

Korea

Focus

2024 | Briefing No. 12

The Trump Presidency and Korea -
Retrospection and Outlook

Gwendolyn Domning



KOREAN
STUDIES
FREIE
UNIVERSITÄT
BERLIN



The views expressed and conclusions drawn in this series are solely those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the positions or views of the Institute for Korean Studies or its employees. The Institute for Korean Studies is not responsible for, nor does it verify, the accuracy of any information contained in this series. The primary purpose of this series is to promote scholarly discourse across geographical and linguistic boundaries.

**Published by: Institut für Koreastudien (IKS), Freie Universität Berlin,
Otto-v.-Simson-Straße 11, 14195 Berlin. Germany.**

Copyright to papers in this series remains with the authors or their assignees. Reproduction or reposting of texts in this paper can only be done with the permission of the respective author. The proper form for citing working papers in this series is: Name of author or editor, (Year), Title, Working paper, Freie Universität Berlin, Institute of Korean Studies, Berlin.

The Trump Presidency and Korea - Retrospection and Outlook

Gwendolyn Domning

KDI School-FU Korea-Europe Programme

Institute of Korean Studies

Freie Universität Berlin

2024

Korea Focus – Briefing is a series of short articles that review key events organised by the KDI School-FU Korea-Europe Program. This issue is based on the event „The Trump Presidency and Korea - Retrospection and Outlook” and the input by the discussants Prof. Dr. Eun-Jeung Lee, Prof. Dr. Michael Staak, Dr. Marco Overhaus and Dr. Florian Pölking. The event was moderated by Gwendolyn Domning.

Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as president in November 2024 marked a potential turning point in U.S. foreign policy, with far-reaching implications for Korea. Recently commemorating the 70th anniversary of U.S.-Korea relations, South Korea has also emerged as a key player in the evolving trilateral security framework with the U.S. and Japan under the Biden administration, further influencing the region's strategic landscape. What developments await this critical alliance amid ongoing regional and domestic challenges?

In the case of North Korea, a second Trump presidency may signify another diplomatic episode between the estranged countries. However, compared to five years ago, North Korea is in a completely different bargaining position. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the Trump administration will pay special attention to the issue at this time, with other pressing matters still needing to be addressed.

Reflecting on pivotal moments in U.S.-Korea relations, the discussants provided insights into the current state of the alliance and explored its potential future trajectories within an increasingly dynamic geopolitical environment.

Retrospection: The first Trump administration and South Korea

Under the banner of America First, the first Trump administration (2017-2021) sought to diminish military engagement globally. U.S. strategic partners were urged to increase defence spending. In the case of South Korea, the U.S. insisted it pay a substantial sum of 5 billion dollars per year for military cooperation, raising concerns about the stability of the alliance. While demanding higher financial contributions from the South, Trump initially threatened the North with “fire and fury like the world has never seen”, only to later become the first American president to personally meet the leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, planting the seeds of hope for a new era of diplomatic détente. Unfortunately, these expectations were not fulfilled, as the Hanoi summit of 2019 ended without agreement.

Overall, the first Trump administration surprised international observers with its unpredictability. Characterised by tariff wars and disengagement, the U.S.’s new attitude destabilised the global order to some extent, leaving policy experts at a loss regarding how to respond to the bold new rhetoric of their longstanding partner. For South Korea, this signified heightened concerns over national security as well as new financial burdens. It was also during the Trump administration that the U.S.–Korea Free Trade Agreement was renegotiated, resulting in reduced steel exports to the U.S. and higher tariffs on Korean automobiles. For the North, however, it presented a golden opportunity to finally gain diplomatic recognition from the U.S. Its willingness to engage with the U.S. was evident, although this aspect has since undergone some changes.

The current situation: Global and national challenges for the U.S. and Korea

December marked not only the election of Donald Trump as president but also a historical scandal in Korea. On the night of 3rd December, President Yoon declared martial law, deeming the opposition party a threat to national security. Special forces then attempted to storm the National Assembly and arrest prominent political leaders; however, their mission failed due to the swift resistance from civilians and the quick response from parliamentarians.

