The ill-conceived and haphazard diplomacy of Donald Trump’s administration in Northeast Asia risks alienating both North and South Korea and undermining the confidence of US allies in the region.

This is baffling at a time when Washington appears determined to take on China over a range of issues and is seeking support from the very allies it is belittling. The situation could seriously unsettle the region and even lead to war, writes Van Jackson.

THE UNITED STATES faced a dilemma during the Barack Obama administration. Because North and South Korea were openly combative at the time, diplomatic progress with one Korea came at the expense of antagonizing the other. The US alliance with South Korea under Obama was the strongest it had been since the end of the Cold War. That necessarily meant the US rivalry with North Korea during that same period was commensurately hostile.

For a time, Moon Jae-in’s presidency in South Korea alleviated this dilemma. President Moon’s bid for peace with Kim Jong Un presented Washington with a rare opportunity to improve ties with North and South Korea simultaneously and thereby durably improve the security situation in Korea. But a string of un-strategic, ill-considered moves by Washington since 2018 have started turning both sides of the demilitarized zone against it.

The obstinacy with which the US continues to pursue the impossible goal of North Korean denuclearization risks a future nuclear crisis. Washington keeps trying to enlist South Korea in its confrontation with China, making policymakers in Seoul question not just America’s reliability, but also its wisdom in the realm of strategy and foreign policy. And the US has begun openly extorting South Korea in burden-sharing negotiations, leading to a notable rise in anti-alliance sentiment for the first time in more than a decade and a resurgence of South Korean policy elites hinting at going nuclear.

These missteps are proof of strategic incompetence. Their consequences are more dire, and closer, than many realize. If the US does not quickly change course, it will face a future in which South Korea remains a US ally in name only (if at all), and North Korea becomes an unprecedented threat.

ENTRAPMENT BY INCOMPETENCE

Self-sabotage has become a theme of US policy toward the Asia-Pacific. Since 2018, the US has pursued what it calls a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy, and policy elites in Seoul have expressed acute fears of entrapment because of it. The FOIP strategy envisions a zero-sum confrontation with China in the political, economic, and military domains. Rhetorically, it sounds like a more muscular version of past US strategies such as the “rebalance to Asia” during the Obama era.

In practice though, America’s FOIP strategy has echoes of a new Cold War. It rationalizes a highly reactive, haphazardly executed trade war with China as part of a gradual decoupling of the US and Chinese economies. It requires a larger and more visibly active US military footprint in Asia in the name of deterrence, including intermediate-range missiles aimed at China that might need to be hosted by allies and partners in the region. And the FOIP strategy as practiced devalues the region’s vehicles for peaceful diplomacy, the foremost being the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The Trump administration may see such institutions as low on substance, but they are unquestionably high on symbolic importance to the region. So when President Donald Trump fails to appear at the East Asia Summit and sends lower level substitute officials to the ASEAN Regional Forum, as he did in November this year, America’s symbolic absence speaks louder than any tweet ever could.

Collectively, these moves replace order with uncertainty and narrow the basis on which the continued avoidance of war depends. Economic decoupling and America’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade negotiations undermine Asia’s so-called capitalist peace. And the marginalization of regional institutions weakens the architecture for diplomacy that has helped stave off interstate wars in Asia since 1979. Eliminating these pillars of regional peace leaves only military deterrence — a stability based on fear and manipulating risk — to prevent interstate conflicts. America’s reaction to China is the direct cause of this unsettling shift in the regional order, and Asia’s smaller states do not appear to be getting a vote in the matter.

It is common for observers to critique the execution of US Asia policy under Trump. Erratic, inconsistent messaging coming out of Washington naturally raises doubts about US reliability. But the greater concern in Seoul is whether and how confronting China in such a zero-sum manner benefits the region, or the US itself.

