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Introduction

Kathleen Stephens

When North Korean forces staged a massive surprise attack across the Korean 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950, overwhelming the defenses of the fledging Republic of Korea, President Harry Truman decided the US would act, quickly sending US forces and galvanizing the United Nations in support. Two and a half years later, as Truman departed the White House in January 1953, US and UN forces were still fighting Chinese as well as North Korean forces to a bloody stalemate along the 38th Parallel, armistice talks dragged on, and American public opinion on the Korean "police action" had soured. In this atmosphere Truman reflected on his eventful tenure that saw the end of World War II and the shaping of the post-War US-led order, and declared, "Most important of all, we acted in Korea.... The decision I believe was the most important in my time as President of the United States."

The Armistice signed six months later, like the 1945 division of Korea itself, was meant to be temporary, pending a peace settlement. It was accompanied by a mutual security agreement between the Republic of Korea and the US, anxiously insisted upon by South Koreans who feared abandonment, and reached with acquiescence rather than enthusiasm by the US. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said, "We had accepted (the Mutual Defense Treaty) as one of the prices we thought we were justified in paying to get the Armistice."

It is safe to say that no one in 1953 would have predicted that seventy years later, the US–ROK relationship would be broader, deeper, stronger, and more important than ever, for both countries. This is rooted in a range of factors, some welcome, some concerning, including the extraordinary rise of South Korea to middle power status punching

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above its weight, the shift of economic and geopolitical weight to Asia and the rise of China, and North Korea's continued pursuit of policies to maintain a totalitarian family dynasty by means, including nuclear weapons proliferation, that isolate it, oppress its people, and threaten the region.

Over the last seventy years, South Koreans often fretted that the US was not paying enough attention to Korea. But every American president at some point in his tenure was confronted with the challenges of entanglement, commitment, and leverage in South Korea, and with the challenges of engaging or deterring North Korea. Donald Trump in this sense was no exception. Where Trump deviated from most of his predecessors (and most of his own national security staff) was in a deep-seated dislike of alliances in general and of South Korea in particular, and, with North Korea, in a readiness for saber-rattling and brinksmanship, for seat-of-the-pants, top-down bargaining, which ultimately was no more successful than earlier, more traditional diplomatic efforts.

The chapters in this volume are an essential antidote to focusing solely on the headline-grabbing Trump–Kim summits, and the "fire-and-fury" and "love letters" rhetoric that dominated American coverage of Korean issues during the Trump years. Indeed, America's most important relationship on the Korean peninsula is with South Korea. And peaceful, lasting progress toward denuclearization and a permanent peace requires that Seoul and Washington work closely together.

The maturation and strengthening of the US–ROK alliance are directly related to South Korea's own modern story. It is an extraordinary one: from poverty to prosperity, authoritarian rule to a thriving democracy, a "hermit kingdom" to an influential global player in technology, culture, and much more. None of this seemed likely at the end of the Korean War in 1953, which ensured the survival of the Republic of Korea but left it in ruins, still tragically divided, facing the rival Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north, and utterly reliant on the US. There is much inspiration – and some hard lessons – in South Korea's blossoming, and in how the US–ROK relationship has broadened, deepened, and become more resilient – and more important to both countries – over the decades.

Diplomats are witnesses as well as sometimes participants in history, and I count myself fortunate to have lived in South Korea during three periods: first in the 1970s as a Peace Corps volunteer in authoritarian Korea as economic growth began to take off; next in the 1980s as an

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American diplomat covering South Korean domestic politics during decisive years in the struggle for democracy; and finally as the US Ambassador to South Korea from 2008 to 2011, the first Korean speaker and first woman to serve in that role.

I initially lived in rural South Korea as a Peace Corps volunteer from 1975 to 1977. Scarcity defined the country – scarcity of food and goods, scarcity of basic infrastructure, and, under its authoritarian government, inadequate civil and human rights. As volunteers we lived and worked in Korean homes and schools, where the unheated classrooms were so cold in the winter that I could see my breath and that of the seventy-plus middle school boys as they attempted to learn English – and I attempted to teach it. (Years later the same students told me that when teachers weren't looking, they would splinter small wood pieces from their desks to light the dormant woodstove and warm their fingers.) Industrialization and urbanization were accelerating, though by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita measures South Korea was still near the bottom of the pile, along with North Korea. But change was happening, and was perceptible even in the countryside: More teachers (but few students) started commuting by bicycle rather than by foot; small refrigerators appeared at the village shop, stocking novelties like milk; Korea's denuded hillsides were being reforested (I participated in numerous mass plantings myself) even as massive shipyards and auto plants were being constructed in former fishing villages. What was not in scarcity was human audacity and ambition, which I saw in Koreans' fierce determination to put a terrible period behind them and focus on security, opportunity, and education for their children, and a discovery of pride and hope in a Korean state.

