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The Return of Trump Amid Korea's Political Turmoil

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I. Introduction

2024 was a politically volatile year both in the US and on the Korean Peninsula. Despite felony convictions, two assassination attempts, and the withdrawal of president Joe Biden from the campaign and replacement by vice-president Kamala Harris, Donald Trump won the US presidential election. As of January 20, 2025, the 45th US president will thus also be the 47th US president. In North Korea, supreme leader Kim Jong Un dramatically—and not without risk—increased his support for Russia's war in Ukraine, including massive armament shipments and the sending of soldiers to the battlefield. Pyongyang's reward has been financial/economic, energy, diplomatic, and military-technological assistance from Moscow, which provides the Kim regime with an alternative to over-reliance on China. As for South Korea, 2024 featured a landslide National Assembly election victory by the opposition Democratic Party, increasing inter-party gridlock and recriminations, and a failed martial law decree by president Yoon Suk-yeol in the service of a self-coup attempt. If it had succeeded, Yoon would have annulled democratic processes and civil constitutional protections, arrogated all political and executive power to himself and the military, and suspended the National Assembly for a period of his determination.

This shocking step toward tyranny—considered long-relegated to the distant past of South Korea's developmental dictatorships of the 1950s-1980s—was as badly conceived as it was executed, collapsing after less than three hours, when legislators (mostly from the opposition) breached the cordon of deployed soldiers around the National Assembly, entered the plenary chamber, and voted 190-0 to revoke the martial law decree. In addition to facing criminal charges for insurrection and abuse of power (for which Yoon has been arrested), Yoon has since been impeached (and suspended from his duties) and is awaiting a ruling from the Constitutional Court on his possible final removal from office. The current head of the executive is an acting president, the cabinet is weakened and government action hampered by crisis, the country is deeply divided (with a vocal minority of conservatives supporting Yoon and condemning the opposition), and a special presidential election is likely to be held by May (assuming Yoon's impeachment is upheld). Barring ballot disqualification for felony electoral fraud conviction, the most likely winner of the special presidential election would be opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, who is lukewarm about the US-South Korea alliance and likely to significantly change government priorities, both domestically and in terms of foreign affairs.

Thus Trump enters office with North Korea in a position of surprising leverage and relative stability, while South Korea is in profound political turmoil. Moreover, all the foregoing is taking place within a time of upheaval in the international system, with US-China rivalry continuing, war in Ukraine and the Middle East, many European states politically and economically adrift, and major international organizations (UN, WTO, OSCE) ineffective.

It is in this context that this policy report examines the likely

impact of the second Trump administration on the Korean Peninsula.

Trump's overall policy commitments—which will provide the basic compass for his second administration's approach to the Korean Peninsula—are generally inconsistent and often unclear, but can be described as a floating mix of:

(i) **Traditional Republican** party positions on energy (fossil-fuel support, climate change skepticism), taxes (lower marginal income taxes), government bureaucratic power (the lower the better), and cultural issues (e.g., anti-abortion, anti-DEI).

(ii) **Nativist populism** (immigration demonization, "America First" industrial policy).

(iii) **Authoritarian evolution** in domestic governance (venal use of political power for personal financial gain, employment of government "lawfare" against political enemies, appointment of political radicals to fundamentally change the functioning of US government).

(iv) **Nationalism** (transactionalism rather than order-building, tariffs as central economic/trade tools), **selective hawkishness** (aggressive focus on China, weak support for Ukraine), and **diplomatic adventurousness** (focus on personal rapport with dictators, undermining of alliances) in foreign affairs.

This report focuses on the last (iv) of these characteristics, analyzing them within the context of the likely development of US-Korea relations under a Trump 2.0 administration. To this end, this report proceeds in the following way. **Section II** examines the first Trump administration's approach to US relations with South and North Korea, as well as their state under the policy orientation taken by Biden from 2021-2025. **Section III** discusses likely US relations with South Korea during a second Trump administration, notably looking at economic/trade concerns, the possible evolution of US-South Korea combined deterrence and military alliance cooperation, trilateral relations with Japan, the possibility that South Korea might pursue nuclear weapon development, and the effect on US-South Korea relations of a second Trump administration's China policy. **Section IV** discusses likely US relations with North Korea during a second Trump administration, focusing on the potential for renewal of US-North Korea denuclearization diplomacy, possible crisis scenarios, and the effect on US-North Korea relations of Trump administration China policy. Finally, concluding section V offers selected policy recommendations—for both South Korea and Europe, including Germany—based on the foregoing.

II. US-Korea Relations: From Trump 1.0 to the Biden Administration Reset

The first Trump administration broke with traditional US policy toward the Korean Peninsula in important ways. To start, the post-1953 foundation of the US approach toward the Korean Peninsula has been the military alliance with South Korea, and there is general consensus that Trump's personal and policy preferences put the US-South Korea alliance under significant strain. The most obvious evidence for this was Trump's rhetorical denigration of both the alliance itself and South Koreans. He referred to South Koreans as "terrible people" "laughing all the way to the bank" for taking advantage of US alliance commitments, and notably disrespected South Korean president Moon Jae-in, whom he qualified as "weak" and "did not like dealing with," going so far as trying to exclude him from a 2019 mini-summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom.¹

Trump's positions on the institutional pillars of the US-South Korea alliance also tended to undermine continuity of cooperation, trust, and inter-operability. One of Trump's first major actions concerning Washington-Seoul relations was to criticize the 2007 US-South Korea KORUS trade agreement.² His demand for its renegotiation (backed by threats to withdraw from it) was motivated by "Make America Great Again" economic nationalism and a transactional spirit regarding alliances and international order.

