Donald Trump’s shock election to the US presidency in November 2016 sent waves of uncertainty throughout capitals around the world about the future direction of US foreign policy. In Asia, leaders are coming to terms with what a Trump presidency could mean for the region, especially for hot spots such as North Korea and lingering tensions among Asia’s major powers.
Between a Rock and a Rocket Man: South Korea’s Anxiety

‘With friends like this, who needs enemies?’ South Korean president Moon Jae-in might be forgiven for such a thought as he contemplates US policy under President Donald Trump. South Korea entered 2017 facing turmoil over the eventual ouster of Park Geun-hye. Trump compounded the unease by threatening to dump a bilateral free-trade agreement, force Seoul to spend massive sums for US forces there and publicly chastised Moon for trying to ‘appease’ North Korea. Trump’s war of words with Kim Jong Un has frayed nerves further.

Seong-ho Sheen describes Seoul’s efforts to navigate this newly fraught relationship with Washington.

DURING HIS presidential campaign, Donald Trump bashed South Korea for not paying enough for the US-South Korea alliance and promised to repeal the free-trade agreement between the two countries, which he called a “job-killing deal.” As for North Korea, Trump suggested that China — not South Korea — was the key to solving the nuclear problem, arguing that “they have total, absolute control ... of North Korea.” Add to this South Korea’s domestic political turmoil that left it without a president of its own for nearly five months following the ouster of former President Park Geun-hye in March on corruption charges. Seoul watched helplessly as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe quickly built a personal rapport with Trump, playing two rounds of golf with the new president at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida following an earlier visit to Trump Tower in Manhattan before Trump’s inauguration. In sum, there was deep concern in South Korea about the future of relations with the US in terms of alliance management, the trade partnership and the handling of the North Korean nuclear issue as Trump was sworn into office in January.

MANAGING THE ALLIANCE

When South Korea elected a new president in May, many questioned whether the incoming government could build a constructive partnership with Trump. Moon Jae-in, a self-made labor and human rights lawyer and liberal party candidate, could not come from a more different back-ground than Trump. In fact, Moon's election was the result of a deep internal crisis that saw President Park, the daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee, impeached for bribery and corruption involving a secret confidante of hers. Representing the liberal wing of South Korean politics, Moon has long argued for a wide range of reforms targeting South Korea’s largely conservative establishment. As for foreign policy, Moon questioned the decision made by the Park government to deploy the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system against North Korea’s nuclear threat, a move to which Beijing strongly objected as a violation of its national security interests.

Despite these differences, however, Moon was convinced of the importance of the South Korea-US alliance in addressing the North Korean nuclear challenge, as well as other foreign-policy issues in the region. As a consequence, he determined to build a positive partnership with Trump. Indeed, the first Moon-Trump meetings in June at the White House went relatively well. The two presidents appeared to establish a good chemistry and pledged their commitment to the bilateral partnership.

As a result, Moon was able to get some important concessions from the US that were unthinkable in previous decades. The South Korean government announced the lifting of the 500kg weight limit on Korean missile warheads previously imposed by the US government. Now, South Korea can develop more lethal missiles capable of targeting North Korea’s key military facilities buried underground. This could enhance South Korea’s ability to independently arm its military, paving the way for strategic weapons capabilities and even nuclear weapons. Indeed, after Trump’s visit to Seoul in November, the South Korean government announced that the US government had approved the possible introduction of a nuclear-powered submarine for the South Korean navy. The move was a clear departure from the position of previous US administrations, which denied all requests from South Korea to usher in such nuclear technology.

What happened? The measures were the product of Trump’s increased confidence in Moon after his progressive government reversed certain positions regarding thorny issues between Seoul and Washington. For example, despite his earlier skepticism about the deployment of THAAD, Moon eventually decided to fully deploy the system, in the face of months of Chinese protests and sanctions, intense domestic debate and continued North Korean missile and nuclear tests.

Moon’s resolve in the face of Pyongyang’s weapons tests also helped to bind the two allies. He has long advocated engagement with Pyongyang to solve the nuclear problem and to achieve permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, however, continued to challenge the new South Korean government with missile and nuclear tests. A former member of the elite special forces of the Korean military, Moon regarded these actions as provocative and decided to counter each North Korean test with live-fire drills and military exercises involving the latest South Korean missiles, artillery and strike aircraft. Moon and Trump both echoed the need for strong pressure against these North Korean provocations. And Trump doubled down on the US commitment to defend South Korea against North Korean threats in his speech to the South Korean National Assembly in November.

As such, it was China, not the US, that was increasingly feeling the negative impact of North Korea’s nuclear provocations. Since the South Korean decision to deploy THAAD in response to North Korea’s fifth nuclear test in September 2016, Beijing pursued tough economic sanctions, not against Pyongyang, but against Seoul.
It is almost unreal that South Korea has so far come out of all of the predicaments of the past year without a major crisis, and with its economy growing at 3 percent and the stock market reaching record highs.

South Korean companies such as Hyundai and Lotte reportedly saw their sales in China suddenly plummet earlier this year. South Korean movies and cosmetics also suffered, while the South Korean tourist industry was one of the most directly hit, with a sudden plunge in Chinese visitors. The South Korean public became increasingly angry over China’s perceived economic punishment, seeing it as bullying by Beijing in response to Seoul’s legitimate right to employ measures to counter North Korea’s nuclear threat.

But then a breakthrough came immediately after China’s 19th Party Congress in October. After President Xi Jinping was officially inaugurated for his second term with an even greater concentration of power, the two governments announced a joint statement to restore a co-operative partnership. This demonstrated an acknowledgement by Beijing that its continued pressure on South Korea was not succeeding in undermining Seoul’s alliance with Washington.

