

Center for American Progress



How to Create a Durable U.S.-South Korea Alliance

Finding Common Ground Among Progressives

By Michael Fuchs and Abigail Bard August 2019



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Introduction and summary

The United States and South Korea have a close, long-standing alliance. However, as with many alliances, there exist inherent tensions and various ups and downs. More often than not, the most contentious disagreements between the two countries are heightened when progressives are in power in Seoul, no matter which political party is in power in Washington, D.C.

Understanding why this is the case and whether more can be done to improve the United States' relationship with South Korean progressives is an important step toward building an alliance that can weather political changes and policy disagreements. There is space for progressives in both countries to find common ground so that the alliance can more effectively deal with pressing political issues. This report focuses on issues in the foreign policy sphere, including North Korea's nuclear weapons program and a rising China, as well as the issue of trade between South Korea and the United States.

Defining “progressive” and “conservative” in the context of this report is inherently difficult. Because of the differences in the political and social contexts of the United States and South Korea, labels that capture political and ideological beliefs do not necessarily mean the same thing in both countries. People can be considered “progressive” or “conservative” for different reasons, and many who describe themselves as such may disagree on the meanings of those terms.

On the domestic policy front, progressives in both the United States and South Korea generally advocate for labor-friendly economic policies and antitrust reform, while conservatives typically favor less regulation of the private sector. In the foreign policy space, progressives in both countries tend to emphasize engagement and diplomacy with adversaries, while conservatives often demonstrate more hawkish attitudes.

However, the battleground between progressives and conservatives in the United States is often defined by perspectives on a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues; in contrast, attitudes toward North Korea are often the most salient dividing lines between the two ideological stances in South Korea.¹

The use of “progressive” and “conservative” in this report aims to reflect this scope and broader debate. The Center for American Progress recognizes, however, that there is a diversity of views on the terms “progressive” and “conservative” as political and ideological labels and to whom those labels apply.

Divergent foreign policy views within the alliance

On foreign policy, progressives in the United States and South Korea often diverge. Despite the fact that the two countries are allies, their interests do not perfectly overlap. Many foreign policy practitioners in the United States, whether they are progressive or not, are concerned about the possibility of war on the Korean Peninsula, as well as broader threats radiating from North Korea. These threats include North Korea's possession of ballistic missiles and nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons; proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction; and cyberattacks against the United States, South Korea, and others.² In addition, the United States sees South Korea as an ally capable of playing a larger role in regional and global affairs. South Korea has embraced this role in certain ways, such as when it provides development assistance abroad, but its overwhelming foreign policy focus is understandably on North Korea. This dynamic can lead to differing expectations between the two countries,³ with the United States encouraging South Korea to do more on regional and global issues as South Korea prioritizes North Korea policy.

Historically, conservative parties in South Korea have emphasized the importance of military deterrence against North Korea over engagement, and they have tended to favor more hard-line policies. Progressive parties, meanwhile, have supported attempts to improve inter-Korea relations and engage with Pyongyang.⁴ North Korea policy is a politically divisive issue in South Korea, but there is broad bipartisan support in the United States for maintaining an American military presence in South Korea, as well as deep concern about the threats posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons programs and cyberattacks, among other activities.⁵ The U.S. foreign policy consensus on North Korea—supported by many U.S. progressives—is closer to the views held by South Korean conservatives than it is to the views held by South Korean progressives.

South Korean progressives' uneasiness with aspects of the alliance comes in part from the legacy of human rights and pro-democracy advocacy in South Korea. While the U.S. government supported the South Korean military dictatorships of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan as part of its Cold War containment strategy, current

President Moon Jae-in and his progressive predecessors Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung were activists and dissidents against those same governments.⁶ Progressive members of the current political generation have been accused of being pro-North Korean communists by their political opponents, and many were jailed for their views.⁷

Because of this history, there is a deep-rooted and understandable level of skepticism of America among some progressives in South Korea. While contemporary South Korean progressives are not necessarily anti-American, many of them are perceived as not as wholeheartedly supportive of Washington as are their conservative colleagues. This dynamic can cause friction on alliance-related issues, including how to handle North Korea and China.