I went back to South Korea in the 1980s as a diplomat in the political section of the US embassy, serving there for six years. This time, the economy was booming more than ever, but political discontent was seething, along with demands for democratization. Once again Korean aspirations and determination took hold, and Korea turned decisively and irreversibly toward democracy. This political blossoming has not gotten the same attention as South Korea's economic transformation, but it was just as unexpected and just as hard won. One of my jobs at the US embassy at the time was to write the Congressionally mandated human rights report on South Korea at a time when human rights was a major tension in the US–ROK alliance, and there was much to be concerned about. I spent a lot of time with opposition politicians and student, religious, and labor activists in the democratization movement, most of whom were highly

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critical of the perceived failure of the US to live up to its own ideals when it came to supporting democracy in Korea.

The US, which had come under increasing criticism for prioritizing security over political liberalization in earlier years, increasingly played a positive role. Secretary of State George Shultz and others in the Reagan administration surprised many Koreans with their insistence, both publicly and privately, on political progress. It was a good case study in quiet, and sometimes not so quiet, diplomacy.

But it was the South Korean people who demanded change – especially the university students who took to the streets and inspired many to join them with the demand for direct election of the next president. The 1988 Seoul Olympics were planned as South Korea's great coming-out party; this too spurred the Chun government to agree to a new constitution, an election, and a host of other reforms. Since that decisive year of 1987, South Korea's civil and democratic institutions have continued to take root, the military has stayed away from politics, and the country has never looked back.

I saw the many fruits of South Korea's economic and democratic transformation when I returned as the US Ambassador in 2008. A sense of freedom, creativity, and innovation infused the life of the nation, from artists to inventors, to a vibrant press and public life. I often look back to my Peace Corps days and think with some wonder how far Korea has traveled. Today, from across the Pacific, as we routinely purchase South Korean products, drive Korean cars, and enjoy Korean cultural exports, it is easy to forget or take for granted the difficult journey Korea has traveled. But that story is central to the narrative of modern Korea, as is the fact of the continued division of the peninsula.

South Korea's modern transformation has been accompanied by an evolving US–ROK relationship. It is a broader, deeper partnership rooted in shared values and strong people-to-people ties, and a deep, complex history. There have been major bumps and irritants along the way, including during the Trump administration. But relations between the US and the ROK remain strong, with broad public support in both countries. There has been, however, a growing need for a strategic review of their future alliance and relationship due to changes in the regional environment, especially as US–Chinese relations enter a troubled period, and as security and economic relationships evolve among the countries of the Indo-Pacific region.

The attention devoted to the US's and South Korea's relationships with North Korea has somewhat overshadowed South Korea's identity

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as a powerful, technologically advanced country with strong democratic values and globally attractive soft power, gained through its well-known commercial brands and cultural exports. Shared values and common challenges – such as climate change and adaptation to advanced technologies – provide a foundation for productive future relations between the US and South Korea. Long-standing people-to-people relationships also serve as an enduring basis for friendly ties.

Nevertheless, the US and South Korea face coming policy choices that may bring them closer together or push them farther apart. One continuing challenge will be to ensure that policy coordination toward North Korea continues. Another challenge – or opportunity – comes from the Biden Administration's return to multilateral diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region and to an emphasis on human rights not only in North Korea but in China too.

It has been crudely put that South Korea will have to "choose" between the US and China, but this grossly oversimplifies a complex policy environment to the point of being misleading. All countries, including the US, will cooperate with China where possible, and resist China when it impinges on their interests. There is not one choice to be made, but hundreds of policy decisions, large and small. A still oversimplified but more accurate way to describe South Korea's policy choices will be whether it will lean toward a "hedging strategy," to be among countries that are more accommodating to China's preferences, or whether it will be a fuller participant in a collective "shaping strategy" to nudge China toward rule- and norm-based behavior. In regard to multilateralism, the old distinction between security and economic frameworks is becoming irrelevant because the lines between defense and commercial technologies are blurring. The world is changing, not least because of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. The US and the ROK cannot avoid making fresh policy decisions and should not take their alliance and relationship for granted while doing so.

