

In Focus

# The 2024 US Presidential Election: Asia's Hopes and Fears

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South Korea is watching with some trepidation. Biden likely represents a continued strong bilateral alliance. But a victory for Donald Trump is fraught with peril.

# Peril with Little Promise: The US Presidential Election and South Korea's Dilemma

## By Chung-in Moon

In Focus: Moon

**The election is being watched with trepidation in South Korea. Should President Joe Biden be re-elected, Seoul would likely see continuity in the relationship and a continued strong US-South Korea bilateral alliance.**

**But a victory for Donald Trump is fraught with peril. He could throw the alliance into turmoil, try to make South Korea a front-line state in the US standoff with China, threaten overtures to North Korea, and demand South Korea increase defense cost-sharing and defense budget or face the withdrawal of US forces, writes Chung-in Moon.**

**The situation is worrying for all sides of the political spectrum in Seoul.**

THE US PRESIDENTIAL election this November is a global concern because of its profound potential impact on world politics and economics. If President Joe Biden gets re-elected, his government can be counted on to sustain liberal internationalism and alliance politics, the predictable backbone of American foreign policy for the last 80 years. However, if former President Donald Trump is returned to power, he is likely to seek a roughshod foreign and national security policy agenda pleasing to his MAGA (Make America Great Again) supporters; this could radically reshape global geopolitical and geoeconomic alignments. This kind of retrenched Trump vision for America will greatly impact its allies, partners and friends.

These same concerns have been raised in South Korea. Conservatives in the country, including the incumbent Yoon Suk Yeol government, seem to favor the re-election of Joe Biden because of his emphasis on a robust bilateral alliance, a tough posture on North Korea and a coalition of like-minded countries. Yoon's government is wary of sudden policy changes under a new Trump administration. Paradoxically, some progressive forces in South Korea have shown wishful thinking about a new Trump administration. They seem to believe a Trump redux may bring about new momentum for the denuclearization of North Korea and progress for the overall Korean Peninsula peace process through his kind of disruptive leadership. These contending expectations reveal how detrimental the outcome of the November election could be to the future of peace and prosperity in Korea.

### WHAT IF BIDEN IS RE-ELECTED?

Conservatives in South Korea will welcome a second term for Biden for several reasons. Above all, Biden has underscored the importance of the US alliance with South Korea within the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy. His next administration will continue to emphasize an alliance with South Korea that enhances values such as democracy and human rights; emphasize strategic alliance in the form of alliance-building beyond the Korean Peninsula; and pursue a comprehensive alliance built around military and non-military domains such as the economy, technology and intelligence. Moreover, the strategic importance of South Korea-US-Japan trilateral co-operation and co-ordination will be highly valued by a Biden administration. For the Yoon government and conservatives in Seoul that see the alliance with the US as a vital lifeline, the continuation of the Biden administration would be a blessing.

The new Biden administration's policy to strengthen a deterrence strategy against North Korea would be another factor comforting conservative forces in South Korea. Biden has already committed to a strategy of conventional and extended nuclear and integrated deterrence against North Korea. He can be expected to honor the Washington Declaration, which he adopted along with Yoon on April 26, 2023. His administration will keep US forces in South Korea at current levels, hold joint military exercises regularly and deploy American strategic weapons as agreed. This is reassuring for those South Koreans who value security.

But there are some concerns about collateral damage emanating from Washington's hard line foreign and economic policy on China, especially decoupling and de-risking in the semiconductor sector. Nevertheless, many in South Korea expect that a new Biden administration will not impose any specific bilateral protectionist measures on South Korea that would, for example, jeopardize the existing Korea-US Free-Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), because it is not expected to harm the broad alliance for simple economic gain.

But it is unclear how the US will take on North

Korea in a second Biden administration. The status quo approach of preventing North Korean military provocation, while maintaining the existing sanctions regime, will remain the mainstay of US policy on North Korea, but Biden officials have recently floated the idea of "interim steps" (e.g., selective sanctions relief for progress on North Korean denuclearization). A new Biden administration might see this option as a way to revive dialogue with Pyongyang. But the Yoon government will oppose it because it believes that the combination of tough deterrence and maximum pressure will eventually make North Korea either surrender or collapse. The recent North Korea-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, forged during Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in June, will likely prevent a new Biden administration from seeking dialogue with North Korea. Having discarded the American card in favor of Russia, Kim Jong Un is unlikely to respond to an American call anyway.

Progressives in South Korea, who support a proactive peace policy, will be critical of this approach. They already dismiss Biden's North Korea policy as nothing but a continuation of the Barack Obama administration's failed "strategic patience" policy. Thus, a new Biden administration will face two divergent reactions from South Korea.

