

Divergent Priorities in Dangerous Times: The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Faces Uncertain Future

By Bruce Klingner

The U.S.-South Korea partnership is being challenged by the uncertainty of both nations' Indo-Pacific policies, competing national objectives, and U.S. President Donald Trump's willingness to risk long-standing alliances in favor of transactional economic gains. While the alliance has successfully weathered previous crises, the bilateral relationship may be facing its greatest challenge yet as Washington is more willing to force Seoul to conform to U.S. priorities.

The election of President Lee Jae Myung brought an end to South Korea's monthslong political upheaval triggered by predecessor Yoon Suk Yeol's imposition of martial law and subsequent impeachment. Yet the country remains riven by deep political divisions that will constrain Lee's pledge to reunite the electorate.

During the campaign, Lee adopted a more centrist persona by abandoning many of his previous progressive foreign policy positions. However, competing factions within the Lee administration advocate conflicting foreign policies, leading to potential ambiguity surrounding the country's future policy direction.

The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific policy remains bereft of details. The degree to which the United States will play an overseas security role remains an unresolved debate among administration officials.

Traditional Reaganite interventionist hawks have been replaced in the Republican Party by prioritizers, constrainers, and neo-isolationists. This, along with President Trump's willingness to use tariffs as cudgels against economic partners, has caused U.S. allies to increasingly question the viability of U.S. security guarantees and commitment to its defense treaties.

As both the United States and South Korea find their footing on their Indo-Pacific strategies, there will be clashes over policy toward China, but also potential alignment on engaging North Korea. South Korea's new leadership will be tested by the deteriorating regional security environment, U.S. demands for greater security contributions, and a U.S. trading partner that poses a more immediate economic threat than China.

South Korean Election Brings Political Stability but Policy Uncertainty

During the 2025 presidential campaign, Lee rebranded himself and his party as "centrist conservatives" by moderating or abandoning earlier extreme foreign policies.¹ The Democratic Party of Korea (DP) proclaimed that it has recalibrated its foreign and national security policies

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toward middle-of-the-road pragmatism, having evolved away from the far-left policies of previous progressive President Moon Jae-in.

But skepticism remains high that the DP merely repackaged its policies, a familiar case of old wine with new labels, to counter conservative depictions of the party as being too soft on security threats and to garner sufficient support to win the election. There are concerns that the DP will eventually return to its ideological roots on foreign policy.

Many in the United States saw Moon, as well as previous progressive administrations, as overly deferential toward North Korea and China, antagonistically nationalist toward Japan, and seeking greater autonomy in South Korea's alliance with the United States. South Korean progressives often saw Washington, rather than Pyongyang, as the greater source of tension on the Korean Peninsula and the larger impediment to inter-Korean reconciliation.

Since assuming the presidency, Lee has continued to emphasize the importance of South Korea's security relationship with the United States. He has depicted South Korea's outreach to North Korea as pragmatically seeking to reduce tensions rather than as a renewed attempt to fulfill previous progressive idealistic goals of reconciliation or reunification.

Lee's appointments of senior officials encompass bifurcated foreign policy views. The selection of Wi Sung-lac, a longtime diplomat and National Assembly member, as National Security Advisor reflects an emphasis on centrist, pragmatic alliance policies.

However, the appointments of Chung Dong Young as Minister of Unification and Lee Jong Seok to head the National Intelligence Service reflect the conciliatory Sunshine Policy of earlier progressive governments, in which Seoul provided massive benefits to Pyongyang without requiring reciprocal actions.

Lee's High Wire Balancing Act

South Korea has traditionally balanced its relationships with its security guarantor the United States and its largest trading partner China while attempting to alienate neither. President Lee is caught between Scylla and Charybdis, trying to simultaneously accommodate the Trump administration's more forceful efforts to forge allies into an anti-China coalition while minimizing the risk of retaliation by China.

