



Report from Seoul: South Koreans Are Also Voting on Kim Jong-un—and Donald Trump

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An accident of geography created the foundation for inter-Korean relations. South Korea's capital, Seoul, is just thirty or so miles from the Demilitarized Zone, north of which sits the North's sizeable if aging military. In any war Seoul, the country's economic, political and population center, would face destruction.

The city is one of the world's great metropolises; roughly half of the nation's people live in Seoul and the surrounding province. The city pulses with commerce—and politics too. The Blue House, home to the president, will soon have a new resident as South Koreans vote on Tuesday to replace disgraced and impeached Park Geun-hye.

The Republic of Korea's political transition promises major change. Likely victor Moon Jae-in, the loser to Park five years ago, is on the left, having served as chief of staff to the late Roh Moo-hyun. Moon's economics trend toward America's Sen. Bernie Sanders—criticism of the corporate conglomerates that play a dominating role in South Korea, proposals to create public-sector jobs, and concern over labor conditions and income inequality.

In this Moon matches the popular mood after the Park scandal, which was rooted in part in corporate political abuses. His foreign-policy views also are on the left. Moon hails from the same political movement that propelled Roh to power. The latter was elected in the midst of a burst of anti-Americanism following a traffic accident that killed a couple of teenage girls. Roh was a strong proponent of the Sunshine Policy, which offered the Democratic People's Republic of Korea subsidies and aid in an attempt to purchase peace.

The Sunshine Policy was abandoned by Roh's two right-leaning successors, but Moon advocates reviving the policy, including reopening and even expanding the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which provided the North with nearly \$100 million in hard currency annually. Moon also opposed deployment of the THAAD antimissile system, which sparked a row with China. Although he tempered his positions during the campaign—for a time he appeared to lose ground to the center-left candidate Ahn Cheol-soo, who takes more hawkish foreign policy positions—Moon might not be inclined to cooperate with the Trump administration's plan to squeeze the North economically and certainly would oppose threats of a military "solution."

President Donald Trump is the great unknown. South Koreans accustomed to Washington's protection were unsettled by his campaign criticism of the alliance. He complained that the South

didn't spend enough on the military—undoubtedly true in the sense that Seoul underinvests in defense since it can rely on America. He also complained that the United States didn't get good value for its money spent—also clearly correct, since there is no longer a Cold War to give the Korean Peninsula special geostrategic importance for Washington. South Korea's protection self-evidently should matter more to South Koreans than Americans.

Subsequent assurances to Seoul from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis calmed the waters, but then the president threatened preventative war against the DPRK, announced he was sending a nonexistent armada to Korea, said the South should pay for THAAD, and threatened to tear up the two nations' Free Trade Agreement. In response, as in *The Wizard of Oz*, National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster told the South Korean government to pay no attention to the man sitting in the Oval Office.

It was not a performance likely to enhance the South Korean people's confidence in Washington's commitment to their well-being.

Of greatest danger is the administration's constant insistence that "all options are on the table." This long has been Washington's standard formulation for threatening war. It was a routine refrain applied to Iran prior to the signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Few in South Korea are inclined to support military strikes against the North. South Koreans have lived with North Korea's constant threats and intermittent provocations for years while using the peace to turn their nation into a prosperous democracy. Few expect the DPRK to attack. But they know that if Washington starts shooting, a Second Korean War is not only possible, but likely.

In advocating the possible use of force, since, he noted, any conflict would be in the ROK rather than America, Sen. Lindsey Graham acknowledged that it would "be bad for South Korea." But that barely describes the horror that almost certainly would result.

The North has artillery dug in along the DMZ north of Seoul, as well as Scud missiles. The DPRK could augment high explosives with biological, chemical and possibly nuclear weapons. North Korea also has abundant soldiers and equipment which, despite serious deficiencies, might reach Seoul despite allied air superiority. Backed by the United States the ROK would win, but at very high price.

It would be a tragic irony for the United States to spend sixty-four years working to prevent recurrence of conflict on the peninsula, only to trigger one of extraordinary destructiveness. And while Sen. Graham is right that the conflict would not occur on U.S. territory, plenty of Americans would die fighting on the peninsula and in possible missile attacks on American bases in the region. It would have to be vital interest indeed to warrant also sacrificing the lives of potentially hundreds of thousands of Koreans, as well as Chinese, Japanese and Russians affected by the war. Hoping that the North would forswear retaliation for U.S. strikes would be a wild gamble, with extraordinary human and economic costs if wrong.

Although the Trump administration hopes to scare the DPRK and China, Washington so far has created more unease than fear in Seoul. The city continues business as usual. A friend of nearly thirty years, active in national security policy, told me simply "Trump is bluffing." Although

some American analysts posit that Trump's unpredictability may prove to be a useful political tactic, in the South, at least, that tendency has made it hard for people in the ROK to take his varying pronouncements seriously.

Which likely undercuts the impact of his threats in the North as well. Pyongyang responds to every challenge by promising even greater death and destruction, so assessing what Kim Jong-un and others in his government really believe is next to impossible. However, to the extent they look at cues suggesting what others believe, the Kim government isn't likely to believe that American action is likely. Nor is Beijing. Which suggests that whatever advantage Washington might have gained from Donald Trump trying to replay Richard Nixon's famous "madman" already has dissipated. It will be very difficult for the administration to regain leverage by reviving the threat.

Donald Trump probably is bluffing, but who really knows what is going on inside the presidential brain? And how he might react if he realizes that the North Koreans have come to view him as a paper tiger?

The greatest danger may not be an intentional war. Even if the president is bluffing, conflict could result from two impulsive, untested leaders playing a reckless game of geopolitical chicken and misjudging the consequences. Sitting at breakfast at my hotel atop a hill offers a fine view of the Seoul cityscape. It's not a pretty sight, but Seoul is filled with millions of people who want what Americans want: a better life for themselves and their families. President Trump should keep that reality in mind the next time he starts musing about the potential for war on the Korean Peninsula.

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