Trump's transactionalism vis-à-vis South Korea was also present in the military dimension of US-South Korea relations. At the expiration of the Special Measures Agreement (outlining South Korean financial contributions to offset the costs of the US stationing troops on the Peninsula) in 2018, Trump demanded a 150% increase from South Korea, which managed to negotiate a one-year extension with an 8.2% increase. When the extension lapsed in 2019, Trump demanded a 400% increase, leading to major alliance disruption and months of protracted, contentious negotiations.³ Trump also denigrated the core mission of the US-South Korea alliance: a combined military posture for deterrence (both conventional and extended nuclear) and warfighting. Trump used the pejorative "war games" to refer to US-South Korea combined military

exercises, effectively halting them in 2018 (without advance consultation with South Korea) as a part of diplomatic effort with North Korea.⁴ On multiple occasions he threatened to withdraw US soldiers from South Korea in order to pressure the Moon administration on various issues, and suggested that South Korea (and other US allies) might pursue nuclear weapons for self-defense (thus implicitly undercutting the reliability and credibility of US defense and deterrence commitments to South Korea).⁵

Many of Trump's expressed wishes and plans regarding policy toward the US-South Korea alliance did not come to fruition. This was largely due to Trump's scattershot governance and lack of understanding of the levers of US bureaucracy, pushback by both US Congress and Trump's foreign/security/defense senior officials, concerted diplomacy by South Korea, and the informal political costs stemming from undermining the alliance in the face of broad popular support for it in both the US and South Korea.⁶ These guardrails are less likely to hold up under Trump 2.0.

Concerning North Korea policy, there is a good argument that Trump administration 1.0 came as close to both war and rapprochement with Pyongyang as any previous administration.⁷ Trump entered office in January 2017, a moment when US-North Korea relations were already headed toward crisis following Pyongyang's 2016 successful tests of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, which induced US reaction via sanctions and military asset deployment on and around the Korean Peninsula. Kim Jong Un's January 2, 2017 new year's speech referenced an impending intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test, while the US was finalizing preparations for installation of a controversial Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery for US-South Korea forces on the peninsula.

By April, Pyongyang was testing short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and sharpening anti-US rhetoric, as the US responded with sanctions, military deployments, and Trump's own rhetorical riposte warning against war on the

1 The Korea Herald. 2020. "Trump said that he didn't like dealing with Moon, that S. Korean were 'terrible' governor." July 17. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200717000058>; Steven Nelson. 2021. "Trump slams 'weak' South Korea president for saying he 'failed' in Kim Jong Un talks." New York Post. April 23. <https://nypost.com/2021/04/23/trump-slams-weak-moon-jae-in-for-saying-he-failed-in-kim-jong-un-talks/>; Kyle Ferrier. 2021. "Trump Reveals What Many Already Suspected About His Korea Policy." The Diplomat. April 28. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/trump-reveals-what-many-already-suspected-about-his-korea-policy/>.

2 Leslie Schaffer. 2017. "Trump's aggressive drive against one 'horrible' trade deal may break down." CNBC. September 2. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/29/us-south-korea-trade-deal-trumps-drive-against-horrible-korus-may-break-down.html>

3 Michael Fuchs and Haneul Lee. 2020. "Bridging the Divide in the U.S.-South Korea Alliance." Center for American Progress. November 23. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/bridging-divide-u-s-south-korea-alliance/>

4 Brad Lendon. 2018. "Donald Trump says US to stop 'war games' with South Korea." CNN. June 12. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/12/politics/trump-us-military-war-games-south-korea-intl/index.html>

5 Veronica Stracqualursi. 2018. Trump apparently threatens to withdraw US troops from South Korea over trade." CNN. March 16. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/15/politics/trump-us-troops-south-korea/index.html>; Reuters. 2019. "Trump considering withdrawing up to 4,000 U.S. troops from South Korea—report." Reuters. November 21. <https://www.reuters.com/article/southkorea-usa-military/trump-considering-withdrawing-up-to-4000-us-troops-from-south-korea-report-idUSL3N28040K>; Fuchs and Lee, 2020.

6 Jacob Fromer. 2019. "U.S. Congress moves to block Trump from pulling troops out of South Korea." NK News. December 10. <https://www.nknews.org/2019/12/u-s-congress-moves-to-block-trump-from-pulling-u-s-troops-out-of-south-korea/>; Fuchs and Lee, 2020; John Bolton. 2020. *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

7 Van Jackson. 2018. *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Bolton, 2020.

Korean Peninsula.⁸ On July 4, North Korea tested an ICBM, the Hwasong-14, and declared itself a “full-fledged” nuclear power.⁹ The US responded with US-South Korea military exercises, sanctions, and, again, Trump's rhetoric, this time containing his now (in)famous “fire and fury” claim hinting at US nuclear weapon use against North Korea. Pyongyang responded by threatening US military bases in Guam, leading Trump to answer with statements that the US was “locked and loaded” to attack North Korea, if Kim did not stand down.¹⁰ Trump's National Security Advisor, John Bolton, has claimed that the situation was analogous to the Cuban Missile Crisis; US Secretary of Defense James Mattis slept fully dressed in order to respond to potential emergency.¹¹

After a summer of continuing US-North Korea tension, including more missile tests by Pyongyang, in September North Korea carried out its sixth (and currently last) nuclear test, a possible thermonuclear device. US and international sanctions followed, as well as combined US-South Korea military exercises. Pyongyang then fired an IRBM over Japan in late September, as Trump announced a “maximum pressure” campaign against North Korea. Both the US and North Korea traded rhetorical vitriol and threats over the following weeks, culminating in another North Korean ICBM test in December. Reports circulated that the US was considering a “bloody nose” strike to compel North Korea to halt its provocations, and in early 2018 Trump's State of the Union speech focused on North Korea as a potential target of US strikes.

Although it is impossible to know with certainty the seriousness of the risk of US-North Korea war in 2017 and early 2018, informed US administration and congressional foreign policy experts put the probability range at 10-40%.¹² This would indeed likely be the closest the US has come to war with a nuclear-armed state since the Cold War.