Lee was previously critical of Seoul's reliance on the U.S. alliance, even referring to U.S. troops as an "occupation force," but he adopted a far more positive tone during the 2025 campaign. Lee commented that he was committed to "strengthening the South Korea-U.S. alliance and firmly upholding our shared responsibilities as part of the free democratic bloc."²

As president, Lee has vowed to maintain ongoing military plans, including extensive defense expenditures; strengthen the "three-axis" defense strategy of preemption, missile defense, and retaliation; and implement the August 2023 Camp David agreements with the United States

and Japan to enhance trilateral coordination in addressing regional security and economic challenges.

Yet, while Lee affirmed the importance of the U.S.-South Korea alliance as “the foundation of our diplomacy and security,” he also underscored that “we should not go all in and put all our eggs in one basket.”³ He advocated a cautious approach in navigating the U.S.-China strategic competition: “We should not undercut our alliance with the United States, but we also should not emphasize it too much, as it could alienate other countries.”⁴

China

Successive progressive and conservative South Korean administrations have been more diffident than other U.S. allies in criticizing China’s human rights abuses and transgressions against its neighbors due to China’s history of economic coercion and retaliation against countries that defied or even merely criticized its actions. South Korea struggles to find sunlight in the shadow of the Chinese dragon.

When conservative Yoon became president in May 2022, he criticized his predecessors for their timid deference to China and declared that he would replace South Korea’s policy of “strategic ambiguity,” of fence-sitting between the United States and China, with “strategic clarity.”⁵

Under Yoon, South Korea became more forthright in articulating its concerns about a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan and directly linking the security of Taiwan to that of South Korea and the Indo-Pacific region.

Yet Yoon remained reluctant to risk China’s ire over Taiwan. In August 2022, he did not meet with U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) after her trip to Taiwan triggered angry Chinese statements and extensive military exercises.⁶ The Yoon administration’s December 2022 *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific* made only one mention of China, and it was in a positive context.⁷

While Yoon incrementally strengthened South Korea’s messaging on China, the DP remained reticent to take a stance on Taiwan contingencies. In 2024, Lee complained about Yoon’s stronger messaging on China: “Why keep pestering China [and] why bother meddling everywhere?”⁸ Instead, Lee advocated for a more conciliatory tone, commenting that South Korea should say “xie xie”—“thank you” in Mandarin—to China.⁹

Lee downplayed the relevance of the Taiwan Strait to South Korea: “Whatever happens in the Taiwan Strait...what does it matter to us?”¹⁰ In July 2024, the South Korean opposition parties vowed to introduce legislation to prevent the South Korean military from intervening in a crisis over Taiwan.¹¹

After his first summit meeting with Trump in August 2025, Lee said that it was no longer possible for South Korea to pursue its policy of “security with the U.S. and economy with China in the past,” implying a significant policy shift toward the United States.¹²

However, Lee commented after his October 2025 summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping that bilateral South Korea-China relations had been “fully restored.” The two leaders signed seven memoranda of understanding on boosting trade and other economic matters, including a five-year currency swap deal worth USD 48 billion.¹³

North Korea

Progressive South Korean administrations repeatedly sought breakthroughs with North Korea by providing extensive economic and diplomatic benefits coupled with security concessions while deferring any requirement for corresponding gestures by North Korea.

During his previous presidential campaigns, Lee strongly emphasized engaging with North Korea to achieve “a new era of peace on the Korean Peninsula.” He advocated withdrawing the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system from South Korea, rapidly transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean military forces from the U.S.-led Combined Forces Command (CFC) to a South Korean-led CFC, and ending an intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan.¹⁴

In sharp contrast, Lee’s 2025 campaign made little mention of North Korea and lowered expectations of engaging the regime from previous grandiose objectives of reconciliation, denuclearization, and reunification to more modest goals of reducing military tensions and achieving peaceful coexistence. Lee emphasized that South Korea’s formidable military capabilities and strong security ties with the United States provided requisite security to reach out to North Korea and mitigated the necessity to respond to every North Korean provocation.¹⁵

During his 2025 presidential campaign, Lee advocated reestablishing military communication channels with North Korea, creating a joint military committee to resolve issues, and restoring the 2018 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA).¹⁶ That agreement had established buffer zones to prevent inadvertent military clashes between the Koreas, halted live-fire military exercises near the military demarcation line (MDL), and removed guard posts and minefields in the demilitarized zone (DMZ). However, North Korean provocations and retaliatory actions by both Seoul and Pyongyang led to the termination of the accord.

