

TRYING TO LOOSEN THE LINCHPIN: CHINA'S APPROACH TO SOUTH KOREA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China sees South Korea as a critical part of its effort to establish its preeminence in Northeast Asia. South Korea's status in the U.S. alliance architecture as the "linchpin" and its central role regarding North Korea issues, as well as its geographic proximity and economic dynamism, have underscored the country's importance to China's regional strategy. This strategy is driven by a desire to weaken Washington's alliance relationships, increase Beijing's influence on Korean Peninsula affairs, including North Korea denuclearization, and shape the region to be more amenable to supporting its preferences.¹ Beijing perceives Seoul as the weakest link in the U.S. alliance network, given its perception of South Korea's deference and history of accommodating China's rise relative to other regional players, such as Japan, which considers China a long-term security threat.²

For most of the two decades following the normalization of bilateral relations in 1992, Beijing primarily employed its soft power — encouraging economic interdependence and people-to-people ties, emphasizing China's desire for peace and prosperity in the region, and highlighting its role as a "good neighbor," for example — to woo South Korea. Seoul has welcomed the blossoming of trade cooperation and further developing security cooperation in large part because South Korean leaders view China's cooperation as vital to Seoul's North Korea policy, even as its leaders became increasingly wary about China's rise and aggressiveness.

Those fears became reality when Beijing, emboldened by its growing economic, diplomatic, and military weight, took a more confrontational approach and sought to exert its strength toward punishing South Korea when Seoul decided to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) American anti-ballistic missile defense system after North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January 2016.³ The THAAD issue provided insight into the drivers of China's relationship with South Korea and the tools it employed to exert influence over the Korean Peninsula. This paper traces the trajectory of China-South Korea relations, how the North Korea nuclear issue and the U.S. alliance infrastructure have affected bilateral ties, and how Beijing might seek to cajole and coerce Seoul to defer to China's interests amid the intensification of U.S.-China strategic competition.

WARMING TIES

For three decades, China and South Korea have been deepening both their economic and political ties, upgrading the relationship at least five times, according to scholar Min Ye: to "friendly cooperative relationship" in 1992; "collaborative partnership for the 21st century" in 1998; "comprehensive cooperative partnership" in 2003; "strategic cooperative partnership" in 2008; and "enriched strategic cooperative partnership" in 2014.⁴

Trade, tourism, and cultural exchange data similarly attest to the upward trajectory. In 1992, bilateral trade totaled a little over \$6 billion,⁵ but by 2003, that number jumped to \$63 billion, making China South

Korea's largest trading partner, replacing the United States.⁶ Twenty years after normalization, the total was a whopping \$215 billion.⁷ In contrast, the South's trade with the U.S. in 2012 was a bit more than half that amount, at \$123 billion. The U.S. continued to lose ground; in 2018, the China trade was worth around \$268 billion, with the U.S. at \$132 billion.⁸

Millions of Chinese tourists flooded into South Korea year after year, while the number of Americans visiting South Korea never hit the million mark, according to available data provided by the Korea Tourism Organization.⁹ More South Korean young people study in China versus the United States — in 2018 it was 63,000 to 58,000¹⁰ — and 68,000 Chinese students (compared to 2,700 U.S. students) went to South Korea in 2018.¹¹

Despite the acceleration of economic ties, the China-South Korea relationship has had its ups and downs, mostly in the political sphere. It was up through the 1990s and for most of the first decade of the 2000s, as both countries focused on economic growth, Seoul sought more autonomy from Washington, and Beijing's diplomacy was, as scholar David Shambaugh argued in 2005, "remarkably adept and nuanced, earning praise around the region."¹²

Bilateral ties were cooler in 2008-2012 when South Korea's conservative government under President Lee Myung-bak doubled down on drawing closer to the U.S. after a perceived weakening of the alliance under the previous progressive governments. U.S. diplomatic and military support to South Korea following North Korea's 2010 attacks against the South Korean warship the Cheonan and its shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, which combined resulted in the deaths of 50 South Koreans, seemed to highlight the necessity of the Obama administration's Asia rebalance, designed in part, to protect the region against North Korean provocations and demonstrated the importance of the alliance for South Korean security.