Just as suddenly as the 2017 crisis started, however, the Trump administration 1.0 approach to North Korea shifted to diplomacy and negotiation in 2018. The permissive condition for this shift was the start of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, which host nation South Korea used as a mechanism for inter-Korean rapprochement. The Moon administration assessed that improved inter-Korean relations required an off-ramp from the US-North Korea crisis, while both the US and North Korea were willing to enter nuclear

negotiations from perceived positions of strength—the US believing sanctions would bite sufficiently that Pyongyang would possibly consider denuclearization, and Pyongyang believing its successful race across the nuclear threshold would be a *fait accompli* allowing it to extract sanctions relief while keeping a nuclear arsenal and program. It is also worth noting that part of Trump's willingness to negotiate with Kim was likely driven by his personal, self-aggrandizing interest in achieving a deal with North Korea, while numerous administration senior officials worked against Trump out of fear that he would surrender too much in order to achieve it.¹³

A tense phase of diplomatic preparation resulted in a summit in Singapore between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un. The June 12, 2018 Singapore Declaration that emerged from the summit was heavy on glitz and light on deliverables, with cooperation on POW/MIA remains being the only concrete cooperation area, although section 3 did refer to “DPRK denuclearization.”¹⁴ Despite North Korea continuing to advance its nuclear and missile programs in the interim, the Singapore summit set up—after an extended diplomatic process—a second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi, which took place in February 2019. This meeting, which was intended to substantively address denuclearization, broke down quickly, as Trump and Kim failed to find any serious overlap in their respective positions and were unable to overcome the lack of an advance agreed framework established at the senior official level.¹⁵

Especially Kim left the Hanoi summit feeling betrayed and embarrassed, and in the aftermath neither US-North Korea nor Trump-Kim relations managed to recapture positive momentum.¹⁶ A half-hearted, impromptu mini-summit between Trump and Kim took place at the DMZ during Trump's add-on visit to South Korea following the 2019 G20 summit in Osaka, Japan. Trump's crossing of the MDL into North Korean territory was symbolically important, and Trump and Kim exchanged a series of letters during the latter part of Trump's term, but no serious diplomatic negotiations took place after the Hanoi summit, as Kim seemingly made the decision to freeze out the US and press ahead at full-speed on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.¹⁷

Ultimately, the Trump administration 1.0 approach to the Korean Peninsula was largely a failure. The US-South Korea alliance was damaged and North Korea emerged as a de

8 BBC. 2017. “Trump fears ‘major, major’ conflict with North Korea.” BBC. April 28. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39741671>

9 Rachel Lewis. 2017. “North Korea Says It's Tested an ICBM. Here's Why That's a Big Deal.” Time. July 4. <https://time.com/4844403/north-korea-icbm-kim-jong-un-test/>

10 BBC. 2017. “Trump warns N Korea that US military is ‘locked and loaded.’” BBC. August 12. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40901746>

11 Bolton, 2020; Katie Stallard. 2020. “Donald Trump's North Korea Gambit: What Worked, What Didn't, and What's Next.” Wilson Center—Asia Dispatch. November 26. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/donald-trumps-north-korea-gambit-what-worked-what-didnt-and-whats-next>

12 Jackson, 2018.

13 Bolton, 2020.

14 The White House. 2018. Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit. June 12. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>

15 Stephan Haggard. 2020. “John Bolton on the Summits 2: Hanoi.” KEI—The Peninsula. July 29. <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/john-bolton-on-the-summits-2-hanoi/>

16 Stephen Noerper. 2019. “US-Korea Relations: From Hanoi to Hiatus.” Comparative Connections 21/1: 37-44. <https://cc.pacforum.org/2019/05/from-hanoi-to-hiatus/>

17 Stephen Noerper. 2019. “US-Korea Relations: Friction, Impasse, and Projectiles.” Comparative Connections 21/2: 39-46. <https://cc.pacforum.org/2019/09/friction-impasse-and-projectiles/>; Mason Richey and Rob York. 2020. “US-Korea Relations: Stir Not Murky Waters.” Comparative Connections 23/2: 39-52. <https://cc.pacforum.org/2021/09/stir-not-murky-waters/>

facto nuclear state dedicated to accelerating its nuclear and missile program while shutting off diplomacy aimed at denuclearization.

It is in this context that the successor Biden administration entered office in January 2021. Biden focused on restoring US-led alliances, and the US-South Korea alliance was no exception.¹⁸ To this end, the first, most obvious change was rhetorical, as the Biden administration consistently praised South Korea and the US-South Korea alliance. Conservative Yoon Suk-yeol's 2022 assumption of the South Korean presidency, coupled with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for a return to more traditional, muscular combined military exercises than under presidents Trump and Moon. An April 2023 Biden-Yoon summit in Washington produced the Washington Declaration, comprehensively reinvigorating the US-South Korea alliance, especially in the military dimension, where both conventional and extended nuclear deterrence (via the newly created Nuclear Consultative Group) were enhanced.¹⁹ The Biden administration also pushed extensively—and successfully—for greatly enhanced trilateral cooperation among the US, South Korea, and Japan, both for deterrence against North Korea and regional order-building (a part of a larger effort to contain China).

Overall, the Biden administration's cooperation with South Korea brought the bilateral relation to its strongest point in decades, as is evidenced by the robust public and policy-maker support for the alliance in both states.