After assuming office, the Lee administration quickly acted to build trust and stimulate engagement with North Korea. The administration urged civic groups to halt their efforts to send information into North Korea via balloons and water bottles, the first attempt by the government to curtail the operations since a 2023 South Korean Constitutional Court ruling that struck down a 2020 Moon administration law criminalizing the sending of anti-Pyongyang leaflets into the North.¹⁷

Lee then directed the government to prevent the balloon launches, halted the National Intelligence Services’ radio and television broadcasts into North Korea, and removed military loudspeakers in the DMZ that had been broadcasting propaganda into the North.¹⁸

During his September 2025 speech to the UN General Assembly, President Lee defined his North Korea policy approach as “Exchange, Normalization, Denuclearization” (END), an incremental plan to gradually build trust with North Korea. Lee pledged three assurances to North Korea: that South Korea will respect the other side’s system, will not pursue any form of absorption-based unification, and has no intention of hostile acts.¹⁹

In response, North Korea firmly rejected Lee’s efforts at engagement, declaring there was little difference between Lee’s approach and previous failed efforts by his predecessors. Kim Yo Jong, the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, emphatically declared that North Korea is “not at all interested” in Lee’s reconciliation efforts and has “no will to improve relations” with South Korea.²⁰

In his speech to the North Korean Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim Jong Un categorically rejected Lee’s proposed phased END approach as “destroying with their own hands the justification and foundations for negotiation with us.” Kim declared that “we have no reason to sit together with [South Korea] and will do nothing together with it.” Kim ridiculed South Korea as a “deformed entity with hemiplegia and a colonial tributary” of the United States.²¹

U.S. Indo-Pacific Policy Remains Undefined

The Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy remains a vague work in progress and subject to competing factions. The firing of National Security Advisor Michael Waltz and the downsizing of the National Security Council (NSC) staff’s Asia directorate diminished the role of traditional security hawks in the administration.²² U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has adopted a more restrained tone than during his tenure in the U.S. Senate; under Rubio, the State Department toned down its annual human rights report on North Korea.²³

The two strongest factions within the administration are the “prioritizers,” who see China as an existential threat to the United States and Taiwan as the only global partner worth defending, and the “restrainers,” who prefer a neo-isolationist approach that retrenches U.S. strategic interests to the U.S. homeland. The former perceive U.S. forces in South Korea as “hostage” to the North Korea problem which, if it escalated to a war, would be a “distraction” from the priority China threat.²⁴ The latter cite Afghanistan and Iraq as failed, expensive examples of assertive neoconservative policy that promoted democracy abroad, often through military intervention.

Trump seems aligned with “fiscal hawks” who advocate using punitive economic tools, such as tariffs, rather than military actions to influence foreign nations. This has been most prominent in China policy, with Trump refraining from echoing other U.S. officials’ threats of military retaliatory action to a Chinese attack on Taiwan. Yet for all of Trump’s tough economic talk on China, he has repeatedly capitulated in response to Chinese economic retaliatory actions, including during his October bilateral meeting with Xi. The United States again walked back its measures against China, returning to the *status quo ante* without having addressed the key U.S. objectives of redressing China’s trade surplus with the United States, its unfair and predatory trade practices, and its theft of intellectual property rights that had initially triggered Trump’s tariffs.²⁵

U.S. Demands More, Promises Less in Alliance

Having browbeaten South Korea into a disadvantageous trade deal that violates the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) that Trump had previously renegotiated, the United States is now demanding security concessions as well. Trump has long held negative views toward alliances, seeing them in transactional terms rather than through the long-standing bipartisan consensus that alliances are integral to U.S. strategic interests as security force multipliers.

