

Doubling Down on the U.S.-South
Korea Alliance: Olympics Diplomacy
Did Not Breach Trust, but Trump-
Moon Confidence Is in Jeopardy

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The U.S.-ROK alliance faced a quickening pace of North Korean provocations in 2016-17, with Pyongyang violating UN Security Council resolutions dozens of times.² Those violations included a fourth nuclear test in January 2016, fifth in September 2016, and sixth in September 2017, as well as numerous missile tests of various trajectories from different platforms. North Korea tested intermediate-range missiles overflying Japan and missiles of intercontinental range on lofted trajectories, while developing road-mobile and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. As policymakers in Seoul and Washington coordinated responses to those provocations, changes in national leadership and domestic political preferences brought into question the bilateral trust the alliance needs to deter conflict, reassure publics, and promote regional cooperation.³

Elections have consequences, even before votes are cast. Enduring international security alliances are based on shared national interests and a track record of diplomatic commitments and military cooperation. For allies with highly integrated defense policies, such as the United States and South Korea, it is natural for policymakers and citizens to keenly observe the national elections of the other country. Will the next government be a reliable partner, or will it fail to honor existing agreements? Will the incoming leadership improve relations, or will it downgrade cooperation? These questions were being asked before Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in were elected. The search for answers inevitably involves speculation, feeding expectations that are often overly optimistic or pessimistic.

Ahead of Trump's election, his campaign rhetoric questioned the terms and intrinsic value of the alliance to an extent not seen since Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign promise to withdraw U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula. President Moon came to power on the heels of conservative president Park Geun-hye's impeachment and removal for corruption. Moon's politics are notably more progressive than Park's or Trump's, including a record of pro-engagement policies toward North Korea.⁴ Against this backdrop, Kim Jong-un delivered his 2018 New Year's Day address claiming that North Korea has the ability to hit any U.S. city with a nuclear-armed missile, but that Pyongyang is ready to re-engage Seoul via participation in the Winter Olympics.⁵

An unprecedented level of sports diplomacy ensued between North and South Korea. According to the ROK Unification Ministry, "It was the first time since the division of the Korean Peninsula that the constitutional head of North Korea and a lineal family member of North Korea's supreme leader came to visit the South. This shows that North Korea has a strong will to improve inter-Korean relations." The ministry spokesperson further claimed that the Pyeongchang Olympics engagement was "the result of the consistent effort that the Moon Jae-in administration has made since its day of inauguration to restore inter-Korean relations...lead the initiative in a proactive manner and [find] resolution through peaceful means."⁶

Given the contrast with the Trump administration's coercive diplomacy, a major question surrounding Moon's pro-engagement policies is whether they allow space for North Korea to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington.⁷ This chapter analyzes recent inter-Korean engagement and finds that Seoul's efforts did not breach trust in the alliance and that the allies are not approaching a diplomatic rupture. There are signs of strain in the face of uncertainty, especially given Moon's ambitions regarding Korean national identity and Trump's unconventional alliance management style. Despite sometimes unhelpful political rhetoric and media coverage critical of bilateral relations, trust between the U.S. and

South Korean governments is allowing them to double down on the alliance, while shrewd diplomacy by the Moon administration has increased space for South Korea's middle power role in Asia.⁸

North Korea at the Olympics: Test for the U.S.-ROK Alliance?

Ahead of the Olympics, Moon said that South Koreans “need to protect inter-Korean engagement like a candlelight,” an emotive reference to the popular candlelight demonstrations that helped bring him to office.⁹ Moon's conviction for improving inter-Korean relations was demonstrated at the beginning of his term by bringing many pro-engagement officials back into government, many of whom had experience working directly with Pyongyang during previous progressive administrations.¹⁰ These South Korean officials engaged Pyongyang via secret messages and meetings in the latter part of 2017 so that North Korean participation in the Olympics did not come out of the blue with Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's speech.

