“Editorial”

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President Donald J. Trump has disrupted the U.S. security structure in East Asia during his first two years as president, weakening the foundations of partnership with American allies in the region. This is particularly true regarding the Republic of Korea (ROK). South Koreans had reason to be concerned about the future of U.S. Korea policy after Trump's surprising election in November 2016 because as a candidate he had targeted the ROK for harsh criticism, repeatedly claiming that its ally was not paying enough for U.S. protection and damaging the American economy with unfair trade practices. He also suggested that the United States no longer should defend South Korea. Furthermore, he demanded to renegotiate the Korea-U.S. (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement, branding it as a “horrible” deal. As president, Trump's handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis at first threatened to undermine the U.S.-ROK alliance when he declared in April that he would be pleased to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The next month, he said that he would withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea, although he reversed that decision three days later. These incidents combined with his comment that the ROK should pay for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile defense system raised doubts about Trump's concern for South Korea's survival. ROK President Mun Jae-in, after assuming office in May, worked hard to build Trump's support for a strong U.S.-ROK alliance, cooperating with his policy of imposing “maximum pressure” on North Korea to abandon its missile and nuclear weapons programs. But Trump continued to alienate this critical U.S. ally. When Seoul thought about lifting economic sanctions on North Korea in October 2018, he remarked publicly that it would not do so because the South Koreans “do nothing without our approval.”

Trump's maneuvers in using the U.S. military presence in South Korea to manipulate the ROK in advancing self-serving U.S. policy goals are nothing new. Less than two years after the United States occupied southern Korea militarily during September 1945, U.S. officials began to discuss the withdrawal of American forces. On 29 June 1949, U.S. troops ultimately left South Korea, after

the strong objections of the ROK's government had delayed scheduled departure for six months. One year later, the Korean War began. That war decisively altered Korea's place in U.S. security planning from what it had been in the late 1940s. For example, in the fall of 1947, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reported that Korea had little strategic significance for the United States, favoring prompt removal of U.S. troops. But the State Department feared that leaving southern Korea would lead to Communist domination over the entire peninsula, thereby damaging U.S. prestige and credibility in Asia. These same factors contributed to President Harry S. Truman's decision to recommit U.S. ground troops in Korea to prevent Communist forces from conquering South Korea. As the war progressed, U.S. training and equipment transformed the ROK Army into a formidable military force that on the eve of the armistice in July 1953 provided a majority of the troops deployed along the battlefield. But that did not mean that the United States wanted to sign a mutual defense treaty with the ROK. It did so only as a necessary concession to South Korean President Syngman Rhee to secure his acceptance of the armistice. In the first article of this issue titled "The U.S.-ROK Relationship into Full Bloom: From 'Little Strategic Interest' to Alliance Partner, 1947-1966," Jun Suk Hyun and William Stueck explain how the South Koreans over the next dozen years won American admiration and respect as trusted and valuable allies.

Hyun and Stueck explain "the formation and durability of the U.S.-ROK alliance from 1947 to 1966 through an examination of the evolving perceptions of Korea in Washington and the evolving relationship between Americans and Koreans." Nearly the first half of the article describes U.S. relations with South Korea before and during the Korean War. It then shows how U.S. worries about an expansionist Communist China and an unreliable Japan transformed the "staunchly anti-Communist South Korea [into] the most reliable strategic partner of the United States in East Asia." The Eisenhower administration initiated this process when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles negotiated a mutual security treaty with the ROK in August 1953, but then failed to persuade Rhee to abandon his commitment to forcible reunification. Meanwhile, non-U.S. members of the United Nations Command (UNC) steadily withdrew their troops from South Korea, while Moscow and Beijing increased North Korea's military capability in violation of the armistice agreement, causing the United States to abrogate its inspection provisions and deploy nuclear weapons in the ROK. In July 1957, Japan's insistence on a reduced U.S. military presence in its nation led to relocating the UNC from Tokyo to Seoul. But U.S. leaders remained displeased with the alliance because of Rhee's inability to enact plans for economic development that would decrease the ROK's dependence on American aid. Hyun and Stueck explain how Pak Chông-hŭi removed this

concern after seizing power in May 1961, resulting in the United States viewing “the ROK as a valuable strategic asset . . .” “With South Korea’s settlement with Japan and commitment of combat forces to Vietnam in 1965 and U.S. acceptance of a Status-of-Forces Agreement with the ROK a year later,” the authors conclude, “the bilateral alliance relationship reached a peak after two decades of challenges, reconsiderations, and negotiations.”