Beijing's consistent efforts to shield North Korea from the consequences of its actions underscored for Seoul the limits of its diplomacy with China. Chinese leaders' refusal to punish Pyongyang for its killing of South Koreans or for its burgeoning nuclear weapons program dampened South Korea's enthusiasm for

closer Chinese ties. Korea expert Victor Cha noted the development of a "deep reservoir of trust" between Presidents Lee and Barack Obama, making this period the "best days in quite some time" in the U.S.-South Korea alliance.¹³ Beijing blamed Lee's hardline policies for the 2010 North Korean attacks, while a few Chinese experts lamented that the 2010 incidents made South Korea exasperated with China's North Korea policy and more dependent on the U.S. for security.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Lee sought to develop the "strategic cooperative partnership" with Beijing, reflecting Seoul's acknowledgement that its future was inextricably tied to that of its neighbor and that any resolution of the divided peninsula required the cooperation of China.

CHASING THE DREAM

The years 2013-2016 were probably the best years of China-South Korea ties in modern history. Chinese scholar Yu Tiejun called this period the best example of China's "neighborhood diplomacy."¹⁵ The concurrent ascendancy of Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Park Geun-hye, who pledged to restore "balanced diplomacy" vis-à-vis the U.S. and China, provided an opportunity for the two countries to reset the relationship and test the capacity of the relationship to tackle strategic issues.

Xi began advancing the idea of the "China dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"¹⁶ and implemented more robust "neighborhood diplomacy" — which Brookings Senior Fellow Jonathan Stromseth and other experts have suggested is "designed to integrate neighboring countries into a Sino-centric network of economic, political, cultural, and security relations."¹⁷ Park embraced China's desire to seek closer ties, seeing it as a way to highlight the compatibility of interests; she told Xi during his visit to Seoul in 2014 that she hoped the "convergence" of the China dream and Korea's dream would "promote peace, stability, and prosperity of the Northeast Asia region," according to the Chinese government's readout of meeting.¹⁸

In those four years, Seoul and Beijing engaged in an intense flurry of high-level dialogue and signed a free trade agreement, an important development for the world's seventh and first largest exporters.¹⁹ More

controversially, South Korea joined the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank²⁰ and Park went to Beijing to attend a massive military parade celebrating the end of World War II — widely seen as Xi muscled showing off the flashy modern weaponry as metaphor for China's elevated status in the world — sparking concerns in Washington that Seoul was leaning toward Beijing at the expense of its alliance with the United States and damaging regional security cooperation.²¹

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But Park's motivation lay in what Korea scholar Scott Snyder has called the “holy grail of Korean unification that Seoul has sought for over two decades.”²² She had reason to believe that she had an opportunity to drive a wedge between North Korea and China, while complementing and boosting Seoul's efforts to foster change on the Korean Peninsula toward eventual reunification. New North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's acceleration of his nuclear weapons capabilities and blustery threats had led to an unprecedented weakening of the decades-old alliance between Beijing and Pyongyang. There had been observable changes in Chinese attitudes about the regime in North Korea. Upon becoming leader of China, Xi went to Seoul before he went to Pyongyang, a deliberate snub for the young leader in the North. Indeed, high-level visits between the communist allies had come to a virtual standstill from 2012 to 2018. Furthermore, Beijing opened up the space for public criticism of North Korea in authoritative media, made some efforts toward stricter sanctions enforcement, and conducted artillery drills near its border with North Korea.²³ Media reports indicated that China had even started to make plans for the collapse of North Korea, including considering refugee housing and ways to manage the potential military and political upheaval.²⁴

