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# South Korea Matters More to the United States Than North Korea's Nukes

The Biden administration should prioritize one of America's most important allies.

BY **S. NATHAN PARK**

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People watch reporting on the U.S. presidential election showing images of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden (right) and South Korean President Moon Jae-in (left), at a railway station in Seoul on Nov. 9. JUNG YEON-JE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

In the last four years, despite outgoing President Donald Trump's boasts, the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear arsenal has become greater than ever. But the incoming Biden administration should not be blinkered by a singular focus on North Korea leader Kim Jong Un's weapons, because the most important change in the peninsula has been happening on the southern side of the DMZ. In a world where China is now the main foreign-policy challenge for the United States, South Korea emerged as an indispensable U.S. ally, with the potential to play the role that West Germany did during the height of the Cold War. The time has come for the

United States to reorder its priorities in the Korean Peninsula: Rather than treating South Korea as a part of the solution for the North, Washington must treat the U.S.-South Korean alliance as a standalone concern, and seek to leverage the alliance to establish a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

To be sure, North Korea's nuclear arsenal is a serious matter. But take away the weapons, and North Korea is the same country that it has been since 1973, when President-elect Joe Biden became a senator: an isolated and impoverished country whose sole importance in the world comes from the harm that it causes to its own people and the potential harm it may cause to its neighbors.

Now, consider South Korea, which is certainly not the same country as it was in 1973 when it was an economically struggling right-wing dictatorship. Today, South Korea is among the world's top-10 economies, bigger even than Russia or Brazil. It is a world leader in technology and a crucial link in the global supply chain of high tech materials such as memory chips and 5G equipment. Few can match South Korea's soft power that churns out Academy Award-winning movies and Billboard chart-topping music. (K-pop group BTS's fandom was so strong that even Chinese state-owned media backed off from criticizing them.) Seoul's vibrant democracy inspires others in Asia; protesters in Hong Kong and Thailand adopted Korea's protest music and K-pop as their own anthem.

In addition, South Korea is an underrated military power. Born out of an apocalyptic civil war and after spending entire existence preparing for the next one, South Korea has seventh-largest standing army in the world with nearly 600,000 soldiers, fifth-largest air force in the world by the number of aircrafts, and its own very large arsenal of ballistic missiles. Seoul's defense plan goes beyond merely defending against North Korea. Under President Moon Jae-in—belying his reputation as a liberal dove—South Korea has been actively building a blue water navy with aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines to protect the remote sea lanes crucial for its trade. Seoul's foreign policy circles are quietly debating whether South Korea should pursue its own nuclear-weapons program, especially considering the uncertainty of U.S. commitment in its East Asian allies shown during the Trump administration.

The latter point poses a significant challenge to the Biden administration. Following the four years of Trump, South Korea's opinion of the United States is at an all-time low. This is different from the anti-Americanism of yesteryear, originating from fear and resentment of the United States' overwhelming power and influence over Korea. Under Trump, the United States became small, unreliable, and petty in the eyes of Koreans. Doubt over U.S. commitment to South Korea began to set in immediately after Trump took office, as Washington failed to support—or even acknowledge—South Korea as it was subject to China's massive economic retaliation for deploying U.S.'s THAAD missile defense system. The temporary euphoria caused by Trump's diplomacy with North Korea did not last, as the flashy photo ops failed to lead to any tangible result. Then the extortionate demand of fivefold increase for South Korea's contribution to stationing U.S. troops in its territory soured the public opinion once and for all. An overwhelming 96 percent of the public [opposed the hike](#) at one point; so boorish was U.S.

ambassador Harry Harris with this demand—reportedly, he said the word “five billion dollars” [at least 20 times](#) in a 30-minute conversation with a South Korean lawmaker—that even South Korea’s pro-US conservative politicians came away insulted.

