



## The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Is Now Asia's Oddest Couple

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The Trump administration has placed North Korea at the top of its priority list. Despite threatening war on the Korean Peninsula, however, the president so far has paid little attention to Seoul's perspective. President Donald Trump consulted with both Chinese president Xi Jinping and Japanese 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. President Park Geun-hye was charged with corruption and impeached by the National Assembly last December; in the interim the appointed prime minister served as acting president. Moon Jae-in was elected to replace her last Wednesday, in a vote advanced from December of this year.

Presidents Moon and Trump spoke last week, with the latter extending a summit invitation. But such a meeting might divide as much as unite. For instance, when President Kim Dae-jung visited President George W. Bush in Washington in March 2001, their differences were on public display.

Just as Presidents Kim and Bush were very different, so are Presidents Moon and Trump. Moon's father was a refugee, and President Moon served in South Korea's Special Forces. He 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. Moon ran for president in 2012, losing narrowly to Park. He headed the opposition party in the interim and was well positioned when Park's presidency imploded, essentially taking down the conservative ruling party as well.

President Moon has a well-developed ideology. A liberal, his economics run toward Bernie Sanders. He promised to reign in South Korea's dominant chaebols, or corporate conglomerates. 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. The Kaesong Industrial Complex was constructed in the North, for ROK companies that hired North Korean workers, providing Pyongyang with

around \$100 million in hard currency annually. Moon advocates reopening and even expanding Kaesong. Moon also proposed resuming the Six-Party Talks, intended to lead to denuclearization, as well as initiating bilateral talks, including a third North-South presidential summit in Pyongyang.

Matched with, and possibly against, Moon is Donald Trump. His administration's policy toward both South and North Korea is, at best, in flux. 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 that 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, even dismissed, by his appointees. About the only policy he and those who supposedly work for him agree on is threatening military action, which most observers, and almost all South Koreans, view as inconceivable.

Officially, the South Korean government 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. government. Nevertheless, people with whom I spoke seemed uncomfortable discussing future relations with the Trump administration.

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. Long reliant on America for their nation's defense, they are nervous about the future. Talk of military action against the North is particularly disconcerting: I was asked more than once, would the administration really risk triggering another Korean War?

President Trump has his defenders, but they are a distinct minority. A couple of analysts argued that the rhetoric of the two presidents was similar—mention of possible negotiations and preconditions for engagement. One even repeated National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster's unconvincing dismissal of the president's demand for \$1 billion for THAAD: that the comment merely reflected the president's general concern with burden sharing. Another researcher believed the threat of military action merely reflected Washington's past commitment to South Korea's security.

All this is likely wishful thinking.

President Moon made his political career battling Korea's long-time military dictatorship and, indirectly, the United States, which backed that regime. Roh, aided by Moon, was elected in part due to a surge of anti-Americanism triggered by the deaths of two teenage girls in a traffic accident involving U.S. soldiers. Although Roh moderated his position toward the alliance after his election, the tension was palpable.

Moon was committed to the Sunshine Policy, which emphasized engagement over confrontation with North Korea. He maintained that commitment despite Pyongyang's continued missile and nuclear development and sometimes violent provocations.

During the campaign he urged revival of the Sunshine Policy, which some have nicknamed the Moonshine Policy, including reopening Kaesong. He even talked about creating an “economic community” with the North.

Moon also advocated negotiation. He urged restarting the Six-Party Talks, involving China, Russia, Japan, the United States and the two Koreas. He proposed bilateral talks with the North, explaining that he wanted to make his first foreign trip to Pyongyang. He opposed deployment of THAAD, a joint U.S.-ROK initiative intended to protect against a North Korean attack. And, unsurprisingly, he would not support starting another war on the peninsula. 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 shrunk. He talked of setting conditions for negotiations, temporized on THAAD and announced that Washington, instead, would be his first travel destination. Nevertheless, in all of these areas he still varies sharply from the Trump administration. And many of his key staffers are from the radical left. For instance, his chief of staff, thirty-nine-year-old Im Jong-seok, once organized a student takeover of the U.S. ambassador’s office and even was jailed for promoting contacts with Pyongyang.

Moon’s perspective is perfectly defensible, though naïve, at least regarding North Korea’s willingness to moderate its behavior. The North’s latest missile test suggests that Pyongyang is not in a conciliatory mood. However, the alliance long ago lost its *raison d’être*. Having dramatically surpassed North Korea economically and in most other measures of national power, Seoul is capable of defending itself and deciding its own policy toward the North.

Nevertheless, the alliance remains—and it likely faces rough waters. In general, Moon is less likely to acquiesce to Washington’s views.

The Trump administration stated its intention to apply maximum pressure on the North. That means more economic sanctions and threats of war. The president indicated his interest in talks, but apparently only with preconditions, most notably agreeing to Washington’s demands first. (Alas, North Korea’s most recent missile test likely is Kim Jong-un’s response to President Trump.) The administration also placed great emphasis on winning Beijing’s assistance in limiting aid and trade with the North. Although Secretaries Jim Mattis and Rex Tillerson downplayed the issue of burden sharing, it is perhaps the only constant of the president’s comments on the alliance.

In all of these areas the Moon administration threatens to undercut, even obstruct, Washington’s objectives. 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 United States isolated in refusing to talk unless Pyongyang accedes to the former’s demands. South Korean policymakers uniformly contend that Seoul owes nothing more financially. And there is little doubt that Moon’s government would oppose any proposed military action.

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. At the same time, President Trump is likely to react badly to any resistance to his priorities. North Korean behavior might drive the two allies together, but if not South Koreans may find end up paying a high price for subcontracting out their security to Washington.

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