Nonetheless, problems remain. There is lingering South Korean desire for an independent nuclear deterrent (in part due to the continuing North Korean nuclear threat and in part due to doubts about US extended nuclear deterrence credibility arising from Trump's previous shaky alliance commitment).²⁰ US economic nationalism and hawkish policy on China—which started under Trump and continued under Biden—also generate friction between Washington and Seoul.²¹ The most serious risk, however, is the fallout from Yoon's martial law decree and attempted self-coup. The US was not informed in advance, which may undermine trust between Washington and Seoul. Moreover the martial law decree involved deployment of elite South Korean forces without consultation with the US commander of US Forces Korea/Combined Forces Command, who has operational wartime control over South Korean troops

under a combined military posture. Yoon's impeachment subsequent to the failed martial declaration has also led to a high possibility of his removal from office and a snap presidential election, which is likely to be won by an opposition Democratic Party candidate lukewarm about the US-South Korea alliance and trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan.

Regarding North Korea, the Biden administration's approach was no more effective at convincing its leader to denuclearize than previous administrations. Indeed substantive US-North Korea diplomacy was virtually non-existent, as Pyongyang had no interest in denuclearization talks outside of (presumably) a real possibility of gaining sanctions relief and de facto recognition as a nuclear state, which Washington has been unwilling to offer. Instead, the Biden administration worked with South Korea and Japan to focus on deterrence against and diplomatic and economic isolation of North Korea. However, China's unwillingness to seriously enforce sanctions and Russia's massive arms/energy/military-technology cooperation with North Korea (in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war) undermined Biden administration strategy for weakening the Kim regime.²²

18 Antony Blinken. 2021. Reaffirming and Reimagining America's Alliances. Speech at NATO Headquarters. <https://www.state.gov/reaffirming-and-reimagining-americas-alliances/>

19 The White House. 2023. Washington Declaration. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>

20 Mason Richey and Rob York. 2024. "Right Where We Left It." *Comparative Connections* 26/1: 55-74. <https://cc.pacforum.org/2024/05/right-where-we-left-it/>

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

III. Trump 2.0 and the US-South Korea Alliance

There is widespread agreement that Trump's disdain for the US-South Korea alliance damaged it during his first administration, an effect in conformity with Trump's disposition toward alliances in general. As this is a position of Trump's that seems to be consistent over time, his re-election represents risk for Seoul. This is especially so as Trump administration 2.0 will have fewer personnel, bureaucratic, and congressional guardrails, insofar as Trump has bent the Republican congressional caucus toward his foreign policy vision and learned from his mistakes in the appointing of senior officials during his first term. As much of what the Biden administration has accomplished for the US-South Korea alliance is based on order-building that Trump does not appreciate, one can expect that a Trump administration 2.0 will seek to undo parts of Biden's US-South Korea alliance agenda.

The political chaos in Seoul—subsequent to president Yoon's impeachment—presents an extra challenge for South Korea. First, currently South Korea has only an acting president with a weakened ministerial cabinet. Thus South Korea's top leadership is not in a position of strength for early engagement with the Trump 2.0 administration. This would normally be a moment for good first impressions and tone-setting for the future. However, in the worst case, South Korea will appear vulnerable and attract aggressive demands from Trump 2.0; at best, South Korea will still miss early opportunities and hope that Trump 2.0 will be distracted with other areas of interest for the several months it will take for South Korea to elect a new president with a full mandate (or, much less likely, to restore Yoon to office).

Second, the probable successor to president Yoon will be a progressive Democratic Party candidate, most likely Lee Jae-myung, who has a lukewarm attitude toward the US-South Korea alliance, less propensity to cooperate with Japan, and more interest than Yoon in both inter-Korean relations and improved connections to China. This set of interests will have mixed consequences for US-South Korea relations, but certainly the relationship will be different than it would be under Trump and Yoon.

Concretely, there are at least six areas in which Trump administration 2.0 could possibly adopt positions that threaten the cohesion of the US-South Korea alliance:

(i) **Tariff increases and Host-nation support (Special Measures Agreement (SMA)):** Currently, the Trump administration is planning a dramatic increase in tariffs: 60% on imported goods

from China, 25% on imported goods from Mexico and Canada, and 10% on imported goods from nearly all other countries, including South Korea. It is unclear to what extent these measures are fixed proposals or opening bargaining positions. Little can be intuited from the composition of Trump's economic team, which is a mix of long-time tariff proponents, recent tariff converts, and a minority of more traditional globalization supporters. Nor is it clear the extent of political and business community support or pushback.

In any event, US trade policies under Trump will almost certainly upend established global economic flows, and South Korea will be affected. The impacts of Trump's economic policies—both tariffs and the likely continuation of Biden administration export/import controls on high-tech goods from/to China—are likely to vary according to industry, but Seoul will likely be a target. Arguably nothing attracts Trump's ire more than another state—especially an ally dependent on US security guarantees—having a significant positive trade balance with the US, which is the case for South Korea. However, Seoul does have leverage to defend its interests. It is currently the largest FDI provider in the US, has an FTA (KORUS FTA) that theoretically provides some obstacles to tariff increases, and has significant shipbuilding capacity (which the US lacks and Trump has already referenced) that it could leverage for favorable economic/trade treatment in other sectors.

As for host-nation support, the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) scheduled to end in 2025 was renegotiated toward the end of the Biden administration, and is now set to end in 2030. In principle, this would limit Trump's potential transactional leverage to extract additional alliance financial contributions from Seoul, although he might demand renegotiation anyway, just as he did the renegotiation of the KORUS FTA during his first term. Indeed, Trump has already criticized the new SMA, which indicates that he may attempt to secure a major increase in South Korean funding for US troop presence on the Korean Peninsula, backed by various threats to freeze aspects of alliance cooperation. However, Trump may have less leverage during his second mandate than imagined, as South Korea's strategic value as a US ally has increased substantially within the context of US-China rivalry that Trump is likely to continue, thus giving Seoul tools to counter large SMA increase demands.²³

Probability of risk: Moderate

Severity of risk: Low/Moderate

23 Ju-min Park and Heekyong Yang. 2024. "No rift over costs of U.S. troops in South Korea if Trump elected, says former Trump adviser." Reuters. July 9. <https://www.reuters.com/world/no-rift-over-cost-us-troops-south-korea-if-trump-elected-says-former-trump-2024-07-09/>

(ii) **Changes to troop levels and mission of US Forces Korea (USFK):** Trump's first term was marked by unclear intentions regarding USFK troop numbers (currently 28,500) in South Korea. Occasional statements indicating desire to reduce on or remove from the peninsula US soldiers may have been genuine or may have been a negotiating tactic for renewing the SMA or the KORUS trade deal. US Congress, at least, was worried enough that it included language in the 2019 and 2020 NDAA's (National Defense Authorization Acts) to prohibit the US president from reducing troop numbers below certain levels, unless the US defense secretary certified that North Korea was no longer a threat and US security would not be compromised. Such measures, however, are merely an obstacle, not a total block, on the president's ability to reduce USFK troop numbers.

