

# [Column] Three options for Korea as it confronts the return of Trump

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**Trump's second term will no doubt place immense pressure on South Korea**



Former US President Donald Trump points to the crowd ahead of addressing supporters on election night in the early hours of Nov. 6, 2024 (local time) in Palm Beach, Florida, after being all but assured victory in the election. (AFP/Yonhap)



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The Donald is back.

Despite two court convictions, assassination attempts, and scandals of all kinds, Donald Trump is bound for the Oval Office once again, four years after leaving it.

The Republican Party has secured control of the Senate and is likely to win the House of Representatives as well. Complete control of the government would be the icing on the cake for what can rightly be called the “Trump miracle.”

Trump's reelection is creating joy and grief in equal measures around the world. Zelenskyy in Ukraine and European members of NATO, as well as Palestine, Iran and their supporters, perceive a serious

threat from the foreign policy pivot presaged by Trump 2.0.

Netanyahu in Israel and Putin in Russia are tickled pink by the prospect of another Trump administration. While China has made little response other than a brief statement from its Foreign Ministry, Beijing is obviously on edge over Trump's return.

But how will Korea be affected?

We shouldn't jump to conclusions about Trump's policy for the Korean Peninsula. We'll have to monitor the composition of his cabinet and who he picks as his advisers. There are likely to be three competing factions in Trump's second administration.

First, there is Trump and his loyal confidantes, and the transactional attitude they espouse. These are the kind of people who emphasize advantage over values, who base all diplomatic relationships on a cost-benefit analysis, and who are willing to make diplomatic deals to achieve their desired ends.

Second, there are the devotees of Trump's creed of MAGA, making America great again. Along with their loyalty to Trump, they're strongly opposed to US intervention overseas and don't want the US to go to war unless the national interest is severely infringed. This faction is strongly characterized by Jacksonian isolationism.

The third and final faction is the "neocons," the hardcore wing of the Republican Party. Neocons support the use of force for maintaining American primacy and disseminating American values around the world.

While the transactional approach is likely to be the prevailing theme of foreign policy and national security in the incoming Trump administration, the interaction between these three factions will also be a determining factor.

Regardless of who sets the tone for national security and foreign policy under the new Trump administration, it will have a major impact on the present and future of America's alliance with South Korea. In particular, it calls into question the future of the "alliance of values based on a democratic coalition" that has been underlined by South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol.

Yoon has touted agreements with the US to bolster extended deterrence and integrated deterrence as signature diplomatic achievements, but it's unclear whether those agreements will remain in place.

Given the widening gap between Americans' perceptions of the threat of North Korea and the threat of China, there's a chance that the deterrence strategy of the US and South Korea could undergo a fundamental adjustment. Change may also be in store not only for the intensity and frequency of South Korea-US joint military exercises, but also for the US' forward deployment of strategic weapons to the Korean Peninsula.

If South Korea refuses to shoulder the costs of such activities, Trump could threaten, once again, to scale them back or suspend them altogether.

While the Yoon and Biden administrations recently updated their defense burden-sharing agreement, Trump could renege on that agreement and demand that South Korea increase its defense contribution

from the current level of US\$1 billion to US\$10 billion. He could use a potential reduction in the number or total withdrawal of US troops in South Korea as bargaining chips.

The North Korean issue will be another major variable. Trump has repeatedly expressed his intention of cutting a direct deal with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. If Trump reaches a grand bargain with Putin to settle the Ukraine issue, he may also enlist Putin's aid to persuade Kim to be amenable to negotiations.

That kind of breakthrough in North Korea-US relations would almost certainly create friction with Yoon's hard-line policy toward North Korea.

The concern here is that if the US' extended deterrence against North Korea is disrupted or if negotiations lead to the US condoning North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons during Trump's second term, South Korea's drive to acquire its own nuclear arsenal will gain impetus, and a Trump-led White House could even make gestures that seem to allow such a move.

South Korea's nuclear armament could very well trigger a nuclear domino effect throughout Northeast Asia, potentially crippling strategic stability in the region.

Trump's second term is also expected to have a negative impact on the economy. According to a recent report by the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, Trump's promised tariffs could cause South Korea's total export volume to shrink by somewhere between US\$22.2 and US\$44.8 billion. If Korean exporters struggled to find replacement markets or otherwise adapt, that could lead to a 0.29-0.67 point drop in Korea's real gross domestic product.

The economic impact would be even greater if the US reduces or suspends subsidies promised to South Korean companies that have decided to invest in the US under the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act.

Back in office, Trump may also ask for a revision to the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement because of the country's chronic trade deficit with South Korea.

What's clear is that Trump's second term will place immense pressure on the South Korean government. Given these prospects, it's worth contemplating the options of "exit, voice and loyalty" proposed in the landmark treatise of the same name by American economist Albert O. Hirschman.

South Korea has long held to a policy of unwavering loyalty to the US. But is that policy actually our best option? Do we have the wisdom, and the courage, to consider giving voice to our objections to the US, or even seeking an exit to the current arrangement?

We'll find out soon enough.

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