ROK President Pak, as Hyun and Stueck note, secured financial rewards from the United States for committing South Korean troops in the Vietnam War as part of his larger plan to make South Korea “less dependent on its superpower partner.” Ironically, this created circumstances that motivated Richard M. Nixon after he became president in January 1969 to lower the U.S. commitment to defend the ROK. The following July in Guam, he declared that while the United States would maintain nuclear defense of its allies in East Asia, military operations to defeat insurgencies would be a local responsibility. Acting on this “Nixon Doctrine,” in March 1971, Nixon announced the withdrawal of 20,000 troops in the U.S. 7th Infantry Division that had been stationed in South Korea since the Korean War from a total of 62,000. The following summer, Nixon accepted an invitation from Beijing to visit the People’s Republic of China (PRC) early in 1972. Naturally, Pak viewed these actions as a betrayal and a prelude to U.S. abandonment. His anxiety escalated when Jimmy Carter became president in January 1977. During his campaign, Carter criticized Pak’s repression of civil liberties, while pledging that if elected he would take all U.S. troops out of South Korea. In March 1977, he announced plans for military withdrawal from the ROK that year, also declaring that fostering human rights worldwide was a central goal of his foreign policy. Carter’s advisors were very worried that his policies would destabilize the ROK and invite a North Korean attack. But Charles Kraus explains how Carter’s “dismal record regarding this East Asian nation was not simply his misplaced focus on troop withdrawals and human rights” in the second article of this issue titled “Failure to Change the Status Quo: Jimmy Carter, the Two Koreas, and the International Pursuit of Dialogue, 1977–1979.”

Kraus challenges the conventional view that Carter’s campaign pledge to withdraw U.S. troops from the ROK alone defines his handling of relations with Korea. Instead, he examines the issue of dialogue, emphasizing how “Carter consistently argued that bilateral and multilateral talks could ameliorate the tense security situation on the peninsula.” At first, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea [DPRK] was eager for direct talks with the United States, as Kraus shows in referencing exchanges between North Korea and Romania. But Carter did not respond for fear of further stoking the ROK’s fears of abandonment after his pledge to withdraw troops. In July 1977, however, he decided that

pursuit of dialogue between the Koreans would facilitate removing U.S. forces, seeking the assistance of the Soviet Union and the PRC “to rein in North Korea.” Secretary of State Cyrus Vance initiated “a frenzied international campaign” to arrange negotiations between the Koreans, but learned from China, Romania, and Yugoslavia that Kim Il Sung would not meet with the ROK. After abandoning his troop withdrawal plan in early 1978, Carter’s misplaced faith that the PRC would act as an intermediary led him to press Beijing to change Kim’s mind, “but it was not willing or able to coax P’yŏngyang to respond positively to [his] initiatives.” With difficulty, Carter then persuaded the ROK to join in inviting the DPRK to participate in talks, but North Korea did not respond. In October 1979, the assassination of Pak Chŏng-hŭi ended Carter’s efforts to establish inter-Korean dialogue, which Kraus argues “was a creative solution that demonstrated the president’s ability to devise problem solving strategies for his Korea agenda.” The author also concludes perceptively that “Carter’s inability to measurably change the status quo on the Korean Peninsula has doomed his legacy in U.S.-Korea relations.”