In the past, Trump and some of his national defense and security team (including defense secretary nominee Pete Hegseth, national security advisor Michael Waltz, undersecretary of defense for policy Elbridge Colby) have questioned USFK troop levels and mission. Thus this issue could be salient during Trump administration 2.0.²⁴ In reality, a total (or even significant) withdrawal of USFK troops from the peninsula is unlikely due to congressional objections, intra-administration bureaucratic hurdles, and the presence of some stalwart USFK supporters among Trump's team, but Trump does have more limited options available for reducing the US military presence, such as not replacing the 4,400 person Stryker Combat Brigade Team that rotates on/off the peninsula every nine months, if he were to choose to do so.²⁵

Several of Trump's senior officials—e.g., Waltz, Colby—have supported a reformulating of the USFK/CFC mission to more flexibly focus on deterring China.²⁶ This perspective is broadly in line with the overall thinking of several of Trump's other senior official choices (secretary of state nominee Marco Rubio, CIA chief nominee John Ratcliffe, deputy national security advisor Alex Wong) who prioritize the China threat. This would likely militate maintaining present US troop strength, but would necessitate a strategic re-thinking of the US-South Korea military alliance that Seoul would likely find unwelcome, insofar as it de-prioritizes the Korean Peninsula and puts South Korea in a difficult position between Beijing and Washington. Seoul and Washington would thus likely clash over such a strategic re-thinking (especially under a Lee Jae-myung presidency), resulting in instability both on the peninsula and in the East Asia region.

Probability of risk: Moderate

Severity of risk: Moderate/High

(iii) **Trilateral cooperation with Japan:** One of the signature accomplishments of Biden administration foreign policy was linking the US's Indo-Pacific alliances in so-called "minilateral" networks, including the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral, which focuses especially on defense, security, and intelligence cooperation. This serves both for regional order-building and deterrence against North Korea and (in the background) China.²⁷ Trump's transactional approach means that the order-building logic of the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral is likely to be downgraded for his second administration, but the capability that such alliance networks provide for containing and countering China in the Indo-Pacific will be instrumentally attractive. Indeed the contemporary rejuvenation of minilateral networks started in 2017, when the Trump administration began focusing on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (US-Japan-Australia-India), so Trump administration 1.0 already demonstrated appreciation of minilateral networks even prior to the current heightened state of US-China strategic rivalry. With respect to the specific case of US-South Korea-Japan security/defense cooperation, senior officials in a Trump administration 2.0 have already indicated that the trilateral is likely to maintain support.²⁸ Moreover it has been increasingly institutionalized in order to make it harder to unravel.²⁹

However, the likely assumption of the South Korean presidency by Lee Jae-myung, who is very sceptical (along with his party as a whole) of cooperation with Japan, means that the risks for the trilateral arises from Seoul. In one scenario, the US under Trump would desire to maintain the trilateral despite South Korean disinterest under Lee, which would have a knock-on effect of undermining bilateral alliance cooperation as well. In a second scenario, neither Lee nor Trump would be sufficiently willing to expend political capital on advancing the trilateral with Japan, which would consequently weaken.

Probability of risk: Moderate

Severity of risk: Low/Moderate

(iv) **Integrity of conventional and integrated, extended deterrence:** The first Trump administration's US-South Korea alliance policy was noticeably marked by a scaling-down of combined military exercises, which contribute directly to US-South Korea conventional deterrence of North Korea, as well as indirectly to US extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea (via the strategic integration of conventional and nuclear assets). The proximate causes were a mixture of efforts at détente with North Korea (which dislikes alliance military exercises) and Trump's characteristic transactionalism, as he

24 Clint Work. 2024. "What the Return of Trump Would Mean for South Korea." *The Diplomat*. March 30. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/what-the-return-of-trump-would-mean-for-south-korea/>
25 Ibid.

26 Song Sang-ho. 2024. "Ex-Pentagon official stresses need for warplan rethink, swift OPCON transfer, USFK overhaul." *Yonhap News Agency*. May 8. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240508000300315>; Lee Hawon and Lee Jae-eun. 2024. "US troops will not leave South Korea even if Trump is re-elected," says Trump ally." *Chosun Daily*. July 10. <https://www.chosun.com/english/people-en/2024/07/10/3DGVZ5TU5NEKHDRYUVOQB6NOIE/>

27 Richey and York, 2024.

28 Trevor Hunnicutt et al. 2024. "Trump will encourage Japan, South Korea ties, allies tell foreign officials." *Reuters*. June 29. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-will-encourage-japan-south-korea-ties-allies-tell-foreign-officials-2024-06-28/>

29 Jesse Johnson and Gabriel Dominguez. 2024. "U.S., Japan and South Korea ink deal to 'institutionalize' security ties." *Japan Times*. July 28. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/07/28/japan/politics/japan-us-south-korea-trilateral/>

connected continued US military “protection” of South Korea to (a) greater South Korean host-nation (e.g., SMA) support, and (b) lowering of the US trade deficit with South Korea (e.g., via a renegotiated KORUS trade deal). This perspective on relations with South Korea is consistent with Trump’s distaste for alliances in general, insofar as they are order-building partnerships going beyond immediate, reciprocal satisfaction of US national interests.