Despite tensions built up over 2017 with North Korea's sixth nuclear test, provocative missile tests, heated rhetoric, and rebuff of Moon's public overtures, Pyongyang sent a sizable and highly visible delegation to the Winter Olympics in February 2018. The North Korean contingent of over 300 was made up mostly of performers: singers, an orchestra, a taekwondo demonstration team, and the famous all-female cheering squad.¹¹ Of the 22 North Korean athletes, most did not earn their spot to compete, and none medaled. But the North and South Korean athletes marched into the opening ceremony together under a unification flag as they had at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, the 2004 Summer Olympics at Athens, and other international sporting events. For the first time since table tennis and youth soccer tournaments in 1991, and for the first time at the Olympics, the two Koreas fielded a combined team. When the combined women's ice hockey team was introduced, “Arirang,” played in place of either country's national anthem.

Pyongyang also sent high-level political representatives to the Winter Olympics, as it did to the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon. Kim Yong-nam led the delegation to the opening ceremony. As the nominal head of state, he meets distinguished guests to Pyongyang whom Kim Jong-un cares not to meet, performs ceremonial roles, and represents North Korea at some international events (he attended the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi). Gen. Kim Yong-chol, a vice chairman of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party and director of the United Front (intelligence) Department led the delegation to the closing ceremony. Both delegations included senior officials focused on sports and inter-Korean relations, and Kim Jong-un sent his sister, Kim Yo-jong, to personally invite Moon to Pyongyang for a summit.

The Pyeongchang Olympics involved more sports diplomacy than seemed possible just months beforehand. Inter-Korean exchanges continued after the Olympics with South Korean K-pop stars holding a concert in Pyongyang in early April that was attended by Kim Jong-un and others in the North Korean elite. A joint concert was also held with North Korean singers, and the two Koreas staged a combined taekwondo event. Sports and cultural diplomacy helped reopen channels of high-level political communication between Pyongyang and Seoul, and restarted working-level cooperation. Also, the Kim regime

increased its acceptance of South Korea as a dialogue partner on security, notable because Pyongyang historically refused to discuss nuclear issues with Seoul, arguing those were to be addressed with the United States.

Olympics Diplomacy Raising Questions about U.S.-ROK Trust

The speed and scale of inter-Korean engagement raised key questions for trust in the U.S.-ROK alliance. First, whether the Moon administration is clear-eyed about the brutal nature of the Kim regime. Second, whether Seoul values the strength of the alliance over conflict avoidance. Third, whether the South Korean government remains committed to international sanctions demanding North Korea's denuclearization.

Many commentators criticized the Moon government for rolling out the red carpet for the North Koreans and handing them a propaganda victory; some even argued that North Korea should be banned from the Olympics.¹² North Korea is indeed a human rights abusing state that did not earn its ticket to the Winter Games, but when apartheid South Africa was excluded from the Olympics, it was not half a divided nation that neighbors the host country. The Olympics was an obvious domestic and international play for Moon, and not just because of his progressive politics. Since his inauguration, Moon was pinned between an aggressive North Korea, unfriendly China, and less predictable U.S. administration. It is thus not surprising that he took the opportunity to take the initiative, welcoming the world to Pyeongchang. Moon has long stressed the need for Seoul to be in the lead on inter-Korean relations, and for North-South cooperation to determine the course of unification.¹³ Overseas observers are justified in drawing attention to international standards and the grim realities of the North Korean regime, but ultimately, the people with the greatest interest and say in Korea's future are Koreans themselves.

For many South Koreans, U.S. "maximum pressure" on North Korea ran the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation; the Olympics thus offered a safety valve. Moon's domestic politics prompted him to reiterate that the North Korea nuclear issue must be resolved peacefully and "no military action on the Korean Peninsula shall be taken without prior consent of the Republic of Korea."¹⁴ It may have been grating to Americans for Seoul to advertise a veto over U.S. action when it has no such veto over North Korean military moves. But given Seoul's extreme vulnerability to North Korean attack and the importance of alliance coordination, Washington would almost certainly consult with South Korea before taking kinetic action. North Korea's participation in the Olympics did not meaningfully reduce the North Korean threat—it staged a military parade during the "Olympics truce" period and continued weapons modernizations and cyberattacks. But welcoming the North Koreans to Pyeongchang likely realized a "Peace Olympics" by forestalling North Korean nuclear or missile tests and reducing fears of artillery fire and terrorism.¹⁵