Negotiating with North Korea

The U.S.-South Korean alliance is predicated on the existential threat that North Korea poses toward its southern neighbor. Both North and South Korea claim sovereignty over the entirety of the Korean peninsula, and the U.S.-South Korean alliance and the U.S. military presence in South Korea help deter North Korea from attempting to invade the South. Understanding how the United States and South Korea view the North Korea challenge is crucial to understanding the alliance.

Historically, there has been only one time period during which more progressive parties held the executive branch simultaneously in the United States and in South Korea. Kim Dae-jung became the first progressive president of South Korea in 1998, overlapping with the second term of former U.S. President Bill Clinton. Over the following few years, Kim and Clinton were relatively aligned in engaging diplomatically with North Korea. Kim pursued his Sunshine Policy with North Korea—which saw engagement with North Korea as the best path to reduce tensions—while the United States continued negotiating with North Korea over the implementation of the 1994 Agreed Framework, in which North Korea agreed to give up its nuclear capabilities.⁸ Clinton was willing to lean in to diplomacy; his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright became the most senior sitting U.S. official to meet with a North Korean leader as she sought to lay the groundwork for a potential Clinton visit to Pyongyang—which ultimately did not happen while he was president.⁹

Since 2001, however, U.S. and South Korean policy and politics have been considerably less aligned. After Clinton left office, his conservative successor, George W. Bush, quickly withdrew from bilateral negotiations with North Korea and named

the country part of the “axis of evil.”¹⁰ Kim Dae-jung’s successor, the progressive Roh Moo-hyun, campaigned on putting distance between Seoul and Washington while continuing the Sunshine Policy.¹¹ The two leaders disagreed on North Korea policy: While Bush later supported multilateral talks with North Korea, he initially pursued economic sanctions while Roh continued a reconciliation and cooperation strategy.

This period also coincided with North Korea conducting its first successful nuclear test in 2006.¹² Following revelations that North Korea had been pursuing secret nuclear capabilities, political opinion in the United States generally cemented around the narrative that North Korea had been hoodwinking the international community for more than a decade by engaging in sham negotiations. The politics of supporting forward-leaning diplomacy became even more challenging for both progressives and conservatives in the United States.

The conservative Lee Myung-bak was elected president of South Korea in early 2008, and Barack Obama came into office in the United States in early 2009. While Obama was open to engagement with North Korea, eventually reaching a small, short-lived deal with North Korea in 2012, the hallmark of his tenure was “strategic patience”—effectively, trying to wait out the Kim regime while adding economic pressure when warranted.¹³ He and former President Lee saw eye to eye on holding a harder line on Pyongyang, with Obama asserting in 2012 that “there will be no rewards for provocations.”¹⁴ In 2013, the conservative Park Geun-hye took office in South Korea, and Park and Obama found themselves largely aligned in not wanting to engage with North Korea unless North Korea demonstrated sincerity about denuclearization.¹⁵ U.S. and South Korean progressives found themselves moving apart on how to approach North Korea, only for the stars to realign in favor of engagement in 2017, when both the progressive Moon Jae-in and the conservative U.S. President Donald Trump came into office.

President Trump’s decision to pursue leader-to-leader engagement with Kim Jong Un has exacerbated tensions between U.S. and South Korean progressives. While many U.S. progressives tend to be pro-diplomacy and have supported Trump’s turn toward diplomatic efforts, they also are critical of how Trump is executing those efforts.¹⁶ Many progressives believe that Trump has no strategy for the diplomatic process; that Trump rushes into summit meetings with Kim Jong Un without a sense of how to advance U.S. interests; and that the ways in which Trump approaches diplomacy could overall undermine chances for progress by squandering U.S. leverage.

