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ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

2025- August. ISSUE 12

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS:
U.S. AND ROK SEEK
ALLIANCES MODERNIZATION,
BUT HOW?

BY DEREK GROSSMAN



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갈 길 먼 한미동맹 현대화: 정상회담이 남긴 것

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August 2025

Of all the issues President Lee Jae-myung discussed with President Donald Trump at the White House on August 25, perhaps the thorniest was ROK-U.S. alliance modernization. To be sure, both nations broadly agree

**양국 모두 동맹 현대화의
필요성에는 동의했지만, 정작
그것을 어떻게 추진할 것인지에
대해서는 두 정상이 뚜렷한
해법을 내놓지 않았다**

that modernization is necessary. After the summit, Lee gave a speech at the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS), a major think tank in Washington, in which he stated “At the summit meeting today with President Trump, President Trump and I agreed to make and modernize our bilateral alliance to be more reciprocal and future-oriented in line with the changing security landscape.” But neither Lee nor Trump offered many

concrete details on how to do it, likely reflecting tensions—even rising tensions—behind the scenes regarding this critical part of the U.S.-ROK relationship.

Before arriving in Washington, for example, Lee poured cold water on the prospect that Seoul might agree to the Trump administration’s desire to achieve “strategic flexibility” for the alliance, i.e. shifting U.S. forces deployed on the peninsula toward other regional contingencies to counter China. Here,

the Trump administration may have a point: the term “strategic flexibility” has been around for decades, making its first appearance in a 2006 joint statement Seoul signed with the George W. Bush administration. Moreover, the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) undergirding the U.S.-ROK alliance does not specify that U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) has to be exclusively focused on the North Korean threat, leaving open the possibility of focusing on others, like China. Nonetheless, responding directly to U.S. demands, Lee remarked “this is not an issue we can easily agree with.” Lee countered, “Instead, discussion on a future-oriented strategic transformation of USFK

**이재명 대통령은 트럼프 행정부가 한국이 ‘전략적
유연성’-즉 주한미군의 임무를 북한에 국한하지
않고 중국 등 역내 역지에 활용하려는 구상-에
동의할지도 모른다는 기대에 찬물을 끼얹었다**

are necessary from our perspective as well.” He thereby underscored his government’s keen interest in keeping the focus on North Korea as the ROK’s top threat rather than any distractions. Perhaps due to such bilateral differences, neither Lee nor Trump explicitly mentioned strategic flexibility during the summit.

**한미 간의 오랜 쟁점인
전작권(OPCON) 전환 문제 역시 이번
정상회담에서는 전혀 언급되지 않았다**

The two leaders were also mum on operational control (OPCON) transfer from the U.S. to ROK militaries, which is a perennial alliance modernization issue. A couple of weeks before the summit, the State Affairs Planning Committee of Lee’s government issued a five-year plan, and within it, called for OPCON transfer to occur by 2030. In 2006, Washington

and Seoul had agreed to OPCON transfer, but conservative ROK administrations had delayed it, until Lee’s progressive predecessor, Moon Jae-in, agreed with the first Trump administration that OPCON should occur only after certain conditions are met, rather than on a set date. For Lee, it is very significant to overturn a fellow progressive leader’s pact with the United States, and yet, his plan went entirely unmentioned during the summit.

Yet another area of tension in the alliance concerns troop deployments. At present, the U.S. has approximately 28,500 troops positioned in South Korea to deter North Korea. However, a report in May noted that the Trump

**동맹 내 또 다른 긴장의 영역은
주한미군 배치와 관련된 우려 사항이다**

administration was forming preliminary plans to withdraw approximately 4,500 troops to reposition them in other locations across the Indo-Pacific, to include in Guam, as part of a broader strategic reassessment. To date, the Trump administration has not confirmed this report, but the concept appears to fit well with Washington’s close attention to China as its top geopolitical foe. It also would not be the first time the U.S. has reduced troop deployments in South Korea: indeed, the Bush administration, which successfully negotiated strategic flexibility with Seoul in 2006, took the opportunity to withdraw roughly 8,500 troops for warzones related to the Global War on Terror following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Hence, it is hardly impossible that this could happen again. In the past, South Korea has stressed the need to keep U.S. troops on the peninsula at the current level.