Nonetheless, many observers felt that the Moon administration bent the rules and made special allowances to facilitate North Korea's participation and high-level visits during the Olympics.¹⁶ The Kim regime likely intended to test sanctions enforcement and stir up divisions among South Koreans by sending provocative political and cultural figures to Pyeongchang. General Kim Yong-chol was under international economic sanctions and blamed by conservative ROK administrations for the 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan* that killed 46 South Korean sailors. Other North Koreans had to be given special travel waivers on humanitarian grounds from the United Nations in order to attend the Olympics. Meanwhile,

the South Korean taxpayer appeared to be footing much of the bill for performances by North Korea's large propaganda outfits, the Samjiyon Orchestra and cheering squad, raising transparency issues about sanctions enforcement. However, the Moon administration did consult with the UN and United States regarding sanctions exemptions and declined certain North Korean requests such as refueling the Mangyongbong-92 ferry. South Korean commitment to sanctions enforcement continued even as analysts suggested that UN resolutions were beginning to take a toll on the North Korean economy.¹⁷ Seoul did not soft-pedal implementation of UN sanctions after the Winter Games, nor did it remove its unilateral sanctions known as the "May 24 measures," or rush to restart the shuttered Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kungang tourism project.

Despite Some Daylight between Them, the ROK and United States Stayed on the Same Page

U.S. and South Korean leaders are fond of saying that there is no "daylight between them" when it comes to dealing with North Korea.¹⁸ That may be optimistic, but the Trump pressure campaign did leave room for diplomacy and the Moon engagement approach did not just revert to the Sunshine Policy of past progressive administrations. Much had changed since South Korean progressives were last in government a decade earlier: North Korea conducted numerous nuclear and missile tests, flagrantly attacked South Korea in the *Cheonan* sinking and Yeonpyeong Island shelling, and broke various international and inter-Korean agreements. Restarting the Kaesong industrial park and Mt. Kungang tourism facility are not just matters for ROK policy since those projects would likely violate current international sanctions.¹⁹ The Kim regime's commitment to *byungjin* replaced previous North Korean ambiguity on maintaining nuclear weapons, making the Sunshine Policy unsustainable and hardening South Korean public opinion.²⁰

Ahead of the Olympics, North Korea demonstrated little progress on denuclearization, missile test moratoriums, conventional military restraint, or human rights, but some South Koreans viewed U.S. vice president Mike Pence's positions at the Olympics as unhelpfully strict.²¹ Pence visited the *Cheonan* memorial, met with North Korean defectors, and traveled to South Korea with the father of Otto Warmbier, an American student who died from mistreatment by North Korean authorities. Pence avoided greeting the high-level North Korean delegation and did not stand to applaud the North Korean athletes walking in to the Winter Olympics opening ceremony with the South Koreans under a unification flag. Pence also skipped a pre-opening ceremony dinner where he would have been seated at the head table with the North Koreans and taken a group photo that included them. Moreover, before the close of the Olympics, the U.S. Treasury Department announced additional sanctions to crack down on North Korea's deceptive maritime shipping practices and illicit coal and fuel transports that help to fund its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.²²

Despite the different approaches of the Trump and Moon administrations, the allies largely remained coordinated and supportive of each other. Moon gave credit to Trump's pressure campaign for pushing North Korea into talks with the South, and there was strong U.S. support of South Korea's strategy of making the Olympics a success. Coordination was very close on security matters, and the U.S. Treasury Department gave inter-Korean engagement at the Olympics a pass from sanctions enforcement. The United States sent a large Olympics delegation and high-level political representation. Trump was increasingly restrained in

his tweets and rhetoric about North Korea. The U.S. delegation had even coordinated with the Moon administration regarding an encounter with the DPRK delegation. Pence was willing to talk with the North Koreans, and a meeting was scheduled, but the North Korean side cancelled at the last minute, presumably irked with the vice president's focus on denuclearization and North Korean human rights. After Pence's visit, the Trump administration indicated it would be willing to talk with North Korea without preconditions; but actual negotiations would require North Korea to commit to denuclearization, and any sanctions reduction would require progress on denuclearization. Meanwhile, the Moon administration consistently stated that denuclearization is a goal of its engagement policy.