The eight essays collected here offer a first step toward moving the US–ROK relationship beyond the headline-grabbing behavior of the North's nuclear program and Donald Trump's salacious tweets. The authors scrutinize the economic connections and public diplomacy between the two allies, and consider the impact of soft power, internal politics, and human rights. They examine security issues on a broad level, and seek to fit China, Japan, and other nations into the complexity of current and future relations, in ways that transcend the simplistic friend/enemy dichotomy. Most of all, though, they take

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the relationship seriously by recognizing that the asymmetric power imbalance that marked my early years in Korea is no longer salient. Indeed, readers of this volume may well come away with the recognition that the two nations are now so deeply interconnected that no single issue or person – not even a president of the United States – can rip them asunder. It is imperative for the future of both nations and for the world that they remain that way.

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1

The Trump Administration's Place in the History of US Relations with the Korean Peninsula

David P. Fields

INTRODUCTION

"The great disruptor" was a term applied to President Donald Trump by both his friends and his foes as his administration pursued policies on countless issues that were not only the opposite of former President Barack Obama's, but in many cases out of step with decades of Republican orthodoxy. In foreign policy this trend towards disruption was clearly on display in US relations with the Korean peninsula. Appearing to turn traditional diplomacy towards the two Koreas on its head, Trump went to extraordinary lengths to cultivate friendly relations with North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK), while at the same time demanding humiliating concessions on trade and security issues from South Korea (Republic of Korea or ROK) – an American ally of nearly seven decades.

Both policies were seen at the time as dramatic breaks with the past, and in some senses this was true. No sitting US president had ever met face to face with any member of the Kim family – the hereditary dictators of the DPRK. While other presidents had sought changes in the US–ROK alliance, including the withdrawal of American forces, none had paired them with the insults and dismissiveness towards the ROK that Trump displayed.

In the broader historical context of US relations with the Korean peninsula, however, President Trump's policies towards the ROK and the DPRK appear more as variations on a theme than dramatic breaks with the past. For many South Koreans Trump's bullying was just the latest chapter in their troubled history with the US: a history in which

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American leaders make decisions and demands with little regard for the consequences on the peninsula. While Trump's three meetings with Kim Jong-un could rightly be called historic in a narrow sense, there is ample evidence they were just the latest installment of what some scholars refer to as "entrepreneurial diplomacy" with the DPRK – a type of diplomacy that thrives in the absence of official diplomatic relations between the two states and tends to yield greater benefits to the practitioners themselves.

This chapter will provide a broad historical context for understanding the Trump administration and its approach to the Korean peninsula. It will proceed in three sections. The first section will survey US relations with the Korean peninsula from 1882 to the creation of both the ROK and the DPRK in 1948. An understanding of this period is essential to grasping why Koreans harbor feelings of distrust towards the US, rooted in what they believe was the American role in Korea's colonization and division. The second section will examine US relations with the ROK since 1948, paying special attention to the evolution of the US–ROK alliance from its beginnings in 1953 as a grudging American concession to the ROK to a broad partnership between the two states based on shared interests and values. The third section will examine US–DPRK relations since 1948 to explain both the absence of official relations between the two states and how entrepreneurial diplomats have thrived in this void. Each section highlights the relevance of these historical periods to the Trump administration's approach to Korea. The chapter concludes with some general thoughts about what was, and was not, new about Trump's Korea policy.

A Reliable Ally? US Relations with the Korean Peninsula, 1882–1948

Any conception of US–Korean relations starting in the mid-twentieth century will have difficulty accounting for the ambivalence many in the ROK currently feel towards the US, which on the one hand is the ROK's indispensable ally, and on the other was at least complicit in the three great Korean tragedies of the twentieth century: Korea's colonization by Japan, its division in 1945, and the Korean War.

