

Trump 2.0: Curse or blessing?

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South Korea faces risks in alliance, North Korea issues

By Moon Chung-in

South Korea is undergoing a serious polycrisis. While domestic politics is embroiled in an uncertain process of presidential impeachment, military tensions with North Korea have heightened to an unprecedented degree. To make matters worse, the advent of Trump 2.0 signals bad omens for South Korea's national security and economy. Trump-phobia is widespread in South Korea.

It is feared that Trump 2.0 might disrupt or weaken the South Korea-U.S. alliance by demanding too much for defense cost-sharing and even threatening the reduction or withdrawal of American forces in South Korea. Trump has already expressed his displeasure with a recent settlement of the Special Measures Agreement on defense cost-sharing for American forces in South Korea in which Seoul agreed to pay \$1.1 billion yearly. He argued that being a money machine, Seoul can pay at least \$10 billion, a ninefold increase. After taking office on Jan. 20, he may try to renegotiate the terms of cost-sharing by using such bargaining chips as the suspension of joint military exercises and training and the deployment of American strategic weapons. He may also deliberate on changing the overall mission of American forces in South Korea. South Koreans are extremely worried about such possibilities.



Divergent threat perceptions toward China will be another source of contention. Trump 2.0 is likely to intensify U.S. hard-line policy on China, and the mission of American forces in South Korea might be restructured to focus on deterring China rather than North Korea. For South Korea, however, deterrence against North Korea will continue to be its top priority and it will be reluctant to join the American strategy to encircle and contain China proactively. This discrepancy in goals will strain relations between the two countries.

Trump's interest in doing a direct deal with North Korea could trouble Seoul-Washington relations. Trump seems confident about being able to reboot dialogue with Kim Jong-un through summit diplomacy. Seoul would be concerned about two fallouts from such Trump 2.0 summit diplomacy, if that were to occur. First, he may enter nuclear arms reduction negotiations with Kim not on denuclearization but on exchanging Pyongyang's suspension of nuclear and missile activities and a reduction of nuclear facilities, materials and weapons for the relaxation of sanctions and diplomatic normalization. This would be tantamount to recognizing North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons state. South Korea, which adheres to the principle of CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement), cannot accept such a deal. Second, an approach that sidesteps participation by South Korea — so-called “South Korea passing” — in the process of Trump-Kim bilateral talks would be a disaster for Seoul, particularly from a domestic political point of view.

Trade pressures by Trump 2.0 could also damage the South Korean economy that relies heavily on U.S. export markets. Imposition of universal tariffs, termination of subsidies to South Korean companies that have invested heavily in the U.S., and other types of nontariff barriers including quantitative restrictions would certainly deepen Seoul's anxiety.

These possible “Trump curses” cannot be cured by simply showing loyalty or raising one's voice. South Korea needs new thinking that goes beyond transactional dealings.

To cope with the defense cost-sharing issue and the divergence in threat perceptions, South Korea might need a structural readjustment. The Trump 2.0 “America First” doctrine will not tolerate South Korea's free riding any

longer, and the continuing presence of American troops cannot be taken for granted either. Like Europe, South Korea might have to seriously consider reducing its dependence on the U.S., while seeking greater military self-reliance. Transfer of wartime operational control from the U.S. is essential in this regard. Seoul must make every effort to change its security environment by improving ties with North Korea, China and Russia. In preparation for weakened American commitment or disengagement, Seoul needs to deliberate on building a new security architecture in Northeast Asia that could replace an American-centered collective defense system based on the current alliance. A collective security system through inclusive multilateral security cooperation could be an option, which includes all the nations in the region under the rubric of common security.

Trump's direct deal with Kim Jong-un does not have to be necessarily a curse. On the contrary, it could be a blessing. As Sigfried Hecker has long argued, if Trump can persuade Kim Jong-un to halt North Korea's nuclear and missile activities, roll back its nuclear weapons and missiles, and dismantle its nuclear programs incrementally, even at the expense of sanctions relaxation and diplomatic normalization, that would open a new horizon for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. One precondition is that such efforts should be linked to improved inter-Korean relations, a formal end of the war and the transformation of the armistice agreement into a sustainable peace regime, a regional nuclear arms control regime, and the creation of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Northeast Asia.

It will be difficult for South Korea to avoid short-term damage caused by Trump's trade protectionism. To cope with protectionist pressures, however, South Korea needs to enhance its competitiveness through innovation and partner diversification. It should also take advantage of open regionalism by hastening the finalization of the trilateral free trade arrangement with China and Japan, while enhancing the Regional Comprehensive Partnership and joining multilateral efforts to revitalize the World Trade Organization.

Arnold Toynbee once said, "Civilizations come to birth and proceed to grow by successfully responding to successive challenges." Challenges imposed by Trump should not determine our destiny. We should overcome them with creative responses. When we do this, the Trump curses can turn into new blessings.

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