



# Trump Sticks to the Script, Bolsters U.S. Defense Commitments in Japan and South Korea

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During his first visit to Northeast Asia as president, Donald Trump has stayed on script, deepened relationships with his counterparts, and succeeded in communicating the right combination of assurance and resolve in the face of the global threat posed by North Korea. Indicative of the message and tone of the first part of Trump's five-country Asian tour was the presentation of hats by Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe. Emblazoned with the message "Make the Alliance Even Greater," the hats were a not-so-subtle jab at the limits of Trump's "America first" rhetoric when talking to friends and allies. Most notable from Trump's visits to Japan and South Korea was what did not happen: no counterproductive personal attacks on North Korea's Kim Jong-un and the fogged-out denial by Mother Nature of a visit with South Korean president Moon Jae-in to the demilitarized zone.

## Spotlight in Japan, Good Face in Korea

President Trump's visit to Japan put in the spotlight perhaps his closest relationship with any world leader. He has called Abe more than any other leader since becoming president, and Abe was the first leader to

meet Trump following his election victory one year ago. Abe was also the first leader Trump hosted at Mar-a-Lago and has been his most active golf partner among foreign counterparts. The fact that they share common perspectives on North Korea and have developed a close personal relationship made Trump's visit to Japan probably the easiest and most enjoyable destination on this trip. Despite Japanese public ambivalence toward Trump, Abe successfully made the case in the October elections that he is best qualified to manage both North Korea and Trump. The United States supports Japan's efforts to strengthen missile defense and to develop capabilities to retaliate against any potential aggression by North Korea.

The relationship between Trump and Moon is newer and has remained rockier than the relationship with Abe. Since his election last May, the left-leaning Moon has shown himself to be a pragmatist in recognizing the critical importance of the U.S. commitment to

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South Korea's security. Despite Trump's September charge on Twitter that Moon prefers "appeasement" of North Korea and Moon's public insistence that any military action against North Korea would require South Korea's approval, the two presidents have managed to put a good face on the relationship thus far, primarily by focusing on strengthening combined military capabilities and burden-sharing in the face of the North Korean threat.

In Seoul, Trump lifted limits on South Korea's ballistic missile development and agreed to more regular deployment of strategic assets on and near the Korean Peninsula. Moon, for his part, plans to sharply increase South Korean defense spending. Following the spat over the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, Moon administration officials have made statements regarding the "three no's" (no further THAAD deployments, no South Korean participation in regional missile defense, and no trilateral security alliance between the United States, Japan, and South Korea) as part of efforts to support China-South Korea rapprochement. However, this did not prevent Trump and Moon from agreeing to boost trilateral security cooperation with Japan to defend against North Korean aggression.

### **Critical Message on North Korea and Security**

Regarding North Korea, the critical message that Trump had to deliver in both Tokyo and Seoul was the assurance that U.S. defense commitments are durable in the face of a growing North Korean threat and that he would not prematurely drive the region into a military conflict with North Korea in which the material and human costs would be borne predominately by South Korea and Japan. At the same time, in advance of his critical conversations on North Korea with Chinese president Xi Jinping in Beijing, Trump needed to build momentum for the administration's international pressure campaign against North Korea by making sure that both the hawkish Abe and the dovish Moon are unified in

support of a strategy of "maximum pressure and engagement" toward North Korea.

Emphasizing U.S. military power while stating the hope that he would not have to use it, President Trump successfully drove home and finally appears to have endorsed his administration's policy of coercive diplomacy toward North Korea: i.e., mobilizing international pressure on North Korea by trying to increase economic sanctions and further its diplomatic isolation—backed by the threat of military force—as a means by which to convince the Kim regime to return to dialogue. In a surprising deviation from prior statements belittling his own secretary of state's efforts to establish negotiation channels with North Korea, Trump noted both in his joint press conference and in his National Assembly speech in Seoul that the United States is open to dialogue and that North Korea would be wise to choose this path to resolve the nuclear issue. This softer message from Trump was no doubt a source of great relief among South Korean officials.

The main opportunity for Trump to articulate his policy approach to North Korea came at the South Korean National Assembly. In the first address by a U.S. president since Bill Clinton in 1993, Trump contrasted South Korean freedom and prosperity with North Korean oppression and darkness. This argument was successful primarily because he presented the facts regarding the nature of the North Korean regime and let those facts speak for themselves, rather than engaging in personal attacks or over-the-top rhetoric. Trump then delivered his main message for Kim Jong-un: "The weapons you are acquiring are not making you safer. They are putting your regime in grave danger. Every step you take down this dark path increases the peril you face." Trump offered Kim a path to a better future in exchange for denuclearization.

The president's combination of rhetorical restraint and military posturing successfully bridged apparent gaps in the positions of South Korea and Japan. It also calmed some anxieties (at least in Seoul) about U.S. unilateral military action. However, preferred options could shift dramatically if North Korea threatens the

U.S. homeland or U.S. allies. North Korea should not mistake the lowering of the rhetorical volume as a lessening of the United States' resolve or minimizing of the risks of military conflict.

## Resistance on Trade

The hard edge of Trump's engagement with Northeast Asian allies came on the issue of trade, where his message of "fair and reciprocal" trade provided a heavy-handed note of discord amid expressions of broader alliance cohesion. Trump met with resistance from trade policies that conflict with those of his administration in both Tokyo and Seoul. Abe countered with a call for the United States and Japan to work together in leading "high-standard rulemaking in trade and investment" to create a "fair and effective economic order" in the region, while Moon agreed to expedite review of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in order to achieve "free, equitable, and balanced trade together."

Trump's main point of attack in pursuit of balanced trade in goods with both countries came in his unilateral assertions in joint press conferences that Abe and Moon would be authorizing billions of dollars in defense expenditures that would enhance defense capabilities and benefit U.S. workers. At the same time, the Trump administration claimed that South Korean companies announced 64 new projects in the United States worth \$17.3 billion and plans to purchase

\$57.5 billion in U.S. goods and services. The White House also highlighted that Japanese automakers Toyota and Mazda would invest \$1.6 billion in a new U.S. manufacturing plant that will create an estimated 4,000 jobs.

## Conclusion

The conversation with Xi Jinping is the chief payoff of Trump's first trip to Asia, and Trump gained momentum toward that discussion during his visits to Tokyo and Seoul. Xi has consolidated power through the recent Party Congress and is in a position to respond to Trump's requests—if he chooses to do so. Moreover, Xi's cooperation is essential in the effort to impose maximum pressure on North Korea designed to bring Kim Jong-un to the negotiating table. But Xi will likely not risk North Korean instability just to please Trump, so the gap between the two leaders on this issue may persist. Instead, Trump will probably need to wield the threat of secondary sanctions against Chinese customers of North Korea in an attempt to drag China along in pressuring the Kim regime.

President Trump's time on the ground in Japan and South Korea was a success because he acted presidential and stayed on script. Yet while South Koreans and Japanese may be assured and North Korea may be deterred for the moment, effective assurance will require continued self-discipline and focus even after the president returns home. ∞

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