It is not that South Korea prefers China to the US. Most policy-makers there neither love nor trust Beijing. In 2016, when Seoul decided to accept the deployment of a controversial ballistic missile defense battery (called Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD), China retaliated with punitive economic measures that hinted at the might-makes-right alternative future South Korea would suffer if China enjoys unchecked regional dominance. Some South Koreans even sympathize with the logic of the US confronting China across the wider Indo-Pacific.

But like most Asian governments, South Korean policy-makers believe it is in their national interest to avoid being made an enemy of China. And that is a major reason why the Trump administration’s FOIP strategy unnerves them — it explicitly enlists allies in the fight against Chinese expansionism abroad.
The US has repeatedly sought South Korean contributions to regional, not just Korean, security. In practical terms, that has meant requests for South Korea to join maritime patrols in the South China Sea, make South Korean territory available as a waypoint for US forces in China conflict scenarios, strengthen defense co-operation with Japan, ban Chinese technology firms such as Huawei, and potentially host US weapons (such as new ground-launched missiles) that can reach China.

South Korea has largely rejected these solicitations because China interprets them antagonistically, making it more likely that South Korea becomes a target of punitive coercion. Worse, US requests for South Korea to join the fight against China ignore the fact that South Korea has problems with the very premise of the FOIP strategy. Even if the US never asks Seoul to host ground-launched missiles, US strategy as currently conceived requires placing new China-ranging missiles in the region regardless. That move increases risks of crisis instability without the missiles ever touching South Korean soil. Similarly, US “freedom of navigation” patrols are intended to be a defiant counter-move to Chinese illegal island-building in the contested South China Sea. Yet, such operations simultaneously exacerbate friction with China while doing nothing to actually impede China’s gradual military occupation of the South China Sea.

And South Korea, like most Asian nations, has invested heavily in a regional economic interdependence that Trump’s tariff war with China is gradually disentangling.

As these examples suggest, from Seoul’s vantage point, the US approach to countering China risks deteriorating the Asian security environment generally, which is counter to South Korean and alliance interests. It is unprecedented for South Korea, a loyal ally for generations, to openly worry about US regional strategic thinking. From the Vietnam War to the 2003 Iraq invasion, South Korea has been by America’s side through its biggest strategic blunders. But as I met with policy-makers in Seoul throughout 2019, I heard a series of common refrains: “Does the US know what it’s doing in Asia or with North Korea? Does the US understand what’s in its best interests? Who is even in charge?” Any government that believes America’s choices are making the region more dangerous will have trouble deferring to US policy goals or obliging its requests.

EXXTORTION BEFORE ABANDONMENT
South Korean fears that the US is making its security situation worse are heightened by a deep internal contradiction in US Asia policy: it implores allies to join the fight against China even as it deplores allies as at best expend-
able. To wit, Trump’s repeated derision of and rent-seeking from allies. According to a recent memoir by Guy Snodgrass, a speechwriter for former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, while Trump sees allies generally as free-riders, he sees South Korea, in particular, as the world’s worst offender. Little surprise, then, that in 2018 Trump demanded South Korea double its nearly US$1 billion contribution to the alliance burden-sharing, and in 2019 increased the demand by 500 percent.

A five-fold increase in the compensation sought for the US presence in Korea is flagrant extortion. The US has done nothing meaningfully different compared to past years to warrant such a gratuitous demand, and US officials anonymously confirmed that the US$5 billion figure Trump requested from South Korea was arbitrary. Despite this, US officials are faithfully executing Trump’s demand rather than mediating or resisting it, which deflates hopes that technocrats and rational policy-makers can responsibly steer US decisions in spite of Trump.

From Seoul, it is difficult to see Trump’s maximalist levy on South Korea as anything but a pretext for US troop reductions. Trump has openly mused about his desire to withdraw troops, and since 2018 has suspended military exercises and bomber deployments because he thought they were “very expensive.” And although the US has publicly denied it, American officials have conveyed to South Korea plans to quickly withdraw US troops, which deflates hopes that technocrats and rational policy-makers can responsibly steer US decisions in spite of Trump.