Formal diplomatic relations between the US and the Kingdom of Joseon, as Korea was then known, were established by the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation (hereafter the 1882 Treaty). This treaty was primarily the result of the efforts of two men:

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Chinese diplomat and strategist Li Hungzhang and American Admiral Robert Shufeldt. Li hoped the establishment of relations between the US and Joseon would forestall Japanese ambitions on the Korean peninsula and preserve the Chinese sphere of influence there. Shufeldt's ambitions were likely more personal. For him, negotiating a treaty that "opened" Korea to the US would give him a legacy in some ways comparable to the then-renowned Commodore Mathew Perry, who had "opened" Japan. Shufeldt personally lobbied the State Department to be given the task. Such personal ambitions gave Shufeldt the stamina necessary to persevere through the long and tortuous negotiations with Li, in which Shufeldt doggedly resisted Li's attempts to insert into the treaty language recognizing a Chinese sphere of influence in Korea.[1] All negotiations were held in China, with Li negotiating on behalf of the Koreans. Shufeldt did not meet a Korean diplomat until the brief signing ceremony in what is now Incheon.

The result was a treaty that was far more important to the Kingdom of Joseon than it was to the US. King Gojong, the last monarch of traditional Korea, placed a great deal of confidence in Korea's relationship with the US, even believing that the 1882 Treaty entailed an American commitment to Korea's independence.[2] Gojong's belief was the result of wishful thinking – some of which was encouraged by American diplomats and missionaries in Seoul – as well as a misinterpretation of Shufeldt's insistence that the US would not recognize a Chinese sphere of influence in Korea. Unfortunately for Gojong and Joseon, American policymakers intended no such commitment to Korea. As one American diplomat in China wrote in 1883, "having opened the door to Corea [sic] we should go in and do what good we may," but "We [the US] have very little to lose whether Corea becomes a province of China or is annexed to Japan or remains independent."[3] A clearer statement of American ambivalence towards the Korean peninsula during this period can hardly be found.

[1] Charles Oscar Paullin, "The Opening of Korea by Commodore Shufeldt," *Political Science Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1910): 470–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/2141171.

[2] Yur-bok Lee and Wayne Patterson, eds., *One Hundred Years of Korean-American Relations, 1882–1982* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 17. Young Ick Lew, Byong-Kie Song, Ho-min Yang, and Hy-sop Lim, *Korean Perceptions of the United States: A History of Their Origins and Formation*, trans. Michael Finch (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006), 97.

[3] Mr. Young to Mr. Frelinghuysen, Peking, December 26, 1882, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1883*, doc. 72, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1883/d72.

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The true American position on Korea became clear in 1904 when the Japanese occupied the Korean peninsula during the Russo-Japanese War and began the process of colonization. Korean envoys, including future ROK president Syngman Rhee, sent to the US to request support for Korea's independence based on Gojong's understanding of the 1882 Treaty, were met with evasive answers from the Theodore Roosevelt administration, if they were answered at all. Roosevelt's Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, had already informed the Japanese prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War that the US had no interest in the Korean peninsula, and in return received assurances that Japan had no interest in the Philippines, an American colony since 1898.

This exchange of views, known as the Taft–Katsura Memorandum, was not a quid pro quo, much less a "secret treaty" [밀약] as it is still widely known in Korean; the US was disinterested in Korea regardless of the Japanese stance on the Philippines. Still, Roosevelt's inaction angered Korean nationalists, who believed the US had disregarded its responsibilities towards Korea and been complicit in Japan's colonization. The Taft–Katsura Memorandum, and the alleged violations of the 1882 Treaty that it entails, is still relevant in US–Korean relations over a century later. For North Koreans, the Taft–Katsura Memorandum is an early example of what they believe is American perfidy and a link between the Japanese colonization of Korea and Korea's later division. For many South Koreans, it is evidence of at least tacit American complicity in their country's colonization by Japan. The episode also raises doubts about the US's trustworthiness as an ally, which have never gone away entirely and were exacerbated more by Donald Trump than by any other recent president.

From 1905 to 1945, Japan occupied and then colonized Korea. This colonization was recognized by the US, which quickly downgraded its embassy in Seoul to a consulate. Ironically, it was during this period that American interest in the Korean peninsula grew. In 1907 Korea experienced one of the great Christian revivals of the twentieth century, and American missionaries began to tout the possibility of Korea becoming the first "Christian nation" in Asia. American interest in Korea grew further after the 1919 March First Movement, a nationwide nonviolent demonstration demanding Korea's independence from Japan. The brutal Japanese response to this movement and the largely mistaken belief that the Japanese were specifically targeting Korean Christians led to an outpouring of sympathy in the US and around the world.

Savvy Korean nationalists in the US, many of them Christians, lobbied hard to convert this sympathy towards Korea into support for its

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