Nothing in the evolution of Trump’s foreign policy outlook has changed in this respect. First, it is likely that Trump 2.0 will again enter negotiations with North Korea regarding its nuclear program, which may again lead Trump to downscale combined alliance military exercises that maintain readiness necessary for warfighting and deterrence.³⁰ Second, in an April 2024 Time interview, Trump focused extensively on tying US security/defense guarantees—including rhetorical and bureaucratic commitment, as well as presumably combined military exercises—for allies to their alliance financial contribution and defense expenditures.³¹ Notably, South Korea was mentioned explicitly as a state Trump considered deficient in this regard, meaning that much of the risk of Trump’s questionable first-term commitment to US-South Korea deterrence of North Korea is likely to be present in a potential second term. This has been underscored by senior officials in Trump 2.0 administration already broadcasting that allies such as South Korea will need to do more for their own defense and security, hinting that the US may be less focused on combined security/defense cooperation, which would undermine deterrence of North Korea.³² If Lee Jae-myung becomes South Korea’s next president, the possibility of clashing with Trump (or, alternatively, agreeing with Trump’s possible desire to downscale exercises) would also undermine alliance military cooperation necessary for integrated deterrence to be airtight.

In the final analysis, all of this calls into question US extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea, as ultimately the US’s capacity to deter North Korea in the nuclear domain rests on the credibility of the threat that the US president would order a nuclear retaliatory strike on Seoul’s behalf, which in the current situation, given Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities, necessarily entails some risk for the US. There is limited confidence—both among South Korean elite policymakers and independent analysts—that Trump’s commitment in this regard is sufficient.³³ An opaque and possibly mitigating factor to

these risks is the existence of the Nuclear Consultative Group. If both Trump 2.0 and South Korea under Lee invest in continuing to advance and institutionalize this body, extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea may fare well over the short-/mid-term.

Probability of risk: Moderate/High

Severity of risk: Moderate/High

(v) **Possibility that South Korea begins nuclear weapon development:** The perception of Trump’s shaky commitment to the US-South Korea alliance—along with North Korea’s growing nuclear program and hostility—has driven a noticeable uptick in interest in an independent nuclear deterrent by both South Korean elites and the general public.³⁴ Simply put: there is doubt that Trump administration 2.0 will maintain the institutions necessary for the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea, as well as doubt that Trump would order a retaliatory nuclear strike on South Korea’s behalf, if it meant risk for US interests. Consequently, South Korea’s relevant ministries have undertaken studies on how and under what conditions Seoul might develop nuclear weapons, and major political figures (including president Yoon) have repeatedly broached the possibility.³⁵

This development was paired with some willingness to countenance an independent nuclear deterrent for Seoul among possible Trump 2.0 senior officials. In 2024, Elbridge Colby Christopher Miller, Mike Pompeo, and Allison Hooker—all former senior officials in the first Trump administration—expressed the need for a re-evaluation of US policies preventing South Korea from developing nuclear weapons.³⁶ Only Colby, however, has received a nomination for a cabinet posting in Trump 2.0 administration (although Allison Hooker remains likely to hold a senior position). The positions of Waltz, Rubio, and others is currently unknown regarding South Korean nuclear weapon development. As for Trump’s stance, it is unclear whether his thoughts on the matter have changed since his 2016 statements that South Korea and Japan should consider independent nuclear armament.³⁷

South Korea’s flirtation with martial law and subsequent political instability is likely to make it harder for the US to accept South Korea’s development of nuclear weapons. Even such a

30 Joe Smith. 2024. “Trump claims Kim Jong Un wants him to win upcoming presidential election.” NK News. July 19. <https://www.nknews.org/2024/07/donald-trump-claims-kim-jong-un-wants-him-to-win-upcoming-presidential-election/>; Hyonhee Shin. 2024. “North Korea wants to restart nuclear talks if Trump wins, says ex-diplomat.” Reuters. August 1. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-wants-restart-nuclear-talks-if-trump-wins-says-ex-diplomat-2024-07-31/>

31 Eric Cortellessa. 2024. “How Far Trump Would Go.” Time. April 30. <https://time.com/6972021/donald-trump-2024-election-interview/>

32 Work, 2024; Song, 2024; The Korea Herald. 2024. “Ex-Trump official voices hope for S. Korea to make ‘big’ contribution for defense.” July 17. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240717050138>

33 Victor Cha. 2024. “Breaking Bad: South Korea’s Nuclear Option.” CSIS—Report. April 29. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>

34 Cha, 2024.

35 William Gallo and Lee Juhyun. 2024. “Trump’s possible return re-ignites South Korea nuclear debate.” VOA. May 3. <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-s-possible-return-reignites-south-korea-nuclear-debate/7596584.html>

36 Ibid.

37 Stephanie Condon. 2016. “Donald Trump: Japan, South Korea might need nuclear weapons.” CBS News. March 29. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-japan-south-korea-might-need-nuclear-weapons/>

step as re-negotiation of South Korea's 123 Agreement with the US, which might allow South Korea to take further steps toward nuclear latency, now seems more distant. Moreover, while a South Korean nuclear program would be a significant challenge technically and diplomatically (a major guardrail preventing it has been US extended nuclear deterrence coupled with US policies (notably in the civil nuclear domain) and international law (e.g., the Nonproliferation Treaty) that have ensured major costs for Seoul), an additional obstacle now is that the Democratic Party, including likely president Lee Jae-myung, has demonstrated no interest in developing nuclear weapons.