### WOULD A TRUMP VICTORY BE A CURSE?

If Trump returns to the White House, things could be radically different. Most South Koreans are worried that the return of Trump would be a curse. In his first administration, Trump called for South Korea to pay a "fair share" of its defense costs by arguing that South Korea has long had a free ride due to American largesse. A Trump 2.0 would press Seoul to increase its yearly defense cost-sharing to the level of US\$5 billion. Seoul is currently paying roughly US\$1 billion per year to cover wages for South Korean workers at US military bases and support for logistics and military construction-related expenses. A new Trump administration would likely urge the Yoon government to increase its defense budget as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) to more than 3

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percent. And it cannot be ruled out that the government in Washington may request Seoul to reimburse expenses arising from joint military training and the deployment of strategic weapons. There is also a good chance for the second Trump administration to exercise greater protectionist pressures on South Korea as it enjoys hefty trade surpluses with the US. Tough negotiations could severely undermine the foundation of the bilateral alliance. Both conservatives and progressives would be critical of such pressures.

More worrisome would be a new Trump administration's potential effort to weaken the bilateral alliance by reducing and/or withdrawing American forces from South Korea. Harkening back to pre-World War US isolationism, some MAGA extremists advocate the termination of all foreign American troop deployments. Uncertainty over the future of the Indo-Pacific strategy will surely undermine American security commitments in Korea. The hard-won consolidation of South Korea-Japan-US trilateral co-operation

would also be damaged. Conservatives including the Yoon government would be panicked by such developments precisely because this scenario could create a power vacuum on the Korean Peninsula, heightening the risk of war.

Former Trump administration officials such as Robert O'Brien and Elbridge Colby of the pro-Trump conservative American Global Strategies consulting firm argue that the primary target of US forces in South Korea is China, not North Korea. Colby even advocates that South Korea and Japan should be allowed their own nuclear weapons to deal with the China threat. If such changing priorities become policy, most South Koreans would be alarmed, regardless of whether they lean left or right. The top priority of the South Korea-US alliance should be the defense of South Korea from North Korean threats. South Koreans would not want South Korea to serve as the front line of a new Cold War. Divergent threat perceptions could emerge as another critical friction point under a new Trump administration. It

is for these reasons that the new Trump administration could be a curse for South Korea.

As for North Korea, in a second term Trump may try to revive contacts with North Korea. He may try to hold another summit with Kim Jong Un. His dream of striking a "big deal" with Pyongyang and contributing to denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula could serve as a pathway to fulfilling his political legacy. However, the success of such endeavors ultimately depends on Kim's response.

Kim has little to lose by fostering a close relationship with Trump, because showcasing friendship with a global leader sends a powerful message both domestically and internationally. The problem is that Kim's trust in Trump was shattered when Trump walked out with no deal at the Hanoi summit on Feb. 28, 2019. Moreover, Trump did not keep his promise not to undertake South Korea-US military exercises when he met Kim Jong Un at the Panmunjom summit in June 2019. To mend that fractured trust, Trump would need to extend significant overtures. This could include pledges on immediate sanctions relief, normalization of relations with North Korea, halting South Korea-US joint military exercises and training, non-deployment of strategic weapons in the South and even the reduction of US Forces in South Korea. In exchange, he could seek commitments — which may never be realized in practice — from North Korea to cease nuclear and missile activities, along with a gradual verifiable reduction of its nuclear arsenal. Complete nuclear disarmament will take a much longer time.

This is the most worrisome scenario for conservatives and the Yoon government. If it happened, it would be tantamount to recognizing North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, shaking the Yoon government's long-held policy on North Korea. However, progressives could see such a development as a new opportunity for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem as well as for opening a new horizon for the peace process. Trump's potential initiatives, such as halting joint military exercises, reducing US force levels, sanctions relief and diplomatic normalization, could become useful cards

for progressives in pursuing their Korean Peninsula Peace Process involving a declaration to formally end the Korean War and transforming the current armistice agreement into a peace treaty. This could also potentially pave the way for a new security architecture in Northeast Asia.

#### CHOICES FOR SOUTH KOREA

Regardless of who wins the US election, there will be rather limited immediate changes because of recent geopolitical events. The North Korea-Russia treaty and the tense confrontation between China and the US in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea will sustain and even strengthen the US security commitment to South Korea. Even if Trump gets re-elected, changes will be limited, although there may be skirmishes over defense cost-sharing. Overall, the Indo-Pacific strategy will likely remain intact, and bloc diplomacy and even military confrontation will intensify. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the US would alter its foreign and national security policy toward Korea.

However, South Koreans are concerned about domestic political backlash in the US after the November presidential election. It cannot be ruled out that depending on the electoral outcome, the US may well enter a period of domestic political chaos, which could erode American foreign policy and weaken the credibility of America's security commitments. That would be nightmarish for South Korea.

South Korean domestic politics will be further divided. Conservatives will champion further strategic convergence with the US, whereas progressives will call for greater strategic autonomy. Domestic cleavages in the wake of this most alarming of American presidential elections will make the South Korean path to peace and prosperity perilous.

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