Generally speaking, progressives in Washington are often attacked as “weak” or “soft” if they advocate for engagement with hostile countries.¹⁷ Conservative leaders, however, are politically freer to engage with adversarial countries because they are viewed as “tougher,” and therefore less susceptible to being deemed “weak” in the context of American politics, in what is known as the “Nixon goes to China” phenomenon.¹⁸ For instance, former President Obama was politically eviscerated for negotiating with Iran, despite forging the successful Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which prevented Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability. President Trump withdrew the United States from this deal in 2018,¹⁹ yet he has been applauded by his political supporters for meeting numerous times with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un—even though he has yet to secure any substantive results.²⁰

There is a commonly accepted—yet overly simplistic—narrative in the United States that North Korea is inherently untrustworthy because it has violated its previous commitments to denuclearize.²¹ Because of this, many Americans have expressed skepticism of Kim Jong Un’s sincerity in the current round of negotiations. Why would Kim give up what he sees as a key component of regime security? And if North Korea will not denuclearize, should the United States continue to negotiate?²² Even if some U.S. progressives believe that a North Korea that has accepted some arms control measures in exchange for economic relief is preferable to the status quo, it can be politically tricky to thread that needle. Few policymakers want to advocate for accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

Another reason that U.S. progressives are often wary of diplomacy with North Korea without preconditions is, as typically strong supporters of international norms, they worry that engaging with North Korea could be perceived as normalizing and legitimizing a government that commits gross human rights abuses and flouts international law in pursuit of its nuclear program.²³ If the Kim regime were treated as a more normal nation in its economic and political relationships without having to give up its nuclear weapons, would other countries feel encouraged to pursue illicit weapons of mass destruction programs? If the Kim regime were given economic incentives to denuclearize, would that strengthen the North Korean government’s ability to further oppress its people and continue to deny them political and civil rights? Would the mere act of engaging in diplomacy with North Korea with a focus on nuclear issues send the message that the United States does not care about human rights? This latter fear in particular seems to be confirmed every time Trump praises Kim Jong Un and explicitly downplays human rights concerns.²⁴ U.S. progressives tend to support diplomacy but believe that it must be conducted thoughtfully so as to not undermine human rights and other goals.

Many South Korean progressive policymakers, however, approach North Korea differently. First, many South Korean progressives believe that Kim Jong Un could be different enough from his father and grandfather that they can engage with him in good faith.²⁵ Second, the recent trends of increased information flows into North Korea and the development of market economies in parts of the country suggest that Kim must do more to serve his citizens because markets increase the demands people have of their economy.²⁶ Progressives interpret this necessity as giving Kim an incentive to engage,²⁷ with Kim declaring “economic construction” as a central strategic objective for the nation.²⁸ Third, if relations improve among North Korea and the powers it considers hostile, North Korea will be more likely to denuclearize in the long run²⁹—which is one reason why South Korean progressives are promoting inter-Korea economic projects.³⁰ While U.S. progressives tend to focus on the civil and political aspects of human rights, South Korean progressives emphasize that the economic rights of the North Korean people will improve through inter-Korean engagement coupled with lowered tensions on the peninsula.

There is some frustration among the South Korean progressive community with U.S. progressives, particularly with some of the United States’ elected leaders. For example, they believe that while former President Obama spent his political capital negotiating with Iran and improving relations with Cuba and Myanmar, his legacy on the Korean peninsula consisted merely of waiting for the Kim regime to collapse under his policy of strategic patience.

Currently, South Korean progressives see some elected Democratic leaders as trying to derail the current U.S.-North Korea diplomatic process through their criticisms of President Trump’s relationship with Kim and their opposition to Trump more broadly.³¹ Some South Korean progressives fear that if a Democrat is elected to the U.S. presidency in 2020, the new administration will scrap whatever deal Trump has reached with North Korea or end diplomacy. They see some elected Democratic leaders as being more aligned on North Korea policy with conservatives in South Korea rather than with their progressive brethren. They also believe that U.S. Democrats have undervalued North Korea’s offer to dismantle its nuclear facility at Yongbyon and have set the bar too high for diplomacy.³²

The role of China in the U.S.-South Korean alliance

While North Korea is the priority issue in the U.S.-South Korean alliance, China's rise, its support for North Korea, and its bullying behavior toward South Korea in recent years have made dealing with China an issue of growing importance. From the perspective of many policymakers in the United States, the U.S.-South Korean alliance is not only about deterring North Korea, but also about balancing China.