On the other hand, self-confidence is running high among South Koreans. The defeatist self-conceptualization as “shrimp among whales,” buffeted by the crosswinds from Korea’s more powerful neighbors, has faded significantly. In particular, South Korea’s successful response to the COVID-19 pandemic, contrasted especially with the Trump administration’s abject incompetence, has given Koreans the sense that they have arrived. A recent study showed Korean public’s national pride [rose](#) sharply from 2019 to 2020. High-ranking officials freely express that they have the power to shape their own destiny, even in the face of global superpowers. In a recent symposium, Foreign [Minister](#) Kang Kyung-wha said: “Korea is certainly in a geopolitical position that looks like we are caught in a crossfire. But I think you can turn that around and say it’s leverage.” Lee Soo-hyuk, Korea’s [ambassador](#) to United States, was even more blunt: “I feel pride that we are now a country that can choose [between the United States and China], not be forced to choose.” KBS, South Korea’s public broadcaster, [carried](#) a two-part article called: “No More America Number One”—a harsh title with even harsher assessment of the decline of the United States under the Trump administration, made all the more shocking because of the broadcaster’s usual stiff-necked decorum.

All of this puts the U.S.-South Korean relationship at an inflection point. Repairing the alliance does not simply mean going back to the pre-Trump era, when South Korea was seen more as a U.S. client state whose international importance was limited to how much it helped advancing the U.S. objectives with North Korea. Such a crabbed view of the alliance, in fact, introduced unnecessary strain in the relationship, as the success of the alliance was judged solely on how closely the two countries were aligned as to Pyongyang. As the slogan for Biden’s transition team goes, the U.S.-South Korean alliance must be built back better. If China is the main challenge for the U.S. foreign policy, it naturally follows that the United States must give very high priority to its democratic ally nearest to China. For the United States, the health of its alliance with South Korea may well determine the outcome of its strategic competition with China as well as the establishment of the rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Fortunately, the United States is still in a good position with respect to South Korea. In some corners of Washington, D.C., there are concerns that South Korea might abandon the U.S. alliance and join the Sinosphere, informed by a vague notion of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis (which lumps them together as “Confucian” powers) and the idea that South Korea’s liberals (who are currently in power) are secret communists who are in league with the Chinese Communist Party. Such views are ignorant and overblown. South Koreans still like the United States much more than they like China. (In a recent [poll](#) asking a favorability rating between 0 and 100, Koreans gave the United States the score of 49.9, and China 29.6.) Koreans are fiercely proud of their hard-won democracy, and are not at all fans of illiberal China or North Korea. Further, as an exporting economy, South Korea recognizes that free trade and the liberal world order—underwritten by the United States—are indispensable to its success.

But inevitably, there are smaller yet significant points at which U.S. and South Korean interests will diverge. The United States may wish its two foremost democratic allies in East Asia to get along better, but South Korea will not stop demanding that Japan face the crimes of its imperialist past. South Korea may quietly support the U.S. initiatives to check China's rise, but it will not adopt an openly hostile rhetoric or join a group whose explicit purpose is to oppose China. Most importantly, South Korea absolutely will not begin a war with North Korea, which may very easily escalate into a nuclear war that destroys millions of lives. Taking South Korea seriously as an ally means that, in these situations, the United States will not get 100 percent of what it wants. Instead, Washington will have to persuade Seoul by pointing to the greater ideals of liberal international order that they share and nudging its partner closer to its own position—as it might do with any ally.

Doing so will require patience and persistence on the part of the United States. Restoring the trust in the alliance may take longer than the four or eight years of the Biden administration, when South Koreans can plainly see the United States is just one election and one Trump—or a similar figure—away from sliding back. The recent [joint fact sheet](#) issued by the State Department and South Korea's Foreign Ministry, seeking to harmonize the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and Korea's New Southern Policy focusing on South Korea's role in Southeast Asia, is a commendable effort to align the two countries' foreign policies rather than Washington demanding Seoul to toe the line set by the United States. The Biden administration should do many more of these in different areas such as combating the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, or free trade and movement of people, to assure that it sees South Korea as an important partner.

It will also require a mental adjustment. For a long time, Washington approached the Korean Peninsula with North Korea as the main issue, and South Korea as perhaps one component of the overall solution. This order of priority must now be reversed: Alliance maintenance with South Korea is the main issue to be addressed, one of whose components is North Korea. Fortunately, some in the D.C. foreign-policy circles are [coming](#) to this view. For the U.S. foreign policy in Asia to succeed in the next several decades, the Biden administration must do so as well.

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