U.S. security demands to South Korea include:

1. Increase South Korean defense expenditures:
 - a. Augment South Korean defense spending from the current level of 2.6 percent of GDP to 3.8 percent or 5 percent of GDP.
 - b. Revise the 2024 bilateral Special Measures Agreement (SMA) to increase South Korea's annual payment to offset some of the cost of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea.
2. "Modernization of the alliance"—a structural realignment of the bilateral defense relationship in which South Korea assumes greater responsibility to counter the North Korea threat so that the United States can:
 - a. Reorient the primary mission of U.S. forces in South Korea toward the China threat.
 - b. Reduce U.S. force levels in South Korea.
3. Expand South Korea's security role in the Indo-Pacific region and publicly commit to support U.S. military operations during Taiwan contingencies.

Beyond these issues, Presidents Trump and Lee may agree to reduce or cancel bilateral combined joint military exercises. Lee would argue that doing so would appeal to Pyongyang and increase the potential for diplomatic reengagement with the recalcitrant regime. Trump could be amenable, since he unilaterally cancelled bilateral allied exercises and the rotational deployment of U.S. nuclear-capable strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula after the 2018 Singapore summit with Kim.²⁶ Trump's decision was a major unilateral concession—for which the United States received nothing in return—that led to a multi-year degradation of allied deterrence and defense capabilities.

Augment South Korean Defense Expenditures

In May 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth called on Asian allies to increase their defense spending, citing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s pledge to raise defense spending to 5 percent of GDP.²⁷ The NATO commitment to increase spending to 5 percent of GDP by 2035 consists of two parts—3.5 percent of GDP toward direct defense expenditures and an additional 1.5 percent on supporting categories such as strengthening infrastructure and the defense industrial base.²⁸

South Korea's defense expenditures already rank among the highest in the world and in 2024 were approximately 2.6 percent of the country's GDP.²⁹ South Korean defense expenditures do

not include the additional annual USD 1 billion SMA contribution to the United States, provision of land for U.S. bases at no cost and tax free, and South Korea's payment of over 90 percent of the USD 10.7 billion cost of building the U.S. Camp Humphreys military base, the largest American military base outside of the continental United States.³⁰

Subsequent media reporting in August 2025 indicated that the Trump administration had considered demanding during tariff negotiations that South Korea raise its defense spending to 3.8 percent of its GDP.³¹

For comparison, U.S. defense expenditures are estimated at 3.4 percent of GDP.³² Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, criticized the Trump administration's budget proposal for underfunding military expenditures, since the defense budget would only be 2.65 percent of GDP by 2029.³³

Increase South Korea's Contribution to Offset U.S. Troop Costs

South Korea provides substantial resources to defray the costs of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, paying half of all non-personnel costs for U.S. forces stationed in South Korea.³⁴ Trump's demand in his first term to literally make a profit off U.S. service members in South Korea strained U.S.-South Korea relations. During SMA revision negotiations, Trump directed his delegation to seek "cost plus 50 percent." He later increased his demand to an exponential 400 percent increase in Seoul's annual payment to USD 5 billion. The president threatened to reduce or remove U.S. forces if South Korea did not acquiesce.³⁵ The allies did not reach a final agreement during the first Trump administration.

In late 2024, Trump called South Korea a "money machine" which should pay USD 10 billion annually for receiving "big time military protection" from U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and that if he were in office South Korea "would be happy to do it."³⁶

Trump claimed that South Korea began its annual payments during his first term, that the payment was billions of dollars, and that former U.S. President Joe Biden terminated the SMA agreement and allowed South Korea's payments to go "way, way down [to] almost nothing."³⁷ All three statements were false—the SMA began in 1991, South Korea didn't pay billions annually during Trump's first term, and Biden signed SMAs in 2021 and 2024. The first Biden SMA with South Korea led to a 13.9 percent increase to USD 1 billion annually, and the 2024 agreement will increase the South Korean contribution by 8.3 percent to USD 1.47 billion in 2026.³⁸

Media reports in August 2025 indicated that the Trump administration considered demanding that Seoul increase its USD 1 billion annual contribution to offset the costs of basing U.S. forces in Korea, though they did not reveal a specific amount.³⁹

Modernizing the U.S.-South Korea Alliance

The Trump administration has indicated it will press South Korea to accept greater responsibilities for defending itself against North Korea as the United States reorients toward the China threat as well as for South Korea to publicly commit to a bigger role in Taiwan contingencies.