Perhaps, the clearest sign of U.S.-ROK coordination was how the allies de-conflicted military exercises with the Olympics. Trump and Moon agreed to delay Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises to avoid overlap with the Winter Olympics and the subsequent Paralympics ending on March 18. The Trump administration saw the Olympics as a special case for de-conflicting military exercise schedules and supported the Moon administration's vision of creating an atmosphere for dialogue. At the same time, the allies agreed to maintain readiness of U.S. forces on the peninsula and close coordination between their militaries. This involves conducting two major theater-level command post exercises (Key Resolve and Ulchi Freedom Guardian) and one theater-level field training exercise (Foal Eagle) each year. Advocates of a "freeze for freeze" or "double suspension" arrangement tend to paint a false equivalency between the United States and North Korea regarding tensions or instability.²³ North Korea is the norm violator that threatens peace. It is a non-starter to suggest a freeze on legal U.S.-ROK military readiness and defensive interoperability in exchange for North Korea abstaining from violations of UN Security Council Resolutions. It was a strong indicator of U.S.-ROK trust that previously scheduled military exercises resumed in early April after the Olympics. It was also notable that the exercises occurred without derailing the engagement process.

The Spring of Summits: Building or Breaching Trust?

Moon clearly did not want to miss the window for engaging North Korea that had been opened with the Olympics. He learned from the experience of the Roh Moo-hyun administration (for which he was chief of staff), that a last-minute inter-Korean summit does not succeed because of insufficient time to implement agreements before the next election. As a result, Moon sought an early inter-Korean summit to continue the momentum from the Olympics for deescalating tensions and building peace on the peninsula. But Moon and his advisers knew that if South Korea drastically improved relations with Kim Jong-un with no progress on denuclearization, trust between Seoul and Washington would be seriously damaged. Hence, they pushed for a spring of high-level shuttle diplomacy to engage North Korea multilaterally.

The Moon government engaged in working level and mil-mil talks at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea. Moon's national security adviser, Chung Eui-yong, and spy chief Suh Hoon, traveled to Pyongyang in early March 2018. It was the first occasion South Korean officials had met with Kim Jong-un since he took power in late 2011. Kim

appeared to receive them warmly, held the meeting at the Workers' Party headquarters, spent four hours with them, and allowed North Korean media coverage. The two Koreas also agreed to establish a hotline between their leaders.

Immediately afterward, South Korea sent its top officials to Washington to report on their meeting with Kim Jong-un. Chung recounted that North Korea affirmed its commitment to denuclearize, pledged not to use nuclear or conventional weapons against South Korea, and expressed willingness to freeze nuclear and missile activities during talks with the United States. Chung also carried a message that Kim wished to meet Trump in person. What happened next will be extensively reviewed and debated by historians but suggested an impressive level of U.S.-ROK trust. Based on Chung's briefing, Trump agreed to meet with Kim and asked the South Korean national security adviser to draft, with White House officials, a statement about a Trump-Kim summit, that Chung would announce outside the White House that evening.²⁴ Trump then personally expressed confidence in Moon and endorsed his efforts for a Korean peace declaration.

Moon continued to move quickly on diplomacy, showing attention to achieving the "right conditions" for an inter-Korean summit: getting North Korea to commit to talking about denuclearization and to have the inter-Korean summit follow resumption of substantive contacts between the U.S. and DPRK. The Moon-Kim meeting on April 27 at Panmunjom was a political victory for Moon because it was the first inter-Korean summit at a neutral location, effectively hosted by South Korea, so Moon avoided the optics of appearing to pay tribute to or appease the Kim regime in Pyongyang. High-level encounters during the Olympics occurred in the context of cultural diplomacy; meeting at Panmunjom carried the added symbolism of military confidence building.