But it was a failed gamble for Park. As her predecessor Lee Myung-bak had learned in 2010, China was not a reliable strategic partner, as Chinese leaders perceived Washington's increased military and sanctions pressure on Pyongyang as the source of instability in the region, driving the Kim regime to develop and advance its nuclear weapons program. As Chinese scholar Wang Junsheng explained, “China defines its role and responsibility as alleviating North Korea's vulnerability and insecurity through a stable relationship with Pyongyang, in light of the imbalanced geopolitical structure.”²⁵

Xi's pledges to Park about developing the security aspect of the relationship turned out to be hollow promises during periods of crisis, such as when North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test in January 2016 and Xi refused to take Park's telephone calls for a month.²⁶ When they did finally speak and Park expressed her concern about taking strong coordinated action against the North's latest provocation, Xi insisted, “The Peninsula cannot have nuclear weapons as well as wars and chaos,” and said that all parties should maintain “peace and stability on the Peninsula to calmly deal with the current situation.”²⁷

The Chinese leader's unsatisfying comments and deflection of the blame away from Kim Jong Un clarified for the Park administration and others China's perception of the threat to its interests: it was not the regime in Pyongyang, it was the presence of U.S. troops on the Asian mainland. Kim Jong Un's nuclear test that year revealed that China's dream was not South Korea's dream, and exposed the inherent conflict in Beijing and Seoul's respective goals. Rather than punishing Pyongyang, China lashed out at Seoul, painfully reminding the South Korean government the limits — and dangers — of economic interdependence.

DREAMS DEFERRED

Bilateral ties took a turn for the worse in 2016 when Park Geun-hye agreed to deploy THAAD, the U.S. missile defense system. Though Seoul and Washington insisted that THAAD was aimed at countering North Korea's increasing capabilities, Beijing vehemently opposed the THAAD deployment, contending that it was a threat to China's security and a move designed to contain and undermine China, and retaliated against Seoul by

implementing an unofficial economic boycott.²⁸ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that THAAD “goes far beyond the needs of the Korean Peninsula and the coverage would mean it will reach deep into the Asian continent,” and added, “It directly affects the strategic security interests of China and other Asian countries.”²⁹ The Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Qiu Guohong bluntly said that THAAD deployment could “destroy” the bilateral relationship.³⁰

The anger wasn’t just political. After it was revealed that the South Korean conglomerate Lotte was in negotiations with the South Korean government to provide the land for THAAD, a commentary in China’s state-run press agency Xinhua warned, “Lotte will hurt the Chinese people and the consequences could be severe... Lotte stands to lose Chinese customers and the Chinese market. That would be a large slice out of their economic pie.”³¹

South Korean scholar Yul Sohn³² has pointed out that Beijing was “sophisticated in its use of coercion.” In addition to clamping down on tourism and cultural exchanges, China followed through on its threats against Lotte, shutting down 39 of its stores, but never acknowledging any of these actions. Sohn also noted that Chinese leaders selected South Korean economic targets that would not harm Chinese businesses that relied on South Korean firms, while harming those that compete with them, and used “selective implementation of domestic regulations, including customs inspections or sanitary check” and “extralegal measures.”

The economic coercion cost South Korea \$7.5 billion dollars in losses in 2017 alone, according to estimates by the Hyundai Research Institute, given that its bilateral trade with China is bigger than with the United States and Japan combined.³³ China’s losses amounted to just \$880 million.

Despite its attempt to wield its significant economic heft for political influence against its much smaller neighbor, however, Beijing found only limited success in shaping Seoul’s security choices. Rather than finding a malleable partner in South Korea in its efforts to counter U.S. influence in the region, China’s blunt use of coercive economic tools damaged its reputation with Seoul and the South Korean public, while doing little to prevent new liberal President Moon Jae-in’s decision

to complete the deployment of THAAD anti-missile defense units after North Korea’s intercontinental ballistic missile tests in July 2017.³⁴