Approximately two hours after the declaration, the National Assembly voted against the martial law, barricading itself within the democratic halls. Following a delayed acceptance, Yoon then vanished from the public eye for a few weeks.

The U.S. embassy declared that it was unaware of the president's plans, signalling a breach of trust that President Biden lamented. His administration made significant strides in strengthening security cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, consistently

positioning him and his partners as advocates of democracies. The abrupt declaration of martial law thus raised concerns in the final days of the Biden administration, straining U.S.-Korean relations.

However, the incident is not as distant from America's political realities. Reflecting on the storming of the Capitol in January 2021, the country has only recently encountered a similar event. This situation may have highlighted social division, the politicisation of judicial and political processes, and the erosion of democratic institutions in the oldest democracy. Now more than ever, the resilience of democratic systems is being tested. South Korea's sudden "backsliding," as some media have termed it, is therefore not an isolated phenomenon but rather a symptom increasingly observed globally.

With ongoing political turmoil in South Korea, the country will undoubtedly encounter difficulties in positioning itself within the priority agenda of Trump's new administration. At this critical juncture of transition in international politics, the South is left with a power vacuum that will prove challenging to address until all judicial proceedings are concluded. Even in a scenario where a new president is elected, Trump will have already surpassed his 100th day in office. Drawing on past experiences, it is also likely that demands for increased financial contributions for U.S. troops and a continuation of the tariff war may have already begun before Korea resolves its leadership crisis. Regardless of the circumstances, Trump 2.0, as his second administration is sometimes termed, will present a challenge to South Korea's international policymakers.

The circumstances for the North are different. During the campaign, Trump signalled his interest in renewing ties with his "old friend" Kim Jong-un. Even during his first term and following the inconclusive Hanoi meeting, Trump had already demonstrated his continued interest in the North by arranging a spontaneous meeting at the DMZ via Twitter (now X) in June 2019, becoming the first president to set foot on North Korean soil. It can be anticipated that, at least to some extent, diplomatic rapprochement may persist during his second administration. Nevertheless, one should not be overly optimistic about the priority North Korea will take in the U.S.'s new international agenda, considering that the Ukraine war and the conflict in Israel remain dominant issues for now. Even Trump, notorious for being unpredictable, has vowed to end the Ukraine war within 24 hours, a feat he will need to prove upon entering office.

Another critical aspect to consider is that North Korea currently occupies a markedly different bargaining position compared to the past. The country has not only revitalised its relationship with Russia but is also actively participating in the Ukraine conflict, thereby gaining valuable experience in warfare. Furthermore, North Korea has made significant advancements in its artillery capabilities, demonstrated by multiple missile tests over the years. Today, North Korea is neither isolated nor ineffectively equipped to leverage its threats. Its bargaining position has improved significantly, indicating a potential reluctance to engage with the United States as

freely as it once did. Consequently, the Trump administration must earnestly contemplate strategies to encourage North Korea to return to the negotiating table for further discussions..

Conclusion

Overall, it is evident that the Trump administration will tremendously impact international politics and Korea. For the South, the new president begins his term during an unstable period, leaving it susceptible to potential economic pressures Trump may choose to impose. If a continuation of his first term can be anticipated, South Korea will again confront a demanding strategic partner. Nevertheless, the trilateral security cooperation between the U.S., Korea, and Japan is unlikely to be undermined by these changes in leadership. The alliance has already proven stable and robust; therefore, the impact of Trump 2.0 will likely be less dramatic than some predict. In the case of the North, the new American administration may continue to seek rapprochement, which may, however, not be as well received as it once was. With the Hanoi summit disaster still fresh in everyone's mind, the U.S. may need to deploy all its diplomatic charm to open a new window of opportunity for a genuine period of détente between the two parties, which may also positively influence the peninsula.