The first Moon-Kim meeting was only the third inter-Korean summit and carried much symbolism for historical reconciliation. Kim Jong-un walked from the North Korean side to meet Moon at the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) at the truce village where the Korean War armistice was signed. The location is also very near where violent incidents occurred, including when North Korea fired gunshots at a DPRK soldier who fled to the South in November 2017. Moon and Kim shook hands at the MDL, Kim stepped onto the South Korean side and then invited Moon to briefly step into the North. The details of the meeting, from the ceremony, decoration, music, food, and video were all designed with inter-Korean symbolism. Some of Moon and Kim's talks appeared quite personal, and the two planted an inter-Korean peace tree in the DMZ—remarkable given how as a young soldier, Moon participated in Operation Paul Bunyan to remove a tree that was the site of the 1976 axe murder incident. As during the Olympics, North Korea was engaged in smile diplomacy with South Korea's support. Kim Jong-un appeared unfiltered in the international media for the first time and attempted to project a normal country image and charm offensive with his sister and wife in visible roles.

Many expected the inter-Korean summit to be long on symbolism and short on substance. Critics pointed out that new declarations should not absolve North Korea of its previous commitments, and engagement should not violate existing UN sanctions. But the "Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula" offered a meaningful framework for engagement while stressing denuclearization. It was

more than symbolic for Kim to be the first North Korean leader to step foot onto the South Korean side, maintain a testing freeze, and include denuclearization in an inter-Korean statement. North Korea made a high-profile announcement of nuclear restraint in advance of the meeting; afterwards, it invited international journalists to witness the dynamite closure of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site tunnels.

While these moves do not represent a strategic decision to denuclearize, much less constitute irreversible dismantlement, the two Koreas established a basis for conflict prevention and confidence building with steps that have significance in North Korean domestic politics. The Kim regime also seemed to temper some of its explicit and expected demands, at least temporarily. These include that U.S.-ROK exercises cease, U.S. forces withdraw from the peninsula, the Kaesong and Mt. Kumgang projects be reopened, certain North Korean escapees be returned by South Korea, and Pyongyang only discusses denuclearization with Washington.

Dramatically, the inter-Korean summit was part of a larger schedule of summitry in spring 2018. The U.S. and ROK sides reacted in measured and coordinated fashion to abrupt China-DPRK summits and exchanges between high-level officials in Beijing and Pyongyang. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo of Japan met in a summit with Trump, spoke over the phone often with Trump and Moon, and hosted a trilateral Japan-ROK-China summit in Tokyo. Moon again visited Trump at the White House in May 2018 to discuss the results of the inter-Korean summit and coordinate on a meeting between Trump and Kim Jong-un. When the U.S.-DPRK meeting slated for June 12 in Singapore appeared at risk of cancellation, Moon managed to hold a snap second summit with Kim in the DMZ in an attempt to bring North Korea back on track.

Underappreciated by the first draft of history written by the media, U.S.-ROK trust was actually higher than many thought going into and coming out of the Winter Olympics, helping to make the spring of summits possible. Standing next to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said, “the close communication and trust between Presidents Trump and Moon have been the driving force that has brought us to this point of breakthrough for the denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula.”²⁵ However, the long-term consequences of summit diplomacy are likely to hinge on the maintenance of U.S.-ROK trust through a process of South Korean domestic political and national identity change, and the Trump administration’s unconventional approach to security alliance policy.

Political Contestation of Korean National Identity

The Moon administration is not only engaged in high-stakes diplomacy, it has thus far adroitly navigated domestic politics, maintaining high public approval rates and keeping the conservative opposition on the defensive. The South Korean government did everything it could to make the Pyeongchang Olympics a success in terms of inter-Korean relations and domestic support. Moon administration officials asked South Korean media not to focus on negative aspects of DPRK participation in the Olympics or publish speculation that might offend Kim Jong-un, but also presented a positive narrative of inter-Korean reconciliation strongly tied to progressive views of national identity. South Korean conservatives, ideologically opposed to embracing the Kim regime, expressed concerns about the strategic

and financial costs of engaging North Korea. They demanded greater transparency, so the public could assess the benefits of sports diplomacy versus the costs of embracing a pariah state that threatens its region and abuses its people. Conservatives argued that engaging North Korea presents trade-offs for sanctions enforcement and diplomatic relations with other countries and that delaying U.S.-ROK military exercises damages readiness and the credibility of deterrence. In any event, South Korea achieved a successful Olympics not disrupted by North Korean missile or nuclear tests, and it witnessed increased domestic and international support for engagement.