China’s actions have had a negative impact on South Korean public opinion. A former South Korean national security adviser said that it became clear for his country “how harsh [the Chinese] can be in dealing with their small neighbors and how hollow their commitment to a peaceful rise actually turned out to be,” adding, “The romantic view of China is gone now.”³⁵ Indeed, in March 2017, Xi’s favorability rating in South Korea was at its lowest ever (at 3.01 out of 5.0), according to a poll conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.³⁶ Reflecting South Korean anger over China’s defense of Pyongyang’s actions, nearly 70% of South Korean respondents said they believed China would take North Korea’s side if another war was ignited on the Korean Peninsula. This was a sharp contrast to 2015 — before THAAD — when nearly 57% believed China would not join the North Korean side.

That negative opinion had a long tail. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs polling from 2019 indicated that about 14% of South Koreans perceived China as a reliable future partner, compared to 33% in 2016 before the THAAD episode.³⁷ Meanwhile, a whopping 95% of South Koreans interviewed by the Asan Institute in 2017 had a favorable view of the alliance with the United States.³⁸

TIES STABLE... FOR NOW

Despite the public’s unfavorable opinion of China and Beijing’s demonstrated willingness to cause pain for Seoul, Park’s successor Moon Jae-in — motivated by, among other issues, Beijing’s support for his more concessionary approach to North Korea — nevertheless sought to stabilize ties. Shortly after winning the presidential election in May 2017, Moon met with Xi for the first time at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam and declared the “three no’s” — no additional THAAD deployment, no agreement to join a U.S. anti-missile system, and no military alliance with the U.S. and Japan — which appeared to sufficiently mollify Beijing but raised alarms in Washington and elsewhere that Seoul was buckling under Chinese pressure.³⁹ Concerns about the progressive president’s commitment to the alliance also rippled through the policy and expert communities.

Defenders of the Moon administration argued that the “three no’s” were merely statements of longstanding policy and consistent with the new president’s vision and the strategy he professed on the campaign trail.⁴⁰ Asia analysts Bonnie S. Glaser and Lisa Collins cautioned against premature claims that China “won” the THAAD dispute. They argued, “Beijing’s willingness to restore normal bilateral ties despite Seoul’s refusal to remove THAAD suggests that China’s coercive gambit failed,” but acknowledged that it was too soon to declare it a “total flop,” given that Beijing plays the long game and that the trajectory of the future relationship depended on Seoul’s “willingness to take additional steps to bolster South Korea’s security.”⁴¹

Moon and Xi would meet five more times, most recently in December 2019 in Beijing.⁴² The two leaders stuck to platitudes, pledging to improve bilateral ties, but the strained tone of the meeting betrayed the lingering mistrust. Urging more progress in trade cooperation, Moon said, “We may feel a momentary sense of regret toward each other, but... our two countries can never become estranged.”⁴³ Xi maintained that China and South Korea are “influential countries in Asia and the world” and are “close friends and cooperative partners,” but in a thinly-veiled criticism of South Korea’s alliance with Washington, Xi stressed the need to “accommodate each other’s core interests and major concerns.”⁴⁴

The tense mood was also probably affected by Moon’s decision, during his June 2019 summit with U.S. President Donald Trump in Seoul, to take part in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, a significant change from his previous approach of not taking sides to avoid antagonizing China.⁴⁵ If Washington was worried about the “three no’s,” Beijing was almost certainly vexed by Moon’s expression of support for what it saw as an attempt to contain and constrain China, and the implications for bolstered capabilities of the U.S. and allies to counterbalance China’s moves in the contested waters of the South China Sea. China expert Yun Sun argued that Moon’s “three no’s” and cautious support for the Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed to chart a middle path, “the end result is that both Washington and Beijing are perturbed by the perceived damage to their interests.”⁴⁶

Indeed, neither Washington nor Beijing is likely to be satisfied by Seoul’s actions. South Korea’s decisions in the past decade have shown a desire to maintain equilibrium, “to acquire enough relative power to maintain, at a minimum, independence from neighboring great powers’ influence,” as Asia expert Balbina Hwang observed in 2017.⁴⁷

