

When Life Gives You Lemons: Moon Jae-in and US-Korea Relations

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Few world leaders have faced the brunt of U.S. President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy more than Moon Jae-in. Even fewer need U.S. cooperation for the cornerstone of their foreign policy agenda more than Moon and his plans for inter-Korean engagement. Despite several major challenges in the relationship over the past three years, there has also been **new opportunities** – thanks in no small part to Seoul's efforts.

Where U.S.-Korea relations have been most fruitful – and dynamic – is North Korea policy. Entering the Blue House in May 2017, Moon was up against a recently inaugurated Trump administration that opted for a more forceful strategy considering

a full range of military options, including a pre-emptive strike. As tensions escalated over the rest of the year – including North Korean missile and nuclear tests as well as heightened rhetoric such as Trump's infamous “fire and fury” threat – the only off-ramp proved to be the **PyeongChang Olympics** in February 2018. Moon's efforts to turn the Olympics into the “Peace Games” jumpstarted diplomacy between Washington and Pyongyang, opening the door for inter-Korean engagement, which in turn helped to sustain talks between the two adversaries. By the end of February 2019, there were two U.S.-North Korea summits and three inter-Korean summits.

However, since the U.S. and North Korea failed to agree in Hanoi last February, there has been little progress. North Korea has aggressively restarted testing short-range missiles, there has been limited working-level talks between Washington and Pyongyang, and Kim has turned his back on Moon – who helped Kim and Trump push through previous impasses.

Even with the tenuousness of these diplomatic gains, other issues in U.S.-Korea ties have proven more challenging. Trump has actively gone after **two pillars of the relationship**: the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) and the military alliance, citing the bilateral trade deficit and cost, respectively.

Trump was reportedly prepared to formally withdraw from the KORUS FTA, but ultimately opted to amend the existing deal. Mostly satisfied with the agreement, the Moon administration was on the defensive going into talks in January 2018. On the one hand, the minor updates agreed to in September that year allowed Trump to claim victory and Moon to direct more joint attention to North Korea. But on the other, Washington's one-sided approach resulted in **a missed opportunity to modernize and upgrade the existing trade agreement**.

Trump's fixation on the cost of basing American troops in South Korea has been more of a protracted issue. When the 9th Special Measures Agreement (SMA) was set to expire at the end of 2018, the White House used the opportunity to try to dramatically increase Seoul's financial contributions to the non-personnel expenses of hosting the U.S. military. In negotiating the next SMA, the U.S. originally asked for South Korea to double their previous 960 billion *won* (\$790 million) contribution. Only after the year-end deadline elapsed and with the Hanoi summit fast approaching did both sides reach a compromise. In early 2019 Seoul agreed to an 8% increase, but the deal only lasted through the end of the year rather than a few years down the

line as was the standard in previous arrangements. Negotiations for the 11th SMA have proven to be even more contentious. Washington's steeper ask has caused talks to drag on through early April. Even with a global pandemic and the furlough of 4,500 Korean contractors working on U.S. military facilities Washington remains unwilling to compromise.

Despite the ups and downs of the past few years, **Korean support for the U.S. has been unwavering**. Polling from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Pew show high, sustained favorability of the U.S. among Koreans throughout the past three years. These views come in spite of strong disapproval of key U.S. actions, such as the nearly 70% of Koreans opposed to paying more in SMA contributions, and swings in Trump's approval rating, driven by his North Korea policy. The latest figures from Pew show Korean confidence in Trump rising from 17% when he first entered office to 44% by the spring of 2018, holding steady through last spring. Gallup Korea shows a similar trend, but polling from November indicates **there has since been a drop in Trump's favorability** – a rise and fall coinciding with talks (or lack thereof) with Pyongyang.

For Moon, the public's continued support for the U.S. despite disagreements on certain policy issues and with Trump has provided invaluable leeway in managing tumultuous relations with Washington. This support will also be crucial moving forward. Koreans have been able distinguish between the U.S. and Trump, but there are number of conceivable new developments which could **give rise to anti-Americanism**. Such a scenario would severely constrain Moon's ability to work through tough spots with the U.S. and pursue his inter-Korean agenda for the remainder of his tenure.

Of course, just as important in looking ahead to the rest of Moon's term is **who will be sitting in the White House next January**. Should Trump win re-election, it is not clear how he will approach North Korea, but he seems more likely than the current Democratic front-runner Joe Biden to take a softer line. The reverse seems true on the bilateral relationship, with Trump doubling down on his more hardnosed positions on economic and security issues.

Additionally, COVID-19 has thrown a wrench in the works across a number of policy areas, but could provide a **window for cooperation with North Korea**. Although the pandemic forced Moon to table a plan to send tourists to North Korea, recent letter

exchanges between Trump and Kim as well as Moon and Kim regarding efforts to contain the virus are a positive development that could help lay the groundwork for renewed talks.

Amid so much uncertainty, it is difficult to see exactly what hurdles Moon will face on the path ahead with Washington. However, how Moon has adapted to the challenges so far suggests he is well suited to uphold the strength of the relationship and make the most of out of opportunities to engage with Pyongyang.

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