Even before the Olympics, Moon had set out to unify South Korea under a more progressive national identity. He trumpeted the people power of the Candlelight revolution that unseated his predecessor, Park Geun-hye. Moon wasted no time scrapping Park's conservative history textbook "reforms" and elevating national commemorations of the Gwangju Uprising and Jeju Massacre, historical events considered by progressives to be pinnacles of resistance against military authoritarianism but downplayed by conservative administrations. After the Olympics, Moon looked to restore inter-Korean agreements made during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations and to deepen a pan-Korean identity.

Remarkably, at the April 27 Panmunjom summit, Moon appeared to join Kim Jong-un in blaming former presidents Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak for a lost decade in inter-Korean relations, defined by frayed ties and unmet agreements. To South Korean conservatives, this sounded like revisionist history because Lee closed the Mt. Kumgang tourism project after North Korean soldiers shot a South Korean woman in the back. The Lee administration restricted trade with North Korea because of the *Cheonan* sinking. Park later closed the Kaesong complex after a series of North Korean nuclear and missile tests. Some South Korean conservatives allege political retribution as Moon's two immediate predecessors, both conservative presidents, are incarcerated for corruption and larger investigations into the dealings of their administrations and associates are ongoing. Opposition party leaders were predictably critical of the Panmunjom summit. Hong Joon-pyo, the then chair of the Liberty Korea Party, said that Chamberlain was fooled by Hitler at Munich, but Moon was a co-conspirator at Panmunjom. Yoo Seong-min, co-chair of the Bareunmirae Party, said that no one should be impressed by handshakes with Kim Jong-un since North Korea has not changed since having cheated on all previous inter-Korean agreements.²⁶

Such political wrangling matters not only for South Korea's summer 2018 elections, but also for the longer-term trajectory of national identity. Many among South Korea's young generation share formative experiences of the 2010 *Cheonan* sinking and Yeonpyeong Island shelling, in addition to North Korea's provocative nuclear and missile tests. In other words, the young generation is not predisposed to the Sunshine Policy or embracing North Korea. Many lack enthusiasm for Korean unification, given identity distance from North Korea and the expected financial costs. However, most want peace and stability, and were moved by the emotional symbolism of the Olympics and Panmunjom summit. The Moon administration looks to build upon that sentiment by enshrining inter-Korean engagement in domestic law, using taxpayer money to promote inter-Korean exchanges, and expanding municipal involvement in those exchanges after progressive candidates make advances in the summer local elections.

There are also questions of South Korean identity vis-à-vis China and Japan. These were on display during the recent dispute when Beijing exercised diplomatic and economic pressure on Seoul over the deployment of a U.S. missile defense system known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea. Moon and his advisers were skeptics of THAAD during the campaign, and its deployment faced uncertainty at the beginning of Moon's tenure. Ultimately, Seoul stood its ground and prioritized the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance in defending against North Korea. But Seoul offered Beijing assurances labeled the "three noes": no intention of welcoming additional THAAD batteries, no plan of participating in a regional missile defense network, and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with Japan and the United States. As a result, some American strategists expressed concern about Seoul bandwagoning with Beijing, not just economically, but also in dealing with North Korea.²⁷ At the Panmunjom summit, Moon and Kim emphasized the homogeneity and oneness of the two Koreas, evoking common ethnicity (*minjok*) dozens of times in their speeches and joint statement. For some Japanese, this raises concerns about inter-Korean unity on celebrations of historical anniversaries involving Japanese colonialism, the status of the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, and reconciliation for surviving "comfort women" victims.²⁸

All this matters for trust in the U.S.-ROK alliance because South Korean identity may internalize a lower threat perception of North Korea and a declining opinion of the United States. South Koreans could ask: why pay more of the stationing costs of U.S. troops or compromise on trade as Trump demands? Why host THAAD missile defenses and maintain the frequency and scale of U.S.-ROK military exercises? Why keep strategic distance from Beijing and accept U.S. requests for greater trilateral cooperation with Japan? How South Koreans answer these questions will depend on their national identity politics, which will also interact with the alliance management policies of the United States.