BEIJING LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO EXPLOIT PERCEIVED GAPS IN ALLIANCE

The sharpening of U.S.-China strategic competition will intensify the pressure on Seoul to choose sides, even if that dilemma is not explicitly put forth by the two larger powers. Beijing is likely to keep trying to exploit the seams and gaps in perceived alliance weaknesses and is taking an approach that is a combination of positive assurances and public and private pressure and threats. China’s perception of success in influencing South Korea’s decisions will embolden future coercive efforts, further hardening Seoul’s distrust of Beijing. Such an approach is aimed at demonstrating its regional leadership, while downgrading U.S. presence and credibility in the region. Or in the long run, as Sun posits, “China would demand South Korea’s deference on key strategic issues and not just its neutrality,” given Xi’s strategic aspirations.⁴⁸



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Xi almost certainly sees opportunities to make progress on China’s goals because of the significant fissures that have appeared in the U.S.-South Korea alliance under the Trump and Moon administrations. Trump’s consistent criticisms of the alliance,⁴⁹ demand for a 400% increase in host nation support,⁵⁰ and the threat to launch a military strike against the North Korea in

2017⁵¹ with apparent disregard for the devastating implications for the Korean Peninsula have fueled mistrust in South Korea. Meanwhile, Moon's high priority on engagement with the Kim regime and push for inter-Korean economic projects, at times regardless of U.S. opposition, showed that he was willing to risk Washington's ire to advance inter-Korean progress, potentially at the expense of denuclearizing North Korea.

Beijing's leaders probably will focus on North Korea, weaving greater engagement with both Koreas to increase China's influence on the Korean Peninsula. Despite icy ties that had marked the first seven years of Kim Jong Un's rule, Xi has accelerated and intensified diplomatic engagement, including visiting Pyongyang in June 2019 for a summit with Kim, the first time a Chinese head of state had done so in 14 years. While Xi intended to remind Kim of his dependence on China and rein in the young leader's aggressive proclivities by encouraging his focus on economic engagement, his robust engagement with North Korea probably was driven by a desire to avoid being marginalized in nuclear negotiations; in fact, Beijing has bracketed every inter-Korean summit and Trump-Kim meeting with China-North Korea meetings to protect its interests.

With South Korea, Xi probably will use Moon's strong desire to make headway with Pyongyang during his single five-year term to loosen the sanctions regime against North Korea, in line with these leaders' belief that inducements rather than pressure would support their strategic interests. While Xi wants to play a central role in driving events on the Korean Peninsula and incentivize North Korea to refrain from provocative actions that would justify close U.S.-South Korea cooperation, Moon seeks to create conditions that would make greater inter-Korean exchanges and economic integration possible. China and Russia's proposal — supported by Seoul — to lift a slew of sanctions on North Korea in December 2019⁵² shows how Xi is trying to shape the direction of the global effort on North Korea denuclearization, efforts that are at odds with the U.S. approach of sharpening the choice for Kim between nuclear weapons and economic development.

Xi and Moon are likely to shore up this convergence of interests if Xi visits Seoul this year. During Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's December visit to Seoul —

his first in four years — Moon said, "I would like to ask for continuous support from the Chinese government until the new era of a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula opens." For his part, Wang took a swipe at Trump, stating, "China and South Korea as neighbors should strengthen dialogue and cooperation to jointly uphold multilateralism and free trade."⁵³ In a separate meeting with his South Korean counterpart, he said that China "opposes the bullying of small nations by big nations that rely only on its strength," adding, "We also oppose internal interference by other countries," in a bid to fuel the progressive South Korean government's aspirations for autonomy.⁵⁴

At the same time, Beijing is grabbing opportunities to demonstrate its regional leadership, calculating, as former senior State Department official and Brookings nonresident senior fellow Evans J.R. Revere has noted, "that U.S. influence in Northeast Asia is waning and that friction in the U.S.-South Korea alliance, the erosion of the U.S.-South Korea-Japan security cooperation, and a passive U.S. approach to its regional alliances."⁵⁵ While the media reported on Trump's jokes about North Korea's "Christmas gift" — which the region feared would be a destabilizing strategic provocation — and the president's exorbitant demands for a five-fold increase in South Korea's contribution to support the U.S. troop presence there, Chinese leaders convened a trilateral meeting with South Korea and Japan in late December.