“Modernizing the alliance” has become the new moniker for a long-debated concept of “strategic flexibility,” in which the United States utilizes its troops in South Korea for off-peninsular expeditionary operations, including China-related contingencies. During the George W. Bush administration, the United States declared it would withdraw U.S. forces from South Korea for redeployment to Iraq. South Korea tried to prevent the departure of U.S. forces due to concerns that the units might not return to South Korea, which ultimately proved to be the case.⁴⁰

South Korea was also concerned at the time that any U.S. military units redeployed from South Korea to a potential Taiwan contingency or any South Korean support for U.S. operations in Taiwan could trigger Chinese attacks on South Korea. In March 2005, then South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun declared that South Korea “will not be embroiled in any conflict in Northeast Asia against our will.”⁴¹

Eventually, the two governments papered over their differences by acknowledging each other’s interpretations. In January 2006, then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon signed an agreement in which South Korea “fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces [in South Korea]. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, the U.S. respects the [South Korean] position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.”⁴²

Since then, there has been an underlying tension between expanding the role, responsibilities, and geographic scope of the alliance and maintaining the alliance’s primary focus on the defense of South Korea. Successive U.S. presidents and Congress have pledged to maintain U.S. forces at the existing 28,500 troop level and have repeatedly affirmed the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee to use all necessary means, including nuclear weapons, to ensure the defense of South Korea.

In a break from that past guidance, in March 2025 the Trump administration released the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance recommending that the potential invasion of Taiwan be given precedence over other dangers in the Indo-Pacific region. The document indicated that the United States is prepared to “assume risk in other theaters” due to personnel and resource constraints and that it will pressure allies “to take on the bulk of the deterrence role” against other threats, including North Korea.⁴³

The final National Defense Strategy (NDS) is rumored to prioritize protecting the homeland and Western Hemisphere over countering major adversaries such as China and Russia, according to sources who have seen the report. The strategy appears to shift away from the first Trump

administration's strong focus on countering the threat that China poses to the United States and the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴

Widespread deployments of U.S. military forces to U.S. cities and the U.S. southern border with Mexico on law enforcement duties as well as the use of naval and air assets to interdict Venezuelan cartel drug shipments appear in line with the new strategy. The new NDS does, however, maintain the Trump administration's advocacy for dialing down U.S. forces and commitments overseas, with commensurate calls for European and Indo-Pacific allies to assume greater burden-sharing responsibility for their own defense.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia John Noh commented that South Korea and other U.S. allies should “dramatically” increase their defense spending, prioritize capabilities that deny China's military objectives, and take greater responsibility for Indo-Pacific regional security. Noh emphasized that Indo-Pacific allies must go beyond hosting U.S. forces to actively defending “critical terrain, sea lanes and infrastructure within their regions, thereby reducing the operational burden on U.S. forces.”⁴⁵

A senior U.S. defense official commented that the United States is looking to “modernize” its alliance with South Korea and “calibrate” the U.S. force posture on the Korean Peninsula in order to prioritize deterring China.⁴⁶ In July 2025, the Department of State signaled discussions with South Korea regarding shifting the focus of the bilateral alliance in response to the “changing regional security environment” and urging South Korea to embrace a “future-oriented comprehensive strategic alliance.”⁴⁷

In August 2025, the Trump administration debated a requirement for South Korea to publicly endorse a change in the positioning of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea and support flexibility for USFK's force posture to better deter China.⁴⁸

USFK Troop Reduction

In May 2025, media reports suggested that the Trump administration was considering redeploying 4,500 U.S. troops from South Korea to Guam. That personnel number equates to the removal of the Stryker Brigade Combat Team, the only U.S. ground combat maneuver force in South Korea.⁴⁹

