



Trump's America or America's Trump, and the Korean Peninsula

Won Gon Park (Handong Global University)

Nobody dares to deny that Donald J. Trump is an unconventional American president. He did not have a political career before coming to the White House. Since he was elected, he has blatantly denied the role of the US as a leading promoter of international norms and principles, instead pursuing narrowly defined tangible material interests with the slogan “America First.”

As the president, Trump has executed some of his campaign pledges such as issuing anti-immigration executive orders, building a wall along the US-Mexico border, pulling out from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and withdrawing from the Paris climate accords. The fulfillment of these promises has run counter to the internationalism established and continually promoted by the US since 1945, with a few exceptions such as the Nixon period. President Trump has also harshly criticized America's traditional allies—mainly South Korea, Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and NATO—for not shouldering enough of the costs of the alliances, while seemingly advocating in favor of some authoritarian regimes by boasting of his personal relationships with the leaders of North Korea and Russia.

The most appalling action of late in which President Trump engaged was the abrupt decision to pull US troops out of Syria. After his phone call with Turkish President Erdoğan, Trump unilaterally announced the withdrawal of US forces from Syria without prior consultation with his top officials. The Kurds, who have fought with the US against ISIS for years, have suddenly found themselves outnumbered and outgunned against Turkish troops, who consider them terrorists. Even though the Kurds are stateless, meaning that they do not have a formal treaty with the US as a coherent and legal entity in the international community, it is understandable that they expected the

US to help them gain certain territories to govern autonomously as more than 11,000 Kurds shed their blood fighting together with American troops.

After three years at the helm, it is time to answer the essential questions, namely of how Trump's policies should be defined and whether his leadership is a one-time phenomenon of an "unconventional" president or whether it is indicative of a deeper change within the US. Such questions have already sparked many arguments in the fields of American politics and international relations. While the issue remains controversial, after three years of the Trump presidency, many scholars have agreed that we will see more Trumps in the future. *The Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria recently wrote an article titled "Trump's misbehavior fits a global trend," arguing that because "we are living in times of great change" people feel insecure and anxious. According to Zakaria, 21 out of 27 democratic countries no longer believe that elections can bring about change. This has led people to support "populist leaders who play on their fears, seize on scapegoats and promise to take decisive action on their behalf." It is well known that Zakaria is one of the most vocal critics of Trump. Just a week before the presidential election, he called Trump an "American cancer," yet it is worthwhile to pay attention to the fact that many other prominent scholars all over the world come to a similar conclusion.

If Trump is a phenomenon, then the consequences of Trump's foreign policy are far more serious. Trump is not an isolationist, but rather pursues 'selective engagement' in world affairs. Essentially, President Obama shared the same approach by pulling US troops from Iraq and not becoming heavily involved in Syria. Because the Obama administration felt that the US had overreached through George W. Bush's "war on terror," Obama calculated that it was time to retrench and focus on domestic reform. In a sense, Trump has had a similar approach of retrenchment as he has frequently said things like, for example, "bring our boys back home," and actually implemented that in Syria, yet there are very important differences. Obama emphasized the importance of a "Rules-Based International Order" (RBIO) as the main principle for international relations while Trump has more brusquely put US interests first and expressed his contempt for the existing order, calling it "wildly unfair."

The most obvious trend that can be easily seen is the US's bashing of China. Vice President Mike Pence reiterated the US commitment to balancing China in his speech at the Wilson Center in October 2019, which followed his previous year's speech expressing the same at the Hudson Institute. The US Department of Defense and Department of State released the reports *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* and *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* respectively in 2019. These reports clearly defined

China as a “revisionist state” who “seeks to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations.” The Trump administration is not alone, as the American foreign policy community in general shares the view that the US should contain the “rise of China” even though it would cost the US to decouple the economies of the two countries. A majority of scholars have expressed their expectations that competition between the US and China will continue for a while, with some even saying it could last a generation.

Trump’s America will continue to pursue selective engagement, seek to revise alliances so that allies shoulder their fair share of responsibilities and costs to provide public goods for the security of the world, short-term economic interests, and balancing against China. The Korean Peninsula will be influenced more heavily by this “new normal” started by Trump than any other place in the world. First, South Korea is facing daunting challenges vis-à-vis its alliance with the US in terms of cost and responsibility sharing. The Trump administration conducted a “global review” in the first half of this year to find new ways to demand that allies shoulder a larger share of the cost burden. The details of the new framework are not yet publicly known, but it seems that the demands of the US are not limited to increasing the cost of stationed US forces and include an “alliance contribution” that goes beyond the Korean peninsula. As of the end of November 2019, there are no signs that the Trump administration will back off its initial demand that South Korea fork over an extra \$5 billion USD, five times what South Korea paid in 2019.

Second, as shown by South Korea’s attempt to pull out of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, the US emphasizes ally contributions and the building of a network for a new architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. South Korea’s announcement that it would halt GSOMIA in August and intended to terminate the agreement completely within three months of November 23 encountered fierce opposition from the US. Nearly all relevant US high officials except for the president and the vice president delivered clear messages to South Korea not to withdraw from GSOMIA because doing so would only help North Korea and China. Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley defined GSOMIA as “the key to security and stability in the region” on his way to visit South Korea. The US has seen GSOMIA as one of the most important mechanisms in implementing its Indo-Pacific strategy and worries that South Korea’s pull out will undermine its network building. At this moment, although there is still room to improve the US execution of the Indo-Pacific strategy, it is apparent that South Korea can expect to face more serious pressure from the US to side with its efforts to balance China.

Third, North Korea’s denuclearization is growing more difficult to achieve due to the

intensifying competition between the US and China. China supports North Korea within the boundary of UN sanctions. While there is speculation that China has opened its backdoor to help North Korea economically, at least on the surface, China has tried to cooperate with the US and the international community to achieve complete denuclearization. However, the Chinese definition of denuclearization is more similar to North Korea's 'denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,' which includes the requirement for the US to abandon the extended deterrence of South Korea. If the competition between the US and China evolves further, China's position will deviate further from the US and it will step up its shameless support of the North. North Korea will in turn be less willing to give up its nuclear capabilities and it will lead to the final collapse of diplomatic efforts to denuclearize the North.

The year 2020 will be a huge challenge for the Korean peninsula. North Korea's self-imposed deadline at the end of 2019 is rapidly approaching. The burden sharing negotiations between the US and South Korea are supposed to conclude by the end of this year. If the negotiations between the US and the DPRK fail to achieve any progress this year, 2020 could begin with North Korea's 'new way,' which does not exclude the possibility of tensions similar to those which plague the Korean Peninsula throughout 2017. If the ROK and the US burden-sharing negotiations fail, the US will likely come up with some new corresponding measures. However, it is difficult to guess what nature of such measures will be because of Trump's unpredictability. Finally, in November 2020, the Korean Peninsula and the world will see whether the unprecedented changes of the past four years will continue at the same rate for another four years. Four more years of Trump will cement the changes he has made and decrease any chance that the US will reverse its course.

- *Won Gon Park* (wonpark@handong.edu) is a professor at the School of International Studies at Handong Global University. He is also a member of the Policy Advisory Board of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Korea.

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Date of Issue: 27 November 2019 979-11-90315-24-1 95340

Typesetting: Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:

Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager
North Korea and National Security Research Group
Asia Democracy Research Group

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209)

j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697