

# [Column] A prospect more worrying than a Korean Peninsula sans US

Posted on : 2025-11-24 17:19 KST Modified on : 2025-11-24 17:19 KST

**The worst-case scenario is maintaining the uncertainty of the current status quo**



President Lee Jae Myung gives a briefing on the joint fact sheet South Korea released with the US on tariff and security agreements, held at the presidential office in Seoul on Nov. 14, 2025. (Yonhap)

**By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University**



“The ROK-US alliance has developed into a genuinely future-oriented comprehensive strategic alliance that covers national security, the economy and cutting-edge technology. The door is wide open for a renaissance in the ROK-US alliance that will be beneficial for both countries,” Korean President Lee Jae Myung said on Nov. 14.

Lee was sharing his stance on the fact sheet that Korea and the US had published about a series of agreements reached in recent months.

Despite criticism, it is surely undeniable that the Lee administration strove valiantly in the areas of tariffs, investments, national security, and nuclear energy, especially compared with the US’ negotiations with Japan and Saudi Arabia, to take two notable examples. That just shows how tough these negotiations were to begin with.

Watching these negotiations play out and wind down has impressed upon me the bitterness and anguish of being a small power.

The negotiations were the latest reminder of US President Donald Trump's conviction that Korean security and prosperity were only made possible by American munificence and that the time has come for Korea, as a wealthy country, to pay the US back.

Trump has been criticized for leaving no room for fairness or symbiosis in his "retroactive transactionalism" and for taking unilateral actions aimed at looting others under the pretext of being mutually beneficial.

Such tendencies were evident in the self-deprecatory lament by Korean Trade Minister Kim Jung-kwan, who played a key role in the negotiations with the US. "There's nothing fair about the terms [of this MOU]. Does it make sense to split the proceeds 50-50 when the US isn't paying a penny?"

In these proceedings, there is no sign of the US as the world's impartial and benevolent benefactor.

The issue here is excessive dependence on the US for its security. And that's not limited to Korea — Japan, Saudi Arabia and even the countries of Europe are prone to structural vulnerabilities deriving from the US' security umbrella.

For such reasons, some in Korea have even begun discussing the once-taboo subject of "the Korean Peninsula without the US."

Is there any substance to such speculation?

The Korean Peninsula without American involvement would be predicated on the annulment of the ROK-US alliance and the withdrawal of American troops currently stationed on the peninsula. That would also mean the US writing off the option of exerting military influence not only on the peninsula itself but in East Asia more broadly.

That would only be possible if the US, stretched to its limits and bowing to MAGA demands, were to adopt an isolationist policy of focusing on regional hegemony over the Western Hemisphere (that is, the Americas) under the banner of an updated Monroe Doctrine (sometimes called the "Donroe Doctrine," after Donald Trump). This scenario also presumes the US acknowledging the Korean Peninsula and East Asia being absorbed into the Chinese sphere of influence.

Another way for the ROK-US alliance to be repealed and US troops to be pulled out is if South and North Korea were to end their hostile relationship, establish peace on the Korean Peninsula and declare a neutral policy line.

But realistically speaking, the chances of either of these scenarios becoming a reality are remote. The US is unlikely to pivot to radical isolationism, just as the Korean Peninsula is unlikely to see the establishment of a peace regime to a degree that would justify the withdrawal of US troops, at least any time soon.

Furthermore, the US and China's escalating strategic rivalry is likely to serve as a negative factor.

It is also possible to envision the US seeking to greatly reduce, if not completely withdraw, US Forces Korea (USFK) while becoming an "offshore balancer" and entrusting regional defense, including the role of counterbalancing or containing China, to South Korea and other allies. In this scenario, Korea would play the leading role in its own defense while regional defense would be handled jointly by American allies in the area such as Korea and Japan, with the US providing extended deterrence (including the nuclear umbrella) as well as supplemental military support.

That's the position advocated by mainstream "realist" political scientists in the US, including John Mearsheimer. That scenario could also leave South Korea in an uneasy security posture.

But the worst-case scenario is maintaining the uncertainty of the current status quo. If the US maintains its alliance with Korea and USFK while making excessive demands by way of compensation, Korea could find itself in a security dilemma even more troubling than the scenarios of the US becoming an offshore balancer or vacating the Korean Peninsula altogether. These dilemmas include the considerable risk of the US threatening to draw down or pull out troops unless Korea makes "appropriate" defense contributions or entangling Korea in an unwanted regional conflict.

The US insistence on "strategic flexibility" — which could mean arbitrarily relocating USFK troops or equipment or redefining its role without adequate prior discussion with the Korean government — is bound to be a serious liability. And if the US were to slap Korea with heavy tariffs for failing to carry out its investment commitments, that could rock the ROK-US alliance to its very foundations.

Thus, we need to focus on the strategic uncertainty that would ensue from a Korean Peninsula without the US.

What actions should we take?

First, we need to counteract uncertainty in the alliance by boosting our strategic autonomy and our independent defense capabilities.

Second, we need to actively seek a new regional order of multilateral security cooperation that goes beyond collective defense agreements based on our alliance with the US.

Third, we need to explore practical ways to avoid economic pressure from the US through open regionalism and a multilateral trade order.

Ultimately, the Korean government needs to play a leading role in ending hostility in South-North relations and in building a win-win, symbiotic regional order that transcends geopolitical alignment.

Please direct questions or comments to [[english@hani.co.kr](mailto:english@hani.co.kr)]

Original Korean