The top three commanders of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific warned against moving U.S. forces further away from the North Korean and Chinese military threats. General Xavier Brunson, the commander of U.S. forces in Korea, highlighted that “USFK is the physical manifestation of the U.S. ironclad commitment to the U.S.-South Korea mutual defense treaty.” He emphasized the strategic importance of South Korea's location as an “aircraft carrier” straddling the East and West Seas that can curb Russian and Chinese threats in the East and Yellow Seas, with U.S. forces in Korea being the only U.S. military units on the Asian continent.⁵⁰

Admiral Samuel Paparo, Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), counseled that reducing U.S. forces in Korea would “reduce our ability to prevail in conflict [and] there's a

higher probability” that North Korea would invade South Korea.⁵¹ Similarly, General Eric Smith, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, argued against redeploying Marines from Okinawa to Guam as it “puts us going the wrong way” by moving combat forces further away from “the crisis theater, from the priority theater” of potential China contingencies.⁵²

Congress again became so concerned that the Trump administration may trim U.S. force levels in South Korea that it included language in the National Defense Authorization Act to maintain USFK at current troop levels. Congress similarly sought to prevent the reduction of USFK force levels during the first Trump administration.⁵³

Defining a South Korean Role in Taiwan Contingencies

President Lee will try to resist U.S. pressure for a greater South Korean security role in the Indo-Pacific, particularly any explicit South Korean role in Taiwan contingencies. He emphasized that it is in South Korea’s national interests to avoid becoming too deeply involved in the China-Taiwan conflict and instead prioritized the need to “respect the status quo and maintain an appropriate distance.”⁵⁴ He has avoided taking a position on whether South Korea would support intervention in a Taiwan crisis.

When asked directly whether he would come to Taiwan’s aid if China attacked, Lee dodged the question and replied cryptically, “I will think about that answer when aliens are about to invade the earth.”⁵⁵ Lee wants to maintain strategic ambiguity around Seoul’s intentions, taking a page from the U.S. playbook. However, Washington is pushing its allies for greater clarity than it itself is willing to declare.

U.S. allies, reliant on Washington for part of their defense, typically harbor anxieties of abandonment or entanglement. For South Korea, U.S. involvement in the defense of Taiwan could simultaneously engender both fears. South Koreans would be gravely concerned that the United States would no longer be willing or able to fulfill its commitments to existing war plans for the defense of South Korea. A perceived weakening of the U.S. security commitment could embolden Pyongyang to engage in coercion, greater provocations, and/or direct attacks.

U.S. involvement in a military conflict over Taiwan would concurrently generate South Korean alarm at being entangled in a war with China. South Koreans worry that if the United States used its bases in South Korea to stage attacks on Chinese forces, it could trigger Chinese attacks on South Korea.

OPCON Transition

President Lee, like his progressive predecessors, advocates accelerating the return of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean military forces from the Combined Forces Command (CFC) to Seoul.⁵⁶ In August 2025, the Lee administration announced it would strive to complete OPCON transition during its five-year term, defining it as a key national policy goal. The government pledged to bolster South Korea’s military capabilities and develop an implementation plan with the United States to fulfill the conditions-based plan.⁵⁷

In a 2014 bilateral accord, Washington and Seoul agreed on three prerequisites for OPCON transfer: the South Korean armed forces must have acquired requisite military and command means to be able to lead the combined forces; to have sufficiently developed indigenous missile defense and preemptive attack capabilities against North Korean nuclear and missile threats; and the security environment must have improved due to complete or significant North Korean denuclearization.⁵⁸ There are numerous additional subordinate requirements.

Progressives depict the issue as a matter of regaining national sovereignty and reducing dependence on the United States in the alliance. However, that viewpoint overlooks that during wartime, even after OPCON transfer, both U.S. and South Korean forces would remain integrated into the CFC, which would be subordinate to the National Command Authorities of *both* countries, as it is today.

