



Moon-Trump Summit: An Assessment

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Summary

- The Moon-Trump Summit observes continuity in US-ROK alliance, reflecting an overwhelming influence of structural factors in shaping the trajectory of the bilateral relation.
- The Joint Statement focused on six themes in advancing US-ROK relations. A major outcome of the Summit is the agreement reached on “lock-step coordination” on North Korean policy.
- Both leaders also agreed on the leading role of Seoul in engaging North Korea. Such a move not only reflects Washington’s realisation of its limitation in dealing with North Korea but also its efforts to seek a new opening.
- Trump’s criticism of economic ties manifests an ideological and institutional divergence between Seoul and Washington with the potential of negative implications in the long term.
- The Summit outcome reflected President Moon’s limitation on advancing Seoul’s position in the face of mounting insecurity.
- Domestic political compulsions were reflected in the approach to the Summit. President Moon focused on getting an assurance and support from the US to avoid internal criticism and political sabotage. On highlighting the renegotiation of trade agreement and alliance burden, Trump was appealing his domestic political constituency in congruence with his “America first’ approach.

Introduction

The newly elected President of South Korea had his first Summit with the US President Donald Trump on June 29-30, 2017 in Washington. Moon-Trump Summit was a significant event on many counts. The Summit was President Moon's first overseas trip since he assumed office in May 2017. It offered an early glimpse into the evolving foreign policy posture of the new administration and its approach to US-ROK relation. Second, the Summit was the key event that opened up a new chapter in US-ROK alliance under Trump and Moon. It also restored channels of communication which was lost during the months of political paralysis in Seoul, especially in the context where the bilateral relationship has shown signs of fatigue. Third, Moon hurried his trip to Washington on facing a security crisis in the Korean peninsula and an uncertain regional strategic order. The evolving Moon-Trump equation is a key factor that has implications for regional security order.

New Context of US-ROK Relations

Political change in the US and South Korea in 2017 along with developments in the regional strategic environment with an assertive China and a belligerent North Korea brought about a new context for US-ROK relations. The election of Donald Trump as US President and Moon Jae-in in South Korea resulted in a situation of uncertainty and tension in bilateral alliance relations. The new leadership both in Washington and Seoul came into power with a promise of departure in their respective country's foreign policy. Ambiguity over the changing direction of foreign policy in Seoul and Washington along with different ideological and personality traits of Trump and Moon produced an anxiety over the future of the US-ROK alliance.

Apart from the personality of the leadership, three events caused the pre-Summit concerns over the future of US-ROK alliance. First, President Moon's decision to suspend deployment of Terminal High Altitude Defense (THAAD) missile defence system in South Korea citing procedural problem and an environmental assessment, perceived in Washington as Seoul's betrayal of the alliance in appeasing Beijing. Second, a perceived divergence between Seoul and Washington on their approach to North Korea following President Moon's pronouncement of an engagement policy and President Trump's "maximum pressure and dialogue" policy with occasional military overtones. Third, the economic dimension of bilateral relation has been under stress with President Trump's view of South Korea as a "free rider" and his insistence on rectifying that through renegotiating the trade agreement and demanding Seoul to pay more for its security, led many in South Korea to doubt the commitment of the US for the alliance.

Outcome of Moon-Trump Summit

The Moon-Trump Summit attracted much attention in South Korea, but, had very little coverage in American media. President Moon, who was visiting Washington for the first time made sure to produce an emotionally charged narrative of US-ROK relation through various events he attended which emphasised how deeply he, as an individual and Korea, as a country, is indebted to the US.

A major outcome of the Summit is the cordial relationship developed between Trump and Moon. A significant achievement considering the pre-Summit concerns over the chemistry between the two leaders because of their different background, personality and ideological orientation. The Summit resulted in a Joint Statement focusing on six themes to carry forward the relationship. Subjects of discussion were alliance strengthening, approach to North Korea, trade, bilateral economic cooperation other than trade, US-ROK global partnership and the future of the alliance.

The Joint Statement reflects a significant continuity in the US-ROK alliance.¹ It reaffirmed, Washington's commitment to "defend the ROK", "condition based transfer of Wartime operation control to South Korea", the shared goal of "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in a peaceful manner", "concerns over North Korean human right violation", the significance of "trilateral cooperation between US-ROK-Japan" on dealing with regional security challenges.²

In comparison to the previous Summits, Moon-Trump Joint Statement has significant changes in language and content, an analysis of which provides insights into the new developments in the US-ROK relation.

One condition that Summit put for the transfer of wartime operational control to Seoul is Korea acquiring critical defensive capability, through "Kill Chain, Korea Air and Missile Defense System (KAMD) and other alliance systems".³ It is important to note that there is no reference to THAAD, which is controversial yet seen by many as the key system in enhancing alliance defense posture. The reference to 'other alliance system' is a ploy to avoid the negative consequences of mentioning THAAD in the joint statement. Though there is much apprehension in Washington, it is a compromise made at the request of President Moon who maintains an ambiguous position on the THAAD deployment. In fact, President Moon made an effort in Washington in convincing American Congress that he is not against THAAD deployment but is delayed on the "demand for democratic procedural legitimacy"⁴. He also refuted the China factor by saying THAAD deployment is a "matter of sovereignty," and, "it is not right for China to make inappropriate intervention".⁵

The most significant achievement of the Summit is the agreement that Seoul and Washington reached to coordinate their approach to North Korea, including "how to create necessary condition for denuclearization talk". However, to reach a consensus President Moon aligned his approach to that of President Trump's policy of 'maximum pressure and dialogue'. It is important to note that President Moon had made a consistent effort during the pre-Summit period through media interview and speeches that he is on the same page with Trump on North Korea. In doing so, he has substantially moved away from his earlier position of an unconditional engagement policy. The change in Moon's approach indicates the vulnerability of Seoul on security and in particular its limitation in approaching the North Korean problem independently.

