

# Can Donald Trump save South Korea-Japan relations?

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by Tongfi Kim

Many opine that President Trump is bad for South Korea-Japan relations, but he can be a positive influence if Seoul and Tokyo wake up to the dangers they are facing. Critics have argued that Trump's disregard for U.S. alliances has led to the failure of the U.S. government to contain disputes between South Korea and Japan. While acknowledging the importance of the United States as a mediator between the two East Asian countries, I argue that Trump has actually given a strong incentive for Seoul and Tokyo to set aside their rivalry – to save their U.S. alliances from him.

In an influential 1999 book, Victor Cha argues that the relationship between South Korea and Japan becomes less conflictual when both states perceive U.S. security commitment in East Asia to be declining. Trump has indeed cast doubt on U.S. commitment to the two allies although the U.S. foreign policy establishment is still firmly committed to the U.S. role as a military protector in the region. Granted, South Korea-Japan solidarity despite antagonism is far from automatic, and their domestic politics will continue to hinder improvement of the bilateral relations, but Seoul and Tokyo have important strategic reasons to overcome their frictions.

Many pundits claim that the bilateral relation is at its lowest point after its normalization in 1965. For example, in October and November 2018, South Korea's supreme court ordered Japanese firms to pay compensation for wartime forced labor during Japan's colonial rule, throwing into question the postwar settlement based on the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations

**President Trump is reportedly planning to demand payment from host countries of U.S. troops covering the entire cost of stationing plus 50 percent. Seoul and Tokyo should treat this so-called “Cost Plus 50” as a wake-up call to deal collaboratively with the threats their U.S. alliances are facing. South Korea and Japan need to coordinate their Special Measures Agreement negotiation strategies, not just to save money, but to preserve the long-term viability of U.S. alliances in East Asia. Above all, they must avoid buying U.S. favor at the expense of each other and appeasing U.S. adversaries such as China and Russia.**

between Japan and the Republic of Korea. In November 2018, the South Korean government dissolved the foundation funded by Japan to compensate the so-called “comfort women,” dealing a blow to the 2015 bilateral agreement to settle the issue of the wartime sexual slavery. Since December 2018, when a South Korean warship allegedly locked fire control radar on a Japanese surveillance plane, the two governments have been blaming each other for dangerous behavior. The radar-locking incident has been particularly worrisome

because the two countries' defense officials had traditionally maintained cordial relationships even when the diplomatic relations were strained.

Then came the news of the so-called "Cost Plus 50" plan. Seoul and Tokyo should treat it as a wake-up call to deal collaboratively with the threats their U.S. alliances are facing. President Trump is reportedly planning to demand payment, from host countries of U.S. troops, covering the entire cost of stationing plus 50 percent. As many experts have already noted, such a plan which multiplies the host countries' financial contribution is unrealistic, but it will still hurt the credibility of U.S. security commitments and domestic political support for the alliances in the host nations. The excessive demand from the U.S. president may be a negotiation ploy, but the tactic is dangerous because Trump has demonstrated a genuine disdain for U.S. alliances.

In February 2019, South Korea and the United States concluded negotiations of their 10th Special Measures Agreement (SMA), which delineates Seoul's financial contribution for hosting U.S. troops. South Korean negotiators managed to limit the rise of the payment to an 8.2 percent increase (as opposed to the reported initial U.S. demand to double the previous amount), but the agreement is set to expire in a year, forcing both sides to return to negotiations almost immediately after signing the agreement. Mike Bosack, who participated in the most recent SMA negotiations between the United States and Japan, noted that South Korea was the "first test bed" for Trump's cost-sharing policy and Japan was "next after that." The current SMA between Japan and the United States will expire at the end of March 2021, with negotiations probably launching in late 2019 or early 2020.

South Korea and Japan need to coordinate their SMA negotiation strategies not just to save money but to preserve the long-term viability of U.S. alliances in East Asia. Above all, the East Asian allies must

avoid (a) buying U.S. favor at the expense of each other and (b) appeasing U.S. adversaries such as China and Russia. There are short-term gains to be made by such strategies, but they will backfire soon.

First, South Korea and Japan must avoid undermining each other in their respective cost-sharing dealings with the Trump administration. It is no secret that Seoul and Tokyo compete to win favor from Washington, be it on North Korea policy, history disputes, or general prestige in the hierarchy of U.S. partners. Accommodating Trump's demands is an easy way to differentiate oneself from the other allies, especially if public opinions of other allies make it difficult for the president to achieve one of his well-known foreign policy goals – to extract more financial concessions from U.S. allies. With Trump in the White House potentially until 2025, however, South Koreans and the Japanese should seriously worry about the risk of the other's alliance with the United States becoming weak. U.S. security commitments to different allies are widely considered to be interlinked, and U.S. forces stationed in Korea and Japan naturally have complementary roles.

Another way through which East Asian allies may cope with the Trump risk could be to appease alliance adversaries such as China, Russia, and North Korea, but this is not advisable either. Conciliating adversaries is sometimes a viable policy option, and there are diplomatic and economic gains Seoul and Tokyo could pursue by appeasing the adversaries, in addition to the supposed benefit of reduced military tensions. In the current circumstances, however, South Korea and Japan would have to negotiate with the adversaries from a weak position, and their appeasement of the adversaries will be used by the U.S. president to further undermine the alliances. It is important to maintain support for the alliances from the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and appearing soft towards adversaries can create the perception of disloyalty or weaken the rationale for the alliances.

South Korea and Japan can resist President Trump's anti-alliance policies in various ways, but their efforts are unlikely to succeed without cooperating with each other. They should coordinate how they calculate the costs of hosting U.S. troops to challenge the arbitrary number that U.S. negotiators are likely to bring to the table. Seoul and Tokyo should work together in many

other ways such as waiting out President Trump with window dressing of burden sharing, working with pro-alliance officials within the U.S. government, and engaging with adversaries without undermining U.S. alliances. The U.S. president gave a reason to work together but, ultimately, South Korea and Japan have to save themselves from the acrimonious disputes.

## About the author

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