To date, the United States has insisted both countries adhere to the conditions-based transfer agreement. Seoul has not yet fulfilled the requisite conditions. General Brunson, commander of U.S. forces in Korea, warned against premature OPCON transition: “If we choose to take shortcuts, that could endanger the readiness of the force here on the (Korean) Peninsula.”⁵⁹

However, Seoul may find it is pushing on a more open door than in the past. The Trump administration is more willing than previous U.S. administrations to accept OPCON transition, since it could reduce U.S. responsibilities in South Korea. Secretary Hegseth responded positively to Seoul’s intent to regain wartime OPCON, calling it a “great endeavor” that reflects a growing South Korean ability to take military leadership.⁶⁰

U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby advocates that South Korea “take primary, essentially overwhelming responsibility for its own self-defense against North Korea” to concentrate U.S. resources on its defense posture toward China.⁶¹ Colby called for reviewing OPCON transfer conditions, potentially lowering the bar for compliance.⁶²

Bilateral Summits Decrease Alliance Tension...For Now

There was great trepidation before the first Trump-Lee summit meeting in August 2025, given tensions over the U.S. imposition of tariffs and extensive media reports of forthcoming U.S. security demands. Anxiety escalated still further when, hours before the summit, Trump issued a tweet accusing Seoul of raids on churches and appearing to characterize the impeachment of former President Yoon as a “purge.”

Prior to the meeting, Lee had publicly commented that the U.S. push for “strategic flexibility” of USFK—meaning China-oriented missions off the Korean Peninsula—was “not an issue we can easily deal with.”⁶³

Lee subsequently commented that his staff “were worried that we might face a ‘Zelenskyy moment,’” a reference to the disastrous, humiliating meeting that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had with Trump.⁶⁴

However, Lee's sycophancy of Trump and his diversion of the discussion toward a shared objective of engaging North Korea enabled the South Korean president to avoid catastrophe and seemingly establish a good personal relationship with Trump. Catering to Trump's quest for a Nobel Peace Prize, Lee emphasized that Trump was "the only person who can make progress [with North Korea]...If you become the peacemaker, then I will assist you by being a pacemaker." Lee even suggested the potential for construction of a Trump Tower and golf course in North Korea.⁶⁵ Press briefings after the first Trump-Lee summit provided no clarity on whether there had been a breakthrough in resolving the predicted contentious alliance security issues.

The second U.S.-South Korea leaders' summit in October 2025 provided both major announcements and continued uncertainty due to differing depictions of what was agreed to. In a surprise announcement, President Trump reversed years of U.S. policy by announcing that the United States would allow South Korea to develop a nuclear-powered submarine.⁶⁶ However, Washington and Seoul seem to differ over where to construct the submarine, what type of nuclear fuel to use, and whether they would have to renegotiate their existing civilian nuclear agreement.

On November 4, President Lee announced South Korea would implement an 8.2 percent increase in defense spending in 2026 to "significantly strengthen our national defense capabilities and make sure to realize our hope for self-reliant defense."⁶⁷ Progressive South Korean administrations have typically augmented the country's defense budget at higher rates than conservative presidents, and they have sought greater autonomy in South Korea's alliance with the United States by reducing South Korea's reliance on the U.S. military and seeking OPCON transition.

In addition, South Korea announced it would make USD 25 billion worth of U.S. military equipment purchases by 2030 and provide USD 33 billion in support for USFK, though the latter is likely to include assistance that Seoul is already providing.⁶⁸

After the November 2025 bilateral Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) with his South Korean counterpart, Secretary Hegseth commented that South Korea would assume a larger role for defending against the North Korea threat because the allies must be prepared for "regional contingencies." Hegseth commented that USFK's primary responsibility would remain defending South Korea, including a continued commitment to provide nuclear deterrence.⁶⁹ However, the SCM document did not include previous U.S. pledges to maintain USFK at current force levels and that any North Korean nuclear attack would lead to an end of the regime.⁷⁰

U.S. and South Korean post-summit security statements are a Rorschach test subject to interpretation over how significant a change they represent from previous bilateral agreements on strategic flexibility, the role of USFK in regional contingencies, and the potential for OPCON transition. Contrary to earlier indications, there does not appear to be a reorientation of primary USFK responsibility toward Taiwan scenarios nor any public South Korean commitment to a supporting role in defending Taiwan.

