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President-Elect Donald Trump Joins South Korea's Left In Pushing New Korea Policy

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South Korea's political convulsions seem likely to deliver a new president sooner rather than later. Elections are scheduled for December, but if the Constitutional Court ratifies the National Assembly's impeachment of President the poll will come months sooner.

What remains of the devastated ruling party hopes for salvation through the candidacy of former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. After massive rallies against Park even some ruling party parliamentarians voted for her impeachment. However, the opposition has the advantage, especially the sooner the vote is held.

There are plenty of contenders on the left. On the rise is Seongnam Mayor Lee Jae-myung, who has gained notoriety pushing for Park's ouster. Lee styles himself as the Korean Bernie Sanders, railing against economic inequality and corporate privilege.

Of greater interest to Washington, however, is Lee's perspective on security issues. The Republic of Korea's left long has had a love/hate relationship with America. Washington's support for the military dictatorships of Park's father, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan, who emerged after Park pere's assassination, soured many South Koreans on the alliance. Nevertheless, fear of North Korea and desire to avoid having to bear the full cost of defending against the North led even Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun to preserve the relationship. Similarly, the main opposition party's formal leader and current presumptive presidential nominee Moon Jae-in supports the status quo with the U.S.

Not Lee, however. He has a very different perspective on security issues, and sharply antagonistic opinions as to America's role. He recently complained that U.S.-ROK ties had "degenerated into a subordinate relationship where we give whatever amounts of money they ask us to give." Instead, he argued, "The U.S. should be begging us for the defense of East Asia." He suggested defenestrating America's nearly 29,000 troops, renegotiating the bilateral free trade agreement, and talking with North Korea's Kim Jong-un.

Ironically, the incoming Trump administration might be sympathetic to all of these policies, though perhaps for different reasons than Lee. President-elect Donald Trump appears to be a committed protectionist and views virtually any agreement reducing any U.S. trade barriers as unfair to America; presumably he believes this applies to South Korea. He might be happy to tear up the FTA, even though Americans would pay more for imports and sell fewer exports, an economically painful combination.

Candidate Trump also indicated his willingness to talk with Kim. The president-elect did not

indicate whether he meant personally meet or governments engage, but broadly speaking it's a sensible idea. Refusing to have diplomatic relations or other sustained contact for the last 69 years has achieved nothing. Isolation has not convinced Pyongyang to give up its nuclear and missile programs.

Engagement offers no sure path to success, of course. But regular contact might discover limited areas where agreement was possible, encourage modest confidence-building measures, reduce tensions and perceived threats, and provide a small window into an almost uniquely opaque system. Negotiations should not be seen as a reward with the North, but the best means to salvage something from years of U.S. failure in dealing with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Finally, Trump criticized America's troop presence: "We have 28,000 soldiers on the line in South Korea between the madman and them," yet "We get practically nothing compared to the cost of this." His solution: "They have to protect themselves or they have to pay us." However, he seemed to instinctively recognize that U.S. military personnel should not be hired out like mercenaries: "We are better off frankly if South Korea is going to start protecting itself." Which should mean bringing the garrison home.

The fighting stopped more than 63 years ago. The South has raced past the DPRK in virtually every measure of national power. The former's economy is about 40 times that of the North. The ROK overwhelmingly wins the two nations' technology race. Pyongyang's old allies, China and Russia, would not back the North in a war.

Indeed, U.S. policy has succeeded, providing a defense shield behind which South Korea could develop. Seoul is now capable of doing what nation states normally are expected to do: protect themselves against foreign threats. There's no longer any reason for Americans to defend the South. Washington should bring its forces home, allowing South Koreans to do whatever they believe necessary to safeguard their own nation.

Thus, rather than wait for President Lee, or whoever else wins the South Korean election, to send the U.S. home, President Trump should begin the process as soon as he takes office. He should announce that his objective is to turn over the ROK's conventional defense to Seoul, indicate that he will negotiate the withdrawal period for American troops with the new South Korean president, and offer to talk with Pyongyang.

However, there is one place where Trump should disagree with Lee. And that is on the defense of East Asia. Unless Lee has discovered a new way of thinking about geography, he will come to realize that the ROK actually is in the region. Thus, regional stability and security matter to his nation.

In contrast, America is thousands of miles away, on the other side of the world's largest ocean. A total regional meltdown would cost the U.S. economically by disrupting commerce, but would not threaten America's safety. There would be no North Korean or Chinese expeditionary force headed toward the U.S. No civil war on America's borders. Not even a flood of refugees seeking sanctuary in the U.S.

Thus, even when it comes to East Asia the U.S. presence serves the ROK (as well as Japan and other friendly states) far more than it does America. If anyone should be paying anyone, the South should be writing Washington a check. Better, however, would be for Seoul to do more with its own resources to protect its own interests. No more relying on the U.S. for protection.

If Lee is elected and decides that the region doesn't matter, President Trump should wave a hearty good bye as he orders America's troops home. Washington officials should stop allowing other nations to manipulate them into serving other nations' interests.

Indeed, it shouldn't matter to the U.S. who ends up as South Korea's president. The Trump administration should improve American security by pulling the U.S. out of the Korean imbroglio. It would be especially easy to do so if Lee Jae-myung is elected. Then all the Trump administration would need do is implement Lee's election program.

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