Trump's Alliance Management Style a Source of Uncertainty

Any new national leader can be expected to differentiate in substance and style from their predecessor, but Trump has taken that to a new level, pulling out from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, the Paris climate change agreement, and the Iran nuclear deal, and renegotiating the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). Especially in presentation, Trump departs from his predecessors with the rhetorical tone of his tweets and speeches, extreme frankness in public settings, assault on the "establishment," and constant disruption of the news narrative.

Trump has asserted that the United States gets little in return for protecting South Korea, while Seoul benefits disproportionately from trade and takes American jobs. Such rhetoric can damage trust because positive perceptions about an ally's role and values can come into question, driving suspicion and worst-case scenario planning. Consistent, transparent communication is important for trust. Allies expect advance notification and consultation regarding policy changes via diplomatic channels, not surprise developments announced via Twitter.

South Koreans also perceived uncertainty in the Trump administration's decision-making process. On the one hand, Trump's intuition to "flip the script" by front-loading interaction between leaders ahead of a usually drawn out working-level process may interface productively with the North Korean system. But South Koreans were made nervous by

Trump's threats to walk away from talks, and the appearance that U.S. diplomacy was understaffed. The Trump administration was slow to fill positions in the State Department in particular and relied heavily on the intelligence channel to communicate with North Korea. Trump's decision to meet Kim Jong-un seemed abrupt to U.S. allies and stoked concerns that he may draw down U.S. forces in Korea and fall into a North Korean trap.

Aides argue that Trump was elected to do things differently, and that the North Korea policies of previous administrations, Democrat and Republican, did not work. Supporters also claim that Trump's unconventional rhetoric toward North Korea, diplomatic maneuvers with China, and military and economic pressure effectively brought Kim to the negotiating table. Moreover, the Trump policy team on North Korea has expanded over time, coordinated with South Korea, and communicated directly with the Kim regime. Pompeo first visited Pyongyang as CIA director to meet Kim Jong-un and confirm North Korean intentions for a summit. On his second visit, then as secretary of state, Pompeo again met Kim, discussed denuclearization, and returned with three Americans who had been long detained in North Korea. This bodes well for negotiations, and Trump appears to be seized with the idea of ending the state of war on the Korean Peninsula.

However, the policy personnel in the United States has gotten tougher on Pyongyang than when the Trump administration embarked on its "maximum pressure" campaign. Seasoned diplomat Joseph Yun retired, Pompeo replaced Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, PACOM Commander Admiral Harry Harris rather than a professor will become U.S. ambassador to Seoul, and a more hawkish figure may take over for the deterrence-minded Gen. Vincent Brooks as commander of U.S. Forces Korea. National security adviser H.R. McMaster was succeeded by John Bolton, who has a record of advocating regime change; his "Libya model" comments about denuclearization apparently provoked North Korea since the Libya story did not end well for Muammar Gaddafi.

Trump himself has expressed great optimism for improvement in U.S.-DPRK relations and economic development cooperation, but he has also made clear that the U.S. military is ready if necessary, and sanctions should continue until North Korea denuclearizes. If the spring of summits fails to advance denuclearization, the Trump administration may return to a hawkish approach on North Korea. Trump already directed the U.S. military to update Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) plans and considered ordering military families home from South Korea. If such a pullout occurred, it would prompt a crisis of confidence in South Korea's security and the U.S.-ROK alliance because military action would appear imminent.

Conclusion: Preserving Trust in the Alliance

Many observers associate fluctuations in the strength of the alliance with policy changes by different occupants of the White House and Blue House.²⁹ After new leaders come to office, it is easy to attribute policy changes and coordination failures to their intentions and characteristics, even though the reality of alliance management is much more complex. Leadership changes and initiatives are important, but it should not be forgotten how enduring national interests and bilateral institutions provide the alliance with continuity. Mutual trust has allowed the U.S.-ROK alliance to cooperatively address North Korean provocations, relations with China and Japan, and basing and command reorganization.