The meeting was mostly for show, but it was the first time Moon and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had met in 15 months, and made Beijing look like a successful facilitator.⁵⁶ Ties between Washington's two closest regional allies have never been great because of Japan's brutal colonization of the Korean Peninsula in the first half of the 20th century and its use of sex slaves and forced labor during World War II, but relations between them have plummeted to its lowest levels over a trade dispute and negatively affected economic and security cooperation, with the Trump administration unwilling or unable to sufficiently staunch the bleeding.⁵⁷ With Chinese Premier Li Keqiang hosting the Moon and Abe and the three sides issuing a statement in support of dialogue with North Korea on nuclear issues, Beijing played the role of regional anchor.

More recently, as China has had success in taming the spread of the coronavirus, even as the death toll mounts in the United States, Xi has been using the pandemic as an opportunity to further cozy up to Moon. In mid-May, Xi dangled the prospect of a visit to Seoul this year to Moon in a phone call and remarked that, “Our countries have been a model for international cooperation on infectious diseases.”⁵⁸ Beijing and Seoul also have started to open up business travel between the two countries to reinvigorate their economies,⁵⁹ even as negotiations on defense cost-sharing between the United States and South Korea drag on as of the end of June, sparking concerns about the Trump administration’s handling of the talks.⁶⁰

These diplomatic moves have been accompanied by more coercive actions. Beijing probably will continue to flex its economic muscle to punish its neighbors, putting Seoul with a familiar dilemma of choosing the U.S. or China. When Washington placed sanctions on Chinese telecommunications company Huawei and lobbied its allies to reject the firm’s 5G technology, China reciprocated with stern warnings to its neighbors. The Chinese government’s National Development and Reform Commission gathered technology companies, including South Korea’s SK Hynix and Samsung, to warn of unspecified consequences if they cooperated with the Trump administration’s ban.⁶¹ Given the reliance on the China market and the fact that Huawei is a competitor and a key partner for South Korea’s biggest technology companies, Seoul faces another difficult choice and another possible blow to its economy.⁶²

More worrisome for its potential to spark an unintended military clash has been China’s unauthorized intrusions into South Korean airspace in recent years. According to a former senior Korean Air Force official, Chinese violations of South Korea’s air defense identification zone (KADIZ) has increased from 50 cases in 2016 to more than 70 in 2017 while penetrating deeper into the zone, in part to show China’s expanding influence over the Korean Peninsula.⁶³ In 2019, there were over two dozen breaches, including the first China-Russia air patrol in the region — over islands that are disputed by Tokyo and Seoul — sparking a brief military confrontation that involved China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan.⁶⁴ The South Korean Ministry of Defense has pointed out that “such incidents raise

regional tension and may lead to collisions with ROK military or civil aircraft,”⁶⁵ but given China’s dismissal of South Korea’s “strong complaints,” such incidents are likely to reoccur, especially as Beijing tests the strength of the U.S.-led security infrastructure and seeks to normalize a more aggressive maritime presence in the region.⁶⁶

HAZARDS AHEAD

South Korea’s role as the linchpin the U.S. alliance architecture in Northeast Asia will continue to be a key target for China. As the strategic competition between the U.S. and China shows no signs of abating and China’s leaders appear to have more tolerance for conflict with the United States, Beijing’s pressure on Seoul probably will intensify, using a range of coercive tools, as the THAAD case has shown. The Moon administration, for its part, will try to avoid risking antagonizing Washington and Beijing — probably unsuccessfully — while taking actions to diversify South Korea’s economic and foreign relations via the New Northern Policy and New Southern Policy, which aim to build stronger ties to Russia, Mongolia, and Central Asia, and Southeast Asia and India, respectively.⁶⁷