There is currently a vigorous debate in the United States about how to approach a rising China. For decades, the United States has operated under the theory that by integrating China economically and diplomatically into the broader international community, China would become more open and connected with international institutions and regimes that promote liberal norms, and the United States could encourage China to play a responsible role in the international system. Instead, China has exploited the international system in recent years. China has blatantly ignored the rules of the World Trade Organization; used its economic and military might to pressure countries from the Philippines to Japan to Vietnam over territorial sovereignty claims; and exported its model of technological authoritarianism to other autocracies, all while becoming more repressive at home.³³ As China continues to use its power to shape the regional and global order, many progressive and conservative policymakers in the United States are becoming more hawkish on China.

Naturally, the United States and South Korea view China differently. China is South Korea's neighbor and its largest trading partner, which means it could be more costly for South Korea to push back against China.³⁴ While the United States has a huge stake in maintaining its bilateral economic relationship with China, its geographic distance from China and its larger economy and greater global power insulate it more from Chinese pressure.

A key element of U.S. strategy toward China is the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea, Japan, and Guam. This military presence is a symbol that the United States is invested in the region and contributes to efforts to deter military aggression from China. Yet it also leads to another point of disagreement between U.S. and South Korean progressives: Although there is a general consensus in the United States on the importance of U.S. alliances in Asia to deter China, South Korean progressives are less interested in maintaining an anti-China posture.

The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system provides a clear example of this disagreement. In 2016, the Obama and Park administrations agreed to deploy the U.S. THAAD missile defense system in South Korea after North Korea carried out its fourth nuclear test.³⁵ China was angry about the deployment, believing that THAAD served a dual purpose of targeting Beijing, and retaliated economically against Seoul, costing South Korea at least \$6.8 billion.³⁶ Before becoming president, Moon Jae-in was critical of the system's deployment and the decision-making process.³⁷ After taking office, he delayed the deployment of four THAAD launchers.³⁸ In November 2017, the Moon administration reaffirmed its policy of “three no’s”—no joining the U.S. anti-missile system, no tripartite military alliance with the United States and Japan, and no additional THAAD deployments.³⁹ Some in the United States and in South Korea largely interpreted this policy as appeasing China. However, Moon kept the THAAD battery deployed, despite ongoing objections from Beijing.⁴⁰

This returns to the central point of tension in the alliance: North Korea. If a deal with North Korea were to lead to a substantial change in the U.S. military presence in South Korea, the United States' ability to deter China could decrease, raising concerns among U.S. policymakers across the political spectrum about indirectly emboldening China. South Korean policymakers, meanwhile, must deftly balance pressure from both Washington and Beijing. As Speaker of South Korea's National Assembly Moon Hee-sang said in April 2019, “We cannot abandon economy for the sake of security, and we cannot abandon security for the sake of economy.”⁴¹ Moreover, South Korean progressives are generally more open to the idea of a reduced or altered U.S. military presence if such a change were part of achieving progress with North Korea.⁴²

The effect of economic tensions on the alliance

While the U.S.-South Korean alliance is often viewed through a security lens, it is also built on strong economic ties. The United States is the second-largest export destination for South Korea, as well as its third-largest source of imports.⁴³ South Korea is the United States' sixth-largest trading partner.⁴⁴ The two countries also have a robust free trade agreement known as KORUS.

Economic relations are not unrelated to security relations; the United States' security guarantee allowed South Korea to focus on economic development following the Korean War, which helped propel South Korea into becoming one of the world's largest and most dynamic economies. The interplay between security and economics became apparent early in the Trump administration, when it insisted on renegotiating KORUS and imposing tariffs and quotas on South Korea, even as it attempted to work with Seoul on North Korea. The progressive government in South Korea appears to have relented on trade issues in order to foster cooperation regarding North Korea, resulting in a slightly revised KORUS, but the trade tensions left some in Seoul wary of the current U.S. administration's approach to the alliance.⁴⁵

While trade with South Korea is hardly one of the more controversial topics in the alliance, in the United States, the divisive debate over trade policy has already affected South Korea. It could easily do so again unless a new consensus on trade policy emerges in Washington.