Probability of risk: Low

Severity of risk: High

(vi) **Pressure on South Korea to shift the alliance focus toward China:** Over the last decade, including under the Trump administration, US policy toward China has become more hawkish and focused on containment and the attempt at maintaining regional primacy in the Indo-Pacific. US alliances have been leveraged to play an important role in this development, with mixed effects on the allies themselves. US partners have increased their ability to counter Chinese coercion through cooperative security/defense action with the US, but also exposed themselves to US pressure in the economic/trade sphere. Both the South Korean government and some of South Korea's major technology companies—e.g., Samsung, SK Hynix—have faced difficulties in balancing their interests between the US and China. This is likely to continue under a Trump administration 2.0.

Beyond this strategic entanglement of economics/trade and security/defense, numerous Trump administration 2.0 senior officials have indicated a desire to reform the military dimension of the US-South Korea alliance to focus on China.³⁸ This shift may produce politico-military discord in the alliance, as South Korea continues to view North Korea as its primary threat, while such a re-focusing on China may distract from readiness and deterrence against Pyongyang and potentially aggravate tensions with Beijing. This will be even more pronounced in the (likely) case of a Lee administration in South Korea, which will aim to improve relations with Xi Jinping.

Probability of risk: Moderate/High

Severity of risk: Moderate

³⁸ Song, 2024.

IV. Trump 2.0 and US-North Korea Relations



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Donald Trump's peculiar political style—highly personal, transactional, and based on brinksmanship—lends itself to volatility, including in foreign affairs. During his first presidency, this was particularly evident in the approach to North Korea, which careened from near-warfare crisis to summit negotiations with Kim Jong Un. The fact that neither war nor peace broke out in US-North Korea relations—indeed the Korean Peninsula in 2017 and 2021 looked very similar, aside from North Korea's improved nuclear and missile programs—was due to a mixture of factors, including Trump's unfocused incompetence in understanding peninsula issues, administration and congressional guardrails, the Kim regime's off-putting³⁹ diplomatic over-reach, and the mechanisms of deterrence maintained by both Washington and Pyongyang. These factors are likely to be salient again in the Trump 2.0 administration, albeit with some changes, including more-loyal Trump senior officials likely to minimize pushback against his policy choices, and a more China-centric strategic challenge for the US in the Indo-Pacific.

Concretely, there are at least three pathways in which a Trump administration 2.0 may approach North Korea:

(i) **Diplomacy regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs:** A second Trump administration and the Kim regime are likely to re-attempt diplomatic negotiations regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.⁴⁰ Presumably the Trump administration would again aim at North Korean denuclearization as the primary objective. North Korea, however, has essentially eliminated this possibility through leader-level rhetoric, domestic legal changes, increasing reliance on nuclear weapons for strategic aims and regime survival, and enhanced international cooperation options (e.g., China, Russia) for mitigating the effects of sanctions. Trump administration 2.0 will thus be unlikely to be able to compel North Korea to the negotiation table, if denuclearization is on the agenda.

Therefore the pressing question is whether a second Trump administration would do what the first did not: aim negotiations at arms control with North Korea, for example settling for a cap-and-freeze deal in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions. If there were no further expectation of denuclearization, the consequence would be de facto recognition of North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. For the moment, neither Trump nor most of his chosen senior officials (Waltz, Rubio, Ratcliffe, Wong, Colby, etc.) have publicly expressed a position on this matter, although defense secretary nominee Hegseth referred to North Korea as “nuclear power” during his confirmation hearing. At least one factor makes it possible to envision the new Trump administration engaging in some kind of arms control with Pyongyang: the focus that Trump administration 2.0 is likely to have on China. If the administration considers that such a deal with North Korea could stabilize the peninsula and allow Pyongyang to be prised away from Beijing (already there is a growing rift between the two allies), Trump may believe that arms control for sanctions-relief and rapprochement could be strategically beneficial enough to outweigh the costs to international nonproliferation law/norms and US ally reticence (especially from South Korea and Japan). It is also the case that such a scenario would presumably be easier under a Lee administration than under Yoon, although Lee would need to be attentive to avoiding a scenario in which Trump attempts to bypass him in engaging with Kim.

There is no guarantee that North Korea would have an interest in such a scenario, especially as long as Pyongyang continues to maintain its enhanced economic and military relationship with Moscow. In this regard, the incoming Trump administration's Ukraine policy takes on extra salience. If Trump and his team manage to use diplomacy to bring Russia and Ukraine to negotiations for a halt of the war, Pyongyang's value to Russia would likely decline precipitately, at which point Kim may look for diplomatic openings with the US.

Probability of risk: Moderate

Severity of risk: Moderate

(ii) **US-North Korea escalatory crisis scenarios:** Under Trump administration 2.0, the reverse side of US-North Korea nuclear diplomacy is potential conflict. First, both Washington and Pyongyang would have incentives to engage in brinksmanship—e.g., threats, weapons tests/demonstrations, North Korean provocations, US-South Korea military exercises—in the lead-up to any potential negotiation, in order to build maximal leverage. This may result in miscommunication/misperception/misunderstanding and inadvertent crisis escalation. Second, failed diplomacy may

³⁹ Kim's expectations at the Hanoi summit included unrealistic international sanctions relief in exchange for very limited North Korean concessions on nuclear program development.

⁴⁰ Smith, 2024; Shin, 2024.

also incentivize conflict, especially as initiated by Pyongyang. If Kim believes that diplomacy with Trump has reached a dead-end with little or no viable future for crisis off-ramps, rapprochement, eased isolation, and prospects of regime survival, he may engage in precipitate aggression toward South Korea, implicating conflict with the US as alliance partner.

