingly more narrow vision of the U.S. role in the world and his transactional approach to international relations, the world has had to react to a more self-interested exposition of American leadership, one that defines responsibility as predominately if not exclusively defined by American interests. Since the American role and interest in the post-World War II era has always been defined broadly focused on upholding international order, this rhetorical if not actual shift in American policy has reverberated globally and has caused every country to have to reevaluate expectations of the United States.

Another complicating factor is that while candidate Trump has emphasized “America first” themes, his view is in the minority among the United States foreign policy establishment, which remains committed to the idea that effective projection of American leadership and upholding of alliance structures and partnerships globally strengthens U.S. influence and keeps America safe. The U.S. Congress and the U.S. military are two institutions that have shown deep commitment to international cooperation and to the value of maintaining alliance commitments, which also continue to enjoy support among the American public. The U.S. State department would normally join in support for American internationalism, but has thus far been muted and sidelined. As a result, Congressional voices and senior members of President Trump’s own cabinet have been the leading voices that have provide active reassurance and commitment to alliance partners that contradict the president’s own rhetorical abandonment of many structures of cooperation that the United States has put into place based on an inclusive definition of American interests.

U.S. policy toward Asia in the early days of the Trump administration has been ad hoc and issue-driven, with North Korea emerging as a top priority, even shaping the contours and parameters of the president’s engagement with China. Japan has also made great strides in developing close relations with the Trump administration through Abe’s personal outreach. Prime Minister Abe

has emerged as one of President Trump's favorite telephone partners. South Korea has hardly been neglected, having been the venue for monthly visits by cabinet level officials since the inauguration (Mattis, Tillerson, Pence, and Pompeo). President Trump has actively traded phone calls with South Korea's acting president and Tillerson has met on multiple occasions with Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se. These high level contacts have been ably supported by active channels of communication between the two governments.

### *The Trump Administration's Early Focus on North Korea*

However, the Trump administration has been criticized for not having an Asia strategy to replace the Obama administration's pivot to Asia and for not sufficiently staffing Asia positions in proportion to the president's priorities. Among senior level officials, there is no one in the room who has direct experience or innate understanding of Asian issues. Yet these senior level officials have had plenty of opportunities to develop first-hand perspectives on the situation and options surrounding North Korea by prioritizing and completing a policy review within two months of the beginning of the administration. That review has resulted in the repetition of important phrases that define what Trump administration policy is not: "the era of strategic patience is over," "all options are on the table," but not to provide a clear hierarchy of preferred tools by which to address North Korea. The methods included in the strategy Certainly, the objective of the policy is to solve the North Korea problem through peaceful denuclearization, but that leaves the administration free to apply any number of measures across the spectrum of available instruments in combination with each other in an effort to find one that will work to bring North Korea's nuclear development efforts to heel.

Implications for the United States are: 1) time is not on the US side; 2) North Korea's nuclear arsenal and its missile capabilities are growing unmonitored and unchecked; 3) the US faces a North Korea that will soon have the capability to back up expressions of hostile intent with expanded credible capabilities to threaten a wider range of targets, but has sent ambiguous/contradictory signals about how it would use those capabilities (defensively or offensively).

Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea is a regime preservationist leadership guided by a revolutionary anti-imperialist ideology that seeks unification on North Korean terms and is operating on the following assumptions: 1) North Korean nuclear development drives US toward binary choice of acquiescence or use of force, but North Korea assumes that risks to US as upholder and beneficiary of regional stability and to allies friends are prohibitive; eventually US will acquiesce: "If the President, who advocates the idea of putting the US first, intends to avoid war with North Korea, he has no choice but to silently withdraw the fist that he has raised." 2) North Korea lives in space created by geostrategic mistrust between US and China, (there are limits to Sino-US coordination on North Korea deriving from differing geostrategic interests; 3) North Korea nuclear drive can drive a wedge in US alliances, and the ability to hold at risk the

United States will introduce deeper tensions. In addition, North Korea has benefited from Sino-ROK tensions associated with THAAD deployment.

As a result, Trump administration faces the same challenge from North Korea as Obama, has the same objective of denuclearization, has the same mix of options (from diplomacy to economic pressure to covert operations to military force), but is approaching issue with greater urgency and higher priority. One of the effects of treating North Korea as a higher priority is related to pressure on China, which may have had the effect of mobilizing greater Chinese attention to North Korea but is unlikely to ensure full Chinese cooperation with the United States on North Korea. Another side effect of North Korea has been the use of bluff and bluster on the US side, which may increase the risk of miscalculation.

The instruments available for Trump admin to apply to North Korea include the following:

