



THE PENINSULA

Korea Policy Series: The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Faces Uncertain Future

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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 Mung brought an end to South Korea's monthslong political upheaval triggered by predecessor Yoon Suk Yeol's imposition of martial law and subsequent impeachment. However, competing factions within the Lee administration advocate conflicting foreign policies, leading to potential ambiguity surrounding the country's future direction.

President Lee will attempt to maintain South Korea's traditional balancing of its relationships with its security guarantor the United States and its largest trading partner China while attempting to alienate neither. 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.

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 as well as the broader conservative movement.

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.

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 demanded security concessions as well. Washington pushed Seoul to increase South Korean defense expenditures both as a percentage of the country's GDP and through greater contributions to offset the cost of stationing U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula.

The Trump administration advocates modernizing the alliance by reorienting the primary mission of U.S. forces in South Korea toward the China threat. Doing so will require South Korea to assume greater responsibility for countering the North Korea threat and the United States to potentially redeploy some of its forces elsewhere in the region.

Two U.S.-South Korea leaders' summits provided both major announcements and continued uncertainty due to differing depictions of what was agreed to. 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 United States Forces Korea (USFK) in regional contingencies, and the potential for transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces from the U.S.-led Combined Forces Command (CFC). 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. But North Korea has rejected all U.S. and South Korean entreaties for dialogue since the last U.S.-North Korean diplomatic engagement in October 2019. Although Trump touts his friendship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, North Korean diplomats in New York repeatedly refused to accept his letter seeking to reopen dialogue with Kim, nor did they accept Trump's request for a meeting during his October 2025 trip to South Korea.

The North Korean leader sees little need to engage with the United States, since he is receiving far greater benefits from Russia with fewer conditions than he could possibly attain from the United States. Russia's largesse in return for North Korea providing massive amounts of military equipment enables North Korea to mitigate the impact of international sanctions, as does Kim's lucrative cybercurrency crimes.

Tempestuous Time for the Alliance. As both the United States and South Korea find their footing on their Indo-Pacific strategies, 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.

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.

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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Feature image from the [ROK Armed Forces](#).

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Return to the Peninsula



THE PENINSULA

Korea Policy Series: Building Up Japan-South Korea

Rapprochement

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Author: [Shihoko Goto](#)

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Executive Summary

The commitment to improve relations between Japan and South Korea as outlined at the 2023 trilateral Camp David summit is no longer personality-driven. Japan, South Korea, and the United States all have new leaders since then, and all three countries still clearly recognize the value of stronger ties between Japan and South Korea as an integral part of continued regional stability. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi since October 2025, Japan sees improved relations with South Korea as critical for its own military and economic security. While Takaichi will need to focus on securing her position as Japan's fifth prime minister in as many years, the political debate has already delved beyond simply focusing on domestic concerns. There is growing momentum to develop a roadmap for Tokyo to promote stability and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific with trusted allies, one that must include South Korea.

Policy Recommendation

The vision for Japan's relations with South Korea should include:

- Developing economic alliances and networks for confronting new trade challenges: Trade relations with the United States and dealing with tariffs as well as foreign direct investment (FDI) requirements are immediate challenges facing both Japan and South Korea. The urgency of trade negotiations with Washington since April left little room for cooperation between the two countries despite their similar concerns; however, the two countries continue to share broader concerns regarding economic security and resilience to coercion. Persistent trade tensions provide an opportunity to explore forging economic alliances and systemic exchanges of information regarding the latest trade developments.
- Strengthening bilateral ties within existing multilateral frameworks: A number of partnerships already exist in the Indo-Pacific and beyond that could be the foundation for greater cooperation between Japan and South Korea. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is one such example that would benefit from South Korea's accession not just as a trade deal but as a framework to build trust between the two countries, united in their shared interest to establish a stable and predictable mechanism for economic engagement.
- Championing regional security and economic challenges beyond national borders: Japan remains committed to promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), yet the rapidly growing ties between China, Russia, and North Korea are chipping away at the allure of FOIP across the region. As two of the biggest winners of the post-World War II rules-based order, both Japan and South Korea are best positioned to promote regional growth and stability through a shared vision. At the same time, their ability to work closely together to pursue shared interests will exemplify the value of building trust.

Conclusion

From domestic political uncertainties to the politicization of history, the persistent risks to relations between Japan and South Korea cannot be ignored. Yet the external risks facing the two countries are far greater and demand that both sides maintain stable relations and close policy cooperation. At the same time, the need for the two countries to work closely together to further their shared economic interests independent of the United States is increasing in urgency.

Shihoko Goto is Vice President of Programs at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. All views are the author's alone.

Feature image from the [Prime Minister's Office of Japan](#).

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