Yet another risk for potential Washington-Pyongyang conflict stems from poor military alliance management between the US and South Korea. If combined military exercises for warfighting readiness are not maintained, deterrence may erode and North Korea may take advantage by initiating conflict. This is more likely to be the case if South Korea elects a progressive president such as Lee Jae-myung. Alternatively, under conservative president Yoon (if he is restored to power by the Constitutional Court), or his successor, Seoul may respond too aggressively to Pyongyang's provocations, setting off a cycle of reprisals that initially escapes Washington's ability to manage the conflict.

Finally, heightened US-China rivalry for Indo-Pacific primacy represents a risk for the Korean peninsula. If China's paramount leader Xi Jinping were to judge that his window for achieving unification with Taiwan were closing, he may initiate a hybrid or conventional war against Taiwan in order to compel unification. If the US were to come to Taiwan's aid (especially through re-deploying Korea-based US troops or assets), or even be distracted from sufficiently maintaining deterrence on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea may opportunistically take advantage of the situation to initiate conflict with South Korea (for instance, through attempts to establish maritime territorial gains south of the Northern Limit Line).

Probability of risk: Moderate/High

Severity of risk: Moderate/High

(iii) **Effect of China focus on US-North Korea relations:** Like the Biden administration, Trump administration 2.0 is likely to fit relations with North Korea into the larger strategic context of US-China great power rivalry, prioritizing Beijing rather than Pyongyang. This implies several possible pathways. One is that, as with the Biden administration, Trump will find North Korea unresponsive to diplomacy on terms acceptable to the US and largely resort to a form of "strategic patience," letting the North Korea threat grow and managing crisis flare-ups while directing US assets and energy to countering China. A second possibility is that a strategically enterprising Trump administration 2.0 will attempt to exploit a potentially budding China-North Korea rift and fracture their alliance. Given the nature of the Kim regime and its trade dependence on China, as well as US policy path-dependence, it is difficult to imagine a true regional realignment in which Pyongyang and Washington would have lasting close ties. However, North Korea's long-standing distrust of China and recent rapprochement with Russia indicate that the Kim regime is interested in diversifying its foreign relations away from over-reliance on China, giving the US an opportunity to disrupt Beijing's influence in Northeast Asia. It remains highly opaque what inducements North Korea would require to engage this foreign policy shift. Lastly, the above approaches could backfire, making conflict scenarios more likely. A particular worry would be that Trump 2.0 administration would contain or counter China in such a way that it would engage its North Korea ally in a combined effort to roll back US power and influence in East Asia.

Probability of risk: Moderate/High

Severity of risk: Moderate

Table 1 | Summary of potential Trump administration 2.0 Korean Peninsula risk issue areas

Issue Area		Probability	Severity
US-South Korea Alliance	Pressuring South Korea on tariffs and host-nation support	Moderate	Low/Mod
	Decreasing USFK troop levels and/or reformulating mission	Moderate	Mod/High
	Downgrading trilateral cooperation with Japan	Moderate	Low/Mod
	Weakened integrity of conventional and integrated, extended deterrence	Mod/High	Mod/High
	South Korea beginning nuclear weapon development	Low	High
	Pressuring South Korea to shift alliance focus toward China	Mod/High	Moderate
US-North Korea Relations	Restarting diplomacy regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs	Moderate	Moderate
	US-North Korea escalatory crisis scenarios	Mod/High	Mod/High
	China focus effect on US-North Korea relations	Mod/High	Moderate

V. Policy Recommendations

Given the foregoing, the following policy options recommend themselves for, respectively, South Korea and Europe (including Germany):

(i) **South Korea**

(a) Prepare diplomatically and financially for higher SMA contribution demands by Trump. To this end, create a (re) negotiation roadmap, and consider linking related issues (e.g., military-industrial production investment in the US) to offset potential US demands.

(b) Prepare relevant ministries for all US-South Korea alliance aspects becoming linked to trade/economic relations.

(c) Prepare relevant ministries for both diplomacy and conflict with North Korea. Establish strategies and make connections to Trump and his senior officials so as to not be excluded from Washington-Pyongyang diplomacy.

(d) In addition to US-South Korea-Japan trilateral relations, continue to improve and institutionalize bilateral South Korea-Japan security/defense and intelligence cooperation.

(e) Continue studies of the positives and negatives of an independent nuclear deterrent within the context of US-South Korea alliance rupture, but assume that this will be neither possible nor necessary in the short-/medium-term, given South Korea's political situation.

(f) Task relevant ministries to prepare for how Trump administration 2.0 is likely to use the US-South Korea alliance as an instrument for countering China in the Indo-Pacific, including scenarios with changes to USFK troop level and/or mission.

(g) Task relevant ministries to study opportunities and risks for South Korea if US-China relations worsen.

(ii) **Europe/Germany**

(a) Improve security and defense in the European theatre to deter Russia if Trump administration 2.0 focuses excessively on the Indo-Pacific (including Korea and China) and decreases support for Ukraine.

(b) Continue to prioritize engagement with strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, including the meaningful deployment of selected military assets where they can have an impact on regional stability.

(c) Reinforce the international nonproliferation regime through multilateral diplomatic fora, inducements, sanctions, and reputational costs for violators (naming-and-shaming).

(d) Task relevant ministries (national-level), European agencies and directorates-general (EU-level), and NATO with preparing studies on the regional and global strategic effects of Indo-Pacific partners acquiring nuclear weapons (or aiming at nuclear latency), and the domino effects this development would have.

(e) Task relevant ministries (national-level) and European agencies and directorates-general (EU-level) with preparing for trade disruption between the US and South Korea, and the opportunities and risks entailed.

(f) Task relevant ministries (national-level) and European agencies and directorates-general (EU-level) with preparing for trade/economic disruption stemming from North Korea-related crises, including two-theater conflict involving a simultaneous Korean Peninsula and China-Taiwan crisis.

(g) Maintain European (national- and EU-level) diplomatic channels to North Korea in order to monitor and, if/where possible, influence the Kim regime in its relations with the US and South Korea.

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