- 1) Economic pressure/sanctions—increasingly the debate is over China's enforcement of sanctions and US application of secondary sanctions against Chinese business partners with North Korea. Early fruit of US prioritization of Chinese pressure on North Korea is the apparent Chinese petroleum cutoff to North Korea, but latest Xi-Trump phone call early this week also shows Xi pushback against Trump's raising of tensions. By prioritizing North Korea cooperation as litmus test for other issues in US-China relations, Trump can gain some help from China and force China to accept greater costs in management of North Korea, but there are likely limits to the amount that China will bear.
- 2) Covert operations using information penetration/cyberdisruption/electronic warfare—these efforts have been featured in NYT, but it is unclear of effect and unlikely that these measures can do anything other than slow North Korea missile development, not stop it.
- 3) Preemption options—CFR task force called for shooting down missile tests; Haley seemed to draw a redline at ICBM launches; others suggest that preemption can occur only if North Korea is preparing to launch nuke at US. Challenges include convincing allies and Americans that all other options have been exhausted; on the other hand, there is a view that China is only motivated when conflict is imminent or when dialogue is gaining momentum. Despite US posturing, military strike on North Korea at this stage would be widely regarded as premature, especially at the beginning of campaign to pressure Beijing.
- 4) Diplomacy—this option is underdeveloped; administration recognizes value of diplomatic coordination with allies; VP Pence seemed to suggest possibility of diplomatic outreach, but unclear to what end. Former DefSec Perry is arguing that the time is ripe for diplomacy based on rising tensions; others might suggest more pressure is necessary before diplomacy unleashed. However, tensions and risk of miscalculation are high enough that both sides would benefit from dialogue channel to clarify intentions and to state privately what provocations would credibly result in a strong response. Admin

should open a direct private dialogue channel to help DPRK interpret the contradictory messages coming from many spokespersons on this issue, including Vice President Pence, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, National Security Advisor McMaster, Secretary of State Tillerson, Secretary of State Mattis, and President Trump himself. China has a potential role to play as an intermediary, but its attempts have thus far failed through parallel denuclearization/peace talks and dual suspension of talks and exercises. South Korea's new president may seek dialogue, but at a minimum this should be coordinated and perhaps even done together with the US focused on tension reduction.

### *The Moon Administration and Prospects for U.S.-ROK Alliance Coordination*

The election of left-leaning Democratic Party candidate Moon Jae-in as South Korea's new president marks a confidence-boosting victory for South Korea's democratic process and for public demands to fight endemic corruption. But Moon will soon find that the justifiable wave of self-confidence drawn from his party's domestic triumph after the impeachment of conservative Park Geun-hye will only carry them so far. Now, South Korea faces an increasingly insecure Northeast Asia and must cope with the uncertainty of the Trump administration.

The enduring tension that shapes South Korea's foreign policy is the Korean desire for autonomy versus the necessity of an alliance with the United States that has prevented war and enabled regional prosperity in Northeast Asia for over six decades. South Korea's power shift from a conservative to a progressive leadership will push Korea toward autonomy in the U.S.-ROK alliance and inter-Korean relations on the template of Moon's liberal predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun.

Moon wants to revitalize inter-Korean dialogue, renew economic cooperation, retake South Korea's responsibility for wartime decision-making from the United States, and resume six-party talks on North Korea's denuclearization. But even though some of Moon's advisors desire independence from the United States, there is no viable alternative that can guarantee South Korea's security.

Trump and Moon will face tense flashpoints in their relationship: how to bring North Korea back to denuclearization, the cost and responsibility-sharing within the U.S.-ROK alliance, trade relations and the possible revision of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), and how to improve South Korea's relations with Japan.

#### *a) U.S.-ROK Policy Coordination on North Korea*

The nub of the North Korea issue is how most effectively to achieve denuclearization. The Trump administration expects to dial up international pressure on North Korea as needed by convincing China to squeeze North Korea economically, while admitting the eventual need for negotiations. But Moon has expressed his preference for early negotiations and his desire to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex closed by the Park administration in February 2016 after

North Korea's fourth nuclear test. A coordinated strategy will be essential: conflict here will strain the alliance and drain congressional and public support for South Korea.

#### b) Defense Cooperation and Burden Sharing

Following North Korea's early March missile test, the United States hurriedly deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)—an anti-ballistic missile system—in South Korea's Seongju County. And although Trump's demand that South Korea pay for THAAD in late April probably boosted Moon's support prior to the election, public unilateral demands over burden-sharing or other defense issues will politicize the alliance and undermine Korean support for U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). Those comments have created a pretext for critics of THAAD within the Moon administration to investigate Park's decision to deploy the system, even though South Koreans strongly supported Park's decision. But that support could erode if Park administration officials are deemed to have exceeded their power within the acting government during the impeachment.

#### c) Reform of the KORUS FTA

Third, Moon advisors point to the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement with pride as a deal the Roh administration originally negotiated with the Bush administration in 2007. The Obama administration ratified an "improved" version of the agreement, but Trump's obsession with a growing merchandise trade deficit ignores that the United States enjoys a growing surplus in exports of services to South Korea and that KORUS has fostered high-quality job-creating inward investment from South Korea in the automobile and electronics sectors, among others.

#### d) Korea-Japan Relations

And then there is the Japan problem. A fourth source of friction between the Trump and Moon administrations could arise if South Korea tries to renegotiate the December 2015 comfort woman agreement with Japan that included an apology from the prime minister for Korean victims of World War Two-era sex slavery and donated nearly \$9 million for a Korean-government run foundation to support the victims and their families. Moon supporters would claim the 2015 agreement did not satisfy Korean public expectations for Japan's formal expression of remorse, but the government of Japan is unlikely to renegotiate. Regardless of how Japan-South Korea bilateral relations move forward, the United States will continue to see trilateral coordination with Japan and South Korea as essential for an effective pressure strategy against North Korea.

Moon's efforts to strengthen Korea's diplomatic leadership within the alliance will likely conflict with Trump's "America first" approach to alliances. Rather than a divergence of interests, the great risk to alliance coordination between Trump and Moon is bad chemistry. If mishandled, the collision of these forces could endanger that alliance, just at the moment when the world needs maximum coordination to bring North Korea's growing nuclear threat to heel.