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# ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

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CHALLENGES FACING  
THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION  
IN RELATIONS WITH KOREA

BY ROBERT SUTTER



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Professor Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the Elliott School of George Washington University (2011-Present). He also served as Director of the School's main undergraduate program involving over 2,000 students from 2013-2019. He has served as Special Adviser to the Dean on Strategic Outreach (2021-present). His earlier full-time position was Visiting Professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University (2001-2011). A Ph.D. graduate in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University, Sutter has published 23 books (four with multiple editions), over 300 articles and several hundred government reports dealing with contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States. His most recent books are *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy of an Emerging Global Force*, Fifth Edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), *US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present*, Fourth Edition (Rowman & Littlefield 2022), and *Congress and China Policy: Past Episodic, Recent Enduring Influence* (Lexington Books, 2024). Sutter's government career (1968-2001) saw service as senior specialist and director of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the US Government's National Intelligence Council, the China division director at the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.



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# CHALLENGES FACING THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION IN RELATIONS WITH KOREA

**ROBERT SUTTER**

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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Whatever hopes or concerns [South Koreans](#) had about their relations with the incoming Donald Trump administration were superseded by South Korea's protracted leadership crisis following the aborted declaration of martial law by President Yoon Suk Yeol on December 3. Yoon's subsequent impeachment, arrest and detention were sharply contested, with repeated and sometimes violent mass demonstrations for and against President Yoon. Both sides

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await the ruling of the Constitutional Court determining Yoon's fate. In the interim, governance has remained orderly but the political upheaval in Seoul has undermined the [Korean government's ability](#) to prepare for the new Trump Administration and raises questions in Washington about the political future in Korea.

## **Negative Attitudes, Conflicting Positions, Undetermined Policies**

Assuming the crisis is resolved in the coming weeks, prevailing negative attitudes, conflicting positions, and undetermined issues in South Korean relations with the Trump administration will become more important and overall move relations in a negative direction. South Koreans' view of the implications of the election of Donald Trump is strongly influenced by the [perceived negative record](#) of the earlier Trump presidency. Trump's [overall image](#) in South Korea is poor. He is widely seen as disrespectful of South Korea, unreliable, and prone to harsh rhetoric and abrupt disruptive actions that impose costs on South Korea with demands for large increases in South Korean payments to support US forces in South Korea and US tariffs or other measures imposed to reduce the large US trade deficit with South Korea.

[Some in South Korea](#) believe that the government dealt reasonably well with the previous Trump administration's demands, notably for a revised US-South Korea trade agreement (KORUS) that would reduce the US trade deficit with South Korea, and for a reported [400% increase](#) in South Korean financial support to compensate the United States for the costs of US forces in Korea. The actual results of the first Trump administration were seen by [a dozen experts](#) in Seoul interviewed privately in July 2024 as imposing few major costs on South Korea. But more publicly prominent are others viewing Trump's recent repeated statements that South Korea pays "[almost nothing](#)" for US forces in Korea and other derogatory remarks about South Korea as foreshadowing tough demands as Trump once

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again becomes president. Some are prone to worst case scenarios, expecting that President Trump this time will have a freer hand in imposing his will on South Korea, less impeded by the advice of senior officials in the earlier Trump government who protected South Korea from the full impact of the [president's demands](#).

Regarding North Korea, one commonly raised scenario in [private interviews](#) with 25 experts in South Korea in July 2024 involves Trump once again seeking a peace agreement during a summit with North Korea's Kim Jong Un that would bypass and isolate South Korea. President Trump prompted such concerns when he told a Fox News host on January 23 that he plans to reach out to Kim Jong Un in his second term. A possible breakthrough with North Korea is complicated by prominent North Korean military support for Russia in the war in Ukraine and the Trump administration's strong interest in ending that conflict with a peace agreement. North Korea's willingness to once again negotiate with Trump is also unclear. Overall, the incoming Trump administration's approach to various issues regarding North Korea [remains unknown](#).

The Trump administration's position is also undetermined on the Yoon government's support for the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, such as by improving Seoul's relations with Japan and targeting challenges posed by Chinese government

**The Trump administration's position is also undetermined on the Yoon government's support for the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy**

behavior. Yoon in 2023 embraced the US-fostered South Korea-Japan-US trilateral cooperation mechanism which has involved closer military, economic and political cooperation and was viewed as a [signature achievement](#) of the outgoing Biden administration in creating of positions of strength for countering China in northeast Asia as well as dealing with the greater threats coming from North Korea.

In response, Beijing saw the necessity, for now tactically, of reacting with [moderation and restraint](#) and launching a modest charm offensive seeking to build common ground between China and South Korea and China and Japan. Beijing sought to reawaken these ties to mitigate the negative consequences of the deepening South Korea-Japan-US trilateral cooperation. [Yoon responded](#) positively to Chinese overtures, moving forward in advancing cooperation during a trilateral summit meeting in May of the government leaders of South Korea, Japan and China and holding

a meeting in June of Chinese and South Korean defense and foreign vice ministers. Yoon also avoided antagonizing China on Taiwan, despite his [earlier unprecedented references](#) to Taiwan in official statements. He also resisted Biden administration efforts to have South Korean forces more closely involved in American plans to counter a Chinese attack against Taiwan—including through strategic flexibility for US forces forward deployed in South Korea.

