



South Korea Elects the Anti-Trump: Whither the Washington-Seoul Alliance?

Doug Bandow

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SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA—The Trump administration has placed North Korea at the top of its priority list. So far, however, the president has paid little attention to Seoul's perspective. President Donald Trump consulted with both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but made no similar call to South Korean leaders.

That in part reflects the fact that the Republic of Korea only last week ended a lengthy political crisis with the election of Moon Jae-in as president. Presidents Moon and Trump spoke last week, with the latter extending a summit invitation. But such a meeting might divide as much as unite.

President Moon once was jailed for protesting against the military dictatorship and became a human rights lawyer. He was friends with another activist attorney, Roh Moo-hyun, eventually working to elect the latter as president, for whom he served as chief of staff.

President Moon has a well-developed ideology. His foreign policy is pacific, most notably supporting the "Sunshine Policy," first initiated by President Kim Dae-jung, a former dissident elected president in 1997, and continued by President Roh.

As a result, the South transferred an estimated \$10 billion in various forms to Pyongyang even as the latter was developing missiles and nukes. Moon advocates reopening and even expanding the Kaesong Industrial Complex, for ROK companies which hire North Korean workers. Moon also proposed resuming the Six Party Talks, intended to lead to denuclearization, as well as staging a third North-South presidential summit in Pyongyang.

Matched with, and possibly against, Moon, is Donald Trump. The president sharply criticized the alliance during the campaign, then seemed to embrace it. He proposed talking with the North's Kim Jong-un, even saying he'd be honored to do so, but his aides set conditions the president didn't mention.

He demanded that the ROK spend more on the military and provide \$1 billion for the THAAD missile system, only to have those positions downplayed, by his appointees. But all of them seemed to threaten military action, which could trigger a full-scale war.

Officially the Seoul says little about the Trump presidency. Even privately officials are circumspect.

With a new president just elected they emphasize that they can't speak for their government. And even if they could they wouldn't openly criticize the U.S. administration. Nevertheless, people with whom I spoke seemed uncomfortable discussing future relations with the U.S.

Those outside government are less hesitant to express their views. President Trump's criticism of the alliance and especially his inconstancy unsettle even America's best friends. Talk of military action against the North is particularly disconcerting: would the administration really risk triggering another Korean War, I was asked more than once?

President Trump has his defenders, but they are a distinct minority. Their hopes likely are wishful thinking.

President Moon made his political career battling Korea's long-time military dictatorship, and, indirectly, the U.S., which backed that regime. Moon maintained his commitment to the Sunshine Policy despite Pyongyang's sometimes violent provocations. He even has talked about creating an "economic community" with the North.

Moon also advocated negotiation. He opposed deployment of THAAD, a joint U.S.-ROK initiative intended to protect against a North Korean attack. Perhaps most important, he talked about the ROK taking a more active role in policy toward the North.

A good politician, Moon softened many of his positions during the campaign as his lead shrank. Nevertheless, he still varies sharply from the Trump administration. And many of his key staffers are from the radical left.

Thus, the alliance likely faces rough waters. In general Moon is less likely to acquiesce to Washington's views. Indeed, Moon's proposals would undercut, even obstruct, Washington's objectives.

For instance, more South Korean economic engagement necessarily eases pressure on the North. If the South increases aid and investment, Washington can hardly insist that China cut its economic ties with the North. South Korean negotiations with few preconditions would leave the U.S. isolated in refusing to talk unless Pyongyang accedes to the former's demands.

No doubt the two governments will do their best to paper over difficulties as they arise. But President Moon strongly believes in a different path, seemingly incompatible with the Trump administration's stated plans. If North Korean behavior doesn't drive the two allies together, South Koreans may end up paying a high price for subcontracting out their security to Washington.

Doug Bandow is a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan and a Senior Fellow at the Cato institute.