Recommendations

U.S. and South Korean progressives do not need to perfectly align their policy positions or be in lockstep on all alliance issues. However, there is space to improve understanding of each other's perspectives in ways that could strengthen the alliance and enable it to better weather disagreements. This report makes the following six recommendations:

1. The two countries should expand mechanisms for broadening and deepening understanding of each other's foreign policy views. These steps can include basic relationship-building efforts, such as increasing legislative and educational exchanges between the progressive foreign policy communities in the two countries.
2. U.S. progressives should attempt to rewrite the American narrative on North Korea to clarify that the United States is flexible in how it pursues progress with North Korea. Denuclearization is a key goal of the United States, but there is also space to support South Korean allies by continuing to push for engagement with North Korea, as well as supporting the desire of many South Koreans to coexist peacefully with their neighbor before denuclearization occurs. Such actions could help achieve U.S. goals of reduced tensions on the peninsula.
3. The two progressive foreign policy communities should engage more substantively on two issues: human rights in North Korea and relations with China. The Moon administration's approach toward human rights in North Korea during diplomacy efforts has unnerved progressives and conservatives alike in the United States, as well as some conservatives in South Korea. There is a perception held by some that Moon is downplaying the human rights atrocities committed by North Korea in order to focus on improving relations.⁴⁶ However, given Moon's background as a human rights lawyer, it is difficult to seriously criticize him for not caring about human rights.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there is a shared interest on both sides in advancing human rights in North Korea, even if their tactics and perspectives may differ. On China, progressives in both countries should share their respective longer-term approaches and how the U.S.-South Korean alliance fits into those views. Because long-term policy approaches to China are still evolving in both the United States and South Korea, now is the time to be having the discussion.

4. U.S. and South Korean progressives should be willing to have serious and sustained conversations about the goals of the alliance, including how the U.S. troop presence on the Korean Peninsula and joint military exercises contribute to those goals. Some policy circles treat these topics as third rails in the U.S.-South Korean relationship since they can lead to politically contentious debate. In 1977, then-U.S. President Jimmy Carter announced his desire to withdraw U.S. ground troops from South Korea, though that decision was never implemented.⁴⁸ President Trump has renewed this debate through his uncertainty on whether to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea⁴⁹ and his complaints about the cost of stationing U.S. troops there.⁵⁰ In addition, U.S. policymakers across the political spectrum have raised concerns about the modification of U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises post-Singapore Summit.⁵¹ The number of troops on the ground and nature of military exercises have never been static, and both sides should be open to discussing how modifying and adapting them can contribute to security on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the United States should emphasize that the nature of military exercises and the number of troops do not change its security commitment to South Korea.
5. Progressives in both countries should look for ways that economic cooperation can help advance shared domestic priorities, from women's empowerment to income inequality to the mitigation of economic displacement. Both sides must recognize that economic cooperation is a core pillar of their relationship, not just an afterthought to security considerations.
6. Finally, there is space for progressives in both countries to cooperate on domestic democracy reforms. President Moon's campaign platform was partially based on reducing corruption in South Korean democracy, and the United States is currently struggling with serious challenges to some of its own democratic institutions.⁵² By working together, the two countries can share lessons learned and solutions to emerging challenges to democracy, such as how to protect freedom of speech on the internet while also preventing the influence of malicious foreign governments online.

Conclusion

The U.S.-South Korean alliance was forged in war and has weathered decades of ups and downs, bilateral tensions, and violent skirmishes with North Korea. The alliance remains strong, but it also faces significant questions about its future. In order to strengthen the alliance so that it can weather future storms, progressives and policy-makers of all political leanings in both countries must have a strong interest in exploring areas of disagreement and taking steps to address them. Over time, developing stronger areas of bipartisan consensus on the key challenges facing the alliance will strengthen the partnership for decades to come.

About the authors

Michael H. Fuchs is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. Previously, Fuchs was a deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Fuchs has also held positions as special adviser to the secretary of state for strategic dialogues; special assistant to the secretary of state; and deputy national security director for Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign.

Abigail Bard is a former research associate for Asia Policy at the Center. She is currently a graduate student at Georgetown University.

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