South Korea's deepened cooperation with Washington and Tokyo and countermeasures against China are controversial with [progressive politicians](#) who have the majority in the National Assembly and led the impeachment effort against Yoon. The progressives are seen as poised to win the next regularly scheduled presidential elections in 2027 and a possible presidential election this year to replace Yoon, if he is removed from power. The initial impeachment motion by progressive politicians in control of the National Assembly took aim at Yoon's [lack of geopolitical balance](#) by aligning with US values, improving relations with Japan and provoking North Korea and China. They remain wary of the United States, more critical of Japan, open to negotiation opportunities with North Korea, and more moderate toward China, favoring a policy that balances between the United States and China. How the Trump administration would react to such shifts in policy remains unclear. Trump did welcome the support of South Korea's previous president, progressive leader Moon Jae-in, as he pursued summits with North Korea's Kim Jung Un in 2018.

Korean conservatives are more favorable than progressives toward American pro-Japan policies, which target Chinese challenges. However, they [have concerns](#) involving US forces based in Korea becoming involved in a possible US-China military conflict over Taiwan, US seeking direct South Korean support in defense of Taiwan, limitations on

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access to the US market, complications for South Korean manufacturers involving US restrictions on the transfer of advanced computer chip technology to China and, for some, US opposition to South Korea developing [nuclear weapons](#). Trump administration positions on these matters are to be determined.

Important South Korean economic issues with the United States center on the reality that the liberal economic order favoring continued globalization and interdependence is undergoing major change. It is fundamentally challenged by domestic populist forces in the United States and other markets disadvantaged by globalization who oppose their countries' elites' liberal policies. The US strategic competition with China reflects and adds to this challenge. Against this background, South Korean public opinion was unenthusiastic about either Trump or Vice President Harris, seeing both favoring tariffs and other trade restrictions adverse to South Korean business, though Harris was viewed as [steady and predictable](#) whereas Trump was viewed as more negatively disruptive of South Korean policy priorities.

Koreans generally appreciated the Biden-Harris government efforts to provide \$7,500 subsidies for electronic vehicles (EVs), leased by South Korean manufacturers in the United States. [Hyundai](#) is building an EV plant in Georgia

expected to begin operations later in 2024 to provide cars meeting qualifications for the US \$7,500 subsidy, while [KIA](#) is also building a factory in Georgia to supply subsidized EVs to US consumers. However, the Trump administration reportedly [plans](#) to end the \$7,500 subsidies. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is also [expected](#) to end US involvement with the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)—a move seen detrimental to Korean involvement and positive interest in the group.

## Trump Administration Initiatives--Implications

For the present, as Trump returns to the presidency, three policy areas seem important for Korea.

**First**, the Trump administration has pledged to [institute tariffs](#) with perceived negative implications for South Korea.

The tariffs may focus more on China than Korea but will be seen in South Korea as disruptive. On the other hand, South Korean businesses may benefit because big US tariffs on Chinese imports may lead US and other companies to disengage from China and invest in nearby countries like South Korea when producing products for

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the US market. Also, concurrent Trump policies advancing major tax cuts for US businesses and reducing government regulations could result in a boom of US economic growth of uncertain duration that would benefit South Korea and other Indo-Pacific exporters.

**Specialists in China see this trend as facilitating China's rise to Asian dominance as the United States is seen as in decline in Asia.**

**Second**, President Trump seems likely to [continue the practices](#) of his first term of devoting less positive attention and less close consultations with allies and partners; while also demanding more of key allies and partners regarding trade balances, military preparedness and burden sharing. The combination of disruptive unilateral tariffs and

perceived downgrading of high-level US positive attention to and consultation with South Korea and other allies and partners could have negative implications for US competition with China. It is seen to reinforce a growing regional judgment of [US disengagement](#) from leadership in the region, prompting adjustments in the policies of South Korea and other allies and partners in ways that are more accommodating of China. Specialists in China see this trend as facilitating China's rise to Asian dominance as the United States is seen as in decline in Asia.

**Third**, Trump's senior appointments overall forecast enhancing the enduring bi-partisan agreement in Washington on a [US hardening toward China](#) featuring stronger efforts to defend America from serious Chinese challenges in military, economic and governance matters. The efforts are forecast to involve major tariffs, greater military preparedness, and high-tech competition, along with less attention to human rights and democratic values. As noted,

such efforts are more likely win the support of South Korean conservatives than South Korean progressives, who favor more moderation toward Beijing.

### **President Trump remains transactional in his dealing with China and other major powers**

Nevertheless, President Trump remains transactional in his dealing with China and other major powers. He may see advantage in negotiating with China over trade, Taiwan and other differences. On January 17, Trump [spoke warmly](#) about his phone conversation that day with Chinese President Xi Jinping, their first since Trump's election in November. He [repeatedly recalls](#) positively past negotiations with Xi Jinping; he is the only prominent American leader making positive public statements about Xi, who is widely seen as untrustworthy.

Negotiating another trade deal with China, similar to the negotiations carried out in the first Trump administration seems to have few negative implications. President Trump negotiating a broader agreement with China involving compromise of US commitments to Taiwan is [viewed very negatively](#) in Taiwan and Japan, and could also prompt serious concern in South Korea and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. Such negotiations also risk major backlash domestically as bi-partisan US majorities in Congress and public opinion strongly distrust Xi and oppose the Chinese government.

### **Outlook**

President Trump's first term followed an erratic path in developing and executing competition with China in the Indo-Pacific and gave low priority in dealing with regional concerns including relations with South Korea. The [overall result](#) was decline in US regional influence with China emerging as the regional leader in economic, political and security matters. The Biden administration was more consistent in competing with China and more attentive to regional concerns, notably US relations with South Korea, and US influence in the region grew relative to China.

The above noted concerns of South Korean leaders about current and future Trump policies suggest that [decline](#) in US regional influence in the country will resume. How far, how fast and with what consequences all remain to be determined.

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*The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.*

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