Inter-governmental trust holds an alliance together, despite changes in leadership. But there is downward pressure on bilateral trust beyond the personalities and politics of the current residents of the White House and Blue House. If South Korean identity perceptions vis-à-vis North Korea change dramatically, and if the Trump administration's style of alliance management is evaluated negatively by South Koreans, the trust-based foundation of alliance cooperation could be eroded.

However, controversies over inter-Korean diplomacy at the Olympics did not breach trust in the alliance. Americans understood that Moon wanted to host an Olympics safe from North Korean provocations and full of reconciliation theater. More than a few American analysts support Moon's engagement policies and criticize Trump's coercive diplomacy. They suggest exploratory talks during which North Korea would not test nuclear devices or long-range missiles, a resumption of multilateral negotiations, and if Pyongyang recommit to denuclearization, the U.S. and DPRK could set up diplomatic Interest Sections in each other's capitals.³⁰ Meanwhile, skeptics insist that Pyongyang is trying to drive a wedge between Seoul and its partners and to "normalize" international tolerance or acceptance of its nuclear status.

Questions remain about the trajectory of South Korean and U.S. policy going forward. Even if policies do not change much, rhetoric based on emotions and political pandering (rather than on facts and national interests) can degrade perceptions in the other country about its ally and set off a downward spiral of trust. The era of dealing with a North Korean missile test by possibly "blowing it off the launch pad" has past. Talk of giving North Korea a "bloody nose" may be good coercive diplomacy, but not reasonable military action. The expected utility and effectiveness of such a strike is much less than the expected risks, unless the United States and its allies had credible intelligence that the North Koreans were about to launch a nuclear attack.³¹

Trump and Moon agreed that the United States and ROK do not seek North Korean regime change or collapse. But there should be pressure, otherwise North Korea will not denuclearize. The regime currently sees more safety with its nuclear weapons programs than without. To change that calculation, Trump is right that Chinese cooperation on pressure is needed, but Moon has a point that the carrots previously on offer look too small to North Korea. Also, for Moon, it is important to reassure his domestic audience there will not be a military conflict and to show he is pushing for a diplomatic process. The challenge is persuading Pyongyang to change its behavior. That calls for pressure via coordinated implementation of policy among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The calibration for Moon is to seek that cooperation without looking soft, while the calibration for Trump is not to appear too hardline to realize that cooperation.

Some Korean progressives seem to want the United States to play "bad cop" focused on denuclearization and human rights while South Korea plays "good cop" focused on social and economic engagement. Others want Seoul to play an intermediary role between Pyongyang and Washington and even between Washington and Beijing. That risks U.S.-ROK trust. It is fine for Washington and Seoul to productively differentiate roles, but staying on the same page is essential so that the efforts by one are not misconstrued as undermining the efforts of the other. Eventually, sanctions relief and economic cooperation can accompany North Korean progress toward denuclearization. Rushed solutions and grand bargains risk unintended consequences. The safer bet is on better enforcing sanctions, strengthening deterrence, and reinforcing alliances, while engaging Pyongyang in sustainable dialogue.³²

Meaningful dialogue does not mean giving North Korea something for nothing. It means Pyongyang should desist from provocations and return to negotiations. If North Korea maintained a testing freeze, moved artillery and troops back from the DMZ, and allowed separated family reunions, that would be a good start for confidence building and further humanitarian initiatives. In his Berlin speech, Moon offered such assistance on flooding, infectious diseases, and forest management.³³

The Moon government recognizes that South Korea has more to lose in terms of trust and cooperation with the United States than it presently has to gain with North Korea. This is why Seoul continues to double down on the alliance. But U.S. policymakers should avoid a situation where South Koreans blame America for a lost opportunity for transformative diplomacy. South Koreans must also be wary about being accused of soft-pedaling during the “last chance” to arrest North Korea’s nuclear missile development. Confidence building with Pyongyang can productively lower tensions and test North Korean intentions, but such efforts should not contradict UN sanctions or sacrifice trust between Washington and Seoul.

Endnotes

¹ The author appreciates excellent research assistance from Kristie Youngeun Kang.

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