U.S. Stymied on Outreach to North Korea

While the Trump administration will quickly come into conflict with Lee's conciliatory approach toward China, the two leaders will find greater alignment on their mutual desire for engaging North Korea.

Trump repeatedly extols having a strong relationship with Kim and his desire for another meeting. There was intense speculation of a hastily planned U.S.-North Korea leader meeting during Trump's October 2025 trip to South Korea, particularly after Trump declared that he would "love to meet" the North Korean leader and would extend his Asia trip to do so.⁷¹

Instead, North Korea ignored the U.S. president's pleas as it has rejected all diplomatic entreaties from the United States for the past six years, including a personal letter from President Trump.⁷² Nor are there any indications of a thawing in Pyongyang's intransigence. Kim declared in October that, while he is willing to meet with Trump, the United States must abandon its "delusional obsession" with denuclearizing North Korea.⁷³

Kim sees little need to engage with Washington, since Pyongyang is in a far stronger strategic position than during the first Trump term, thus negating its need for diplomatic, security, or economic benefits from Washington. North Korea receives far greater benefits from Russia with fewer conditions than it would get from the United States.

Russia's largesse in return for North Korea providing massive amounts of military equipment, ammunition, and troops enables North Korea to mitigate the impact of international sanctions, as does Kim's lucrative cybercurrency crimes and resurgent trade with China.

Russia and China are also now even more obstructionist in the UN Security Council (UNSC), preventing any punitive action against North Korea after its repeated violations of UNSC resolutions.⁷⁴ Recent North Korea-China-Russia trilateral meetings in Beijing and Pyongyang underscore the strength of their relationships and their ability to defy U.S. pressure.

Kim could, however, potentially see an upside to reaching out to Trump. North Korea could propose to Trump that they sign a bilateral peace declaration to "end" the Korean War, achieving what no U.S. president has done in seven decades. Pyongyang could suggest that such an accomplishment would merit the Nobel Peace Prize, which has eluded Trump.

However, a simplistic peace declaration with North Korea would be a historic but meaningless feel-good gesture that would not improve the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. It would not reduce the North Korean military threat to the U.S. homeland or U.S. allies; instead, it could create societal and legislative momentum in both South Korea and the United States for the premature reduction or removal of U.S. forces and the degradation of U.S. deterrence capabilities.

Drawing down U.S. forces before reducing the North Korean nuclear, missile, and conventional weapons threats would be a sign of weakness. It would risk destabilizing the region and

emboldening Pyongyang to take more provocative actions. It would also play into Beijing's desire to reduce U.S. influence in the region.

Conclusion

The U.S.-South Korea alliance and overall relationship face tempestuous times. The United States needs allies and partners to economically compete with and militarily confront the multi-faceted China threat. But Washington has instead alienated potential collaborators and undermined collective action by threatening its allies, demanding avaricious security payments, and imposing capricious and excessive tariffs. The United States has exacerbated allied fears of abandonment by introducing strategic ambiguity as to whether it will uphold its treaty commitments to defend its allies.

South Korea, like other U.S. allies, is buffeted by President Trump's transactional approach to U.S. partners, escalating regional security threats, U.S. and Chinese economic coercion, and a more self-assured North Korea buoyed by Russian support.

During the Trump administration, alliances will be weighed more on their current utility to the United States rather than on a sense of tradition or past accomplishments. The Trump administration will tolerate fence-sitting by allies and partners who seek to balance between Washington and Beijing less than previous U.S. administrations.

South Korea will face far greater pressure to augment its defense expenditures, pick a side in the U.S.-China strategic competition, and accept weaker U.S. security commitments. Seoul is struggling with its desire to refrain from actions that could anger Beijing in light of the risk of losing U.S. support for the alliance. President Lee depicts South Korea's geopolitical position as being "between two grinding stones."⁷⁵

By highlighting its current and potential value as a regional security contributor in the Indo-Pacific, South Korea could guarantee continued U.S. commitments to defending South Korea and maintaining a large troop presence. In return, as it faces rising global security and economic challenges and threats, the United States should well remember Winston Churchill's famous maxim, "The only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them."

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