MANAGING THE KORUS FREE-TRADE DEAL

Yet another weak spot in the bilateral partnership, and the alliance for that matter, was Trump’s protectionist attack on the bilateral trade relationship. Feeling domestic pressure, the Moon government had so far resisted US attempts to sit down and negotiate a revision of the Korea-US Free-Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) signed in 2012, which Trump has blamed for increasing America’s overall trade deficit. After the first preliminary meeting between trade representatives in August, the South Korean government told reporters that Seoul would “not agree to the unilateral proposal” to amend the deal until it first examined the causes of the trade imbalance between the two countries.

Annoyed by Seoul’s defiance, Trump told reporters that his administration would announce an “important decision” regarding the trade deal in early September, strongly suggesting US unilateral withdrawal. Amid confusion in Seoul over whether that was another negotiating tactic by Trump, many in Washington worried that the fate of the KORUS FTA was doomed after witnessing the withdrawal from the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement under Trump, a much bigger and more important trade deal for the US along with its Asia-Pacific allies including Japan, Australia and New Zealand. But then the KORUS FTA — and perhaps even the South Korea-US alliance — was saved by North Korea’s sixth nuclear test on September 3 this year, a day before Trump was presumably scheduled to announce a withdrawal from the KORUS FTA. The new crisis may have provided Trump’s advisors as well as Republicans in Congress with an excuse to argue strongly that this was not the time to disrupt the alliance over a trade pact.

In the following weeks, top trade representatives from the two allies met in Washington, and the South Korean government said the two sides reached a common understanding on the need to reopen the KORUS FTA to increase the benefits for both countries. US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said there will be “intensified engagement” with South Korea to amend the pact. Again, Seoul heaved a big sigh of relief — for now — because Trump did not utter any threatening words on the trade issue during his visit to the South Korean capital in November. Instead, Moon and Trump said they had agreed to renegotiate the trade agreement in a timely fashion.

MANAGING THE NORTH’S NUCLEAR CRISIS

North Korea is the biggest challenge for Seoul in its policy co-ordination with Washington, because Moon has advocated a different approach from Trump. Since coming into office, Moon has pushed for engaging North Korea more fully, while Trump has emphasized putting maximum pressure on Pyongyang for its bad behavior.

During his visit to Berlin in July, Moon laid out his vision for peace on the Korean Peninsula, in which he declared peace as the top priority of his administration. To achieve this, he emphasized building long-term peace and co-operation with North Korea based on mutual respect. He made it clear that South Korea does not want a collapse of the North Korean regime nor does it seek a forceful reunification. And he emphasized the need for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis.

Despite Moon’s call for diplomacy, Pyongyang has seemed determined to test and challenge Trump with a series of missile tests. Counter to Trump’s tweet that North Korea’s ICBM threat “won’t happen,” North Korea has proceeded with various missile tests, including long-range missiles capable of reaching the continental US. As a result, Trump has appeared to be increasingly skeptical about diplomacy with North Korea. Soon after North Korea’s sixth nuclear test in September, he tweeted that South Korea should now
know that “talk of appeasement” will not work. And Trump’s tough talk has become increasingly aggressive. In early August, he threatened to unleash “fire and fury” on North Korea and then warned that US armed forces were “locked and loaded.” At the United Nations General Assembly on September 19, he declared that if the US “is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.”

This unusual threat by an American president surely got Kim’s attention. In an unprecedented TV appearance, Kim called Trump a “mentally deranged US dotard” and vowed to “tame” him “with fire.” Later, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho said: “Since the United States declared war on our country, we will have every right to make countermeasures, including the right to shoot down United States strategic bombers, even when they are not inside the airspace border of our country.” Later, North Korea threatened to test a nuclear device over the Pacific Ocean and to attack the US.

In response, the US military has been flexing its muscles. B-1 bombers and F-15 fighters flew farther north of the Demilitarized Zone along the North Korean coastline than they have in years. Three US carrier strike groups conducted a combined exercise in mid-November in the Western Pacific, putting a powerful US force within striking distance of North Korea. The US Air Force, meanwhile, has announced that, for the first time, it will send a squadron of a dozen F-35A stealth fighter jets to Kadena Air Base in Japan in early November for a six-month deployment. The US has also dispatched several submarines, including at least one nuclear cruise-missile submarine, to Korean waters. Also, it was recently revealed that the US military increased its stockpile of munitions in Guam by about 10 percent.

There had more recently been some speculation about possible talks between Washington and Pyongyang, because the Trump administration noted that the North Korean regime had not conducted any new missile and nuclear tests for more than two months. But then, on Nov. 28, Pyongyang launched yet another missile test, this one reportedly traveling a greater distance than any of its previous ICBM tests. Trump, meanwhile, had earlier announced the re-designation of North Korea on the list of state sponsors of terrorism with more sanctions. As many experts express their concerns that Trump — even in the face of continuing provocations from Pyongyang — is playing a dangerous game with North Korea, possibly stumbling into a second Korean War, tensions on the Korean Peninsula remain higher than they have been in over a decade.

So far, South Korea and its newly elected government have managed to keep its first year with the Trump administration, and the alliance for that matter, from becoming a major disaster. It is almost unreal that South Korea has so far come out of all of these predicaments without a major crisis, and with its economy growing at 3 percent and the stock market reaching record highs. The Moon government deserves credit for managing a stable relationship with Washington and maintaining peace on the peninsula amid swirling tensions between Trump and Pyongyang.

That said, it is too early to tell when and how the crisis with North Korea will be resolved. Moon knows the importance of the alliance to South Korea’s national security. Trump, meanwhile, needs to know that South Korea and President Moon offer the best chance he’s got to deal with the ever more menacing “Little Rocket Man.”

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