



Clarifying Challenges and Maintaining Trust in the Seoul-Washington Alliance

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When two top alliance managers coauthor a [Washington Post op-ed](#) entitled “The 66-year alliance between the US and South Korea is in deep trouble,” policymakers and analysts should pay attention. Cooperation between South Korea and the United States faces a complicated landscape including North Korea’s continued provocations and diplomatic recalcitrance, China’s growing regional assertiveness and military cooperation with Russia, a severe downturn in relations between Seoul and Tokyo, and uncertainty surrounding the US-China trade war. But there are several empirical cases in the recent op-ed that require an on-the-ground perspective in Seoul to understand challenges for maintaining [trust in the alliance](#).

Richard Armitage and Victor Cha write that Seoul’s aborted threat to cancel its General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan was “an act of alliance abuse” toward the United States. However, the Moon administration’s misfire on the intelligence-sharing pact can be better described as an emergency flare calling for US attention, prompted by Japan’s new export restrictions applied against South Korea this summer. The Moon government should be commended for pulling back from killing GSOMIA, while Japan should be encouraged to engage in talks toward lifting its export restrictions. The US was insufficiently engaged in alliance management at critical moments over the past year as Korea-Japan [historical disputes escalated](#) and a [radar-lock incident at sea](#) went unresolved. As a consequence, Washington had to overcompensate with heavy pressure to save GSOMIA. Quiet diplomacy is now needed to uphold trilateral cooperation and forge compromise during ongoing negotiations.

Defense cost-sharing talks between Washington and Seoul are especially challenging this year because the initial US request was unprecedentedly high. But the Korean public largely associates this with Trump's particular bargaining style. [Korean public opinion](#) is not represented by a handful of students climbing a wall with placards to make a political stunt, so it may overstate national sentiment to say that "the Korean people's anger at perceived Washington greed was evident in demonstrations this month when protesters broke the perimeter of the US ambassador's residence." The general reaction to that incident was that the young people involved will learn their lesson after facing the rule of law (which they are), and South Korean police need to increase security around the compound (which they have). Mentioning demonstrations in Seoul conjures up recent images of dueling mass protests over prosecutorial reform and a failed justice minister—contentious issues in [South Korea's polarized domestic politics](#). But there are no such mass protests against the US at this time, and no angry mobs storming the embassy or ambassador's residence.

On foreign policy, some Americans lament that Seoul "will not support Washington's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept" for fear of offending China. In fact, South Korea has spelled out in detail the positive overlap between its "New Southern Policy" and the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy," including in a [fact sheet jointly released in November 2019](#). Washington can call for greater coordination and more vocal support from Seoul on regional cooperation, but US foreign policy also needs to consider allies' circumstances and national interests. On South Korea's end, some diplomatic finesse is required as Seoul's top security and diplomatic partner appears to be entering a protracted rivalry with Seoul's [top trade partner and immediate neighbor](#). Nonetheless, South Korea is actively courting new partners in India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), largely to hedge against [China's economic coercion](#).

Still, Armitage and Cha are concerned that the Moon government is "leaning toward Beijing." As evidence, they point to how South Korea "wants to join China's proposed multilateral trade arrangement." However, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is not China's but a process initiated by ASEAN seven years ago. It is unusual to single out South Korea's participation with China when RCEP includes all ten ASEAN countries plus Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Moreover, it was Washington that ceded agenda-setting on trade in Asia by pulling out of the higher-quality [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP) and pursuing a trade war against China not coordinated with US allies.

South Korea has an important [middle power role](#) to play in Asia by upholding international norms and developing regional networks that involve common interests with the United States. Yet

Armitage and Cha write, “in another ominous sign of the US-South Korea alliance weakening, the South Korean and Chinese defense ministers on the sidelines of a multilateral gathering in Southeast Asia inked an agreement to increase defense exchanges.” Seoul pursuing reciprocal visits with Chinese defense officials and trying to get hotlines to actually work with Beijing are efforts at confidence building and crisis prevention. A more proximate sign of trouble for American leadership at Asian regional meetings is the [non-attendance of the US president](#), which leaves a perceived vacuum for China to fill.

Throughout their distinguished careers, Armitage and Cha have ably and effectively argued in favor of the extensive mutual benefits of US alliances. They now worry that a [perfect storm](#) of the challenges above could result in a “premature withdrawal of US troops from the [Korean] Peninsula.” Among policymakers and analysts, it is an honorable charge to sound the alarm to prevent worst-case scenarios and guard against poor judgement by unpredictable leaders. Yet while reading signals from current events, it is important not to be alarmist—because overinterpreting facts on the ground can damage the very trust between Washington and Seoul that alliance managers work tirelessly to defend.

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