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The irony is that the five-fold increase Trump seeks comes at a time when the US needs its allies to implement a collectively confrontational strategy toward China. US allies in Asia have rarely been as valuable as they are today, yet Washington is trying to extract more than allies could conceivably give because Trump sees them as a liability. This further underscores concerns about US strategic incompetence. It is simply not possible that South Korea is both useless and necessary, a liability in general but an essential contributor to the confrontation with China. The incoherence of the US position adds to doubts about the wisdom of its strategic judgment.

**STILL GETTING NORTH KOREA WRONG**

The price of strategic missteps is highest in America’s dealings with North Korea. In pursuit of denuclearization, the first year of the Trump administration risked the most dangerous nuclear confrontation since the Cuban Missile Crisis. As Trump’s former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster said repeatedly in 2017, the US could not accept the risk of simply allowing Kim Jong Un to retain nuclear weapons and was willing to use force to prevent it in future.

There are two problems with the McMaster view. One is that North Korea has a long tradition of responding to pressure with pressure in kind; it has almost never backed down in the face of American coercion. The nuclear crisis itself was born of Kim Jong Un’s defiance of Trump’s “maximum pressure.” The other problem is that North Korea already has nuclear weapons and there is no plausible way of eliminating them short of a devastating war. The McMaster mindset is dangerously out of date.

The multiple presidential summits that followed the 2017 nuclear confrontation only seemed to reinforce America’s commitment to the quixotic goal of North Korean denuclearization. US policy clings to the fiction that denuclearization is achievable.

Since US talks with North Korea stalled in 2019, and Kim Jong Un has predictably clarified that he will never unilaterally disarm, the US finds itself hostage to the same nuclear impasse that it has always faced, only under less favorable conditions than ever. Trump wants to tout his friendship with Kim Jong Un while dismissing all evidence that North Korea’s nuclear capabilities have grown during his time in office. South Korean conservatives, in particular, are deeply worried about the cumulative effect of Trump giving Kim a pass on repeated missile testing.

Kim Jong Un, meanwhile, has been misled into expecting that Trump would grant his country sanctions relief without having to surrender any of his nuclear deterrent. If Kim concludes that Trump has conned him, North Korea is likely to return to coercive measures that risk rekindling crisis. The goal of denuclearization, just as in 2017, makes for an irreducible conflict of interest between longtime rivals. The only difference now is that America’s bargaining position weakens as North Korea’s offensive capability grows.

Behind closed doors, everyone in Washington quietly agrees that the best — perhaps only — deal available with North Korea is an arms control regime that freezes and modestly rolls back North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. But that deal will remain unrealistic until the US de-links nuclear diplomacy from the well-intentioned but impossible vision of disarming North Korea. After all, why would Kim faithfully implement bargains that the US claims move him closer to eliminating his nuclear deterrent?

**HOW DOES THIS END?**

US decision-making under Trump has worsened the security situation in Korea in many ways. It has antagonized North Korea, possibly squandered the last best hope of curbing its nuclear weapons capabilities, and has allowed Kim to conduct missile tests with impunity. It has extorted South Korea, seemingly as a pretext for withdrawing troops and fracturing the alliance. It has solicited South Korean contributions in a fight against China that all but guarantees Seoul ends up in an adversarial posture with China. And it has begun making decisions toward the broader Indo-Pacific in a manner that jeopardizes Asia’s precarious track record of no interstate conflicts since 1979.

In all these ways, the US has demonstrated both unreliability and shaky strategic judgment. The question is whether the Trump administration or its successor can reverse course on any of its ill-conceived choices before at least one of them blows up. Hanging in the balance is the US-South Korea alliance itself, a future Japan-Korea strategic rivalry, a possible nuclear South Korea and Japan, and the prospect of war with China or North Korea.

Van Jackson is a professor of international relations at Victoria University of Wellington and an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. Twitter: @WonkVJ.