Finally, Washington and Seoul are at odds over both cost-sharing and burden-sharing the alliance. On cost-sharing, the Special Forces Measures Agreement (SMA) is relevant. Dating back to his first term, Trump often publicly criticized South Korea for ripping off the U.S. because it allegedly refused to pay its fair share to house American troop deployments on its bases. Trump demanded that Seoul pay five times more of the cost, severely angering and insulting Seoul. In the end, South Korea paid around eight percent more than the previous year, bucking Trump’s demands. Then, President Joe Biden’s administration decided to sign a five-year SMA in late 2024 to lock in cost-sharing percentages. This had been normal prior to 2018, but it also conveniently prevented a future Trump administration from meddling further. But now that Trump is back, he may seek to reopen this old wound. On at least two recent occasions, for example, he has mused aloud about bundling a new trade pact with defense cost-sharing, saying “[It would be] nice to wrap it all up in one package for each country.

**트럼프 대통령은 캠프 험프리스 기지를
언급하며 “아마도 서울이 우리가 큰 요새를 가진
그 땅의 소유권을 미국에 넘겨야 할지도
모른다”라고 농담을 했는데, 이는 '비용-분담' 즉
방위비 분담 갈등이 앞으로도 계속 동맹의
골칫거리가 될 것임을 예고한 것이나
다름없었다**

One point on alliance modernization that came up during their summit was related to burden-sharing. Burden-sharing refers to the costs each nation incurs to develop their military capabilities to contribute to the alliance, and in this area, Lee proactively offered to invest more. Under the slogan, “Make America’s Shipbuilding Great Again (MASGA),” Lee said Seoul would invest \$150 billion of a total \$350 billion investment pledge as well as another \$150 billion in foreign direct investment in semiconductors, vehicles, batteries, and other sectors that could support alliance defense efforts. At present, the ROK spends just 2.8 percent of GDP on defense, and the Trump administration has sought a significant rise to 5 percent. Although Seoul has only pledged 3.5 percent, it believes that other investments, like MASGA, should count for another 1.5 percent as well. Trump certainly welcomed MASGA, especially amid all of Lee’s flattery of him in the Oval Office, but it remains to be seen whether Seoul’s commitments will be enough to satiate Trump.

**마지막으로, 다소 불길한 점은, 양측 모두
바이든 정부 시절 체결된 동맹 강화 협정들에
대해 일절 언급하지 않았다는 것이다**

Finally, and quite inauspiciously, neither Lee nor Trump mentioned Biden-era agreements that have sought to strengthen the alliance. In 2023, Biden signed three distinct agreements to enhance coordination at the highest levels. The Washington Declaration, for example, aims at sharing more sensitive American information on nuclear warfighting plans with Seoul, and the Camp David trilateral summit agreement strengthened trilateral cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, particularly against North Korea. Biden also signed a Joint Summit Statement that specifically sought to deepen and expand the alliance.

Overall, the leaders scarcely discussed alliance modernization the most recent U.S.-Korean summit. To be sure, it is possible that negotiations did occur, but were purposefully kept quiet. It is also equally possible that both Trump and Lee decided to leave it up to their national security teams to hash out the finer details of defense interactions. But because Trump has a clear pattern of threatening South Korea on alliance issues, neither of these seems likely. Rather, the U.S. and the ROK probably have genuine differences and even grievances against each other, and this does not bode well for alliance modernization over at least the next three years.

You know, it’s nice and clean.” And during the summit, Trump, apparently referring to Camp Humphreys, quipped “maybe Seoul should give the U.S. ownership of the land where we have the big fort,” virtually ensuring that cost-sharing frictions will continue to haunt the alliance. Seoul responded cautiously to Trump’s statement, with National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac saying he would need to further investigate the background of his remarks and President Lee avoiding it entirely.

**‘부담 분담’은 동맹에 기여하기 위해 각국이 군사
역량을 개발하는 데 드는 비용을 의미하는데, 이
분야에서 이 대통령은 적극적으로 더 많은
투자를 제안했다**

**한미 양국은 실제로 상당한 이견과 불만을 안고
있으며, 이는 앞으로 최소 3 년간 동맹 현대화
전망이 밝지 않음을 시사한다**

The good news is that Trump and Lee have remarkably similar worldviews, whether on the alliance (they both want it to work), North Korea (they both want engagement), and Japan (they both see the nation as critical to helping deter North Korea). Even against geopolitical foes China and Russia, there could be strategic alignment as neither country seeks war and rather a reset in diplomatic ties. It is unclear, however, if common worldviews will be enough to keep the alliance moving in a positive direction, or if substantial achievements in alliance modernization will just have to wait until the U.S. returns to a more traditional approach toward the U.S.-ROK alliance.

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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