



WILL THE WHITE HOUSE STAND BY SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN?

BY ATMAN TRIVEDI

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In his Senate confirmation hearing, CIA Director Mike Pompeo declared – twice – that the goal of a planned US-North Korea summit would be to address the North Korean nuclear threat to the United States, without clarifying if and how regional allies fit into the equation. Only after being prodded did he acknowledge the role of the US military deterrent in protecting friends.

Whether the White House likes it or not, when it comes to North Korea, we're all in this together. The administration simply cannot sustain the "maximum pressure" policy it believes is necessary to achieve complete denuclearization without South Korea and Japan.

North Korea historically [seeks to](#) drive a wedge between the United States and its partners to ease pressure and sanctions, and limit the scope of its nuclear and missile commitments. Pyongyang would like nothing more than to effectively end the US-South Korea alliance. Rising China sees it as a Cold War relic; it, too, would embrace decoupling.

Other countries in the region are watching intently: if long-time US allies can't count on protection when the chips are down, they may feel like there is no choice but to embrace China.

Not a lot of time remains before a potential [May or early June](#) US-North Korea summit, and it's easy to brush past details of alliance management in hurried diplomatic preparations. Navigating these risks will require the administration to continue an – at

least until recently – [positive trend](#) of listening to, and coordinating with, its trusted but most vulnerable ally on this issue for almost 70 years, South Korea.

The White House has been criticized for a narrow, short-term, and transactional approach to longtime US allies, one that runs hot-and-cold and obsesses over trade deficits. Its basic instinct is not to listen carefully to friends' concerns and to inject trade into life-and-death security matters.

Last September, following a North Korean nuclear test, the president aimed some not-so-friendly fire at Seoul, accusing the left-leaning government of [appeasement](#). The administration recently managed to secure modest improvements to [the US-Korea trade pact](#) without deep acrimony with South Korea, but not before the president [appeared to use](#) the US troop presence as leverage. He later threatened to hold finalizing that deal as a "[card](#)" to ensure the South toes the US line on North Korea negotiations.

Similarly, no country has more visibly tied its security to the US than Japan, and yet, it was the largest foreign steel supplier [not exempted](#) from recent, sweeping metals tariffs. Don't be surprised if Trump tried to extract in Mar-a-Lago this week an agreement from Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to negotiate a bilateral trade deal in return for US backing on Japan's abducted citizens and the North's missile threat.

But for the most part, since Trump's trip to Asia last November that included a well-received [speech](#) in South Korea, the White House and Blue House have generally stayed in lockstep.

This February, Trump uncharacteristically stood aside as President Moon Jae-in seized the initiative, with an assist from North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un. The former human rights lawyer and student activist arrived in office last May pledging to strengthen the US alliance while also giving direct diplomacy a chance. Moon has had [over 10 years](#) to learn the lessons from the last inter-Korean summit, during which he served as the Blue House chief of staff.

He capitalized on the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang to get a second chance, initiating extended discussions with the visiting Pyongyang delegation that included Kim's sister. Moon then dispatched envoys to meet Kim, and immediately sent them to Washington to brief Trump. The whirlwind of diplomacy led to an agreement on a first-ever meeting between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader. Following some flattery about the president's indispensable role, South Korean officials were even given the opportunity to announce the historic summit outside the White House.

Seoul believes Kim is serious about denuclearization in exchange for security and a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War. North Korean officials [reportedly](#) confirmed directly with the administration its willingness to put its nuclear weapons on the table. Trump trusted South Korea. He was right to do so – even though history teaches there's plenty that could go wrong. After all, Seoul has the most to lose if diplomacy fails.

While Washington is still abuzz over a potential Trump-Kim summit – and the startling news that [Pompeo traveled to Pyongyang](#) over the Easter holiday to meet with Kim – the Moon-Kim meeting set for April 27 has received scant attention. Moon will need to ensure the North's nuclear and missile programs stay front-and-center, even though Kim will want to leave that topic for Trump. As Pompeo made clear, the abiding US interest is stopping Kim's crash effort to be able to threaten the US mainland with a nuclear weapon. However, without some table-setting on substance at the

Moon-Kim meeting, momentum for a Trump-Kim summit may grind to a halt.

The Moon-Kim dialogue can also set a positive tone for denuclearization talks by making demonstrable progress on abductees from Japan and South Korea, and conveying the importance of quickly releasing the three US hostages. Close allied coordination on all these issues is an imperative, before and after the inter-Korean summit.

The South faces an existential threat from the North's nuclear and conventional weapons, and Japan is well within range of Pyongyang's medium-range missiles. Yet, Seoul and Tokyo agree that trading central elements of the alliance – a continuing US force presence in Korea, Japan, and elsewhere, the ability to conduct joint military exercises in self-defense, and the US nuclear umbrella – is too steep an asking price.

These partners shouldn't be left with the impression that US security pledges could be compromised by the threat of a long-range nuclear strike on the homeland or as part of a separate peace with the North that guarantees safe harbor only for the US.

From the US perspective, if further direct talks with North Korea either do not materialize or sour, it's not hard to imagine the blame being laid at Pyongyang's doorstep. Neither Pompeo, nor National Security Adviser John Bolton, have demonstrated [much patience](#) for diplomacy – at least not in prior roles. That reality can't be lost on Kim, and it could lead him to be on his best behavior.

US diplomatic missteps could decouple the allies, especially given Seoul's strong commitment to diplomacy; or worse, lead to miscalculation that puts everyone back on a fast-track to military confrontation. To present a united front to maintain maximum pressure, Moon and Abe need to believe the US will protect their countries' interests. Avoiding a devastating conflict on their soil has to be at the top of the list. Statements attributed to Trump implying [a cavalier attitude toward war](#) because thousands (if not millions) would “die over there” undermines trust.

Trump's voice is arguably the only one in Washington that matters on North Korea. Can he stand by allies and be a reliable friend, even as Pyongyang and Beijing try to expose cracks in their solidarity? Stay tuned. On North Korea, the most likely path to denuclearization requires recognizing that "America First" cannot be America alone.

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