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Below the smiling façade of summit diplomacy, China and South Korea will face increasing challenges, as positive economic relations of the past give way to greater economic rivalry and North Korea’s growing nuclear weapons capabilities continue to inject instability into the region. Beijing’s use of coercion to achieve its goals — with South Korea as well as other countries in the region — will probably limit,

if not undermine, its attempt to wean Seoul away from Washington, while reinforcing for the Moon administration (and probably successive governments) the need for South Korea to build and cultivate cooperative partnerships with its neighbors, outside of the framework of the U.S.-China strategic competition.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration's framing of the region as a binary contest between "free and repressive visions"⁶⁸ and the president's consistent characterization of South Korea as a free-rider and demeaning comments — when the South Korean film "Parasite" became the first foreign language film to win the Oscar for Best Picture, Trump responded: "What the hell was that all about? We've got enough problems with South Korea, with trade. On top of it they give them the best movie of the year."⁶⁹ — give little comfort to Seoul as it tries to maneuver its way between the two great powers. While Beijing's ham-fisted approach to Seoul has muted to some extent the deleterious effects of Trump's open disdain and distrust of alliances, Seoul has borne the brunt of "the harmful spiral of geo-economic competition that reflects intensified Sino-American rivalries," as Yul Sohn noted.⁷⁰

For the Moon administration, the priority on rapprochement with North Korea, despite the Kim regime's refusal to engage, will continue to be a key factor in Seoul's relationship with Beijing. And if the current stalemate in U.S.-North Korea nuclear talks last in the near- to mid-term, Moon might rely more on cooperation with China, to include providing economic incentives to North Korea to facilitate improved ties, regardless of U.S. objections. But this might be a means to an end. As one former foreign policy adviser to Moon told *The Atlantic*, the South Korean president believes that reconciling with North Korea will reduce the pressure for Seoul to choose sides. He explained, "if we have a good relationship with the North, then we can say that we don't need THAAD," reflecting a deep concern about the Trump administration's commitment to Seoul.⁷¹

The U.S.-South Korea alliance is undoubtedly going through a rough patch. But without proper tending, Washington is in danger of falling into the same trap of seeing Seoul solely through the lens of competition with Beijing, rather than recognizing its interests and

preferences outside of the great powers paradigm and perceiving Seoul's actions as part of a zero-sum scorecard between the United States and China. More damaging for U.S. credibility has been its inability or unwillingness to provide assistance to Seoul as it faced Chinese retaliation for THAAD.

But it is never too late for Washington to heed the counsel of Asia defense expert and Brookings fellow Lindsey Ford, who has argued for a "deeper dialogue about the practical challenges that China's influence poses for alliance management." To do so, she adds, Washington "needs to think more creatively about how to help smaller allies and partners offset the risks they are likely to face when they do align with the United States on sensitive issues."⁷² Her comments echo the argument made by China expert and Brookings fellow Ryan Hass, who has persuasively advocated for a more consultative and flexible approach to our allies rather than pursuing a quixotic pursuit of a united bloc against a China monolith, recognizing that complete U.S.-South Korea alignment is not possible, given Korea's geography and economic ties to Beijing.

At the same time, the U.S. needs to do a better job of linking Seoul's desire for regional stability, economic growth, and multilateral cooperation toward shaping Beijing's choices on security, governance, and the economy. Showing our decades-old ally greater American willingness to understand and incorporate its concerns seems like a reasonable minimum requirement to preserve a 70-year-old relationship that since the 1950s has been a part of the "backbone of global security."⁷³

Beijing clearly recognizes South Korea's strategic importance. It would behoove the Trump administration — and future U.S. presidents — to arrive at that conclusion as well.

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