

What to Expect from the First Moon-Trump Summit

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South Korea's newly elected progressive president Moon Jae-in was swept into office six weeks ago on a domestic anticorruption agenda and pledges of dialogue with North Korea, following a bribery scandal that led to the impeachment of his predecessor. While piecing together a new cabinet, Moon has faced an unremittingly steep learning curve in foreign policy: North Korea has challenged his offers of dialogue by conducting a series of missile tests in the weeks following his election, and he faces conflicting pressures between Beijing and Washington over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system. Now Moon faces his most consequential foreign policy challenge: the task of working with the Trump administration to ensure the continued smooth management of the security alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Moon's Pragmatic Approach to Foreign Policy

Moon's campaign platform affirms the centrality of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the objective of denuclearization of North Korea. But it also seeks dialogue with North Korea toward that end and asserts a greater role for South Korea in the management of

peninsular and regional security issues, including a pledge to reassert wartime operational control over Korean forces currently exercised in wartime by a U.S. commander. Many analysts recall that a decade ago, when Moon served as chief of staff under the progressive administration of Roh Moo-hyun, the relationship between Seoul and Washington during the George W. Bush administration was fraught with tensions that were only contained by the Bush administration's patience and prudent management.

Moon takes power in South Korea against the backdrop of a host of domestic and international constraints that are much more severe than those that South Korea faced a decade ago under the Roh administration. Moon's Democratic Party holds minority status in the National Assembly, necessitating cooperation with other parties to get things done. Public support in the United States and South Korea for the security alliance is at an all-time high. North Korea is more militant and less internationally minded under

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Kim Jong-un than under Kim Jong-il, who held two summits with his South Korean counterparts. Kim's appeals to nationalism as the basis for cooperation ring hollow among South Koreans facing the risks of North Korean nuclear blackmail. Regional tensions between Washington and Beijing have been rising, despite the Trump administration's efforts to secure China's cooperation on North Korea.

Given the constrained atmosphere and high stakes that South Korea faces, Moon has no choice but to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy. As part of this approach, he has visibly moved to minimize potential differences with the Trump administration in interviews with foreign media outlets in advance of his visit to Washington. Moon has argued that his ideas for diplomacy with North Korea are consistent with Trump's North Korea policy of "maximum pressure and engagement." He has also repeated that Trump's campaign promise to sit down and have a hamburger with Kim is not at odds with his own push for dialogue with Pyongyang. While emphasizing a commitment to sanctions against North Korea, Moon has downplayed his campaign promise to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex, conditioning such efforts on evidence of North Korea's commitment to denuclearization.

In a June 23 interview with CBS, Moon even endorsed Trump's criticisms of the Obama administration's policy failures, emphasizing that he has "the same view as President Trump." In his June 20 *Washington Post* interview, Moon called Kim Jong-un "an unreasonable leader and a very dangerous person. Yet he is the person who has effective control over North Korea." Moon's pragmatic emphasis on alignment with the Trump administration and his emphasis on South Korea's willingness to take greater responsibility for its own defense are significant steps designed to minimize potential differences in advance of the summit. It is notable that in contrast with the style of his political mentor Roh, Moon is pursuing early pragmatism despite the risk that such an approach may generate frustrations among his domestic political base.

Challenges Ahead

Even following these gestures, potential landmines remain. As part of his commitment to democratic transparency and his criticisms of the process through which the prior administration decided to deploy the THAAD system as rushed and opaque, Moon has authorized an environmental review that threatens to delay the addition of four launchers to the two launchers that have already been installed at Seongju. Protesters have blocked the road to the THAAD site, necessitating maintenance and resupply by helicopter. Since Moon's election, China has doubled down on its rhetorical opposition to the deployment of THAAD, further politicizing the issue.

The Moon administration has provided assurances to the Trump administration that the environmental review will not result in a reversal of the decision to deploy the system. The Trump administration has thus far provided statements of understanding, but the sense of urgency created by North Korea's continued march toward a nuclear-strike capability may fray U.S. tolerance for domestically driven delays by Seoul.

The Moon administration's decision to conduct the review pits the domestic political imperative of maintaining a transparent democratic process against North Korea's evolving threat and will generate greater domestic and international pressures on the Moon administration that could easily spin out of control. On the other hand, a complete abandonment of the environmental review would alienate Moon's core supporters and contradict the reformist principles that secured his election in the first place.

Moreover, South Korean and U.S. alliance managers will have to live with the fact that President Trump's long-held personal view that South Korea is a free rider could resurface at any time to generate bad chemistry between the allies. This view already surfaced in late April during South Korea's election campaign when Trump tweeted that South Korea should pay for the \$1 billion THAAD system, despite the fact that the

system has been introduced to South Korea at the request of the U.S. Forces Korea commander to provide force protection against North Korea's growing missile threat. South Koreans already anticipate a challenging negotiation over a new agreement to determine the ROK's share of the costs for the stationing of U.S. forces in South Korea later this year.

A second dimension of this view applies to the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). Trump criticized the KORUS FTA as unfair during the election campaign based on the fact that under the agreement South Korea has continued to run a sizable merchandise trade surplus with the United States. Notwithstanding the facts that no U.S. companies have moved jobs to South Korea under the agreement, the United States has run a surplus in export of services that outstrips the merchandise trade deficit, and the KORUS FTA has induced significant investment by South Korean companies in the United States, the Trump administration will likely pursue a review.

The U.S.-ROK alliance is under new management, with Trump and Moon at the helm. An unlikely combination of leaders has emerged to carry the alliance forward on the basis of deeply held enduring interests and rising regional threats. The task before them is to develop the chemistry and commitment necessary to work together to meet increasingly serious, shared challenges. ∞

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