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THE PENINSULA

Mitigating the New Politics of Zero-Sum

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Major political developments at the end of 2024 have ushered in new unpredictability in the US-South Korea relationship for 2025. First came the re-election of Donald Trump in the United States, followed by dramatic events in South Korea that are still evolving after President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived declaration of martial law. Deep political division is a powerful undercurrent contributing to both these developments, the aftermath of which will play out in unique and uncertain ways in each country over the course of 2025.

Politics is a perpetual contact sport. There are winners and losers, after all. The depth of political polarization in both countries, however, has brought out a tendency in political leaders and their challengers to increasingly frame and pursue political choices in starkly binary, zero-sum terms. Sustained high levels of polarization, in turn, render increasingly impossible the political tolerance that is necessary for the kinds of compromises that modern-day liberalism and pluralism rely upon—those that pay more heed to acknowledging and striking some balance among interests, rules, and rights.

What feels more unfamiliar and concerning about today's new "politics as usual" emanates when each "side" in a deeply divided political system pursues starkly iconoclastic goals not just to achieve their political priorities in traditional ways but also to delegitimize or tear down what a sizable portion of the population on the "other side" still values and finds important. When this happens, politics moves beyond a series of compromises that evolve over time amid a competitive marketplace of ideas and interests into something else altogether: a zero-sum contest where "winning" becomes not just achieving new political priorities but also an act of overturning the other side's past accomplishments and denying acknowledgment of their policy priorities.

One external manifestation of the rise of zero-sum beliefs in US politics is a fundamental shift away from traditional US support for the postwar liberal economic order—and nowhere more so than in international trade. This is the system that Washington meticulously forged, invested in, and championed following the end of World War II. At the center of this approach was the belief that the United States' longer-term interests are best served through a series of international commitments that enable all its members to reap the benefit of mutually beneficial growth that can come from adhering to rules-based trade.

Maintaining the system often proved messy and difficult amid conflict, cheating, and other challenges. Trade, moreover, can be more zero- than positive-sum at times, an angle that China well understands and often pursues. Inertia also has crept into the system, preventing new compromises among nations that had proven necessary to keep the trading system relevant and responsive to evolving needs and changes.

Rather than invest further in trying to take on these challenges collectively, as it has in the past, the United States instead has effectively abandoned much of its historic leadership role in this area and proceeded to progressively untether itself from many of the obligations it long insisted upon but now no longer finds prudent.

Even as the United States remains the world's second-largest exporter, Washington's nearly 75-year commitment to promoting open, rules-based trade has come to be viewed in the political mainstream of both political parties in increasingly zero-sum terms. Simply put, it has resulted in the view that trade is a greater source of harm than opportunity for the United States. With this dramatic shift in view, the bipartisan political consensus that long upheld the US commitment to the system has faded into the background.

As the United States continues pushing away, it has offered no consistent vision for what kind of system it might prefer instead. The fundamental principles of non-discrimination, transparency, and due process that the United States long insisted on being reflected in international trade rules routinely reflected its own practices and principles. Once US political polarization became so deep and results in chronic discord and gridlock over what the rules should be within its own borders, it no longer became able to consistently advocate abroad for these old rules, much less agree on and advocate for new ones.

These deep domestic disagreements are a principal reason the United States failed to follow through on the Barack Obama administration's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, championed as a "high standard" model for trade. It is also why, nearly a decade later, history appears ready to repeat itself should the Trump administration follow through, as widely expected, to terminate further support for the Joe Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

Meanwhile, firms that attempted to adjust to the United States' discriminatory new rules for subsidies and other incentives enacted under the Biden administration-supported Inflation Reduction Act, whether by moving large production lines across national borders or re-configuring products and supply chains, may suddenly find these incentives terminated or further curtailed.

If these predictions hold, these efforts and programs—just as some launched by the first Trump administration were then spurned by the Biden administration—will have fallen victim to the new reality of zero-sum-driven politics across differing US administrations.

US political polarization and the ensuing decisions will assuredly further impact its trading partners in these or similar ways into 2025 and beyond, including security allies like South Korea. Political choices made in Seoul's own turbulent political marketplace, from trade to industrial and other economic policies, amid its shifting politics and priorities will also be closely watched and assessed for their impacts on the United States.

Those of us in government in early 2017, who witnessed in stark terms the challenges that rapid and dramatic shifts in political power and expectations in both nations wrought on traditional approaches and assumptions, cannot help but see parallels as 2025 begins. Political change is once again sharp and dramatic, giving rise to new uncertainties and risks, such as the potential for miscues, amid certain new expectations and priorities. It is safe to say that in 2025, as it was in 2017, simple reliance on the depth and breadth of the common interests shared between the United States and South Korea will prove insufficient in the face of new expectations that prioritize changing the status quo.

This time around, a more proactive approach that takes these new domestic political realities into account is necessary. To transcend zero-sum worldviews, a more productive start would include a readiness on both sides to clearly express and acknowledge the other's priorities and concerns up-front, a readiness to be more flexible about the ways each could adequately accommodate the other's core concerns, and a consistent readiness to prioritize the potential for compromise wherever possible and necessary.

As the United States and South Korea redefine and vigorously safeguard their essential interests, effective problem-solving will require going beyond conventional thinking and boundaries to include other possibilities across all facets of the US-South Korea relationship. The difficult project for 2025 is to imagine what could be added to, instead of taken away from, this important relationship to respond to legitimate concerns in ways that also help begin to tamp down on the zero-sum-driven assumptions and impulses that have emerged as the familiar face of today's political polarization in each nation.

Michael Beeman served as a senior trade official at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative for over 16 years, most recently as the Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for Japan, Korea and APEC from 2017-20 during which he led the renegotiation of the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement. From 2023-24, he was a Visiting Scholar and Lecturer at Stanford University. He received his DPhil in Politics from the University of Oxford in 1998 and is the author of Walking Out: America's New Trade Policy in the Asia-Pacific and Beyond (Stanford, 2024). The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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US Public Opinion on Hallyu and Implications for Korean Soft

Power

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Hallyu (or Korean Wave) looks to continue its march onward in the Year of the Blue Snake. Netflix announced that the first five days of *Squid Game* Season 2 netted 68 million views, breaking the company's previous first-week debut record set by *Wednesday* in 2022. Since its release on December 26, the show has already become Netflix's seventh most popular non-English TV program behind *Squid Game* Season 1, which currently has over 265 million views. Hallyu contents have had hints of success in the past, but the robustness of its rise across a broad spectrum of genres is a relatively recent phenomenon. What explains this trend? More importantly, why does it matter? Drawing on KEI's annual survey data, an analysis of US public opinion data suggests that much of the interest in the United States is driven by the younger generation and that the recent rise of Hallyu should be taken seriously due to its significant impact on US attitudes about South Korea.

Why the Korean Wave Is Getting Bigger

Among the explanations for the continued success of Hallyu is the ubiquity of digital and internet platforms, such as YouTube, OTT content players, and Spotify. These platforms provide multiple entry points for Korean content producers in the global market, which previously was managed by mega media outlets and PR firms. Gone are the days when music albums needed to go through Western marketing and scouting firms or producers. Now, Korean music artists can rise to global stardom by posting their content on YouTube