President Ronald Reagan, unlike Carter, cared little about the absence of political rights in South Korea, focusing instead on reaffirming the U.S.-ROK alliance as part of his strategy to rollback Soviet influence in East Asia. But just over a year before he left office in January 1989, a democracy movement had ended military rule in South Korea. Free elections made No Tae-u president, who implemented a new self-reliant policy of seeking normalized relations with the Soviet Union and reconciliation with the DPRK. Even with the end of the Cold War, President George H. W. Bush was concerned that President No’s actions were undermining the U.S.-ROK alliance. But in 1992, reports that North Korea was developing nuclear weapons reemphasized the importance of the partnership for both South Korea and the United States. President William J. Clinton was determined that the DPRK would not possess nuclear weapons, resulting in his preparations in the summer of 1994 to authorize U.S. air strikes to destroy the DPRK’s nuclear facility. Instead, former President Jimmy Carter’s personal mediation with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung led to the Agreed Framework, providing economic incentives to the DPRK in return for freezing its nuclear program. Thereafter, the Clinton administration actively supported ROK President Kim Dae-jung’s implementation of his “Sunshine Policy” for engagement with North Korea, which resulted, for example, in the DPRK declaring a moratorium on missile testing in September 1999 in return for a partial lifting of U.S. economic sanctions. But George W. Bush would end this collaboration after becoming president in January 2001. James Jungbok Lee, in the second article of this issue titled “Treating Allies with Respect: U.S.-ROK

Alliance and the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis, 2002–2006,” explains how Bush’s Korea policy not only revived anti-Americanism in South Korea, but brought the U.S.-ROK alliance to the brink of collapse.

In October 2002, the United States charged that North Korea was processing highly enriched uranium in violation of the Agreed Framework. Fears spread after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 that the United States next would take military action against the DPRK. To resolve the crisis, China arranged the Six Party Talks that began in August 2003. Lee attributes the rising discord between the United States and the ROK during these negotiations to the fact that South Korea “had set out to cooperate closely with the United States in seeking to answer the nuclear problem,” but “the United States failed overall to reciprocate . . .” He acknowledges how prior scholars have pointed to the divergence in threat perception to explain the disunity, but emphasizes the U.S. refusal to respect the ROK’s status as a main reason for the friction. South Koreans who elected No Mu-hyŏn as president late in 2002 agreed with him that the U.S.-ROK alliance needed to be “more horizontal and egalitarian” because their nation had become “a solid middle power.” Initially, No followed the U.S. lead in the nuclear crisis, viewing its resolution as the first step in an ROK-led initiative to achieve an “Age of Northeast Asia.” His “ambition to play an influential regional role befitting the ROK’s middle power status,” Lee argues, caused No to assume the role of mediator to promote U.S.-DPRK cooperation. But rather than softening its position, the Bush administration was inflexible in rejecting concessions before the DPRK completely dismantled its nuclear weapons program. Defying his ally, No then adopted “a more proactive and assertive approach on the nuclear issue.” Lee describes in detail several examples of how he sought to engage North Korea with conciliatory diplomacy and economic incentives. His determination to assert the ROK’s status, the author concludes, “led to a precipitous decline in the U.S.-ROK alliance cohesion until the DPRK’s first nuclear test of October 2006.”

Beginning in February 2008, the U.S.-ROK alliance began to regain its strength after Yi Myŏng-bak became president. He ended the policy of attempting to engage with North Korea, which coincided with the desires of the second Bush administration. From 2009 to 2017, under President Barack Obama, the United States followed a policy of “strategic patience” that made no serious effort to alter the impasse on the Korean Peninsula regarding the DPRK’s possession of nuclear weapons. President Donald J. Trump adopted a provocative policy toward the DPRK that invited war during 2017, reasserting with vigor the demand for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s missile and nuclear weapons programs. President

Mun Jae-in, who assumed power in the spring of 2017, ultimately decided to pursue the role of mediator between Trump and DPRK leader Kim Jong Un. This led to the Trump-Kim summit at Singapore in June 2018, producing an ambiguous agreement to achieve the total denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Nothing happened thereafter in terms of specifics to achieve this goal. Trump and Kim Jong Un met again in late February 2019, but serious progress toward the DPRK dismantling its nuclear program still has not occurred. Meanwhile, Trump's inconsistent policy toward South Korea continues to threaten the foundations of the U.S.-ROK military alliance. No one can predict with any confidence what will be the future of events on the Korean Peninsula.