On achieving their "shared goal of complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean peninsula",⁶ both leaders emphasised a peaceful approach. It meant "implementing

existing sanction and impose new measures designed to apply maximum pressure” while keeping the option for dialogue open “under the right circumstances”. The joint statement categorically mentioned that both Seoul and Washington view sanctions as a “tool of diplomacy” to bring North Korea to dialogue. However, the Joint Statement is vague on the starting point for dialogue by stating “under right condition”, without elaborating what that right condition is. Thus leaving the space for ambiguity for both parties to agree or disagree with each other’s approach in the future citing their different perspectives on what the “right condition” is. President Moon gave a hint on what he has in mind on “right condition” in a speech delivered after the Summit at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington. For him the right condition for dialogue can be; “when North Korea promises to stop its nuclear and missile provocation” or “when North Korea releases the American citizens that it currently detaining”.⁷

Another significant development in the Summit was Trump’s recognition of Seoul’s “leading role in fostering an environment for peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula” and the new administration’s plan to “restart inter-Korea dialogue on issues including humanitarian affairs”. Handing over significant leadership responsibility to Seoul, Washington reveals not only its limitation on dealing with Pyongyang but on its urgency for a breakthrough.

Ensuring Washington security commitment and support for his North Korean initiative, Moon achieved a substantial advantage at the domestic front. Moon will be less prone to criticism at home for being weak on national security from the conservatives and will be in a position to focus on other policy reforms. The domestic political compulsion of not having a majority in Korean National Assembly prompted President Moon to adopt a pragmatic approach to security issues. Washington’s recognition of Seoul’s leading role in carrying forward inter-Korea relations, would be much appealing to Moon’s progressive support base, who wanted to see a situation where South Korea is in-charge of issues dealing with North Korea. In short with the outcome of the Summit President Moon is in a position less confronted by the division that exists between conservatives and progressive on North Korea.

The Summit also witnessed the differences of interests over the economic partnership between the two countries. The friction on economic ties underscores ideological divergence reflecting the political change in Washington. A key factor that underpinned the robustness of US-ROK alliance during the last two decades is the convergence of economic interest with a shared belief in the free market. Washington’s adoption of a protectionist approach to international economic relations under Trump has invariably built an ideological barrier to bilateral economic relations. The free market principle which used to be a key theme in the previous Joint Statements found no place in Moon-Trump manifesto as a shared value. South Korean sources also reported that the seven-hour delay in the release of the Joint Statement was caused due to Washington’s rejection of the word “free” in referring to trade relations in the South Korean proposal.⁸

Joint Statement acknowledged Trump’s concerns over the trade issue and committed to taking measure to ensure ‘balanced’, ‘reciprocal’ and ‘fair trade’. There was no mention what that measure is in the Joint Statement. However, during the joint press conference, President Trump

demanding to renegotiate the trade agreement. In fact, he even said that both parties have agreed to renegotiate the trade agreement at the Summit.⁹ However, President Moon later rejected the claim.¹⁰ After the Summit Washington sent a formal notification to Seoul with its proposal to renegotiate the trade deal.¹¹

Trump also raised the issue of alliance cost sharing. While ensuring the US commitment to defend Seoul, Trump said that his administration is working “to ensure fair burden sharing in support of the US military presence in South Korea”. Trump’s view on this issue is transactional, informed by the belief that the deployment of the US forces is directly contributing to the defense of those nations, they should pay more to the costs of alliance. Since his election campaign Trump accused South Korea as a “free rider” and demanded Seoul to pay more its security.¹² Though the issue was not mentioned in the Joint Statement, the emphasis given to it by Trump during the joint press conference suggests it as a key issue in the bilateral context in the long run.

At the Summit it was quite clear that the economic dimension of the bilateral relationship is not that smooth as it is on the security front. The Summit result made it clear that President Moon who is facing a mounting security situation succumbed to the pressure of President Trump in the economic arena. Incidentally, there was a significant economic package which Seoul brought to the Summit to appeal President Trump. The package included plans of Korean companies to invest in the US to a tune of 12 billion USD¹³ and an agreement to buy American natural gas worth 25 billion USD¹⁴.

Conclusion

The Moon-Trump Summit ended better than expected. The structural condition of mounting security tension ensured the continuity of the US-ROK alliance. The Summit also witnessed President Moon advancing Seoul’s role in dealing with North Korea within the US-ROK alliance framework and gaining US support for his engagement policy. However, the future of the US-ROK alliance is not without challenge. Even though both leaders agreed to have “lock-step coordination” on the North Korean nuclear issue using pressure and engagement, there is no agreement on how much pressure and to engage under what condition. For the time being President Moon may have managed to keep the THAAD issue off the table. However, on facing increasing pressure from China, it will not be easy for President Moon to hide behind his ambiguous position on THAAD.

More than what Moon-Trump agreed on North Korea, their approach will depend on developments in US-China relations. It will be difficult for Seoul to advance its engagement policy when there is no coordination between Beijing and Washington on North Korea. Washington’s recent introduction of secondary sanctions has already met with resistance from Beijing and Moscow, who are against any more sanctions against Pyongyang.¹⁵

The diverging perspective on economic relations and alliance burden sharing are also important factors. The differences between Seoul and Washington on these issues are only emerging, and their impact on the bilateral relationship remains to be seen.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

End Notes

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